Pick a Card

By Brandy Dewinter

With grateful respect to Bill Hart and his creativity, I decided to try an SRU story. It can be archived by Mindy, and by anyone else who has Bill Hart's permission to archive SRU stories, as long as there is no charge for access.

SRU - Pick A Card (1/2)

"Shelly, please, don't go out tonight. Or, let's go somewhere we can be together."

"Why, darlin' there's no reason we can't go out together tonight."

"You know I can't go to those smoky bars you hang out in. My allergies could even make that fatal."

"Your loss," Shelly said airily, putting the last of her things in her purse for the evening. She had dressed in a too-tight, too-short mini and a stretchy top that showed every bit of her admittedly spectacular figure. At 35, she was still firm and shapely. In fact, with her long blonde hair and youthful clothing styles, she looked more like 25 than 35.

Not so for her husband, Rick. He was still trim and very fit, though he had to work at that a lot harder than Shelly did. But his hairline was receding so fast it wasn't clear that it was also rapidly turning grey. Though he was only eight months older than his wife, Rick looked at least 15 years her senior.

And his appearance was the lesser of their differences. In temperament he was even more her opposite. Where she had always been the life of any party she attended, and she attended a lot, he was much more comfortable at a play or a quiet dinner in a nice restaurant. Of course, his allergy to tobacco smoke was an even greater limitation on their mutual activities. About the only compatibility they seemed to share was that he had the money to pay for her habits. Not for the first time, Rick wondered if that were truly the reason she had married him.

He decided to try one more time, before she left. "Please, dear, why don't we go out to dinner instead. They're doing Twelfth Night at the Regent and I'm sure we can get tickets."

"Right," she snorted. "Like I want to go see some musty old tragedy when the gang is going to be dancing."

"Twelfth Night is a comedy," he muttered, but it was to her disappearing back.

SRU - Pick A Card (2/2)

The doorbell to the Applegate's home had been chosen more for its melodious tones than for its ability to penetrate sleep. But then, Rick Applegate hadn't really been asleep anyway. He was not-watching some late-night infomercial as he not-read his predicted financial report. Mostly he was waiting for the sound of the garage door. And waiting.

The doorbell startled him as effectively as an alarm clock, though. He jumped from his stupor and tried to get his tired mind to absorb the importance of the sound. Why would his doorbell be ringing at, what was it, 3:00 AM?

The policeman standing at the door knew about that sort of confusion. He had seen it entirely too many times. It wasn't as common to be telling a man his wife had died in a car crash as the other way around, but it certainly wasn't any easier. Especially since she hadn't been alone. He'd need to tell the husband that. It would be even harder if he found out later. Maybe even dangerous, since the man had escaped with only minor injuries. It wouldn't do to have the husband go into some blind rage after some well-meaning person told him about the wife's companion.

It seemed Rick's next conscious thought was of sitting on a bench in a local mall. At some level he knew that he had been going through the motions of funeral arrangements. Had even attended the funeral. He had been on his way to the office when he remembered their anniversary was coming up and he needed to get Shelly a gift. Autopilot had taken him to the mall and had moved his body along the corridors until he felt like sitting for a moment.

Across from him was a strange little store he didn't remember from before. He wasn't all that familiar with this mall, usually only coming in for gifts for his wife. The standard mall store had as big an opening as possible to lure shoppers in from the corridor, but this place had a regular wooden door and a glass front window like an outdoor shop.

"Spells R Us." He hadn't heard of that place.

With a start reminiscent of his shock at the late-night doorbell, Rick sat up and looked around. *What am I doing here?* he thought.

For a moment, the loss of his wife almost caused him to break down into tears. He wouldn't be needing any more anniversary presents. In an attempt to get his mind off his personal tragedy, he decided to go look into the little shop.

The tinkle of a tiny bell was reassuring somehow, no melodious chimes like his house with all of the attendant memories. Even the dusty confusion of the place seemed comforting. His home seemed so cold and sterile now that Shelly was gone. Rick was looking around the store, his orderly accountant's mind trying to figure out some rhyme or reason for the selection of merchandise displayed when an old man wearing a bathrobe came out of the back room.

For the first time since that fatal night, Rick laughed. The old man frowned for just a second, then concentrated for an equal time, then smiled in return.

"Yours is cleaner, Rick," the old man said.

"Huh, what did you say?" Rick asked.

"I said your robe is cleaner," the man repeated.

"How did you know that I have a robe just like that one?" Rick asked.

"I'm a wizard. I know lots of things," the man replied.

Usually this claim was good for some sort of emotion from the patrons of the old man's shop. Mostly disbelief, often humor, sometimes suspicion. Seldom anger. But that was Rick's response.

"Yeah, well, if you're a wizard, give me a spell to kill someone!"

Rick was as shocked by his outburst as the old man. He was not a violent person. He didn't even get angry very often, and when he did it was the sort of cold hardness that made him strong enough for the cutthroat world of big business, not this white-hot desire for murder. Yet it was real. He knew that even as the words were spilling from his snarling lips.

The old man who claimed to be a wizard peered at Rick for a long moment. His eyes appeared to look deeper than the surface in a way that deflated Rick's anger even as they respected it. Nodding abruptly, the old man walked along his counter and reached down for a deck of cards. Well, not really a deck. There were only a few cards in the small stack, maybe four or five.

He spread the cards out along the counter, face down, and said to Rick, "Pick a card."

There were four cards, it turned out, all identical as far as Rick could see.

"And if I do?" Rick asked.

"Then you will have the ability to kill the man who killed your wife."

"What do you know about my wife's death?"

"I know that she had too much to drink the night she was killed, Rohypnol in her bloodstream as well. Snyder poured her into her seat without even fastening her seat belt, and when he ran off the road from his own drinking, she was helpless when she was thrown from the car."

Then the old man continued with an even more shocking revelation, "And I know that this is not the first time he's done something like this. He left a woman dead in Texas from the same sort of accident. If you want to kill him, I can help."

Applegate looked around for some sort of surveillance trap, then said, "Look, I'm not really going to kill anyone. I was just popping off. Are you a cop?"

"No, I told you I'm a wizard. And I didn't say you'd kill him. I just said I'd give you the ability to kill him. Whether you do or not is up to you. There. Now I'm as guilty as you of conspiracy to murder. If you do kill him, that is."

The old man pointed to the cards again. Rick hesitated, moving closer to the counter but not reaching out.

"Well, if you're not a cop, then this sounds entirely too much like a deal with the devil. What's this going to cost me?"

"Your life as you know it," the man calmly replied.

"That's already over," Rick snorted dismissively.

"Then you've got nothing to lose," the old man claimed.

Rick looked at the man suspiciously, "What do you have to gain?"

The wizard was about to shrug off any suggestion of gain, but he realized that Rick was too used to the business world to trust someone who claimed to be doing something for nothing. Instead, he thought for a moment and then said, "Okay, how about this? You pick a card. In fact, I'll give you all the cards. One week from today you come back here and give them back to me, along with whatever you think is fair for a rental. I know you'll be fair."

This was almost the wrong line to take with Applegate. He had been in deals like this before and had a reputation of being more than fair. There was a twinkle in the old man's eyes now that showed he knew this about Rick, too. A part of him wanted to negotiate a firm price right now, yet, what price? A few cards, part of a deck, were almost worthless if there was no magic, and of what value if there was?

Compulsively, as though someone else were jerking strings on his arm, Rick reached out and turned over the third of the four cards, a Queen of Clubs.

"Okay, I picked one," he snapped.

"Look at it, closely," the old man ordered.

Rick picked it up and stared at the face card. It was standard, as far as he could tell. No Tarot peculiarities, just a two-headed woman in a somewhat ornate outfit. Well, actually, it was a bit peculiar. Instead of the outfit looking like some sort of color design in the material of the Queen's outfit, it seemed more like a symmetric metal design over simple leather. And didn't the card Queens usually have some sort of headdress instead of showing long dark hair?

The eyes were strange, too, though they hadn't seemed so just a second before. They were brilliant blue and seemed to be looking right at him. He found them strangely compelling, deeper than a thin card should be. Larger, too.

Larger than even a real person's eyes. So large that they seemed to be larger than him, swelling up to surround him, consume him, swallow him into their crystal depths.

Regina Morningstar looked down at her warrior's outfit, and then down at the old man. She was taller than he, taller in fact than Rick had been. The whirls of metal armor that covered her leather minidress seemed to dance as she breathed with the shock of reawakening. The sword in the sheath over her shoulder whispered out in unconscious reflex as she tried to take in her unfamiliar surroundings.

"So, old man, you've called me out again," the dark-haired woman said.

"Actually, it wasn't me. Another has called you. He has a righteous battle to fight. You must listen to him."

"Right, like I'm going to surrender control of my body again like you made me do the last time," snarled the tall warrior.

"I didn't say that," the old man denied. "I just said you should listen to him."

"Him? I missed that the first time. You mean there's a guy inside of me?" she snapped.

"Yes. His wife was killed by a predatory man. He wants revenge. In fact, he thinks he wants to kill the man."

"Well, killing some predatory scum is all right with me, but I don't need to surrender control to do it," she replied with a toss of her smooth ebony tresses.

"Some time has passed since your last visit," the old man warned. "You could probably use at least listening to what he has to say."

"Yeah, maybe. If I get curious, I'll ask him. Do I get the rest of the cards this time, too?" she asked, pointing to the still-unturned cards.

"Yes, or at least he does. You won't be able to change unless he focuses on the cards through your eyes."

"Right, I know the drill," she said as she gathered in the remaining cards. "Now, where is this creep that needs killing?"

The old man just smiled at the tall warrior woman and said nothing.

"Fine, be that way. I'll find him on my own," she growled and turned for the exit. Somehow the tinkle of the little bell seemed silly rather than cute as it announced her departure.

The leather-clad warrior had only taken a few steps from the door of the shop when a child's piercing cry split the air.

"Xena!" he yelled. The caller was a boy about ten years old, now tugging frantically on his mother's hand.

"Mama, there's Xena! We need to talk to her!"

The warrior woman looked around first at the shout and then to see who the kid was yelling about. In a heartbeat it was clear that she herself was the object of the kid's attention.

The boy's mother let herself be pulled toward the taller woman and tried to get her child to make a little less noise.

"Are you really Xena?" the boy asked Morningstar. His eyes were almost as large as her chakram, and his mouth almost as round. She had no clue who he was talking about, and in her confusion, she surrendered just enough control to hear an internal voice shouting with frantic energy.

Hey! Let me out! Who are you?

Who are you? she thought to herself.

I'm Rick Applegate. The wizard told me to turn over a card and all of the sudden I was inside looking out from your body.

Oh. Yeah. The wizard warned me about you she thought back at him.

Well, he didn't warn me about you! Applegate snarled inside her.

Let me out!

Can't do that, Morningstar replied. *At least, not yet. Look, we can cover all that later. First, can you do anything about this screaming kid if I let you talk?*

Huh? Sure. He just thinks you're a TV star.

TV? What's that? Never mind. Tell me later. First get rid of him.

From inside his shapely prison, Applegate suddenly realized he could talk. It was as though he felt a buzz in his own throat that told him he had at least limited control over his host's, or actually hostess's body.

Squat down to his level, Rick whispered in his own mind.

The tall woman squatted down with easy grace until she was eye to eye with the wide-eyed boy.

"What's your name," Rick asked.

"Tommy," the boy replied.

"Do you like the Xena show?"

"Yes, ma'am. I watch it every week," the boy politely answered.

"Well, I'm not really Xena. She's just a TV character. My name is, um," *Regina Morningstar* came a whispered comment, "Regina Morningstar."

"Morningstar? Like the club?" the kid asked.

"Very good!" Rick and Regina replied together, providing an odd echo to the words.

Tommy's mother smiled at the praise for her boy. "He's really interested in ancient weapons. Not many his age even know what a morningstar is. So, Miss, um, oh, I get it. Regina. Heh. Queen of the Club. Cute. Are you an actress, too?"

Rick tried to just nod, but those muscles weren't his to control, so he answered verbally, "Yes, ma'am. I'm here to promote the action figures. You can get them at the Spells R Us store."

"Don't you mean Toys R Us?" the mother smiled.

"Oh, yes. Sure." Rick replied. Regina stood their body up and started to move down the mall. The boy's eyes still seemed too large for his head, but he let himself be pulled toward the toy store though he kept staring over his shoulder at the tall, dark-haired warrior woman.

What's TV? Regina asked internally.

It's a device that shows moving pictures, with sound. People put on, um, plays and they are displayed on the television, explained Rick.

Just then they passed a reflective wall of glass and Rick caught sight of his new appearance. His shock at the image allowed him to exert a bit more control for a second and he brought them to an abrupt halt.

Wow! he gasped.

Reflected in the glass was the spitting image of Xena the Warrior Princess as created by Lucy Lawless. Six feet tall, leather minidress with shiny bronze armor, knee-high boots, and long raven hair.

You're gorgeous, he blurted out.

Why, thank you, Regina smirked.

The pause was a problem, though. More calls of, "Xena!" could be heard as additional children, and a few adults, started to converge.

We've got to get away from these crowds, Regina thought.

Not dressed like you are, we won't Rick replied in a sentence confused by their dual nature.

*I can fix that, if we can find a bit of privacy for a moment," Regina promised.

Okay, duck in there, Rick indicated with a mental picture. Since virtually all of the interested patrons had been male, they were soon safe behind the door to a ladies restroom.

Another mall customer came walking out of a stall, fastening up her jeans as she moved to the counter. It was a quite attractive young woman, a natural redhead as demonstrated by a few hairs straying out from behind her tiny panties. Rick blushed so hard that a bit of that got through, too, leaving Regina looking embarrassed to the other girl.

"Sister, I'd need to hide, too, if I wore an outfit like that," the redhead laughed at Regina.

"Yeah, well, that's, um, what they told me to wear," Regina managed to get out while Rick was still trying not to look at the girl's panties as they peeked through her too-tight jeans.

"Damn," the girl said, "I have got to lose some weight. Can you help me for a second?"

"Um, sure," Regina replied. "What do you want me to do?"

"Just squeeze the sides a little," the redhead requested. Regina's strong hands held the zipper close enough that the girl could finish closing her pants. Rick blushed even harder as he couldn't get Regina to look decently away from the redhead's body.

Settle down, Regina demanded as the girl left. *It's no big deal.*

Not for you, maybe, but the only woman I ever got that close to is my wife! Rick declared, then a sad tone crept into his mental voice as he corrected himself, *or was.*

The wizard told me your wife was killed. You want to get the guy who did it?

Yes, Rick answered. *I'll kill him if I can.*

Well, now you can, Regina declared. *How? Are you going to do it?*

Probably not, replied Regina, then seemed to jump topics.

How much did the wizard tell you about me, and the cards? *Nothing,* Rick replied. *He told me to pick a card, then concentrate on it. Next thing I knew, I was in here and you were, well, here.*

That's about what I thought, Regina mused. *Well, here's the situation. If you concentrate on any of the cards, you become the character on the card. The Queen of Clubs becomes Regina Morningstar, and so on.*

And so on? Rick asked.

Oh, it will be easier just to show you, Regina replied as she drew the cards from behind her belt.

Let's see, she mused as she glanced quickly at the four cards, *to get where we want to go, money is always handy.*

She selected the Queen of Diamonds and held it up to their eyes. *Concentrate on this card now.*

Rick was still trying to get a look at the other cards out of the corner of their eye. *All the cards are queens!*

Of course, Regina replied. *Now concentrate!*

Rick finally let his attention focus on the card held by Regina. In a moment he again felt the eyes of the figure on the card seem to grow and envelop him. This time they were standing in front of the mirror in the ladies room so he could see their new appearance immediately. In place of a six-foot brunette in armor and leather, he saw a blonde of more ordinary stature. She was dressed in a dark red power suit, complete with heels and a frilly blouse. Her movements showed more briskness than the languid power of Regina Morningstar, but they were just as graceful in their own way. She was, if anything, even more beautiful, though in a very sophisticated style.

Wow! he exclaimed again.

Thank you, kind sir, the mental voice giggled.

Um, who are you? he asked.

I'm Regina Diamond. I suppose you could say that I'm the same person, but when I am in this persona, I'm a bit less . . . physical, shall we say?

With that the woman checked her flawless appearance in the mirror and strode from the powder room with an intriguing combination of purpose and feminine grace. Outside, a liveried chauffeur was waiting.

"Ah, Miss Diamond, are we ready?"

"I don't know about you, Charles, but I'm ready," Regina Diamond laughed in reply. Of course, it would never do for her chauffeur to keep her waiting, so they proceeded out the door to the mall. About a city block's worth of limousine was idling at the curb as 'Charles' hurried for the door. In moments, Regina was settled and Charles was asking for their destination.

Where do we go? Regina asked her inner companion.

Um, maybe to the bar where my wife met this Snyder guy, Rick answered.

He still felt the sense of being able to talk, so he used the crystal pure now-soprano tones of Regina Diamond's voice to answer Charles, "The Mystic Club, Everglade and 4th."

Where did Charles come from? Rick asked.

It doesn't matter, Regina replied. *He's part of the setting for this persona, like Regina Morningstar's sword. He goes away when I change form.*

Applegate was about to question her further, but just what rules would there be for magic anyway? Pseudo-people appearing and disappearing at need were no less likely than the other parts of this strange enchantment.

They reached the nightclub just as the crowd was reaching its frenzied peak. Regina Diamond sailed past the line like she owned the place, barely nodding to the bouncer at the door. The interior was just as smoky as Rick had feared, but it didn't bother him in this new form.

In fact, the smell didn't even seem to touch the pristine purity of Regina Diamond's elegant image.

Rick had seen Snyder at the hearing on his drunk-driving charge, but he almost didn't recognize him in this setting. The penitent, meek man who had convinced the judge to give him probation (for the eighth time, though not in this state) was not apparent in the arrogant confidence Snyder displayed as he hunted his favorite prey. Perhaps Regina Diamond was a bit less careful to maintain control of their body, or perhaps Rick was learning to exert a bit of his own control over their dual persona, but whatever the reason, as soon as Rick saw Snyder, Regina started moving that way.

Snyder happened to be at the bar so Regina slid sleekly onto a stool next to him and tapped her long fingernails to get the bartender's attention. It also got Snyder's attention.

Instead of rising to the bait, though, Snyder seemed to withdraw a little.

"Excuse me," he said, moving slightly away to give her room.

"For what?" Regina asked.

"Huh, um, well, for nothing, I guess. I just didn't want to crowd you," he replied.

"If I felt too crowded, I'd let you know," she said with a smile.

"Yes, ma'am," Snyder said as he ducked his head in an almost-bow.

This bow was subservient, though, not the courtly assumption of manners he had showed to Shelly.

Then he turned back to scan the rest of the room.

Ma'am? Rick asked in shock.

Oh, I get that a lot, Regina Diamond answered. *This guy is not interested in a relationship between equals. He wants to dominate. He'll find someone less, shall we say, regal?*

Oh. Then what do we do to get him alone so I, um, we, can kill him? We can't do it here in front of everyone.

Rick's question was met by an internal silence, yet even in the silence there was a sense of amusement floating lightly over his concern. In a moment, he understood.

Another card?

The internal sense changed to one of agreement, accompanied by movement as Regina Diamond stood and headed toward yet another ladies room. In the room, she quickly selected the Queen of Hearts card. There was enough of a crowd in the room that they couldn't do a transformation right there, so they went in to a stall before Rick concentrated on the image. In moments, he felt another transition, but they had to wait until the group of women in the room had cycled enough that it would be unlikely anyone would remember that the woman coming out of their stall had not been the one to go in.

When they emerged, the rich elegance of Regina Diamond had given way to a girl-next-door freshness. The dark red power suit had given way to a bright red minidress that was a bit too small for the abundant curves it had been tasked to cover. The mid-heel pumps had become quite a bit higher, and quite a bit flashier. The still-blonde hair was even longer, and thicker, and slightly tousled in a way that invited a caress.

Wow! Rick said as he looked in the mirror.

You're not terribly original, his internal companion laughed.

It seems strange to need to do this, since we're so 'close' but let me introduce myself. I'm Regina D'Amour.

That I can believe, Rick answered. It was a good thing he didn't have full control over 'their' body, since it wouldn't have looked right for him to be drooling at his own appearance. Regina D'Amour laughed out loud with a silvery giggle and swayed from the ladies room back into the main part of the club.

Just in time to see Snyder leaving with another woman. One who was close enough to Regina D'Amour, or to his Shelly for that matter, that Rick knew their new persona would have been successful in capturing his attention.

He's getting away! Rick groaned.

Oops, Regina agreed. *Well, maybe next time.*

But what if he kills that woman, too? Rick asked.

Well, he wasn't nearly as drunk tonight as he was on the night your wife was killed, Regina assured him.

I still don't like it, Rick grumbled.

Regina D'Amour was designed to be a guy magnet, and her design was very effective. Even as Rick was watching his target leave, Regina had become the target for a number of single men, or at least men who wanted to be single when she was around. Thankfully he could withdraw and let Regina handle the conversation while he tried to decide what to do.

Regina, he interrupted her. *We have to go get him. I can't stand by and let him screw up somebody else's life like he did mine.*

Oh, okay, party pooper, she grumbled. She had been enjoying the attention. Her persona was just too full of fun and happiness to feel bad in a social setting.

So what do we do? Risk asked. *Get Regina Diamond back so we have a car?*

That won't be necessary, Regina D'Amour announced. *Let's go outside.*

Rick played passenger again as they walked outside, then turned down a dark alley. Even in his masculine form he'd have hesitated before going into so threatening a place, but Regina D'Amour walked with breezy confidence into the darkness. Just before it got too dim to see, she selected out another card.

Look at this one, she commanded, and Rick complied.

The card was the Queen of Spades, and as he looked at it Rick felt their body changing yet again. This time, their clothes turned into a skin-tight stretchy catsuit that flowed down to encompass soft-soled boots and dark gloves. In seconds, only full lips and ivory cheeks showed below a dark mask that highlighted luminous blue eyes. The tumble of blonde hair had become a cape of midnight dancing lightly on slender shoulders. It would be hard to say what the color of the catsuit was.

It must have been mostly black, but it threatened to fade into transparency with every breath, at every point where the taut material was stretched to cover smooth contour.

Regina Shadow, came the abrupt introduction.

Rick gulped and nodded, or tried to nod. Nothing external showed, but the intent was communicated. Regina Shadow waited for nothing further and flowed through the shadows back toward the street.

Do you know his address? she asked.

Yes, Rick answered. *Are we going to get a cab, dressed like this?*

Something like that, she replied. Once she had determined their destination, she slid silently through the dimness until they came to an overpass crossing a freeway headed in the right direction. She crouched on the bridge, then leaped into the darkness.

Once again it was a good thing that Rick's control was limited, for his scream of terror died in silence before it escaped from Regina's glossy lips. Instead of falling to their death, they fell only a few feet onto the top of a delivery truck. Regina's boots stuck to the top like glue, her gloved hands just as firmly, and they settled down for a windy but stable ride.

At the appropriate point, now only a few blocks from Snyder's residence, Regina jumped from the delivery truck and they merged with the shadows again until they stood on the roof of Snyder's apartment.

The rooftop entry was locked, but it took only seconds for Regina to pick the lock with tools that Rick had not noticed were hung about her belt. The crept along the hallway to the right door and listened. Inside, there were sounds of occupancy, though not of passion.

"Stupid bitch," Snyder was growling. "Passed out on me."

They heard the sounds of movement down an internal hallway, then the unmistakable sounds of Snyder relieving himself. Regina used this opportunity to pick the lock to his apartment and in seconds they were hidden in the shadows of the bedroom. The blonde who had been last seen hanging on Snyder's arm was sprawled on the bed. Her clothes had been roughly stripped from her, but something about the disarray implied that the evening's main event had not been realized.

What are you, the perfect cat burglar? Rick asked his current hostess.

Perfect assassin, Regina Shadow replied. *I don't need money.*

While Rick was trying to absorb this new information, Snyder walked back into the room and slapped at the slumbering girl. His only response was a soft, furry snore. Growling again, he shoved her to one side of the bed and slipped into his own side. In moments his own snores drowned out those of the sleeping girl.

When it was clear that he was soundly asleep, Regina stood up. She walked over to the sleeping pair and looked down on them.

Okay, Regina said internally, *here's your chance. Kill him.*

Rick saw target areas appear on Snyder's sleeping body and felt a tingle that let him know he had control over Regina's body. He knew that a strike at any one of several locations would result in Snyder's death.

Some would create results mimicking a heart attack, others would result in screeching agony that would cause enough pain to trigger a real heart attack. Any sort of death that he wanted could be inflicted on the sleeping man.

But he couldn't do it. Killing a man in cold blood was just not within the range of things he could stomach. He hated this man, make no mistake about that, but murder was as much a statement about himself as about this man.

I don't want to kill him, just hurt him, and get him to stop preying on women, he explained.

Sorry, can't help you with that, Regina Shadow replied. *You mean the perfect assassin doesn't know how to just hurt someone?*

Why bother? she answered.

Perfect assassin indeed, including no feelings of remorse.

Rick still couldn't do it. Then an idea came to him. He used the body control he possessed, but instead of reaching for the sleeping man, he reached for the cards. He decided he'd get out Regina Morningstar again. A warrior woman should be able to beat up somebody pretty well, he thought.

When he spread the cards out to look for the one he wanted, he found that there were five cards, not four.

The new card was a Joker, an ugly visage though not wearing the tassled hat and multi-pointed collar of a typical jester card. He felt the first stirrings of power as he looked at it, then quickly looked away.

Now where had that card come from? And why? He carefully put it back into the stack so that he wouldn't fall into its image. That would be horrible, to be that ugly, and you could just tell from looking at the face that the person would be stupid as well.

Rick carefully looked at the cards again, trying to find the Queen of Clubs. But the card that caught his eye was again the Joker card.

Again he shuffled the few cards together, deliberately moving the Joker card to the back of the deck. Again when he looked it was the first that he saw.

Rick was trying to decide what to do next when Snyder stirred. In the dim light, the aquiline planes of his face took on a harshness reminiscent of the angular ugliness of the Joker card, and Rick finally understood.

This time, he selected the card deliberately, being careful only to glance at it before turning it away. He put the other cards back in one of the utility pouches on Regina Shadow's belt, and then held the card facing away from him and toward Snyder. A gloved hand snaked out to the switch on the bedside lamp. When light flooded the room, Snyder's eyes squinted even more tightly closed for an instant, then tried to focus on the room.

"What's going on?" he asked as his eyes were captured by the card held before them.

He froze in place. A wave of change moved through the room as his lean body became gaunt, his sharply-chiseled features marred by deep acne scars, his eyes clouding as though intelligence were being leeched into the darkness.

The slender blonde next to him became pudgy, still blonde but with dark roots obviously showing. Her own face was marked by acne, evidence that her current lack of cleanliness was the habit of a lifetime.

The furnishings of the room became threadbare. The walls dissolved to reveal a single studio apartment, much smaller than the one they had entered. Clothes were strewn haphazardly, the closest thing to a statement of style being the multiple Domino's deliveryman shirts. A shimmer formed over the small TV to show a single photo of the woman and the man Snyder had become. She was in a too-tight dress and proudly holding a marriage certificate, while he was smiling foolishly.

With that event, the flow of transition stopped and Snyder collapsed back into sleep.

I still think you should have killed him, Regina Shadow said.

It might have been more merciful at that, Rick agreed, but his grin threatened to split even the full lips of his hostess's beautiful mouth.

Regina Diamond walked through the mall, casually window shopping. It had been a week since she had first obtained the cards from the wizard. She had promised to bring them back in a week. Or Rick had. The distinction was becoming hard to remember. After Regina Shadow left Snyder's apartment, now located in a run-down part of town, Rick realized that he didn't have a card to turn himself back into, well, himself. He thought about returning immediately to the shop, but somehow he hadn't gotten around to it.

Instead, he'd experimented with each of the queen cards (carefully avoiding the Joker card). It seemed that Regina Diamond's credit cards had no limits. Regina Morningstar, once they had obtained some more suitable clothes, enjoyed a spectacular day at the beach. She was a natural athlete, equally comfortable at swimming, water-skiing, or flirting with the lifeguards. Just for fun, one night Regina Shadow had stolen a very large ring right off the finger of a too-haughty matron, but she put it under the bed where it would be found after a bit of panicked search. Like she said, she didn't need money.

Overall, though, most of the week had been spent as Regina D'Amour. Off them all, she simply enjoyed life the most. It was a wonderfully effective elixir for Rick's broken soul to find happiness in the simple things of life. Regina D'Amour went to see Twelfth Night, then found herself accepting an invitation to a post-performance party. That led to a dinner invitation the next night, which she accepted on a lark. Rick would never have done that, but then, Regina wasn't really Rick.

Or, wasn't really the Rick that was. Or at least, the Rick that she seemed to remember.

These musings occupied Regina Diamond as she walked along the mall. As the week had passed she had thought a few times about the location for the little shop, and couldn't really remember where it was, so she had decided to wear her rich persona and just enjoy the shopping until she came across it. Which indeed she did.

The tiny bell caroled cheerfully as she walked into the dusty store. This time, the old man was sitting behind the counter waiting for her.

"So, Rick, how much have you decided my cards were worth?"

"All that I have, of course," the elegant woman replied.

"In that form, that's quite a bit," the old man chuckled.

"Well, I can't seem to go back to my old life," she smiled.

The wizard gave her a sharper look, "Do you want to?"

"You already know the answer to that."

"Yes, I suppose I do," he smiled.

"I'll tell you what," he continued. "I'll let you pick one card and keep it. Whoever you become will have access to Rick Applegate's assets.

You can make a donation to an appropriate charity in lieu of paying me for the use of the cards."

The blonde looked at the old man with one shapely brow arched into discreet incredulity. "Any card I want?"

"Pick a card."

"But I might get the Joker card."

"Yes, you might," he said calmly. "Or I can just change you back to Rick and you can go back to your old life."

She looked at the cards for a long time. Being Rick, was that so bad? Certainly better than the Joker. But so alone, too. Alone even before he had lost Shelly. In truth, he had never really had Shelly. He had known deep in his heart that she had not loved him, but his time as Regina D'Amour had shown Rick that he had not truly loved his wife, either. Perhaps that Rick was not even capable of love. He was too much in control all the time, too careful. Even Regina Shadow felt more thrill as she stalked a target than Rick had ever felt.

The only good choices were women. A week ago that would have made the decision obvious. A week ago Rick would not have had any more interest in being a woman than in being the Joker.

But even the Joker, Snyder as they left him, had his wife in bed with him instead of out playing around. Was anything worse than being alone?

Regina looked at the old man one last time, then reached out and chose a card. Without even looking at it, she fled from the shop.

The old man wasn't worried. He knew that she would eventually be forced by her own curiosity to look at the card. It would only take an instant this time to capture her attention. Transition would happen simultaneously with recognition of what the choice had been.

He chuckled to himself as he picked up the remaining cards. It would have been so easy to force the choice to whatever he had wanted. Still, Rick hadn't killed the predatory Snyder when he had the chance. He had chosen an alternative even before he knew of the Joker card's existence, so the old man had decided Rick could choose his own fate. It truly had been a random choice.

The wizard looked at the remaining cards to see what one had been selected. He chuckled again as he conjured a replacement, then placed the five cards back into the little box behind the counter.

The End