

Roll For Damage

There was a moment of silence as the entire congregation stared up at Eulalie. Shock, awe, fear. These were all expressions she had expected. It was all just data to the Arachne, filtered through multiple sets of eyes. She knew who was sweating, who was holding their breath, and who had pissed themselves.

Her whole life, she had been taught to see humans as anything other than prey. She could love them, hate them, or even ignore them entirely. As long as she saw them as something other than food to be eaten with disdain, she would flourish. It was the most important lesson her mother could teach her, and it was one that would stick.

But right now, her friends were in danger. Because of the demon in this room, she risked losing somebody else that she cared about, and she needed to disconnect. Now that she was about to face down a demon who had gone full-blown Agent Smith on her, it was time to see the world in a way that made her comfortable. Killing people? That wouldn't do. She had been raised better than that.

But a demon hivemind wearing meatsuits? That sounded like something out of a videogame. Eulalie loved video games. When it came down to it, videogames were really just bits of code, numbers that flowed through a processor to generate images. It didn't matter how many people you killed in a game, because it wasn't real at all.

Even with the members of the congregation shifting back and forth, she counted three hundred and twenty seven of them, and at least six of them had turned. Seventeen mercenaries were visible, two of which had turned. Down below and to her left, she heard the ominous sound of a round being chambered.

With a casual swipe of her hand, Mace shot forward and smashed into the armed attacker with enough force that a trail of gore coated the pews behind him. This distracted a zombie, which allowed the demons behind it to take it to the ground.

By the time she leapt forward from the stage, her body twisting in mid-air like a contortionist so that she could properly view the scene from above, Lily, Dana, and Tasia were already leaping into the fray. Lily barreled into a cluster of Legions while wearing a cheerleader's outfit with a football helmet. The werewolf

swatted a man who fired two rounds into her, sending him flying across the room. And Dana...

Eulalie briefly marveled at the speed and fluidity demonstrated by the zombie. Dana moved as if this scene had been rehearsed, spinning around and cutting down her foes with her sword. The room was already soaked in blood, and there were now three hundred and twenty two enemies remaining. That thought played out in Eulalie's head like a video game announcer.

The Arachne landed silently behind the crowd, and grabbed hold of a demon who tried to run past her. With a practiced movement, she snapped the man's neck and tossed him aside, then kicked a nearby woman so hard that her shoes went flying off as she tumbled through the air. When one of the mercenaries aimed a shotgun in her direction, she sidestepped the blast and punched him so hard that his torso collapsed.

"Oh, fuck, I'm so sorry," she whispered in horror. Humans were far more fragile than she thought. Taking several deep breaths, she looked away from the mess she had made and closed her human eyes for a moment. Basking in the other visual spectrums made it easier to separate herself from reality, which would probably come up in therapy later.

She made a mental note to find a good therapist.

Somebody managed to fire their gun into Dana before she lopped off their arm. Though electronics were shut down by the frequency jammer Eulalie had hidden in the rafters, anybody lurking outside would hear the gunshots for sure.

"Just a game, just a game," she muttered, then held out her hand and willed Mace to return. The flying weapon leapt to her aid. She jumped up onto the wall and swung down at a pair of zombies that had run at her. If they bit her, would she turn? That would probably be very bad. Luckily, Mace had no problems dealing with the undead for her.

Eulalie felt a shift in the air currents and leapt to the side as a man up on the balcony opened fire on her location. He had entered through one of the side doors and had clearly noticed her first. Scrambling up the wall onto the ceiling, she looked over in time to watch the balcony get shattered from below by one of the demonic parishioners. Tasia had picked the woman up and thrown her like a missile, taking out the gunner.

“That was almost a fastball special,” Eulalie muttered, then jumped down into the melee to knock some attackers off of Dana. The zombie had been swarmed by the congregation and had almost been disarmed. Dana made brief eye contact with Eulalie, and what the Arachne saw there scared her.

“Dana?” she asked, but her friend had already moved away to disembowel somebody.

Lily was having no problems as she stormed over, her tail whipping back and forth to sting people. A few demons were already snoozing between the pews, at least two of them being eaten alive by zombies.

“You and I are going to have a long talk when we get home,” she declared, pointing angrily at Eulalie.

“You’re not my mother,” Eulalie replied defiantly. Though her comment had been intended as sarcasm, Lily’s features twisted up as if she had been struck.

“You’re right,” replied the succubus as she lifted up a demon with her tail and strangled him. The man’s legs kicked in the air, which attracted a zombie. “But you’re still my friend.”

Tasia howled in the corner of the room, and then the room erupted in gunfire as some of Legion’s meatsuits picked up guns that the dead security team had dropped. Lily flared her wings, catching the fired rounds with her body. The bullets she didn’t catch deflected off of Eulalie’s chitinous armor.

“Can we have this moment later?” Eulalie tossed Mace casually to the side, allowing the weapon to slip away from her hands and into somebody’s face. “This is how people get killed in movies.”

Lily rolled her eyes and lowered her wings. The man hanging from her tail was now riddled with bullets, his eyes bugged out as his body tried to reanimate.

“Fuck it, whatever.” She threw the man down. “But one more thing.”

“Make it quick.” Eulalie crossed her arms.

“We’re all predators here. But that was never the reason you were special.” Lily caressed Eulalie’s cheek. “Spiders aren’t just hunger and violence. They’re also quite smart, it’s why they have webs. You’re one of the smartest people I know, so don’t get caught up in the moment. Play to your strengths.”

Eulalie stared at the succubus in awe. The spider comment was something her mother used to tell her all the time. Playing to her strengths was one of her dad's favorite sayings. She was unsure how to reconcile hearing both of these things from her friend.

Lily flared her wings and leapt up toward the balcony. "I'll be back in a minute," she declared with a grin. "Try to leave some for me."

Eulalie watched her friend go, then turned back to the mess that had erupted. Some members of the congregation had fled out the front door into the night, and she had no way of knowing if they were possessed or dead.

"Mace!" She held out her hand and the weapon smacked into it. "We've got some hunting to do."

The weapon shivered in delight as she ran out into the humid night air.

Gunsmoke. Blood. Fear. These were the primary scents that lingered in Tasia's nostrils as she tore into her foes. The demon's meat suits only had the advantage of numbers as she slashed at them with her claws, ripping what little remained of her outfit with every movement. A man got too close and she snapped her jaws down around his neck and shook until she felt something snap. Satisfied, she dropped him on the ground and leapt forward at an old woman with a cane.

She winced at the staccato sounds of gunfire, heat and agony blossoming up her back. These bullets weren't silver, but each one brought pain similar to being stabbed with a hot knife. Growling in anger, she ripped one of the pews off of the ground and hurled it at the men and women who were now armed with guns. A squad of mercenaries came in through a side entrance and advanced, focusing their gunfire primarily on Tasia.

Tasia turned her back and hunched over, letting the bullets rip into her back. Already, her body was pushing the bullets back out, but a shot to the head would knock her unconscious if it didn't penetrate her skull. She saw the succubus leap up to the second floor, leaving the two of them alone. Eulalie was missing as well.

Despair welled up in the back of her mind, but the wolf forced it back down. Right now, they were a pack, and each of them had a role. It wasn't her job to

question what came next, but to chase it down with teeth bared. Dana had taken several hits as well, and was covered in blood. Tasia had no idea how much of it belonged to Dana.

Legion swarmed forward, pushing Dana back. Nearly ten people had her in a crush as four of them grabbed at the zombie's hand to try and disarm her. Dana fought back with inhuman strength, but leverage wasn't on her side. All around her, Legion was doing battle with the zombies that were rising up. The new mercenaries hadn't noticed this, and were already dealing with an undead problem of their own.

Tasia crouched down, then leapt forward, becoming a wrecking ball of teeth and fangs. She felt the rest of her dress rip free and grabbed her sword out of habit. Steam rose from her palms as the defensive magic of the sword bit into her.

She brought her blade down over and over again. It wasn't the grace of Tasia the knight. In fact, it barely resembled the years of study she had devoted to it. The blade was little more than a fancy butcher knife in her hands. She could do far better on her own.

Dana squirmed free, crawling back on stage where Tasia joined her. The zombies were far more interested in Legion than anyone else, but the demon was moving in. Tasia stood over Dana, crouching down to help shield her from the incoming rounds that were being fired by anyone who had managed to arm themselves.

"This is a mess," Dana grumbled, then tilted her head back to look up at Tasia. Her blue eyes had gone gray, and they lingered on Tasia's muzzle.

Tasia grunted in acknowledgement. Blood dripped from her torso and splashed on Dana's shoulders. She contemplated it for a moment before looking up into Tasia's eyes.

"Stop me if this goes bad," she said, then wiped her hands through Tasia's blood and stuck her fingers in her mouth. Her eyes rolled back in ecstasy, and she shuddered in delight.

Tasia remembered what had happened in the beach house and thought back to Dana's tale of the Nirumbi. Whatever happened next, they would need that additional edge if they wanted to survive. She briefly contemplated the sword in her own hands before coming to a decision.

Tasia was no longer a Knight of the Order. This blade had been her life once upon a time, but those days were gone. If she ever hoped to progress in understanding herself, she needed to stop letting the Order hold her back. She jammed the point of the blade into the stage, causing it to wobble in place as she crouched down on all fours and let out a howl.

“That’s my girl,” Dana whispered, her words barely audible.

Tasia charged into the fray once more, delighting in the terror and blood that followed. Her prey was not strong enough to stop her, nor was it strong enough to defeat the pack. Legion was making efforts to flee, but the zombies were just as fast. Pockets of fighting had broken out everywhere and the gunfire was no longer focused on Tasia or Dana.

Tasia targeted the demons first. The zombies wouldn’t leave, driven only by their blind hunger. Although Legion was essentially a hive mind, the demon had become so scattered that the advantage of numbers no longer mattered.

Stepping around a zombie that was eating a parishioner, Tasia tore into a couple of men who had tried to flee. She broke the back of one and tossed him to the zombies before pinning the other down beneath her claws.

“You ruined everything!” Legion yelled so hard that the skin of his face turned red.

Tasia responded by disemboweling him, then kicked him across the room where he could become food for something else. Sometimes actions were better than words.

The front door of the church exploded, revealing the vampyr, Timotei.

“You!” he shrieked, his eyes so wide that vessels had burst. “It’s because of you that he took Mila from me!”

Tasia growled, then stood to her full nine foot height.

“I’ll kill you!” The vampyr became a blur, kicking Tasia in the gut so hard that she toppled over a pew and fell on top of a trio of zombies that were feasting on a corpse. The zombies grabbed her, and she howled in pain as their teeth broke her flesh. Hot fire raced through her blood, extinguishing the virus that would change her.

At least, she assumed it was a virus. To be fair, she had no idea what mechanism Dana's undead status functioned by. She was just glad that her own status as a werewolf cancelled it out.

Timotei leaped on top of her, swatting the zombies aside as he straddled her chest and punched her hard in the mouth. A tooth cracked, then fell out when she opened her jaws wide and bit down on Timotei's head. This started a dramatic tug of war where the vampyr tried to shake her off while digging his claws into her fur. The two of them became a tumbling ball of rage and hatred as they rolled into the aisle and back toward the stage. Tasia didn't mind, though. Despite all her wounds and the throbbing sensation in her jaw, she was finally having fun.

One moment, Dana had been back in the kitchen with Daryl. It was the day she had been murdered, and she just stood there and listened to his instructions. Dimly aware that this was yet another memory, all she could do was watch and wait. It wasn't until she felt the hot taste of fresh blood in her mouth that she finally snapped free.

Now she was up on a stage, standing before hundreds of people. Legion was dying before her eyes as the zombie virus ripped through the demon's meat suit. The thing Dana had always prayed wouldn't happen had now come to pass, like a grim prognosis.

The room was full of demons, but she strictly had eyes for the undead. No matter what happened next, she had to make certain not a single one of them left this place intact. Looking out at the men and women gathered before her, she decided that none of them could leave, just to be safe.

"Roll for initiative, bitches!" Eulalie threw Mace into the audience and leapt from the stage as both Lily and Tasia joined her. Dana moved to join them, the taste of human blood fresh in her mouth. Her blade came down on a man nearby, and then the church vanished.

"Ah, hell yeah!" Velvet pumped her arms in the air as Bigfoot pulled several wooden figurines from behind his seat and set them on the battlemat. Eulalie danced from side to side as Bigfoot adjusted their positions on the board.

"After months of searching, the cult of Baal has finally revealed themselves. Roll for initiative." Bigfoot grinned at Dana, who had already tossed her dice on the board.

"Sixteen," said Eulalie.

"Ugh. Four." Velvet scowled at her die. "I think mine is cursed."

"I got a twelve." Dana frowned at the miniatures. "So what's the plan? There are a ton of these guys, and I don't think I have any AOE attacks."

"That's why you should always buy some alchemist's fire." Eulalie picked up her character sheet. "Oh, shit. I used all of mine on that troll."

"Are any of the cultists goblins?" asked Velvet with hope in her voice.

Bigfoot shook his head. "Nope. Though they are humanoid, none of them are your favored enemy."

"Crap baskets. How much HP is everybody at?" Velvet looked at Dana, her face freezing in place. Soft lines of concern wrinkled near her eyes, yet she was smiling. She was happy.

A bullet tore into Dana's side, and she swung her blade down, taking off the gunman's arm. Though she didn't need to breathe, she gasped for air. Taking a better stance, she dropped down into the melee, kicking one demon away as another tried to grab her hair. With fresh, living blood churning away in her stomach, she felt the emotions come.

"Ah, fucking hell." Eulalie pulled a bag made of spider silk from beneath the table and rummaged through it. "I shouldn't have missed, I think that die is broken."

"That's what you always say," Velvet said with a laugh. "You're just shit at rolling."

"Then why don't you let me use that random number generator, huh? I'd at least be guaranteed a statistical spread."

"No tech at the table," Bigfoot declared, then paused to sip his beer. "I like how the dice sound when they roll," he added for Dana's benefit.

"I've got a potion you can have." Dana looked at her character sheet. "But I need to get it to you and it isn't my turn yet."

"Ha! I can handle this." Velvet studied the board. "Even if you take an attack of opportunity, you should be able to get to her. Then I can cover your back."

“Are you sure?” Dana frowned at the board. “What’s your health at, anyway?”

“It’s fine.” Though Dana had only known the Arachne sisters for a couple of days, she could tell Velvet was lying. “Besides, even if I go down, Lala can resurrect me. There’s a certain priest that owes her a favor.” Velvet licked her lips seductively.

“Gross,” replied Eulalie. “But accurate.”

Hands clasped around Dana’s neck, squeezing so hard that the blood fought to push its way to her brain. Pulled so suddenly to the present, Dana actually reached out with her free hand in an attempt to pull that memory forward once more. It was a cherished memory, one that she revisited often.

Yet in this moment, it was painful, like the exposed nerve of a tooth. Her vision shimmered as tears formed, blurring the angry faces of those around her. It was Legion, looking at her through many different faces. They nearly had her disarmed.

Eulalie dropped down from above, clearing enough of the congregation away that Dana was able to slip free. The moment froze, and she could see the agony hidden beneath the surface of the Arachne’s face. There was anger, pain, and maybe something else. Fear? Regret? Dana’s heart was pounding so loudly in her chest that she couldn’t concentrate.

Realization finally snapped into place. What Dana was seeing on Eulalie’s face was loss, plain and simple. Velvet’s death had broken Eulalie, but the Arachne had worked hard to put herself back together. But now, in this moment, all of the cracks from being shattered were on full display for the world to see.

Seeing Eulalie’s emotions laid bare revealed yet another truth. Dana may have fooled herself into thinking she was just doing this for Eulalie, but that wasn’t actually true. She missed her friend. She wanted to do this for herself. Her emotions were a whirlwind, so she grabbed onto the first one she could. From somewhere buried deep in her stomach, a ball of rage began to unfold.

Dana locked eyes with Eulalie just as the anger boiled over, filling her with a thirst for violence.

“Dana?” asked Eulalie.

"I would like to use rage," said Dana, staring down at the table from above. Bigfoot chuckled quietly to himself and leaned back in his chair.

"I was wondering when you'd finally get around to using it," he said.

Dana smirked and picked up her mini. "The extra hit points will help me get to Eulalie, and then I can help kick some ass afterward." She moved her miniature next to Eulalie's wizard.

"Hold on." Bigfoot rolled the dice and frowned. "Oof, that didn't go as planned."

"What happened?" asked Eulalie and Velvet at the same time. Both of them were leaning over the table, their eyes shining in the lantern light.

"Critical miss on the attack of opportunity." When the sasquatch grinned, it showed all his teeth. "Looks like you got lucky!"

"Hell, yeah," Dana replied.

Charging forward, Dana felt the world slow to a crawl. Her mind was racing so fast that she had plenty of time to think about her next moves. Blood was spilled, hot and fresh, and she licked it off her lips. It gave her strength, speed, and maybe something more.

Legion seemed to realize that something was up, and she got rushed again. Though her strength was increasing, it still wasn't enough for ten thralls at once. Suddenly, Tasia was there, ripping the parishioners away. The two of them fell back together, Dana surveying their attackers. She was bleeding from multiple wounds, and her body was knitting itself back together as fast as possible.

"This is a mess," she said, her words oozing out of her like molasses. Even now, the world was starting to speed up again. If they were going to get out of this, she needed that extra edge the blood provided.

The smell of steaks sizzling on a grill splashed down on her from above, and Dana turned her head to sniff the sweet ambrosia of werewolf blood. Remembering what had happened before, she looked up into Tasia's face.

"Stop me if this goes bad." Honestly, if this didn't work, things were going to be bad anyway. She scooped up the blood on her fingers and stuck it in her mouth.

"Alright, I should be able to take a hit," Eulalie said. "Let's see here. Dana is acting as my meat shield right now, so that should keep my butt out of the fire. How are you holding up, Vee?"

Velvet arched an eyebrow. "I took three hits this round, what do you think?"

"Can you take at least one more?" Eulalie pointed at a cultist in the corner. "Because if he doesn't kill you, I can cast Haste."

"Wicked." Velvet's eyes lit up.

"What does Haste do?" asked Dana.

"Short version, let's Velvet make an extra attack with each weapon," Eulalie replied. "And since she's a ranger dual wielding katanas..."

Velvet cackled maniacally and pulled extra dice out of her bag. "The prophecy shall be fulfilled," she declared.

"Only if you hit," Bigfoot reminded her. "These aren't your favored enemies."

"Thanks for the reminder, Uncle Foot." Velvet stuck out her tongue.

"Two Weapon Fighting has its drawbacks," explained Eulalie.

"Mathematically speaking, you would typically be better off trying to wield a weapon normally because your chance to hit goes up, but your damage output is much higher if you have two weapons and can actually land both hits."

Dana nodded. "Yeah, I remember we discussed this when I made this character after the last one died. I can use Power Attack to do something similar."

"You didn't explain the best part," Velvet said as she cupped her hands together around all her dice.

"What's the best part?" asked Dana.

"Hold on." Velvet targeted the cultist nearest her. "This guy," she said, then rolled her twenty-sided die several times.

Bigfoot bit his lip in thought, then nodded. "Technically, you missed once, but I'll give it to you because Rule of Cool."

"Rule of Cool," Velvet declared, then grabbed the stack of dice she had just set up and started shaking them in her hands. "And now for the best part!" She

threw the dice on the table and let out a cackle. "Whoop whoop! I love that sound!"

Bigfoot leaned forward and scrutinized the dice. "Yeah, that will do it. You bring down your blades so fast you reduce the cultist in front of you into a bloody mess."

"Yeah!" Velvet pumped her arms.

"That's my girl," Eulalie said with a grin.

Tasia howled, then leapt off the stage, leaving her weapon behind. Caught up in the present and her memory at the same time, Dana found herself repeating Eulalie's words. Along the edges of the stage, figures swarmed her as others fled. The world had become sticky, clinging to all of its players and allowing Dana to properly think and feel for the first time in forever.

There was a hole deep inside, right next to the one that Alex had left. For the first time, Dana felt like she could run her hands along its side and properly feel its dimensions. Ever since she had died, nothing was supposed to hurt her. But right now, she felt the bitter loss of her friend. Other emotions tried to call for her attention, powered by the fresh blood in her system, but she pushed them all away. For now, she wanted to hurt. She wanted to be angry.

"I'm feeling particularly murderous," she said to nobody but herself, then took two steps to the right and picked up the blade Tasia had left behind. It was identical to her own in the ways that mattered. If she closed her eyes, she doubted she would be able to tell the difference.

Behind her, she heard someone slide a fresh clip into a gun. Stepping back and to the side, she whipped around and brought the blades down in tandem. The man who had snuck up on her froze in shock as he lost first his hands, then his life. Standing over his corpse, Dana stared down at him in contempt.

"Two Weapon Fighting," she whispered. "I'm going to roll all the dice tonight."

A pair of demons tried to flee up the aisle just as Timotei burst into the church. Tasia immediately engaged the vampyr, and the two of them tore apart the room as Dana danced between her foes, her enchanted blades singing a song of bloody destruction.

“Who are you?” one of the demons demanded as Dana pinned him to the wall.

“You killed my friend,” she replied, then beheaded him. Nearby, another Legion groaned.

“Why do you all keep saying that?” Legion demanded. Dana replied to this meatsuit in a similar manner, then shredded a trio of zombies who came for the snacks. The undead ignored her, so they were easy kills. Looking up, she saw that Legion was trying to flee.

“You’re not fast enough,” she growled with tears streaming down her face, then threw herself at the demons once more.

Lily sprinted across the upper level of the church, keeping her eyes open for any signs of resistance. Sure enough, a small group of Legions emerged from a darkened hallway, their eyes blazing with light.

“You’ll go no further,” they declared, spreading out in the hopes of stopping her. Lily slid to a stop, her wings folding shut behind her. These were some of the younger vessels that Legion had claimed, each one strengthened by the demon’s essence as well as the thrall bond they had with Timotei. Alone, they were no match for her. Together, they would slow her down or even stop her.

“Do you really think you can stop me?” she asked.

As a group, Legion nodded.

“Good.” Lily moved forward as if to brute force her way down the hallway, hopefully moving in Deacon’s direction. The men and women formed themselves into a wedge, ready to wrestle her down. Once they were lined up, Lily pulled out the Mossberg shotgun she had stolen from a mercenary and emptied three rounds into the group, causing them to cry out in dismay as they fell in on each other.

The succubus chuckled at the two Legions who stared at their counterparts dying on the floor. They gazed up at her in horror as she aimed the gun their way. “It’s wabbit season,” she declared, pumping it for effect.

She had expected them to run, but they tried to charge her instead. Using the Mossberg as a club, she knocked one out and then stabbed the other through the neck with her tail.

“Hardly worth the ammo,” she muttered as she hopped over the spreading pool of blood on the floor. “Now where did your buddy go?”

It took a little bit of sleuthing, but Lily knew she had hit the jackpot when she came across a door with an Enochian seal scratched into the ceiling that trapped her in place. She used the remaining rounds in her Mossberg to destroy the formation, then kicked open the door to reveal Deacon trying to squeeze out the window while carrying what was clearly a bug-out bag.

“No, wait,” he cried, but Lily snatched him with her tail and tossed him into a nearby chair.

“Oh, I’m going to enjoy this,” she said with a grin, licking her lips seductively. Deacon shivered in fear as Lily used the last of her venom to send him spiraling into unconsciousness. As the good pastor drifted off to slumberland, Lily got up and pushed the biggest piece of furniture she could find in front of the door.

“It’s dinnertime,” she declared, then sat on his lap and leaned close, her consciousness sliding forward and into his. Her descent into Deacon’s Dreamscape was seamless, and she found herself sliding down the interior walls of his church, unseen by the faceless congregation. It was easy enough to move among the parishioners. They were like mannequins that had been posed and were awaiting further instructions.

“What’s all this about?” Lily poked one of the faceless members of the congregation, then altered her outfit and squeezed between a couple. She had to wait a few more minutes for Deacon to properly appear in his own Dreamscape, but his entrance was nothing short of ostentatious. Trumpets heralded his arrival, and he descended from above on a pair of white, feathered wings that extended far behind him. A beam of light guided him to his place on the stage, and the crowd went berserk.

“Greetings, friends!” Deacon held his hands in the air and closed his eyes, bathing in the adoration. Though the parishioners lacked faces, they certainly had pockets, because they started throwing their money onto the stage.

“I don’t even need Freud for this one,” Lily muttered to herself as she started slinking toward the stage. She gave a mental tug at the scenery and wasn’t

surprised when she couldn't alter the landscape. If she pulled too hard, it might alert Deacon to the fact that she was in his head. Typically, this wasn't something her prey would be aware of, but the man had spent years with a demon. It would be dumb to assume he didn't have some sort of mental defenses taught to him.

She meandered through the crowd, noticing that the congregation became more animated whenever he was looking at them. It was almost like his brain was a computer that simply couldn't process the details of something he wasn't looking at directly. A few more minutes of inspection revealed that the reason for this was that the dream was recurring. His mind was on autopilot, meaning that it would be much easier for him to detect her if she caused the vision to deviate.

Scowling, she moved to the edge of his vision and snuck onto the stage and then behind it. It was easy to move among the shadows, but she still took her time. Call it a hunch, but something struck her as odd about the whole vision.

While debating whether she should populate the front of the congregation with attractive women, or maybe have a sexy AV tech come on stage, Deacon stopped mid speech and turned to look over his shoulder. Lily knelt down behind a speaker and turned her thoughts inward in an attempt to avoid detection.

"Who's there?" he demanded. "Legion? Is that you?"

Lily knew better than to attempt impersonating the other demon. The fact that Deacon had slipped into lucidity suddenly meant that he had been trained for just this occasion.

"Hello?" Lights clicked on all across the stage, chasing away the shadows. Dark figures lurked at the edges of Deacon's dream, and Lily watched them with suspicion. Those weren't manifestations of hers or Deacon's. They were the ever elusive watchers, beings that lurked in the realm of dreams. She pretended she couldn't see them, knowing better than to get involved with such creatures. If they latched onto Deacon's dream, then they could startle him awake and she might not get a chance to put him back under. She was already low enough on dream juice, succubi weren't meant to stick dozens of people in a single evening.

But those things? If they got hold of her, they could keep her from leaving for long enough that Deacon would get away. Why were they even here? Though there wasn't any rhyme or reason for their presence, they did tend to hover around nightmares and people with dark tendencies. Considering Deacon had just

condemned a bunch of people to eternal damnation, she figured that would count.

“Wait a second. Wasn’t I at...” Deacon stepped into view, scratching the back of his head. A tiny ripple went through the dream, and Lily felt the boundaries flex. Osgrove was trying to break free using logic, but he was still pretty deep.

Ignoring the watchers, Lily stepped into view, disguising herself as a generic woman in mom jeans and a sweater. “Oh my gosh, is that you? You’re Deacon Osgrove, right?”

“Um...yeah.” Deacon stood up straight, a look of confusion on his face.

“Wow, I couldn’t get tickets to your show. How exciting is this?” Lily ran up to him and took him by the hand. He was off guard, which was a good thing. Deacon tried to stare at one of the shadow entities when it moved in for a closer look, but she put a copy of his book in his hand.

“Sign this for me!” She held out a pen for him and he took it automatically. It was hard to say which vice was his strongest, but it was definitely a tie between greed and pride. Opening up her book, he struggled with the pen as it kept slipping out of his fingers.

“Yeah, um, give me a second.” He handed her pen back and stuck his hand in the pocket of his robe to search for one of his own. Lily used the distraction to tone down the venue, removing people and structures as he tried in vain to sign his own name. He messed up several times, but Lily always handed him a fresh new book to try again.

“Can you tell me the story about when you were in a homeless shelter?” Lily bit her lip and swayed from side to side. “It’s my favorite.”

“Of course.” Deacon smiled, and the world behind him melted away. They were now standing inside the homeless shelter, and he led Lily over to a cot where a younger version of him sat on the edge.

She didn’t care so much about the story, but his enthusiasm for the subject made it easier for her to take control of the dream. Using the tormented souls trapped inside her essence, she populated the shelter with men and women she had claimed. They obeyed her every whim, allowing her to get a stronger grasp on his dream.

If she hadn't been paying such close attention, she would have missed the enochian script hidden underneath homeless Deacon's cot. She took a step back and smirked at the runes that now glowed before her eyes. This was most likely Legion's handiwork, which meant they expected her to do something like this.

Then again, when would they have done it? No, this was something put in a long time ago, most likely as a precautionary measure. Deacon could talk a mean game about how he and Legion were equal partners, but Lily suspected it might actually be true. Legion had invested quite a bit into their partnership.

Now that she knew the script was there, she had one of her souls take on her visage as she slipped away when Deacon wasn't looking. Her souls wouldn't be affected by the script, but it would detonate like a bomb if she stepped on it. She would get flung out of Osgrove's demented little head and he would awaken.

She would have to take her time. Her original intention had been to get Deacon talking about himself and start flirting, but that was no longer going to work.

Moving carefully to the edges of Deacon's consciousness, she checked in with the real world. Only a couple minutes had passed, but the shouting and gunfire revealed that the party was still in full swing. She most likely only had another few minutes before Legion sent more puppets her way. Sure, she could just break his neck and be done with it, but she wanted his soul in the worst way possible. Already, she fantasized about strapping him down to a moving walkway covered in razor blades for a year or so.

Looking for ideas, she dug through his memories. To her surprise, Deacon had been fairly virtuous. Other than a couple of very discrete dalliances over the last few years, his main focus had been on becoming richer and expanding Legion's congregation. Typically, men in Deacon's position were very eager to abuse their power in whatever way possible, but he was too focused on his goals to worry about getting laid.

She would have to go deeper. While Deacon was distracted by her double, she walked the corridors of his mind and peered into the doorways. So many of the rooms contained Deacon preaching, it was clear that the act really did give him joy. He got to be the center of attention as well as making bank off the pious act. Naturally, she hated him even more for this.

“So what exactly are we hoping to find?” Spirit Mike manifested next to her. There was no goofy outfit this time, his serious features mimicking her own.

“I need to figure out what gets this guy off,” she said. “But I have to do it in a way that he doesn’t suspect anything. Things back on Earth are very tense, and I’m running up against a deadline.”

“Uh huh.” Mike scratched at his chin.

“But you knew that already.”

“Yep.” Mike opened a door and stuck his head inside. “Ugh, he’s writing in his journal on the tour bus. That one is a dud.”

“Damn. At this rate, I’m gonna have to dry hump him out in meatspace and hope for the best.” Lily shook her head in frustration, then kicked open the door nearest to her. Deacon was baptizing a group of people in this one.

“Don’t these memories strike you as a little one-dimensional?” Mike opened another door which revealed a park sermon. “I know that the guy has it bad for being America’s top pastor, but this almost feels deliberate.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, what about you?” Mike leaned against the nearest wall. “For centuries, you just wanted your freedom. Now that you have it, what would your hall look like? Is it all the choices you made? Is it just cherished memories you’ve made since then?”

“I hate when you analyze me.”

He shrugged. “Technically, this is self reflection taken to an extreme. If you don’t like it, send a complaint to management.”

“Ass.” Lily frowned at Mike. “But you’re right, though. All this stuff seems so benign. And we already found a trap in here. So what are you thinking?”

“Misdirection.” Mike knocked on the door nearest him. “Anyone digging around in here will only see this stuff. If you weren’t a succubus, how deep could you even go?”

“Probably no deeper than this.” Lily started to say something else, but held a finger to her lips as a ripple went through the hallway. Mike waited for nearly a minute as Lily checked in on Deacon, who had become suspicious. She allowed

him to take control of the dream long enough that he relaxed his grip on the foundation.

“He almost woke up.” Mike spoke once Lily had returned. “His mind is strong.”

“He’s been trained.” She looked down the hallway. “Like you said, misdirection. If these are the things he wants us to see, then where does he keep the juicy bits?” Lily gestured down the hallway, which was so long that it disappeared into darkness.

“We need to think like him. That trap that Legion left, it wasn’t for you specifically. It was for a demon. This right here? It’s a mess for anyone who gets in. What kind of person would invade his mind?”

Lily rolled her eyes and jacked off an invisible penis. “You’re stating the obvious.”

“But why would a demon be here in the first place? This is something they planned for, they expected someone to come snooping around. Didn’t Deacon mention a demon popped by not long ago?”

“He did, but so what? Hey, where are you going?” She watched as Mike picked a door at random and walked inside. Deacon was on stage, holding both hands in the air as the crowd sang *Hallelujah*.

“Everything is about layers, right? If we dug long enough, would we find a room under lock and key? I almost bet we would. But that’s because a demon would expect the best secrets to be kept in there.” Mike skipped down the steps and jogged toward the stage. “And when they force it open, perhaps another trap. Or maybe Deacon has a dead man’s switch, and he just dies.”

“Dark, but your logic is solid.”

“Of course it is.” Mike climbed onto the stage and turned to hold his hand out. “I’m just a sexier manifestation of your subconscious.”

“I wish you acted more like this in real life,” she replied, allowing him to help her onto the stage.

“No you don’t.” He winked at her. “But that’s okay.”

“Maybe I should start locking up my thoughts,” she muttered as Mike moved next to Deacon and started looking around. He finally grinned and picked up Osgrove’s personal Bible.

“I think it’s this,” he said, handing it over to Lily.

“Really? Why?”

“Where better to hide the truth than the Bible?” Mike laughed. “It’s classic misdirection. Hide the answer in plain sight. We both know the man is full of shit, so why would we even consider looking at this thing? It’s in almost every memory, but we assume they’re all about him anyway.”

“You almost have me convinced,” she muttered, then opened the Bible to a random page. A tiny door appeared on the surface of the book’s pages. “Damn. I didn’t expect this at all.”

“Of course you didn’t.” Mike took the book from her and set it on the ground, pages open. “But that’s because you’re still mostly a demon.”

“What else am I?”

Spirit Mike laughed. “I guess we’ll find out together.” He stepped onto the book and the two of them shrank down, now standing in the crease of the spine. The letters beneath them lifted free of the paper and circled their legs like hungry fish as Mike moved to the door and put his hand on the knob.

“Shall we see what’s behind door number two?” he asked.

“I hope it’s a car,” she replied as Mike pushed open the door. It most definitely wasn’t.

The creatures of the swamp had gone dead silent as Eulalie stalked her prey from the trees. It had been simple enough to chase down the first couple of demons, but that had allowed time for the rest to flee the property, followed by the undead. Realizing that a zombie outbreak would be much worse than letting Legion escape, Eulalie had prioritized smashing their skulls with Mace.

The shouts of panicked men carried across the compound as the rest of the security forces came rushing back in. She didn’t dare try to head back until their numbers dwindled. Her escape route in the attic was still an option, but she really wanted to make sure she brought the others through with her.

Realizing her options were limited, she decided to catch a few more stragglers as well as plan for more. Pulling sticky webs from her spinnerets, she was already weaving some snares as she raced ahead of Legion's flock. There were plenty of stones and rotting logs to use as counterweights, and she was able to snag a demon early on. The man howled obscenities at her, but this only served to draw in some of the zombies she had missed. This bought her some more time to catch the others who had gotten away.

From high up in the trees, she could see enough of the infrared spectrum that her prey were essentially glowing lights moving between the brush. The demons tended to run hotter than the humans she had seen, a fact which she found slightly interesting. The armor on her skin was dark enough that she was little more than a shadow at night, leaping silently through the trees.

Mace was less subtle. Her sentient weapon blasted through rocks and bushes, often catching Legion off guard. There was no mercy given, and the mace seemed to understand that any of these former men and women could turn later on. In this, Eulalie was also methodical. Nothing of the brain could survive if she wanted to avoid the zombie apocalypse.

It was still really icky, though.

The activity in the woods died out quickly, though the sounds of gunfire intensified at the church. From her perch, she spotted one last demon crouched down in the underbrush. With a smirk, she manipulated some webbing in her hand as she moved toward the young woman.

Dropping down from above, Eulalie fastened the noose she had made around the demon's neck. When Legion tried to run, she yanked hard enough to rip the demon off her feet.

"Nice try," she commented, then pounced. It took only a few seconds to bind the demon's hands and feet before strapping her down against a tree.

This meatsuit was a woman in her late twenties, her blonde hair caked in dirt, blood, and mud. She wore a sweater with a college logo, and had acne scars all along her neck. When she glared at Eulalie, her eyes turned red and glowed.

"Who are you?" demanded the demon.

"No one of consequence." It was one of Eulalie's favorite lines from a movie.

“Hardly,” spat Legion. “It’s clear you’re working with them. But why?” The demon lowered her gaze to Eulalie’s body. “And how are you here? Your kind was exterminated almost a century ago.”

She contemplated the demon, then reached out and grabbed the palm of the woman’s hand. With barely any effort, she used her thumb to break a finger.

“You think that will hurt me?” Legion chuckled. “All you’re doing is hurting the woman I have trapped in here with me.”

“Please. I know that demons lie if not asked directly.” Eulalie snapped another finger, and Legion actually winced.

“Okay, so maybe I feel it too,” Legion confessed. “But it’s very—OW!”

“You’ve got seven left, don’t be a baby.” Eulalie moved to break another finger, then paused. What was she even doing here? This version of Legion was no different than any other, so why toy with her?

“Cruelty,” Legion spat, sweat beading up on her forehead. “Your kind is always about the cruelty.”

“Not always.” Eulalie broke another finger, making Legion wince. “I knew an Arachne once who was kind and gentle. Probably the best of our kind, to be honest.” This time, she pinched the base of Legion’s thumb and applied just enough pressure that the demon’s eyes bugged out of her head. “And you took her from me.”

“Please, I think I would remember squashing a—FUCK!” Legion screamed as Eulalie crushed the metacarpal. “Why are you doing this?”

“Catharsis, honestly.” Eulalie grabbed Legion’s other hand.

“No, wait.” The demon gasped for air, then swallowed. “Seriously, tell me what you want. There has to be an agreement we can make.”

“Two things, honestly.” She curled a finger around Legion’s. “I plan to find you, you know. Not this version of you, the real one, Legion Prime. I’m going to find out where you’re hiding and then I plan to make you suffer. If I’m lucky, that will happen tonight. Even if you run out of bodies and go to Hell, I’ll summon you back. It’ll be a party.”

“But I don’t understand.” Legion started crying, but stopped when Eulalie slapped her.

“Don’t bother.” The Arachne shook her head. “Maybe if I was my sister, I would be fooled. She might have even let you go. That’s the part of her I miss the most, honestly.”

The demon chuckled, her eyes suddenly dry. “It was worth a try.”

“I get that.” Eulalie tilted her head and listened to the distant sounds of the forest. “But back to your questions. You see, you took her from me. Tangentially, I might add. So I’ve decided to take everything from you. After tonight, you’re gonna be low on bodies, right? Well guess what? I’ll find all of them. Snip, snip, snip,” she said, miming scissors with her hands. “I intend to cut you out of this world.”

“Yeah, you said that already.” Legion rolled her eyes.

“Sorry, I’m new at this.” Leaves rustled nearby, but Eulalie ignored them. “But that also brings me to the other thing I want.”

Legion opened her mouth to ask. Eulalie grabbed the demon’s lower jaw and yanked, pulling it so hard that it broke away. All that kept it connected was the skin of the demon’s face. She screamed in agony, bashing the back of her head against the tree as she writhed.

“I needed more bait,” Eulalie said as she jumped up into the tree. Down below, three zombies came out of the bushes and started feasting on Legion. A fourth one showed up, crawling on the ground and dragging its legs. With a whistle, she summoned Mace, who made quick work of the corpses below. Now that her work in the swamp was done, it was time to get back to the church.

She swung by her traps and finished off anyone who remained. The Legion that had been hanging upside down was now in two pieces on the ground, surrounded by zombies that consumed him. Though Eulalie had gotten used to the cracked coconut sound of a head exploding, that didn’t mean she wouldn’t hear it in her dreams forever.

Satisfied that this wave of escapees had been taken care of, she left the swamp and was back on church soil. There were a few clusters of bodies around the building, but the gunfire had diminished. Eulalie spotted a few runners, but sent Mace after them. It was time to get back inside and see what she could do to help.

She was almost to the front door when she was caught in the headlights of a large town car. The vehicle slowed and came to a stop nearly twenty feet away. Blinded by the lights, Eulalie stepped to the side to get a better look at the newcomer.

A monster of a man stepped out of the driver's seat, causing the shocks of the vehicle to sigh in relief. He was wearing a duster and a wide-brimmed fedora.

"Now isn't this a surprise," he said in a deep voice. Though his words were calm, his dark silhouette generated terror in Eulalie. "Just minutes ago, a young man shot rounds at my car just to get my attention. Before I could pull out his spine, he informed me that I needed to come back right away because Osgrove had the wolf in his custody. But this? Even I couldn't have predicted this."

Eulalie's mouth opened and closed, but it was like she couldn't breathe.

Still hidden by the headlights, the Hat Man chuckled and took a step toward her. "You're almost the spitting image of my dear Octavia."

"Octavia?" Eulalie managed to push the word past her lips. She had never heard that name before.

"I dare say you wouldn't know her by that name, it was the one I gave her. I don't typically do that with my test subjects, but she was more special than the others." The Hat Man pulled off what looked like driving gloves. "I'm sure she's long deceased. What are you, four, five generations removed? I was under the impression your kind had gone extinct, which makes this an excellent—"

Mace shot over Eulalie's shoulder, spinning wildly like a top. The moment before impact, the Hat Man raised a hand and caught the head of the mace in the palm of one hand. His arm jerked around as Mace tried to escape, but the man's grip was too strong.

"Fascinating," he declared. "I've heard rumors, but to see such a beautiful thing up close? This was worth my time."

"Let go of him." Eulalie found her voice as her legs flexed. "He doesn't belong to you."

"Ownership is such a loose term these days," the Hat Man declared as he gripped Mace in both hands. "I will be adding this to my Collection so that I can see what makes it work."

“I said let go!” The Arachne leapt forward, cocking her hand back. At the last second, she ducked out of the way, but the Hat Man grabbed her arm. His fingers tightened around the chitinous armor of her body, cracking it like an egg as it broke away in his hand. She was able to snag Mace’s handle, but she was yanked off her feet as the Hat Man pulled.

“Such emotion is uncharacteristic of your kind. I daresay there’s been a shift.” He swatted Eulalie, shattering her protective armor. “I suppose I’ll figure out more when I take you apart, too.”

That sinister feeling of dread returned immediately. Eulalie, seeing no way out, reached into one of her pockets and pulled out a small canister. The Hat Man laughed, the light from the car briefly touching his face.

“Is that what I think that is?” His skin was pulled tight across his skull, giving him a smooth complexion. “An Arachne carrying pepper spray, that is rich.”

“It’s not pepper spray, asshole.” Eulalie clicked off all three safeties on the canister before pointing it at the Hat Man.

“There is nothing in that bottle that I—”

Eulalie shifted slightly so that the wind was at her back, then pressed the button. It was a special blend that Zel had made for her, intended solely for life or death situations. The pressurized mixture of nitrous oxide and Dragon’s Breath came out in a thin stream that coated the Hat Man’s face.

The Hat Man let go of Mace and stumbled backward, clutching his eyes. He made the mistake of trying to scoop it free, which meant the Dragon’s Breath pollen dug even deeper into his skin. Shouting in anger, he stumbled about and bumped into his own car.

“Dragon’s Breath? How?” He placed his palm on the car and hissed something in Latin. An eerie green field surrounded the vehicle. “I guess you’re a survivor just like she was.”

Eulalie backed away from the car, not sure what to expect. The Hat Man pulled a bloody rag from his coat and used it to open the door.

“Should we meet again, I’ll be better prepared.” He got into the car and fastened his seat belt. “I look forward to collecting you someday.”

The Arachne said nothing. The town car's engine roared, and then the steering wheel turned by itself. After a quick U-turn, she was able to see a small coffin in the back of the vehicle, strapped down by chains. She had no idea what had just transpired, but one thing was clear.

She hoped she never ran across that fucker again.

"What in the actual fuck am I looking at?" asked Lily.

Spirit Mike frowned. "You know, I'm not entirely sure myself. But it's not what I expected."

They were standing on the edge of a cliff, looking down at a beach. Below, a pair of figures were holding hands and laughing, the waves washing over their ankles. One of them was Deacon, easily twenty years younger. The other was a woman with long blonde hair in a white dress.

"This isn't the kind of salaciousness I expected." Mike looked to Lily. "Why hide this? It's nice."

"That's what I want to know." Back in the real world, Lily could hear shouting in the hall. It was unknown how long she would have before Legion found a way to bust in and rescue the slumbering pastor. "But evil is typically wrapped up in something that appears innocent and benign."

"Like bad hot sauce inside a burrito."

Lily stared at Mike. "Did you seriously just compare the battle between good and evil to a burrito?"

He shrugged. "It's not my fault that burritos are a universal language. What isn't there to like? It's a flour tortilla wrapped around whatever you want. Don't even get me started on a breakfast burrito, a good piece of bacon defines the whole thing."

Lily rolled her eyes and leapt from the cliff, her wings spreading wide to allow a casual descent. She might have been outside the memory, but could feel the walls of the dream shaking. Deacon was putting up quite the fight already, and that was just because of her presence here.

She watched Deacon and the woman with a frown. They were speaking, but their voices were buried by the sounds of the waves.

“It’s like spiritual white noise,” Mike commented from next to her. “So whatever they’re saying is important.”

“You’re stating the obvious again.”

“I could go back to talking about burritos.”

“Don’t.” Lily felt like her whole being was wound tight like a spring. This incursion wasn’t supposed to be so hard. It was likely that Legion had helped Deacon forge his mind this way. She noticed the woman had on a wedding band. “I’m guessing this is his wife.”

“Would seem that way. Since we’re solving a mystery, do you think—”

“Yeah, yeah.” With very little thought, she changed her outfit to an orange, oversized shirt with a red bikini bottom. “Happy?”

Mike nodded. “Classic look with a beach aesthetic. I approve.”

She couldn’t help but grin. “Okay, let’s see what we can do about the settings.” Reaching out her hand, she opened up a panel in midair filled with sliding switches. She pulled one down slowly, causing the sounds of the ocean to diminish. A ripple went out across the memory and she waited.

“Very fragile in here,” Mike remarked.

Lily didn’t respond. She waited for the memory to stabilize, then finished muting the ocean. Putting her hand on another slider, she turned the volume up on the dialogue.

“Do you really think he can help us?” Deacon’s wife tilted her head to one side. “It’s not that I doubt you or my faith, but the Bible warns us about those who bear false promises.”

Deacon chuckled, then turned to his wife. “Oh, my heart. It is natural to doubt. Have not all good men of God doubted at some point? Thomas? Gideon? Even Moses had his reservations. This is clearly a test, given from up on high. If we flee the call, then we are truly lost.”

“Oh, barf,” Mike muttered. “He even preached to his wife.”

“Besides,” Deacon continued. “Don’t you trust me? I have found a higher calling, but the world doesn’t know it yet.”

“Of course I trust you.” The woman’s features softened. “Everything that I am is completely yours.”

“Good.” Deacon smiled and kissed his wife, then hugged her tight with his head on top of hers. The smile didn’t reach his eyes.

“This is hardly damning,” Mike said.

“Agreed. But it’s clearly important to him.” Lily moved to the edges of the memory and contemplated the threads holding it in place. “If I can just get this guy to nut, I’ll have more time to figure it all out.”

“Well, this is his wife.” Mike made a circle with one hand and stuck a finger through it suggestively. “Instead of a sexy hookup with a fan, maybe a romantic memory?”

“Ugh.” Lily scowled and plucked at one of the threads. “But yeah, that makes the most sense. What do you think?”

“I don’t know. I have a suspicion that romance isn’t his thing.” Mike scrunched up his face. “Maybe he did something really kinky with her once? Some sexy nun and priest role play?”

“Potentially.” The memory shook again and cracks formed along the edges of the scene. Lily studied the threads some more and was surprised to find that some of them had been braided together. “What do we have here?”

Using her hands and her tail, she managed to pull the threads wide to reveal a golden line of energy hidden between them. Just revealing it had an immediate effect on the ocean, which surged as if something came to life beneath its surface.

“This is what he doesn’t want us to see,” she said, then touched it. The world made a wet, ripping sound as the memory shifted. They were in a room bereft of decoration with a large, four poster bed. Deacon and his wife were in the bed, their clothes scattered on the floor.

“I’ll be gentle,” he promised her as he kissed her forehead and then her cheeks. “We’ll take our time, okay?”

His wife nodded nervously, then gasped when Deacon arched his hips. Lily walked to the nearest window and looked outside.

“Same beach,” she commented.

“And their first time,” Mike added. “Or hers, anyway. But they’ve got wedding rings on.”

“Honeymoon, perhaps.” Lily knelt down next to the bed. What was she missing here? This memory was special to Deacon, but what was the value in hiding it away? Surely it wasn’t because Legion foresaw someone like her seeking it out.

“Something’s off.” Mike walked along the perimeter of the room, then stopped next to the night stand. He opened up the drawer and pulled out a green book. “Hey, the Gideons were here,” he noted.

Lily ignored him. She was busy watching Deacon’s face. His wife was so caught up in new sensations and feelings that her eyes were closed, blind to what transpired on Deacon’s face. It wasn’t just lust, but elation and victory. Something much bigger was happening here.

Out in the real world, someone was banging on the door. Frustrated, Lily ran her hands along Deacon’s legs and pulled on the Dreamscape, moving his soul into the memory. Osgrove fought her at first, but settled once he became lost in the sensation of fucking his wife.

“I half expected that to fail,” said Mike.

Lily nodded. She was in a hurry, and absolutely hated fast food. Whatever was going on in Deacon’s mind, she could always digest it later. Deacon’s wife curled her legs around her husband’s waist and gave out a cry of delight.

“I’m still waiting for the twist.” Mike walked to the closet and looked inside. “What makes this memory so special to him?”

Deacon’s face turned bright red and he held his breath. In the real world, Lily was grinding on his lap, hoping to speed things along a bit with some dry humping. The furniture blocking the door shifted as the door opened about an inch.

“C’mon, you fucker,” she muttered.

Osgrove’s face lit up in victory as he blew his load, both in his wife and in his pants. Lily jumped free of the Dreamscape and forced Deacon’s eyes open, all barriers removed. She placed her lips against his and pulled his soul out so hard that she felt the edges of it rip.

“Gah!” he proclaimed, the color draining from his face. Though his body lived, he was officially gone. Not wanting to leave a perfectly good vessel for Legion behind, Lily spun the man’s head backward. When he slumped forward in the chair, he was staring at the ceiling with his mouth agape.

“One last look at daddy,” she muttered, then slid free of him as the door behind her burst apart.

“No!” Legion in the form of two elderly women charged into the room. One of them knelt at Deacon’s side while the other tackled Lily against the wall. Surprised at how strong this vessel was, Lily fought back with jagged claws.

“I don’t remember you being this strong,” she said as Legion put her in a chokehold.

“You killed him,” cried the Legion by Deacon. The one holding Lily smashed her into the floor so hard that the room shuddered and pictures fell off the wall.

“You seem upset,” Lily wheezed, then let out a burp. “In case you were wondering, he was delicious.”

She was lifted off the ground and held in place. The free Legion started scratching something into the floor.

“Let him go,” Legion demanded. “Or I’ll send you back to Hell.”

“Like I care,” Lily replied. “What’s ten minutes in a little hellfire?”

“You don’t understand. I’ll break the bond with your master and send you straight to *him*.” The wood peeled up under Legion’s nails.

Lily felt butterflies in her stomach. Could Legion actually do that? “You’re bluffing,” she said.

“Am I?” Legion regarded her with glowing eyes. “Because in twenty seconds, you’ll find out for sure. He’ll demand a tithe, you know. Pull those souls right out of you.”

“Like...that...will help you...” she was being strangled so hard her jaw no longer moved.

“I’ll make a trade. I have something *he* wants.” Legion scratched a rune into the floor and it blazed with power. The temperature in the room rose several degrees as dark smoke curled around the edges of the floor.

“How...” It was the only word Lily could squeak out. Legion even managed to grab her tail in one hand and tuck it under an arm.

“I’ll tell you,” whispered the Legion holding her. “As of twenty minutes ago, I was occupying over three hundred bodies. Now? Less than fifty. My attention is more concentrated than it’s been in decades. In a single evening, you and your friends have undone so much of my work. To say I am displeased is...an understatement.”

Lily grunted, and closed her eyes. The black smoke was now curling up her legs, and she felt a tugging sensation at the center of her body. Panic flooded through her, and she considered the soul nestled in her gut. Deacon was floating in an empty void, screaming in terror. She hadn’t begun to digest him yet, so he was still pretty feisty.

“I guess it’ll be the hard way then.” Legion let out a growl that came from every corner of the room, then knelt down to draw one more rune. The floor creaked and then Legion paused, her eyes going wide.

“Damn...” she muttered as the demon’s body went limp and collapsed. Behind Legion stood Dana, a wild look in her eyes.

“Sneak attack, bitch.” Dana cocked her head to one side, her lips twisted into a jester’s grin. “Hi, Lily. I’m on a killing spree.”

Lily stared in horror, then was thrown to the floor as Legion threw herself backwards through the nearest window. Somehow, Dana was fast enough to cross the room and snag the demon by her ankle and drag her back in.

“No! No, it isn’t fair!” Legion tried to fight back, but the enchantments on Dana’s blades ensured the demon didn’t last long. When Dana was finished, she looked at Lily.

“You good?” she asked. Lily shuddered at what she saw.

“Yeah,” she replied, then gestured at Deacon. “Had a little snack.”

“Good, good.” Dana licked her lips and looked at the dead demons. “They’re getting stronger. It’s annoying.”

“Uh huh. Are you okay?”

Dana laughed, and tears ran down her cheeks. “No!” she cried. “No, I’m not!” With that declaration, she spun on one foot and ran back into the hall. “Hurry up,” she cried. “And quit splitting the party! Uncle Foot hates that!”

Lily gaped at the open door, then took a deep breath and walked toward it. Once this was done, they were all going to need therapy. As she passed the boundary, she looked back one last time at Deacon Osgrove.

“Enjoy eternity, you piece of shit.” She stepped into the hallway and slammed the door shut. Somewhere down below, a werewolf howled in agony.