

Eating Out

The concrete room was quiet, save for the steady drip of some far-off leak. Lily basked in the silence, staring at the ceiling and imagining there were cracks to count. Her whole body felt like it was on fire, her nerves stretched to the limit. Whatever prayer or hymn Deacon had used on her had actually caused her to burst into flame at one point. It wasn't the fires of hell that had tormented her, but the flames of salvation.

Which was a giant load of bullshit. Deacon shouldn't have been able to tap into holy magic, but there was no denying the experience. The man had stopped only long enough to make the occasional demand for information, and that was only on the rare occasion that Legion left the room. The demon had appeared not to be affected; however, Lily suspected that was a pretense.

"You look terrible." Spirit Mike stood over her now, contemplating the burnt flesh. "I mean, even terrible, you look great. But you've certainly looked better."

"Here to be my cheerleader?" she muttered. "If so, you should have dressed appropriately."

"Oh. Sorry." Mike stepped out of view for a moment, then returned in a cheerleader's outfit. He turned around and did a little squat, revealing that the bloomers didn't quite cover his rear. "Better?"

Lily snorted, then groaned. "You always know how to make a girl laugh."

"Humor is the most powerful weapon in my arsenal." He turned around and lifted his skirt to reveal that his cock stuck out of the top. "And there's this, too."

She laughed again, the sound more like a cackle. The pain was starting to fade, but the memory of it was still too fresh. If she laughed any harder, she could slip into madness.

"You're not healing," Mike said.

"No shit." She licked her dry lips and squinted at him. "I'm just as surprised as you are."

He examined her wounds and shook his head. "They're definitely trying to break you."

“That’s what I have you for.” She lifted her head enough to look at herself. Her entire body, clothing included, was made of demonic magic. With just a whim, she could be anybody, look like anyone, with the only caveat being her own cloven feet. Steam lifted from her body where Deacon’s hymn had scoured away layers of her essence, occasionally punching holes in her. These wounds should have been nothing, and in any other circumstance, she could heal with just a thought.

But not now. It was like her mind and body were disconnected, and she no longer had the control she once did. She was weakened in every way possible, but Deacon knew better than to dismiss her. The bastard had been handed a proper way to torture a demon, and he was quite good at it.

“Don’t suppose you could help a girl up?”

Mike shook his head. “Can’t. Pulled my hamstring last week, not allowed to lift any other girls on the squad.”

“You ass.” She laughed again, then went still when the door behind her opened. Looking up, she was able to make out a pair of figures. One was Deacon, the other was one of Legion’s meat suits.

Deacon had slight bags under his eyes and held a cup of coffee. Legion was wearing a man who looked like a stereotypical trucker, with the puffy hat, beard, and a vest.

“Now, aren’t you a sight for sore eyes.” Deacon yawned. “You’ve been awfully chatty on the monitor. Who were you talking to?”

“You’ve got your man in the sky, I’ve got mine.” Lily winked at Mike. “Though mine actually listens and gives a shit. May even love me, who knows?”

“I’d ask if you ever tire of your own voice, but I already know the answer.” Deacon moved to stand at the edge of the circle. “I must say, I was impressed by your restraint last night. You answered so many of my questions with absolute nonsense that sounded like it was grounded in truth. My team spent the better part of the evening going down rabbit holes with nothing to show for it, other than knowledge of a perverse sex act called a blumpkin. Your lack of candor isn’t good for you or me.”

“Aw, did I upset you?” Lily stuck out her bottom lip. “How ever will I live with myself?”

Deacon sighed. “No matter. The sun is almost up, which means Timotei will be back soon. I fully expect your tune to change once I start dismantling your friend in front of you.”

Lily frowned. “That’s an odd choice of words.”

“Is it, though?” Deacon looked at Legion, who chuckled in response.

Legion walked around the perimeter of the sigil as he spoke. “You see, we’ve found that once you start carving pieces off of someone, they are pretty happy to talk. Now we can’t quite do this with you, but your associate? I won’t even ask her anything. We will bring her here and you can watch me take an arm, or maybe a leg. Timotei can do it without killing someone, and the look of shock in their eyes when they see the damage? Exquisite. Pain, disbelief, shock, all rolled into one.” He did a little chef’s kiss with his fingers.

Deacon made a face. “And then we wait. She’ll tell us everything we want to know, and more. But what she won’t know is that we’ll do it again. Not that I quite have the stomach for it, but that’s what’ll happen. I’ll leave Legion and Timotei in charge, of course. While I may be a monster in your eyes, I am still only human.”

Lily growled, her whole body tensing up. Other than moving her head, she was unable to move.

“Now, now, save your energy. Unless you’ve decided to tell me something I can use, that is. If so, maybe we can leave her with enough limbs to—” There was a distant bang, followed by the sound of the door opening. Lily turned her head to see Timotei storm into the room, his shoulders hunched. He was alone.

Deacon stared at the vampyr, lines of concern on his face. “Please tell me you caught her.”

“They got away.” Timotei sneered in Lily’s direction, then stepped over the sigil. “They were working together and the Order got involved. I almost had them, but wouldn’t have time to bring them back.”

Lily laughed. “Aw, was it past your bedtime? Don’t forget to brush your teeth, wouldn’t want your breath smelling like—”

The vampyr picked her up and slammed her back into the concrete. He did this over and over, but Lily could only flop uselessly. It hurt way less than the hymn had. Timotei was an asshole, but he was definitely a one-trick pony.

“What is she?” Timotei demanded, his fangs in her face. “When I tried to devour her essence, it was like I had been poisoned!”

“Maybe she’s just too much woman—” Lily didn’t get another word out as the vampyr hit her.

“Enough.” Deacon raised a hand, and Timotei dropped her. “You need to stop letting our guest antagonize you.”

“Yeah, where’s your sense of hospitality?” Lily grinned.

“We need to move.” Legion looked at Deacon. “While I don’t think he’ll come down on us too harshly, I do believe a change in venue is in order. But if he decides that you’ve disappointed him, then none of us are safe.”

Deacon frowned, then looked toward the door. “But I’ve got another show tonight.”

Legion’s facial features twisted as the demon within pressed his way forward to the surface. Harsh lines appeared on the trucker’s face. “Holding the wolf was a personal request from him. He may decide to take you apart, instead, see what makes you tick. I can’t protect you from him while I’m spread so thin amongst the flock.”

“Ah. Well...” Deacon sighed. “I suppose we’ll have to have mass early. Send out the special invites, we’ll have our service this evening. I don’t suppose you still have eyes on her?”

“I’m moving in already, but...” Legion looked at Timotei. “If he had problems, then I’m not assured of my own success. I only sent a few vessels, I didn’t expect our new friend to be so...resourceful. We’ve got more of the bitch’s blood and can renew the spell later. It would be in our best interest if I collectively pulled myself together for tonight.”

“Damn.” Deacon looked down at Lily. “Looks like you’re going to be a consolation prize. Maybe the Curator will be satisfied with you instead. Legion, have her prepped for transfer right away. Timotei, I expect our time is short. Once we’re ready to move, pack yourself away.”

The vampyr bowed in Deacon’s direction, then melted into the shadows. Shortly after he left, the door opened up and a group of men came in carrying small panels with lines carved into them. They moved into the circle with Lily, holding the panels upright as they closed in on her. The lines flared to life as they

drew close, and Lily realized that the panels had a modified version of the script on the ground that was holding her in place.

Her helplessness reminded her of being trapped in Amir's ruby, of being bound only by his direct commands. Terrible memories surfaced, and her anger flared as the walls were latched together, the runes completed. They glowed with a sickly light that lifted her into the middle of the pattern. She could hear chatter outside the box, but couldn't see what was happening.

"You can't do this," she whispered, the magic lifting her to float in the very center of the box and pinning her in place. She had never seen magic like this before.

"My dear succubus." Deacon appeared up above, clearly standing on a ladder. "I already have."

With that, he slid the top panel into place, trapping her inside the box.

Tasia dreamt of the forest. Things were simpler in the woods. The smells all blended together like paint on a canvas, forming a tapestry of information that she could reference with a single sniff. There were no roads, no exhaust fumes. The sounds of the forest were like music, punctuated only by the passage of a predator or the sounds of prey dying.

She remembered her training fondly, weeks out in the European wilderness, hunting game with her pack. Their sole instruction had been to become in tune with the wolf within, to allow the power they had been given to bloom and run free.

They hunted, they fought, they mated. The trappings of the human world had faded into distant memory, the past now a phantom. It was here that most of them passed the first test, embracing their new strength and flourishing. It had only been when they were forced to reclaim their humanity that most of them had failed.

Between dreams of hunting deer and hunting her own, Tasia floated in darkness, listening to the steady hum of the road beneath their car and the distant, muffled buzzing of the engine. Sensing no danger in these moments, she had slipped blissfully back into sleep.

Car rides put her to sleep because they helped shut out the world of man, and she embraced those dreams fully. Sadly, all she would ever have of the pack now were her memories. She thought that the Order would become her pack, but that had fallen apart shortly after it began. There would always be doubt, even if she somehow cleared her name. In her quest for power, she had only served to isolate herself even further from the only people she ever knew.

With this epiphany, she woke up and sat in silence for several moments, letting her mind drift. The events of last night came back to her in a rush. She took a deep breath and let it out, knowing that today wasn't going to be any easier.

When she finally cracked her eyes, it was to the dawning rays of light that crept into the cabin of the Kia. She yawned, her jaw cracking, then sat up in her seat. They were parked along a dirt road, out of sight from the highway and surrounded by trees. The cabin smelled of sweat, blood, and something musky that teased at her senses. Realizing that she was alone in the car, she sat up in alarm and looked around.

Dana was leaning against the back of the car, hunched over as if trying to catch her breath. Curious, Tasia opened the passenger door of the car and stepped outside, inhaling the scent of the nearby trees. With the rising of the sun, they were now safe from the vampire, but the demon might be nearby. The Kia's engine creaked as it cooled, which meant they hadn't been pulled over for long.

Chuckling, Tasia wandered toward the back of the car. "Piss break?" she asked, turning the corner and freezing in place.

The air was saturated with the smell of arousal. Dana was leaning forward with her ass on the bumper and her pants pulled down to her knees, frantically rubbing her engorged clitoris. A silver vibrator was discarded on the ground nearby. When she looked up at Tasia, it was with lust-filled eyes. There was something primal lurking in that gaze. Something hungry.

"What's going on here?" Tasia asked in disbelief, her voice almost a whisper. She didn't know why, but she took a step closer. The air was heavy with the smell of sex, pulling her in like a magnet. Dana pointed at Tasia with one finger, then beckoned her forward.

"Are you into chicks?" Dana's voice was guttural, her torso flushed. Her eyes had fallen to Tasia's chest. "It would really be great if you were. I'll even settle for mildly curious."

"I..." Tasia's mind flashed back to the woods, to the pack. For them, sex and violence were two sides of the same coin, and they had flipped it often. Man, woman, it hadn't mattered. What mattered was strength, pleasure, and fulfilling each other's desires.

But the pack was gone, and with it, a part of her had gone as well. That had been part of the experiment, to see if the wolf could be tamed and bring its power back to the Order. Unlike most of her brethren, she had been able to resist the animal inside, to keep it at bay when it wasn't needed.

This was a woman whom she had fought, who had saved her life, and now desired her. These were all things the wolf in her head understood, and she found herself taking another step forward. Her pulse was pounding in her ears as instinct took over, driving her toward the desperate woman.

"I might hurt you," Tasia whispered, staring deep into Dana's eyes. "I like it rough."

"Good." Dana licked her lips and lifted her shirt to reveal firm breasts. Her nipples were engorged, standing at attention beneath the rising sun. "I don't mind rough."

She let go of her snatch and grabbed Tasia by the shoulders, forcing the werewolf to her knees. Tasia didn't resist, the sweet smell of pussy filling her nostrils. Her heart was beating loud inside her head, as if distant drums were playing just for her. She was drooling now, confronted with a pair of cum-soaked thighs.

"The safe word is chucklebunny." Dana grabbed Tasia's hair and guided her into place. Tasia buried her face in Dana's crotch and inhaled deeply through her nose. A surge of information entered her brain, the smell reminiscent of the air after a summer rain. Dana's slippery thighs left slick trails on Tasia's cheeks as she opened her mouth and tasted her.

Dana gasped, holding Tasia's head in place. The werewolf ran her hands up Dana's legs until she was clutching her by the hips. Powerful muscles flexed as Tasia stood, continuing to suckle at Dana's labia while she lifted and pressed Dana against the back of the car. Dana wrapped her legs around Tasia's muscular shoulders and let out a whimper of delight.

Tasia felt the heat of the sun on her back as she pinned Dana's hips against the top of the hatchback, fingering her with one hand while squeezing her own

breast with the other. Dana's arousal was contagious, and her own pussy clenched in anticipation. Yesterday, this woman was her enemy. Now?

Well...that was complicated.

"More," Dana cried, digging her nails into Tasia's scalp. "More fingers!"

Tasia obliged. With her current angle, she was able to work her way up to three fingers inside of Dana's vagina while continuing to nibble and lick her clit. The metal of the Kia screeched as Dana clung to the roof, ripping up trim.

Strong hands tugged at Tasia's hair, but she kept going, eventually working in her pinky. Dana's labia were stretched tight, causing her clitoris to emerge from beneath its hood. Her hand was soaked with Dana's fluids, and Tasia briefly considered seeing if her fist would fit.

Dana squealed, and struck the roof of the car so hard that a side window shattered. When she came, her vaginal walls tightened down enough that Tasia thought her fingers would break. She struggled to keep her hand from being pushed out, and winced when Dana shifted further onto the top of the car, denting the roof with her ass.

"Oh, fuck that was good." Dana was panting on the car roof now, her body limp. If anyone were to pull off the road right now, there would be no hiding what they were up to.

Tasia grabbed Dana by the thighs and helped her slide down the car. Once they were eye level with each other, Tasia grabbed the waistband of her shorts and pushed them down. She kicked them away and put her hands on her hips. The breeze teased the hem of the dress up to reveal her bare ass.

"You done?" she asked, lifting the skirt to reveal her hairy crotch. "Because I'm not."

Dana wiped the drool from her face and smirked. "I'm just getting started," she said, then guided Tasia away from the Kia. Turning around, she undid the latch on the hatchback and pushed the back seats down. She climbed in and gave the floor of the cargo area a friendly pat.

When Tasia moved to join her, Dana grabbed her by the shoulders and pinned her down, her hungry lips now dancing along Tasia's neck. Tasia wrapped her legs around Dana's waist as the two of them made out, their kisses both rough

and frantic. Dana's ponytail had come loose, creating a blonde curtain that obscured the outside world.

Tasia gasped when she felt a finger slide inside her, then growled. Dana was nibbling on her breasts now, sucking hard on her nipples. Though they were inside the Kia, the emotions and desire took Tasia back to the forest, to those happy moments with the pack once again.

Dana scooted herself out of the Kia, sliding her arms under Tasia's thighs to lift her pelvis off the floor. She held the werewolf up, kissing the tender flesh of her inner thighs while continuing to finger her. Tasia moaned in delight as Dana's tongue found her clitoris, her arms stretched wide as she pressed her hands against the back doors of the car. She felt the material give beneath her fingertips.

"I hope...they paid...for the extra insurance!" Tasia gasped as a shock ran through her lower spine. Pleasure was coming in intense bursts, her stomach filling with heat as each stroke pushed her closer to orgasm.

Dana lowered Tasia's body, wiping her mouth with one hand. "That's right," she muttered. "You said you like it rough."

"Yes, but this is fine." Tasia wagged her hips back and forth. "Please don't stop."

"I don't plan to." Dana crawled up Tasia's torso and kissed her, her lips needy against Tasia's. The werewolf shivered in delight as she felt a pair of fingers enter her again, curling up to stroke her G-spot. Tasia gasped when Dana pinched her nipple with her other hand.

"Feel free to resist," Dana said, then pinned Tasia down by pressing her palm against Tasia's sternum. "Use the safeword if you're uncomfortable."

The blonde lifted Tasia's pelvis from the inside, all while pistoning her fingers. Tasia gasped and moaned as she tried to push Dana away, but her arm was like steel. Dana's talents with her hand had Tasia gasping for air, and she let out a cry of delight as she fought back, unable to break free.

Dana was clearly stronger than she was, and Tasia didn't know why. Short of transforming, she was unable to escape. The heat was building throughout her entire body now, her nails elongating as the beast within struggled to break free. The wolf didn't crave a fight, nor did it fear for Tasia's safety. Instead, it wanted to join in the fun.

Tasia cried out as her muscles tightened up, her body struggling to contain the wolf while crying out for sweet release. Her hips jerked up and down, fully out of her control, as Dana power-fingered her closer to orgasm. The back seat was shredded by her flailing hands, and hair was sprouting along her forearms.

When Dana slid a finger into Tasia's ass, she came so hard she howled. The sound was magnified inside the interior of the Kia, causing Tasia to become disoriented as she reached for the nearest headrest and ripped it free by accident. The tension in her entire body melted away all at once and she went limp, whimpering in pleasure as Dana continued fucking both of her holes. Through bleary eyes, she could see the smirk of satisfaction on Dana's face. She slowed her movements and started kissing her way up Tasia's belly.

By the time Dana's lips met Tasia's, the wolf had receded, but the damage to their stolen car was done. The two of them held each other for several minutes, Dana's skin cool against Tasia's warm flesh. Tasia had wondered more than once if she would ever get to experience this again, the closeness of another person. Nobody in their right mind was likely to hook up with a werewolf, and the damaged interior of the car was a perfect example why.

Yet Dana didn't seem to care. This woman that Tasia had hated for so long was now a source of comfort, and she leaned into it. While her own feelings might be complicated, the wolf was satisfied that Dana wasn't just safe, she was a friend, maybe even something more. Though it was temporary, Tasia felt like she was part of a pack again, experiencing a connection far greater than what the Order could give her.

The Order. They were likely already making efforts to track her down. Sitting up, she pushed Dana away and gestured out the back door. "We should probably get going," she said, sad to break the spell that had fallen over her. "It's...we're...I don't want to get caught."

As if remembering where she was, Dana nodded and got out of the car. It took a minute for the two of them to get dressed and put the seats back up. When Dana shut the trunk of the hatchback, it didn't quite latch all the way. She slammed it into place, and Tasia wondered if it could ever be reopened.

Dana paused long enough to pick up the discarded sex toy, and then they got into the car. The cabin smelled of sex and sweat, and Tasia inhaled both scents deeply. This was something she would remember, a memory to cling to.

When they pulled back out onto the road, the wind whistled through the new gaps in the trunk of the car and the broken side window. Despite the noise, a sense of calm descended over the cabin of the vehicle, and Tasia looked over at Dana. It was like a switch had been flipped, the woman now entirely focused on the road ahead.

After nearly twenty minutes, Dana broke the silence. "So libraries have witches."

Tasia looked over at Dana, pondering. All the lust and excitement of earlier had passed. What had happened to that moment of passion? To that connection? Was Dana a master at putting her feelings away or was there something else at play?

"They do. It should make sense that libraries are a natural place to find magic users. It's where knowledge is collected."

"That makes sense, but you made it sound like all libraries had a witch running them." Dana looked over at Tasia. "In hindsight, librarians seem like they know everything already, so maybe it's been magic this whole time."

"To clarify, not all librarians are witches. It's pretty rare to find a branch that doesn't have one, though. After World War II, the Order did some lobbying and got the federal government to fund public libraries. The US was woefully unprepared for some of the magical atrocities they saw over in Europe, and this was a natural way to seed witches across the country without anyone being the wiser. Naturally, this was a secret buried so deep that I doubt the current government even knows about it, but that's kind of the point." Tasia's stomach growled, and she chewed at her fingernail in response. Her finger still tasted of Dana, and she started salivating. She would need to eat some actual food real soon.

"So a nationwide cell of magic users, ready at a moment's notice." Dana chuckled. "Imagine that."

"A majority of them aren't fighters at all. It's all about what most of them call white magic, and acting as a neighborhood watch of sorts. When they encounter something they don't understand or can't handle, they call the Order in to handle it."

"And you think one of them can undo the demon's tracking spell?"

Tasia nodded. "It should be within their skillset. Where are we, anyway?"

"Georgia, actually. Had to take a straight shot north on 95 to keep Count Dracula off our tail." Dana sighed. "I actually saw him a couple of times. Bastard would be a couple of miles back."

"Was he flying?" Tasia felt a chill run up her spine.

"Maybe. Looked more like he was jumping to catch up, but I couldn't be sure. I would see him pop up above the treeline for a moment. He had to stay off the road to avoid being seen, but there was an empty stretch for a bit where he just sprinted after us T-1000 style. Kept worrying that he would turn into a bat or whatever and catch up to us." Dana frowned. "I'm guessing vampires don't do that."

"Not all of them, no. The best way to think of vampirism is like a virus that mutates whenever it gets passed on. Some new vampires become shapeshifters, others become insanely strong, lucky ones might get both. I came across a nest of them once where their supernatural abilities were almost non-existent, save for being very attractive. The only thing they all share is a hunger for lifeforce in one form or another, which gives them strength."

"Lifeforce?" Dana touched her neck. "So not just blood?"

"Blood happens to be the easiest conduit. When you get bitten, they can drain you of your lifeforce without making too big of a mess. If it doesn't kill you, it leaves your body weak to vampirism, which is how you might become one, or even a thrall. A thrall is like a vampire's slave."

"Good to know. So this guy may have servants."

Tasia nodded. "Perhaps, but thralls are usually just humans, so he would have to be stupid to sic them on us. What are the odds we can stop for breakfast? I'm fucking starving."

"There's food near the library, which doesn't open until 9 anyway. We're almost there." As if elaborating her point, Dana pulled the car off of the highway and drove a few miles into town. They passed a couple of gas stations and a Wal-mart, then pulled into the parking lot of a restaurant. Mama's Diner had a picture of a breakfast skillet that made Tasia's mouth water.

"I'm afraid we can't split the bill," Tasia said.

“Don’t worry about it. You earned it already.” Dana winked at her, then jogged ahead to open the door. Tasia found it a little unsettling to see how quick the switch was flipped. It was almost like Dana was acting, but she couldn’t see any seams in the performance.

Her smell had also changed. Earlier, Dana had smelled largely of blood and sweat, but also the pack. It was as if she had temporarily become a werewolf. Now, however, she carried the faint smell of death all around her. The only times Tasia had smelled something similar was when she was standing over a body or tracking a predator.

What kind of predator are you? she wondered as Dana led them inside and asked the hostess for a booth. They were taken to the back of the restaurant where Dana requested to be sat by the window. The hostess obliged, and they sat down across from each other, giving both of them a view of the road.

“I’m so fucking hungry,” Tasia muttered, going over the menu. “That shouldn’t be a surprise, given my...condition.”

“Order what you need.” Dana looked over the top of her menu. “Seriously.”

“Are you sure? It might draw attention. There’s a reason why it’s called wolfing down your food.”

Dana shrugged. “I’ll think of something.”

When the server came, Tasia took Dana’s advice to heart and ordered most of the special menu. There were three different skillet meals that were meat based, but she also ordered a ham-steak, three sides of bacon, and the chocolate chip waffle stack. Dana put in a similar order, which caused the server to pause and look up from his tablet.

“Are y’all ordering for someone who isn’t here yet?” he asked.

“We’re food vloggers,” Dana said. “If you don’t mind, we’re planning on recording content for a mukbang video. Go ahead and bring the plates as they are finished instead of all at once.”

“Ah, gotcha.” He finished writing down their order. “What do you want to drink?”

“Water is fine for me. You?” Dana looked at Tasia.

“Do you have tea?”

The server nodded, then took their menus and left. Once he was gone, Tasia leaned across the table.

“What the fuck is a mukbang?” she asked.

“New streaming trend. You watch someone eat a shit ton of food, question their life choices, but can’t look away.” Dana used the condiment tray to prop up her phone. “When he drops stuff off, talk to the camera about what food means to you, or whatever. We’ll eat off of each other’s plates to help sell it, like we’re sampling everything.”

They spent the next several minutes discussing potential plans. If everything went well, they would head back down to Florida in the afternoon. Tasia was worried about running into the vampire again, but Dana kept brushing it off. She was under the impression that they would have plenty of time to return before nightfall.

When their food arrived, Tasia wasted no time digging into the first skillet. It was called the Meat Feast, and had three different kinds of sausage. Each skillet came with a stack of pancakes, so their table was soon packed with dishes.

Halfway through devouring her third plate, Tasia realized that Dana wasn’t eating at all. Instead, she would sometimes move the food around or shift it to a different plate. Dana sipped at her water a couple of times, but it seemed more out of habit than anything else.

“Are you going to eat?” asked Tasia around a mouth full of scrambled eggs.

“Not hungry. Ate last night.” Dana glanced out the window and smirked. “And this morning.”

“Bullshit. Hair pie has no calories, and I was with you last night. Only thing I saw you eat was...” Tasia made a face. “I don’t think you ate anything. No, wait. I saw you eat yogurt or something.”

Dana kept staring out the window. “See? I ate something.”

Tasia swallowed her food and scowled. “No, hold on. I know that something’s up with you.” She lowered her voice below the din of the diner. “I saw you get stabbed and shot, but you were fine afterward. You’re almost as strong as me—”

“Maybe even stronger than,” Dana corrected.

“Fuck you, don’t interrupt.” Tasia held up her fork, which had a pierced sausage on the end. “I thought you were a witch, the worst kind, but I’ve never seen you do magic, other than that trick where you don’t die. Your hair color is brighter this morning, which I just noticed. If I didn’t know any better, I would think you’re...you’re...”

Dana lifted an eyebrow.

“Some kind of machine,” Tasia finished. “But you bleed and are definitely human, or human-shaped. I understand this partnership is...unconventional. You saved my life when you didn’t have to, and that means something. This morning meant something.”

Dana shook her head. “Let me correct you. This morning was fun, but don’t get the wrong idea. That was...something you wouldn’t understand. Lily usually helps me with it.”

Tasia licked her lips, a grin spreading across her face. “Now you have my attention.”

The blonde sighed and leaned way forward in her seat. “Here’s the thing. What we have right now is fine. You’ve agreed to help, and that’s exactly what I need. But I don’t want to rock the boat. Telling you is a leap of faith, and I’m not sure I’m ready to do it yet.”

Tasia grunted, then let out a sigh. “That’s just it. It’s not just about curiosity. It’s about establishing a deeper sense of trust. When you become a knight at the Order, they pair you with a mage based on psychological testing, but that doesn’t always work out. They make us do counseling together, to make sure we can read each other like an open book. My old partner, he...” She took a deep breath. “Amida and I were close. He was my friend, and that’s not common. There are knight-mage pairs that hate each other as people, but the bond is strong. Amida knew to stand to my left, cause I was better at covering my right. We knew each other’s favorite foods, shared our fears with each other. Unlike the others, I came from a well connected family, yet I knew Amida better than my own mother. That’s just how it is in the Order.”

“Really?” Dana made a face. “To me, you all seem so disorganized. You jump to assumptions, that’s how we managed to trick you so many times. Well, how Lily did, anyway.”

“I was still in training.” Tasia raised her voice. “She was way out of our league, I’ll admit that now. It’s part of why I—” She looked around the diner, then made a pair of canines with her fingers in front of her face.

“Now that, I’m curious about.” Dana stared hard at Tasia for several long moments. She was so still that it looked like she wasn’t breathing, and when she did move, it startled Tasia. “Okay, then. A mutual exchange. I’ll talk about myself, but only if you tell me about how you leveled up. We have about forty minutes before the library opens, so you might want to cut right to the point.”

“It was an attempt at an old experiment.” Tasia shoveled some more food in her mouth. “The Order has been working for centuries to maintain the balance between the natural and the supernatural. We’ve even gone so far as to work directly with supernatural entities. This works well sometimes, but we needed an edge. It is very difficult to find a cryptid who is willing to work with us on a larger scale.”

“Explain that part.” Dana held up a hand for silence, then politely smiled as their server took away a couple of plates. “Okay, continue.”

“Imagine trying to convince a 700 year old spirit to help you hunt down a demon who is abducting children in their woods. The spirit doesn’t care. It might care only if we accuse it of the deed. Once you transcend the bounds of mortality, how do you gaze on the world of the living in a favorable light? For example, the Order works with a couple of dragons. Immensely powerful beings who could turn the tide of a war, just like that.” She snapped her fingers for emphasis. “But they don’t care. We can’t kill them, because they’ll fight back. So we appease them in exchange for whatever help they’re willing to give. In one case, it’s just a massive beast we feed snacks to so that it doesn’t wake all the way up and obliterate the northwestern United States.”

“Okay, so trouble recruiting monsters, continue.”

“In over a thousand years, only a handful of werewolves were willing to work with the Order. On most of those occasions, it was sort of like us. Common enemy, short-term goal. They are immensely powerful beings, and what makes them so special is they started as regular humans. Could we harness that power for ourselves by transforming our own people?”

Dana nodded. “I’m willing to bet this is the part where you tell me how it all went wrong.”

She was right. Tasia explained how the first experiment had failed, how lycanthropy wasn't just about a human who could tap into a primal strength. All magic had a price, and becoming a werewolf meant becoming one with the very nature of the wolf itself. Some in the pack had wondered if they had become part of some fundamental truth, others thought it was a long-lost deity, but Tasia believed it was little more than instinct.

Still, it felt silly speaking of the wolf like a separate entity, but Tasia was surprised to see Dana accept it as gospel. There was an understanding in her eyes when Tasia talked about how the wolf would take control, how higher thinking took a back seat and she was just along for the ride. She explained how the first experiment had ended badly because the wolf had been too strong, causing the pack to tear itself apart. The Order had spent years figuring out ways to dilute its influence and allow the humans to maintain control.

In the end, the most recent experiment had been a success, but only barely. The wolf was strong in Tasia, and she had bluffed her way through some of the final tests, determined to survive. For the longest time, her sole motivation had been to become strong enough that nobody could ever control her again. While it was true that she couldn't be controlled by others, she now struggled with controlling herself. She was easily worth five knights now, if not more, but when she and the wolf worked together, she was a one woman army.

Wrapping up her tale, she sighed and leaned back in her seat, patting her now full belly. The server came over to check on them, and Dana asked him for the check and some boxes to pack everything up. When they were alone again, she leaned forward across the table and spoke.

"Tell me more about diluting the wolf's influence. How did the Order control it?"

Tasia waved a hand dismissively. "Started with psychological profiling. Couldn't do the experiment on anyone with anger management issues."

"Then how did you get in?"

Tasia snorted. "That's cute. Before crossing paths with you, I was known for being good at my job. A little intense, maybe, but I didn't lose my temper."

"So what else?" Dana's eyes were shining with curiosity.

“Lycanthropy is magical in nature, but it communicates like a virus. The Order actually built their own version of a vaccine. If you’re ever bitten or harmed by a werewolf, there’s a chance your body fights it off naturally. They made a cocktail that strengthened the mind while weakening the werewolf blood they had harvested. The idea was to give us just enough to push us over the edge. During the transformation stage, they regularly pumped us with all sorts of drugs to keep the changes to the brain minimal.”

“But why? I thought werewolves were normal people during the day.”

Tasia nodded. “That’s just it. They typically change only at night, or when threatened. The wolf is almost completely separate, like Jekyll and Hyde. A full-blown werewolf will absolutely slaughter without rhyme or reason, hunting to appease their hunger or even their rage. The Order needed people who could force the transformation and maintain themselves while in wolf form. It was extremely rare to meet a werewolf who could do this naturally, but we met them and studied their origins. Replicating that was...difficult.”

“So what happened to them? The ones who didn’t meet the Order’s standard?” When Dana asked, Tasia felt her stomach drop.

“That was a primary downside to the experiment. We had to hunt our own,” she replied, dropping her gaze. “And I don’t mean that casually. When we were all turned, we formed a familial bond and became a pack. Those first few days were...I wish I could describe it. It was like walking into a room and meeting family you didn’t know you had, but somehow instantly knew they loved you and would always have your back. You became part of something so massive, so...complete.

Tasia wiped a tear away from her eyes. “But just like any family, trouble was lurking. Turns out that the wolf doesn’t always claim you right off the bat. Some of us lost our minds weeks after the first transformation, it was all very sudden. Attempts were made to help them recover, but they had gone feral, even worse than a regular werewolf would. They transformed and simply never came back, which meant...when they fully lost themselves, they became far stronger than ever. That strength was enticing to some, and the wolf took them, too. And each time, we came together as a family to hunt them down, and...”

Dana reached across the table and took Tasia’s hand. “I get the idea,” she said. “You don’t have to say any more.”

Tasia nodded and sat back in her seat. Dana said nothing, and the two of them sat in silence for a bit until the server came with the check and several boxes. Dana packed everything up and then left a stack of cash on the table. They walked out to the car and stacked the leftovers in the backseat before sitting up front.

Once inside the car, Tasia looked at Dana, then over her shoulder at the backseat. The amount of leftovers they had were staggering.

“If you weren’t gonna eat, then why did you order so much food yourself?” she asked.

Dana started the car. “A few reasons. It helped sell the mukbang story. You seriously ate enough food for a family of five. I was also hoping you wouldn’t notice the food I didn’t eat. Since you were so hungry, this was a good way to get food for later when you get hungry again. Also, I was worried you might be all weird after this morning, and wanted the opportunity to make a joke about a doggy bag.”

Tasia snorted. “And people think I’m a bitch.”

“It’s the kind of comment Lily would have made. I miss her. She’s depending on me right now to rescue her ass, and I intend to make good on it.” Dana looked at Tasia. “But you get that, don’t you? I don’t think very highly of the Order, but when you talked about the pack, and how they were family, I realize that you understand how I feel.”

Tasia nodded, then turned her attention to the road as Dana pulled onto the main road and headed further into town. Having a full stomach and a car trip was already making her feel sleepy.

“Hey, hold on.” She looked over at Dana. “I thought we had an agreement. I tell you about becoming a werewolf and you tell me what your deal is.”

Dana scowled. “I won’t lie, I was hoping you forgot.”

“Only because you let me spend the whole time talking about myself.” It had actually felt good to talk about her experience with the pack, but that wasn’t important right now. “Trust is a two way street. I should also point out that you had your finger up my ass earlier. I feel like I’ve earned it.”

This actually made Dana smile. “I was born human. A couple of years ago, I was making great progress toward being a college dropout. Then I was murdered by a necromancer.”

Tasia scoffed. “If you don’t want to tell me, then I’d rather drop it.” She clenched her hands and stared out the window, suddenly angry.

“I am telling you.” Dana stopped at a red light and looked at Tasia. “When I was killed, the necromancer trapped my soul inside my body so that I would stay intelligent.”

“No shit, really?” Tasia stared at Dana in shock. “But that doesn’t make sense, because if you’re right, that would make you...” The possibilities were extremely limited, but none of them were good.

The light turned green and Dana turned her attention forward. “Please remember how much you enjoyed my finger in your ass,” she said as she hit the gas.

South Beach Public Library looked more like an afterthought in the middle of an upper class neighborhood. It was a squat building that wasn’t very close to the beach at all, though it did have a playground outside with a large sandbox and turtle decorations.

Dana pulled into the first spot she could find, then cast a glance in Tasia’s direction. The werewolf was staring straight ahead in silence, as she had been for the last ten minutes.

“Are you okay?” she asked, reaching into the backseat to pick up her backpack. Dana had allowed Tasia time with her thoughts for the drive, but if the knowledge that Dana was a zombie had emotionally crippled her, she needed to know right now.

“It’s just...the way you are, it’s...” Tasia pressed her hands against the dashboard. “It goes against everything we’ve ever learned.”

“How so?” The library had just opened, but a few more minutes wasn’t going to hurt. A few parents had arrived with their toddlers, but that was it.

“Neglecting your unique condition, the dead don’t come back, not like you. I’ve heard of people who die and then slowly rot until they pass on, or animated

corpses with no will of their own. But you? The closest thing I can think of is a lich, and you miss the number one requirement.”

“A phylactery?” Dana thought back to the DND campaign she had played with Eulalie last winter. The big bad evil guy had been a lich. “I guess my own body is a phylactery.”

“No, I mean intent. A lich seeks to prolong their existence at the price of others, but you weren’t given a choice. You hardly seem consumed by madness, so what’s the difference?”

“People would say the same about werewolves, right? Hungry rage beasts, looking to pick fights.” Dana patted Tasia on the leg. “I’m only technically dead. My mind and soul are still here, I’m just...stuck.”

“Do you feed on the flesh of the living?” Tasia looked toward Dana, but didn’t make eye contact.

“I have, but it was an emergency and they started it.” When Dana saw Tasia tense up, she sighed. “I constantly hover between life and death, which means I’m similar to a vampire in that regard. I am sustained by lifeforce, and require more of it if I get injured. When I run low, I lose myself, much like your pack members did. I’m not really me, because all that matters is the hunger. So when you talk about the wolf, I know what you mean, how it feels to have something bigger than you control your actions.

Anyway, I’d managed to avoid eating live flesh until the Nirumbi tried to kill me and my friends. I had to choose between going completely feral, or fighting on my own terms. Feeding on them wasn’t about giving in to the hunger, but about protecting the people who took me in and became my family. And in case you’re worried, I made sure to properly kill everyone I attacked.”

“Nirumbi?” Tasia blinked in confusion. “Who are they?”

“Little guys. Tribe of cannibals. Spears and drums.” Dana tapped her fingers on the steering wheel, the cries of the Nirumbi manifesting in her head as she ran through the snow, blood dripping down her chin and—

“Hey, where’d you go?” Tasia shoved Dana’s shoulder. “I was talking, but you zoned out.”

“Ever since I died, I have hyperthymesia. If I experienced it, I have perfect recall. The man who killed me messed with my brain chemistry, which locked off

my emotions. My experiences have created a unique situation where I often find myself reliving moments of intense emotional expression at the least—”

“Flashbacks. They’re called flashbacks.” Tasia rolled her eyes.

“It’s dead girl PTSD,” Dana replied. “Anyway, whenever I eat enough lifeforce, I get to experience those blocked emotions all at once, and it can be quite...difficult to process them. In my bid to avoid eating people, I’ve been using a backup substance with a wicked side effect.”

“That yogurt stuff?”

Dana nodded. “It’s not yogurt, and it makes me dreadfully horny afterward.”

“Oh. Yeah, that’s weird, too.” She looked out the window and pointed. “I’m still thinking all this through, but nothing’s changed. Let’s go find a witch.”

“Let’s,” Dana replied, then they got out of the car. The building looked like it was only a few years old, and it was several degrees cooler on the inside. Dana didn’t really notice things like the heat anymore, but she heard Tasia sigh in relief.

They walked up to the help desk together, where an older woman with cropped brown hair was busy processing books from a basket that likely came from the return bin. She smiled at the two of them, but it faded. The shift in her demeanor was subtle, but uncanny.

“Can I help you?” False sincerity and a cool tone. What the hell was that about?

“Yes, we find ourselves looking for, uh...” Dana looked at Tasia. She had no idea how to ask for the services of a witch.

Tasia sniffed the air, then tilted her head. “We’re looking for a series of books on the occult and are hoping we can read them all in order.”

The cryptic phrase generated a response in the woman, who pursed her lips and looked past them. “We don’t want any trouble in here,” she whispered.

Tasia exchanged looks with Dana, then turned her attention back to the librarian. “We’re not here for trouble, we’re here for spellwork.”

The librarian scowled, then stared down at her hands. She seemed to be undergoing some kind of internal struggle, then took a piece of paper and wrote

an address on it before sliding it over. "You can find help here," she said. "Now please leave."

Tasia growled, but Dana grabbed her by the hand and led her away. "Thanks," she said, then led Tasia out to the car. Once inside the Kia, she shook her head. "What the fuck was that about?"

"I don't know. Woman smelled like a witch, but they're usually much friendlier." Tasia inspected the paper with the address, which Dana was already entering into her phone. Once the GPS pulled it up, she backed out of her space and called Eulalie.

The phone rang several times before the Arachne picked up. "Hey, you survived!" Eulalie sounded happy. "I was wondering when you would call."

"I've got you on speakerphone," Dana said, letting Eulalie know that Tasia could hear her. "The library was sort of a bust, but they gave us an address. Want to make sure we aren't walking into a trap?"

"Sure thing. Gimme those digits."

Tasia read off the address and Eulalie went silent. In the background could be heard the clacking of keys, followed by a grunt. "Okay, looks like you're headed to a rental. Small apartment at the edge of town, let me see...shit."

"What happened?"

There was a crackling sound, followed by static. "Spilled chips on my keyboard."

"Snacking at your keyboard? Have you been sleeping?"

"Nope!" Dana could almost picture how wide Eulalie's eyes were based on her response. "My best friends got abducted by a demon and a werewolf and I have NOT been okay for hours. Speaking of, Lily is being moved."

Dana felt her emotions budge just a little, but not enough to react. "Do we know where?"

"We don't. Also, that building is owned by a company that does nothing but buy a ton of shitty real estate and rent it out. The address is pulling up several people, previous tenants is my best guess. Looks like the rental agency don't keep their records online, either, so I can't crack in and tell you who's living there now. It'll be a surpriiiiiiise."

“I’ll call you once we’re untagged.” Dana ended the call and looked at Tasia. “Sorry about her, she’s kind of a mess right now.”

“Aren’t we all? So what is she, a mermaid?”

That actually made Dana laugh. “Not too far off base, but that’s her secret to share, not mine.” If they were going to emotionally cripple the poor werewolf, they needed to do it one monstergirl at a time.

It wasn’t long before they pulled the Kia into a parking space just outside of an apartment complex that had been painted a hideous shade of white that made the dirt in the corners stand out. Each building had a letter on it, and when they found the right one, they climbed three flights of stairs to get to the top floor. Tasia sniffed deeply and frowned.

“They’ve got mold,” she said, sniffing the air again. “Really bad.”

“I don’t smell anything.” Not that Dana would, but even her normal sense of smell was usually sensitive enough for it.

“It’s under the smell of the paint, kind of like how you can smell the stink in a bathroom just past the air freshener. My guess is they painted within the last month.”

“They teach you that in werewolf school?” Dana wasn’t particularly worried about being overheard. The statement itself was fairly ridiculous.

“As a matter of fact, yes they did. We learned how to identify different types of fungus by taste, touch, and smell.” Tasia made a gagging sound. “But only after we passed the class about chasing our tails.”

Dana smiled happy that Tasia had made a joke. Revealing her undead status to the werewolf had made her extremely uneasy, but Tasia had been correct when said that trust was a two-way street. Perhaps it was easier to accept because their experiences shared so many parallels, or maybe it was because Dana had fucked her this morning.

Either reason worked for her.

The apartment they wanted was at the end of the hall. Outside was a gorgeous pink cruiser bicycle with a basket on the front and rainbow streamers. Fresh flowers had been woven into the basket, and the bike had been locked to

the metal balusters of the railing. It was the only spot of color on the entire floor, and the doormat nearby said **Hocus Pocus, Motherfucker**.

Dana and Tasia exchanged a glance.

“Lily is gonna be so mad she missed this.” Dana knocked on the door. When nobody answered after a minute, she knocked again. “Maybe nobody’s home.”

“Somebody is.” Tasia turned her ear toward the door. “I heard someone pause their show after the first knock.”

“So why didn’t they answer?”

The werewolf shrugged. “Maybe they’re hoping we’ll go away.”

Dana knocked again. “Hello? The library sent us.”

“Really?” Tasia lifted an eyebrow.

“What else did you want me to say?” Dana heard the floor creak on the other side of the door, followed by a deadbolt being turned. The door opened a crack, revealing a security chain up top. A woman with green eyes and dark hair pressed her eyes into the gap.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“The library sent us.” Dana jerked a thumb at Tasia. “A demon is tracking her and we need the spell popped.”

“Shit,” the woman responded, then shut the door. They heard her fumble with the security chain, then the door opened to reveal a hallway full of plants. “Come inside before you get tracked to my doorstep.”

They stepped inside and the door was shut behind them. The woman walked in front of them and let out a sigh of relief.

“Sorry about that,” she said, setting a baseball bat down by the door. “Let’s sit at the table. Would you like some tea?”

“I’m good. Tasia?” Dana looked at Tasia, who shook her head.

“Just water for me,” she said.

The witch was wearing leggings with an oversized shirt that draped off her shoulders. Her face was pale and there were dark circles under her eyes. When she saw Dana staring at her face, she looked away.

“Sorry, I wasn’t expecting company. Go ahead and sit at the table. I’m going to check my wards.”

She disappeared down the hallway toward a pair of rooms while Dana and Tasia sat at the table. The whole apartment was overflowing with houseplants, making the home feel more like a greenhouse. The television was on, but Dana didn’t recognize the show. There were half-empty moving boxes scattered throughout the apartment.

“None of this is how I pictured a witch.” Dana pulled out her phone and sent Eulalie a quick text saying they had made it. “But maybe that’s the point. It wasn’t that long ago that none of this was real to me. The closest brush I had with magic was a girl in college who kept burning candles to get good grades.”

“And did she?”

“Nope. Maybe if she had attended class instead of trying to harmonize with the universe in the quad, she would have actually passed freshman year.” Dana put her phone aside and set her elbows on the table, leaning toward Tasia. “How long do you think this will take?”

“Why? Are you in a hurry?” The witch had reappeared, holding a tray with some candles, a crystal, a silver bowl, and a glass of water for Tasia. She sat down between the two of them, handed Tasia her drink, then rubbed her eyes. “If you’re worried about the demon, don’t. The wards will scramble the spell on your soul. They can track you to within maybe five miles or so.”

“The demon is only half the problem. It has a vampire working with it.” Tasia held out her hand. “I’m Tasia, by the way. That’s Dana.”

The witch took her hand and shook it, revealing a tattoo of a butterfly on her inner arm. “Aileen Durant. Part-time librarian, full-time witch.” She turned to Dana and did the same.

“Only part-time?” Tasia frowned. “I thought witches who got placed were given full-time work?”

“Tell that to Madame Ogná.” Aileen saw the confusion on their faces. “Head librarian of the South Beach branch. She’s the one who sent you, cause she’s the only other witch.”

“She didn’t seem the friendliest. Kicked us out as soon as we got there.” Dana crossed her arms. “Not that I blame her. We’re not your typical clientele.”

“Yeah, Oгна’s a real piece of shit.” Aileen pulled out a small black grimoire and started digging through the pages. “That’s why I’m part-time. She only schedules me to work when she isn’t.”

“To be fair, you all probably don’t want a werewolf hanging around your building.” Tasia grinned, but her smile faded when Aileen paled.

“Oh, I doubt it’s because you’re a werewolf.” Aileen sighed and leaned back in her chair, staring up at the ceiling. “Though that explains the weird vibe I get off the two of you.”

“Then why did she kick us out?” Dana asked.

“Probably because your auras are tangled. It’s the reason I got placed at this branch. Oгна is a master at aura work. I can see them, too, it was Goddess’ gift to me.” Aileen rubbed her eyes again. “I’m sorry, I’m going through a tough time.”

Dana thought back to the security chain and the bat by the door. Pieces were falling into place, but the puzzle was not yet complete. “What does it mean that our auras are tangled up?”

“You two totally fucked,” Aileen answered. Tasia was mid-sip of her water, and ended up spraying it out of her nose. “Oгна is an incredibly talented witch, but very close minded when it comes to people from a certain community. It’s why I get to stay at home and figure out how I’m gonna afford food and rent.”

Tasia looked angry, but said nothing. Dana didn’t know what else to say, so just sat there.

“Those are my problems, sorry. Need a better headspace before I do this.” Aileen scowled at the silver bowl. “But if you’re a werewolf, a vampire shouldn’t be a problem.”

“This one was. It kicked our asses.”

Aileen lifted an eyebrow. “Tell me more.”

Dana and Tasia took turns sharing details of their fight with the vampire. Aileen nodded to show she was listening, but spent her time prepping whatever ritual she was about to perform. The candles were arranged in a certain order on her tray, and she added water and some sort of oil to the bowl. When the tale was finished, she sat back in her seat and made a face.

“You might be dealing with an old-world vampire,” she concluded, then looked at Tasia. “I can break the tracking spell, but you’re on your own with the vampire.”

“What do you mean, old world?” Dana remembered that the vampire had said something about his blood being old.

“Think of vampirism like a pyramid scheme,” Aileen said. “Every time it gets passed on, a vampire only gives a fraction of its power to the next one. Maybe it’s ninety percent, maybe only fifty. Vampires today are largely watered down versions of the monstrous beings who once roamed the land. Most of the originals were hunted down by the Order, but you should know that.”

Tasia nodded. Dana didn’t bother correcting Aileen.

“If you’re being hunted by someone on the OG vamp crew, I definitely can’t help you. Those bastards are scary powerful. Daylight weakens them, but won’t kill them. The only solution is the tried and true practice of a stake through the heart, followed by a beheading.”

Dana looked at Tasia, then Aileen. “I thought a stake through the heart killed them?”

“Nope. Makes them lose consciousness. Heart can’t pump blood to their brain, so they pass out. Cut off their head, then find a way to destroy the remains.” Aileen looked over at Tasia. “When we’re done here, would you please put in a good word for me? I’ve been trying to get transferred somewhere new, and I think Ogná’s been intercepting my complaints.”

“Yeah, no problem.” The lie slid off Tasia’s tongue easily, but the look she gave Dana was one of regret. Aileen had no way of knowing that both of them were persona non grata with the Order right now.

“Great, thank you.” Aileen put on a pair of surgical gloves and picked up a knife. She fired a quirky grin at Tasia. “Shall we begin?”