

Rebellion Reborn
Book 3 of the Metis Files
By
Brian S. Leon

Angel of the Night

Fear not the night.

Fear that which walks the night.

And I am that which walks the night.

But only evil need fear me...

and gentle souls sleep safe in their beds...

because I walk the night.

—Lt. Col. David Grossman

Chapter 1

Gretna, Louisiana, outside New Orleans, March 10, 1919

In the quiet stillness of the early morning, rats began gnawing at the back door of a small corner row house that also served as a neighborhood grocery—one of several in the largely immigrant neighborhood. Dozens of the foul rodents, some still wet from swimming in the Mississippi River just a few hundred yards away, gave off steam in the cool late-winter air as they gathered. Whatever unseen force drew them also drove them to chew just as fervently. The fusty creatures all worked as a single writhing entity, and within thirty minutes, the rodents managed to quietly bite the lower panel of the flimsy wooden door free, providing an entryway—though not for the rats. Once they ate through the wood, the mass of stinking, steaming vermin disappeared back into the night as silently as it had assembled.

A large humanoid figure—more shadow than substance—emerged from the darkness along the fence around the tiny back yard, dragging a long-handled axe over the dirt and sparse grass behind it. The shifting form silently swept up the rickety pair of stairs to the rear door and cautiously, almost reverently, placed the axe down quietly next to the door while it stooped toward the small hole created by the rats.

Silently, the figure peered through the gap left by the missing panel. It gazed into the darkened kitchen beyond for some time, listening and watching for signs of movement within. Then the figure tentatively reached a bony, clawed hand toward the door. Its long, slender fingers moved over the opening as if testing the hole before it extended an emaciated hand through the breach and, more importantly, across the tiny home's threshold. Nothing stopped it.

The figure snaked one arm inside, followed by the other. The limbs bent severely at the elbows so they would fit. The spectral figure forced its head through the small opening, then a series of sounds like muffled pops came from its torso as the creature's unnatural bulk decreased like a wadded-up newspaper. The being crawled through the hole almost like a snake, arms twisted at impossible angles to support its weight as it pulled itself through. Once inside, the figure gathered itself back to its height of nearly seven feet, rolling its head and shrugging its stooped shoulders back into position with a series of soft cracks. Then it began an aberrant convulsive stretching and twisting along its long limbs to reset the dislocated joints. Limbs reformed and functional, it reached back through the opening and retrieved the axe set just

outside the door. The being's wraithlike blackness enveloped the small room like a void. Only the very edge of the recently sharpened axe-head glinted in the darkness.

The entity had emerged into a simple, spartan kitchen with a single cupboard, a large sink, and a cast-iron wood-burning stove along the wall to the right, opposite a small dining table flanked by two plain chairs. The tiny room's only other feature was a lone doorway leading to the bedroom—the small home's only other room. A clock ticked, and a muffled snore came from somewhere beyond the doorway, causing the figure to hesitate. As the soft noises continued uninterrupted, the figure silently swept through the doorway.

The bedroom was as austere as the kitchen, just large enough for a bed, a small chest of drawers, two trunks, and a rickety rocking chair at the foot of the bed. The only light came through a gap in the curtains covering a small window set high along the nearest wall and overlooking the alleyway behind the house.

In the center of the room, three people slept soundly on the iron-tester bed. A woman with an infant nestled in her left arm lay next to a man who was the source of the snoring. Mosquito netting, currently pulled back out of use, hung from the bar across the head of the bed frame.

As the dark figure's scrutiny swept from the sleeping forms and back across the room, it noticed a large crucifix on a mantel along the far wall, next to the ticking clock. Paintings depicting not only the Crucifixion but also the Virgin Mary and a praying Sister of Mercy adorned the otherwise-bare wooden walls. The figure recoiled slightly at the collective images then refocused its attention on the small family in the bed.

Standing over the woman, the monstrosity silently drew the axe overhead as far as the ceiling would allow then swung down, viciously striking the sleeping infant on the right side of her head at the neck, killing her instantly. In a continuous fluid motion, the shadowy form brought the blunt edge of the axe across to strike the woman low on the left side of her head near her ear, crushing her skull and knocking her unconscious.

The brutal blows jarred the man awake. Rousing himself, the small man saw the dark figure standing over his wife and child. He froze, blinking hard, trying to make sense of what stood across from him as abject fear gripped him.

Before the man could utter more than a sound, the shadowy figure grabbed him by the face, its skeletal fingers digging into the thin flesh of his scalp, and shoved him off the bed and

back against a wall. The man, still mostly in shock, weakly and clumsily attempted to swing his fists in defense of his family, but he failed to connect as the shadowy figure somehow, impossibly, instantaneously closed the distance between them. The man tried feebly to defend himself while the creature toyed with him, batting him around like a ragdoll for a few moments. Finally, like a cat tiring of playing with its prey, it brought the butt of the axe-head down on the man's head, fracturing his skull and rendering him unconscious, though not dead. The tormented man's limp body flopped across the bed.

The continuing commotion within the small space startled the woman back to semiconsciousness. Barely lucid, she had no idea what she was seeing or even what had transpired. Terrified by what she *thought* was standing over her husband's body, she tried to scream, but the sound stuck in her throat. She watched as the shadowy image moved from the opposite side of the bed directly in front of her before she could blink. It reached an emaciated, clawed hand for her, and she froze, consumed by fear, unable to move or even utter a sound as it grabbed her head in a viselike grip and began to squeeze until her world went black.

The next morning, neighbors found the family lying on the bed in pools of their own blood. The unconscious father had collapsed over the dead body of his daughter, while the nearly comatose mother mumbled incoherently, saying her daughter's name—Mary—repeatedly. They found a bloody axe outside the kitchen door, which somehow had a small lower panel removed.

Chapter 2

I arrived at New Orleans Union Station from Chicago on the Number 8 train, the Panama Limited, on Saturday, March fifteenth, at nine in the morning. Though cool, the morning was a pleasant change from the frigid late-winter winds along Lake Michigan and far better than the winters I'd spent overseas working for Army Intelligence during the Great War.

I hadn't been to New Orleans since just after the turn of the new century, when I was chasing the rumor of an apparent murder committed by a being calling itself Comte Jacques Saint Germain, but I always liked the city. As I had during my previous visit, I wished I'd come under better circumstances. Such was my life as the immortal protector of humanity for the past three thousand years.

Exiting the station onto South Rampart Street, I could feel the slow and comfortable Southern vibe the city gave off. Just three blocks to the east, I could see the monument at Lee Circle. I still remembered when it was Tivoli Circle, before they'd dedicated it as a monument to General Robert E. Lee.

Some things in the South die hard.

Standing on the corner of Rampart and Howard, I set down my leather satchel to check the file folder I had been given by the Pinkerton field office in Chicago. I was supposed to meet Francis Deringer, a junior apprentice in the local offices, here—or rather, he was supposed to meet me.

I'd been with the Pinkertons for only a few months, but as usual, Athena—my patron and the source of my strength and immortality—pulled the strings to get me where she believed I would best serve human interests.

Despite the fact I was reasonably new to the agency, they gave me the position of special investigator and the rank of senior agent. As a one-time goddess of tactics and warfare, Athena wielded significant influence, and her organization, the Metis Foundation, had serious political pull. From what I knew of the reason I was standing in New Orleans, the locals, as usual, had no idea what plagued their city. Frankly, even though I was a week too late to celebrate it, as far as I was concerned, the whole situation was made even worse by the fact that Mardi Gras had been cancelled again this year due to the Great War.

“Uh, Mr. Ark-en-ox? The-o-filly Arkenox?” asked an unsure, slightly squeaky voice with an unmistakable Brooklyn accent.

“Ah, it’s pronounced Toe-feel Ar-sen-know, but yes, that’d be me.” I replied, facing the voice. “I take it you are Francis?” The name I was currently using was one I’d used the last time I lived here almost twenty years ago. It was very Acadian, or “Cajun,” as the locals said. Only a very few beings knew me by my true identity, Diomedes Tydides, onetime warlord and King of Argos. But that was more than thirty lifetimes ago.

Dressed in slacks and a worn tweed sack coat over a matching waistcoat, he stood there, wringing a cap in his hands. Nothing about the kid suggested he was anything other than human—and an uptight one at that. While people could certainly cause all kinds of trouble, mortal humans were a comfort compared to what I was used to dealing with.

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir, lemme grab your bag for you. The automobile is this way,” the kid said in his thick accent, grabbing my bag and heading toward a shiny dark-green 1917 Anderson 6-40 Combination Roadster parked just up Rampart.

“Well, Mr. Deringer, it is painfully obvious that you are *not* from these parts,” I said, easily falling back into my practiced Southern drawl.

“No... no, sir. I’m from Brooklyn. They just assigned me down here for me, um, my apprenticeship,” the boy replied sheepishly while working to convert the car from its roadster form into a more comfortable five-seater by unfolding the rear seat.

“Ah, well, no matter,” I replied, climbing into the back of the vehicle. “*Allons-y!*”

“Pardon?” he replied.

“Forgive me. It means ‘let us go’ in the local vernacular,” I said.

“Right away, Mr. Arceneaux,” he said, drawing out the name, recalling how to pronounce it properly.

The kid turned the car around on the narrow street, headed us down Howard Avenue toward Lee Circle, and veered around the monument onto Saint Charles Avenue then up toward City Hall and Lafayette Square.

“Where are we headed first, Francis?” I asked, not really caring.

“The main office. It’s only a block from City Hall since we was contracted by the city to help keep an eye on the growth of the local Mafia.” Taking in the sights as we drove, I found it hard to miss the significant changes taking place in the city.

We pulled into a broad alleyway next to a three-story redbrick building adorned with the ubiquitous iron lace along the porches lining the front façade for which the local architecture was

known. Everything in this part of town appeared to have been built recently or was currently under construction.

“The whole third floor’s ours,” Francis said, beaming as he clambered out of the roadster and grabbed for my bag. “We enter around the back. Front entrance is for payin’ stiff’s.” His enthusiasm made me grin as I followed him around the building to a set of rickety stairs.

“I was under the impression that this office dealt specifically with City Hall and Mayor Behrman rather than the public,” I said in response to Francis’s comment about “paying stiff’s.”

“This office, yeah, but they still ask us to use the back entrance to come and go,” he replied. “Plus, it’s safer some times. Not so public, if you get my meaning. We got a public office down in the French Quarter.”

“Indeed. Safer, you say?” I asked, eyeing the dubious stairway.

Francis ignored me and began climbing without concern. We made it to the top of the poorest excuse for a wooden fire escape I had ever seen to a windowless door on the top floor. It was the only entrance onto the unstable structure. Francis dropped my bag on the narrow landing—shaking the entire structure—and removed his cap. Scratching at his head, he mumbled to himself. Finally, he nodded then knocked three times. He waited then knocked once more before trying the knob. The door opened outward, seriously decreasing the space on the tiny landing. The whole thing was clearly defensive in design. Inside the door, two men flanked the entryway, holding shotguns.

I followed Francis into a large dark office area occupied by two desks manned by a young blonde and a middle-aged brunette clacking away on typewriters. Heavy smoke from cigars and cigarettes filled the space, instantly making my eyes water and my lungs burn. There were four doors off the room—two directly behind the desks and one to either side. I couldn’t identify any other entrances to *this* office.

The blond typist glanced up and smiled brightly at Francis as we walked in. Both of the secretaries were somewhat less than lookers, but they were probably great typists—especially the older brunette. The kid smiled back at the blonde, dropped my suitcase—again—and adjusted his cap as he approached her.

Francis sat on the edge of the woman’s desk, and I stood in awkward silence for several seconds while Francis desperately tried to make time with the woman. Finally, bored by the

whole scene, I cleared my throat—trying not to cough up a lung from the smoke—and earned a brief, reproachful scowl from the brunette. She *definitely* ran things around here.

“Excuse me, miss, but in which office might I find the agent in charge here?” I gave her my smoothest Southern accent, laying on the charm, figuring if I made friends with her, it might make my stay in New Orleans easier.

“Are you Arceneaux?” she asked while continuing her typing.

“I am he,” I said, “but you may call me Theophile.”

She gave me a quick once-over then went back to typing. I knew I wasn’t bad looking, dressed in a new light-gray Norfolk jacket, matching slacks, and a bowler, but I insisted on wearing a full beard and mustache, which given the current time of the Red Scare, wasn’t very popular. I guess I came across as too Eastern European or like a dockworker. That was what I told myself, anyway. *Whatever. I’m not here to socialize.*

“Agent Carson will be with you as soon as he arrives this morning,” she said then glared at me. “You may wait here, Agent Arceneaux.” She stressed my last name as she said it, clearly establishing any relationship we might have had as a working one and making it known that my presence was unwanted. *She couldn’t have been clearer if she were made of glass.*

I took a seat in one of only two wooden chairs in the room. While I waited, I wondered if telling her I was a veteran of the Great War would earn me any points. American patriotism was high, based on our recent victory over the Kaiser. That information was likely in my file, though, so that was doubtful. Then I wondered, mostly maliciously, what her reaction would be if she knew I was over three millennia old and that my being here meant something truly horrible was going on in the Crescent City.

The idea made me smile, but then it caused me to refocus my attention, too. I sighed, coughing slightly. Nasty situations were my bread and butter. *And it’s lunchtime once again.*

Chapter 3

Not even ten minutes later, two men came through the door—one in a serious huff while the other trailed behind with a constipated expression on his face. The man in the lead was taller than me, but leaner, with sandy-brown hair and a huge bushy mustache waxed into curls at the ends. His bright-blue eyes were ablaze even in the dark, smoky room, and he puffed a cigar as he tore through the room, tossing his derby onto one of the desks. He resembled a train steaming out of the station. The tension in the office became palpable.

The man following him wasn't much smaller, though he was much darker—Italian maybe—but he was clearly cowed by the other. He stopped at the blonde's desk, smiled wistfully at the secretary, then spoke quietly to Francis, who promptly darted out of the office with a nod and tip of his cap to the blonde. The brunette secretary stood, handed the uptight man a stack of papers, then pointed at me. The man's reaction was far from hospitable. I was beginning to resign myself to being *persona non grata* around the office when I decided that the brunette had big teeth. That made me feel slightly better for some reason.

“Agent Arceneaux?” he asked, clutching the papers to his chest like a professor carrying too much and clearly exasperated by having yet another thing to worry about.

“Call me Theophile,” I replied, getting to my feet and extending my hand.

“Toe-feel? So that's how it's pronounced,” he began without taking my hand. “We all assumed it was ‘The-o-philly,’ but then none of us are locals. Follow me.”

He headed into one of the two offices behind the secretaries' desks, and I followed. The door remained open behind us. Inside the office, he dropped the stack of papers on his desk and took off his jacket, revealing a Beretta Glisenti model 1915 in a shoulder holster.

With a huge sigh, he turned to face me. “Toe-feel, was it?” He eyed me like he was about to begin a diatribe of some kind, then he abruptly stopped and stared at all the papers on his desk. “You want some coffee or something to drink?”

“No thank you,” I said, noting the placard on his desk. “Agent Dioguardi, is it?”

“Um, yes, but...”

I pointed at the nameplate.

“Ah, yes. Johnny Dioguardi,” he said, finally extending his hand. “Welcome to New Orleans. Well, welcome home, anyway.”

I shook his hand.

“It has been a while,” I replied. “Too long, in point of fact. I hear tell you boys have an issue down here.”

“An issue?” His face scrunched up in confusion for a moment before he regained his composure. “Oh, yes, the murders...”

The guy clearly was a bit addlebrained. I wondered if it was normal or because of a current situation.

All of a sudden, a bellow erupted from the office next door, rattling the walls and windows. Dioguardi started then went rigid, closing his eyes and breathing deeply. Somebody was screaming at someone or something. My guess was the human train. I also guessed he was Agent in Charge Carson. I could see why Dioguardi was jumpy. It took him a few seconds to recompose himself after the outburst.

“Penelope,” Dioguardi said politely through the open door to the blond secretary outside his office, “would you please get me a bicarbonate?” He sat back down heavily, thumping his chest and belching softly.

“Tell me about the murders,” I said, trying to get him to refocus.

“The murders, yes.” He reached into a drawer behind the desk and threw a fat folder across it at me.

The first piece of paper in the file was a typed document with New Orleans Police Evidence numbers across the top and stamped copiously with “Copy” in big red letters across it.

Hell, March 13, 1919

Editor of the Times-Picayune, New Orleans:

Esteemed Mortal:

They have never caught me, and they never will. They have never seen me, for I am invisible, even as the ether that surrounds your earth. I am not a human being, but a spirit and a fell demon from the hottest hell. I am what you Orleanians and your foolish police call the axeman.

When I see fit, I shall come and claim other victims. I alone know whom they shall be. I shall leave no clue except my bloody axe, besmeared with blood and brains of he whom I have sent below to keep me company.

If you wish, you may tell the police to be careful not to rile me. Of course, I am a reasonable spirit. I take no offense at the way they have conducted their investigations in the

past. In fact, they have been so utterly stupid as to not only amuse me, but His Satanic Majesty, Francis Josef, etc. But tell them to beware. Let them not try to discover what I am, for it were better that they were never born than to incur the wrath of the axeman. I don't think there is any need of such a warning, for I feel sure the police will always dodge me, as they have in the past. They are wise and know how to keep away from all harm.

Undoubtedly, you Orleanians think of me as a most horrible murderer, which I am, but I could be much worse if I wanted to. If I wished, I could pay a visit to your city every night. At will, I could slay thousands of your best citizens, for I am in close relationship with the Angel of Death.

Now, to be exact, at 12:15 o'clock (earthly time) on next Tuesday night, I am going to pass over New Orleans. In my infinite mercy, I am going to make a little proposition to you people. Here it is:

I am very fond of jazz music, and I swear by all the devils in the nether regions that every person shall be spared in whose house a jazz band is in full swing at the time I have just mentioned. If everyone has a jazz band going, well, then, so much the better for the people. One thing is certain, and that is some of those persons who do not jazz it on Tuesday night (if there be any) will get the axe.

Well, as I am cold and crave the warmth of my native Tartarus, and as it is about time that I have left your homely earth, I will cease my discourse. Hoping that thou wilt publish this, that it may go well with thee, I have been, am, and will be the worst spirit that ever existed either in fact or realm of fancy.

The Axeman

A cold shiver shot down my spine, and I stared at Dioguardi once I'd finished.

“Yep. The *Times Picayune* got that yesterday, and the police have asked them not to publish it until tomorrow. The whole damn town is already on edge. And I mean everyone—the war, the Spanish flu, the Mob... and now this. We were brought down here to deal with the growing Mob threat, not this stuff.”

“So why are the Pinkertons involved with this at all?” I asked.

“Well, so far, most of the attacks seem to have been directed at Italian grocers all around the city, and a group of police detectives thinks it's Mafia related. The mayor wants us to make sure it's not some kinda turf war developing. On the other hand, a lot of the hoo-doo locals think

it's actually supernatural. We're all a bunch of New York gang guys. We don't know how to deal with the local superstitions and stuff—voodoo and all that rigmarole. Home office sent us you because hopefully, *you* can give us some insight into the local perspective.”

I sat quietly for a minute. The axe murder thing in the letter didn't bother me as much as the “fell demon from Tartarus” part did. *And what the hell is the whole Satanic Majesty Francis Josef about?* Either the writer was a certifiable loony or something had, in fact, escaped Tartarus and was playing Lizzy Borden with the locals. I assumed the latter, because Athena wouldn't have arranged for me to come otherwise. *Just peachy.*

Still, I needed to know what types of nonhuman creatures might be causing trouble, and the simplest source of that information would be the one human who had been in control of the city's underworld for the past few decades. If that didn't pan out, I would be forced to wander, uninvited, into all the “hoo-doo” that Dioguardi mentioned.

“I take it ‘Millionaire Charlie’ Matranga is still the capo here?” I asked, alluding to the man who had been the head of the Matranga crime family since the 1880s.

“Yes,” he replied, “We haven't been able to identify any other active families here, so the Matrangas are it, but they are building.”

“He still got his place over in the District?”

“District?” Dioguardi asked with a confused expression. “Oh, you mean Storyville. Well, the Department of the Navy officially closed Storyville a few years ago, but he still runs his place there, yeah. Why?”

“I think maybe I should go have a chat with him.” I got up from my chair, hat in hand.

“We've already checked that angle pretty thoroughly. Believe me, it's a dead end. The Mob has nothing to do with it.”

“Did you talk with him directly?” I asked, heading for the door.

“Of course not. We talked to our usual informants. You can't just walk right in to Matranga's place—” He tried to move out from around his desk to intercept me, but I had already cleared his office door.

I might have heard him say “wait” and “stop” before I walked out the door, but I could have just been imagining things.