

THE PERFECT THING

A SIGNAL BEND SHORT

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*... Look to your science again
Where it is written: the more a thing is perfect
The more it feels of pleasure and of pain.*

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto VI

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Note: *This story takes place during Chapters 17-19 of Show the Fire (Signal Bend 6). There are spoilers here, then, for that book and perhaps all the books preceding it.*

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Lilli stood in the Hall, a shotgun cradled in her arms, and watched Isaac walk out the front door, trailed by the scant remains of the Horde: Tommy, Zeke, and Dom.

He'd simply walked past her, shrugging her touch away as she'd tried to stop him, or at least to slow him, to talk to him. He'd walked past her, into the night, straight into the fire.

“Lilli.”

She jerked her arm away from Tasha's unexpected touch but turned to her. “What?”

“People are scared.”

Join the fucking club, Lilli thought. But she knew what Tasha was saying and, after a few more beats indulging the weight of her own fear, she nodded. “Yeah, okay.” And she got about her business.

She went back to the kitchen; Tasha followed. Shannon and Cory were standing together at the back of the room. Little Luke, not quite two months old, slept quietly in a pack on his mother’s chest.

“Shannon—I need you to sit with Brad and Tim’s parents.” Brad and Tim were the boys who’d been working the gate and who’d apparently been shot. With no information yet about whether they were dead or alive, Shannon was the best person to bring them calm.

But Shannon turned her head to Cory, whose hand she was holding. “Will you be okay?”

Cory nodded, trying to put on a brave face, and Shannon said, “Yes. I can do that.”

“Thanks, Shan. Just try to keep them calm. We can’t have a riot in here.”

Shannon nodded and went out into the Hall. Lilli watched her go and turned back to Cory.

Cory wasn’t holding up well. Lilli knew she should be patient—Cory had a tiny baby, her old man was missing and maybe dead, and she was still new to all of this—but Lilli had never been especially long on patience. And she needed help to manage whatever was happening. She made sure her voice was calm and gentle. “Cory, can you help at all? Or would you be better if you went back to Hav’s room?”

Havoc’s old lady cleared her throat and took a deep breath. “I can help. What do you need?” He voice wavered a little, but Lilli respected that—the willingness to step up even in fear. She felt that fear, too, deep in her gut. But her man had been here these past torturous hours, he had not been missing like Show and Len and Havoc had. And Badge. Sweet Badge.

Isaac had been here, and being here when his men were missing had all but driven him mad. Lilli knew that whatever was happening outside now, her man was being reckless and impulsive. Show was missing, and Isaac had locked himself away from her. There was no one to keep him steady.

But if she dwelt too long in those thoughts, she’d curl up in a corner. She had two kids to keep safe. More than that—she had all of the Horde kids, and the Signal Bend kids, to keep safe.

“It’d be good to have one of us in charge of the kids. Can you handle that? Just keep ‘em corralled—maybe in the bays, safely out of the way. I’ll get somebody to drag the kid stuff back there. The toys and shit.”

Cory nodded. “I’ll get Nolan and Lori to help.”

“Good. Thank you.” When Cory went out, Lilli turned to Tasha, who was leaning on a counter, her rifle still in her arms. “Tash—you need to get your med kit and start thinking about how to set up. We already have at least two casualties. There could be more.”

Tasha nodded. “Already on it. I’ll need at least one dorm room, since those boys don’t live here already.”

“Yeah—there’s an empty at the end of the dorm hall. It’s not made up, but I’ll get a girl on it.”

“I’ll do it. We should put plastic or something on the bed.”

“There are tarps on a shelf in the Room.” Tasha nodded and left, too. Alone now in the kitchen, Lilli sighed. Now she had to figure out what to say to the people out there that would keep them calm. She had no idea what.

She was saved from that task by the crash of the front door opening in from autumn night. Isaac came in, carrying the body of Brad Jordan in his arms. Lilli knew right away that he was carrying a body and not a living boy. She’d seen lots of bodies carried in such a way, draped over the arms, in Afghanistan. She’s seen wounded soldiers carried that way, too. There was a visible difference, to Lilli’s eye at least, in the way a body with blood coursing through it lay, even while unconscious.

And even if that had not been true, one look at Isaac’s pale, bleak, furiously resolute face told her the irrefutable truth.

Tommy walked in directly behind Isaac, carrying Tim Breuer. The body of Tim Breuer. Both boys were dead. Neither of them was out of his teens.

She stepped in front of Isaac. “Tasha was going to fix up the room at the end for medical. There’ll be privacy for their parents back there.”

Isaac nodded, looked over his shoulder at Tommy, indicating he should follow, and walked down the dorm hallway.

Lilli watched him go and then turned back to the front door. Dom and Zeke stood just inside. And three Latino men with AKs were grouped in front of the still-open door. What the *fuck*? Lilli was still holding a shotgun; she aimed it now.

And three AKs turned on her.

Zeke lurched forward. “Lilli, no!” He stepped between her and the strangers. “Put it down, Lilli. Just put it down.”

Lilli didn’t know Zeke. He was a new patch, a transfer from another club, and he tended to stick to himself. She had no trust for him yet, patch or not. And she sure as shit didn’t know why they

were allowing armed strangers into the clubhouse, where townspeople and club families—club *children*—were supposed to be safe. She turned to Dom.

“What the fuck is going on, Dom?”

“You gotta put the gun down, Lilli. Just trust me. Isaac has some time. He’ll explain.”

“What do you mean, Isaac has some time?”

But Dom shook his head. “He’ll explain.”

One of the strangers, a tall, thin man with a long, black ponytail and a sparse growth of longish beard, raised his AK and aimed it at her head. “Put the gun on the bar, bitch, or I will thin this room out. Starting with you.”

His accent was thick. These were cartel men. In their house. The Horde had let them in. What the fuck was going on?

Though her muscles almost literally creaked with resistance, she put the gun down. And then the tall man stepped up to her, grinned, swung his gun arm wide, and grabbed her ponytail with the other hand, yanking her around and hard back to his chest. Isaac was standing now before her, his rage painting his face, his entire body, with livid tension. She hadn’t heard him come up behind her.

“Every gun. Bring us every gun in this building. Or I kill this one...eventually.” The man who had her barked the order at Isaac. Lilli could see his jaw working relentlessly around his clenched teeth. He ignored the man and held Lilli’s eyes with his own.

“Dom, Zeke. Get the Prospects and get it done.” From behind her, Zeke and Dom both moved immediately to obey. Tommy, too—he’d been standing a few feet behind Isaac. Now he headed to the pool table.

Without looking away from Lilli, he then spoke to the man whose fist was tangled in her hair. “You said I could have time with her and my kids.”

“When we have the guns. You can have the time that’s left. But we leave in fifteen minutes.”

Isaac called out, “*Move*, brothers.”

“Isaac, what’s—” She was cut off by a savage yank on her hair. Isaac took an aggressive step forward and then stopped. His hands were coiled into fists, and the muscles in his neck and shoulders had lifted into cords of rigid ire. His chest rose and fell with each deep, strenuous breath.

“Shut up, *puta*. You can talk to your man when I get your guns.”

The minutes dragged and sped simultaneously as the guns were collected and removed from the Hall. Isaac stood where he was, staring at Lilli, not moving, not speaking. His eyes, though—in his eyes she read a compendium of information. His guilt, his fear, his barely-contained fury. And his sorrow, his loss. That blazed out at her from his eyes that would not leave hers. Lilli's heart became a rock in her chest.

As if on the other side of a glass wall, Lilli could hear the sounds of the people around her. The men carrying armloads of weapons. Women crying—the boys' mothers, she supposed. And a strange tide of spoken sound. It took a while to reach her conscious thoughts; those thoughts were too devoted to Isaac for much else to work through. But when it did, she understood that the sound she was hearing, that odd swell, was unrest.

The people of Signal Bend expected the Horde to save them, not bring dead boys in to lie at their parents' feet, not allow armed strangers into their safe haven. Not stand silently still while those strangers took over.

“Isaac—ah!” Again, her hair was pulled viciously. She could hear and feel the roots being pulled away. This time, Isaac's eyes dropped. Only for a second, and then they were back. But that second broke Lilli's heart. Not for her, but for him.

Isaac had lost faith.

Tommy came to him. “That's it, boss. They got everything now.”

Isaac nodded and turned to the man holding Lilli. “Can I have some time now?”

The man turned the hand holding the AK and looked at a big, digital watch on his wrist. “Seven minutes. You're one second late, and we ventilate this place.” He released Lilli and shoved her toward Isaac, who caught her in his arms.

He wasted no time. “Where are the kids?”

“In the bays. Cory and Nolan took all the kids back to keep them safe.”

Isaac nodded and grabbed her hand, dragging her with him down the side hall.

She went with him, but she needed some answers. Fear was filling her chest with acid. “Isaac, what's going on? Do you know where Show is? The others?”

“Yeah. I'm gonna get 'em back. I'm gonna get 'em back.” He pushed the doors open to the bays and let her hand go. Lilli didn't ask more.

Isaac dropped to his knees and called Gia and Bo to him. They came right away. They always dropped everything and came to him. Maybe one day that would change, but for now, he was their hero, a god in their eyes.

He clutched their children to him and held them tightly. And then Lilli understood.

Isaac had made a trade. Himself for his men.

She put her hands over her mouth and pushed the despair back into silence.

When he stood again and turned back to her, his eyes glittered with tears. He came right to her and grabbed her hand.

“No—Isaac.”

“C’mon, Sport. We only have a couple of minutes.” His beautiful, deep voice rasped with emotion. He pulled her out of the bays. Lilli caught Cory’s eyes and saw both confusion and sympathy there.

Isaac pulled her into his office and closed the door. She turned on him immediately, swinging with her right, but he caught her wrist and pulled her close. “No time for foreplay, baby.”

“You bastard. Please tell me you didn’t. Please, Isaac.”

He chuckled sadly and brushed a loose strand of hair from her face. “I knew you’d know before I could tell you. I don’t have a choice, baby. They want me. They’ll just kill me now, in front of you and the kids, if I don’t go. This way, I can get the others home. Show, Lilli. They’ve got Show. This is a fuckin’ drug cartel. I wouldn’t leave any of them, but you know I can’t leave Show. No matter what.”

“Jesus Christ, Isaac. I don’t—I—Jesus *Christ*. What they’ll do to you. Isaac, fuck! No! We’ve paid enough. We’ve fucking paid *enough!*” She could feel tears coming, and she shoved them back down her throat.

He grabbed her face in his hands. “Lilli. We don’t have time for this shit. I know. I *know*. This is what I have to do. All this shit we’ve been through, it’s on me. What Show and Len and Hav and Badge are going through right now—it’s on *me*. I have to fix what I can. You know I do.”

She opened her mouth to protest again, and he kissed her—the depth and desperation of his love for her making his mouth move savagely on hers. Knowing that it was the last time she would ever hold him, ever touch him, in this life, Lilli gave up her fight and kissed him back, wrapping her arms around his torso, under his kutte, and clutching his shirt in her fists.

When he pulled away, she cried out and tried to bring him back to her, but he held her away, his hands still grasping her head. “Baby—do you remember telling me you wouldn’t change one second of your life, not even the most awful seconds, because it brought you where you are, it brought us together?”

She nodded, her face moving against the rough skin of his palms.

“Well, I’ve got regrets. But I would suffer every horror again. I will suffer any horror comin’ up, and I will do it gladly. Because I had you. That gift is worth everything. What we’ve had—it’s the best life could possibly be. Maybe you never stop paying to have something so precious. Maybe that’s just the way it is. We are perfect, you and me. I fuckin’ love you, Lilli.”

She knocked his hands free of her head and wrapped her arms around him. “I love you, Isaac. Please come home. Please come home. Please.”

He lifted her up and tucked his face against her throat. “No, baby. I’m sorry. So fuckin’ sorry. But I don’t think I will be.”

Then he set her down, took her hand, and they walked back out into the Hall. Lilli set her jaw and squared her shoulders; the emotion she would show Isaac in private, she would never show anyone else.

The tall man nodded to one of the other strangers, and there, in front of most of Signal Bend, the President of the Night Horde MC was shoved against the bar and bound with his wrists behind his back.

As he was roughly pulled out the door, away from home, he turned and winked at her.

~oOo~

But he did come home. It was Havoc who’d paid the price Isaac had offered of himself. Show, Len, and Badger had paid, too, in flesh and bone, blood and pain. Isaac returned largely unscathed.

When Isaac had called her, she’d had a magnificent, crystalline moment of ecstatic bliss. She’d never thought to hear his voice again. Seeing his name on her phone, she had steeled herself for more horror, perhaps to hear the voice of the man who’d taken her from her.

But no. It had been Isaac, telling her he was coming back to her. And she had known real joy.

Then he had told her the rest of it, and she set joy aside. He’d asked to speak to Tasha, and Lilli handed her phone over and then shared the news with Shannon. And then with Cory.

Now Cory was sedated, and Nolan had found someplace to be alone, and the rest of them were waiting for the men to come home.

Lilli had been helping get the dorms set up as a makeshift hospital. She was standing in the Hall, near the entrance to the dorm hallway, when Isaac came in, carrying Badger in his arms. Badger was alive—as she knew the boys had been dead, she could see in the fluid resilience of his limbs that Badger was alive.

She and Isaac faced each other for only a scant second before he continued down the hallway, but in that brief meeting of their eyes, Lilli saw everything.

He had not returned unscathed. His will was broken.

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It was hours before they had a moment even to speak to each other about anything other than matters at hand—getting the cartel gunmen out of their clubhouse, getting their guns back, caring for the wounded, sending the townsfolk home. The healthy Horde met briefly in the Keep and came out with a schedule for town protection. Isaac went back to check on his brothers.

Lilli focused on the townsfolk, getting them home, answering their questions as well as she could. There had been a bad vibe all night in the clubhouse. People were angry, and they were not sympathetic to what the Horde was going through itself. It never developed into more than a steady rumble of complaints and the frequent hardening in the eye when Lilli looked their way. But it meant trouble, Lilli knew that. She didn't have the mindshare currently to worry about it, but she set it aside for later.

Finally, when she'd taken a moment to sit at the bar in the now-quiet Hall, Isaac came and stood at her side. As he had hours earlier, he asked, "Where are the kids?"

"Sleeping. Lori and Nolan set up a fort in the bays earlier, before we had word. Like a little campsite. She's sleeping in there now with them."

He nodded, then wrapped his hand around her arm. "Come with me, Sport. I need you."

She slid off the stool, and he led her back to the weight room. Havoc's body lay in his office.

He closed the door and the blinds on the windows. But when she went up to him and put her hands on the buttons of his shirt, he closed his fists around them. "No, baby. I don't want to fuck you. Not now. I don't want to talk. Not yet. I just want to hold you. Forever."

He enclosed her in his huge, strong arms, and she tucked herself deep into the warmth of his kutte, tight against his broad, strong chest.

As they stood in the dark weight room, holding each other, not speaking or even moving, the tears that Lilli had been shoving away for hours and hours would no longer be denied. Isaac said nothing. He only held her more tightly and let her cry.

He was right. What they had was perfect. And maybe there would always be a new price to pay for the happiness they had found together. Maybe every price would be more painful than the last. But she would pay. To have this, to have him, his presence and, perhaps, someday, only his memory, she would gladly pay.

