

November 21, 1979 (Late Afternoon)

Standing atop the small cot, I focused on the vault-like door with its tiny window, blinded by a small sliding panel, its metal lip masking the slit between door and sill. How much time did I have?

"Charity?" I said, speaking as calmly as I could manage in order not to frighten the child into a paralytic silence. "What did you tell them? Exactly?"

The girl sniveled for what felt like an eternity before replying. "I told them about you. What you are. Exactly."

I closed my eyes, cursing in multiple languages, although silently. No good now to rage against the child, the damage had already been done.

But how? And why?

So many questions. So little time.

"What else did you tell them?" I asked.

She hiccupped several times, before finally regaining control of her voice. "How to hurt you. How to keep you from hurting them."

I opened my mouth, not at all certain what was about to come out of it.

Suddenly a bright light filled the room, the harsh glow washing away every shadow, every dark space. I hadn't noticed the floodlights before but saw them now, recessed into the upper corners of the room, each bulb protected by a wire cage. Half blind, at least for the moment, I dropped from the cot to the floor, blinking furiously as I searched desperately for a corner or, lacking that, any small space I could hide in.

Pointless. The room's simplistic layout had been designed to defeat all attempts at concealment. The single door would open flat against the opposite wall, no shelter to be found there, and the space beneath the cot's frame was too narrow for anyone but a child (and a small child at that) to crawl beneath. The ceiling was an almost uninterrupted expanse of sheet metal, leaving no purchase for my claws.

Trapped.

For a moment I considered bracing myself against the door, denying them entrance, then decided against it. A temporary solution at best and, after all, what would be the point? Eventually they would get in. Then there would be a battle, one I might well lose. But if so, I vowed, I would take as many of them with me as possible. Starting with Midge.

There. Footsteps. Followed by the rattle of what had to be a massive key in a series of locks.

I straightened, running my hands over my outfit to smooth it and present myself in as elegant a fashion as possible, given the circumstances.

One way or the other, I told myself, there will now be an ending.

The door's upper panel slid aside, and through the wire-reinforced glass I could see the barrel of some sort of gun. I remained where I was, turning my hands in such a way as to conceal my talons, now fully extended.

The hinges squealed as the door opened, allowing two large men to enter, with Midge several feet behind them. Each of the males wielded a double-barreled shotgun. Both were aimed at my head. The larger fellow was dressed like a farmhand, the smaller one in a black suit like a mortician. Neither took his eyes off me.

If you were to rush forward now, you could almost certainly disarm one before he gets a shot off and blows your head apart. But both?

"Don't tell me you believe any of that child's nonsense?" the mortician asked Midge.

"Good question," Midge drawled, her gaze locked on me to the exclusion of all else as she hefted a large satchel in her hand, as if to reassure herself it had not disappeared on her suddenly. "On the one hand, it's a tall tale, to be sure. But on the other, that girl knows what'll happen if'n I ever catch her in a lie. And after some of the stuff we've seen over the past year?" She shook her head.

On impulse I pulled my claws in, then held out my hands from behind my back. "Please!" I said, forcing as much hysteria and fear into my tone as I could manage. (And not all of it was feigned.) "Whatever you want, I can get it for you! My family has money! More than you can imagine!"

Midge paid me no mind, acting as though I had not spoken. "But if what the child says about this one is true, she'll last a long time, so long as she's properly secured. And none of that 8mm stuff with its crappy resolution, this one we'll do up right. Cause if that girl ain't lying through her teeth, Miss Madison Avenue here can take a major licking and just keep right on ticking. After all, Chester's stuff has been real popular with the audiences, but the problem is none of those ladies we've had up till now could handle the heavy stuff once he got going good; just gave it up and croaked mid-scene. But this one? Hell, we could make a regular series out of it, bring in the heavy artillery! Tease 'em with a Part One, then later on a Part Two, followed by a Part Three; keep it going as long as we can. We'd have to end it sometime, though, folks get bored eventually."

"Woman, you talk too much," the mortician told Midge. "Andy, you open up same time as me. Aim for the legs first. If she can't run, she ain't much good for nothing."

I tensed, readying myself to spring.

"Won't be necessary," Midge said while grabbing hold of the mortician's gun barrel. "I got something right here in this bag that the child says will subdue the little bitch good. Won't be able to move so much as a muscle."

And as I watched, Midge reached into her satchel and pulled out a crucifix, its six-inch length dangling from a silver chain.

"Crosses work okay, the girl says, but this here's better," Midge said as she moved forward. The two men fanned out, maintaining an unobstructed line of sight. I took a step back.

"Keep your trigger fingers loose," the old harridan warned. "The child claims this one won't try and get herself killed, not so long as she thinks there's a chance of escaping, but best not to take chances."

I forced myself to keep my eyes on the crucifix as I retreated, ignoring both the men and their weapons. Eventually, as Midge got closer along with the others, I felt the wall at my back. Sliding down its length, flinching as I finally turned my face away from the relic, I closed my eyes and moaned as Midge drew close.

"Be ready now, just in case," she told her companions.

One shoved his weapon against my left hip while the other took aim at my right eye socket as Midge quickly stepped forward, slipping the crucifix around my neck and securing it, leaving it to dangle from my neck. Eyes closed, I slumped to the floor.

"Ain't it supposed to burn?" the farmhand said.

"Nah," Midge said, "Charity says it just paralyzes 'em, so you can drive a stake through their hearts."

"I'm still not convinced," the mortician said, his hands trembling slightly, "of any of it."

"That's why we add these as well," Midge said, drawing out several lengths of chain from her bag. "Cold iron."

And as I lay sprawled like a rag doll, Midge began winding the chains tightly around my wrists and ankles, securing each with a small padlock.

The mortician whistled. "Look at the size of that stone!" he said, gesturing with his shotgun at the ruby ring on my wedding finger.

"No calling dibs till later," Midge said. "Anyway, I got a feeling there's some mighty interesting stuff in that high-class luggage she was carrying. We'll lay it all out and roll the dice for first pick, just like usual."

"Hey, check it out," the farmhand said as I glared at Midge with murder in my eyes. "She's pissed for sure!"

"That a fact?" Midge said as she clicked the final lock shut. "Let's see then."

And without another word, she cracked me across the jaw with her fist, hard. My head snapped back, blood seeping from my now-split lip.

"Now she's got something to be pissed about," Midge said.

"Damn," Andy the farmhand said, "if looks could kill . . ."

"I'd of been dead long ago," the woman said. "Andy, hand me that shotgun, then pick her up. I'll go first, then you come after. Martin, you follow Andy."

With disconcerting ease the farmhand flipped me over his shoulder, my head dangling down his front while my legs hung down his back. The crucifix slipped down to my chin but went no further, the chain too short to allow it to slip over my head.

We passed the metal door and headed up the stairs. Halfway to the top I felt the chill of cold metal as Martin's gun lifted my hemline to bury itself in the juncture of my thighs. "Hey, how much of this you think she could take all in one stroke?" he asked.

"Save it for the camera," Midge said from somewhere in front of me.

Then came the soft ping of metal, bouncing off the steps behind me.

"Wha . . . ?" Martin said, the barrel of his gun pulling out of my rear, voice muffled as (or so I imagined) he turned.

And as he did, I lifted my legs and kicked backwards.

Something crunched underneath my left heel. Probably his jawbone. An explosion went off not far from my right ear, lighting a fire in my scalp as I heard Martin tumble down the stairs in pursuit of the ring I had wiggled off my finger to drop as a distraction.

Straightening, I broke free of Andy's grip, then slid down his back and pushed him forward. I heard another loud bang, accompanied by a grunt as Andy absorbed the shotgun blast Midge had intended for me. I shoved him from behind, as hard as I could. Blood puddling underneath his feet, he knocked Midge down, pinning her.

There was no time to parse the situation. I had to make a choice.

I leaped forward and up, instead of backwards, clearing both Andy and Midge. Wrestling her weapon away, I pointed it down the stairwell and yanked at the trigger, discharging the second barrel. Unnecessary, though. The mortician lay in a crumpled heap, eyes wide and staring, unable to move.

More than anything, I wanted to linger, to take my time with each while the others watched. But I had no idea how many more of them there were in the house, people who (unless deaf) had to have heard the shotguns discharging.

So I crouched over Midge's head from behind, snapping the chain that held the crucifix around my neck. My fingers burned as the silver links dug into my flesh. Her mouth gaped like a fish, as if asking, 'How . . . ?'

"You people watch too many movies," I said.

Then I shoved the crucifix into her left eye, all the way to the crossbar.

She squalled, loudly. To shut her up, I extended one talon and slashed her throat almost to the bone. Blood spurted over the three of us like a crimson fan. I licked the drops off my lips.

As the flow weakened, I leaped over the bodies to the bottom of the stairs and retrieved the other shotgun from the mortician. He whimpered like a puppy struck

by a car, unable to move. Neck was probably broken, considering the angle his head lolled at.

So I left him there.

Then I began to search the house.

Such an . . . interesting place. The things I found in those rooms could have provided script treatments for a decade's worth of horror films. Apparently Midge and her boarders were very found of, shall we say . . . trophies.

I did discover another boarder during my search, hiding in a small linen closet. She cried a great deal, along with the expected begging and pleas for mercy. After wrenching her shoulders out of their respective sockets when she resisted, I gagged and bound her, then hung her spider-like from a hook I found in the ceiling of a large, walk in pantry.

Following that I continued my search of the upper floors. No other occupants. That is, none living.

So I returned to ground level.

Finding Charity took longer than I had anticipated. She had grown quiet. Very quiet.

"Charity?" I called out.

Ultimately it proved necessary to track her down by her scent. Just as she had said, a trap door in the floor, covered by a tattered rug, itself covered by a large chest full of a wide and varied assortment of what I assumed to be ill gotten loot.

I slid the chest to one side, then crouched down, my mouth almost to the floor. "Can you hear me, sweetie pie?"

A small noise.

I flung the rug away, then threw the heavy bolt and lifted the trap door.

She cowered in the small space, and I wondered how even one of her small stature had managed to fit inside that miniature oubliette.

"I see you," I said with a smile. I reached into the space, grabbing her by the collar of her filthy shirt, pulling her out, then bringing her close, so that I could whisper in her ear.

"Clever girl," I murmured into her hair.

She trembled for some time before she spoke. "Where are they?"

"There is no need for you to concern yourself with that," I said. "You were very brave, by the way."

She shuddered. "If they'd found out I was lying . . ." she said.

"Shh!" I said. The weight of her small body in my arms felt odd, an unfamiliar (and not quite comfortable) sensation. Drawing on ancient memories of my mother comforting me as a child, I rocked her. "Everything is fine now."

She pulled back, not looking into my eyes. "What are you going to do with me?"

I gave the matter some thought. Part of me wanted to put her back in her little cubbyhole so that I could linger, take my time with the boarders who were not quite dead yet.

But I had other priorities now.

"I saw a truck outside," I told Charity. "I am going to take you back to your parents. In exchange, and as a favor to me, you must promise to say nothing to anyone about where you have been, at least until morning." I matched gazes with her, "Do we have an understanding?"

She nodded, her eyes wide and a bit glassy.

"Good girl," I said, stroking her hair. "Now come, let's get you home."

The child stank. I hesitated, wondering if I should search for cleaner clothing to replace her foul garments. And had I taken more time, found something else for her to wear, how differently might things have ended?

Again, pointless speculation.

She clung desperately to me, so I carried her in my arms. In truth, considering how frail she was, and how much time she must have spent in that narrow space under the floor, she might not have been capable of walking on her own, even if I had put her down.

I had seen a set of keys hanging near the front door after being dropped off by Deputy Clanghorn, keys with a manufacturer's fob matching the truck outside. I snatched them with my free hand as I strode out the front door and marched directly towards the vehicle, wondering as I did how long had it been since I'd driven last?

The first bullet hit me in the lower back, puncturing the organ which had once served as my left kidney. Later I concluded that the shot had been low, rushed. The second missed my right ear by inches, stirring my hair with the breeze of its passage.

It was the third that found its mark, striking me between the shoulder blades, barely slowing as it pierced my flesh. I felt Charity's body stiffen. She made a small sound, as if surprised.

Then she went limp.

I collapsed, dropping her as I fell. Then, turning my head, I saw him.

The deputy.

He stepped forward, aiming his pistol. Jaw clenched (for we Breed do feel pain, whatever you might think) while coiling my legs, I forced myself to wait for him to close the range.

Then I leaped.

I don't think he understood, even afterwards, what had happened. He fired again, the bullet passing underneath me as I flew like a javelin towards him.

Grasping his arm, I bit deep, not stopping until I heard bone splinter. He screamed as he dropped his weapon.

The bloodlust was upon me, but somehow I managed to suppress it. Instead of ripping his throat apart to bath in his fluids, I hamstrung him, then flung his gun over the roof. He screamed incoherently while writhing on the ground, unable now to stand, as he cradled his mangled arm.

I bent over him. "Wait here," I whispered with a feral smile. "I'll be right back." Then I returned to Charity.

Blood pumped out of her chest, a small jet synchronized with each beat of her heart, and I knew she was not long for this world. Leaning over her, I looked into her eyes. "Charity?"

She took no notice of me, instead looking over my right shoulder, as if staring at something a great distance away.

"They're coming," she whispered, a hoarse croak.

And then she died.

#

I collected my purse prior to leaving the hotel room. Two showers since the previous evening, and still I felt unclean.

The sun bled through a slit in the overcast sky, its curve low so that I could stand outdoors, but high enough that I felt the pricking of its fingers walking over my skin. Intuitively, without thinking, I crossed the street to the blissful comfort of a shaded sidewalk.

It must be said that I did go a little crazy, the night before, after the child died. Why? I truly cannot say. Something about her last words—*They're coming*—a pale utterance like the end of all hope.

Empathy? For them? What is happening to you?

I forced the thought away.

True, I had lingered, particularly over the deputy, indulging myself far more than is my usual wont on the rare occasions I allow myself the indulgence of hunting uncooperative prey. And afterwards, when I was done, I had set fire to the house, then squatted in the front yard while listening to the screams of those left within who were not quite dead yet. Sometimes, in the years since that night, I replay them in my mind whenever I am in a mood. They give me a warm, fuzzy sensation.

Phone calls have been made, as have travel arrangements, much to the relief of my underlings, my *topovar*, who had been mad with worry. Geographically George was the closest, but even he will require at least two days to make his way to this town with the odd little name. Pixie.

And then?

I made my way down Main Street. Considering how short a time it was likely to take before the locals discovered the fire and the bodies, including Charity's, it made sense to exercise caution with the questions I asked, but eventually I found those who provided me with the answers I sought. After unfolding the real estate flyer with its map, I checked the house numbers, then paused.

There it was. Smaller than I would have thought, one of those brick ranch houses, a miniature rose garden surrounded by stones centered in the front yard. A single car port at the right end sheltered a middle-aged Buick. It occurred to me that, in a house that small, Charity must have been forced to share a room with her two sisters. How close they must have been.

I sat on a nearby bus bench, closed my eyes, and waited.

I did not have to wait long.

"Found them, did you?"

I looked up, and there He was, standing over me in a Texas tuxedo, a worn cowboy hat perched atop his head at a forward angle sufficient to cast his upper face in shadow.

I closed my eyes again. Which question to ask first?

"Did the child have to die?" I said.

He stared at me with what appeared to be genuine surprise, Hidden Ones only know why. "What makes you think I had anything to do with that?" He said, tilting back His head to stare into the bruised sky.

"I did not mean to imply You were involved," I replied, smoothing my skirt. "The question was more or less rhetorical."

He shrugged, then circled the bench and sat next to me. "Everybody's gotta die," He drawled. "Well, most everybody, that is."

I opened my eyes again. Prior to His arrival I had stoked my rage while waiting for Him, though it made no sense to do so. Now I just felt tired. "What kind of game are You playing?" I said.

He made a noise, like a chuckle, pulling out a pack of cigarettes and holding one out. I stared at him, silently. He shrugged as He took it for Himself, lighting it with a paper match.

"You know," he began, "this one time I went to the circus. Small one. The animals were ancient decrepit creatures, just like the performers. But there was this one fellow, a plate spinner. Must have had a dozen of them things up on poles, switching around from one to the other, fighting like mad to keep them all going."

"And here I had You figured for the more dramaturgical subtleties of the theater," I said.

He ignored the sarcasm. "Then it just kind of hit me, while I was sitting there watching him," He said. "what if he'd added another one? Maybe he could've

handled it. But another? Then another?" He sucked at his Marlboro, then puffed out a perfect circle, following that one with a smaller circle which floated through the larger one without touching it. "Because you knew that eventually, at some point, there would be too many plates to keep track of." He dropped the butt on the sidewalk, grinding it out with the heel of his boot. "See, that's the problem. You take on too much, inevitably everything crashes around you, in the worst possible way."

I sniffed. "And how many plates do You have spinning?"

He looked over at me, then grinned. And as he did, I experienced a sensation no doubt familiar to many, as if the ground had suddenly dropped out from beneath my feet.

"You have no idea," he said, before gesturing at the house in front of us. "Got a game plan yet?"

I shook my head. "No doubt something will come to mind." Then I turned to face Him. "Do you?"

He smiled, a sad little grimace. "So you really think this is a game?"

"Isn't it?"

He coughed, a dry hoarse bark absent of phlegm. "I suppose that depends on one's point of view," He said, without looking at me, "not to mention how one defines the term 'game'."

"My definition would depend on what the stakes are," I replied, studying him.

He *humphed*. "You know, if there's one thing I've learned in my life, it's that people are always asking for stuff they end up not wanting in the end." He pointed at the house. "Know anything about them?"

I shook my head. I knew He was not referring to the parents. "Only their names. Faith and Hope." I shivered, though I could not have told you why.

"How biblical." He got up. "Well, you seem to have the situation here well in hand, so I guess I'll be moving along."

I allowed him two steps. "You didn't answer my question."

He paused, His back to me. "Which is?"

"What are the stakes?"

He turned back to face me, his entire face now in shadow. "An intimate knowledge of what's at stake here is a lot like an intimate knowledge of my dick, girl." He leaned forward, and I felt the ground shift underneath me again. "You couldn't handle either. At least, not as things currently stand." He lifted His hand in a two-fingered salute. "Luck to you."

And with that, He walked away.

I returned my attention to the house. Two of you, hmm? I thought. Interesting. I wonder, exactly how much do the both of you have in common with your recently departed sibling?

Years later, after gaining a hard-won appreciation of what the stakes I had asked after truly were, I would ask myself, in my more reflective moments, What if I had simply gotten up that evening, without looking back, and walked away?
How different might things have been?