**Hell for Leather**

Lawrence Watt-Evans

The odor reached her a few seconds after jingle of the front bell; she wrinkled her nose and, always wary of offending a customer, kept her voice low as she muttered, “What the heck is that smell?” She looked up from the invoices and peered over the counter.

Someone was on the other side of the main coat-rack, poking through the wall display of whips, handcuffs, and fetish gear — someone short, as all she could see of him was a rat’s nest of hair and the black-gloved hand fondling the merchandise. The smell was almost certainly coming from him, but it wasn’t at all any of the usual unwashed-customer odors; it wasn’t sweat or cigarettes or poor hygiene, but a horrid stench of decay.

She wondered if the little guy might be seriously ill. That was not a healthy smell.

He was taking down a whip, and she decided the time had come to say hello. She pushed back her chair, rose, and strolled around the end of the counter.

He cracked the whip, and she picked up the pace; an amateur with a whip could do some expensive damage. “Can I help you find...” she began.

Then she rounded the end of the coat rack, and the word “...something” died in her throat as the customer — if he was a customer, after all — looked up at her.

He grinned, an impossibly wide grin full of far too many teeth, all of them pointed. A wisp of smoke curled up from his left nostril, and his immense pointed ears folded back against the sides of his head. He flicked the whip gently, sending a ripple down its four-foot lash.

“Urk,” she said.

“Don’t need any urk,” he said, in a voice like air brakes talking. “This whip’s pretty good, though — looks like if you put a barb in it it’d strip the flesh right off.” He flicked it again. “And the smell’s mostly just brimstone, with maybe a bit of putrescine, a dab of cadaverine in the mix — yes, I heard you, these ears aren’t just for show.”

“I didn’t mean to be rude.”

“Don’t sweat it.” He chuckled. “You aren’t supposed to like the way I look and smell.”

That was obvious.

He stood about five feet tall, and three feet wide, on clawed feet covered in greasy black fur. The dirty tennis shorts that were almost his only clothing did little to conceal that he was grotesquely, disgustingly male. His protruding belly was as furred as his feet, while the sunken chest above showed stringy gray flesh between scattered clumps of black hair. His head was large and misshapen, topped with a tangle of black hair that, she now saw, did not entirely conceal his two stubby horns. His eyes seemed to shift between bilious yellow and reddish-gold, and glowed faintly. His black gloves hid his hands, but she was fairly certain they would have claws.

He was, in short, a demon. He really couldn’t be anything else. She had never really believed in demons, but with one right in front of her she was not going to waste time trying to tell herself it was a costume or an illusion or a dream. She believed what she saw, and what she saw now was a demon.

“But I... Right.” She swallowed. Demon or not, he was presumably a potential customer. “Was there something I could help you with?”

“Probably a lot of things, honey, but let’s stick to business for now. This whip, here — you got more of these?”

“I believe we do, yes. How many did you want?”

“About ten thousand. To start.”

She closed her eyes and bit her lip, then opened them again. “We don’t have anything like that many,” she said.

“So how many do you have?”

“I’d have to check.”

“You do that, chickie.”

She hesitated. She was alone in the shop; Bruce had called in sick, and Genevieve couldn’t make it until 2:00. Going into the back room to dig out the entire supply of Quick Flick #3 whips would leave the cash register untended, the stock unguarded against shoplifters — and a demon loose in the store.

“I think I’d like to know a little more of what you have in mind first,” she said.

“What I have in mind, Angela baby, is buying enough whips from your precious little store to pay your rent for the next thousand years. This isn’t a problem, is it? Don’t you like money?”

“Sir, if you don’t mind my saying so, that seems a bit silly. If you really need ten thousand whips — well, first, I can’t imagine what you could possibly need ten thousand whips for, but more importantly, for an order that size, you must realize you could just go to the manufacturer and get a volume discount. If you buy them here at Nice ’n’ Knotty, we’ll charge you full retail.”

“Well, I was hoping we could, y’know, make some sort of deal on that.”

Angela stared at his hideous face.

“Sir,” she said, “I’m afraid that I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

The somewhat-faded grin vanished completely. “No, please,” he said. “Don’t do that.”

“I’m afraid...”

“No, wait! I can explain everything. Please don’t make me leave.”

The sensible thing to do would be to order him out of the store, then get to a phone and call the cops and tell them there’d been an attempted hold-up — they wouldn’t believe any stories about demons, but they’d come for an ordinary thief. And the sooner she got him out of here, and that whip away from him, the better — eventually he would realize she was alone, and that he could easily overpower her even without the whip. He hadn’t done anything threatening yet, but the one thing everyone agreed on about demons was that you can’t trust them. He might have wanted her to go in back so he could rape her without being seen from the street, after all.

From the look of him, she had serious doubts about surviving such a rape. She swallowed.

But on the other hand, he was almost pleading now, he looked genuinely worried, he still hadn’t made any threats or hostile moves, and she was as curious as a kitten as to who he was and what he was doing there.

“I’m listening,” she said, stepping back just a bit. “When I stop believing you’re telling the truth, out you go.”

“Fine, fine,” he said. “Okay, first off, my name’s Lorifer, and I’m just a supply imp, a Lickspittle Fourth Class. I’m in charge of supplying some of Hell’s torturers with certain equipment. I don’t do the big cauldrons, the burning sulfur’s someone else’s turf, but when one of the binders needs a length of rope, or a flogger needs a whip, it’s my job to put one in his hand toot sweet.”

Angela swallowed. “Torturers,” she said. She glanced at the fetish wall.

“Yeah, torturers,” Lorifer said. “Not the silly games your customers play, the real thing. I mean, I work in Hell, baby, the underworld, the lake of fire, the infernal regions, Satan’s sanctuary, Lucifer’s domain, the Bad Place. We torture the damned. Ten billion served.”

Angela shuddered. “You mean it’s real?”

“Well, of course it’s real! You think someone made up all that stuff? What kind of sick mind would do that?”

“I don’t know.”

“No one, that’s who. No one human, anyway. God and Satan worked it all out when they made their armistice, back when, after Satan tried a little self-promotion and got his ass kicked out. If you want to blame anyone, blame them — but anyway, that’s not the point. The point is, my job is providing the torturers with stuff. Mostly it’s easy, I can get ropes and chains and blades at any hardware store, but some things get tricky, and one of those is whips.”

“You don’t make those in Hell?”

He gave a disgusted snort. “No, of course not. Don’t you get it? Hell doesn’t do creation. We don’t make anything but pain and misery and degradation. That’s the deal. Not exactly the greatest bargain I ever heard of, but you know, the boss had just lost a war, pretty much unconditional surrender, and he wasn’t really in a position to argue terms, so making anything is the other side’s prerogative. We have to get all our stuff elsewhere — which is to say, from you guys here on Earth.”

“Oh.” She glanced at the fetish goods again. “And you use whips?”

“Well, duh. Yes, we use whips.”

“You don’t just throw everyone in a lake of burning sulfur and leave them there?”

“Not forever — they’d get used to it eventually, and we can’t have that. Gotta break it up, can’t ever let them think it’s as bad as it can get; we want them to know it can always get worse. So we let ’em stew in the brimstone for fifty or sixty years, then pull ’em out and flog ’em to ribbons, then maybe crush them under a millstone, or freeze ’em in ice, or give ’em another turn in the brimstone — we try to vary it, you know, not let it get into a rut where they know what’s coming. Whips are a big part of the whole experience, gotta have ’em if only for variety. And while they’ll generally give a beating for a long time, they don’t last forever.”

“Oh,” Angela said again, feeling a bit queasy.

“So it’s my job to get whips to the torturers. Now, for a long time, that was pretty easy — you guys had whips all over the place, for beating on each other, or on horses, or on oxen, or whatever. But then you went and got civilized, and then you went and invented the automobile, and my job got so much harder you wouldn’t believe it. I mean, I kept the last couple of buggy-whip manufacturers in business all by myself for a few years, stocking up — I was kind of hoping that this whole car thing was just a passing fad that would blow over in a couple of decades, but I could see it might take awhile, so I built up a good big reserve. Lasted me almost a century, even at the rate we wear the things out, but it’s gone now, and your stupid horseless carriages aren’t, so I’m back, and places like this are about the best place I can find to buy whips.”

“What about tack shops?”

“Most of them, all they have is those wimpy little things, or the longe stuff that’s too stiff; I need something flexible with some reach. It’s you or the rodeo supply guys, and frankly, you’re cheaper.” He sighed. “You know, I really thought for awhile that when you guys realized how dangerous automobiles are, you’d give them up. Thousands dead every year, tens of thousands, but no, you keep on driving. Gory movies in driver’s ed class didn’t do squat; Ralph Nader’s scare stories just got you to make the damned things safer, not give them up. The Arab oil embargo — when that didn’t work, we gave up. Nothing short of divine intervention’s gonna get you out of the driver’s seat, we see that now, which means buggy whips aren’t coming back.”

“You wanted us to give up our cars?”

“Well, I did,” Lorifer said, “and some of the others. The lust guys were all in favor of keeping them; the theft department, too. Upper management kind of seesawed.”

“Um.” Angela blinked. “So okay, you want whips — why not order them wholesale? Why come to me?”

“Because of the terms,” Lorifer said. “Because we deal in souls.”

“What?”

“We can only make deals with people with souls. That’s the rule. Even if we aren’t buying someone’s soul, we aren’t allowed to deal with anyone who hasn’t got one. Our bargains all require swearing on one’s soul to be binding — signatures aren’t enough, even when they’re signed in blood. No soul, no hellish business.”

“You’re saying that whip manufacturers don’t have souls?”

“Angela, baby, whip manufacturers are corporations. Corporations are soulless; everyone knows that. We can’t buy from corporations. Gotta stick to sole proprietorships — which is getting harder all the time, even for hardware stores.”

“So I... oh.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t just chance that I walked in here when you had the place to yourself. Nice ’n’ Knotty Leather Goods, Angela Christian, sole proprietor and general manager. Sorry for what we did to Bruce, I had to call in a favor from one of the Asmodeus boys, but he’ll be fine by Friday, I promise.”

“So you’re here to barter for my soul?”

The demon’s eyes rolled up, and he let out a long, exasperated sigh. “No, I’m here to barter for whips. I need as many as you can get me, as fast as you can get them to me — I’ve got back-orders for about ten thousand, and I’d like to stock up a little. You can keep your soul. I mean, if you want to sell it, I could call a broker and get you a pretty fair price, and I won’t say I’d turn down the commission, but that is absolutely not what I came for.”

“I can’t get you ten thousand whips. I can maybe get you three or four hundred, and even that is going to get questions.”

“Three or four...?” The demon winced. “Well, damn, it’s a start, anyway. I’ll take it — and when you can get more, you let me know.”

“Uh... how were you planning to pay for them?”

“Do you take Visa?”

Angela snorted with involuntary laughter. “From you? I don’t think so.”

Lorifer grimaced. “Smart girl; the card’s stolen. Okay, then, how about gold?”

The laughter vanished. “Real gold?”

“Yes, real gold. Come on, don’t be petty.”

“I’d prefer cash. I’m not a jeweler.”

Lorifer sighed again. “Another step. Okay, fine. Good old American dollars. I don’t have it on me; when’s good?”

Angela glanced back at the calendar over the counter. “Tuesday?”

“Tuesday it is. Ten a.m., say?”

“All right.”

“Then I’ll be here with the cash and a bill of sale — gotta have the paperwork, management insists. You can bring a needle, or we can use one of my claws.”

“Needle?”

“For your signature.”

“I thought you said you didn’t need it signed in blood.”

“No, I said signing in blood wasn’t enough.”

She glanced at his gloves and shuddered. “I’ll bring a needle.”

“Now, about the price...”

“It’s marked.” She pointed to the tag.

“Yeah, but can’t I get a discount? I mean, four hundred of these babies...”

“You need them fast, you pay a premium.”

“Oh, come on. I’m on a budget.”

Angela opened her mouth, then stopped, as the reality of her situation hit her.

She was making a deal with the devil.

Well, okay, not the Devil, but one of his minions — a Lickspittle Fourth Class had to count as a minion. She’d seen enough old movies and “Twilight Zone” episodes to know that was dangerous. One wrong step could endanger her immortal soul, and condemn her to an eternity of torment!

Half an hour ago she hadn’t really thought she had an immortal soul, but now its eventual fate was the most important thing she could imagine.

She hesitated; was that really true? The only proof she had was that there was a demon in her shop.

But really, that was enough.

And she was talking about not just having dealings with Hell, but selling this demon instruments of torture. That couldn’t be good. Selling people whips and bondage gear as toys was one thing, selling whips to flay poor damned souls was another.

But it was a lot of money, and those people were already in Hell, and the demon would undoubtedly find a source somewhere, and...

Inspiration struck.

“Okay, here’s the deal — 15% off if you put a warranty on my soul that I won’t ever go to Hell. In writing. In blood.”

Lorifer blinked at her.

“I can’t do that,” he said.

“Why not? If you guys can make contracts saying you do get specific souls, then you can make contracts saying you don’t.”

“Well, yeah, I guess, but I can’t; I’m just a supply imp. You’d need a soul broker.”

“So? Get one.”

He shook his head, dislodging a large spider. “Not for 15% off — I’d have to pay a back-commission, and I can’t...”

“20% off.”

“I...” He hesitated. “Thirty?”

“Twenty-five.”

“You understand that this would only apply to Hell, right? It wouldn’t rule out purgatory; that’s a franchise operation, we don’t hold sway there.”

Angela frowned. “Purgatory’s not eternal, though, right?”

“Technically, no, but you could get a few million years even if you don’t go all Pol Pot or anything. I mean, if you start eating babies for Sunday dinner you could wind up the last soul in purgatory, a few billion years from now when Earth’s a cinder and the sun’s gone cold, before you finally get your pass.”

She shuddered. “I wasn’t planning to eat any babies, thanks.”

“Okay, but then I don’t quite see why you want a Get Out of Hell Free card, when you’re an Episcopalian and all — you’ve already got the whole confession-penance-repentance option for the ordinary stuff.”

“Insurance,” Angela said. “Just playing it safe. So, twenty-five? That’s one-quarter off list, and the soul thing, it’s not like you’d have gotten it anyway — after all, now I know you guys are all real...”

“Well, if we had sicced the Temptations Division on you — but yeah, okay, 25% off retail, and we warrant your soul.”

“Up front, no contingencies or hidden options.”

Lorifer sighed. “Yeah, yeah.”

“Then it’s a deal. Ten a.m. Tuesday.”

Reluctantly, Angela shook a black-gloved hand. Lorifer left, grinning.

It took a day and a half before the stench finally faded.

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By Tuesday morning Angela had bought up every serious whip from every leather goods warehouse in a three-hundred-mile radius, for a total of three hundred and eighty-six, baffling her suppliers.

“It’s a religious thing,” she had told them. “Special order.”

She had also gone over the conversation with Lorifer a hundred times, trying to remember for certain whether she had ever actually promised him four hundred, and whether the missing fourteen were going to be a problem. She had just concluded that she hadn’t ever said four hundred as a definite number when the bell jingled and Lorifer stepped in.

The smell reached her a few seconds later, and she knew she would need to air out the shop all over again.

The transaction went as smoothly as she could reasonably have expected, though she was not happy when she dumped out the contents of the manila envelope and discovered several of the bills had blood on them. Most of it was old and dried brown, but a couple of stains appeared fresh. She looked at Lorifer.

“Don’t ask,” he said. “You don’t want to know.”

With anyone else she might have argued, but with Lorifer she knew immediately that she really didn’t want to know. She counted the money, and made change — after calculating the price for the 386, the promised discount, and the sales tax, the demon got back a small stack of his well-used twenties and $2.54 from the register. She left the payment on the counter, though; the money wasn’t hers until everything else was settled. She demanded the agreement she was to sign.

Her chest tightened at the sight of it. Lorifer had called it a bill of sale, and even with the warranty on her soul she had been thinking of a simple little slip of paper; instead the demon thumped a thick wad of parchment on the counter

“I’ll have to read it,” she said apologetically. “After all, my soul is at stake.”

“Your idea, Toots, not mine,” Lorifer said.

The document was hand-written in fine uncial calligraphy, and was in blessedly... no, in damned large letters, with generous margins, making it easy to read and not as long and complex as she had feared — but then a thought struck her.

“There isn’t any fine print hidden in here, is there? Invisible ink, or anything like that? Nothing concealed?”

“Fine print’s on the last page. Nothing’s hidden — if we’re going to cheat, we don’t use cheap tricks like that. And in this case, for once we aren’t trying to cheat — I need you to keep on supplying whips.”

Angela grimaced, but kept reading.

Some of the phrasing was unfamiliar and unpleasant — the bit about “This instrument shall survive the mortality of the flesh and the passing of the natural world, unto eternity, and shall remain perpetually binding upon the parties, and upon no others, nor shall it transfer in whole or in part to their heirs, either spiritual or physical, neither shall it bind the fruit of their loins or the children of their blood, nor any person whose seal is not subscribed hereunder,” sounded suspicious at first, but upon consideration she could not see any way to twist its meaning into anything she didn’t want.

And finally, she reached the end and the dreaded fine print, which read simply, “This agreement shall be interpreted according to the laws of God and Man, as generally accepted in the Infernal Regions, the Celestial Realm, and the State of California.”

It seemed to be just what she had wanted, delivering a number of whips in excess of three hundred in exchange for an appropriate sum of money and a guarantee that her soul would never gain entry, willingly or otherwise, to the realm of eternal torment popularly known as Hell, with an option — but no requirement — for additional cash-only purchases. It looked right. She could see no loopholes or booby-traps. Even so, it took a ferocious struggle within herself before she could bring herself to thrust the needle into her finger and draw blood for her signature.

Lorifer waited patiently, and when at last the dark red blood welled up he handed her a sharpened goose-quill; she accepted it, dipped it in the oozing fluid, and signed.

Then she dropped the quill and hastily wiped both hands on a paper towel from under the counter, as Lorifer snatched up the document and grinned. “All done,” he said. “Now, was that so bad?”

“I guess not,” she said. “The boxes are over there.” She pointed.

He opened them, pawed quickly through the contents, emitted a satisfied grunt, then dropped the bill of sale in one and picked it up.

“I’m committed now, right?” Angela said.

“Committed to what?” Lorifer asked, as he heaved the first box up on his shoulder.

“To whatever I’ve agreed to by signing that thing.”

He glanced at her, looking puzzled. “You sold me these whips,” he said. “You can’t back out on that.”

“I mean about my soul.”

“Oh, sure — you won’t go to Hell. Even if you want to.”

“Why would I want to?”

“Well, we call that the Orpheus clause — we don’t want you poking around trying to fetch anyone out.” He bent to pick up the second box.

“So it’s too late to back out.”

“Right.”

“So can you tell me now whether there’s a catch? Have I been tricked? Is there something I’ve missed?”

Lorifer shrugged, then had to drop the second box to steady the one already on his shoulder. “Not really,” he said. “I mean, I could be cruel and leave you wondering, but I’m going to want as many more whips as you can get me A.S.A.P., so it’d be kind of stupid to piss you off that way. There’s no real catch. You’re safe from us — though the mere fact that you were willing to deal, instead of going ’retro me, Sathanas,’ has probably bought you a few weeks in purgatory’s boiling pitch. That’s not my department, though, and a good sincere confession may get you out of it.”

“That’s it?” Weeks bathing in boiling pitch sounded bad, but not that bad.

“For you. But see, we play the odds — there are billions of you humans, and you’re pretty much interchangeable as far as we’re concerned, so we’re willing to sign you away, because we know from long experience that if we give you a free pass, you’re likely to take advantage of it and do some real sinning. And y’see, the great thing about that, Angie, is that one sin leads to another — if you decide to raise a little figurative hell, you’re safe, but the odds are pretty good you’ll put a few other souls on our radar.” He gestured at the store’s stock — the studded black collars, the lace-front bustiers, the multi-zippered masks and hoods. “Some of this gear is just the sort of thing we love to see you people play with. It’s not that there’s anything inherently wrong with it, it’s just that it makes it easier to push things just a little too far. And now you can push things just a little too far, knowing that you’re safe — but the people you play with don’t have any guarantees. Even just spending the extra money you’re earning by selling to us might give someone a push in our direction — love of money is the root of our business, after all. We signed away a long-shot chance on you, and in exchange we improve our odds ever so slightly on everyone you mess with from now on. You’ll always have the temptation to screw over your enemies, knowing that it can’t hurt you in the extremely long run, but it might give us their business. Works for us.” He hoisted the final box into position.

She stared at him in horror.

“But I won’t do that,” she said. “I won’t. I’ll be good. I mean, now that I know Hell is real, I wouldn’t risk sending anyone there! Not even my enemies!”

“That’s what you tell yourself now,” he said, as he strode toward the door, “but we both know what my road home is paved with.”

He kicked the door open and stepped out.

“Have fun,” he called back over his shoulder.

She stared silently at the closed door for several seconds before asking quietly, “How?”

*end*