

## Chapter 12

Sunday was far and away Morgana Blackwater's favorite day of the week. This was not, as some would assume, because there was no school on Sunday. Nor was it because Sunday was the day Morgana's grandmother dragged her out of bed at the crack of dawn to go to church... at least not directly. Morgana Blackwater loved Sundays because she had discovered, much to her own astonishment, that she never felt more like a Vampyre than when she was sitting inside a church pretending to be harmed by as a result of proximity to the Holy Spirit.

When she had first discovered this, she was unsure. As far back as she could remember her grandmother had brought her to church, and she had felt the torment even then. She was sure this was true, because one of her first memories was of her grandmother screaming at her to be quiet. The little girl in those memories had not been a vampyre... only... uneasy in a place touched by the divine.

This was confusing when Morgana stopped to think on it. At that age there had been no Morgana Blackwater, only a confused three year old girl name Beatrice Buford Valentine who couldn't stop wondering why her parents weren't around anymore. There was no reason for a child to feel discomforted in a church. No reason a child should feel haunted and watched. Was there?

Perhaps on some level she was mad at God for taking her parents. They had been gunned down when they had happened upon a drug deal in front of their apartment complex. It was a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, she supposed... and had never felt any kind of divine malice. It had happened. She had recovered from it well enough. She certainly didn't

blame God... but still... the unease persisted. The feeling that she was being watched remained.

"Child, I swear by Jesus if you don't stop clicking those stupid plastic toys together, I am going to slap you upside the head with this purse." Beatrice sucked on her fangs so fast she almost swallowed them. It was all she could do to stop from choking on them, and what a humiliation that would have been. No vampyre worth her coffin would choke on her own fangs.

"Sorry Grandma Valentine." Morgana muttered. It was very difficult to pretend to be harmed by the presence of crucifixes when a woman like Grandma Valentine was sitting next to you. Beatrice kicked the bottom of the pew in front of her, impatient for service to start so that her grandmother's attention would find an outlet somewhere else. The old woman's gaze was like kryptonite to imagination.

"And next week you leave that cape of yours at home. I know they say kids your age have to rebel, but no more. Do ya hear me? I've had enough of this demon business." Grandma Valentine smoothed her skirts, adjusted her purse on her lap, and turned to look at the church entrance to smile at newcomers. Her glances back at her granddaughter were still full of acid.

"It's a cloak, and I'm a vampyre not a demon." Morgana muttered, but not loud enough for her grandmother to hear. Grandma Valentine had a heavy purse, after all.

"I mean it, Beatrice. You're a young lady. How do you expect to find a boyfriend if you're dressed like that?" Grandma Valentine whispered, still smiling at passersby. Morgana sometimes wondered if Grandma Valentine could smile while simultaneously driving a stake into her heart. Her words could not have stung more. Especially given the way she had seen Paul Knox looking at her from over the tops of his "Soldier of Fortune" magazines in

recent weeks.

"Grandma... that was *mean!*" Morgana said, stunned. Grandma Valentine didn't seem to hear. "Grandma?" The old woman gasped.

"As I live in breathe.... What is he doing back?" Grandma Valentine was barely audible.

"Who are you talking about?" Morgana, asked. She turned around to look at the entrance. An old man was slowly navigating the center aisle in his wheel chair. Behind him.... "Homer Goodstead!" Beatrice spat. "Ugh, what is *he* doing here?" Grandma Valentine turned around as quick as a snake.

"You know *him?*" Beatrice felt a very old hand wrap around her arm. Cheap acrylic nails bit into her flesh.

"Homer? I go to school with him. He's the biggest jerk I know." Beatrice tried to pull her arm away. Everyone knew vampyres didn't bleed, and if Grandma Valentine managed to break her skin it was really going to mess with her suspension of disbelief. It was bad enough that she seemed to put garlic in every meal she prepared. "Grandma... let go!" Beatrice's arm was released, but she didn't think it had anything to do with the fact that she had asked.

"Goodstead... Goodstead.... that must be Maria's boy. That makes him Raul's grandson." Grandma Valentine stood up all of the sudden. Even though services had not yet begun her voice seemed inappropriately loud. "Raul! Over here! It's Marjorie!" Grandma Valentine seemed... *nervous?* Beatrice's mouth fell open so far her fangs tumbled out into her lap.

"Marjorie?" Beatrice said to no one, unable to suppress the shock in her voice. Nobody called Grandma Valentine *Marjorie*. And she was *nervous?* Grandma Valentine was never nervous because she was too busy disapproving of everyone. Something was very wrong. Beatrice cowered in

her pews, suddenly feeling more nervous and more watched than she had ever felt before.

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"Friend of yours?" Homer asked, as he pushed his grandfather down the center aisle. The woman who stood up seemed to hold the same worshipful attitude toward his grandfather as the group Homer had come to think of as "The Jerks with the Goat." Homer had had a particularly... difficult time tethering it to a leash before leaving for church that morning. It hadn't helped him feel any better about that strange group of eight.

"You could say that... we used to... work together." Grandpa Quixote smiled and waved but he seemed suddenly apprehensive. He obviously hadn't been expecting Marjorie, and was still trying to calculate the ramifications of her presence.

"Is she like us? She's a hero?" Homer gave the woman a new appraising stare. She didn't seem particularly heroic, but then neither did Grandpa Quixote or himself for that matter.

"No, nothing like that. Marjorie's... complicated. I'll explain it to you some other time." Homer shook his head. The past few days had been confusing and he was not done processing all that he had already learned. He didn't need anymore mystery piled on top. He decided to let that mystery wait till later.

"I still don't know why its necessary for us to see this Prince Abdullah speak. He's the guy I saw by the warehouse. He has to be." Grandpa Quixote was too busy wheeling toward Marjorie to give Homer more than a passing answer.

"The newspaper said he would be here, and I'd like to hear what he has to say. Just keep your glasses on. It can't hurt to do a little reconnaissance."

Then Grandpa Quixote reached out and kissed Marjorie's waiting hands.

"Marjorie, still as beautiful as ever, I see." Homer had to admit his grandfather had a certain amount of charm. It probably helped that these people had never been whipped by him or seen him rolling around in his underwear.

"Don Raul, handsome as ever. Will you sit by us for the service?" To Homer's great surprise the old woman actually curtsied, which was something Homer had never expected to see in real life. Curtsies were for quaint Hollywood period pieces.

"Marjorie, I wouldn't have it any other way. Come Homer, take a seat."

"Don Raul, let me introduce my granddaughter, Beatrice. I believe she goes to school with your grandson." Marjorie stepped to the side and Homer got an eye-ful of Beatrice huddled inside her cloak trying to pretend she didn't see him.

Homer turned his face to the side and sighed. If Jesus Christ hadn't been staring directly at him from the front of the church, Homer most assuredly would have taken his name in vain.

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Homer was finding he didn't like church. The sermon seemed monotone and boring. Not to mention all of the choreographed standing he couldn't keep up with. It sometimes seemed he sat down for no other reason than to stand up again. When asked, he struggled to find the right place in the Bible on the back of the pew in front of him to read along with the priest. He had wound up in Leviticus by accident. It had been something about how it was forbidden for a woman to help her husband in a fight by touching the testicles of his aggressor.... which Homer had found odd. Now he just flipped the Bible open and didn't even try. And then there was Beatrice. Beatrice

and her incessant teeth clacking. Homer didn't think church would have been half so annoying had he not been sitting right beside her.

"Please stop that." Homer whispered when a rousing chorus of "Amazing Grace" provided adequate cover. It wouldn't do for the adults to overhear.

"I can't. It's the crucifixes in this place. They cause me great pain." Homer wondered if he could take Jesus off the crucifix long enough to nail Beatrice to the cross in his place. He concluded that pending discovery of a hammer and nails the idea would have to be set aside.

"No they don't. You're not a vampire. There's no such thing as vampires. How sweet the sound! That saved a wretch like me!" Homer interjected when he noticed his grandfather shaking his head at him.

"I am too. I am one of the undead. The Holy Spirit burns my flesh like fire." Beatrice hissed back.

"If that's true then how did you walk here in broad daylight? How does that- was blind but now I see!" Homer waved happily to his grandfather, who had taken to glowering at Homer in a very disapproving way.

"That is such a myth. Vampyres can go out in the day, they're just nocturnal. 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear... and grace my fear relieved!" Beatrice smiled and waved at her grandmother. The two of them stood in temporary truce for the next few lines until the adults turn away.

Homer, realizing he had no idea what the next line was in the song, did his best to guess them by listening to the first syllables uttered by everyone in the congregation. He was right about half the time.

Homer waited until his grandfather and Marjorie were absorbed in their hymnals before scratching the side of his head facing Beatrice with his middle finger. Beatrice reciprocated by following the lines in her hymnal with her own middle finger. Homer scratched until he realized that Jesus seemed

to be staring at him, then coughed and stared at his feet. The song ended before he looked up again. Beatrice seemed to be beaming in victory next to him.

When Homer looked up, his breath caught in surprise. Abbey Freemantle was behind the pulpit. She was gorgeous in a black dress and pearl necklace. He had hoped vaguely that she would be a part of the talk... but to see her in the flesh.... Homer's face turned red when he turned to the left and his grandfather mouthed the words "is that her?" and gave him the thumbs up. Beatrice snickered at his other side. Homer took the opportunity to sit down and kick his feet for a few minutes.

"Hello!" The salutation resounded around the room along with the wincing screech of feedback. Abbey took a step back. "I'm sorry... is this better?" She coughed when no one responded. "Okay then... my name is Abbey Freemantle, I'm here to talk to you all about the International Summit on Tolerance that is being hosted by the McManus Corporation this coming Saturday. Speakers have been flown in from all over the world to speak on the subject of unity and peace. And even though it's only a week away we'd still like to get as much community involvement as we can. It's important to us that every person is represented at the Summit, regardless of economic status or race. To speak more on that subject I'd like to introduce Ian McManus." Abbey stood back and held her hands to the side. She was still holding the notecards she'd been flipping through while reading her speech.

Ian McManus strode to the pulpit from front row of pews, loudly chewing gum as he strutted. When he arrived he took a moment to smile and wave at the audience, then realizing he was still chewing gum, smiled disarmingly turned to make a supplicating gesture to Jesus and put the gum in a wrapper and hid it in his pocket. The crowd laughed uproariously. His

comedic timing had been perfect.

"Hey folks!" Ian McManus called to the crowd. Dressed in a crisp blue suit with a dark red tie somehow did not manage to distract from his casual friendly aura. He had the face of a small town shop owner. The kind of guy who had a name like "Mitch" or "Dutch" and knew more about your life than you did. "I bet you're wondering why a billionaire is hosting a big get-together for peace nicks. Am I right?" No one responded. "Oh, Catholics. Right?" Ian bent his head, crossed his heart and murmured "Am I right?" into the microphone. A child in the middle of the congregation shouted "Amen!" The crowd laughed again.

*Well, the guy sure knows how to work a crowd,* Homer thought as he laughed despite himself. He couldn't help it. Kids were funny.

Ian strode from behind the pulpit, taking the microphone from its stand. He walked down a few steps until he was more or less at eye-level with the audience. "Sorry about that folks. If I'm standing behind anything that looks like a podium I feel like I'm at a press conference and am about to get attacked by reporters. Where was I again? Oh yes. Why does a billionaire want to throw a party for peace-nicks. Everyone here should understand that one. Guilt. Plain old Catholic guilt." The crowd laughed, now completely eased into Ian McManus' friendly charm.

"The world has given me many things. Five billion of them actually, if you looked at last month's issue of Forbes, but that doesn't mean I shouldn't give back. And that's what I'm trying to do. I want to give back to the community. So you should come. I'm going to throw the biggest least exclusive party this town has ever seen, and you should be happy... because otherwise there is no way you people would be invited." People laughed so hard they cried.

"And I didn't settle for cheap peace-nicks either, people. I got some quality hippies to fly to this country. I'm talking Grade A, FDA approved tolerance and good-will here. You sir!" Ian McManus pointed at a random person in the crowd. "Are you going to come to my Peace Summit?" The man he had asked was too busy laughing to respond.

"Come on pal, peace is no laughing matter." The man laughed harder. Finally he nodded, and Ian McManus threw his hands high into the air. "Yes! Did you see that people? We have *one* confirmed guest! Do I hear a second?" Hands shot up all over the crowd. "That's the spirit! It's looking like we have a party brewing here folks!" Ian McManus ran down the center aisle handing out high fives like they were penny candy.

"Now that I've got you pumped up, let's bring in our guest of honor, the one, the only, Prince Abdullah al-Hussein ibn Mohammed!" The crowd was now in an uproar, and the slender man who took position behind the pulpit did not seem altogether comfortable with it. He took the microphone from the ebullient Ian McManus with great hesitation. His solemn expression contrasted poorly with McManus' open smile and folksy way of carrying himself.

The crowd, prepped for humor, was not at all prepared for what happened next. "I am Abdullah al-Hussein ibn Mohammed. I was wondering if any of you would join me in prayer?" The crowd did not know what to do and neither did Homer.

Prince Abdullah's face was as plain as day. Not a plane or a crevasse was hidden to his eye. There wasn't a shadow to be seen. "What the hell is going on here?" Homer muttered.

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"Ah yes. I see I have made you uncomfortable, and for that I apologize. You must now be thinking, but we are Christians? We do not pray on mats as do Muslims. How do we approach a man of a different faith without giving offense to his beliefs? Well?

"You cannot. Not the answer you were expecting, yes? You wanted butterflies, rainbows, and unicorns I presume?" Prince Abdullah smiled apologetically. "How do we keep ourselves from offending our fellow man when we do not know his ways? Impossible. It is only when we understand one another that offense may be kept at bay. That is why I am here. I wish to help you in the West understand Islam.

The man did not so much as speak as he did sing without melody or beat. His voice was like a summer wind, washing around the audience taking away the heat they had not even known they felt, and leaving them in a cool relaxing caress. Raul found himself hanging on every word.

"Have any of you heard of the Five Pillars of Islam? The *Shahada*, the *salat*, *zakat*, *sawm*, and *hajj*? Or are these strange words to you? Then I will explain.

"The *shahada* is this: There is no god but God, and Muhammed is his messenger. This is the fundamental tenet of Islam, and I believe it firmly. But what I am here to tell you is that my belief does not make me hostile toward you, because I understand that you believe in your traditions as strongly as I hold to mine. This is what we must learn to understand about one another.

"The *Salat* requires that we pray five times a day and face Mecca. You have seen us do this, yes? The *Zakat* says that those who are able must give to charity. The *Sawm* tells us to fast for our holy days, and the *hajj* says that if we are able we must go to Mecca and see the Kaaba. Funny words yes?

Yet if we are to understand one another you must learn these as I have learned your Ten Commandments."

Raul was starting to get a bad feeling about being inside the church. Something was happening that was grander than anything he had ever imagined. He had come across two villains in his time as a Hero. Raul leaned forward in his chair and squinted at Prince Abdullah. He had only ever heard of such people as the Prince. Raul turned to catch Homer's attention. "It's not him." He mouthed to his granddson.

Prince Abdullah, whatever his title, was a King as surely as Raul was a Hero. And there was no telling what kind of problems that would cause.

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"What does that even mean?" Homer asked bewildered, as he lowered the ramp for his grandfather to get in the van. They had lingered until the parking lot was mostly emptied.

"It means that he's a king. A leader of men, the same way you're an Agent of Fate." The parking lot had an incline that made it very difficult for his Grandfather to get up the ramp. Homer had to bend down and lean his good shoulder into his grandfather's back just to keep him from sliding down the hill.

"I still don't get what that *means*." So far all Homer really understood about being a Hero was that his shoulder and waist hurt like sin. All the stuff about Fate and being Called confused him to no end.

"What is a hero, Homer? Do you understand it at all yet?" Grandpa Quixote grabbed two support bars on either side of the van and pulled himself in.

"Uh... someone who gets hurt so someone doesn't have to die?" He was out of breath and his shoulder hurt again.

"No! A Hero is someone who can be where they need to be to make a difference. I've told you this! Now a king is someone who has the ability to deal with people's bull crap in an extraordinary way." Homer was so confused he couldn't even think of how to begin expressing it.

"What? There's got to be more to leadership than that?" Homer was stunned that his grandfather had so succinctly reduced the whole idea of governance to "dealing with people's bull crap."

"Homer, how many people out of ten would you say are smart? Any ten people. How many of them would you trust not to hurt themselves just walking around everyday?" Homer spluttered.

"That's not fair, people have different strengths!"

"Homer, don't be ridiculous. Out of ten people how many would you trust not to kill themselves simply through being foolish?"

"Well where are the people? That doesn't seem like it's a fair statement-" Homer paused when his grandfather arched his eyebrow condescendingly. "Two." Homer answered with a sigh.

"I'm surprised Homer. I didn't know you were an optimist."

"Can you please just explain?"

"People fight with each other. That's what people do, and most people are idiots so they're too dumb to stop. A king facilitates peace... or a good king at least. A good king takes all the problems that people have, puts them in context, and lets people get back to business. That's a king's innate ability. He can focus a group of people."

"So what does that have to do with us? Is Prince Abdullah a good king? I don't get it."

"I didn't say he was a good king. I said he was a king. There's another thing you can do, and that's to turn a people to war. We need to know more

before we can decide which kind of king Prince Abdullah is."

"This job sucks. We don't even get paid."

"Would you rather run away knowing that people will suffer for it?"

Homer walked over to the passenger side of a van and climbed into his seat. As usual he winced when the lap belt crossed his waist. "I guess not." He replied sullenly. His grandfather busied himself turning on the car and playing with the knobs that controlled his gas.

"Why did you get so mad at me for getting into a fight with Beatrice?" Homer had not taken his grandfather for the kind of person who suffered fools.

"Because she's coming home with you after school tomorrow." His grandfather put the van into reverse.

"What? I can't stand her! She thinks she's a vampire!"

"She's still coming over. And don't bring up the vampire thing with her again. You two have to learn to get along." Homer wanted to scream again, which had been happening all too many times over the past week.

"Unless you tell me she's actually a vampire, I refuse to be nice to her." Homer crossed his arms and glowered.

"Don't be silly, Homer." His grandfather scoffed. "There's no such thing as vampires."

"No kidding" Homer said snidely.

"She's a witch." Then they were on their way home.