



GUARDIAN ANGEL

Practical Theft

Garret Veldon Kolozsvar had a Guardian Angel. Who knew? Only Garret's is a little different than your average Guardian angel.

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Garret ran across the burning sands. He could almost smell the rough grains baking under the intense sunlight. It reminded him of glass being made in a furnace. The wind out here even fanned the oppressive heat. He expected the grains to turn into a molten slurry under his feet at any second. *They shouldn't be chasing me*, the thief thought to himself. He hadn't robbed them blind; but he'd only taken a few of the bigger, more valuable gemstones. After all, they were easier to carry. They had so much of the stuff, who'd notice a few missing? Still, whenever he turned his head back, he would catch a glimpse of the two guards behind him. Garret could tell they were temple guards. Their bright red turbans gave them away. Still, he thought they should have given up by now.

Scrambling up the next dune, Garret saw the hideous thing. It was standing right in front of him. Squat, it stood on four stumpy legs. The thing had more yellow eyes and twisted spikes than he could reasonably count. The rest of it was all mouth, filled with crooked, twisted, and broken teeth. It smelled like horse manure in an untended stable.

Drawing his sword, Garret prepared to stand his ground. With agility beyond astounding, the creature leaped above Garret's head. The thief ducked; his once-proud fighting stance reduced to a quivering fetal position. His sword poking out like a porcupine with a single spike. Awaiting his fate, Garret could hear... crunching.

Raising his head, his eyes fell upon the remains of the two temple guards, who the creature was happily devouring. Thieves never miss an opportunity. While the dark creature was busy dining on the remains, Garret crept off. He tried to proceed silently, but the dry crunch of the sand beneath his boots made it a challenge. The creature noticed before Garret got more than a few feet and turned its malformed head. Its voice was a dry crack, like the crumpling of a sheet of old parchment. "Where do you think you're going?"

Garret raised his sword and resumed his defensive stance. They faced each other in silence.

"Don't you talk?" the creature growled. Garret took an overhead swing at the black-skinned monstrosity. It avoided the blow deftly, with an air of arrogance. "What in heaven's name are you doing, you ungrateful wretch? I just saved your ass."

The thief shifted on his feet, keeping the point of the sword leveled on at least one of the creature's eyes anyway. "You are a demon from the Ninth Circle of Hell," Garret proclaimed with fervor.

The creature grunted, raising one eyebrow. "Actually, I'm from the Fifth Circle, but I'm not here to quibble about addresses. I'm here to help you out."

"This is insane," Garret grumbled, "I'm speaking with a demon who protests he is coming to my aid..."

"You're standing in the middle of a desert which is about to bake your brain without sufficient water to make your escape. You're being tracked by who knows how many angry temple guards... and you think taking to me is crazy?"

Garret's eyes glanced over at the mangled corpses on the ground, their blood running into the sand. "Are they dead?" he asked.

"I hope so," the creature offered, "Or they are going to have one massive medical insurance claim. Not to mention the fact they'll require heart transplant surgery. Boy, you're lucky I came along when I did."

The creature kicked a crossbow out of the ruined hands of one of the cadavers. "This one was about to skewer you from behind like a pig at a banker's guild picnic."

Straightening up, Garret's eyes returned to the creature. "I'll be going now. Thanks for your help. Now, if you'll just stay there, while I toddle off, we can conclude our business successfully. Without any further confrontation."

Advancing boldly, the creature looked up at Garret's face. "That doesn't work for me."

"What?"

"We stick together, Garret," the creature explained, "My name's Jaxroxath. But you can call me Jax. Everyone else does. I'm your... I don't know exactly how to put this. I guess there is no delicate way... I'm your guardian angel."

"What?"

"You got one word stuck in your throat boy? I said I'm your guardian angel."

"You're a demon."

"Very perceptive of you," Jax echoed, "So... Okay, I'm your 'fallen' angel, to be more precise. Do you know how many of you humans there are? You people breed like rats. You think all of you rate the company of one of the fancy boys with the white wings?" All fourteen of his glowing yellow eyes looked up at the bright blue sky. "Besides you're not exactly at the top of the Big Guy's list if you know what I mean. Some of you are going to get... well, me."

Garret blinked his eyes, several times. "What am I supposed to do with you following me around? I'll stand out like a sore thumb. There won't be any shadows big enough to hide me. Even in the darkest sewers."

Jax stood up proudly. "Pay attention and learn a thing or two for starters."

"What?"

"There's that word again," Jax muttered. "You still have the gems you stole from the temple?"

Garret reached into his pocket with his off hand and pulled out a pile of glistening stones. "Yea, so what?"

"See the dark blue one? The one with the cloudy inside?" Jax grunted. "Toss it."

"What?"

"You're going to have to improve your vernacular, boy. Your jargon is getting tiresome. The blue one has been enchanted. It's a homing device. The guards can track you wherever you go as long as you carry the thing around."

Stabbing his sword tip into the ground, Garret extracted the blue stone from his handful of loot. He examined it briefly, letting the sunlight glint off its reflective surface. Then he tossed the thing over the

other side of a nearby dune. “There,” Garret snapped, “happy now?” Garret retrieved his sword and placed it back in his scabbard.

“Nice pitching arm,” Jax piped up.

“Thanks.”

Garret glanced over at his three-foot-tall companion. “You’ve enough strength to have a great pitching arm yourself,” he commented.

“True,” Jax teased, “but I’m all legs.”

Garret looked at the creature’s three-toed, elephant-like feet. “I see your point. I suppose it would be difficult to hold anything in those mitts.”

The demon snorted. “But, to answer your earlier question...no I’m not satisfied,” Jax finally retorted, “Let’s get out of here before the next bunch catches up with us. There are about twenty of them. I’m fast, but I’m not that hungry.”

Almost without questioning the suggestion, Garret stumbled off down the far side of the dune. Jax ambling along beside him. “Wizards,” Garret grumbled, “Enchaining a stone with a tracking spell. Disreputable types, if you ask me. I’d like to meet the one who did the enchanting work in a dark alley somewhere.”

“I wouldn’t,” Jax objected. “Wizards tend to leave a bad aftertaste. Like mouthwash, but with too many spices in it.”

The sand slipped under Garret’s feet. It was all he could do to keep his legs under him. Jax, on the other hand, didn’t appear to have any problem negotiating the shifting terrain. “So what do we do now?”

“Well, Jax admitted, “I’m supposed to be putting you on the straight and narrow, but I’ve got a better plan.”

“Oh?”

Jax’s teeth cracked as he talked, like someone rubbing two flints together to get a spark. “First of all, I’m going to teach you how to get a better haul of loot. The stuff you took is a pittance. They have other sacred relics in there the clerics of opposing gods would pay oodles for you to despoil and desecrate before them.”

“Oh?”

“Besides, it’s worth your while to get in good with some of the other orders. It’ll give you a nice place to hide out in. Not to mention there are a whole series of royal palaces to can walk right into wearing the right robes. No questions asked.”

The demon spit on the ground. The sand boiled together under it as if it had been seared by lava. “You can’t go back to this temple again anyway. They know what you look like. Besides, they put their temple out here in the middle of the desert for a reason, you know. The venue makes you easy to follow, what with all the footprints in the sand.”

“Oh,” Garret sighed. Truthfully, he was still thinking about the priests and their robes. His imagination began to wonder at the thought of such devious subterfuge. He had pleasant visions of vast chests of gold and silver, casks of expensive potions, and boxes filled with gold-encrusted jewelry... all just waiting to be looted. Priests tended to wear long, flowing robes. You could hide a lot of loot under a robe with big flowing sides. Garret’s face started to brighten up, “OH.”

“We need to get you to an oasis. Then,” Jax grunted, “we’re going to work on your vocabulary.”