On Monday, Nita stood in Clover Family Center's cafeteria, anxiously watching the homeless children line up. The chairs and tables had been cleared away, replaced with cardboard booths decorated in shimmering colors. Each booth was staffed with a demon, ready to grant wishes. She tried not to look at the reporters that had clustered around the room.

Halphas met her eyes from across the room and nodded. Everything was in position.

Nita steeled her nerves, stepping onto the podium that had been set up at the cafeteria entrance. All eyes in the room swiveled to her as she cleared her throat.

"Welcome to LaVey's first-ever charity event, partnered with Clover Family Center," Nita announced. "Today we will be sponsoring a free wish granted to every child hosted at Clover, in support of all families in need and the wonderful work the staff do here at Clover. Organizations like these are the backbone of this community, which LaVey proudly serves." She spread her arms. "Let the wish-granting commence!"

At her words, the children surged forward, queuing before the booths with their requests. As Nita took a spot at her own booth, a reporter hurried towards her.

"Ms. Nit'agmannarath," he said, proffering a microphone. "Congratulations on successfully organizing this generous event. What was the inspiration for doing so?"

"We wanted to give back to the community," Nita replied, carefully reciting the speech she'd prepared over the weekend. "In times like these, it's important to advocate for those of us that are less privileged."

"So this isn't a response to the backlash surrounding the canceled Satisfyy promotion?"

The CEO felt her smile become strained. "No, LaVey enforces its policies out of concern for its customers. Satisfyy employees are not qualified wish brokers, and do not adequately substitute for a supervised, informed conversation with one of our agents.

The reporter opened his mouth to reply, but was interrupted by a boy arriving at the station.

"I want a lightsaber!" blurted the child. There were traces of something red and sticky around his mouth.

Nita exhaled, grateful for the disruption. "You're wishing for a lightsaber?"

"Yeah! A red one, like Darth Vader!" The boy began to spin his arms around, flailing at some imaginary enemy. "Vroom, vrschhh! You know, like that."

She'd seen the *Star Wars* trilogy, though that was decades ago. Nita snapped her fingers, concentrating on her scattered memories. A metal cylinder appeared with a *pop*. The boy pressed the button on its side, squealing as a brilliant red beam emerged from the end.

"This is awesome!" he howled. "Thanks, demon lady!" He ran off.

The reporter, unfortunately, had remained at Nita's booth. "Is it a coincidence that your event is very similar to Satisfyy's?" he persisted. "It is uncharacteristically generous for LaVey."

"This event is well within character for us," Nita retorted. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Halphas rushing in, sensing trouble.

"Oh yes," he interjected. "We at LaVey have always prioritized our customers' happiness. We love to see their smiling faces, and the children are no different."

"I see," said the reporter. "That's very admirable."

"Yes," Nita blurted, relieved. "We hope to see these wonderful children among our customers in years to come."

The man's eyes widened. "Excuse me?"

Sweat beaded on Nita's brow. She tried to backtrack. "What I mean to say is, we hope to see them again as grown, productive adults."

"You said you hope to see them among your customers in the future," the journalist said, shoving his mic further into Nita's face. "Is that to say LaVey is hoping to capture the souls of these homeless children eventually?"

"No! That's not what I meant. The purpose of the event is to raise awareness and provide supplies and toys for the needy."

A circle of people now surrounded them. Another journalist, a woman in a pantsuit, swooped in.

"But LaVey's profits do consist of human souls, correct?" she asked. "What is the justification for this when startups like Satisfyy have found alternative business models?"

"Gentlemen, please," Halphas broke in. "These questions are getting off topic. Could we please get back to the event?"

The demons were saved by the shrill screech of the smoke alarm. Nita turned to see that a wooden table, pushed against the wall, had caught fire. Children screamed as the shelter's staff frantically herded them away. The flames flickered with an ominous scarlet glow.

“It’s the lightsaber!” exclaimed the first reporter. “It looks like the kids were playing with it and it struck the table.” He turned his mic back onto Nita. “Did you have any contingencies for possible hazards like that when you were planning the event?”

“I can fix it!” said Nita desperately. “Look, I’ll take care of it right now.” She waved her hand, sending a bolt of magic towards the wayward weapon.

A girl, fleeing in blind panic, slammed into her side. Nita was knocked off balance, and the spell struck the wall. With a roar, it too burst into flame.

The pandemonium in the room doubled. Nita desperately tried to reach the fire, but was buffeted by fleeing bystanders on all sides. “Stay calm!” she cried. “Everything’s under control, just stay calm, please…”

Just as she fought her way out of the crowd, a torrent of water doused the flames. A cloud of smoke erupted forth, surrounding Nita. She rubbed her stinging eyes and looked around for the cause, coughing furiously.

Her gaze fell on the reporter, standing some distance away with his shirt pulled over his nose.

“Pulled my phone out just in time,” he croaked. It hung loosely in one hand. Even through the haze, Nita could make out the bright purple letters on the screen.

SATISFYY - THANK YOU FOR YOUR PURCHASE.

#

Nita sat in her office, seething.

The disastrous charity event was making its way through the media. Satisfyy’s marketing department had immediately jumped on the incident, and now images of the reporter standing heroically with their app in his hand peppered every news broadcast. Every few minutes her inbox would light up with headlines such as “DEMONIC VISIT TO SHELTER ENDS IN HELLFIRE” or “LAVEY EYES CHILDREN’S SOULS FOR FUTURE PROFITS.”

To rub salt into the wound, social media users on the Internet had begun a campaign to boycott LaVey. Satisfyy was reporting a 30% increase in new user registrations over the past few hours. It was too early to tell what the damage to LaVey’s customer base would be, but the signs were ominous.

The phone rang. Nita picked it up. “Hello?”

“Hello,” came a familiar, businesslike voice. “This is Letitia Fox. Is Nita there?”

Her blood ran cold. “Speaking,” she managed.

“Hey, Nita.” The voice became warmer. “I just wanted to talk about the upcoming interview this week. I’m sure you’ve seen the news by now?”

“Yes.”

“It’s created a lot of bad optics for us,” said Letitia. “We can’t continue with the interview at this time, not with the pushback we’re getting. I’m sorry, Nita. I hope you understand.”

“Wait!” Nita pleaded. An idea, desperate and wild, came to her.

“Look, I have a suggestion. Why don’t you invite Satisfyy to the interview too, and make it a debate? That would draw more viewers, and give LaVey a chance to defend itself.”

“Hmm.” Letitia paused. “I like that, actually. I’ll contact them and see if they’re willing to do it.”

Nita exhaled in relief.

“Just try not to get caught in any more scandals, okay?” the TV host said sternly. “Don’t make me regret this.”

“You won’t,” said Nita, and hung up.

#

On Friday, Nita sat on the stage of Letitia Fox’s interviewing set. It was a glamorous affair, built from glass and plush blue velvet, and surrounded by dozens of audience members. Nita’s attention, however, was focused on the woman in the purple T-shirt across from her, who likewise smiled back. The tension could have melted glass.

“Hello everyone, and welcome back to *The Letitia Fox Show!*” announced Letitia, seated between them. “Tonight’s show is centered around a very hot-button topic at the moment: the world of demonic contracts. Our special guests are Nit’agmannarath, the new CEO at LaVey and Company, and Sarabeth, head of public relations for Satisfyy, the contracting startup that’s currently blowing up the world.”

Nita took a deep breath as Letitia went on to explain the debate format of the interview. Tonight was her last chance. If it went poorly, she wouldn’t get another platform to defend herself.

“Now for our first question,” Letitia said. “The demonic pact industry was relatively niche until recently, when the arrival of new services such as Satisfyy broke through into the mainstream. This influx of users and the responses by more traditional providers has resulted in a lot of discourse surrounding the field. Ladies, what are your thoughts?”

Sarabeth spoke first.

“It’s clear that the demand for magically sustained services has always been there,” she said. “People want fulfillment, social status, anything they can’t easily get elsewhere. They’re willing to pay for quick solutions to their problems, but only up to a certain price. Until now, demonic contracts were afforded only to the very rich or the very desperate. Satisfyy’s mission is to make them more accessible to the masses.”

Nita felt the weight of the audience’s gaze on her.

“LaVey wholeheartedly supports making our services more accessible,” the CEO replied. “However, we want to remind customers that these services are not to be used lightly, as their souls and spiritual wellbeing are at stake. LaVey recommends working with seasoned professionals to broker the process.”

Sarabeth coughed politely. “Those were good principles at one time, but surely things have changed with the modern era? When people have the resources to inform themselves, there is no need for gatekeeping. Making a demonic contract is a highly personal decision, and Satisfyy believes our customers should have ownership of that.”

“That mindset has its flaws,” Nita retorted. “Most people are not qualified to handle these decisions by themselves. They should be getting help from trusted experts.”

“Experts, sure,” Sarabeth said, smiling. “But why should those experts be you?”

Nita’s face felt hot. “Pardon?”

“LaVey is run by demons.” Sarabeth’s eyes glittered, like a cat about to pounce. “Your kind feeds on souls for power, preys on people’s weaknesses so they give more of themselves to you. You’re immortal, you can’t possibly claim to know or want the best for us! Why should we continue to work with you?”

“Keep it civil, please,” said Letitia, looking nervous.

The audience murmured, though Nita couldn’t tell if it was in agreement with Sarabeth. She opened her mouth to respond, but was interrupted by a cry.

“Stop!”

Whispers of confusion filled the room. Nita stood, peering towards the source.

A girl made her way down the aisles, dragging something large and heavy. There was something familiar about her features. She made her way into a spotlight, and Nita realized the draped load in her arms was a body.

“Ten days ago, my grandfather made a contract with the demons at LaVey,” the girl proclaimed. “He asked for his youth to be restored, and they took nearly his entire soul.” She pulled the shroud away. “Look what the monsters have done to him!”

The billionaire was unrecognizable. Gray hair had fallen out in patches, revealing loose mottled scalp underneath. His skin was covered in purple and green splotches, and his eyes, sunken deep into his skull, shone with the haze of impending death. The thing that had once been Hartwell let out an unearthly groan, and lifted a decaying arm to point at Nita.

The studio erupted into chaos. Audience members screamed, shoving each other in a mad stampede to the exits. Later, Nita would wonder whether they were fleeing from Hartwell, or her.

“Stay calm!” called Letitia, but her voice was lost in the din.

Nita scrambled to her feet. She couldn’t use magic, not now; it would only incite more panic. She reached for her phone and dialed 911.

The operator responded. “Hello?”

“911?” She had to shout just to hear herself. “I’m at Letitia Fox’s studio on the corner of Merrimac and Jackson. There’s a crowd stampede, it’s spiraling out of control.”

“Could you repeat that?” asked the operator. “I’m sorry, I can’t-”

Someone shoved into her, hard. The phone skittered away towards the edge of the stage, forcing her to dive after it.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Sarabeth and Hartwell’s granddaughter slip through the back door together.

Nita lost her balance, plummeting into the tumultuous crowd. She twisted and turned, trying to return to the stage, but it was no use. Soon, she was lost in the sea of bodies.