

Midnight Mass

Sitting in Aileen's apartment, Dana was doing her best not to zone out during the ritual. The witch was lighting candles in a specific order while whispering a very long incantation under her breath. It sounded like she was speaking latin, and Dana made a mental note to add it to the languages she should try and learn in her spare time. Aileen held out a gloved hand for Tasia's wrist, and the werewolf laid her arm forward with the inside held up.

"This will probably sting," whispered Aileen as she picked up the knife. She slid it smoothly across Tasia's skin, then frowned when the thin cut left behind didn't even bleed. "Or not."

"Werewolf, remember?" Tasia smirked.

"I've only got so much time to do this before I have to start over," Aileen muttered as she pushed harder on the knife. With a far more serious effort, she managed to break the skin, causing blood to pool along the knife's edge. Turning the blade flat, the witch handed Tasia a small towel while she moved the blade over the silver bowl full of oil and water. Tasia took the rag and wiped her arm down, which had already healed.

The moment the blade touched the water, the liquid hissed and sent up tendrils of steam. Aileen frowned, then looked up at Tasia.

"You said it was just the one demon, right?" She frowned at the bowl as the liquid quickly evaporated.

"We were hunting one demon," Dana replied. "But I think we stumbled onto a nest of them."

"That shouldn't matter...I think." Aileen frowned as the liquid in the bowl vanished, leaving behind a dark black stain. "Well, shit."

"What's wrong?" Tasia looked at the stain and sniffed the air. It smelled like tar.

"When a demon uses blood to track you, it's not about your blood specifically. The process uses your lifeforce to create a snapshot of your soul." Aileen put the knife down and rubbed at her eyes as if nursing a headache.

“Naturally, demons can use a soul link for lots of things, but tracking is the easiest.”

“I’m familiar with the process.” Tasia waved a hand in Aileen’s direction, urging her to continue. “What’s the problem?”

“Okay, right. Sorry.” The witch leaned back in her chair. “You say this demon possessed somebody?”

“That’s the assumption.” Dana crossed her arms over her chest and looked up at the ceiling. “The demons we fought were all in human bodies. Meat suits. Best term for it.”

“Hmm.” Aileen picked up the bowl and looked inside. “So we have one of two problems. Either the two of you ran afoul of an incredibly powerful demon who really shouldn’t be walking the earth, or several demons put tracking spells on you.”

“You can’t tell?” asked Tasia.

“Nope, and that’s the weird part. The magic was working to remove the curse, but I ran out of materials.” Aileen used the tip of the knife to scrape at the black sludge that had hardened inside the bowl. “Damn, this is gonna be hard to clean out.”

“So, what now? Can you break the curse?”

Aileen shrugged. “I could, but I can’t. The liquid in the bowl was distilled water along with a special blend of oils commonly used in sacraments and baptisms.”

“Why not holy water?” asked Dana.

“Overrated. Might not be what you paid for. The water needs to be clean of impurities is all, the oil does all the work.”

“Sounds more like chemistry than magic.”

Aileen grinned. “Welcome to witchcraft 101. But back to my problem. Distilled water is easy enough, you can pop on down to the local grocery store. The oil is a different matter. It’s a specialized blend of pure olive oil, myrrh, cinnamon, and calamus. I’ve got plenty of oil, but I’m afraid that what I have left of the other stuff is nowhere near enough.” She slumped in her chair. “So I can’t help you after all.”

“You can’t get more?” Tasia made a face.

“Unless your Order friends have some on hand, nope. The fact that you’re here means they probably don’t. I could try and get some through Oгна, but I think we’re all aware of how well that will go.”

“We’ve got money for it.” Dana had already pulled out her phone. “I bet I can track it down.”

“The commercial sale of calamus is banned in the US.” Aileen let out an awkward laugh. “Now you know why I have all these plants! One of the first rules of witchcraft is to learn how to grow what you need, because otherwise you’ll spend half your time tracking stuff down.”

Dana looked at Tasia, who suddenly looked defeated. The zombie stood and placed a reassuring hand on the knight’s shoulder.

“Do you need anything else for the spell?” asked Dana.

Aileen made a face. “No, but I mean it when I say you can’t just find calamus. So if you’re planning to drive all around town looking to get some, it’ll just be a waste of time.” She laughed again, a deep throated chuckle that was a little unnerving. “But hey, if you’re willing to pop on up to Canada, you can get some fresh from the source!”

“Let’s just say I know a guy.” Dana tapped her phone for emphasis.

“By all means. I’ve got nothing better to do.” Aileen stared at the silver bowl with contempt. “Scratch that. I need to scrape that shit out before it sets.”

“I’ll be right back.” Dana moved toward the front door and was about to open it when Tasia called out.

“If you’re going outside, maybe you can bring back some snacks?” The werewolf patted her belly when Dana looked back at her. “I’m hungry again.”

Dana nodded, then stepped outside. She dialed up Eulalie and waited several long moments before her friend finally answered. There was a loud rustling sound followed by Eulalie muttering curse words.

“You okay?” Dana asked.

“Must have dozed off.” Eulalie yawned into the phone, which ended with the sound of her teeth clacking together forcibly. “Spilled my damn snacks.”

“Have you slept at all?” Dana stood in the hallway, overlooking the parking lot. Two doors down, a man in overalls wearing a white ballcap gave her a funny look as he unlocked the door to his apartment. Dana turned around so she wouldn’t have to look at him.

“Ha! I’ll sleep when I’m dead!” This declaration was followed by a groan. “Which might be happening right now.”

Dana pursed her lips in concern. “How is staying up going to help us out?”

“Don’t want to…” Another yawn came through the phone. “Miss anything. You guys ditch that tracer yet?”

Dana shook her head, then remembered she was on a phone call. “Not yet. Need you to acquire some stuff for us. Apparently it isn’t easy to come by.” She turned around and saw that the man in the hat was now leaning against his door, clearly listening in on her conversation. She lowered the phone and glared at him. “Can I help you with something?”

The man smirked, then opened up the door to his apartment and wandered inside. Once the door was shut, Dana held the phone up to her ear.

“Sorry. I’m going to text you a list of things that we need. Once we have them, it sounds like our new friend can help.” Dana walked down the hallway toward the stairs to retrieve food from the car. “Speaking of friends, any word on Lily?”

“Oh. Right. She’s being moved. It’s all been highway travel so far. It looks like they’re headed west.” Eulalie’s keyboard clacked in the background. “I won’t be able to do much until she stops. Once she does, I’ll give you a call.”

“So we might be here for a bit.”

“Yep.” Eulalie sighed. “Fuck, it hurts to blink.”

“After you get us our supplies, you need to take a nap, something. Have Sofia watch the computer for you.”

Eulalie chuckled. “Yeah, she probably wouldn’t be too happy to learn that we’ve gone rogue on this. Mike would already be burning down houses to get there.”

Dana was almost to the car now, and she stopped once her hand was on the door. “Maybe we should get him involved then.”

“No.” The playfulness in Eulalie’s voice fled. “Technically, Lily isn’t in any real danger. You’re already running around with an Order fugitive. We absolutely can’t do anything to put him or the house on their radar.”

“I don’t disagree with you, but wouldn’t it make more sense to have extra help?”

“Like who? Yuki? That’s pretty much the only person we could send who might not get tracked, and there’s no way she wouldn’t get Mike involved.”

“Twenty-four hours.” Dana opened up the car door. “That’s how much longer I’m willing to wait before I ask someone for help.”

Eulalie hissed into the phone, followed by a sigh. “That’s more than fair,” she conceded. “I’m too tired to argue.”

“Take a nap.” Dana went to hang up, but Eulalie started yelling into the headset. “You have something else?”

“Yeah. There’s an APB out for your car. Since you’ve got time, you should move it somewhere else. The Order is tracking it and knows you’re in Georgia.”

“Will do.” Dana ended the call and texted Eulalie the list of ingredients for the ritual oil. Once she finished, she reached into the car and grabbed all of their leftovers. When she returned to Aileen’s apartment, she was relieved to see that white hat man’s door was still closed.

She let herself in and set the food down on the counter. Tasia came strolling into the kitchen, sniffing the air. She was followed closely by Aileen, whose eyes immediately wandered to the leftovers.

“Can I stick these in the fridge?” Dana’s hand was already on the handle of an old white refrigerator. “I apparently need to ditch our car.”

“Yeah, go ahead.” Aileen made a face, but didn’t say anything else. When Dana opened the fridge to put stuff away, she was surprised to see that it only contained a loaf of bread, some mustard, and a half empty bottle of diet Cola.

They all stared at that empty space for several seconds before Tasia turned to the witch. “When was the last time you ate?”

“Yesterday.” Aileen’s shoulders slumped.

“Are you sick?”

The witch shook her head. "It was either food or rent."

Tasia grabbed a small stack of leftovers from Dana and walked to the dining room. She hooked her free arm around Aileen's shoulders and shepherded the witch back to the table. The werewolf sat down and opened up the styrofoam boxes to reveal the uneaten meals.

"You're eating with me." Tasia made a show of pulling out a chair for both of them.

"I can't eat this," Aileen protested, but Dana had already procured a pair of forks and had brought them to the table.

"Why not?" Tasia's voice softened.

Aileen's eyes teared up, but she didn't answer. Instead, she picked up a fork and started in on some pancakes. The witch ate slowly, as if afraid that she might become sick. Tasia looked up at Dana with a fierce light in her eyes, but said nothing. When Aileen noticed that nobody else was eating, she made an odd sound in her throat.

"Um...aren't you going to eat?" She looked at Dana.

"I ate recently. Unlike some people, I don't burn ten thousand calories a day." She turned to Tasia, who was now eating some leftover sausage. "My contact is getting us what we need to finish breaking the curse. I need to pop out and ditch the car, so you'll have to wait here. It sounds like we're being tracked by more technological means."

Tasia paused mid-bite, then nodded. "Sounds like a plan, as long as it's okay with Aileen." She turned toward the witch. "Are you okay if we stay for a bit?"

The witch nodded. "I don't mind."

"I'll see myself out." Dana walked out the front door and went to the car. After pulling up a map to find somewhere convenient to ditch it, she got a text from Eulalie saying that it would be a couple of hours before they got their supplies. Satisfied, she drove the car a few miles down the road to a retention pond that was off the main road. She managed to get the Kia up to forty miles per hour before sailing it through the air where it landed in the pond with a splash. The airbags deployed, but she stabbed them with her knife before pushing open the door to let herself out.

Even if the Order found the car, it would take them a long time to find anything of use inside. Dana climbed the embankment and surveyed the area to see if anyone came running. When nobody did, she broke into a light jog back toward the apartment. She had forgotten to factor in the humidity and was still fairly wet when she returned to the apartment complex. Before she could knock on the door, Tasia opened it and held a finger to her lips.

“Everything okay?” asked Dana.

“Yeah, come in.” She stepped back and allowed Dana to enter, then closed and locked the door. “Aileen is sleeping.”

“Okay. Do you think she’d mind if I used her dryer?” Dana started to pull her shirt off, then paused. “Does she even have a dryer?”

“A small one by the bathroom. Here.” Tasia led Dana down the hall and took a left. To the right was a closed door, which Dana assumed was the bedroom. Once the two of them were by the dryer, Dana stripped off her clothes and threw them inside the machine. Tasia grabbed a towel from the bathroom and gave it to Dana, which she wrapped around her torso. The two of them walked out into the living room and sat on the couch.

Dana put her hands behind her head and leaned back, putting her feet up on the table. “Ditched the Kia in a pond,” she said. “That should buy us some time.”

“How are we getting back to Florida?”

“Arrangements are being made. Sounds like Deacon is shipping out and took Lily with him. We have to wait until they stop moving before we can make our next move.”

“How are you all tracking her?” Tasia sniffed the air, then frowned at a nearby plant. “Ugh. Wolfsbane.”

“That one of your weaknesses?”

“No. Stinks like ass is all.”

“I see. Lily still has the tracking device we were going to put on the demon.”

“Something high-tech, I suppose?”

Dana snorted. “Nope. Just a modified Airtag.”

“Why reinvent the wheel, right?” Tasia sighed, staring up at the ceiling. “Where do I go from here? Everything with the Order is a royal mess right now. I’m not even sure how I’m supposed to make contact with them without essentially turning myself in to become a lab experiment.”

“Do you have someone you trust? Maybe go to them first.”

Tasia sighed. “I do, but he’s in another country. He’s pretty high up in the Order and I assume he would vouch for me. But even so, it would probably be some kind of solitary confinement and study for a while. Damn.”

Dana frowned, then stared at her feet. A part of her wondered if she should extend an invitation to the werewolf, but it really wasn’t hers to make. Sure, they had a common enemy for now, but then what? Other than rescuing Lily, she wasn’t even entirely certain what her own plans were. The whole point of this mission had been to identify the demon for Eulalie and maybe capture it. If they gave up now, it wasn’t like they could just drop in again on the Oracle.

“So what do you think is going on with our hostess?” Tasia’s voice dropped as she changed topics. “When I said we’d be here for a bit, she asked if she could take a nap. Said that I made her feel safe.”

Dana thought back to the man with the white hat she had seen in the hall. She had definitely gotten a strange vibe off of him, but he seemed more like a general douche than anything else.

“I don’t know.” She crossed her legs and reclined on the couch, the towel coming unfolded and falling open to reveal her breasts. Tasia ogled her for a moment, but the act wasn’t meant to be sexual, so she let it go. “But I don’t think it’s a danger to us.”

“Few things would be.” Tasia smirked, then stared out the window. When it was clear the conversation was over, she picked up the remote and found something on TV to watch. Dana continued to sit mostly naked on the couch, her thoughts on their witchy host.

Eventually, her clothes were dry, and she changed back into them. Tasia was watching a sappy rom-com, leaning forward in interest as the main characters were about to kiss for the first time. Dana thought the movie was boring, but wasn’t about to ruin Tasia’s good time. In just a few hours, they were probably going to be on the move again.

When Dana's phone buzzed, she looked at the text message from Eulalie and got off the couch.

"Everything okay?" Tasia asked.

"Our supplies are here." Dana walked to the front door and opened it. White hat had his front door open and was sitting in a cheap lawn chair with a beer in one hand as he stared down at the parking lot. He almost seemed disappointed to see Dana, but quickly looked away.

A high pitched buzzing sound filled the air, and a trio of drones descended from above, each one carrying a package. These were the modified drones Dana had been working on at home, each one capable of carrying a small load. They landed in front of Aileen's door, and Dana removed their burdens before they flew off.

White Hat's attention was piqued, but Dana ignored his calls as she turned and walked inside the apartment and shut the door. Aileen staggered down the hallway with deep pillow lines on her face.

"Who was that?" she asked. "Is everything okay?"

Dana held up the boxes. "Witchy delivery service." She set the boxes down and opened them. Inside each was a generous amount of the ingredients Aileen would need, sealed in baggies. She picked up the calamus and tossed it to the witch. "Will that be enough?"

"How?" Aileen stared at the jar of calamus in awe, then looked at Dana. "Did you rob another witch?"

"Friends in high places." Dana's phone buzzed again, and she looked at the screen.

Going to take a nap. Will call when Lily stops moving. This was followed by a series of sleepy face emojis, and an egg for some reason.

"Sounds like we may still be here awhile." Dana looked at Aileen. "Are you okay if we stay a bit longer?"

"If you're gonna feed me, stock me up on supplies for a year, and let me get a nap, you can move in for all I care." Aileen smiled, but there was still sadness in her eyes. "Neighborhood isn't that great, though."

Dana and Tasia exchanged a look.

“If there’s a problem we can help you with—” Tasia started.

“No.” Aileen cut Tasia off, her cheeks turning pink. “I don’t even want to talk about it, not if you want me to get anything done today. C’mon, let’s see if we can’t remove that spell. And maybe eat some more pancakes?”

Tasia sighed, then looked to Dana for support. But Dana knew better. If Aileen didn’t want them in her business, that was her choice to make. So she sat at the table and kicked her feet up on the chair across from her instead.

“Eat whatever you want,” Dana said. “We’ll be out of your hair later tonight and won’t be taking it with us.”

Aileen looked relieved as she moved to the kitchen to retrieve the silver bowl from its place in the drying rack.

Lily couldn’t see out of her magical prison, but she heard plenty. She learned very quickly that there were two kinds of people who worked for Deacon: regular humans who had sold out and Legion.

She could feel Legion’s presence whenever they were near, but the demon never made any efforts to speak with or torment her, which she found strange. The other big giveaway regarding Legion was when she would sense multiple people nearby, but they wouldn’t say a word to each other. In this manner, she deduced that Legion’s lackies moved her out of the complex and onto a transport.

The humans in Deacon’s employ talked consistently, though they often cautioned each other to keep their voices down. They were under strict orders to not speak with the captive, and definitely never fall asleep in her presence. This annoyed her, because with enough time she could have invaded someone’s dreams from a distance and used their body to sleepwalk and let her out.

She also picked up on the fact that they constantly warned each other about Timotei. They mentioned several times to be careful with his coffin, and at least one crew member mentioned the last poor bastard who had accidentally dinged the wood. It amused Lily that Timotei took it personally that his coffin might get a boo-boo.

Stupid vampire, or vampyr as it were. Though the man wasn’t a first generation vampire, he likely wasn’t far down the list. Nobody, not even Amir, had been entirely certain where vampires had come from, but she remembered when

the first rumors about them started circulating Europe. A new kind of undead with special powers that feasted on the living.

Amir had actually taken her to see the movie *Nosferatu* when it first came out in theaters. He had been working with several vampires at this point, and they had expressed concern that the world at large would now be exposed to the truth of their existence. He had laughed throughout the movie, finding the depiction of the monster all too comical. After the screening, he explained to the old world vampires that their secret was not only safe, but that an opportunity existed. If they were the ones making the movies, then they could choose the message, ensuring that their weaknesses never became common knowledge.

And thus, the modern vampire had been born. They were dazzling, sexy, and some of them glittered in the sun. In truth, there were very few hard rules when it came to true vampires. They had to be invited inside, a rule that nobody fully understood. The older ones were obsessed with counting, a trait they shared with some demons. Timotei was old enough that he could probably go out in the sun, but it would weaken him.

During these ruminations, she dozed off and entered her own Dreamscape. Mike was waiting there, and the two of them had a movie marathon based on his own memories. Obviously, this meant that the movies were far from accurate. Lily was fairly certain that he made up most of the films about the vampire woman who wore leather and fought werewolves, but it was absolutely his favorite. She would have to remember that when she had a chance to fuck him in person, but that didn't stop her from hooking up with Mike's soul piece in the safety and comfort of her own mind.

Time was relative in the Dreamscape, and Lily lost track of it. The next thing she knew, the walls of her prison were torn down, revealing that she had been placed inside a circular cell with iron bars. Eager to escape, she dashed toward the bars and was blown back into the middle of her cage.

"Good morning." Deacon knelt just outside, a shit eating grin on his face. Nearby, his daughter was busy typing something into a laptop. When she saw that Lily was awake, she got up and left.

"Is it morning?" Lily spun in place and frowned. She was in a room with wooden floors and a large red curtain. "Is this a theater? I hope we're seeing Hamilton or Book of Mormon. I hear they're both good."

Deacon chuckled, then stood and pointed toward the ceiling. Lily looked up to see that a sigil similar to the one they had used to capture her had been placed above, the runes blazing with power.

“There’s going to be a show,” he said, “but it’s definitely not Hamilton.”

“Damn.” Lily pouted. “Cause I’m looking for a mind at work.”

“Don’t worry, I know you’ll like it. After all, you do love being the center of attention. Excuse me for a moment.” Deacon stepped back and waited as Legion moved around the outside of the cage in multiple bodies, each one using a rope to pull a wall of Lily’s travel prison toward the bars. A couple members of Deacon’s security team were waiting to grab the pieces, their eyes on Lily as they rotated the mobile prison walls to slide them between the bars.

“Is that a new outfit?” Lily asked, staring at the closest Legion. She hadn’t seen any of these vessels before, but made a mental note of each. She was preparing to strike up a conversation with Legion, maybe antagonize him a bit, when she noticed the coffins near the back of the stage.

There were two of them, one roughly half the size of the other. The smaller one had dark nylon straps holding it shut. She deliberately looked away, hoping that nobody noticed her interest.

“If I’m here for a donkey show, I should probably warn you that I’m pretty hard on animals.”

Deacon stared at her for several seconds, obviously confused by her statement.

“You know, a donkey show?” Lily gyrated her hips. “You make me fuck a donkey?”

Deacon sneered. “That’s absolutely disgusting,” he said, taking a step back. “That can’t be a real thing.”

“Oh but it is.” Delighted that she had finally gotten under the man’s skin, she continued. “Before we had musicals like Hamilton, that’s something people did for fun. I know you’re dying to look it up, make sure you turn Safe Search off on your computer.”

“Enough!” Deacon rubbed at his face, and Lily saw the bags under his eyes. Had he even slept while she was being moved, or had the fucker been awake the whole time?

“If you think that’s bad, wait until I tell you about the sort of things two girls can get up to with one cup.” Lily grinned, then summoned a red plastic cup into her hands. “You can look that up, too. I’d show you, but I would need a friend.”

Deacon shook his head and groaned. “You’re incessant, I’ll give you that. But you still have your purpose. Now excuse me, I have preparations to make.”

“Eat my ass!” she shouted after him as he left. Feeling smug, she paced the walls of her new prison, then stared at the coffins that had been left behind. She looked around for something she could throw, but the floor of her cage was solid iron.

“What’s that about?” she wondered aloud, stomping her foot. She knelt down and examined the floor. There were gouges in it, as if someone had tried to dig down into it. Frowning, she paced her cage anew, only to discover that some of the bars had similar marks.

“Looks like we have a mystery to solve.” Soul Mike was pacing the bars with her, wearing bell bottom jeans and a white shirt with an orange ascot tucked into the collar. He held a magnifying glass to the bars and rubbed at his chin as if deep in thought.

“This cage wasn’t made for me,” Lily said, then looked around the room. They were definitely on a stage. For the life of her, she couldn’t figure out why they had built a the iron cage into the middle of it, though.

“Maybe the good pastor is into something kinky?” Mike stared upward, still holding the magnifying glass to his face. “Sucks dicks through the bars for donations.”

“You aren’t helping,” Lily muttered.

“Sure I am.” Mike turned to face her, his eye comically magnified in the glass. “I’m your coping mechanism.”

This made her laugh, which in turn made her frown. She missed the real Mike. With a snap of her fingers, she could probably go straight home into his arms. But then Legion would follow. Whatever Deacon and his flock were into, she absolutely couldn’t bring it home to him. While fairly positive that someone like

Abella could go toe-to-toe with Timotei, that didn't mean harm wouldn't come to the others. For all she knew, Legion would just strap bombs to their host bodies and storm the walls of the house.

She sat and stewed quietly for maybe an hour before she heard movement inside the larger coffin. There was a clicking sound, and then the lid swung open, revealing an ornate, padded interior. She was close enough to see that Timotei's coffin had sliding locks on the inside. The vampyr sat up to regard her with cold eyes.

"Morning sunshine." Lily had created a cup of coffee, which she sipped at delicately.

"It is dusk," he said, then got out of his coffin. He walked up to her cage and snarled, revealing his fangs. "You aren't supposed to be in there."

"You're right, I'm not." She pouted. "You should probably let me out."

Timotei didn't respond. Instead, he left, too.

"Well, shit." Lily scowled through the bars. "Guess it's just me and fun-size over there."

"And me," Mike added.

"Just stand there and look pretty for me."

It was almost twenty minutes before Timotei came back. With him were a pair of Legion's vessels, each one carrying a person over their shoulders. They were tossed to the ground, revealing a pair of young men who looked malnourished.

"Okay, now it's a party." Lily clapped her hands, getting the attention of the men on the floor, but Legion and Timotei ignored her. Instead, they moved to the smaller coffin, carefully moving around it.

"Please," one of the men cried, holding up a hand. "Call the police! They kidnapped us from the park!" The other man said nothing, a blank expression on his face. The smile slipped from Lily's face. If she were to guess, these men were homeless and had been abducted. She doubted it was for a good reason.

"I'm sorry," she said, then shook her head sadly as the nylon straps on the smaller coffin were released.

Something small shot out, and Timotei grabbed it with both hands, clutching the creature tight to his chest. When he turned around, it was to reveal a little girl around four or five years old, her eyes bloodshot with blind rage.

“There is your lunch,” he declared, then let her go. The tiny vampire flew free of his arms and tore into the man who had spoken to Lily, clamping her teeth down on his throat. The man fell to the ground, the toddler sucking out his blood through his neck.

“How could you?” she asked, disbelief in her voice. “You turned a child?”

“It was the plague.” Timotei’s voice was calm, but misery was written across his face. “It was a choice between losing her forever or taking drastic action. This is not the life I would have given her.” He turned his dark gaze on her. “I don’t expect hellspawn to understand a parent’s sacrifice.”

The dying man made little gasps as his life was drained. The other man was staring blankly at the floor, his mind clearly broken. Lily couldn’t help but study the creature huddled over her meal, greedily lapping up the blood that had been spilled.

“Now you understand what is at stake.” Timotei knelt by his daughter and put a hand on her head. She snarled at him, but continued feeding. “Why I would align myself with a demon and his pet preacher.”

The child let out a grunt and dropped her meal, leaving a desiccated corpse behind. Turning her attention toward the cage, she shot forward, crashing against the bars and reaching for Lily with bloody fingers. She gnashed her teeth, then tried to take a bite out of the metal.

“This is so fucked up,” Mike whispered at her side.

“That’s not the worst part.” Lily’s demonic heart pounded in her chest as she dropped her voice so low that she wasn’t entirely certain she spoke out loud. Staring into the child’s eyes, she saw nothing beyond. Even a creature like Timotei had some remnant of the person he had once been. “There’s nothing there. This...thing doesn’t even have a soul. It’s nothing but raw hunger, personified. It may look like a child, but...”

“Mila.” Timotei snapped his fingers and pointed at the man by his feet. “Ignore the woman, she is not your food.”

Mila hissed, spraying the air with bloody spit, then dropped to all fours and crawled to her prey. She tore into him messily, coating the floor with blood. Timotei watched on with pride, but all Lily felt was disgust.

“Vampirism doesn’t have a cure,” she said, wrapping her fingers around the bars. Her skin ignited in places, but the pain barely registered. What she was witnessing was horrible enough that it didn’t matter.

“And they say demons can’t get into heaven.” Timotei arched an eyebrow in her direction. “Yet Legion has already done the impossible. A demon who can control the minds of a hundred men, wrapping himself in their souls until even he can find his way back to Heaven. If such a being can trick his way into salvation, why can’t I find a cure?”

“Because you’re Damned.” Lily shook her head. “When you became a vampire, that was the price. Eternal damnation for immortality on Earth. When you die, you don’t get to go where everyone else does, that much I know. You and I are going to the same place, someday, and neither of us will like it. Even if that wasn’t the case, do you honestly think you’ll find salvation here? You are clearly working with evil people.”

“God tests His most faithful.” Timotei crossed his arms. “When I prayed for His help, the vampires found me. Is that not a sign that He acts in mysterious ways? They turned me against my will, and that was when I knew I was being tested by Him. He gave me this incredible power and the strength to save my child, but it would test my faith. Help doesn’t always come from where you would expect it, but nothing happens without His permission. An eternal reward waits for me and my dear Mila, we must only ask for forgiveness once we have been cured.”

“Holy shit, you’re delusional. You and every nutjob that thinks sky daddy is doing fuck all for any of you. Free will is the game here, the thing you do when you think nobody is watching. The test everyone thinks they’re being put through is self deception at best, you contrite asshole.”

Timotei shrugged dismissively. “I care not what you think. You cannot even speak His name, you are no authority.”

Lily snorted. “Why show me this? Are you hoping I’ll feel bad for you? Offer to babysit when you’re out sucking on dudes?”

He snorted. “Hardly. You’re in Mila’s cage, and she needs to be fed, is all.”

Mila's next meal was clearly insufficient, because she lunged for the nearest Legion vessel. The demon barely stepped aside before Timotei snagged his daughter in mid-air and dragged her back to her coffin. She growled at her father as Legion moved to open the lid, and the three of them shoved her back inside with practiced movements. The whole coffin rattled as she fought to get free, but a third Legion appeared with a pallet jack and wedged it beneath the coffin.

"Lijepo spavaj." Timotei kissed the top of the coffin, then adjusted his sleeves as he turned around. Mila's coffin was taken away, leaving Lily alone with the vampire.

"Is this where you come inside my cage and slap me around a bit more?"

Timotei snorted. "You would like that, wouldn't you?" He crouched down and grabbed the two corpses, then dragged them toward Lily's cage. After opening the door, he tossed the bodies in, the dead men now cooling at her feet.

"What the fuck?" She narrowed her eyes at him. "Why stick the stiff in here with me?"

"For decoration." A smile touched his lips and he turned away from her. He walked back to his coffin, casually lifted it up onto his shoulder, and carried it away.

"Decoration? For what?" She looked at Mike, who only knew as much as she did.

Why did they have her here?

Tasia's eyes snapped open the moment Dana touched her shoulder. She had fallen asleep on the couch watching TV, and was a little surprised to discover that someone had tossed a blanket over her.

"What's going on?" she asked. "What time is it?"

"Ten. Just got a text. Looks like we know where we need to go." Dana held a finger to her lips. "Aileen is asleep again. Poor girl needs it."

"Hmm." Tasia slid off the couch and stretched, yawning hard enough that her jaw popped. She adjusted her outfit, then yawned again. "So where are we going?"

"I've got an address for a place about three miles from here." Dana picked up her backpack and put it on.

"That's...awfully convenient." Tasia frowned. "Lily is nearby?"

"No." Dana shook her head as she moved to the door. "We need to stop there first before heading to Lily's location."

"Gotcha." Tasia was almost at the door when she stopped. "You don't happen to have any cash, do you?"

"For what?" Dana looked confused.

"For her." Tasia gestured toward the bedroom. "The Order will eventually come here. She didn't do anything wrong, but I at least want to pay her back somehow. Girl is practically starving."

"I don't have any cash." Dana turned to open the door. "Because I already left all of it on the kitchen table."

Tasia glanced over at the table and saw a few bills placed in the middle. While it probably wasn't enough, she didn't know what else could be done. She followed Dana outside, then waited while Dana used Aileen's house key to lock up.

"Does she know you have that?" Tasia asked.

"Yeah, she gave me the spare. She didn't know when we'd be leaving, and I didn't want to wake her." Dana pocketed the key and turned to go.

Down the hallway, one of the neighbors had their door open, and three men were hanging out by the balcony. They were splitting a twelve pack of beers and listening to music on a small speaker that had been set at the base of the door. When Dana and Tasia drew near, a couple of them smirked, and moved to block their way.

"Hey girls. Ladies." The man speaking wore a white baseball hat and stank of alcohol. Dana narrowed her eyes at him. "Are you our new neighbors?"

Tasia wasn't sure why, but one of the other men giggled.

"Nope. Excuse us." Dana tried to move through them, but the men huddled up again and blocked her path.

"What's the rush? You need to be somewhere?"

“Anywhere else, honestly.” Tasia crossed her arms and them all a hard stare. “Move.”

“Oh, we got a tough girl on our hands, boys.” White Hat laughed, and his idiot friends laughed with him. Despite the late hour, it was still hot, and the men were all in tank tops and shorts. Based on the smell, they had been drinking for some time now. “A pair of them, maybe. C’mon, don’t you wanna hang with us, have a few beers, relax?”

Dana moved to step past, and one of the other men grabbed her by the arm.

“Don’t,” she warned.

“I’d listen,” Tasia added.

“Why? You got some secret man strength like your friend down the hall?” White Hat smirked. “He looks pretty enough in a skirt, but he ain’t a woman.”

“Excuse me?” Dana turned to look at White Hat, her face a blank mask.

“He doesn’t like to hang out with us either.” White Hat took a pull of beer. “Damn tranny is lucky we even let him—”

Dana’s hand shot out like a snake, grabbing White Hat by the throat and lifting him. His friends stared in shock as she contemplated him, his dangling legs kicking, then casually tossed him over the balcony. His scream was brief, terminating when his fall was broken by landing on the roof of a car in the parking lot. The man still holding her arm didn’t have time to let go before she kicked him in the shin hard enough that his leg gained a brand new joint between the ankle and the knee.

Tasia didn’t even know how to respond when Dana grabbed the third guy by the collar and started dragging him down the hall. While he tried to fight her off, she lifted him much as an adult would a toddler, her fingers going into his pockets.

“What are you doing?” Tasia hissed.

“Adding grand theft auto to my attempted murder charges.” When she turned up empty, she threw the man down the next flight of stairs, where he landed in a crumpled heap. By the time Tasia and Dana made it to the parking lot, they found White Hat gasping for air and trying to crawl between a pair of cars.

Dana knelt by his side and rummaged through his pockets until she pulled out a set of car keys.

“Why?” wheezed White Hat, rolling onto his back with tears in his eyes.

“Why not?” Dana knelt down and took the man’s hat, then put it on her own head. She flicked his nose, causing him to flinch. “You and your buddies should probably get to a hospital. Oh, and if I find out you mentioned me, my friend here, or your neighbor at the end of the hall, I will rip off your arm and shove it up your ass until you can count to five from your stomach.” To illustrate her point, she seized him by the front of his tank top and lifted him off the ground. His eyes fluttered up in his head before he passed out.

“Holy shit, Dana.” Tasia stepped forward to catch the man before his head hit the pavement. “That was brutal.”

“You’re right, it was.” She held out the keys and pushed the button. Two rows back in the lot, a car chirped in response. “Maybe they can be the ones who keep a bat by the door for a bit, lose sleep over who might be knocking at their door.”

And just like that, all the pieces snapped together. The baseball bat, the lack of sleep, the comments about Aileen’s man strength. Tasia just shook her head in disgust as the two of them got in White Hat’s car.

“I know you think you’re helping, but all you did was cause more problems for her.” Tasia looked up toward Aileen’s apartment. “Maybe you’ve spooked them for a bit, but when they figure out we aren’t coming back, it’ll only get worse for her.”

Dana adjusted the seat, then paused, tapping her fingers on the steering wheel. Tasia waited in silence, curious what she would do.

“Fuck.” With that declaration, Dana pulled out her phone and typed something in before sliding it into her pocket. Once finished, she pocketed the phone and started the car.

“What did you do?” asked Tasia.

“I can’t change Aileen’s circumstances, short of getting out of the car and killing those guys. And I don’t even think that would help, to be honest. She’s in a bad situation which is far outside of my skill set.” Dana threw the car in reverse

and backed out of the spot. “The world is often full of monsters that you can’t fight, not without becoming one yourself.”

“You literally almost killed those men.” Tasia frowned. “I feel like that’s a bit monstrous on its own.”

“You’re right, I did. And if I’m being truthful? If I was still human, I probably would have.” They were out on the main road now, Dana weaving between cars. “Do you know what the real difference between monsters and humans is?”

Tasia opened her mouth to reply, but hesitated. As much as those men probably had it coming, the sheer violence of the act against normal people had startled her. There had always been a fine line between the world she had sworn to protect and the one she frequently battled, and it had officially been crossed.

“Tell me,” she said, almost scared to hear the answer.

“Nothing.” The zombie stared straight ahead, her eyes unblinking. “Humans just have different words for what things are so that they feel better about themselves. A person should always be defined by who they are when they think nobody is watching.”

“I see.” Tasia turned away, her eyes now on the other drivers. They were on a straight section of road, and Dana was driving aggressively. More than a couple cars honked when Dana cut them off, but she didn’t react.

“For what it’s worth,” Dana added. “I like who you are when nobody is watching. I like that you were worried about Aileen and her situation. You’re still here, helping me out. There were times you could have left, yet there you sit.”

“You didn’t have to help me, either,” Tasia added. “It would have been wrong.”

Dana smiled. “I want you to remember that. When things get tough.”

“Remember what?”

“That you may be a werewolf, but you certainly aren’t a monster.” She turned to look at Tasia, then frowned. “Shit.”

Tasia had no time to react as Dana slammed on the brakes, allowing a black SUV with open windows to surge ahead. An Order operative holding a gun leaned back inside as the SUV slowed, but Dana had already pulled onto a side street.

“They followed us.” Tasia looked out the back of the car. “We lost the demon, but now the Order is here.”

“Yeah, Eulalie thought that might be the case. She picked up some chatter that we were in the area, I assume they hacked a bunch of security feeds or whatever. I only saw the one car, so I’m guessing we’re just unlucky and it’s a random patrol.”

“Patrols are rarely alone,” Tasia stated as a spotlight appeared over their car. “And there’s the fucking aerial support.”

“This is how we end up on the news,” Dana grumbled as she floored the accelerator. Flashing lights appeared up ahead, but Dana had already turned down another side street, the tires screeching in protest. Tasia braced herself in the passenger seat, accidentally ripping off the handle above the door.

“Won’t be on the news,” Tasia shouted as they took another turn too fast. “Total media blackout.”

Dana pulled her phone out and handed it to Tasia. “Call Eulalie. Put it on speaker.”

Tasia looked in contacts and Eulalie was the only one there. She obeyed Dana’s request, and the phone only rang once.

“Operator.”

“We’re coming in hot,” Dana said. “Is everything ready?”

“Yes. The code for the front door is 8729. There’s a closet in the master bedroom, you need to head there right away.”

“Probably won’t need the door code. How do we close it?”

“Close what?” asked Tasia.

“Just pull the bolts on the other side. Is it the Order?”

“Yep.” Dana reached into the backseat and grabbed her backpack, which she handed to Tasia. “I need you to hold that for me.”

“Why, what are we HOLY SHIT, DANA!” Tasia hid behind the backpack as Dana slammed on the brakes, then turned the car sharply up a long driveway. The car was going thirty when it slammed through the garage door, crashing into the

opposite wall. The airbag smashed the backpack into Tasia's face, but it wasn't hard enough to do any real damage.

Scrambling to push her way free of the bag, Tasia felt it deflate and found herself looking at the edge of a knife. Dana had already stabbed her own bag and had done the same for Tasia. The hood of the car was crumpled up and the doors blocked by the wall they had crashed through, so Dana reclined the seat to go out the back window.

"Hurry!" She punched her way through the glass and held out a hand for Tasia. The werewolf used her own knife to cut the seat belt and threw Dana the pack before climbing over the back seat. Out in the driveway, two SUVs pulled up, and someone had already hopped out of one of them.

"Damn, your friends are pretty—" Dana never finished her statement. Instead, she shoved Tasia out of the way as shots were fired. The bullets blew holes in the zombie's chest, and she stumbled sideways.

"Dana!" Tasia grabbed the zombie's hand and pulled her toward the door into the house. She kicked her way through it, half dragging Dana behind her.

"Master bedroom," Dana whispered, then covered her mouth and coughed blood into it. She was fumbling with the bag, and had pulled out a pair of tampons.

"Where's the master bedroom?" Tasia was having trouble seeing in the darkened home. The headlights of the cars outside were bright enough that they disrupted her night vision.

"Hallway across from kitchen, I checked pictures earlier," Dana whispered, then shoved a tampon into one of her wounds. "Think they nicked my spine, my legs are numb."

"We need to get out of here," Tasia growled. "Maybe if we go out back..."

"MASTER BEDROOM CLOSET!" Dana's eyes were suddenly wild. "NOW!"

Confused and uncertain, all Tasia could do was obey. She found herself in a bedroom with a king-sized bed and a view of a swimming pool out back.

"They won't take prisoners," she said, moving to set Dana on the mattress.

"Into the closet, or I swear to god, I will bite everyone who touches me." Dana clung to Tasia's wrist. "Trust me!"

Tasia felt the breath leave her body as she stared at the paralyzed blonde in her arms. Hoping that she wasn't wrong, she slung Dana over one shoulder.

"Okay," she replied, then moved to the closet door. Already, her sharp ears heard a team entering through the garage, there were at least three of them. Tasia opened the closet to reveal a walk-in with a circular hole on the other side.

"Through the portal," Dana groaned.

"The hole? What is it?" Tasia stepped through the hole and felt mildly disoriented as they were suddenly on a concrete pad in a metal room. Turning around, she saw a thick metal plate had been attached to the wall, held in place by a pair of pins.

"Pull those out," Dana said. Tasia obeyed just as a pair of operatives shined flashlights into the closet. The metal plate slammed into place as bullets pinged off the other side.

"Where are we?" asked Tasia.

"No idea," Dana replied. "But we need to go through the other door."

"What other—" Tasia noticed that the corner of the room had a similar portal. A trio of large rats scrambled ahead of them through the opening as Tasia carried Dana across the threshold, that same dizzy feeling assailing her. They were now standing inside of a small wooden cabin.

"We're through," Dana said. "Go ahead and close it."

"Close what?" This time, she saw a lever built into the nearby wall. She pulled it down, and a similar plate fell into place. On the other side of the wall, she heard a faint beeping sound.

"We need to get outside," Dana said. "Before the bomb explodes."

"Holy shit, Dana." Tasia ran through the front door of the cabin. She now stood outside in the middle of a bog or swamp. There was a loud bang behind her, and the cabin shuddered.

"We should be good now." Dana sighed. "Go ahead and put me down, I need a minute."

"Where the fuck are we?" Tasia stared at the surrounding vegetation, then ran toward the outside of the structure. They were in the middle of nowhere.

“Someone’s old swamp hut.” Dana chuckled. “In Alabama.”

“How are we in Alabama? We were just in someone’s house, what the fuck?” Tasia put her hands on her head, then slid her fingers through thick locks of hair. “Why are we in Alabama?”

“Because that’s where Lily is. At an old church, about an hour’s walk from here.” Dana pulled a flashlight from her bag.

“Why is she at a church?”

The zombie smirked, then grimaced. She pulled one of the tampons out and then reached into the wound with her fingers to pull out a bullet. Dana washed it in her mouth before spitting it out into her hand and studying it.

“Just what I thought. Silver.” She flicked the bullet into the bushes. “I don’t think the Order is interested in capturing you.”

Tasia moved to sit by Dana’s side, the weight of the world suddenly upon her. Knowing there was a kill order on her head had suddenly put an insurmountable gulf in her life. She had been hoping she could go see her father and convince him to stick up for her. However, if she was being honest, she wasn’t sure how he would react at the sight of her. The feelings all came at once, and she bit her lip as she forced all of those emotions into a deep, dark corner of her mind. She would have time to process her feelings later. For now, she had a job and she intended to get it done.

“What are you doing?” asked Dana as Tasia picked up the backpack and put it on.

“We could sit around and wait for your legs to work again, but that’ll take extra time.” She crouched down in front of Dana and slid her arms beneath the blonde’s legs. “You look like a girl who could use a lift.”

Dana chuckled, then leaned into Tasia’s chest as the werewolf lifted.

“My hero.”

“There. How does that look?” Lily summoned hellfire into her hands to burn off some of the dried blood that had gotten under her fingernails. Along the back wall of her cage, she had curled the two bodies up in an attempt to make them less conspicuous.

“I don’t think feng shui has any information about corpses.” Mike moved around the cage and studied the bodies from a few different angles. “But it’s still better than your previous idea.”

Lily nodded. She had originally considered shoving the dead men back through the bars, but it would have required a lot of dismembering to do so. Ever since Timotei’s comments about decoration, it had occurred to her that the whole thing was a setup. But for what, she wasn’t sure.

However, in the last hour, she had heard movement beyond the curtains. People were chatting, their voices low. Deacon had company over, and she already had a feeling that her behavior would just play directly into the man’s hands.

Scowling, she paced her cell waiting for the inevitable unveiling. Based on what she heard, there were at least a hundred people on the other side of the curtain. She tried calling out a few times, but it failed to elicit any sort of reaction. Eventually, she was startled when a speaker just outside the curtain came to life.

“Greetings, friends!” It was Deacon, and he was answered with the sound of applause and shouts of support. “I want to take a moment to thank you all so very much for accepting this very special, once in a lifetime presentation.”

“Oh, brother.” Lily sighed and sat on the ground. She looked over at the corpses and frowned. “At least you two are dead and don’t have to listen to the panhandling preacher out there.”

Being dead, they didn’t respond.

“Now I do believe all of you have been to at least one of my shows, so you’re familiar with how we always begin. It’s time to reach out to the big man himself. If everyone could bow their head.”

The succubus rolled her eyes dramatically. “Now I get to listen to this shit again. What are the odds I can use the dead men to pull a *Weekend at Bernie’s*?”

Over in the corner, something moved. Lily stood and watched as a small creature emerged from the shadows, sniffing hesitantly at the air. It was a rat, and a rather large one at that. It had something strapped to its belly, and it shot across the floor and into Lily’s cage.

“What do you have for me, Ratatouille?” Lily knelt down and smirked. At first glance, the rat looked like a little suicide bomber. It had a vest with a

cellphone tucked into a big pocket on the front. She pulled the phone free and opened the contacts to a picture of a rat in a crown.

The rat took off, vanishing into the darkness. Lily held the phone to her ear and clicked send.

“Operator.” Eulalie’s voice was quiet with a hint of uncertainty.

“So I’m guessing you know where I am.” Lily crouched down in the middle of her cage, her eyes on the perimeter. She was ignoring the prayer in the background, but was certain Eulalie could hear it.

“A church in the middle of nowhere, Alabama.”

“How?”

“You’re still carrying that tracker I gave you to attach to the demon. Is it still with you? The demon, I mean.”

Lily snorted. “Yeah. About that.” She gave Eulalie a quick rundown on Legion and was surprised when the Arachne didn’t have more questions about it. She also told her about the vampyr, his killer offspring, and pretty much anything else she could before someone figured out she had a phone.

Once finished, she asked the question that was on her mind. “Where is Dana? Is she okay?”

“Nearby, actually. She’s on her way to bail you out.”

“No.” Lily shook her head. “I don’t care how badass she is, there’s no way she’s getting past that crowd out there.”

“She’ll have help. Any chance you could snap a few pics of the area? We might be able to portal in directly to your location.”

“Yeah.” Lily used the phone to take a few pictures, then sent them along. “Thanks for coming for me,” she added. “The trick with the rat was a good one.”

“Reggie had to help me with it,” Eulalie replied. “He sent along some soldier rats to assist, the woods around you aren’t very kind to small critters.” A burst of static came through the phone, causing Lily to wince. “What the hell was that?”

“Who are you talking to?” Legion’s voice, pure and unfiltered, came through the speaker. It was the demon’s true voice, not spoken through the filter of a

human host. "Have you forgotten that I was once a creature of light? That phone is like a shining beacon right now."

"At best, you were a hemorrhoid on your daddy's ass." Lily turned the phone off and absorbed it into her body. So much for a friendly voice. Beyond the curtain, the prayer had ended and Deacon was speaking once again.

"Now I know many of you are going to have so many questions about the things I'm going to share, and I feel the best way to start is to tell you the God-given truth. The Devil walks among us."

Someone shouted "Oh yeah!" but otherwise the crowd remained quiet.

"And when I say that the Devil walks among us, I don't just mean figuratively. I've seen him, and met his ilk. Lies spring from his lips as if he were breathing them, and he has told me that he wants the souls of good people, the best people if he can get them. For while every soul is precious, nothing pleases him more than to snatch away a soul destined for God's eternal kingdom."

Someone else cheered. A pair of Legions appeared backstage, watching her intently. They were right to suspect she was up to something, she just hadn't figured out what that something was.

"Now let me tell you that the war against Satan can only be fought by the chosen few who know God's love, who are ready to receive it. Those of you who have come here tonight have demonstrated that you are willing to give it all for your post in Heaven. You are His chosen, and I am asking you for your help."

"Amen!" This pronouncement was followed by a few more. Lily looked at the Legion closest to her.

"Audience plant, I assume?"

Legion chuckled. "Hardly. These people are so thirsty for salvation, they would drink poison to attain it."

"Is that what we're doing? I could use a bit more peace and quiet."

"But before you pledge yourself, I need to expel all doubt from your mind. It is time to share with you a secret that I have only shown a handful of others. Once you see it, there's no going back from the truth. Are you ready?"

This was followed by clapping, and shouts of hallelujah.

“You know, it’s usually the hellspawn we show them.” Legion smirked, moving closer to the cage. “We lock her in here, get her nice and hungry.”

“What, and people think she’s a demon?”

Legion shrugged. “We usually toss in a dog or something. You’ve seen her, she’s a messy eater. Watching a child her size scale the bars while clutching a mastiff in her teeth is quite the sight.”

“You people are sick.”

“Hardly. They’re the ones who are sick.” Legion gestured toward the curtain. “So eager to get a peek behind the curtain, if you will. Why save your soul for Heaven when you can give it away today?”

“That’s not how it works,” Lily muttered.

“Untrue. That’s exactly how it works, and you’ll get to see it.” Legion grinned. “Each person who gives themselves to me only makes me stronger. Strong enough, in fact, that even our surprise visitor will be hesitant to try anything.”

“What visitor?” Lily locked away the fear of Dana’s discovery.

“The one who left a werewolf in our care. He is a man who does not like being disappointed.” Legion stared at the curtain. “Such a being scares even me.”

“What is he?” she asked, now curious.

Both Legions shook their heads.

“I don’t know,” the demon responded. “Perhaps that is what bothers me. He is not a creation of my Father’s, that is for sure.”

“That doesn’t really narrow things down.”

Legion dismissed her with a wave. “It’s no matter. We are offering you in the werewolf’s stead. It is suboptimal, but needs must.”

“Behold!” Deacon declared, and the curtain rose to reveal she was sitting in a church amphitheater, just off to the side of the pulpit. The men and women in the pews turned their attention in her direction, and Lily held up her hands to block the spotlight, doing her best to look vulnerable.

“Please, somebody help me!” she shouted, stumbling around in the cage. “These people are—”

She was doused from the side with liquid, and the holy water raised blisters all along her skin. Crying out in agony, she tried to reach through the bars, but was driven back by the sigils. The people watching cried out in fright as Lily was doused again.

“It’s acid,” she yelled, falling to her knees and covering her eyes. “It hurts so—”

The sigil above her activated, and she felt a blast of divine energy tear through her. Against her will, her horns and wings manifested, causing an eruption of panic from the congregation.

“Have no fear,” Deacon said from his spot in the pulpit. He was wearing an actual frock right now, and clutching a Bible that looked ancient. “All it can do is speak lies to you. You’ve already heard them. A demon is but a wolf in sheep’s clothing, ready to pounce once the flock has bedded down for the night.”

“Ugh,” Lily responded, her head pounding.

“And this here is the truth, my friends. The end times are coming, and the creatures of Hell now walk the land, desperate to claim a few more souls for an eternity of torment in a lake of fire.” Osgrove’s eyes were shining in the light and he held his hands up toward the sky. Lily finally noticed the massive wooden cross hanging above and behind the man. She wondered if the universe would do her a solid and drop it on the man.

“What can we do?” shouted a man in the back. The sentiment reverberated through the crowd as they turned their attention back to Deacon.

“How much do you need?” shouted someone else, a woman this time. People were automatically reaching for purses and pocketbooks.

“It isn’t about money this time, my friends.” He gestured for silence with his hands. “For the time has come for you to be pressed into eternal service for the Lord. You see, the fact that you stand here today is proof of your devotion, of your love for His words. Tonight you shall bask in His glory and know the truth. You are His chosen people.”

Deacon turned to face Timotei, who emerged from the wings holding a large chalice full of wine. The vampyr kept his gaze neutral, his gaze hovering just above the crowd.

“Some of you may be familiar with Communion, whether from your church or your television set.” A few people chuckled. “For those who aren’t, this is when we drink the blood of Christ and partake of his body that we may have his blessings conferred upon us. Unlike what you’ve seen or experienced before, this is the real deal. The spirit is strong in this place and I can feel it watching us even now. I promise you, my friends, that this is a very special Mass and that is no ordinary wine. Please.” He gestured toward someone in the front row, a woman who was in a wheelchair.

The woman rolled forward, her eyes fixed on Osgrove. Lily wondered if she was a demon, but didn’t think so. When she got to the bottom of the stairs, Deacon stepped around the pulpit.

“Mary Anne here has been paralyzed from the waist down for almost twenty years now. I’m sure many of you have seen her story and her struggles on social media. Her accident was how she found her faith in the first place, then lost it when her life took a turn for the worst. Yet here she is, ready to believe and be loved. God loves those who come back to Him, even after the darkest of times, for His love is eternal, as yours should be.” He walked down the steps and his daughter appeared to meet him, holding a small cup.

“What the Hell are you doing?” Lily muttered to herself.

“We aren’t exactly orthodox here, so some of you may notice the process differs from what you’ve seen before. But please bear with me, you’ll understand soon enough.” Deacon took the cup from his daughter and moved toward the edge of the stage, where Timotei tipped the chalice, allowing the thick red liquid to flow. Once the cup was half full, Timotei leaned back, his glittering eyes on the congregation. Deacon’s daughter handed him a piece of bread and stepped back.

“Now, Mary Anne, I have three questions for you. I am about to ask you to drink the blood of a man who lived hundreds of years ago, died, and then was resurrected. Do you accept this?”

“I do,” replied the woman in a shaky voice.

“And will you obey him as you would the Lord?” Deacon’s smile was beatific, his eyes now scanning the crowd.

“I will.” Mary Anne looked like she was about to cry.

“This is his blood.” He held out the cup. “As he accepts you, you must accept him. Please, drink it and be saved.”

Mary Anne took the cup and drank from it, then coughed violently. Deacon patted the woman on the back while handing the smaller cup back to his daughter.

“Can you feel it, Mary Anne? Can you feel his blood moving through your body?”

“I...I...” Mary Anne’s whole body twisted to one side and she let out a cry of pain. A few people nearby stood, but Deacon had his hands out to calm them.

“Tell them!” he cried. “Tell them what you feel!”

“My legs. They hurt so bad.” The woman let out a sob, then shrieked in pain once more.

“That’s right, Mary Anne, your legs! Those legs that haven’t done a damned thing for you in two decades feel like they’re on fire, don’t they!” He raised his hands triumphantly as his words seemed to dawn on the woman.

“My legs hurt. They hurt!” She was sobbing now, and reached out for Deacon’s hand. “But why do they hurt?”

“Because you haven’t used them in twenty years!” And like the showman he was, he pulled the woman forward, up and out of her chair. She sagged at first, but strength soon filled her as she staggered to one side where Deacon’s daughter grabbed her around the waist. The congregation gasped as Mary Anne held her hands out to the side, fighting hard to gain her balance.

“No fucking way,” whispered Lily.

“That’s right,” Deacon cried. “You are one of his chosen, and you have been healed!”

Mary Anne turned in slow motion, her eyes scanning the room in awe. Though some would claim it was just a trick of the light, Lily immediately recognized the glint in the woman’s eyes.

She had become Timotei's thrall. That wasn't wine in the chalice, but the blood of a very old vampire capable of restoring a person's body at the cost of their mind and potentially their soul.

"You sick fuck," she whispered. Was Deacon going to turn everyone into thralls?

Mary Anne took a few steps toward the crowd, gesturing at her legs and speaking rapidly. The congregation was noisy now, everyone craning their heads to get a look.

"Now this isn't a scam, and there is no trick. Every single one of you in this room will experience what this woman has. No more aches and pains, no more sickness. Your body shall be renewed, but that's not all! No, it's not all. Mary Anne, can you feel it in the air?"

Everyone went quiet again. Lily, sensing a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, pushed her lips into her elbow and blew a massive raspberry. When everyone looked at her, she grinned.

"I felt it!" she declared. "It was a massive crock of shit!"

Deacon laughed, and the congregation laughed with him. "Do you see that, folks? Satan's bride talks tough, but she finds this upsetting. Turn your back on the demon and watch Mary Anne."

And that's what they did. The woman was staring around the room, eventually pivoting around until she was gazing up at the cross on the wall behind Deacon. The room became silent as Mary Anne gazed at that holy symbol and trembled.

"It's okay, Mary Anne, I know it's frightening. You're in the presence of the divine, and it is powerful." Deacon placed a hand on the woman's back and held up the piece of bread. "But we aren't finished yet. As new strength flows through your body, the spirit seeks to revitalize your mind that you may serve him. So Mary Anne, my third and last question during this most momentous occasion in your life. Will you partake of his body so that you may become a part of him forever more? Will you let the spirit in that it may work its wonders through you?"

Lily's eyes widened as she watched Mary Anne struggle. The woman looked scared, like a rabbit caught beneath the gaze of a lion.

"I...I..." Mary Anne looked at Deacon, who gently encouraged her. The room started a chant of "Let him in!" while everyone stomped their feet. Lily looked up at the cross, but didn't sense anything there.

"What the fuck is she looking at?" she asked.

"Me." Legion chuckled by her side. "I can be quite intimidating."

"So, what, is the bread one of your vessels, ground up into a paste and baked with flour?"

Legion snorted. "No. Just some day old dinner rolls that were on sale, I think. It's the symbolism I want, there's no need to be gross about it."

Mary Anne took the bread and popped it in her mouth. Lily felt Legion enter the poor woman's body, wrapping around her soul like a blanket of fire. With the promise of eternal love, they had tricked the woman into giving up control of her mind, body, and soul.

"It's my own version of the Holy Trinity," Legion declared. "Why possess people when they'll just give themselves up willingly? Deacon claims their minds while Timotei gets their body. But me? I get their souls."

Lily could only stare in horror as Mary Anne officially became one of the Damned, spinning around to hold her hands high in the air.

"I am reborn!" Legion declared triumphantly in Mary Anne's voice. The whole room cheered, and people pressed forward, begging Deacon to be next.

Lily felt like she was going to be sick.