

Feast

Alison Luhrs

From set *Hour of Devastation*

“And so the Hour of Revelation broke upon the land, and the promised time arrived when all questions would be answered. And lo, the Gate to the Afterlife opened, and from behind its gleaming walls, the true visage of the coming tide poured forth.”

Liliana moved her foot back from the lapping crimson of the Luxa River. Razaketh’s taunts rang in her ears, and she sighed.

I’m too old for this nonsense.

She rolled out her shoulders and pulled her hair back. What Liliana felt in that moment was neither fear nor excitement. It was anticipation. All things considered, the first two demons had been easy to defeat. Surprise and the suddenness of her attacks had played to her favor.

How fortunate that she had the best backup in the Multiverse.

Jace? Can you hear me? Distantly in her mind, she heard a response.

Lili? Where are you! We’re coming! The crowd —

— was too large, I know. I’m on the bank of the river, before the gate. Jace, it’s Razaketh, he’s —

“Where are you, crone?”

The demon’s voice again boomed out.

Around her, the remaining crowd murmured. Those who hadn’t run away stood rooted to the spot, trembling in fear and uncertain of what was going on.

Liliana furrowed her brow. She knew he’d be the type to toy with her. She wouldn’t allow herself to be baited into action that easily.

“Liliana, I know you’re here . . .”

She slinked among the lingering people, her eyes following the dark figure gliding in lazy circles high above the river. Razaketh flew to the open gate and scanned the crowd.

Liliana felt her hand twitch.

She looked down in surprise.

The movement of her hand had been . . . involuntary.

Liliana held her right hand up to her face, a wave of dread crashing into her chest.

Her own fingers waved back at her.

Liliana made a loud noise of disgust and shook her hand out.

It was a scare tactic, that’s all. *She* refused to feel fear. Liliana purposefully thrust the same hand down toward the left side of her dress, toward the Chain Veil.

The demon upon the gate laughed.

“There you are.”

His words sent a chill down her neck.

Out of the corner of her eye, Liliana saw the rest of the Gatewatch arrive. They looked worse for wear, bodies bruised from the melee of the arena. Jace moved toward Liliana’s side, but she threw up a cautionary hand. The four others stopped around her, all gazing up at the demon.

“I do not know the extent of his abilities,” Liliana whispered, her voice urgent and low. “But he’s powerful. We should . . .”

Liliana abruptly stopped speaking. The demon lowered his wings. His words—smooth, steady, *calm*—*poured over the crowd*.

“*Come to me.*”

As soon as his words hit her ears, Liliana felt her shoulders draw back and her face fall slack. The labyrinth of tattoos that covered her skin alit with the demon’s call, and she screamed in the privacy of her mind as, without urging or permission, her body waded forward into the river of blood.



Art by Titus Lunter

In her long life, Liliana had withstood a number of tortures. She had fought, lost, aged, willfully signed away her soul, and more. But nothing was as unbearable or enraging as a loss of control. She had thought she knew the repercussions when she formed those contracts with her demons decades before, but Liliana had never truly envisioned the outcome.

Rage wasn’t an emotion Liliana liked to experience with any frequency. It was a too-hot bath, an uncontrolled flame, an itchy dress that never felt like her own. But as the demon Razaketh urged her body onward, Liliana bore her rage as a banner. She reveled in its churning fury and fought and tugged with all the might of her mind to seize control of herself.

But it was to no avail. No matter how much she mentally fought, her hate never reached her face. Her anger never pulled at her muscles. Liliana had no control over the one thing that was ever actually hers .

Damn it all to the depths of the hells!

She railed and screamed in her own mind, but the tether between her will and her limbs remained severed.

Chandra and Nissa reached out to pull Liliana's wandering body back, and a flare of necromantic energy pushed back their hands. The two women recoiled back, hands withdrawn before the decay and rot seized them.

In Liliana's head, she could hear Jace yelling, and in her ears Gideon's voice echoed, but her attention remained fixed on Razaketh before her.

Go to him was the only command her body knew. The Chain Veil remained tucked away, the demon too close, her allies unable to halt the urge to wade forward.

She wanted to tear the demon's eyes out and swallow them whole. Liliana screamed obscenity after obscenity in her mind, hoping that her cascade of curses would make the demon relinquish his hold.

But the hold stayed.

Liliana waded into the blood of the Luxa. It felt hot, viscous, utterly vile. Her body kept walking, wading deeper and deeper into the river. To her hips. To her waist. To her sternum.

Liliana's thoughts turned from raging protest to an endless scream.

She felt her leg graze something dead under the water. A fish floated past her shoulder. The river was full of freshly dead wildlife, all choked by the blood of Razaketh's ritual. Nothing living survived in the blood mire.

Jace's voice faded in her mind. She was too far out, too deep in the river.

Liliana took a breath and felt her head dip below the surface.

The liquid was cloying and thick, its temperature hot against her skin.

Her heart beat fast and frightened.

I will not be afraid. He is weaker than I am, and I can survive this.

A voice creaked through her mind: "*You can only survive this if you **kill him** .*"

The Raven Man.

Liliana screamed. *Get out! Not now! I do not want to hear from you!*

"You are only free if you kill each of your demons, Liliana. Only then will I leave you be."

Liliana didn't have time to think that over.

She was running out of air.

With growing urgency, she wanted to inhale, even though she knew she would just drown on mouthfuls of blood, but the demon's control of her body overrode her impulses even for breath.

Just as she was sure she'd lose consciousness, her body swam itself to the surface, and she gasped for air.

She had crossed the river and crawled onto the opposite bank. She looked up, blinking through sticking eyelashes, to the base of the Necropolis just beyond the Gate to the Afterlife. Razaketh stood above her on a stone platform, his face as smug and obnoxious as Liliana remembered.

A part of her felt foolish. No other demon wielded this sort of control over her body. How could she fight someone who could maneuver her like a puppet? What kind of tactic could she use to *fight that*?

Razaketh looked down. His face was reptilian and unreadable, but he seemed pleased all the same to encounter his contractor. Where Kothophed and Griselbrand were distant, Razaketh was *playful*.

“What a delightful surprise,” the demon purred.

He motioned with his hand for Liliana to rise from the silt, and without hesitation, her body did it for her, kneeling in the muck. Her dress stuck to her sides, and the blood began to crust in the heat of the sun.

Liliana could feel that this position would cramp her feet, but she was unable to shift or move. She instead focused on her breath, heaving in a rhythm not her own, and tried to tame her panic into determination.

The demon stepped forward and studied his subject. “Old age never suited you.”

Razaketh leered with a reptilian smile. Liliana wanted to rip the look from his face.

“I’m glad you’ve been reaping the benefits of our deal,” the demon said, eyeing the blood on Liliana’s dress. “I do apologize for the mess I’ve made. A dear friend left an assignment for me to fulfill.”

Razaketh looked to the second sun. “You were very fortunate to arrive when you did. You get to see the show! I’m excited to see it myself. It is a surprise for me, too, you know.”

If Liliana could have jumped she would have. A little patter of rain suddenly chimed in the back of her mind—

Liliana! We see you. We’re coming!

Never had Liliana been so relieved to hear Jace in her head. Razaketh hadn’t seemed to notice, and she was briefly thankful for not being in control of the expression on her face.

Oblivious, the demon continued to toy with her. “I apologize for the forcefulness, Liliana, but I love a dog who comes when she is called. And you’re a good dog, aren’t you?”

He held out a lazy finger and tapped it.

Liliana felt her head nod. Her muscles strained and cramped as she tried to resist the urge, but her head tipped forward . . . then back . . . forward . . . then back.

Razaketh smiled, putting his hand down. “Good.”

He went quiet and considered her for a moment. A smug look pulled at the scales of his face as he thought over his next command.

“Bark. “

“Woof,” Liliana replied in a tone that could ice over the sun.

Razaketh made a small noise of displeasure.

“You really ought to read contracts before you sign them, you know. People hide all *sorts* of nasty clauses into them. The other co-authors were so straightforward, but I like a little flair in my dealings.”

Razaketh tipped his chin, and without warning, Liliana's right hand balled into a fist and rushed toward her own face. It halted a hair's width from her left eye. Her face was frozen in the emotionless expression of obedience, but internally she squirmed.

Satisfied with his demonstration, Razaketh silently urged Liliana to put her fist down. As her body obeyed, Liliana's mind reached back down the river, assessing how many dead things remained choked and buried in the blood behind her.

Razaketh straightened himself and puffed his chest. "Now then, crone, tell me what you came here for."

Liliana's jaw popped with returned agency. She shifted it from side to side. The rest of her was still out of reach, but at least her words were again *hers*.

She made them count.

"You have five more minutes to live," Liliana said, voice dripping with resolution. "You will watch me as I kill you."

Razaketh laughed. "Five minutes. How precise."

Liliana's expression didn't change. "I'm a very punctual person."

"I doubt that."

"I killed Kothophed and Griselbrand," Liliana replied with a ghost of a smile. "It was easy."

Razaketh scoffed. "They were idiots."

Liliana smiled. "You're not wrong."

The demon considered her.

"I won't kill you. But I could maim you," Razaketh mused, toying with a knife at his hip. "I could have you do it yourself."

Liliana tipped her chin. "Four minutes."

Razaketh laughed.

Jace's voice appeared in Liliana's mind once more.

Don't move.

Internally, Liliana sighed. *Is that a joke?*

A pause. *Maybe .*

Liliana's attention returned to the demon standing tall over her.

An awkward silence ensued.

"Did you really have nothing more than an idle, empty threat? I'm almost disappointed." Razaketh made a show of shaking his head.

Jace's voice suddenly bloomed again in Liliana's mind, laced with panic. *Wait, Chandra, don't rush ahead —*

"Four minutes is a bit long, isn't it?" Liliana said aloud with a coy smile.

The demon scowled.

Liliana grinned. "How about . . . now?"

From somewhere behind Razaketh's head, a jet of fire engulfed the demon.

Razaketh screamed.

Relief flooded Liliana as control of her body returned. She rushed to her feet, the blood of the river still dripping down her dress, and looked to the source of the fire. Chandra funneled a blaze at Razaketh's screeching body, leaving the demon writhing, his tail whipping wildly as he tried to fight his way through the fire.

The demon unfurled his wings and launched into the air. He barreled down at Chandra at full speed and rammed into her side, knocking the pyromancer into the side of the Necropolis with a bruising *thud*.

Liliana reached a hand back toward the river, drawing on her powers, but Razaketh turned back on her with a snarl.

"I don't think so," the demon roared, and Liliana felt her shoulder dislocate itself.

Her scream was immediate, half pain and half fury, and then she felt her voice forcibly vanish. Razaketh stood, hand out and brow furrowed, again seizing control.

A sudden whip of sand, rock, and reeds barreled into the side of the concentrating demon. A massive elemental emerged, its body forming from the banks of the river. As it rose, rivulets of well water untouched by the blood spell cascaded from it.

With Razaketh's concentration broken, Liliana again shuddered with returned control.

She wasted no time popping her shoulder back into place with a groan, then once more thrust her hand toward the river, dark energy rippling through her as she wove her spell.

Injured and surprised, Razaketh scratched and clawed to get away from the elemental and back into the sky. Behind him, Nissa helped Chandra to her feet, keeping an eye on her elemental. As Razaketh ripped a massive chunk of earth from the elemental's torso, he thrust a clawed hand at Liliana to regain control.

The exertion only half-worked—Liliana's legs gave out, but her body remained her own.

The elemental battered the demon again, and Razaketh turned his full fury on the creature. He ripped off clumps of mud and tore reeds from its sides. He growled and spat and broke a crack in its side with his tail. As he raised a fist to deliver the final blow, he was bathed in flames once again—Chandra, standing once more, let loose a flurry of fireballs at the demon.

Liliana felt her right side go limp, and she fell to the ground.

Razaketh had one hand trained toward her, the other pinning Nissa's elemental to the ground.

Liliana panted against the earth and felt the sand in her teeth. In the distance, she saw the elemental hit the ground. Nissa had retreated behind another part of the Necropolis—she was clearly having trouble maintaining enough mana to keep the elemental active. Razaketh had flown up now and was dodging Chandra's flames with ease.

Jace! Liliana yelled in her mind.

But as the word formed in her mind, she halted.

Her breath had stopped.

She tried to suck in air, but her diaphragm was completely still.

Liliana tried again but found herself unable to *breathe*.

Razaketh landed in front of her, facing away from Liliana, taunting Chandra.

Liliana saw Chandra in the distance behind him taking aim at the demon. She realized that Chandra was unable to see her lying on the ground.

Liliana couldn't breathe. She couldn't move. And the pyromancer was taking aim at the demon standing directly above her.

JACE!

Jace's voice reappeared in her mind, frantic and distracted. *Gideon on your left!*

Liliana twitched as she felt an invisible hand grab her shoulder. Jace must have camouflaged Gideon to help him get closer to her position.

She watched as Gideon's sural flashed into view, carving three thick lines in Razaketh's back. The demon howled in pain, and Liliana coughed and inhaled a deep and desperate breath speckled with sand. She sat up on her elbows and caught her breath between gasps.

Gideon's voice growled in her ear. "Make it fast."

"I intend to," Liliana croaked.

She felt bright, unfamiliar magic envelop the area around her. Gideon had extended his invulnerability, creating a safe barrier between her and the demon.

A moment later, the air around her was engulfed in flames.

Liliana could see Gideon crouching above her now, wreathing his magic around the two of them, a golden dome shielding them from the inferno.

Razaketh stumbled forward through the flames, flailing widely before being tackled by a second elemental. The elemental pinned the demon to the ground, and Razaketh roared, his skin blistering from Chandra's pyromantic bombardment.

Liliana stood. She walked forward with Gideon standing at her back, still maintaining his shielding invulnerability. Liliana sensed a third twinge of magic—Jace must have made them invisible to Razaketh's eye.

Jace, I need you to interrupt his control over me.

Jace's voice resounded with frustration. *What do you think I've been trying to do for the last ten minutes?*

She didn't have time for this.

Drop the invisibility and focus on that while he's distracted!

Razaketh's eyes went unfocused.

Got him, move fast, Jace said, his mental voice full of strain.

"Forward, Gideon!" Liliana asserted.

Liliana walked forward into the wall of flames, blood dripping from her body and sizzling as it hit the ground. Gideon's hand went to her shoulder to strengthen the magic that protected the two of them.

Behind the barrier of invulnerability, the heat of the inferno came across as pleasantly warm. Comfortable, almost. Liliana squinted her eyes against the light and made out the shape of Razaketh in front of her, wrestling with Nissa's massive elemental of sand and water, his flesh dark and singed by the conflagration around him.

Liliana pulled the Chain Veil from her dress.

You don't need that, Jace said in her mind, *it will only hurt you —*

Liliana scowled at Jace's interjection.

But then again . . . he was right.

She didn't need it for this.

Let the demon witness what terror she could wield all on her own.

Liliana slipped the veil back into her dress. If the situation became dire she could always pull it back out, but for now she wanted to test her own abilities. The dying demon before her made her feel particularly *indulgent*.

"Razaketh," Liliana called.

The demon was blistered and pinned to the banks of the river. His face was burned, melting, and wrinkled: a grimace of rage.

Liliana held her head high, peering down at Razaketh in a way she hoped he could *feel*.

"Watch me as I kill you."

She held out her hands and reached her power toward the river.

The river boiled and churned with movement. Razaketh's eyes went wide.

Do it now! Jace yelled in Liliana's mind. Nearby, he flickered into view, dropping his veil as his mental voice strained with effort. Liliana looked at him with a start—the mind mage had snuck up closer than she thought. As Jace grimaced, Liliana felt a twitch in her hand as Razaketh struggled to reassert control. With a flick of her wrist, a menagerie of death spilled up and out of the river of blood. Fish, turtles, snakes, hippopotamuses, shorebirds, and drowned antelopes rose out of the crimson Luxa in a writhing mass. Their mouths gaped, their teeth flashed, and they hurled themselves out of the river and toward the charred body of the demon.

Liliana moved the mass as she would move her own body. Her control resided over each fin, claw, and tooth that burst up from the thick blood of the river. She felt immense: boundless, magnified, and distributed through waves of risen flesh. She wasn't sure where she ended and the hundreds of dead began. For a fleeting moment, Liliana remembered what it was like to wield godlike power.

The demon struggled to pull himself out from under the grip of Nissa's elemental. With a roar and a twist, he broke free and stretched his wings—torn like aged canvas on a rotting frame—and launched into the air again. Liliana sent a burst of necromantic energy at him, and he convulsed as he fell to the ground. Immediately, the morass of undead set upon the demon, fangs and teeth and horns tearing at flesh.

Chandra, Gideon, and Nissa turned away from the carnage.

But next to Liliana, Jace remained transfixed, unable to look away.

Liliana felt him brush against the side of her mind with a cautious touch, asking for an invitation to peer in. Liliana welcomed his mental gaze. *Look Jace*, she thought, *at what I plan to do next*.

Distantly, Liliana heard Jace gag with revulsion behind her.

He immediately retreated from her mind, but Liliana didn't care. She was busy.

Razaketh howled in pain and was suddenly, violently tugged toward the river. Liliana twisted her hand, and another two dozen crocodiles bellowed and dragged their corpses out onto the bank. His leg trapped in the jaws of one of the beasts, Razaketh tried to rise and crawl away from the river, but it was too late. Liliana released her hold on the other creatures and poured her energy and mind into the bodies of the crocodiles. Strong muscles and sharp teeth. An undead hunger for the flesh of the living.

With her consciousness divided among the two dozen dead crocodiles in front of her, she gnashed her teeth and attacked. Her two dozen bellies hungered, and her two dozen jaws opened wide. Without hesitation or humanity, her two dozen selves consumed the last of the demon Razaketh.

She feasted, and he *screamed*.

The crocodiles dragged the remains of the demon into the river of blood, splashing crimson arcs into the air as their tails violently slapped the surface of the water. They crowded and shoved and dug their teeth into the demon's flesh.

Liliana could *feel* herself getting full. Her two dozen jaws latched onto limbs and spun circles to rip them off clean. Her two dozen mouths spat out blood and devoured the charred flesh. There would be nothing left to stumble back to life. She laughed, and the crocodiles bellowed in tandem. Amonkhet's curse would not get *this* corpse.

While her savage, divided mind ate the demon alive, her own teeth gently ground in subconscious tandem.

She laughed and dimly heard Jace heaving behind her.

Liliana, that's enough, Jace pleaded. *Liliana, he's dead. Please stop.*

Liliana swallowed in her own body and tasted nothing.

She was panting with exertion.

And smiling from ear to ear.

She felt sated, relieved, and deliciously monstrous. She didn't want to stop.

Lili, enough.

Liliana lowered her hand and retreated from the bodies of the crocodiles. They lurched, and a moment later, swam upriver of their own reanimated volition. The Curse of Wandering had taken hold.

She had done it!

Liliana giggled and fell exhausted on the sand. No wine was as sweet as independence, no victory as satisfying as self-governance. Liliana was not a sentimental person, but lying on the bank of the River, staring at the glimmering blue of the Hekma, she found herself feeling as if it was all actually possible. As if she *could* be free of the control of others and the things that she despised. The assistance of the Gatewatch had provided the means to her end. Just as planned!

The wind picked up, and a hot breeze blew her hair out of her face. She saw Jace out of the corner of her eye. He was standing next to her, staring down with an unreadable expression. Liliana could smell his vomit on the ground behind him.

"I did it, Jace."

Liliana giggled again.

"I *ate* him."

Jace was, pointedly, not answering.

"The other two demons were a lot easier. They couldn't do to me what he did. And now there's just one more. And then I get myself to myself again."

Exhaustion had set in. Liliana knew she wasn't making much sense. She sat up with effort.

"Did you throw up?" she asked through tired breath.

Jace didn't respond.

Gideon, Nissa, and Chandra approached cautiously. They had stood to the side, watching Liliana's revenge from a distance, and walked forward now, battered from the conflict.

"Thank you all for your assistance," Liliana said with a breathy, grateful smile.

Gideon crossed his arms. "We did what had to be done. Our focus needs now to be on the arrival of Bolas."

"Yes," she said, fixing back her hair with a ribbon from her dress. "First, a moment to catch our breath."

"We don't have time for rest," Nissa said with uncharacteristic perturbation. "From what I can sense, the bloodspell Razaketh cast has begun a chain reaction of sorceries. 'The Hours' that herald Nicol Bolas's return needed to be set in motion by the demon."

Liliana stood on shaky legs. None of the others offered to help her up.

"We'll be better prepared to face him with Razaketh out of the way," Liliana said.

"I agree," Gideon said, "but we intervened to *save you*, despite your deception about the demon's presence."

"And it worked out well, didn't it?" Liliana countered.

Chandra held out her hands to slow the conversation. "We don't have time to argue about what happened. We need to split up and prevent further loss of life."

"I . . . agree," Nissa said. She looked at Jace and fell quiet as the two engaged in a silent, mental conversation.

In the lull, Gideon took charge.

"We need to rally and conserve our strength. If we can, we'll want to ambush Nicol Bolas when he arrives. Let's catch him by surprise instead of the other way around." Gideon looked pointedly at Liliana.

Liliana rolled her eyes. She felt no shame for how she took down the demon. Yet she couldn't deny the coldness with which the others regarded her. Gideon was poorly trying to hide a frown. Chandra's mouth was drawn into a stressed, thin line. Nissa openly scowled. Jace seemed most distant of all.

"Let us seek a better vantage to prepare for Nicol Bolas's arrival," Gideon said. They turned and walked back toward the gate, crossing the threshold back into Naktamun.

Only Jace lingered behind, looking at Liliana with an inscrutable expression.

"Don't look at me like that," Liliana said.

Jace didn't blink. "I'm not going to stand by if you lose it like that again."

"It was necessary," Liliana shrugged.

Jace shook his head. "It was overkill."

Liliana scoffed with a smile. "I did what I needed to."

She turned, tugging her hair tight and away from her face, and left to join the others.

Jace stood for a moment longer. He looked to the stain of blood on the banks of the Luxa and, despite the heat of the afternoon and the sheen of sweat on his forehead, he shivered.