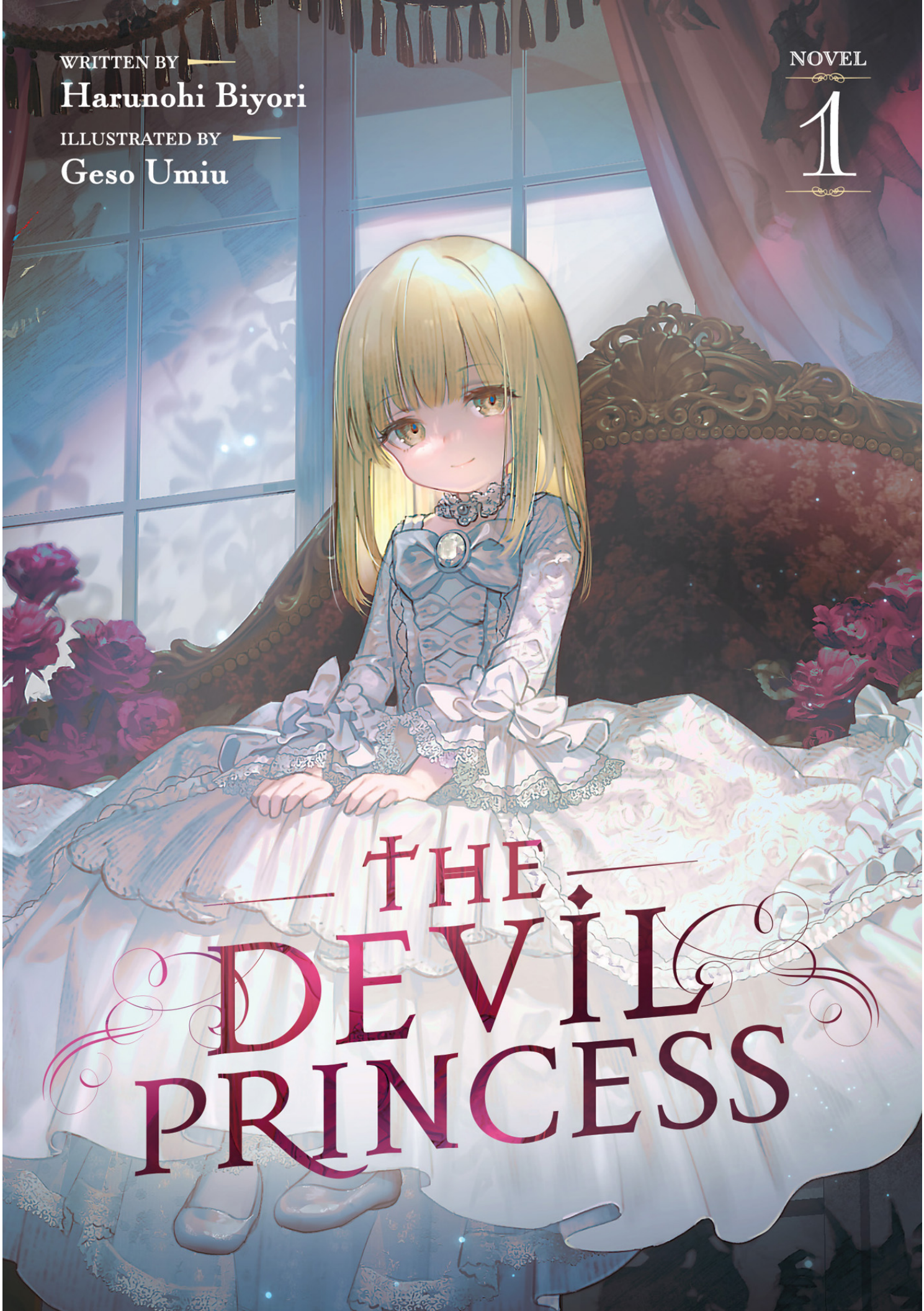

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NOVEL
1
THE DEVIL PRINCESS

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"This is
*impossible*!"
When I turned two
years old, I saw myself
for the first time, and
it left me stunned.



A sinisterness bordering on violence and an air of intimidation radiated out of this lovely, angelic child.

The girl had pierced Albertine's white throat with her fangs—the woman's body was still warm—and yet Zumana could not move a single muscle.


"After all...
I am a demon myself."
I slowly flapped my wings and
rose in the air. With the moon
of the night sky as my backdrop,
I looked down at the man with
the cold smile of a devil.

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*Seven Seas Entertainment*

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# PART 1
# The Tale of the Carefree Devil

◆

## CHAPTER 1
## A Demon's Dreams



# Episode 1:
# I Am a Demon Now

THE LIGHT SURROUNDING ME WAS HAZY, LIKE a daydream. It reminded me of my view of the sky when I gazed up at it from under a pool's water as a child. Everything I could see filled me with this vague feeling of nostalgia. But then the scenery faded, and the image changed. It was like watching one of those old film movies—just one grainy image after the other.

A man like autumn leaves holding my tiny hand.

A woman who walked unsteadily lifting me up into her arms.

A girl and a boy each holding one of my tiny hands as we walked together.

Outside a car window, I could see a bus that looked straight out of a manga, a wall of big buildings and tiny shops stretching along the road behind it.

Outside a train window, I could see railroad tracks stretching into eternity and a townscape with no end.

The images kept coming in sequence. I was a bit older now, going to school wearing the same uniform as the other children. I learned and chatted with friends at school, and then I was sitting in between my brother and sister on the couch watching a movie, and then I was eating dinner with my parents after they got home from work.

All kinds of scenes washed over me, but the happy images that brought tears to my eyes were suddenly blotted out with white.

White walls. White flooring and white sheets. Lying in a pure-white bed, the only thing I could see was the white ceiling.

I weakly raised my trembling hand. I was as thin as a withered tree.

And then it was on to the next image. It changed again and again, but the white world remained the same. I could hear what sounded like someone sobbing as the images finally began to fade…

And my world slowly filled with black.

I drowsily came to consciousness.

Had that all been a dream? It had felt so familiar… A dream of the World of Light that was so far away now.

*Where am I…?*

I couldn't see a thing; something like a thick fog hung in the air. It felt as if I were closing my eyes during the day—no, it was as if my eyes *were* closed. The second I thought about opening my eyes, a place suddenly came into view even though I had no sensation of actually lifting my eyelids.

*Huh? What's going on?*

What I could see now wasn't the white room I had imagined or the park or the city. All I saw was a desolate, twisted land and dark clouds that hung high in the sky for as far as I could see. The simplest way I could describe my surroundings was colorless, blackish ground beneath a colorless dark sky. Beyond that, there were only weeds. This world was absolutely empty.

How can I put it…? If it had been like a manga, with a cold, wintery wind blowing dead leaves about, it wouldn't have been so bad. Unfortunately, there wasn't a single tree in sight—not even any shepherd's purse.

*But hold on a minute. We've got a bigger problem here. I mean, just where the heck I am is important and all, but how am I even seeing this in the first place?*

I had no recollection of ever opening my eyes. When I got the idea to look somewhere, I was able to look at it from all directions at

the same time, almost as if I was recalling the place from my memory.

Even my appearance—

I let out a scream. But I didn't actually make any noise… Instead, *the creature* just bounced up and down, and I realized that the creature was actually me.

*Okay, for real now. Calm down. Why? How is this happening? What's happened to me?! This body wriggles around sure enough, but… I guess it makes sense why I can't let out any noise—I don't really have a mouth.*

In fact, I didn't have a proper body at all. Right now, I looked more like some kind of glazed custard cream.

*What the hell?*

*Okay, I'm a bit calmer now. I think. I might have just been in shock for, like, a couple of hours, but it's not like I have any sense of time, so who cares? I mean, considering what I am now and all, I don't really have a heartbeat, so I was able to calm down rather quickly.*

*This is what I am now. I just need to accept it. Though I don't really* want *to accept it…*

Custard cream was probably a generous description of my new body. I looked more like mayonnaise that had separated and couldn't be whipped back together. I didn't look delicious at all.

*Ha ha ha.* That made me want to laugh. Except I couldn't laugh. Did that mean I was more like a gas, then? Or was I some kind of slime now? In any case, I at least appeared to be some kind of separated mayonnaise.

*Maybe this is just a dream?*

A continuation of the dream I'd just been having? The World of Light that I had seen was reality and this was only some kind of nightmare?

But reality was cruel. The sensations and information I gathered from the outside world, as well as this mayonnaise body, heartlessly affirmed to me that it was all real. And even more frightening was the fact that as soon as I had accepted that this was my body now, I no longer felt uncomfortable and was able to relax.

*Am I really going to…accept this?* I was absolutely bewildered.

Was this one of those things? Like how the mind influences the body, the body influences the mind?

Basically, this was not a body that had the same kinds of emotional ups and downs as a regular human's. I had no heart, so I didn't feel it beating harder. I doubted I could breathe, so I didn't start breathing faster. I didn't know if this body could feel any pain, but maybe I wouldn't get sleepy or hungry either.

I had lost most of what made life worth living…yet I couldn't cry.

A-anyway, even though my body was now something like separated mayonnaise, my sense of self remained. I was still me. No one else—*me*.

*So…who am I, anyway?*

My thoughts faltered. I…couldn't remember my name. The only reason my consciousness remained was because I had memories of the World of Light. But I didn't know if those were actual memories that I had personally experienced or not. They were more like a recording, a movie, just videos and images. That girl I'd seen might not necessarily have been me.

However, I doubted a blob of fake mayonnaise in this empty world could be capable of having such a detailed dream, so it was possible that I had once lived in that world. It was only a possibility, but I wanted to have hope. For now, I would consider myself nameless.

Perhaps I could have come up with a name for myself based on my memories of that world, but something in this body seemed

to reject the very notion. A name wasn't something you gave yourself. Names were granted to you by another—I remembered that much at least.

Even if I had been in that world, I couldn't remember what my name had been there. I was even forgetting what my own face looked like. I was pretty sure I had a family and friends, but I couldn't recall their names or faces either.

*All right. Moving on, then.*

I had seen an image of myself in a school uniform, so I had probably been a student? Based on what I knew, I was probably in my early teens, fifteen years old at most. Though, in my dream, I…

I was sure I had been a girl. Maybe I had been a boy who looked like a girl, but there was no need to overthink this. I'd worn skirts even when I was little, so it seemed a pretty safe bet to say that I was a girl.

Yeah. I was beginning to get a solid idea of what I used to look like. At this rate, maybe I would remember… Huh? Did the color of my body suddenly get darker? My separated mayonnaise body now looked like regular mayonnaise.

Well, I didn't feel any worse for wear, so I continued recalling the details of my dream and deciding who I was.

And so, some time passed since I became myself… I think.

I mean, there was no sun here and I never got sleepy. I had no sense of time, so I had no idea how much of it had actually passed.

After doing lots of remembering—and adding some details to my character sheet, so to speak—I felt as if I had a pretty firm grasp of myself. At least, I thought so.

However, while I'd thought all this was fine at first, a new problem had popped up.

I had absolutely nothing to do.

I mean, if this was real and I couldn't figure out what had happened to me, you would think that fear would overtake me, but I didn't really feel uneasy or even annoyed. Nor did I have any signs of getting depressed due to loneliness. Maybe it was because I now had such a simple body? Maybe it was just the way of this kind of creature; they probably had no need to think about such bothersome things.

Or maybe…it was because I had spent so many years lying in bed? Maybe I was the kind of person to not think about things too deeply? I sure hoped not.

That's right. *The girl in my dream* had been confined to her bed. Taking that into consideration, maybe *I* had died and I was in Hell now. Though, if that were the case, it certainly wasn't all that torturous, physically or mentally.

There was a rumor that this was a dream, just like I had originally thought. Of course, I was the one who had started such a hopeful rumor.

All I could do was sit with myself in silence.

Far off, *that thing* jumped again.

I had said that there was nothing here, but once I calmed down enough, I realized that there was a creature nearby that looked like a small bug. It looked like a bug, but it wasn't a bug. I had no basis of comparison, but it was tiny and moved like a bug, so I decided to call it that.

It had probably been here the whole time and I had just been so confused that I hadn't noticed it. Now that I had regained my composure and my senses of sight, hearing, and smell were in proper working order, it finally caught my attention. Or maybe because I hadn't moved since I had come to consciousness in this body, it had decided I wasn't a threat and it was safe to reveal itself. To tell the truth, since I had assumed that I was completely alone, it

made me feel much better knowing that there was something else here that could move.

When I took a closer look at it, it was actually pretty cute. It didn't look like a bug at all. It was a peculiar creature that looked more like a drop of mist. Since I wasn't doing anything, it came close enough that I could observe it.

*Smack!*

…I was definitely not expecting that. The second it came close, a part of me lashed out at a surprising speed to smack the bug.

*Ahhh! What am I doing?*

Though, when I looked at the bug, I felt like I was being drawn to it somehow. Why did I suddenly smoosh it like that? Was I a cat now?! I had reacted exactly as a cat does when someone waves a toy at them.

*But hold on… What the…?*

There had definitely been some kind of bug-like creature here before I went and hit it. Yet, when I struck, it had disappeared like mist, leaving some kind of sweet floral smell behind.

How strange. I had no idea why a bug would give off that kind of smell. However, for some reason, the smell was giving me the faint sense of satiation, even though my body hadn't felt any hunger before.

It made me remember how in my dream, when I was young, I had sucked the nectar out of a small flower.

*Twitch… Twitch…*

My body was filled with the sensation of really wanting something for the very first time.

My mayonnaise-like body began trembling from the stimulation and excitement of ingesting the sweet smell from the dead bug that had only moments before given me comfort. Spurred on by the sensation, I began prowling around the area.

How the heck was I moving this body…? I presumed I had some degree of physical strength, based on how I was able to hit that bug, and I assumed my mobility would be some sort of crawl. But instead, I began floating along in the direction I wanted to go.

*Maybe it's because I'm so airheaded—nah, couldn't be. There's gotta be a different explanation.*

Anyway, I was able to move about as fast as I'd struck the bug, and I was hovering above the ground. I could not fly into the air, though, which was a bit of a disappointment.

*Oh, I found another bug.*

To tell the truth, I was feeling a bit lonely, so I wondered if I could keep this one as a pet. However…

*Smack!*

I jumped at it the second I spotted it. I really was like a cat. My lack of self-control was kind of pathetic. But I couldn't stop myself. There was something about that sweet smell that made it impossible to resist. I was a girl, after all. In any case, it was the bug's fault for hopping like that and stimulating my pure catlike hunting instincts.

Was I being deeply changed by my circumstances? Or was my soul itself becoming polluted? I didn't like the thought of that, but I had to be practical in accepting that these actions were necessary for living in this body and in this world.

Plus, my memories of the dream weren't perfect, so the version of me that I had based myself on wasn't perfect either. If I could fill in the missing pieces of the puzzle with who I was now, I should be able to become my true self—or so I assumed.

*Hmm? The first bug gave off a floral smell, but this one is more…fruity.*

*Twitch… Twitch…*

*Maybe I should go hunt for more? Okay. Let's do that. And not because I've surrendered to my appetite. I'm doing this to sate my*

*curiosity.*

I decided that I would hunt bugs to kill time from then on.

It wasn't because I wanted snacks, okay?!

*Let's see…*

*Smack, smack.*

*Ooh, there's more!*

*Smack, smack, smack.*

From then on, I spent several days hunting and squashing bugs. Mmm, each one gave off a good smell. Naturally, they had a much subtler flavor compared to the sweetness of that World of Light, but they satisfied my catlike hunting instincts well enough, so the scents were more like the cherry on top.

I took no actual pleasure in killing bugs or small animals; I just didn't feel too bad about it, because they simply vanished when I smooshed them. Likely, the act of hunting the creatures itself was tasty. Probably hunting something bigger and livelier would be even tastier, though I wasn't entirely sure.

When I left my starting spot, I discovered there were bigger creatures that looked like mice. They were much more cautious than the bugs and didn't dare approach me. They were also quick to escape.

Maybe I could make one of them my pet?

*Smack!*

Maybe not.

It tasted so good. Like a cherry or a strawberry.

As I carried on in this simple manner, my body changed.

And I don’t mean that I got fat from eating too many snacks. My dark yellow color brightened, like fresh eggs laid by a free-range chicken and expensive custard made from heavy cream. My separated-mayonnaise-like body slowly solidified into a flan—or a slime, but not the cute jiggly kind you’re thinking of. More like a custard cream that had been dumped onto the floor.

Why did I keep comparing myself to food…?

At any rate, while I was glad to take on a cooler color, it wasn’t nearly enough.

Did this mean I was growing?

Even though I had gotten so heavy that I couldn’t float around anymore?

Wait, did this mean I *had* actually gotten fat? Was I just fat now?!

Now that I had become denser and more like expensive custard, maybe I actually tasted like custard, like how those bugs had all kinds of different flavors?

Maybe I looked tasty to other creatures?

As soon as that thought popped into my head, I was faced with a creature that I had never seen before.

“Kreeee!”

I could only stare up at it.

It was huge!

It was a monkey. Or at least it looked like a monkey. Had we skipped a few levels?! Normally, you were supposed to encounter slimes like me next!

But maybe there weren’t other creatures like me here because this more evolved monkey had hunted them all? Or maybe a slime had gone cannibal and then evolved into this monkey. That was my best guess. Perhaps I had evolved from one of those small bugs too, and then I developed a consciousness and became me.

Which meant that this monkey was higher up on the pecking order than me.

This monkey wasn't big like a chimpanzee; it looked more like a black lemur or some other kind of small primate. It appeared smaller than me, but I had a feeling that its body had a much denser composition than mine.

"Kreee!"

The monkey had this bright red scar on its forehead and was grinning like a human. It freaked me out a little.

*Whoa… It's so creepy.*

But that creepiness helped me keep my cool. It had taken me by surprise, but even supposing that the monkey was more evolved, I was just as perceptive as it.

*Hmm, what do I do? Can I fight it? Can I just punch it with all my might like the bugs?* Now that I was calm, it didn't scare me, despite its creepiness, but I wasn't sure I could actually fight it.

*Ahhh… But the monkey…sure does look tasty…*

"Kreee…"

As if sensing that something about me had changed, the monkey stopped smiling and took on a more wary posture.

Even I could sense that my body was turning darker.

*Shall we begin, then?*

*I'll eat you up without leaving a single morsel…*

The monkey looked like it was about to leap at me, so I stretched my gummy body out to brace myself.

However…

*Huh?!*

"Kreeee?!"

Both the monkey and I simultaneously jumped back.

What was going on?! Our surroundings suddenly filled with this black aura, like goopy coal tar. The sensation was so powerful that I thought my custard body would be destroyed.

*Oh, wait. Hey, monkey! Don't you go running away on your own! My body's so heavy now, I can't move that quickly!*

I thought about running away, but I couldn't.

Nearby, standing atop a rather high rock wall, was an enormous panther. It stood with dignity yet unconcealed ferociousness, its fur pure black.

Rather than intimidated, I was overcome by its beauty and wound up gazing at the beast with fascination.

Based on the size of the monkey, I myself was the size of a big cat. However, this panther seemed to be even bigger than an elephant. And it was such a vibrant shade of black… I realized that vibrant wasn't a word you would typically use to describe black, but it was the only word that came to mind.

The beast's forked tail was longer than its body, and it flicked like a whip. The rock beneath it was crushed by its silver claws as it looked at me with silver eyes. It was the first time I'd encountered another intelligent being in this world.

I realized I was…scared. It was the first time I had actually felt fear since I came to consciousness in this world.

But I just couldn't stop staring at the panther. I didn't even care. I just couldn't tear my gaze away from this magnificent creature.

*Ooh… I really…want to pet it.* I wanted to pet it so badly. I just knew that it would feel so soft and silky. Its chest was sure to feel all plush and fluffy. *Ooooh! It must feel wonderful!*

"Hey." As it looked down at me, the panther's violent aura faded. In a very humanlike gesture, it inclined its head curiously at me. "Why aren't you scared of me?"

Hm?! That was a *voice* just now.

What I literally heard was the panther growling a bit, but in my mind, it became actual words with meaning to me.

Try as I might, I couldn't answer. I was overwhelmingly shocked by hearing intelligent words for the very first time in this world.

The panther's voice was surprisingly nice—deep, like an older man's. Maybe like a man somewhere in his early thirties. I really liked the voice, to put it bluntly, so I tried hopping up and down in an attempt to convey that. Although I wasn't able to make any sounds, I got the feeling that the panther at least understood my enthusiasm.

The panther looked at me with something akin to surprise, despite being a panther. "You can understand what I'm saying?"

I wanted to nod but couldn't, so I tried to express myself with my whole body some more when the panther suddenly pinned me down with his enormous forelegs.

"What have we here? Just as I thought—you're not disappearing. You must have a firm self in there."

*What?! If I hadn't been able to establish a form of self, would I have wound up being eaten just by being stomped on too?! It had occurred to me that that was probably the case but… Wow, I sure dodged a bullet there.*

As I trembled at the very thought, I could sense him smiling slightly. "No need to fear. Or are you angry?"

I wasn't really angry, but it was all just kind of hard to swallow, you know? The panther seemed to understand as he removed his forelegs and brought his face closer to peer at me.

"Relax. I'm not planning to hurt you anymore. But there's just something I don't understand—why do you still have that kind of form?"

Hm?

Why? It wasn't like I had turned myself into something tasty-looking because I *wanted* to look like this. Using my alluring custard cream body, I tried conveying this as best as I could.

Amazingly, the panther understood and explained in an exasperated tone, "Someone as advanced as you should have naturally evolved into a body that's easier to move in, since your body is more solid and heavy. Like that creature you were fighting with, for example. Normally, that's the point when a creature develops a sense of self, but you seem to be a unique case. I was planning to eat whoever won your little squabble, but it appears I found something more interesting."

*Yikes, I got really lucky, then. He would've eaten me, even if I had beaten that monkey.*

"Normally, you should've evolved by instinct. I'm guessing that you figured you'd make do with your current form because of your strong sense of self? However, if you don't remake your body, then you won't be able to escape if you run into stronger creatures. I suppose this stagnation is just a result of having a strong soul, but don't worry, it's not all bad."

I was still confused.

"Since you have a sense of self already, it should be easy for you to form a suitably strong body. Evolving based on instinct, it's easy for most to change into one of those monkey types. They're not weak, but their abilities are average. You need luck if you want to become a stronger creature. Consider yourself lucky you ran into me first."

He wasn't wrong. I probably would have died had I met any other creature who was stronger than me.

"Try evolving. I'll keep watch."

He was so unexpectedly kind. I had all kinds of questions about him, myself, and everything here, but the simple fact of his kindness made it easier to accept this crazy reality, so I decided to concentrate on evolving.

What did I want to become? I had evolved the one time based on my immediate wants, so I had to think about this carefully. However, I had already decided from the onset of all this the path I would walk.

I made my body all soft and pliable in order to achieve that, but he suddenly stomped on me with great force.

"You trying to insult me?"

What?!

"You can't jump straight to having a humanoid form. Quit screwing around here."

He was so intimidating that I wanted to cry. Not that I could.

Naturally, that World of Light was special to me, so I yearned to become a human. It was hard to become a different form once you had set your heart on one. That was why I had tried to become a human, but according to him, that was akin to suicide.

"It's foolish to pick humanoid from the beginning."

Humanoids were weak. It made sense when I thought about it. If a human and a carnivorous animal of the same size got into a fight, the animal would usually win. Humans were only strong because they formed packs and made weapons.

However, such assumptions were meaningless in this world. This was why if I wanted to become stronger, I should become an animal like him or a bug. He told me that if I wanted arms and legs so badly, I could compromise by becoming a regular monkey instead.

Even evolving into an average monkey would've given me a big boost in power. I was pretty sure that gorillas could outpower carnivores too. However, whether or not I could evolve that far was all a matter of luck.

Some creatures had horns and scales. He told me that I could also try to increase my offense or defense by obtaining either of those. However, he didn't have horns or scales. I thought it looked

prettier and cooler to be like him and not have any. He seemed to understand what I was thinking, judging by how he grinned.

"The weaker the creature, the more they deck themselves out. Claws and fangs are good enough for me."

*Oooo… He's so cool.*

He also told me there was even a case where a creature had changed into a humanoid after becoming really powerful—powerful enough to become the boss of their territory. The black panther could have probably become a humanoid too if he wanted, but based on what he told me, I figured he was proud of his current form.

So, back to the topic of what I decided to evolve into. I figured that I could barely manage to evolve into something like a beastfolk with cat ears, but I would probably be weak and I had a feeling that, based on my current size, I would only be able to evolve into a child.

*Maybe I should pick an animal form like he did? I keep going on about cats, so maybe I should become a cat. It would be nice to be similar to him.*

"Made up your mind now?"

I began to move again, so he turned his attention back to me. He had patiently waited for me to decide. He was as powerful a force as ever, but I wasn't afraid of him anymore.

"Get started, then. What's important is to focus on projecting onto yourself what kind of creature you want to become and what kind of strength you want to have."

*Understood!* I hopped in response as I began to solidify the image of myself.

I imagined a slender, cool, pretty cat. I loved fluffy fur, but I also liked short hair. I didn't like shedding.

*Stop. I need to concentrate on what I want to look like. Being pretty and cute is essential. I like dogs too, but the me who was so*

*weak in that dream always felt exhausted whenever there was a dog around and they constantly just seemed to want to play all the time.*

*Shoot, I got distracted again. Gotta imagine what I want to look like… I wanna swiftly run through the darkness and be cool by taking down my enemies like a ninja with my claws and fangs.*

*Something that can nimbly soar across the ground… Hmm? Flying? Becoming a bird might be nice. Hawks are pretty cool. I think only falcons are fast? But you need more than speed to survive. At least, that's what I sensed he was getting at. Something that can swiftly fly without bumping into anything, even in a cave…*

*No, no, no, no. Not flying. I want to be a cat—a cat! I am a cat. A cat. A cat. A cat. I am a cat. A lovely, cute kitten…*

"What the hell is that?"

"I'm not sure what to say." I had done it! I had evolved and could speak now. But although I was ecstatic, he had an undeniably somber expression, despite being a panther.

When my evolution was complete, I had become a cat.

I looked just as I had imagined it too: I was lovely and cute. Even I wanted to give myself praise.

However, although I was a cat, I had become a very tiny furball of a kitten—and the little bat wings on my back were very cute. My custard-cream coloring was now a splendid golden. My cute and round eyes looked like rubies. My claws and fangs were bright red and shone like translucent gemstones—ones that were certainly alive.

I was now the jewel of the world. Such an adorably cute kitten that the me from the dream world would have wanted to take care of me and cuddle me all day long.

"How are you planning to fight like this?"

"Uh, um…"

Uh-oh. He was mad. Why? Well, I could guess why.

He was mad because I was an idiot. Even I knew I was an idiot. This was not the form one would take to survive in a world where the strong preyed on the weak.

"Hah…ha…" I couldn't help but laugh in an attempt to smooth things over. He merely stared at me with a surprising coldness.

Had he run out of goodwill for me? So much for having met someone I could talk to.

I liked his voice, and I really wished he would let me pet him. I knew I had my own fur and all now, but this was different.

He continued staring in silence.

I started toddling over to him with my tiny legs and fell over along the way. Remembering I had bat wings now, I tried flapping them and lifted myself up into the air before falling flat onto the ground again.

Now both of us sunk into silence.

I was flustered, unsure of what to do about how awkward things were now. That was when he sighed loudly and came over, fangs bared.

"Eek?!"

W-was he going to eat me?!

"Don't move."

*Chomp.* He started walking, holding me in his mouth like a father cat.

Compared to him, I was more like a hamster that got preyed on by big carnivores. What was he doing?

"Uhhh?"

"I have no desire to eat you. It's been a while since I last had someone intelligent to talk to. That's all. This will be bothersome,

but I'll raise you until I get bored of your company. You should be happy."

"Okay…"

Just as I had been lonely and wanted a pet, now I was *his* pet, and the two of us began our life together.

However, in my mind, I was a girl. And while he was a black panther, he was also a man with a lovely voice. The thought of being his pet had me feeling a bit self-conscious.

"You're not thinking anything weird, are you?" he asked.

"O-of course not. Ooooh, yeah, so can I ask you something?"

"What is it?" He sounded suspicious, but he answered me all the same.

This area I had ended up in was actually his territory, but not his "den." As we had no need to sleep or eat, he had no need to secure a safe place for himself.

However, what with my weak kitten body and all, I did want a safe place. Not that anything stronger than me would have dared attack for fear of him.

"Where exactly are we?"

All he did was give a slight smile at my vague, stupid question as he tried to guess what I really meant. "I'm guessing you don't mean my territory, but this world itself?"

"Yeah."

"What an odd question. You weren't summoned before? Was that not how you acquired language and knowledge?"

"'Summoned'? No, I think I was only just born."

"What?" He sounded surprised, so I began to tell him about myself.

Since he knew about humanoids and humans, I thought that he might know about the World of Light from my dreams too. I had

already guessed that this might be a completely different world, but I really didn't want that to be the case.

"Memories of a dream? Souls brought into this world are shattered and lose what knowledge they had. I'm not sure whether you were born from a collection of knowledge or if you were remembering it, so to speak."

I went silent.

*This really does mean that there's a chance that I'm not that girl like I thought I was…*

In any case, the image of a gigantic black panther and a golden kitten speaking in serious tones to one another was rather surreal.

I felt that perhaps I wasn't taking the gravity of the situation as seriously as I should, but I could only ever be me, so I had the disadvantage of only being troubled by more frivolous worries.

*All things considered, I'm surprised by how easily he accepted all this.* I was sure that part of it was because of how intelligent he was, but I also got the feeling that someone as powerful as him just didn't sweat the small stuff.

"As for this world, it has many different names. Only the oldest races can understand the truth of it."

Okay, but I wasn't asking for anything that technical.

"Humans have a single term for this world, though. They call it the Ethereal World."

"The Ethereal World?"

"Here, I'll explain it in a way that you can understand."

*Thank you so much.*

Basically, the place where humans and animals and other living creatures lived was called the Material World, and this place—the place full of strong-willed souls—was called the Ethereal World.

"Look up."

"Up?"

I looked up just as he did to see the sky high above completely covered in misty dark clouds as usual.

"That's not the sky. It's a boundary wall. The Ethereal World is divided into several layers. Up there is the layer called the Fae Realm."

Hearing that was a surprise, but I wasn't confused.

Or maybe it made more sense to say that I gradually understood what he meant. In the dream, when I was stuck in bed, the people I supposed were my brother and sister had read all kinds of fantasy stories and myths to me.

"Is there a Heaven too?"

"Heaven? Never heard of anything like that, but the highest level of the Ethereal World is called the Elemental Realm. It's the place where the beings who collect souls and scatter them across the worlds live."

*So maybe these elementals are closer to what I imagine gods and angels to be like? In that case…*

"Say…"

"Yeah?"

"Where are *we*, then? What part of the Ethereal World is this? No, wait—what do humans call us?"

"Hmm, I guess the humans call us demons."

"I was afraid of that."

Somehow, I had figured as much!

I would have much preferred to be a dark elemental or something like that, but reality wasn't so kind. Had I really done something bad enough to deserve being called a demon?

"They call this place we're in now the Demon Realm. The lowest stratum of the Ethereal World is the Abyss. Only corrupted

souls that have been repelled from all of the other worlds fall into the Abyss. Souls that cannot be purified, even after being shattered, then appear in the Demon Realm and turn into demons."

I had no response.

*I mean, did you really have to deal me such intense psychic damage?*

And so, that was how I became aware that I was a demon. But it was good that I now understood myself—or at least, that was what I decided.

"First, we need to do something about that ineffective form you have taken."

"But it's cute, isn't it?"

"And how exactly do you intend to survive?"

As a joke, he chomped me. I was afraid that even play-biting would be enough to kill me, so I wished he wouldn't do that.

"Don't fall now," he warned.

"Okay."

Since I couldn't hunt for myself yet, he was going to go hunting for me.

This time, instead of riding in his mouth, I rode on his head like some kind of blond toupee. But I couldn't dig my claws into him if I was about to fall off, since I was sure that he'd bite me again if I did.

*He's sure nice for a demon,* I thought to myself, but I truly recognized how much of a demon he really was from how mercilessly he killed every slime creature—creatures like I had once been—that we came upon and shredded all the mini monkeys to bits with his claws.

I wasn't so sure about the slimes, but I could definitely sense there was a sense of self in those mini monkeys from how they gazed at me with their eyes full of terror as he tore them to pieces.

By the way, the mini monkeys tasted like apple and grape. They were quite delicious.

"Will this make me stronger?"

"I'm pretty sure that you should be able to hunt for yourself if we keep this up. Though I think you managed to become stronger all on your own."

"Huh? How?"

"A demon's strength is dependent on their self. You already possessed a self to some extent from the onset, so thanks to all the ruthless eating you were doing, I'm pretty sure that you should be able to handle the small monkeys and the like on your own already."

"Ruthless?"

Wasn't there a better way to put it? All I'd done was lose control of my appetite a bit…

I didn't think I was strong enough to take on those small monkeys, and that one with the scar was a bit bigger than the others. Still, it was all getting a bit confusing.

"Say, Mr. Black Panther, what's your nam—?"

"'Black Panther'?" he interrupted. "Don't call me that. Us demons are nameless from the moment we're born. If demons took to giving one another names, it would deny our existence and weaken us."

"Really?"

Basically, none of the inhabitants of the Ethereal World had names. As he said, a demon giving another demon a name was an offensive act that denied their existence. I supposed this was why I hadn't been able to give myself a name either.

There were a few named demons who existed here in the Demon Realm. They had been called to the Material World, either by summoning or some other method, and given a name by people of another species.

The inhabitants of the Material World could give a demon a name. Demons anointed with these names then became even stronger, since they had an even stronger sense of self.

But there was a drawback to this as well: Fragile humans could only name a demon if it was weaker than the person who had summoned them. By naming them, their souls would be linked, and if things went poorly, one might accidentally use the other to death.

There had even been incidents where a human had tried to forcibly give a powerful demon a name and then the human's soul was shattered. That sure sounded scary.

Someone as powerful as my companion was unlikely to be given a name by a creature from the Material World. Maybe one of the mightiest of dragons could? Did dragons even exist? In any case, maybe someone like that could give him a name, but the majority of those kinds of creatures viewed demons with hostility, so he said that wasn't going to happen.

"What should I call you, then?"

"We have no names, but we have titles and species. What we're called varies depending on the color of our fur or scales and where we live. Other creatures call me 'the Dark Beast.'"

"The Dark Beast?"

"I'm the only one of my species, so that is how you may refer to me."

*"The Dark Beast"? I'm not really a fan of that, so maybe I'll just stick with calling him "him."* Based on what he'd said, it sounded like they were more interested in taxonomic titles than species. I supposed it wasn't such a big deal if he was the only one.

It should be noted, though, that he kept calling all of the mini monkey demons just "monkeys."

"Okay then, Mr. Dark Beast. What about me?"

It was annoying that demons couldn't give themselves names either.

"Drop the 'Mr.' You can just call me whatever."

"Okay. So what about me?"

"Your species? Hmm, you're certainly an unusual kind."

It turned out that beasts like us were unusual. Up until I'd evolved, he had assumed that I would become like the monkeys, even though I was intelligent. What a meanie.

The "Dark Beast" name for his species had originally come from intelligent creatures over a long period of time after they had taken to calling him that.

"All right, I've decided. Since your species is similar to mine, we'll call you 'the Golden Beast.'"

"Uh, thanks."

*Golden Beast because I'm a gold cat? Yeah, sure, whatever.*

But I didn't say that out loud. He had such a triumphant look on his face, all I could do was sigh quietly.

***

Some time passed and I got pretty used to life as a demon.

Those mini monkeys had been so scared of him, but of course they would bare their fangs at a kitten like me. They were surprisingly easy to kill once I got used to it; he had been right that I was decently strong.

I stopped caring so much about the look of fear in their eyes when I killed them. It was probably a demonic instinct not to have a heart that cared about that kind of stuff.

"That's a quality you've always possessed, then."

"Excuse me?"

The heck was this giant cat on about?

"I don't mean it in a bad way. I've been thinking that the reason you still have memories may be because you might have a spirit lingering inside of you."

*He's talking about stuff I don't understand again.*

Basically, souls were vessels for life, while memories were a different thing altogether.

Life-forms that possessed souls molded their sense of self based on their souls once they became self-aware. For humans, their souls developed based on their experiences and became spirits.

Spirits accumulated memories and emotions as experience. When they transmigrated, they consumed those experience points to potentially yield greater abilities in their next life. If they kept all of their memories when entering their next life, then they would get zero bonuses to their abilities.

But that would mean I had no abilities.

"So I take it there aren't any humans with powerful abilities who still have their memories, then?"

"There are."

*Really?*

"In those cases, though, they're either a high-ranking demon or their soul is bound to a paranormal creature. Humans who retain their memories tend to be reckless since they believe that there's a next life. They wind up losing all of their experience once they die and have to start over as a louse."

"For real?"

Going back to the previous topic, when a spirit remained, it affected the body. Likewise, the spirit was also affected by the body.

Typically, even if one was reborn with memories, those weren't actually full memories, but merely a record with no emotions attached. However, if someone stubbornly clung to the emotions of

their past life, then the spirit would be unable to acclimate and would not easily be able to gain new experience points.

"What does that mean for me, then?"

"Your memories already feel like records, yes? I don't know if you had a past life or if your spirit is a collection of broken remembrances, but since you've accepted that you're a demon, I cannot imagine what form your spirit currently has."

"I see."

He thought that perhaps if there was a spirit in me based on the memories of my dream, then it could be that its former personality also existed.

"However, even if you have been affected by the records, you are still you—the Golden Beast. You should be proud."

"Okay." *Thank you. Yeah, I'm me.*

"By the way, the experience points of souls are what we demons prey on. Humans with lots of experience are especially tasty to us."

"Uh, right."

That kinda ruined it for me.

And so, I went on talking about all kinds of things with him.

Some creatures obviously had emotions, like the mini monkeys, so I asked him why we didn't talk with them.

"Do you enjoy talking to idiots?"

"I see your point."

There were other intelligent creatures here in the Demon Realm besides the mini monkeys. However, the majority of them couldn't have intelligent conversations or were haughty simpletons. This was why it had been a very long time since he had last found

someone like me to talk to, someone who wasn't afraid of him and could hold a normal conversation.

"Do you enjoy talking to me?" I asked.

"What you told me about the dream was certainly interesting."

I enjoyed talking with him too. He may have looked ferocious—and in fact, I may have been scared of just how ferocious he actually was—but as I conversed with him, I began to really get a sense that he had the knowledge and intelligence of a creature that had lived for a very long time.

However, there were stretches of time when we didn't speak.

Perhaps it was because we were both species of cats, but sometimes it was fun to just roll around on the ground. The way we liked to play and amuse ourselves was similar too.

"Hee."

While I was taking a nap, he suddenly began nuzzling my fluffy stomach with the tip of his nose.

It tickled. Sometimes he really did act like a cat.

I was going to scratch him if he licked me, but I wasn't so childish as to scratch him over rolling me around like a hairball with his nose or smelling me. Besides, he let me snuggle up in his fur too! His fur was sleek, but the fur around his chest got all nice and fluffy when he relaxed. I was practically burying myself in it, enjoying his floof with my entire body.

Also, he gave off this really nice smell. I only just got a hint of it, but it was faintly sweet, like I had just licked some alcohol and was getting a bit drunk. Not that I had ever had alcohol before. I wondered if my belly had a similar smell?

*Ah, hey, I said no licking!*

And so, we spent a very long time together. I didn't exactly know how much time had passed, since time didn't really flow here

in the Ethereal World, but I could sense it from how much I changed.

I had once been a cute kitten, but now I was a lean adult. I'd grown from a furball to about the size of a wildcat. I wasn't nearly the size of him, but I was now able to keep up with him. Though I only used my wings on occasion! Maybe I could be even faster than him if I used my wings for real?

I was getting stronger too. Maybe it was because I ate and drank too much? But he was always catching all kinds of prey and we had been practically inseparable since we met, so of course I got to eat too.

I would go hunting for myself whenever I wanted a snack. I could tell I was getting stronger that way, whether I liked it or not. In fact, I met a rather large monkey the other day, but it scampered off the second it saw me. Monkeys that big were pretty unusual, though. Once in a while, we met a centipede or a beast like us, but we rarely saw any creatures that were as big as this monkey.



Since it was that big, the monkey looked just like a chimpanzee. But, wait a minute…

That red scar on its forehead was familiar…

"Are you that monkey I met once before?"

"I-it's you."

It spoke! Well, I supposed it made sense since it had evolved to this point. Even the older mini monkeys could speak, though we only ever heard them wailing in their death throes.

This monkey had likely been the very first evolved creature I had ever met. The one I was pretty sure I had been about to fight. That sure brought me back. How had he been all this time? He'd sure gotten big!

"Kreeeee!"

"Ah!"

He ran away when I approached. He wasted no time in making his getaway. Figuring I'd give chase, I leaped after him. But just as I was about to catch up, I was left dumbfounded as I lost sight of him.

What had gotten into him? It wasn't like I had mentioned anything about how he would taste like concentrated strawberry jam.

For some reason, monkey demons smelled like fruit. It was so strange!

Though the way he had looked at me made me realize just how strong I had gotten. Whenever I played with the Dark Beast, he would ultimately push me down and rub his nose into my belly, so I hadn't noticed.

Had I gotten stronger? Well, next time I knew I wouldn't lose.

And things went on like that until one day…

"Hey, what's that?"

I wound up losing our game and getting snuggled, but since he was being really annoying about it, I bit his nose and, as an apology, he let me snuggle him back. Just as I was burying my face in his chest, I noticed something in the corner of my vision.

His mood suddenly changed. "Hm? That's a *summoning gate*. I taught you about them before." He barely glanced my way as he gave a curt response. I figured he was just annoyed to have to repeat something he had already told me.

"That's not what I mean. All the little guys are being pulled into the gate. What's happening?"

He'd been in such a good mood before. What had gotten into him?

I remembered what he had taught me about summoning gates. Basically, they were like doors that humans such as wizards could make from within the Material World. Demons who entered them then wound up summoned to the other side.

I wasn't sure if that was true or not, but all I had to go off of were my memories of the dream and what he told me. I had never actually seen humans or such a world for myself.

It turned out that I couldn't go through these doors. I'd been excited to get to go to the World of Light when I'd first heard about the doors, but I couldn't pass through them. The reason had to do with the magic user's power affecting how big the door was. Only small demons could go through the small doors. Although my body was small, I had already gotten strong enough that I could tussle with him, and so only the tips of my legs could go through one of those small gates now. Once, I'd tried reaching a leg inside and feeling around, but I heard some kind of agonizing shriek on the other side and it wound up being a rather surprising experience.

When he was small a long, long time ago, he'd tried many times to go through the doors, but now he said he couldn't even get the tip of his claw in.

*Magic, eh? I sure would like to see it for myself someday.*

"Waaah!"

As I was lost in thought, he suddenly rolled over, sending me flying to my feet. He then glumly said, "The weaker ones are being forcibly summoned from the other side. When that happens, they'll be forced into servitude without even a chance of making a fair pact."

*Ooh, now I understand. All the ones getting drawn in are slimes, mice, and other creatures with the self-awareness of a bug.*

When demons from the Demon Realm were summoned into the Material World, they made a pact with their summoner. You could ask for their soul or a sacrifice in exchange, but the inhabitants of the Material World were apparently quite stingy. If you were able to negotiate a good pact, you could manifest in the Material World without any restrictions so that you could grant their wishes with your strong powers, but it turned out that humans were too afraid to give demons any power.

However, because of the pacts, we wouldn't be able to do anything crazy—although you had some degree of freedom if you managed to poke holes in the pact, which demons were good at.

"There's a lot of bad people in the world. I gotta be careful when I make a pact." I didn't want to boast, but I was confident in my ability to not have any self-restraint.

"You… Yeah. You better be careful," he said.

"Hey, isn't this the part where you tell me I'll do fine, even if it's not true?" We had been together for quite a long time now, after all.

"There's just something so soft about you."

"Hmph." I got a bit sulky and started smacking his face with my paws. He laughed happily.

But then…

"Huh?!"

He had been laughing, but his face suddenly hardened as he threw me back and sunk his teeth into my back.

"Hey, that hurts!"

Since I was a demon, it didn't physically hurt, but I had this sensation of slowly being cut down and could strongly feel his feelings flowing from his teeth into me, and it felt like pain.

It was the first time he had ever bitten me so hard, bringing a shiver down my spine as I recalled when we'd first met.

However, I could feel from the pain that he was very upset.

"Hey?"

"Golden Beast… There is no need for you to go anywhere. You shall remain with me."

I was speechless. He had never spoken to me in such a scary voice before. I stood up as soon as he removed his teeth from my body and nuzzled my nose against his.

"You can be such a troublesome person sometimes."

"I'm not a person." His murmurs sounded like he was sulking, which made me laugh a little.

"Don't worry. It's not like I could go anywhere anyway."

He fell silent.

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The Black Panther Demon. The Wild Beast of the Demon Realm. The Dark Beast.

He truly was a demon to be feared and he got whatever he wanted, no matter what.

After that day, his shackles on me grew even tighter.

It wasn't like I *wanted* to leave him or anything, but I hadn't been lying when I told him that I couldn't go anywhere. Realizing this as well, he was now overly concerned about whether I would just suddenly disappear somewhere.

At least, that was how it felt. Did he have to be so clingy?

Had he always been this possessive?

I had been with him for a long time, but it wasn't like we'd been together all day every day. Whenever I was hungry, I would go hunting by myself. Whenever a strong demon intruded on his territory, he would excitedly run to go fight them.

But now he was constantly by my side. He would come with me wherever I went. And whenever I went astray, he would bring me back in his mouth.

But my biggest problem with all of this was that he didn't let me snuggle him anymore. He would snuggle my stomach, but whenever I tried to snuggle him back, he would snap at me.

Hmph. Was he trying to discipline me or something?

"Huh?"

One day, I noticed he was nowhere to be found. *That's odd… Maybe I should go out and look for a snack while I have the chance?* But the moment the thought popped into my head, he returned.

"Where did you go?"

"I was out hunting," he said as he dropped the creatures he had entwined in his two tails. They were trembling with fear.

"Are these some kind of young demons?"

He had caught four small demons who looked as if they must have just evolved from bugs. They had no mist or stickiness to them. However, they weren't like any of the other demons in this area. Two were a rare jet-black color. One was yellow, like I had

been just before I'd evolved. And the last was white, which I had never seen before. All four of them were very unusual.

"You went out to find these?"

"I happened to come across them."

Happened to come across them while doing what? Each and every one of them faintly smelled of flowers I liked. However, beneath that was a scent unlike anything I had ever smelled here before, and they were uncommon colors.

*Is this like how guys give girls flowers?*

The little demons began trembling even more as I stared at them, which came as no surprise. They had been caught by the *Dark Beast*, who was powerful here in the Demon Realm, and then offered to the *Golden Beast*, who was believed to be his minion. Even if they had no sense of self-awareness, they would tremble simply out of instinct.

I believed that he must have caught them for me because he remembered what kind of flavors I liked, but it felt like a waste…

They did look really tasty, though.

Just then, the little demons leapt with fear.

"Hey, there's no need to be scared. I'm not gonna eat you." Even I knew that didn't sound convincing at all.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked in a low voice.

"Hey, Dark Beast? Can I keep these little guys?"

He only gave a slight smile at this.

"You got them for me, right?"

"True. Fine, do with them as you wish," he said and then promptly flopped on the ground.

He was hard to read and yet an open book, as usual. Well, whatever. He seemed to think that I was trying to amuse myself by

keeping them as pets. Which wasn't entirely wrong, but since they were my pets, I decided I would play with them some.

"Let's have lots of fun together."

They looked at me in shock and confusion.

I tried to smile nicely at them, but it seemed to really scare them.

After that, I started my demon-raising project, which meant that he granted me some degree of freedom again while I was taking care of the little demons. Although these little guys seemed oddly scared of him, so he might have been giving us space out of respect.

*Him? Respectful? Hah.* I couldn't help but chuckle.

So what did they think of me, then? Time to find out.

*Hmm, I'll try this.*

I grabbed each of them in my mouth and tossed them onto my back. I ran carefully so that they didn't fall, gradually increasing my speed before I spread my bat wings and flew up into the great blue sky.

What great blue sky? Where was it? There was nothing but dark clouds here. But it felt nice to fly through. My wings had grown several times bigger than the length of my body, so they looked pretty cool.

So, what was my plan for raising these guys?

Why, *overhunting*, of course.

I flew through the dark skies at ultrahigh speed. Every time I spotted some mini monkeys, I slashed them to pieces with my claws. I felt that I had probably gotten strong enough that just whizzing by them would rend them to shreds, but I didn't care. It was fine.

*Boing! Boing!*

As the little demons got to kill and eat these demons, they gradually stopped being scared of me and took to hopping up and down with joy on my back.

*Hey, you're going to fall if you thrash around like that.* Though I wasn't entirely sure if they were happy because they got to eat or because they were relishing in the demonic glee of murder.

Best not to sweat the small stuff.

It seemed this kind of demon-raising game suited my personality, because I got very into the process of raising and taking care of them. It even helped me to forget how much I wanted to go to that other world.

As I took off into the skies with a smile on my face every day, he would watch me go with an indescribable look on his own.

*Now, time to begin today's training.*

*Fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap, fwap…*

"Hey, you! This is *my* terri—"

*Jolt!*

What was that?! I thought I sensed a pretty powerful demon nearby, but I couldn't come to a quick enough stop.

I'd gotten so caught up punching demons to death one after the other with my claws that I thought something had jumped out at me.

*I'm just gonna pretend I didn't see anything.*

I didn't turn around. I would go on living by looking straight ahead. Which meant I had definitely not seen a demon chasing after me.

*That was awfully close, though. Could it have been stronger than me? He told me that there's nothing that could possibly beat me around here, but you never know what you might stumble across in the Demon Realm!*

While above and below were actually not that big, the Ethereal World was about as wide as space, so I was sure that I was never entirely safe from encountering a strong demon even here in the Demon Realm. I figured that I must have accidentally gotten so carried away flying so fast that I had accidentally left his territory.

*I guess I'll just have to fly back as fast as I can… All the while killing any mini monkeys that I encounter along the way.*

But my pets sure were something. They were just riding happily on my back like usual, even though I was just committing one hit-and-run after another nonstop!

I was now rather fond of their hopping up and down and glad that they weren't scared of me anymore. I slowed down my hunting pace a bit and started talking to them, telling them all about my dream of the World of Light like a mother, like an older sister, like a teacher would.

Was it okay for a demon to have such a dream? I wasn't going to, like, disappear because this was like an act of self-denial, right? Well, I figured that I would cross that bridge if I came to it. I was a demon, after all. I didn't think about consequences.

*Instead of thinking so hard about this, I should focus on working toward getting these little guys to a level where they can speak. Because I'm sure they'll be happy that way too. Okay?*

*Boing! Boing!*

And so, life continued on that way. Thanks to my training them, they became more intelligent…I think.

They were pretty big now and were able to go hunting for snacks on their own when they got hungry. Maybe they were about at the age where they were ready to evolve?

"Maybe you should give them a species name," the Dark Beast commented.

"A species name? Is it okay to give them one at this point?" I was a bit surprised by his suggestion. Now that I didn't have to give all my attention to the little guys, he was back to snuggling me, so I sure was busy.

"Normally, they wouldn't be smart enough to understand that. However, they've started to absorb your knowledge and have become quite stra—I mean, unique."

Was he just about to say "strange"?

"If you do a good job of raising them in your image, they might be able to acquire forms that aren't the typical monkeys."

"Oh, yeah? Was that what you were thinking with m—ow!"

He'd nipped me in the stomach. He licked me when I said it hurt, so I was really confused about what he was trying to do. *Just let me be already.*

"So? What should I make them?" I asked.

"I'm sure you've got some unusual ideas."

"Hmph." I looked away in a huff since there was something cold about how he spoke. *Which of us is supposed to be the child here?*

*But now that I think about it, it's not a bad idea.*

*Their species, huh? What would be good? Maybe I should make them something I saw in a religious book in the world of the dream? No, wait, those weren't demons—those were something more like demigods, so that won't work here. Maybe I should make them monsters from some kind of myth?*

*Maybe not a regular monster either, but some kind of demon or undead thing. Or maybe even the Four Auspicious Beasts?* I started muttering to myself as I thought it over, which brought the four kiddy demons hopping over to me out of concern. *Oh wait, the white one is just playing around.*

The kiddy demons had each developed pretty different personalities even though I taught them all the same way. I got the feeling that they had even chosen genders for themselves, like the Dark Beast and I had.

"Hmm, since you two are of similar colors, I guess you could be brother and sister." At my having decided that, the two black ones hopped up and down happily. The yellow one then looked up at me expectantly. Where was its face? The white one stopped playing around and came over to us too.

"I'm going to decide what your species should look like." And so, I began coming up with stats for them based on how I envisioned their species.

Was it really okay for me to do this? Maybe they had their own ideas about what they wanted to become. However, the four demons accepted my ideas happily like it was the most normal thing in the world.

When I asked him about my concerns, he said it wasn't that strange.

"When in this young, indefinite form, it's hard for demons to create an idea of what they want to be like while they're in the Demon Realm if they haven't been summoned to the Material World. This is why most become ugly monkeys that don't even really have a gender."

"Why monkeys, though?"

There were few demons besides him and me who weren't monkeys here in the Demon Realm. Some became bugs or fish. Wouldn't it be better if there were a bit more variation in the world?

When I asked him this, he thought it over for a moment and looked puzzled.

"Dunno. Maybe the images of demons that humans in the Material World have are affecting us here."

"Ooh."

Then why were demons monkeys?

It turned out that when elementals from the Elemental Realm manifested in the Material World, fire elementals became lizards, earth elementals became dwarves and beasts, while wind and water elementals took on the forms of maidens—all because it was how humans thought they should look.

Was this all due to our image of them from heroic tales? It was true that the idea of a water elemental looking like an old guy didn't appeal to me.

Which made sense for why demons were ugly, but why monkeys? I didn't like the thought of that at all. I always told my kiddies how cute they were while taking care of them, so surely they would grow up to be pretty demons.

And then the time for them to evolve finally came.

"What the hell is that?"

"I am not sure what to say."

I really had no idea what had just happened. It was like déjà vu. But this time, he sounded astonished instead of mad.

"Mishtressssh!" My four fully grown demon children were now capable of speaking, though they were somewhat hard to understand.

*Oh my. They're just so adorable. The only possible problem here is that they're too cute.*

The two black ones I had decided were brother and sister now had adorably round bodies like steamed buns. They gazed up at me with sparkling purple babydoll eyes. The only thing demon-like about them was their black goat horns. No, wait—the horns on the one who seemed more chill (whom I had designated as the little sister) looked more like a sheep's instead of a goat's.

*Whatever. The two horns make it kinda look like she has pigtails and that's cute, so no problem there.*

Next to them was the one who was yellow and exuded an aura that simply begged for attention. She now was a similar color to me—probably because she wanted to imitate me—except she was a snake. Not a cat; a snake. For some reason, her skin was soft instead of scaly, but I supposed it was cute enough.

Last was the white one who loved to spend all her time playing and now looked like a monkey. But not an ugly monkey—a white, fluffy, cute one. She was so wonderfully fluffy. For some reason, I thought she was wearing some kind of clownlike mask at first, but I realized that was just what her face now looked like.

"Golden Beast…"

"Oh, yeah. I know."

He didn't have to say anything further. These were all merely pets.

***

Now that our family had grown with members who were now able to speak, life had much more variety. The kiddies continued to grow and would happily tell me what kind of baddies they had fought that day or about how they had managed to eat a demon that was bigger than them. Our conversations were admittedly a bit gruesome.



But I understood.

The Dark Beast… He allowed me to keep these pets as a collar and chain—to keep me here due to his lingering attachment to me. And I could tell that seeing the four of them play together made him feel at peace too.

But Dark Beast…didn't he know?

Us demons never possessed such emotions in the first place.

And that feeling of peace merely made me start thinking about the World of Light that I had seen in my dreams all the more. When I had been coming up with the stats for these kids, recalling with all my might the knowledge of the dream's world had made me start longing for it all over again, even though I had once given up. Yearning for it, even.

*I want to go home.* The feelings I couldn't put into words began to overflow. The powerful flames of homesickness began to burn within me.

*I want to go home. But I can't.*

Because I wasn't even sure if that shining world from my dreams even existed.

It was then that I realized he had been silently next to me the whole time.

And not just him. The four demons had sensed that I wanted to leave and were looking at me with worry.

*I want to go home. But I can't go home to that world.*

*But if I could go to a world where people lived with the same kind of light, then…*

*Crack!*

Just then, there was a loud popping noise.

He and the four demons were on guard because they had no idea what was happening.

But I knew. I understood it immediately: a *door* to here had opened up from some other side.

My longing had drawn a door—a magic summoning circle—from the other side to me.

It was no easy feat for us demons to go to the Material World because the dark emotions clinging to us were the sins weighing down our souls. Souls heavy with sin sank into the ground. To rise up from this, normal demons had no other recourse but for someone from the other side to wrench open a gate for them.

Had I become strong enough that the weight of my soul could be ignored? Or was it because I possessed knowledge of the World of Light?

I didn't know the reason. All I knew was that the door I had wrenched open to the other side was an enormous summoning gate big enough to envelop my whole body.

"This can't be!" Realizing what it was, he began bounding toward me. Yet, despite his strength, the light of the summoning gate repelled him as if it were rejecting him.

Of course that would happen. I understood that like it was the most normal thing in the world. This summoning circle was meant only for me. It had been created only to take me to the other side.

"No! Don't go!" He cried out, hurling himself at the light repeatedly.

But this summoning gate had been made with all of my power, so it was not so simple to destroy, even for him.

A faint glow began to overflow from the gate. I was being enveloped in the light I had yearned for—the light from my dream—as my body began fading away into the gate.

*Everything's getting so…hazy…* I opened my eyes to look one last time at the Demon Realm, where I had been born and raised. He was staring right at me with a terrifying look on his face.

"Golden Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeast!"

His voice echoed in my ears…

*I'm sorry for making you angry again.*

***

I could see light. It was as if I were looking up at the sky from underneath a dark ocean as I awoke. Slowly, the light grew all-encompassing.

*Where am I? Did I make it to the dream world—to a world with light?*

I couldn't see. I couldn't really hear very well either, though there was something that sounded like faint murmuring. And I couldn't move my body.

*Maybe the summoning failed? Maybe I'm just frozen with the terror that I might actually die? Haven't felt that in a while. And yet —*

Something beat against my body with a loud smacking sound and I reflexively gasped.

*Huh? I can breathe?*

I heard the ear-piercing cry of a small creature. Before I could realize that noise was coming out of my own mouth, I heard the voice of someone who possessed a sense of self. The second I understood they spoke words, I managed to recompose those meaningless sounds into words I could understand.

"Ah, my darling child. My sweet *Yulucia*."

In that instant, it was as if my very soul were struck by lightning.

I was cognizant that I had been born as a nameless demon and that, after using all of my power to be summoned to the Material World, I had been granted a *name* in a body that had gained consciousness for the first time. My once-ambiguous existence had now been fully recognized.

And I also understood then that I, a demon from the Demon Realm, had lost all of my power and been born into this world as a helpless human baby.

# Episode 2:
# I Am a Human Now

OH NO. I WAS IN REALLY BIG TROUBLE NOW, oh no. So much so that saying "oh no" had become my speech quirk, oh no.

Though, of course, I couldn't actually speak. I couldn't form a single word. Whenever I made noises, it just came out as baby gurgling that sounded like, "Ooh! Ahhh!"

Which made sense when I started thinking about it. I was a *human* baby, after all. Without any teeth, I couldn't use my tongue very well.

"Oh, she's so precious! Do you need something, Lady Yul?" Hearing my noises, this pretty maid lady with blonde hair came over to me with this adoring look on her face and spoke to me in baby talk.

Which, you know, made sense. Babies were cute. But seriously, why even ask me that? It wasn't like I could actually reply. I didn't need anything anyway, so I just tapped the maid's hand and she looked so ecstatic that it kind of weirded me out. Look, I just wasn't into that kind of thing. I had heard that talking to babies that way made it harder for them to actually learn words, but it didn't matter to me.

"Lady Yul," though? I realized that was a nickname for me, since my name was Yulucia—the name granted to me that confirmed my existence as a demon—but there were times when I didn't recognize it when it was used to refer to me.

But it was fine. I mean, it wasn't fine for me, since I was a demon, but I could deal with it.

However, there was something about "Yul" as a nickname that bothered me. Maybe it was just me, but the way they pronounced it

reminded me too much of those "yuru mascot" characters from what I knew of the dream world.

It didn't really matter in the end. It had now been two months since I had been born into this world, and I had already learned a whole lot.

I'd thought I understood everything when my existence was recognized, but based on what I was actually able to glean about my situation, I realized that I knew absolutely nothing about this world. Maybe they called me "Yul" because my head was as "*yurui*" as those mascots—carefree and slow…

What I *did* learn was that Yulucia was born to a pretty well-to-do family. The high ceilings I looked up at every day had pretty decorations and my room was really big. The maids came with shades of black, blonde, and chestnut-colored hair. They all looked young and pretty. Based on how they all called me "Lady Yul" and fussed over me every day, it was clear that I was the young lady of the house.

*Hm, wait a minute. I am a lady, right?* I reached down to feel between my legs just in case. I was relieved I didn't find anything *unexpected* down there.

Demons didn't have specific genders, but since I had the mind of a girl, my form as a demon had been female and I had acted feminine as well, so it would have been troublesome to have to change now.

I was very worried at first about whether or not I could actually pull off being a human baby. However, it wound up not being much of a problem. Since I had originally been a spirit from the Ethereal World, my spirit was probably easily influenced by my body, as it would just reflexively cry or do my business for me and I would fall asleep whenever I relaxed.

Among all the problems I had, the biggest was speech. The language they spoke wasn't what they'd spoken in the dream world. The reason I could understand what they were saying despite

hearing this language for the first time was probably one of my abilities as a demon.

My demon ears were interpreting the meaning of the words rather than giving me an understanding of the words themselves. When I reflected on this, I realized that it had been the same with *him*—the one known as Dark Beast. At first, the way he spoke had sounded like just growls to me.

I had a feeling that my demonic power would work for speaking as well, but I did want to learn how to actually speak their language if possible. I could get by for now, but I would wind up a disappointing proper young lady if I could understand what everyone said but not be able to read or write.

And then there was the problem of food. Right now, my main source of food was breast milk. This was another toughie for me. I mean, it was fine and all because my mom's milk tasted good, but for some reason, I didn't like the flavor of my wet nurse's milk as much. It was hard to drink. Even water had no flavor to me. Though I never felt hungry in the first place. Why was my mom's milk okay, then?

But my mom would always look at me with concern when I didn't drink enough, so I forced myself to drink it.

And then there was my biggest problem of all.

Was I a *human*? Or was I a *demon*? If I were still a demon, then I really didn't want to believe that the people here had summoned me.

I had seen five humans in this house.

First, there was my mom. I wasn't sure if she was the one who had named me, but I loved her very much. It felt like both the human baby side of me and the demon side of me loved her. And she was very young too. She looked like she couldn't be older than a high schooler. She was very pretty and had blonde hair.

Next, there was my wet nurse Torfi. She had the air of a wealthy married lady and looked to be in her mid-twenties. Her second child had recently turned one and was now weaning, so she'd offered to be my wet nurse. I knew this because Torfi brought her one-year-old son with her once.

She asked if he wanted to be my servant, but the boy took one look at me and froze, so she never brought him along ever again. Was my face that scary or something?

And then there were my three maids: Vio, Fer, and Min. Saying their names in a row like that reminded me of something…medicinal, but I couldn't put my finger on exactly what. The three of them were very young, probably junior-high or high-school aged. They were very pretty too. Did this world only have pretty people in it? I wasn't sure if their names were nicknames or their real names, but I didn't have any way to figure that out for myself just yet.

Since my family was wealthy, I assumed we had other people here too, like chefs, but at the very least there wasn't anyone capable of using demon-summoning magic.

Did magic exist here? Why yes, it did. I had seen Vio use it. She used something like magic to turn on the lights in my room. I wasn't too surprised that there was magic here, since I'd arrived via summoning, but I was a bit disappointed that I wasn't actually in that world from my dreams.

Perhaps I had been summoned here as a demon, but the people in the house treated me like a normal baby, so I didn't think that they considered me one. In that case, perhaps it hadn't been summoning magic at all, but a natural phenomenon where a hole was opened between dimensions—which I knew happened, albeit rarely. Or perhaps some magic-user had messed up and this whole thing was an accident?

At any rate, it wasn't a big problem to me. The real problem was the fact that I had manifested here in a body; I wasn't a living creature from the Material World.

Had I turned *someone* into my *sacrifice* in order to manifest in this world?

It was no easy feat to summon a demon; a price had to be paid in exchange. And summoning a demon required magic, I guess. So you summoned one using some kind of invisible power as the price, but if you wanted to get an intelligent demon and not one of those unintelligent ankle-biters, you had to pay with something tangible as well.

Normally, the greatest cost was a body that could enable the demon to freely use their powers in this world. In other words, you had to give them a quality sacrifice. On top of that, it was the norm to force a demon to make a pact with you so that they didn't go running around doing whatever they wanted.

Silently, I broke out into a cold sweat.

The most likely scenario in this case was that this body—this *baby's* body—had been a sacrifice to allow me to manifest here. A newly born immaculate soul and body. Based on how wealthy this family was and the fact that I was of noble lineage, I had a feeling this body was more than adequate as a sacrifice to a demon.

*Oh no. I've really gone and done it this time.*

It was too much to bear when I considered that my kind mom's true baby might have been taken away and I had replaced her.

*What should I do?*

I spent day after day racking my brains over this until an epiphany made me realize my anguish was unnecessary.

One day, I was doing my best to drink milk when my mom and Torfi started quietly talking to one another.

"I simply cannot believe how healthy Lady Yul is growing. You must be so happy, Lady Lia."

"Yes, I am. I fainted when I heard that she had been stillborn, but I was overjoyed when I heard that she then suddenly drew her first breath. Vio really tried her hardest for me, and I plan to repay her."

"I'm sure it's because Vio had prayed to be of service to you every day. That must have been how she was able to cast healing magic until she exhausted herself over and over again. She seemed so happy when it finally worked."

So what I was hearing was that this body had already been dead when it was born, and then Vio cast a ton of healing magic on it. But that shouldn't have been enough to bring a person back to life. It was also possible that the baby hadn't been a stillborn, but just had never possessed a soul in the first place. Which meant that I'd just happened to enter this body when I was summoned?

I was pretty sure that it should have been impossible for me to manifest in this world through the sacrifice of a single body… At the very least, I felt relieved that the baby's soul hadn't been sacrificed.

Still, though, assuming I had possessed this body, it was strange how compatible I was with it. I didn't feel any kind of discomfort at all. Perhaps it was possible that I had actually been reborn as my mom's child. I currently had no demon powers to speak of, after all.

Maybe I had used up all of my power in that summoning gate? I did have some inhuman abilities, like an innate understanding of languages, and I never got hungry, but I couldn't do anything at all besides that. In fact, I couldn't even crawl or roll over yet. My stats were lower than low.

Basically, I was just a regular baby now with the remnants of some demonic abilities. I wouldn't have minded at all if it turned out that I was just a normal human, but it troubled me that there were still some demon-like things about me.

*For now, I guess the only thing I can really do is gather information about this world while keeping an eye on myself.*

***

A year had passed since I was born. I'd learned pretty much nothing in that time.

The reason for this being that they never let me leave the premises. I was a baby, so there was nothing I could do about that. I assumed that healing magic meant that they must have a high birth rate here, but I believed that giving birth wasn't safe unless they had a person whose magic was powerful enough to rival the doctors from the dream world.

Now that I was a one-year-old, I could finally crawl, but they wouldn't even let my lazy self be alone in the gardens. And I found it odd that they had never even once taken me out on a shopping trip.

I kind of felt that my mom and maids were a tad too overprotective of me.

However, there were a few things I *was* able to find out. This house was huge, big enough to be called a mansion. However, from what they let me see outside of the windows, I could tell that this house was smaller than the others around us. I was probably seeing the villas of the extremely rich and residences of very wealthy merchants. As a result, I wasn't sure what my social status was in the world.

I was pretty sure that my mom's name was Liasteia, Lia being her nickname. She was only twenty-one years old, which meant she had been twenty when she gave birth to me. Was that normal here in this world?

Even though it had been a whole year, I had yet to meet my dad. Based on what I heard Mom talking about with the other

maids, he had come to see me once, but it was when my eyesight was still bad.

I was glad to hear he was alive. Since he sent me some toys on my birthday, I wanted to believe that he loved me. He was probably just busy with work. Surely.

Also, I now knew of some other people in the mansion. We had an old guy and a younger guy as chefs, as well as a guy in his thirties who seemed to be both our gardener and our guard. I thought he might have a thing for Vio, but there was such a big age gap that she didn't return his feelings. He probably wanted to find a wife sooner rather than later, but it didn't do to rush things.

This world didn't have any electricity. It seemed to be somewhere between the Western medieval times and early modern times? It was pointless to talk about it in terms of the dream world's history, but while they didn't have the scientific innovations of the Middle Ages, they did have magic, so they seemed culturally more advanced than that time period. Everything was really clean, to put it bluntly, which was important. Maybe this world had no problems since they weren't dependent on stuff made out of petroleum.

Still, the culture here felt very similar to the dream world's. They had a monarchy and nobles, just like a country from feudal times in the dream world. Perhaps, since it was all so similar, someone had transmigrated here like I had and spread the knowledge from their world.

However, the food here did not taste good. This was a huge problem.

It wasn't because our chef sucked or because the food culture here was lacking—the problem was my own sense of taste. I had had a really bad feeling the second I realized that water had no taste or smell to me!

I could never forget the shock of the first time I'd tasted the baby food. It's not that it lacked flavor—it had sweetness and saltiness, sure—but it didn't taste good to me at all.

Flavorless custard was its own kind of food hell.

I figured out a way to solve the problem, but it couldn't be used with normal food.

The reason my mom's breast milk and Torfi's tasted so differently wasn't because of a difference in their bodies or anything—I realized that it was because my mom smelled good to me. She had this slightly sweet scent. I mean, she always smelled good, but in a different way. She made me feel that same intoxicated sensation I'd felt whenever I snuggled with the Dark Beast. I came to believe that my mom having a similar scent was the reason her breastmilk tasted so good to me.

Though I'd only be eating solid food from now on, so that knowledge was kinda useless. It was almost enough to make me cry.

Just what was that smell, anyway? I would have to figure it out someday for the sake of having proper eating habits!

Some time after I turned one, they unexpectedly dressed me up in very pretty clothes. It wasn't the kind of clothes found in the dream world, but it was a much nicer dress than I normally wore. Basically, these were going-out clothes.

*That's right. They're taking me outside the mansion for the first time today! I'm so happy. Yay!*

Well.

This was just awful. The absolute worst.

I had been so excited to go out with my mom, but now that excitement had died and withered away.

Fer and Min were riding in the coach with us. I'd always thought that they looked really young, but it turned out that they

were only fourteen years old. Vio was sixteen, but she was staying back at the mansion today.

Anyway, as this noisy coach rocked back and forth for about an hour while the three of them constantly gushed over me, I made a shocking discovery.

This was the kind of place you could call a "holy kingdom." The religious atmosphere was intense. There were all kinds of churches for all kinds of religions and countless priests. The kingdom did have something that could be called an official religion, but the people were free to worship whatever gods or faiths suited them.

Pretty much every single one of the priests of these churches could wield holy magic, so they had a custom where all of the babies born in the kingdom were blessed with holy water at a church. It wasn't compulsory, since it required a donation to the church, but the kingdom as a whole was so devout that pretty much everyone here did it.

That said, there had been a sudden official proclamation that, for some reason, and just this once, all the babies who had turned one year old within the past six months or who were going to turn one year old within the next six months were to be gathered up and the kingdom would cover the cost for priests to bless all of them…

Every single baby in the kingdom.

Whether their family had no religion, whether they were traveling through, whether they'd been born in the slums and weren't registered—the kingdom was going to find every single baby and bless them. In other words, this was absolutely compulsory.

Holy crap. I was in deep shit now.

A real-ass priest was going to give me a real-ass blessing with holy water, which was probably capable of vanquishing lesser demons! I was just a baby right now! I was incredibly weak! Considering that some traces of my demonic self still remained, was I just going to wind up vanquished?!

I began trembling with fear. Seeing this, my mom, Fer, and Min began speculating that maybe the coach was making me feel ill or maybe it was because this was my first outing. They tried to comfort me, saying that the horses may be big, but they weren't scary. However, none of this made me feel better. How could it?!

Why was the kingdom making an exception and doing this now?

We arrived at the church. It wasn't all that different from churches I had seen in the dream world. It bore the symbol of a cross, but it reminded me more of a cross-shaped throwing star. I bet that thing could fly far.

Min told me that this church worshiped the Goddess of Good Harvests, but what was the point of telling a baby that?

Putting that attempt at disassociation aside, the church was packed with women carrying babies in their arms. All these babies had turned one this month. There was quite a line, so I began to wonder if we would have to wait, but a priestess came to receive my mom and brought us before this old man standing in front of a statue of the goddess. He looked like he was super important.

"It is an honor to see you again after so long, Archbishop."

"Ah, if it isn't Lady Liasteia. Thank you for coming today," the old man greeted her with a kind smile.

*I'm scared. What's with this archbishop? Am I actually gonna be blessed by someone with such a fancy title?*

He appeared to be an acquaintance of my mom's and it seemed he would personally administer my blessing.

I really was about to be vanquished, here and now…

"And who have we here?"

"This is my daughter, Yulucia."

"Such a treasure you have been blessed with. She looks just like her father."

"Thank you, Your Grace."

I couldn't help but crinkle up my face as Grandpa Archbishop looked me over in appraisal.

"Let us begin, then. Relax now." Grandpa started chanting something, channeling the light that he conjured within his hand over me.

…But nothing happened. There was a moment where I felt something like a painful burning sensation on my skin, but it was rather anticlimactic after all that worrying. When he sprinkled the holy water on me, I flinched because it was cold, but that was outweighed by my relief that I'd had no bad reaction to either the holy magic nor the holy water.

Grandpa must have chanted some kind of holy magic spell or something. I couldn't make it out since he had been speaking so quietly, but to my auto-translation ability, it sounded something like "Manifest Light."

"Not a single tear from this one. What a good girl you are," Grandpa praised me as he patted my cheek with a genial smile.

Actually, it seemed like he was more relieved than anything? I figured that most babies cried when getting sprinkled with water, so it was just part of the job, but maybe there was more to it. Another baby was crying quite a bit while getting their blessing from one of the regular priests when—

*Bam!*

What the? It sounded like something had broken nearby.

"You have some nerve, trying to use holy water on me!" The voice was distorted, like it was being forcibly wrenched out by something that wasn't alive.

People started screaming and babies started wailing in turn. My mom held me protectively in her arms, and from my position, I

could make out this human-shaped haze rising up from one of the other babies.

*What the heck is that?* This boorish-looking middle-aged guy or something just suddenly appeared out of nowhere. His form was rather awkward, like he had forgotten what he looked like.

"He really did go into hiding inside of a baby!" Grandpa stepped protectively in front of us.

Huh? They had been gathering all the babies because they were looking for this guy? What a pain!

"Members of the clergy, protect the mothers and the babies! I shall purge this creature!" Grandpa said.

"Mwa hah hah! You really think a senile old man like you can defeat me?"

Maybe he was an evil spirit? That was certainly what he looked like. It seemed like he had been alive for some time too, so he looked kinda like a demon. Not that he was a demon, but he was more demonic than I was.

But if the entire nation itself was devoting all of its energies to tracking this guy down to destroy him, then maybe he was powerful enough to be a threat to the entire kingdom. It would have been pretty terrible to allow him to keep running around.

Maybe that was why it wasn't just the priests conducting blessings this year, but the higher members of the clergy as well. They needed all the help they could get to destroy this evil spirit if they found him.

"Evil incarnate, perish!"

"Noooooooooooooooooooo!"

Grandpa's holy magic clashed with the evil spirit's power, creating a beautiful, intense burst of light. However, when other priests and pastors returned from evacuating the others, they joined their powers with Grandpa's, blasting away half of the evil spirit's body with their holy light.

"Don't think you've bested me, insignificant worms!"

"No!"

Realizing he was at a disadvantage, the evil spirit changed tactics and began heading toward us. Since it had hidden inside of a baby's body, it was likely after another baby's soul to make itself stronger.

*Wait a second. Is this thing coming after* me *now?*

Mom, Fer, and Min had been rendered petrified by all of the scary things that were happening. Since we were in the back, it seemed we'd been forgotten during the evacuation.

I was powerless in my current state. However…

The moment the evil spirit and I made eye contact, it froze. The evil spirit actually *froze*.

Even though it was a ghost, it managed to open its eyes so wide that I thought they might pop out of its head. It had no body, but it seemed to now be sweating buckets as it began trembling in such a way that it looked like it was oscillating at ultrahigh speed.

"Eeeeeeeek?!"

And what do you know? It ran away.

I wasn't sure why, but the evil spirit made a complete one-eighty and ran right back the way it came when…

"Perish!"

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhh?!"

Having chased after it, Grandpa and the others gathered and blasted it with holy magic. The evil spirit faded away into dust.

What in the world had just happened?

My one-year blessing was now complete. As I was still reeling from the day's events, Grandpa explained how they had destroyed

the demon. But did he know that hadn't been a demon, but an evil spirit instead? Well, nobody was hurt, so I guess everything was fine in the end. Even the baby who had been possessed was okay.

That was great and all now that it was over, but I had begun to doubt everything I had assumed up until this point, since I hadn't even been fazed by the same holy magic that that they'd used to smite that nationally targeted evil spirit.

I had assumed that I was a powerless human-like demon, but now I was beginning to think that there was a possibility I was a human who was somewhat demon-like. Could it be that I had been truly reborn as a human? Surely not, since I was still demon-ish, but I got the sense that that was closer to the truth.

Could forcing my way to the Material World have set off all kinds of weird anomalies? But, hey, it had been an accident. I swear. It had been beyond my control.

After we left the church, we went shopping and then headed home. My mom, Fer, and Min all took turns holding me like I was a hot potato. It was a bit odd. All of the other wealthy-looking people had been using something like strollers and only carrying their babies on occasion. Why didn't we use a stroller even though we were probably rich too?

***

This was the Holy Kingdom of Talitelud, a great nation located at the heart of the continent. There were a great number of churches here from many religions, as the kingdom welcomed all beliefs. As a result, its citizens were deeply devout and it was known as a sacred land to which many people from other countries traveled for pilgrimages.

The holy capital where the royal family lived, Versenia, was a grand city where close to a million people lived. With the capital at its center, the lands of the five surrounding duchies that safeguarded the capital, forming the shape of a pentagram, brought the total population of the country to ten million people.

One of the five grand duchies was ruled by House Cowell, the guardians of the west. The previous head of the family and his lady wife had died young, so the second prince of the royal family had married into their family to take over its headship. Having separated from the royal family, the second prince was granted the name of Toure, which became the name of the land where he lived, so the house flourished all the more with the second prince taking the title of Duke Cowell.

Toure was the largest territory within the duchy, and it had a great city that was second in size to the capital. The noble houses within Toure and the surrounding countryside were retainers of Duke Cowell and offered him the same fealty as they would a king.

Half of the citizens of this holy kingdom were devout believers of the Church of Kostor, the Goddess of Good Harvest, which was the nationally recognized religion. The man in charge of their religion's headquarters in Toure, Archbishop Malt, was up early that morning.

Although he was in his sixties, he continued to live a simple, virtuous life. He woke with the morning sun, cleansed himself, and prayed. Once that was done, he tended to his private garden located behind the church and then had breakfast with the other members of the clergy.

After they broke their fast, he had tea with the important members of the church to review the day's schedule and, once he was done issuing instructions, Malt would at last take a break. He would let his tiredness show, massage his shoulders, and then gather his resolve to stand back up on his weary feet.

They'd had a very busy year. The past several months, they had been so busy that even Malt needed to pitch in. The cause of all this chaos was an incident that had happened one year ago wherein some demon worshippers on the outskirts of Toure had caused a scandal by summoning demons on a large scale. The mastermind of this incident had been Baron Hayden, who was a renowned summoner. Several other nobles also participated in this large-scale demon summoning ritual, in which one hundred travelers, outcasts, poor, and the like were sacrificed. Thanks to the knights launching a surprise assault on the day of the incident, the organization was quite thoroughly stamped out and apprehended. However, the knights and other soldiers suffered a great number of casualties.

That day, not only were the knights of Toure and their soldiers deployed, but the priest warriors of the Church of Kostor as well. An army of a thousand soldiers raided the noble Hayden family's residence. What they found there was an enormous summoning circle encompassing the entirety of the gardens and the castle. Normally, even the largest of these circles would fit into a small room.

Thanks to their intel, they managed to rescue most of the people who had been abducted. However, by the time they arrived, a hundred people had already been sacrificed during the preliminary steps of the ritual and several demons were lying in wait.

These demons were the denizens of the Demon Realm, located in the Ethereal World—the antithesis of the Material World. Demons were bigger than humans; they were covered in dirty black hair or scales, and although they walked on two legs, they trampled the soldiers down with speed and power surpassing that of beasts. Their repulsive forms evoked an instinctual fear in the living. Their dark gazes seemed to curse those they beheld and they smiled with twisted glee at the sight of human fear, shadowy fangs peeking out from their mouths.

The nobles had managed to summon not only a dozen lesser demons, but three greater demons as well. Besides the difference in

power between the two types, there was a clear variation in terms of their physiques, and—unlike their lesser counterparts—the greater demons wielded weapons. The biggest difference, however, was in their intelligence and use of magic.

This world was overflowing with mana, which was said to flow into the Material World from the Ethereal World. Another theory was that mana emanated from reincarnated souls; living creatures absorbed mana through their breath and food and then could convert it into a usable magical energy. Magic was the lifeblood of the elementals and demons of the Ethereal World, and everything they did was tinged with magic.

Even the lesser demons who could only slash with claws were impervious to non-magical weapons. Their strength was on par with that of a royal knight or ten common soldiers.

The greater demons had no need for incantations like humans. They could hurl fireballs or rain down arrows of ice with a single howl. To face off against the likes of them, humans needed to bring a paladin, who were the most powerful magical warriors and of whom there were only twenty, even in this holy nation.

Because the demons did not possess physical bodies, every single one of the knights was equipped with magic weapons to slay them. In addition, there were many priest warriors from the Church of Kostor present to fend them off, and they brought along someone from the Academy of the Magical Arts who could advise on summoning magic. This advisor had cast powerful elemental magic during the battle as well. Only with all of this were they able to win with only a few dozen casualties.

Elemental magic—which was the advisor's specialty—was different in that the caster offered their magic to an elemental so that the elemental would use their power on the caster's behalf. Elementals came from the Elemental Realm of the Ethereal World and were equal to demons in terms of power. Although the summoner from the academy could only summon mid-ranking elementals, the demons' lack of physical bodies meant that they had

been unable to recover their magic and thus were defeated by the elementals. However…that hadn't been the end.

It had only been the *beginning*.

Every single repulsive demon, along with the soldiers and knights who had fallen to them, had been the true intended sacrifices for the enormous summoning circle. The remaining demon worshippers also offered up their lives in hopes of summoning an even greater demon.

While summoned, elementals manifested in the elements they were attributed to, such as fire and water. Demons, however, manifested with bodies in exchange for human souls.

If a highly intelligent and powerful demon had been summoned and taken a body in exchange for the powerful souls of the fallen knights, wizards, and priests, the beast would potentially be as powerful as an arch elemental and capable of a cataclysm.

In the past, when an arch demon had managed to appear in this world, there was terrible bloodshed and a small country had fallen to ruin before the monster could be slain.

The knights and the soldiers fought like mad, desperate to ensure that they did not succeed in summoning an arch demon in the kingdom. However, when a knight pierced Baron Hayden's chest with his blade, the man grinned gleefully at his own demise as the summoning circle began to glow with a golden light and something emerged from within.

They had summoned an extraordinarily beautiful golden cat.

Everyone gasped at its sublime beauty. Even Baron Hayden, despite having been pierced in the chest, forgot to die, and gazed at it, unblinking.

Was that truly a demon?

Had they accidentally summoned an angel instead?

Everyone hoped as much. Meanwhile, the dying final member of the greater demons fell to his knees, trembling in fear, and bowed

his head deeply in reverence.

"Golden Beast…" Those were the greater demon's final words before he turned to dust.

The priests who were knowledgeable about demons and the summoner from the Academy of the Magical Arts shuddered as they realized what the words meant. When a demon addressed another with "Beast," it implied that they were the most fiendish of creatures, feared even by those of their same species. It also meant that it was possible this "Golden Beast" was even more powerful than an arch demon.

If it was allowed to be released into the world, even this holiest of nations might face destruction.

What was to become of the kingdom? How were they going to defeat this demon? As such thoughts whirled in everyone's minds, they were incapable of action.

However, one person dared to approach the Golden Beast. The dying Baron Hayden had a look of rapture across his face as he stepped into the magic circle. And then, immediately, he was struck by golden light and disintegrated.

In that same moment, the summoner who had been the catalyst for the summoning perished without being sacrificed, interrupting the Golden Beast's summoning. The Golden Beast disappeared in a pillar of golden light that reached toward the heavens.

And that was how the demon-summoning incident in which so many had lost their lives ended. However, that demon had disappeared into the sky. That was a problem.

Normally, when a summoning was interrupted, the demon disappeared inside the magic circle and returned to the Demon Realm. So where did the Golden Beast go?

Seeing this as a grave matter, after consulting with the royal family, the prime minister, and others, Duke Cowell decided to have both the knights and the Church of Kostor conduct a search for the demon.

Perhaps it had returned to the Demon Realm. Or perhaps it had been annihilated. However, if this high-level demon had managed to acquire a body to inhabit, not only the kingdom but the entire world could be in danger.

They focused their search in locations where there was a high density of mana or spiritual landmarks where powerful elementals had appeared before, but they found not a hint of the demon. Ultimately, the Church of Kostor asked the other religions for their cooperation in this search.

It was decided that priests would administer blessings using holy water to every baby born from the day of the incident to about half a year later in case such an evil creature had possessed a baby. If nothing turned up from this, then they would assume that the demon had vanished from the world.

Malt himself had conducted blessings for hundreds of babies over the past six months. Of course, there were more babies than that here in Toure, but he himself conducted the ceremonies for the babies who were most likely to be possessed by the demon, the babies who had been born around that date, and the babies who were believed to possess great amounts of magic as revealed by a secret investigation the country had conducted.

These babies would be the greatest risks, so Malt undertook the job himself to lessen the burden of the younger priests and keep them away from danger. Therefore, Malt could not let his guard down for even a moment. It was only natural that he was exhausted.

"I think that's that for today," Malt muttered.

The young priest serving as his aide confirmed, "Yes, Your Excellency. There are some children remaining; however, I believe that we are nearly finished with all of the high-risk babies who possess strong magical gifts today. You can leave the others to us."

Malt nodded with satisfaction at hearing that they were on track. "Very well. We must keep vigilant as we see our task to its conclusion."

They had been conducting these blessings for about half a year now. According to the country and the Academy of the Magical Arts' predictions, if nothing out of the ordinary occurred with any of the babies blessed this month, they would consider the demon truly gone.

Malt could not be so optimistic; however, he was relieved enough to consider treating the hardworking members of his clergy to drinks and roasted chicken from the nearby food stalls. Nevertheless, that would have to wait until after the day's work was finished. Such were his thoughts as Malt conducted the blessings. That was when one last high and noble lady carrying her baby in her arms walked in.

She was the daughter of a viscount he was acquainted with, and Malt had conducted the woman's blessing when she had just been born. Malt had no wife or children of his own and considered Liasteia to be like his own daughter. Due to recent circumstances, she had been unable to go out in public, but now she had borne a child with the man she loved. Liasteia had always been beautiful, but motherhood had served to make her dazzlingly radiant.

He regretted that he could not greet her without ceremony. Nevertheless, Malt already considered Liasteia's daughter like his own grandchild. Her babe had beautiful golden hair and eyes. She was so pretty, just like an angel. Malt couldn't help but smile.

*Hmm?* For some reason, little Yulucia seemed scared.

He attributed her fear to being faced with an adult who she was meeting for the first time and was sprinkling water on her head.

However, she didn’t burst into tears. He was impressed, thinking it a sign that this little girl was truly Liasteia’s daughter.

Even so, the way she was scared seemed a bit unusual. Maybe she was feeling something that the other, regular babies didn’t? The second that thought popped into his mind, an evil creature emerged from one of the other babies a pastor was blessing.

“He really did go into hiding inside of a baby!”

Due to his position, Malt hadn’t been able to participate personally in taking care of that demon-summoning cult, and it was because of that and his exhaustion that he believed he had finally found the demon they sought.

The report had said that the demon looked like a golden cat, but demons could change their appearances based on the body they possessed. He must have changed himself in order to turn into something more humanoid. Perhaps that was why the creature looked more like an evil spirit than a demon, or it was just as likely an effect of having his summoning interrupted and his power considerably weakened.

Nevertheless, the demon was strong enough that the entire force of the clergy hadn’t been able to defeat him. He had no trump card up his sleeve either, so he must have realized that he was going to lose. He began looking for another pure soul to possess anew and headed straight for Liasteia and her entourage, who had been left behind in the evacuation.

As a noble, Liasteia could wield powerful magic, but fighting was against her nature. Malt feared the worst. However, the second the demon laid eyes on Yulucia, he suddenly became frightened. Malt and the clergy then seized the opportunity to vanquish the demon once and for all.

Malt thought that perhaps, as she was such a pure soul, Yulucia had sensed the demon’s presence and felt fear out of instinct. Conversely, the demon had also been scared of Yulucia because of that same purity of her soul. These thoughts brought

back memories of the legend he had heard in his youth from the man who had been archbishop at the time: Evil creatures like demons tremble in fear before the pure soul of the Saint.

*I see… It all makes sense now!* Malt immediately understood then that this baby—Yulucia—was a gift from the gods to their holy kingdom in the wake of the dark shadow cast over it. She was a *Saint*.

Their holy kingdom had long passed down legends of Heroes and Saints. Even after they had become a religious country, the first daughter of the very first king was said to have received a divine mandate from the Goddess of the Land and worked together with a Hero to purge a great evil.

The princess married the Hero and she became known as the True Saint. She went on to found the Church of Kostor, who worshiped the Goddess of the Land as the Goddess of Good Harvests, which then became the country's official religion.

Given this history, Saints were special to not only the Church, but the kingdom as well. Moreso than any of the royal family and the pontiff of the Church of Kostor…

It was also possible that if the purpose of the Saint was not to purge the kingdom of evil, but to oppose an even greater evil, then perhaps a demon had sensed a Saint had been born and used the demon-summoning ritual in order to manifest in the kingdom to harm her.

Malt was sure of it now. The fact that a powerful demon had appeared at the same time as Yulucia's birth and then appeared again here at her blessing ceremony was proof. Malt stroked the child's head in order to get one last chance to touch the Saint and Yulucia smiled up at him like an angel.

Seeing that smile, Malt was fully convinced that Yulucia must indeed be a Saint, a blessing from the gods. He found it reasonable then that he sensed such strong magic coming from her: It was because she was a Saint.

Numerous trials likely awaited her in her future as a Saint. Malt felt as if a powerful goddess had just told him that the reason he had become archbishop in this age and time was in order to support her in her journey.

"O great Goddess above. Thank you for allowing me to meet her."

Malt returned to his room and began to write letters to the king and pontiff to let them know that he had discovered a Saint.

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Vio, one of the manor's three maids, had graduated from the Academy of the Magical Arts and worked as Liasteia's personal maid since she was fifteen years old. Despite being a commoner, Vio was as educated as any noble and was a rare beauty. She had received offers to work at the academy or even as a noble's mistress and all other kinds of solicitations, but ultimately, she'd picked the path of becoming Liasteia's lady-in-waiting.

She felt she owed a great debt to Liasteia, whom she called "Big Sister."

As a commoner going to the Academy of the Magical Arts, which nobility attended, Vio became the target of their envy for her good looks and smarts, putting her ill at ease. However, the academy had a custom in which the older students acted as mentors for their juniors. Hers was Liasteia, who was five years older than her. Despite her noble ranking, she fully took on the role of older sister and adored Vio like a younger sister.

Not only that, but because of Vio's talent for holy magic, some of the religions tried to coerce her into becoming a priestess. When she refused, they began harassing her family's store and Liasteia

had stepped in to help, asking the archbishop of the Church of Kostor for their protection.

Just when Vio graduated, she heard word that Liasteia was with child, and promptly asked her mentor if she could serve her. Liasteia and everyone else in the manor maintained that Yulucia's good health was thanks to Vio's healing magic, but Vio doubted that anything she had cast had done much at all.

*Perhaps the gods truly do exist.* Because of what some of the churches and temples had done to her family, Vio had stopped believing in the gods. However, she now considered Liasteia's daughter a blessing from the gods who favored them.

Liasteia's baby, Yulucia, was anything but ordinary.

She hardly ever cried. Not even at night. It was surprising how little she fussed. Eventually, Vio began to feel there was something strangely unsettling about her.

The child's appearance had clinched it. A few days after she was born, she had become remarkably beautiful. Liasteia and her husband were both quite attractive people in their own right, so it was only natural that their baby was adorable, but Yulucia greatly surpassed them both in that category.

Fer and Min, who were two years younger than Vio and had been hired after her, doted on the girl so much that it almost bordered on obsession. However, it was the fact that Yulucia looked just like an angel—like the ones in the fairy tales—and Yulucia's powerful gaze, which conveyed her desires, that drew Vio's interest.

Ever since that day, Vio began to observe Lady Yulucia.

One day, Yulucia appeared to be trying to stand, so she was holding onto the bed frame for support. She couldn't get up, though, so she tried to kick off it to stand instead. That was when she bonked her head hard into the bed's railing and lost consciousness. Vio hurriedly used healing magic on her.

Another day, she heard some kind of noise and went to check on Yulucia in her room. The girl was humming some nonsensical tune when she opened her mouth wide and this bug flew right inside, causing Yulucia to choke. The maids all worked together to get her to throw it up.

On a different day, Vio had given her one of the baby cookies that Min had worked so hard to make, especially since Yulucia had such a small appetite. To her surprise, Yulucia liked the cookie enough to stuff her cheeks with it. However, because she had no teeth yet, she had no way of chewing, and with her cheeks puffed up like a squirrel's, Yulucia looked at a loss for what to do.

And then one day, Yulucia was crawling along on the rug when she left Vio's sight for just a moment—and just completely disappeared. Everyone in the manor searched for her, only to find that she had upended the trash can in the living room and hidden herself in it.

Having witnessed all of this, Vio began to believe that Yulucia was a fortunate child beloved by the gods, a heavenly maiden whose eyes shone with such intelligence. She was a beautiful girl, as lovely as an angel. And yet…

"She is a very unfortunate girl."

Despite all of her gifts from the gods, Yulucia was to be pitied.

Upon coming to that conclusion, all of Vio's feelings of unease when it came to Yulucia vanished. Because of the disparity between her looks and her actions, the manor had been filled with more light and laughter ever since Yulucia was born.

"I think that our lady may truly be an angel."

"Why do you say that, Vio?" Liasteia asked curiously as her maid happily brushed her hair.

Liasteia had not led the happiest life, so to her, Yulucia really was an angel who had come down from heaven to bring her joy.

"I hope you'll continue to take such good care of Yulucia, Vio."

"You can count on me, my lady. Every single one of us loves Lady Yul."

Picturing Yulucia in their minds, the two of them smiled at one another.

And that was the birth of this manor's little "princess."

Yulucia, who preferred the little snacks that the maids poured their hearts into making over the delicious food that the chefs made, would surely grow up to be a wonderful lady who understood the hearts of the common people.

However, Yulucia's beauty itself was a danger to her. Yulucia had no idea why they were so overprotective of her that there was always someone by her side, why they always carried her whenever they went somewhere, and why they wouldn't even use a baby stroller with her.

"Hee hee." Recalling this, Vio chuckled to herself. Figuring that they should be home soon from Yulucia's one-year-old blessing, she got to work preparing tea with her charges on her mind.

# Episode 3:
# I Am Two Years Old Now

"HOW AWFUL," I SAID IN MY CUTE, CHILDISH voice.

There was no one else in this room. It seemed big to me, but it was probably on the smaller side compared to the other rooms in the mansion.

An artist had painted flowers all over the light-pink walls. My new smallish bed had a canopy complete with swaying, flower-patterned lace curtains. There was a small dresser for playing make-believe with and a small stool.

From an adult's point of view, it probably looked like there was no one in the room. However, if they looked down, they would notice someone.

Even though such large panes of glass must be very valuable in this world, this room was furnished with a full-length mirror that must have cost an unimaginable sum. And before this mirror stood a small, golden-haired toddler.

Yes, that toddler was me—Yulucia.

I had just turned two years old and I was stunned when I saw my whole self for the very first time.

"How could this be?"

My mom—I mean, my mother—was very beautiful.

Her bouncy blonde hair was soft and smelled nice. I was so happy whenever she carried me in her arms and I would always bury my face in her hair.

After my blessing at the church, I met my father for the very first time. I figured he must be very busy with work. He had come to check up on us because he had heard about the evil spirit at the

church and he apologized to Mother for not being able to come home more often.

My father was a very wonderful person. He looked to be in his mid-twenties with reddish-blonde hair and was quite handsome and charming.

Seeing the two of them together, I imagined it was a wonderful moment for them; they were all over one another like sugar and honey mixed together.

I was the daughter of such an attractive couple, so they must have had very high hopes for my beauty as I grew up.

Aiming to get someone as high as a prince would've been a bother, so I didn't want to do that, but I figured that my looks should be good enough to easily woo an attractive middle-aged man who was the heir of a house of decent standing and who would dote on me. As I was only capable of such lower-middle-class ways of thinking, I underestimated what my future would be like, assuming I would want for nothing.

At the very least, I wanted my mother's affections, and seeing my reflection in the glass window at night, I figured that since I was such a cute baby, I would be able to get by.

At least, that's what I had thought.

"This is *impossible*."

Now, don't get the wrong idea. I didn't dislike my appearance; I believed I was very beautiful in a way. But…I would be happier if I were beautiful several years from now instead. Like, coming into my beauty at like ten or so. From now to then, I would have preferred to be told I was cute and adorable and have my parents be told what an angel I was.

I shook my head, swaying my straight golden hair that reached my shoulders.

What was with my hair? It looked more like gold thread than blonde hair, as if I had brought the golden color of my fur with me

into this life.

My skin was a normal shade of white, but when I took a close look at myself, I didn't see any pores. When you look closely at human skin, you can see texture in it, but mine didn't have any. I seemed to have inherited only the best of my parents' features. With my tiny pink lips and long, gold eyelashes, I was very lovely and pretty. Makeup was meant to be used for defining one's features, but wasn't it uncanny when someone's face was able to naturally replicate the effect on its own?

Well, I was glad to have been born beautiful, even if I felt my looks were a bit overboard. However, that was not the end to the disquieting nature of my looks.

The problem was that I, uh…had no "flaws."

I had no idea how to explain it.

But, like, humans were living creatures. And being alive meant that you suffered from flaws, whether it be your veins, your skeletal structure, or from the effects of your lifestyle, eating habits, even the way you walked. However, I had not a single flaw.

It would've been nice if that was all. I mean, it wasn't good, but I could accept it for now. It meant that when the ladies in the neighborhood told my mother that I looked like a doll, they really meant it—they weren't just being nice.

Unfortunately, I was not a doll. In fact, if there were a doll who looked like me, I would have hated it.

My eyes looked like my mother's and father's: gold with a tinge of pink.

But my gaze seemed way too intense?

I had such a gentle eye color, but there was this weird penetrative look in my eyes, like I was gazing at them with crazy intensity. And I didn't think it was just me who thought so either. The maids should've been plenty used to how I looked by now, yet they averted their eyes whenever I stared at them!

This was *impossible*. It wasn't possible for such an uncanny two-year-old to exist.

Did something happen to my body in the past year? Was it my hair? Maybe it really was because of my demon body's coat? Maybe I would be better off going bald, but that would be counterproductive, because I just wanted to be cute like any normal person. *His* ire must have followed me all the way to this world because I wanted to live like a normal girl in this World of Light.

Maybe the people of this world wouldn't notice my "flaw."

However, *I* certainly did. I was able to see it because of what knowledge I possessed of the world from my dreams. And when the recognition hit me, it gave me chills.

I looked like one of those 3D CG model characters. If such a flawless virtual image made to match people's ideals were to actually appear in real life, people would naturally be freaked out.

"This isn't what a *human* is supposed to look like," I muttered in a daze as I gazed at myself in the mirror in my room for the very first time at two years old.

I had decided my life's goal: live like a human.

For normal people, this would mean living the honest life of a good person, and that certainly did apply to what I meant.

However, I meant it the same way a weak demon attempting to live among human society would: They may not be traditionally attractive, and in fact may not even look human at all, but at the very least, they would try to fool those around them by pretending to act like a regular human.

Thinking back on it now, my father had probably dropped the flowers he bought for my second birthday party because he was shaken when he saw me all dressed up…

Well, my father would just have to get used to my appearance, even though we rarely got to see each other due to his busy schedule. At the very least, my father and everyone else at the manor had gotten pretty used to me, so they stopped freezing up so much.

I decided that next time I saw my father, I would go snuggle up to him like a cat. I was actually a cat, after all, and it was what I was good at.

Now then, one day, a month after I turned two years old, my mother, Vio, and I—oh, and the coachman as well—went on an outing.

This time, they spent a whole lot of time dressing me up like I was some kind of doll. They eventually settled on a Gothic-style dress of dark blue satin with pure white lace and silver embroidery.

This…wasn't how you'd normally dress a child, right? It looked like the kind of fancy dress for adults that you'd put on a doll in a glass case. Didn't this kind of dress cost more than what a typical family would make in a month? It had to be couture. It must have cost even more than most dresses worn by adults. And it wasn't like I'd be able to wear this thing next year!

Two-year-old me began to worry about my family's lack of financial responsibility.

"What's wrong, Yul? Do you feel ill?"

"Would you like something to drink, Lady Yul? We have fruit water or tea."

Mother and Vio both voiced their concern, seeing me so deeply lost in thought as we rode in the coach.

I smiled and shook my head a little. "I'm fine."

*I feel bad for worrying Mother. It makes me happy that she treats me like a normal girl even though I'm such a creepy child.*

Mother responded by hugging me tightly. Behind her, I could see Vio's fingers twitching with impatience, which made me wonder if she was the one who was sick.

I decided to set aside the matter of my family's finances for the moment. I figured that I could help contribute by becoming a child model or something in the future if we needed the extra money.

At any rate, I was really looking forward to today's outing. "Are we there yet, Mother?"

"Just a bit longer, Yul. Do you promise to be a good little girl when we get there?"

"Yes!"

"It's so amazing how much you can say already." Mom and Vio were both smiling.

It might've seemed that I was quite well-spoken for a two-year-old, but the sounds that actually came out of my mouth were quite different. If I were to lower the settings on my demon "language corrector" power, I was sure that I would hear myself more like this:

"Ahw wee dere yet, Madd'r?"

"Yesh!"

Two-year-olds with their poor enunciation were cute. And sly.

And although Mother had asked me to be a good girl, the fact of the matter was that people always picked me up the second I tried to move. I couldn't run around even if I wanted to.

Even now, Mother was holding me in her lap. I understood that she was overprotective since I had been born stillborn and only suddenly started drawing breath some time after birth, but everyone at the manor was a little too overprotective, if you asked me. If I were a normal child, I wouldn't have learned to walk at all yet.

The only thing I was allowed to do at home was feed myself with a spoon. However, I hardly ate because it all tasted weird, so when I let my guard down, they would take the spoon and start feeding me like a baby animal.

Anyway, that wasn't important. What was important was that today was the magical aptitude evaluation test for children to see if they qualified for the magical education that the Academy of the Magical Arts authorized for children two and older. They had a branch of the school in the same city we'd gone to for my blessing.

A magical aptitude test! Magic! You read right. Today, they were going to test my aptitude for spellcraft.

Fantasy's all about magic, after all.

Even though I had been born as a demon with a ridiculous amount of magic, my one and only intelligent companion had been a hotblooded idiot and a tyrant who wound up literally devouring anything else with half a brain, so I had given up on magic, figuring that I'd never have a chance to use it.

"We're here, Yul. Time to get out of the coach."

"Okaaay."

I thought that they would let me finally walk around once I got out of the coach, but Mother got out first and passed me over to Vio.

"I can walk, Miss Vio."

I should mention that what I said actually came out sounding like: "I kah wawk, Mizz Bee-oh."

Practically unintelligible, right? But whatever. Somehow, Vio was able to decipher what I was trying to say, and she smiled as she said, "Out of the question. It is still not safe for you to be outside, Lady Yul. Please permit me to carry you. Also, there's no need to call me or the other servants 'Miss.'"

"Uh, okay."

Well, okay then. Vio sure amazed me, as should be expected of the eldest of the three maids. She was so mature, but still only seventeen, I think? She was tall, pretty, and had black hair. A father who had come here with his own child for the test couldn't help but stare when he saw her and my pretty mother. And then, of course, he looked stunned when he realized in the next instant that I wasn't a doll. Sigh.

After getting out of the coach, we passed through the main gate to this branch of the Academy of the Magical Arts and came out to a wide lawn and garden. Most people with a gift for spellcraft were nobles, and graduates often donated to the school, so the academy's facilities were surprisingly well funded.

I thought the academy would be closed for days like this, but I saw a bunch of teenagers who looked like students in casual clothing milling about. I even saw a boy and girl holding hands as they walked. It was really sweet.

*I would love to go to this academy. Father, Mother, and Vio all graduated from the Academy of the Magical Arts, so that makes me want to enroll all the more.*

However, since it was the Academy of the Magical Arts, if you couldn't use spellcraft or conjuring magic, then you couldn't attend. If I had no gift, then I would have to attend a regular school like Fer and Min had.

Regular schools were for those with very little magical ability and those who didn't have the gift for spellcraft, so they received a general education instead. They could learn how to read and write, arithmetic, history, morals, and etiquette or swordsmanship, should they so wish.

However, their education started at seven years old and only lasted six years. Fer and Min had decided to learn etiquette and how to be maids, so they became our maids-in-training at thirteen. Their education sure wasn't very long. People were considered adults at

fifteen here; however, the two of them joined the work force even earlier.

Meanwhile, the Academy of the Magical Arts was a nine-year program. It seemed to have a similar system to the dream world. Here, however, students graduated when they became adults at fifteen and started working after that, so that just seemed the way of things. In addition to receiving a general education, they also studied spellcraft and, since so many of them were nobles, they also received specialized education. The most talented of them even skipped grades. The students also had to wear uniforms, so your standing as a student was recognizable.

There really was a huge difference in education when lots of nobles were involved. Even at the regular schools, the nobles and rich were separated into different classes. Nobles had something like a debut into high society in their early teens, and it was then that you were expected to meet somebody to marry, which I thought was lame. I wanted to experience the bittersweet romance of youth as a junior high schooler at the very least, not just as an elementary-school student—all the more reason why I wanted to go to the Academy of the Magical Arts. This was probably because the "me" in the dream world had been stuck in a hospital room for so long that it made me want to experience all life had to offer. Perhaps it was an impure motivation, but regardless, I needed a talent for spellcraft to attend. I was going to do my best with this aptitude test.

And so, as we entered the hall where the exam was being conducted, we found that there were already a lot of parents there with their children. At a glance, there were about ten toddlers like me here. Vio kept carrying me in her arms as we headed for the reception. When the lady behind the desk noticed me, she froze.

*How rude to look so shocked by someone's face. I'm not ugly or anything, but it still hurts my feelings,* I thought, half on the verge

of tears as I looked at her. The lady was all flustered as she started explaining the exam to my mom.

Mom and Vio only nodded in response as if nothing had happened. Were they just used to these kinds of things happening whenever I was around? I knew I had to act like I was a human, but I was starting to feel disheartened.

What I learned from the receptionist's explanation was that they were going to test if I could use or see magic. It wasn't like in some story where you'd put your hand on a crystal ball or something that would tell you what your aptitude was. We were to go to the partitioned-off booths where I would wave a magic wand. If I made magic happen, I passed. If not, I failed. It was all very simple. I supposed it only made sense that it was simple, seeing as they were dealing with a bunch of toddlers. But how were babies supposed to know how to channel magic into the wand?

I mean, what even *was* magic? Was it tasty? I was starting to worry about whether I could manage to do it or not when I saw a toddler holding a wand make a small fire pop out of it like a lighter. It seemed like I'd be able to figure it out once I held a wand. The booth that kid was at had a fire symbol on it. Maybe a person was able to show aptitude for multiple elements.

First, I would take the test for ordinary spellcraft.

"Ordinary"? What the heck did that mean? And why did she mention both spellcraft and conjuring magic in her explanation? Based on my demonic translator, ordinary spellcraft was just "spellcraft" while the other stuff was spellcraft and conjuring magic.

Was spellcraft where you cast spells? Whereas with conjuring magic, you didn't? Since this was the Academy of the Magical Arts we were talking about, perhaps spellcraft required study, whereas conjuring magic just needed effort to perform. Ordinary spellcraft included booths for fire, water, earth, and wind. It seemed quite versatile.

"S-so, let's give your daughter this wand." The guy at the fire booth seemed scared. Why was he so scared of a two-year-old?

Mom took the wand—though it was more like a pencil if you asked me. As soon as she gave it to me, I waved it eagerly.

*Crack…!*

It broke. The pencil-like wand snapped right in the middle. Everyone sunk into silence with strange looks on their faces.

"L-let's give it another try!" This guy sure was optimistic. Despite his fear, he was doing his best to play the part of a nice big brother! He gave me a new wand, but this one broke the second I held it in my hand—I didn't even get a chance to wave it.

The silence that followed was painful. The guy and I were both on the verge of tears. Mom and Vio were both wearing those indescribable looks on their faces.

"Let's, uh, use mine, then." What had driven him to this point? He gave up on trying to let me use the wands for babies and instead held out his own wand that was about as long as I was tall.

It would be awful were I to hesitate now. I eagerly grabbed the wand, not wanting to fail him when he was so determined, and…

It disintegrated. The wand immediately crumbled into black dust. It was so invigorating, it made me want to take a video and post it online.

"It would appear that your daughter has no aptitude for fire spellcraft—or, rather, she has no ability for it."

Why had he rephrased it like that?

*Well, if I can't do it, then that's that. I prefer to be an optimist. There's still earth, water, and wind. If I have an aptitude for at least one of those, then I should be able to attend the academy, so no reason to start panicking yet,* I thought as I looked around the room.

I noticed the proctors at the other booths were watching us curiously and then they all simultaneously put away their wands and

put up "be back soon" signs. What the heck? You have to be kidding me.

"Lady Yul, you can still try elemental magic." Vio's kindness pained me. She made it sound like we were going to just give up without even testing me in these other disciplines. Well, fine. I would do whatever it took to pass the elemental magic test.

But why did the wands break? I had no ability? Did that mean my lack of ability broke the wands? What was going on? Was it even a question of magic?

There were six booths remaining. Four elemental magic ones and… Wait a minute—was there no such thing as light and dark magic here? I had wondered as much when I saw the elements for ordinary spellcraft, but you would think there would be light and darkness for elemental magic. Yet, there wasn't.

As for the other two booths… As I was trying to figure them out, I heard Mother and Vio whispering between themselves about it. They seemed to be of a similar mindset.

"Lady Lia, summoning still has a poor reputation."

"I know, it's because it hasn't been that long since that incident. It's not a dangerous occupation so long as they're not summoning demons, but ordinary people may not see it that way."

There was a moment of silence.

*Demon summoning, huh? I know how it sounds coming from me, but I understand why people would be skeptical.* Based on what I learned from listening to them, it seemed that summoning was a scholarly field where you had to research magic circles. Some nobles made it their life's work to be researchers. That was kinda intriguing.

*Summoning is cool and all, but what's the last one?* I wondered as I spotted a booth in the back and pointed at it. "What's that, Mother?"

"That one must be for holy magic. You use that to heal diseases and injuries."

Ahhh, that whole thing. The sparkly light that the grandpa at the church and the priests were using.

*Being able to heal diseases and injuries sounds pretty handy. I bet I would be all set for work for life if I could do it. However, even though I look like a human, I'm still a demon on the inside. I kinda doubt I'll be able to use that kind of magic.*

As I was lost in thought, Vio had a pained look on her face, as if she were trying to protect me from something.

"Lady Lia, if she's able to use holy magic, then she will be in danger of some church trying to take her," Vio said with a grimace. She was the only person in our household who could use holy magic.

Mother chuckled dryly in response. She was friends with that grandpa archbishop, after all. She must have felt unsure of how to respond.

Something awful must have happened to Vio for her to say such a thing. Weird cults had existed in the dream world; maybe there were some here too. But Vio didn't belong to any religious organization, so maybe holy magic had nothing to do with the gods.

"Anyway, we should test her in all of them. It wouldn't be good for us to limit Yul's potential by deciding what it is."

"My apologies. It was not my place to say such."

"It's okay, Vio. I appreciate how much you care about Yul."

Vio hesitated a moment before uttering, "Sister."

"Hee hee. It's been a long time since you last called me that."

Huh. I knew that they both had gone to the Academy of the Magical Arts, but I had no idea that they went that far back. Vio had mentioned that she'd started working at our manor when she was fifteen, so she must have become Mother's maid as soon as she

graduated from the academy. I figured she must've been pretty depressed to have called Mother that, so I started patting her on the head. She smiled, looking on the verge of tears as she hugged me tightly.

*Sorry, but I feel like you're going to crush me since I'm so squishy.*

After we pulled ourselves together, next up were the elemental magic tests.

This wasn't spellcraft, but actual conjuring magic. I was told that it wasn't like ordinary spellcraft where you had to study and recite spells you learned; what was most important was the sensitivity with which you called out to the elementals. This was why summoning was considered a part of spellcraft, whereas elemental magic was conjuring magic because it used feelings. This sure was confusing. But if that was the case, then what did you need to study? Were they just trying to tell whether you actually had magical powers or not? However, I was hopeful about the elemental magic. Demons and elementals were both denizens of the Ethereal World, after all. Didn't that mean we were kin in a way?

At the elemental magic booths, the proctors summoned tiny elementals and then observed each baby's affinity with them. I couldn't wait!

Uh… The little wind elementals all ran away as soon as they saw my face. They didn't even give the proctor a chance to speak. The second Vio stepped within the barrier of the booth, the elementals made a face and ran away as fast as the wind could carry them.

The proctor of this booth hadn't expected them to try so hard to run away that they would break the barrier that was supposed to keep them in. He was beyond stunned. For comparison, if they were human, it was like they had just hurled their bodies into the glass of a locked door to escape. Of course he was dumbfounded.

"Let us be off." Vio didn't even wait. She had been quick to give up. It made sense, though; I had no interest in elementals that ran away in fear of a two-year-old.

"Vio, what's the matter with this water elemental?"

"I don't know. It appears to be crying?"

It was sobbing. The second it saw my face, it burst into tears.

This water elemental, with her small, feminine form, suddenly started groveling when I approached. She refused to budge, even when the woman who had summoned her spoke to her.

What in the world had happened to this water elemental? But I knew the reason. Because the summoner was trying to convey her intentions, she was unable to hear that the elemental was quietly whispering in a state of panic.

However, I could hear the water elemental's voice.

The whole time she kept on muttering, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. It was a mistake for me to be here. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't come here because I wanted to be here. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I wouldn't be tasty if you ate me. I'm so sorry."

*Huh? Why are you acting this way? I haven't done anything! All I want is to be friends! I'm a nice demon, I swear. I'm not gonna eat you or anything like that. I'm telling the truth.*

*Please, stop being so defensive. Let me see your face.*

*Crack!*

"Whoa! What's going on?!"

"The earth elemental—!"

We heard something shatter and there was an uproar coming from the booth across the way. The earth elemental had noticed us, dug a hole in the floor, and was trying to escape.

After it disappeared into the floor, the proctor for that booth kept trying to resummon the earth elemental, but it refused to listen,

so both his and the water elemental booths put up "closed for the day" signs.

We fell silent.

What the heck?

Was it me? Was it my fault? At least let me see your faces!

The fire elemental, said to be the element with the wildest disposition, was the least bad of them. It looked like some kind of fire lizard and, when our eyes met, it didn't even look away—it just glared at me.

The fire elemental did better than the others, but it was still a failure.

"Hello, fire elemental."

It didn't respond.

*Pop!*

"The fire elemental disappeared?!"

"Why? How was it defeated?!"

Having nothing better to do now that their booths were closed, the proctors for elemental magic were in an uproar.

*Did it just kill itself?*

Both elementals and demons reformed in the Ethereal World if they died in the Material World, but still, surely it wouldn't just self-destruct on purpose or anything! After all, dying in the Material World weakened you. If you messed it up, you could be reformed with some other kind of shape and wind up completely different from what you were before!

Was it *that* afraid of me?!

"My apologies, it seems that your daughter and the elementals have the worst kind of affinity possible."

*Next up is what I'm hoping to be good at: summoning! Hmm? Look, I'm not feeling depressed at all. Us demons aren't so emotionally weak that this much would be enough to hurt my feelings… Honest!*

"Touch anywhere in the magic circle," the old man running the summoning booth said. His rigidly straight posture really gave him a nice professorly look.

The man continued on, giving a detailed explanation that sounded like a lecture as Vio set me down in a chair. I wasn't sure if he was talking to me or not.

Basically, he said that the "all-purpose summoning magic circle" on the table couldn't summon a big creature; however, it was connected to a place where it could summon whatever insects were in the immediate area or, depending on the user's magic powers, summon some small animal from farther away. In other words, it wasn't going to summon anything serious.

"Okay." I gave a halfhearted nod and touched the circle.

*…Awoooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo…*

As if from somewhere interminably far away—as if trying to claw its way out from the depths of hell itself—a familiar howling of a beast came from the magic circle.

*Bam!*

As if by reflex, I slapped my hand onto the summoning circle. The light disappeared from the all-purpose summoning magic circle and this putrid smoke began to rise from it as the voice disappeared as well.

Mother and Vio had heard the voice and now looked pale. The professor, who had also been close enough to hear, looked like he had aged decades; he was so pallid as he inspected the summoning

circle. When he turned around again, he looked puzzled. “My apologies. I believe that the circle must have been defective and linked to a strange place instead.”

“I-I see. What are the results of her test, then?” Mother asked with concern.

*Huh? Could I have failed just now?*

“She did not fail. She managed to make a connection, so while her skill is still uncertain, I do believe she has an aptitude for summoning.”

I did it. I passed a test. Though just barely. From what I could see, it should have activated so long as you had magical abilities, but I didn’t care.

*But that sure was close! What we heard must have been You-Know-Who. He sounded so mad. I don’t think I can go home for a long while yet. Not that I know how to go home in the first place.*

I hoped the kiddies were doing all right, at least.

“Isn’t that great, Yul? You’ll be able to attend the Academy of the Magical Arts now.”

“Yay!”

I thanked the professor and we left the summoning booth. Mother was carrying me herself now, pleased that her daughter would be able to attend her alma mater, as we went over to the final booth.

“Congratulations, my lady.” Mother and I were in good moods, but Vio had this subtly dark look on her face as she said that.

I supposed it was because the final booth was holy magic—the source of Vio’s concern. There was nothing I could possibly do about it, so I pretended to be an ignorant child and reached out to her with a confused look on my face. Vio finally smiled as she took my hand.

Did she hate religion that much?

As for the last exam, I wouldn't have minded skipping it since Vio disliked holy magic so much. My entrance into the Academy of the Magical Arts had been secured, so I really didn't care how this one turned out.

"No, you were right about what you said earlier—it wouldn't do for anyone to limit Lady Yul's potential due to personal opinion. Lady Lia, please continue with the examinations."

"All right."

It would have upset Vio for me to refuse after she'd pleaded like that.

As for the exam itself, when we entered the booth, there was a fish that appeared to be a mackerel with red, white, and blue polka-dot patterns.

"W-water…"

*It can talk? I wish my demon translator wasn't so good…* I didn't reply.

What was with the polka dots, though? Was that just how it looked, or was it sick? Ah. The proctor told us that the polka dots were proof that it was fresh.

The fish was laid out on something that looked like a cutting board and was clearly in pain. I noticed its polka dots were slowly fading.

The test was to heal the dying fish using holy magic.

"Holy magic uses no rituals or incantations. You can only conjure holy magic from your love for others and the pure desire to save the weak. If you wish to eat the mackerel while it's fresh, then you must first heal it until the polka dots can be vividly seen."

I certainly had the desire to eat it.

*This guy's a proctor, but I have to imagine he's from some kind of religious affiliation, right? Where have I heard that spiel about love and saving the weak before? I do feel awfully sorry for the fish being stuck in this position…*

And so, I—

"Oooh! What have we here?!"

A powerful light emitted from the tip of the wand I was holding. The fish then started energetically flopping about on the cutting board.

"It looks so fresh and tasty."

"Ahhh!" said the fish. It had no lungs to breathe with, so it had been enduring the pain and thirst all this time. I prayed for the fish to keep on living since I thought how it struggled and clung to life was adorable.

And so, I wound up healing it… That was cruel of me, to be honest.

"It appears that your daughter has a very strong aptitude for holy magic."

*Wait, really? But I'm a demon!*

The moment the fish was invigorated with life and hope again, it was met with death. As I listened to it in its death throes, the only path left to me was to hold the cutlery I was handed and wait for the proctor to finish cooking the fish.

I supposed that I really was a devil.

***



Talitelud was large compared to the surrounding countries. Known as the "Holy Kingdom," it coexisted with nature.

This was because the teachings of the Goddess of Good Harvests said, "Children of man, live in harmony with nature." The pious people of Talitelud had practiced this for generations and now, as a result, there were trees lining the roads in every city and the cities were developed so that there were lush parks and greenery all over.

So it was only natural that the nobles and those who were well-off had trees and shrubs on their estates. It was common for the wealthy to have manors in the cities and villas located in places surrounded by nature. This was true in the area known as Toure in the western part of the Holy Kingdom as well, with there being several estates located among the forests where a clean stream ran through.

A two-horse coach was headed for one of these estates in the tranquil forest. This coach was solidly made but unassuming—it wasn't gaudy in the least. Those who knew coaches, though, would have been able to tell that it belonged to a rather well-off family.

If this were the main road through a forest far from the city, then it seemed likely that the coach would be attacked by thieves or bandits. However, the driver, who likely was acting as a guard as well, merely yawned, giving the impression that this was a relatively safe area.

But no place was entirely safe, no matter how many guards there might be on patrol.

There may not have been wolves, but there were still other dangers like wild dogs. This place may have been free of bandits, but there were always people out there whose fingers twitched to relieve others of their possessions. Bored adults and tiny children made for easy prey for people with such wicked intentions. However…

This forest was different. The air here was different. Any human who passed through noticed that there was something off about this place, but they didn't know why.

Not even the sounds of insects could be heard here. There were no songs from birds. The beasts held their breath, sensing that which humans couldn't. The fortunate person who realized the cause of such tension would have left the forest without ever drawing near.

Just as birds and small animals fled from an area where an earthquake was about to strike, just as they hid from beasts that hungered for smaller critters, the living creatures of this forest feared its ominousness and prayed to the gods that it would pass.

Near this forest were tents where a band of mercenaries lived.

They were refugees who'd come here from the country to the south during the war. However, no country would take them in, so they decided to use their military experience to earn money for travel working as guards for merchants, living as mercenaries until a country accepted them as its citizens.

Perhaps the Holy Kingdom, said to be tolerant toward all, would take them in. This faint hope had brought them to this land. But while they were accepted everywhere as mercenaries, they would be accepted here as refugees.

Some of the youths were of the opinion they should just live as mercenaries, but they still wanted a country they could call home. The four families were each comprised of fifteen people. There were tiny children among them, so they wanted houses in which they could wait for the mercenary members of the family to return home.

However, among them, only eight adults were capable of working, including those who had only just reached adulthood. They had no means for quickly saving up the money necessary to buy a house, which was a requirement for them to become citizens.

There were three children who were not of age yet. Two of them were older than ten, yet the last one was still very young. This cute boy was four years old and had soft, chestnut-colored hair. Despite his age, he was clever and helped out his family without ever being asked.

"Hey, Noel. Once you're done with that, it's time for some drills."

"Okay!" Noel quickly put the branches he had collected for firewood down next to the tent and picked out a branch that looked good before running over to the older man who had just addressed him.

The man was not Noel's father. To the mercenaries, all of the kids were like their own children; everyone was family. Ever since Noel was old enough to become aware of the world around him, he thought of the men like family and as irreplaceable companions as well.

As a member of that group, he wanted to be useful to his family. Noel didn't dream of having a normal life in a peaceful area; he wanted to hurry up and become a full-fledged warrior. This seemed like the kind of thing any child might wish for, but in his case, there was an unusual reason.

The other adults likely trained him so that he had a means of surviving should they all die. Noel had first wished to get stronger, but that wish changed to wanting to be useful to the group as a warrior instead of simply allowing his family to dote on him.

"Nice. Good form, Noel. One day, you'll be a great warrior."

"Really?"

"Really. And you'll have to eat lots so that you can grow up big and strong."

"Okay!"

They weren't well-off enough that they could afford to stay at an inn in town, but they weren't so poor that they couldn't buy any

food. After returning from shopping for ingredients for dinner, Noel was asked by a member of his family to wash the potatoes, so he ran off to the nearby stream.

They'd made camp here and let children go wash potatoes by themselves because they had heard that this place was relatively safe. In the other countries they had lived in up until now, they had not been able to make camp near the estates of nobles; however, the lord of this land was tolerant enough that he was overlooking their presence until they got their next job.

"So cold."

It was autumn already, so although the afternoons were still hot, now that the sun had begun to set, the water in the stream felt cold. In one more month, frost would begin to settle and the season of harsher outdoor living would be upon them. They would have to rent some kind of cheap house to pass the winter in.

If only they still had citizenship in some other country, then they could acquire citizenship here by renting a house for a year. However, as stateless refugees, their children couldn't even attend school so long as they were unable to buy a house. The older children had gone to school for a number of years before the war, but unless their fortunes improved, Noel would be the only one of the children to never set foot in a school.

Noel didn't care since he was still very young, but the older children told him about the history of the world and about the Heroes and Saints they had learned about in school, and it filled his young mind with wonder. He wanted to become a Hero wielding a shining sword to fight evil and protect a Saint, who probably looked like a pretty blonde princess. To Noel, the Saint in his imagination was like a princess he had seen in a picture book.

"I wonder if the Saint is pretty," Noel was muttering to himself when—

"Hey, look. There's a brat over there."

"That one of the refugees?"

Men appeared across the lake, chatting as they watched Noel.

"Wh-who are you?"

The men didn't look like brigands; at least, they were dressed like commoners. But their clothes were almost unnaturally neat and they moved like trained soldiers. Based on their conversation, these men had known that there were refugees here. They were emotionless as they crossed the river.

But the second he saw them opening a large jute bag, Noel recognized them for what they were—thieves.

"Someone—!"

"Be quiet!" one of the men shouted when Noel tried to yell for help. When he reached out for the boy, Noel threw a clean potato at him from below.

"Nngh!" The man batted the potato away. He didn't need to avoid it at all, but he hadn't been expecting such a young child to resist and had reacted reflexively, as it had been drilled into him during training.

Noel saw his chance and ran.

"Wait!" The men gave chase.

He was surprisingly nimble for a child, and were these men mere brigands, he should have been able to get away easily enough. But they were more than that.

"Ah!"

"Stop flailing."

Due to their difference in size, the men weren't even breathing heavily by the time they caught up to him, and one managed to grab him by the head and lift him up.

But the several seconds that Noel had bought himself had been enough.

"Noel!" Sensing something was wrong, the older man from before and a young man came running over, weapons in hand. "Let him go, you kidnappers!"

The kidnappers frowned at the two newcomers, who were dressed in ordinary clothes but wielding spears. They tossed Noel away and the man in the back spoke for the very first time: "Get them."

"Yes, sir!" replied the other two.

The kidnappers unsheathed the blades they carried on their backs. Though these short swords were clearly inferior to the mercenaries' spears, the men exuded confidence borne from years of training, which put the mercenaries on guard.

The merchants they'd escorted had told them about how, two years prior, a great number of children in this country had been abducted as sacrifices for some attempted demon-summoning ritual. There were rumors of the children of travelers being abducted recently as well, so the mercenaries were filled with rage, believing that these were the culprits.

*Clang!*

The young mercenary lunged at one of the kidnappers, who parried him with his sword.

The mercenaries had learned their weapons through combat experience, yet the kidnappers had clearly received proper training. They were skilled with their short swords despite the limited reach and were gradually driving the mercenaries into a corner.

Who were these guys? Soldiers? Why would people like that want to abduct children?

"Are you guys okay?!"

"You've come just in time!"

The other six mercenaries had noticed the commotion and come running.

"Tch!" The kidnappers were stronger, but even they knew when they were outnumbered.

"You're not getting away, you scoundrels!"

The tables had turned in an instant, so the two kidnappers began to retreat as their leader began chanting something.

"He's casting a spell!" the middle-aged man yelled to his other party members.

The mercenaries had never had a chance to learn magic, and those who did have magical abilities could only use its simplest forms. They had fought thieves who could use offensive spells before, so they were well aware of how dangerous spellcraft could be.

"*Wind Wall.*" With the man's final words, the entire battlefield was engulfed in wind, cutting off all noise from outside.

The mercenaries had been expecting an offensive spell and were slow to react as the man started casting his next spell.

"Hear my voice and heed my call." This was neither an offensive spell nor a support one—it was elemental magic. "Come forth, *Salamander*."

A fire lizard emerged from the tinderbox hanging at the man's waist.

"Salamander, defeat my enemies."

At its summoner's command, the fire elemental that was about the size of a puppy changed into a dragon about the size of a tiger. The mercenaries broke out into a cold sweat from not only the rising temperature of the area, but the intimidating air the elemental gave off.

Although considered a minor elemental, the salamander was a formidable opponent. Minor elementals were equal in strength to

lesser demons and, like demons, mundane weapons could not harm them. The best humans could do to fend them off was attack with magic or attack it with a strong enough determination to kill that you overpowered the elemental's strength.

The middle-aged mercenary knew this and felt helpless. "Damn it!" With their shabby weapons, they would likely all be killed. He wished that Noel could have gotten away, but the second he'd been tossed aside, Noel had remained rooted to the spot.

Seeing the older man's demeanor, the younger mercenaries gasped. The kidnappers grinned wickedly.

That was when the fire elemental suddenly stopped moving.

Elementals had wills of their own. While demons were constricted by the terms of their pacts, elementals only cooperated with humans if they wanted to. This didn't mean that elementals had a sense of right and wrong, however. Elementals were the true opposites of demons: Though they had no sense of the good and evil of humanity, so long as their summoner didn't intend them harm, they cared not whether their summoner was a villain and would obey their orders. Elementals faithfully followed the orders of those they chose to serve, even if it meant polluting their own domains.

"What's wrong?! Salamander! Get them!"

And yet, despite the command, the fire elemental didn't move a muscle.

Fire elementals were said to have more destructive impulses than other elementals and had no fear in battle. Yet the flames that had once blazed with the will to fight were starting to dim. It shook as if terrified, wearing an expression like it had already burnt out entirely.

Was there something here that an elemental would fear? The fire elemental fixed its gaze on a point in the forest. Just for a brief moment in the gap between the trees, a noble's coach could be seen passing by.

In that instant, the remaining flames on its body bristled up like a cat's as it ran in the opposite direction with such intensity that it broke the summoner's Wind Wall.

Everyone stared in stunned silence as the salamander ran like a dog with its tail between its legs.

"Oh." That was when Noel let out a weak sound, snapping the men back to the present.

"R-retreat!" The kidnappers began to withdraw in the wake of this indescribable happening.

The confused mercenaries quickly went to check on Noel. "You're safe now. Let's go home, Noel."

"Okay."

Noel couldn't move, but he wasn't hurt. The middle-aged man lifted him up and the mercenaries stepped onto the road to head back to their camp. That was when the coach they had spotted just moments before passed them by. Noel lifted up his head and caught a glimpse of a young golden-haired girl looking out the window from inside the coach.

The second he saw her, Noel was struck by her innocent beauty. He believed that the elemental must have fled because it felt so ashamed to have been helping bad guys.

*She must be the Saint.*

Her figure was burned into Noel's young heart. A small desire the young boy had never felt before took root within him.

# Episode 4:
# I Am Three Years Old Now

"DO YOU REMEMBER WHO I AM, YULUCIA?"

Today, I turned three years old. The man in front of me spoke softly with a look of apprehension wavering in his eyes.

Of course I remembered him. How could I forget?

Not only was this man my father, but he was so handsome and perfect, I could never forget him even if I wanted to! However, I only got to see him once or twice a year. I could tell that he was worried that his young daughter had forgotten who he was.

*Don't worry, Father! I, Yulucia, have recognized myself as being a devil ever since that incident with the holy magic exam and have been trying even harder than before to pretend to be human, so of course I am going to do my best to be your daughter!*

"Fadder?"

Ahh, unfortunately my pronunciation was still bad even though I was three years old now. Despite this, I did my best to address him as I toddled over to him. Father gave a look of both astonishment and joy.

"Yulucia, did you just call me 'Father'?"

Huh? Had I never called him that before? Oh, I supposed not. And so, with trembling hands, the man I had called "Father" for the very first time hesitated to touch me.

*Uh, Father? Don't you seem a little too scared of your three-year-old daughter? Although I'm quite aware I look inhuman, even a devil would feel disheartened by your fear.*

But I wasn't going to lose heart! As a weak demon trying to blend in with human society, it would be best for me to get the

protection of a wonderful man like my father, so I knew that this was a critical juncture.

And I swore that this had nothing to do with having a thing for handsome older men!

It was my birthday today, after all, so I was going to make Father get used to me.

"Happy birthday, Yulucia."

"Happy birthday, Lady Yul."

"Tank yooh."

Mother gave me a silver comb during the party. Was this safe for a demon to use? But when I gave it a little more thought, I realized that I already used silver cutlery every day.

The three maids had pooled their paychecks together to get me a book called *My Very First Grimoire*. Weren't books still expensive in this world…? I hoped it hadn't been too much of a sacrifice to buy. But those weren't the kinds of troubles that a three-year-old from a lower-middle-class family would have, so I accepted it with a happy smile, which made the three of them clasp their hands together in sweet delight.

My wet nurse Torfi had returned to her family once her job was done, but she was here today as well. She gave me a very nice painting to hang in my room. Her four-year-old son Tony was something like my milk brother. He was here too, but he fell asleep the second he saw me. It was almost like he had fainted. I doubted he would come again next year.

My father seemed tired, as if he had raced here from the coach. He gave me a teddy bear that was bigger than me, a cute stuffed rabbit, a bouquet of lilies that I couldn't completely hold in my arms, and lots of baked sweets from a famous shop in the royal capital!

Sweets… Sweets, huh?

There was still something wrong with my sense of taste. Sometimes Min's confections tasted okay and sometimes they didn't. And I was starting to feel that the chef's delicious-looking cakes didn't have enough flavor either. Though, recently—maybe I had gotten used to his cooking? Or he had changed something? Whatever the case, they tasted better than before, though maybe that was because all I'd been given at first was just plain hot salt water for soup.

I didn't know anything about this famous shop, but these cookies made by some stranger tasted like soft, sweetened asphalt to me—not that I had ever eaten asphalt before.

However, I knew that everyone would be sad if I didn't do my best to look like I was enjoying them, so I was internally sobbing as I ate every bite.

After my birthday party was over, my busy father would have to return to wherever it was he went, so I tried my best to delay him by clinging tightly to him so that he had more time to get used to being around me.

Father hadn't once held me, and hesitated to even pet my head, so I toddled over to where he was sitting on the sofa and touched his lap.

"Do you need something, Yulucia?"

As I stared up at him, his gaze darted around a bit. It seemed I had to take a more proactive approach.

"Fadder. Up-up."

"Uh…" His eyes went wide, darting around looking for someone to rescue him, but Mother merely smiled with a warm expression and nodded. Father had a look of determination as he picked me up and sat me down on his lap.

Did he really need that much determination to hold me? But I was touched to have been placed upon his lap.

I felt like he was treating me more like a young lady than his daughter. It made me happy to be on his lap and all, but for some reason, we were both silent. Although I was just pleased to be sitting on the big lap of such a handsome man with his broad chest at my back, he seemed to be at a loss for how to interact with his daughter, what with her uncanny appearance and all.

*But there's no need to fear, Father! I, who have awakened as your very humanlike daughter, have another plan.*

I was a cat. I would be a cat. I could pull it off since that was my original job. I wasn't acting like that because I was acting on instinct!

"Yulucia?" Father trembled slightly as I rubbed my nose against his chest. But I didn't care. I started nuzzling my face against him next. Father gingerly started stroking my hair.

*Not good enough, Father. Mother pats my head with much more love! Do it properly.* And so, I nuzzled my head against his big hand too.

*Huh? There's this really nice smell coming from him.*

It was the same faintly sweet, intoxicating sensation that I got from my mother and from the Dark Beast in the Demon Realm, so I started snuggling my father all the more. That was when he unexpectedly asked, "Did you miss me?"

It was almost as if he was asking himself that question. I looked at him in surprise to find my father staring right into my eyes with this sorrowful look on his face.

Uh… What was I supposed to say? I suddenly felt anxious. And my face was all red from the sweet intoxicating feeling. I felt too self-conscious to keep his gaze, so I wound up burying my face into Father's chest.

"Mm."

"Heh heh. You're so spoiled. Fine, I'll give you all the attention you want." Father's tone changed to one of joy, as if he had never felt any fear at all. His large hand grazed the nape of my neck and my ears as he petted my hair. It tickled and made me twist around in embarrassment, but he caught me with a smile on his face. "Gotcha."

What was this feeling? It was like how it felt when *he* nuzzled me. Was I being disciplined?

"Mee-ah." I made some weird noise; even I didn't know what that was. I buried my face into his big chest trying to get away from his big hand.

That was when he whispered in a sickly sweet tone in my ear, "Ha ha ha. My little Yulucia is just like a kitten, it seems."

"Mee-ah?!"

***

In the Holy Kingdom of Talitelud, there lived a man named Forte.

He excelled at both the sword and his studies. Everyone in his life had high hopes for his future. However, Forte himself had not mustered up his abilities from within.

Forte had an older sister and brother. The three of them were known for getting along well despite how different they were from one another. His elder sister was strong-willed and was kind to the common people. Her brothers were proud of how beloved she was by all, and even after she married into the family of a far-off country, she left a strong impression on her brothers. His elder brother was bold yet sensitive. He surpassed Forte in his martial prowess and charmed many with his fearlessness and affections.

Forte respected his older siblings from the bottom of his heart, and they were proud of and loved their brilliant, clever younger brother in turn.

However, that brilliance backfired on Forte.

Their family held the most power in the entire kingdom, and there could only be one heir. Forte believed that his well-respected brother was adequate to succeed their house and, believing it his job to support his brother, devoted himself to furthering his studies.

However, there were those who believed that Forte was the more suitable heir. Forte himself had no such intention and thus denied it, but when he realized that he couldn't persuade them otherwise, he went to his father to relinquish his family name.

It was his brother, of all people, who stopped him. His brother knew better than anyone how hard Forte worked and valued his talents. Out of all their family members, he understood Forte's nature best. His brother was willing to hand over the headship of their family should Forte desire it—Forte was capable and had a good reputation—but he knew that his younger brother had no such desire to succeed the family name. He wanted his younger brother to be free to live life as he wished. However, since Forte was so talented, the older brother in turn wished for Forte to remain at his side.

Troubled by such conflicting thoughts, the older brother came up with a plan that he knew his younger brother wouldn't like. In a way, it could have been called the path of duty. He would marry his younger brother off to one of their distant relatives who had no male heir. If his little brother were to marry into that family and succeed as that house's heir, they could still be close, though not as close as they were now. That way, his little brother's hard work wouldn't go to waste and both of them could continue to work to support the family, just as they both desired. These were things that a man who had relinquished his family's name could not do.

There was nothing wrong with this plan when one thought about it normally. It could achieve the ideal outcome; however, it instead brought about a slew of problems.

This daughter of their distant relative had a reputation for her string of romances, and Forte's older brother felt bad about marrying Forte to her. Also, his younger brother already had someone he loved dearly who reciprocated his feelings: the beautiful and kind daughter of Forte's wet nurse.

There would have been no problem if Forte could marry her now as he was. All would be well if he could be adopted into a high-ranking house and marry her then. However, her family was not of high enough standing to take Forte as a groom. This was why Forte didn't hesitate at the thought of abandoning his name—it meant that he could be with his true love.

Forte's older brother realized this and it troubled him. However, he was already in talks with their distant relatives and they had already reached the stage where the ties of obligation could not be stopped.

He thought that surely his younger brother must have hated him. And the woman who loved his younger brother must have been devastated. However, the elder brother feared burying Forte's hard work and talents, so he took coercive measures to bring Forte and this other house together.

After marrying into the distant relative's family, Forte conceived two children, as was his duty. At first, he had considered adopting a son from another family, but his wife, who also happened to be a childhood friend, wouldn't accept that as an option.

Although he had not desired this marriage, Forte tried to love his wife and two daughters. However, his wife, who was two years older than himself, was selfish and self-absorbed, and his daughters had similar unyielding personalities. Because of the way his wife

belittled him, his daughters had no respect for him and thus only obeyed their mother.

Having to endure this, Forte wondered if he could ever truly love them…

His wife was called "the rose of high society" and their daughters inherited her beauty. Others claimed to envy him, but Forte couldn't comprehend why. After all, he had never once felt that they loved him.

But Forte understood that his brother had made this match for his benefit. He was truly glad that he was able to work for both his brother's and father's sakes. His hard work was paying off, and he had been granted a position where he could make full use of all of the skills he had acquired. In that, he felt fulfilled in a way.

And yet, the anxieties accumulating in Forte's heart were beginning to weigh on him, leaving him more and more haggard by the day.

His older brother also felt terrible about the whole ordeal, having been the one to force Forte into this situation. And so, he told Forte that there was a place where he could find peace and relaxation—a place that would save the other victim in this situation as well.

Considering how weary Forte had grown of life, he was doubtful even as he traveled there. It was a small estate in a forest, located in a corner of the land Forte had inherited by marrying into this family. There, he found the daughter of his wet nurse, who had still not given up on their love.

Polygamy was not common in the holy kingdom of Talitelud, but Forte was now of a position to desire a second wife. He'd feared that his demanding wife would take her wrath out on his love, so he had held himself back from his beloved up until now.

Nevertheless, upon meeting her again, he could not contain his overwhelming love for her. They became deeply involved and the gods blessed them with an adorable angel.

His cherished daughter had been stillborn, but miraculously drew breath. Now she was growing up so healthy that you wouldn't believe how close she had been to death.

However, his cute daughter was so pure that he hesitated to touch her.

He wondered if the likes of him was worthy of even touching such a child. Could a man like him, who had run into the arms of another woman due to the neglect he experienced from his family, be permitted to act like a father to such a beautiful daughter? Because of such fears, he hesitated to see his daughter despite the fact that he loved her from the bottom of his heart, completely absorbing himself in his work as a means of running away.

And then, on the day of his daughter's second birthday, Forte was shaken by seeing his daughter for the first time in a year. She had just been a cute little baby the last time he had seen her, but in the span of a whole year she had grown fearsomely beautiful for a two-year-old.

Was his daughter truly human? Was she not actually an *angel* sent by the gods?

He was startled by having such thoughts about his own daughter—rendering him even more hesitant to touch her. Yet when he closed his eyes, he saw the faces of his beloved daughter and her mother. He had assumed that by distancing himself out of fear, she would have forgotten all about him and stared at him with cold eyes like his wife and their daughters did. He was so scared, his heart felt on the verge of actually breaking from anxiety.

On his daughter's third birthday, Forte spoke to his daughter with trepidation. His little daughter actually called Forte "Father,"

pronouncing it the way that young children do. Despite his assumption that she would have forgotten him, she remembered him.

Even so, he'd been away for so long that he didn't know how to interact with her. That was when she took the initiative herself and begged him to hold her. It was then, when she was being so adorable, that Forte realized what a fool he had been.

His daughter had missed him. Realizing how sad she was that she couldn't see him, Forte couldn't contain his love for his daughter any longer.

But why had he kept himself away from his daughter just because she was so extraordinarily beautiful? Why had he made his innocent and sweet daughter so sad just because he felt he didn't have the right to love her?

Forte then vowed to the gods in his mind: *I shall love the two of them. I shall dedicate my life to them, no matter who I have to make an enemy of in this world.*

*And I won't force my daughter to marry anyone.*

***

There was a girl named Selina at the Academy of the Magical Arts.

She was twenty this year and wished people would stop calling her a girl because it was beyond embarrassing. But alas, the faculty and staff had taken to calling her "girl" because she'd had a baby face since she was a student there, so she had given up on correcting them. She would have been better off getting married and

then resigning from her post, but she had yet to find a suitable match.

Selina's official position was the receptionist at the Academy of the Magical Arts' campus in the capital. As a student, she had majored in summoning and loved its research, so Selina decided to stretch out her studies at the academy. By the time she finally graduated, all of the workplaces that had wanted to hire her suddenly retracted their offers because of the demon-summoning incident.

Furthermore, Selina was a commoner, so she had no connections who could help her find employment related to spellcraft. The professor of summoning at the academy felt bad for her and, given her talent in drawing incredibly precise magic circles, recommended her to be hired as their teaching assistant. However, she wound up as a receptionist instead because she was such a people person.

Selina wasn't all that dissatisfied with her current job. During her free time, she could satisfy her desire to study magic circles by helping out the professor, and her work as a receptionist required some specialized knowledge, so she was well-liked by visitors and received special bonuses to her salary too.

Because she was so sociable, she even received a marriage proposal from a family of good standing; however, she declined since the potential match was over forty years old. But even if she did find someone suitable to marry one day, Selina believed that she would want to continue with her work for a while longer.

Selina loved cute things to the extreme. She liked watching the children who attended the academy, and she felt especially gratified when she got to see the droves of cute toddlers who came to take their magical aptitude exams every year.

Cuteness was justice and truth.

Selina had heard this while doing an experiment with magic circles. She had connected to a higher world by chance. The words

had been spoken in a language she didn't recognize, but Selina had understood them from her soul, which had surged up and accepted them as a revelation.

Not that it really mattered or anything.

One day, the somewhat eccentric Selina had been invited by her summoning mentor to go to their campus in Toure to act as the receptionist on their magical aptitude exam day, since they didn't have enough staff. There, a woman who must have been of high standing had shown up for the exam together with her maids. This pretty woman had soft blonde hair, and her maids were very pretty as well. However, the second Selina noticed that the girl one of the maids was carrying was real, she was taken aback.

She had thought the girl was a doll at first—that the maids, as a joke, had brought an actual doll with hair made of golden threads and dressed in one of those frilly dresses that nobles like.

Rarely, there were some parents among the rich who treated their children like pets and decked them out like they were accessories. Assuming these people to be that type, Selina was disheartened.

However, when the girl turned her face to look at Selina, it was such a shock that she thought her heart might stop.

*Was* she a doll? No, she couldn't be. She looked like a doll with her exceedingly flawless appearance, but dolls without any imperfections, as though they must have been made by a god or a demon, simply didn't exist. It would have been sacrilegious to dress such a girl in the clothes of ordinary children. It would have been an insult to her beliefs, in Selina's mind.

In that moment, Selina saw a goddess in that girl's golden eyes.

Seeing Selina stiffen, the girl's slightly drooping eyes—her only sign of being human—grew moist with tears. Finally, Selina was able

to comprehend that she was indeed a human.

The golden child had an aptitude for summoning and holy magic, so Selina was certain that if this girl was from a high-standing noble family as she believed she was, she would be attending school not here, but at their main campus in the capital.

Selina couldn't help but already look forward to this girl's enrollment. If she was proficient at summoning, then there was a chance that Selina could get to work with her if she asked the professor. She clenched her fist with determination as she looked up the little girl's name.

*Click.*

"Eek!" Selina jumped and looked up at the sound of footsteps.

Selina had been thinking about the golden girl so much that she kept getting distracted at work, and once every few days, she had to stay for overtime to finish up all the paperwork that had piled up. The next thing she knew, she was the only one left. The only light in the academy's office was the magical light Selina had cast. Of course, there probably were still some faculty and research students here, but they weren't likely to come to the office at this hour.

There were still security guards around, but she was the only one in this room and kept suddenly tensing up because of a memory that kept popping into her head.

The footsteps got closer and a beautiful woman wearing a simple yet finely tailored chic dress stepped into the room, her high heels clicking on the floor.

"Oh my, I didn't realize anyone was still here."

"V-vice Headmistress?!"

The woman shot the shocked Selina a calm yet predatory smile.

The vice headmistress appeared young despite her position—one would guess her to be in her mid-twenties, but Selina knew she was in her late thirties. She had fierce, sumptuous red hair and lustrous, bright-red lips. There was a strong gleam in her azure eyes that made you want to look away. She had sharp features, yet she was glamorously beautiful.

Not exactly Selina's type, however, since she valued cuteness.

"Thanks for your hard work at such a late hour. Might I ask a favor of you?"

"Uh, yes? What do you need?" Selina didn't have the courage to reject her, even if she was already working overtime—though she did find it strange.

The vice headmistress was an honorary position that rotated between the members of the board of directors. This woman only visited the school a few times a year. Selina had no idea what she could be doing here at the academy by herself at such a late hour.

Selina was unable to hide her confusion, so the vice headmistress smiled soothingly at her. "Nothing too difficult. I was wondering if you could give me the rosters of children who passed the magical aptitude exams within the past couple of years—the last three, if possible."

"Okay." *Why does she want to see something like that?* Selina wondered.

As if the woman had read her mind, she then kindly explained, "I want to know how many children we might have to support the kingdom in the future."

"Of course! I'll fetch it for you at once!" Selina sensed there was an ulterior motive behind that smile as she quickly pulled out the list of kids that she herself had already snuck several peeks at by now.

"Thank you. Could you wait here for a moment?" She began flipping through the pages as if searching for something; she wasn't

reading them. Her hand came to a stop, and after checking the page, she immediately closed the register and handed it back to Selina. "Thank you. I'm sorry to trouble you so. By the way, it's not good for a young lady such as yourself to be here alone at this late hour. If you have work left over, you should come early in the morning to finish it instead."

Selina straightened her posture and gave a rigid, almost soldier-like response. "Yes, my lady. My apologies!"

The vice headmistress gave a faint smile as she disappeared back down the dark hall, a magical light wavering at the end of her wand.

Selina stood at attention in silence until she could hear the woman's footsteps no longer. She then slumped into her chair and murmured wearily to herself, "I guess I should just head home now…"

***

The vice headmistress of the Academy of the Magical Arts' campus in the capital was named Albertine. She was not of a social position to regularly speak with commoners and she would ordinarily be accompanied by a few attendants wherever she went. Tonight, however, she had ordered her guards and attendants to hide and remain on standby in the academy's garden. She had no idea who might be watching; she couldn't afford to stand out by bringing a large entourage along. If that clerk girl had acted strangely, then she might have had to suddenly go missing.

She trusted no one except those deep in her inner circle.

"Zumana," Albertine murmured as if letting out a sigh as she walked through the hall.

A slender man in his early twenties appeared and bowed his head deferentially to her.

"Are the children asleep already?"

"Yes. Your daughters were sad because you and your husband have not yet returned. However, they finally fell asleep just a little while ago."

"I see," she muttered, merely sighing as if to say, "So, he hasn't come home yet."

She didn't even seem to realize that the words had escaped her lips, but Zumana could feel the woman's uncontainable fury and cast his eyes down slightly.

"Come," she ordered.

"Yes, my lady."

Albertine didn't even look back as she started walking again. Zumana, who appeared to be a butler, gave a silent bow and followed after.

The only sounds were the clicking of her high heels and the only illumination came from the magical light as they proceeded down the dark hallways. They reached a door that had a faint glow spilling out of its gaps.

"Professor Gaspard? Are you in?" Albertine addressed the door in a voice that was neither loud nor quiet.

A moment later, an elderly gentleman opened it. "My, if it isn't Lady Albertine. Welcome." Professor Gaspard greeted his former-bright-pupil-turned-boss with an amiable smile on his face. "Please come in. Don't mind the mess."

"Thank you. I see you're researching something new?"

The room hadn't changed much since Albertine had been a student. Noticing a new summoning circle she had never seen before, she chuckled as she remembered his nickname: "Research Fanatic."

"Ha ha ha. Well, you see, last year, when I traveled to help out with the magical aptitude exams, one of the children we tested turned out to be quite powerful. I've been working on making a magic circle strong enough to withstand her power. I hope to have it finished by the time she is admitted to the academy."

"Is that so? Whose child was it?"

"I am unsure, but surely their family was of a similar standing to yours."

"Is that so?" Albertine's eyes narrowed slightly as she recalled what she'd read in the register earlier.

"Come, sit. I shall pour you a cup of tea."

"Thank you, but there's no need. I cannot stay long, though I wish I could. I was just wondering how the research on the summoning circle I had asked you about was coming along."

"It's nearly finished now. The circle would be even more efficient were I to incorporate this magical equation for withstanding usage by someone with strong magical powers. However, the binding power weakens when it absorbs strong magic, so I imagine that would be an issue."

Albertine had asked Professor Gaspard to research a special kind of summoning circle for her. She wanted a new kind of summoning circle in which the user could summon a strong creature in their image instead of some random demon, elemental, or fae.

The request had piqued the professor's interest. When a person summoned a fire elemental on different days, they didn't summon the same exact one each time, but one that had a different level of strength depending on how long it had been alive.

It was known that if a summoner got an elemental to like and "possess" them, then that specific elemental could grow and become more intelligent and powerful. That said, hardly any summoners or elementals could reach this level of affinity. If a summoner could

intentionally summon the same specific elemental more than once, then it should be possible for them to increase their own rank.

However…

"What kind of creature do you intend to use the circle for?"

The mood of the room suddenly shifted as Professor Gaspard met Albertine's gaze. Albertine merely smiled at him in return. "I merely enjoy the research of spellcraft," she said. "Also, my dear husband has been so busy trying to clear the names of summoners ever since that dreadful incident. I was hoping to do something that could help him."

"Ah, I see. I'm always so impressed by your thoughtfulness." Gaspard smiled at her exemplary answer and took out the test magic circle he had prepared. "Here's the circle. Be careful when experimenting with it."

"Thank you. I shall be careful." Having acquired what she'd sought, Albertine gave a genuine smile and let a faint sigh escape her lips. "If you would excuse me, then, Professor. I promise that I will repay you for this."

# Episode 5:
# My Magnificent Daily Life as a Three-Year-Old

HALF A YEAR HAD FLOWN BY SINCE MY THIRD birthday. As a three-year-old, I was a big kid, so I was of a different rank compared to a two-year-old. There had been all kinds of changes in my life these past six months, and I had learned a lot of things too.

The first thing that had changed was my wonderful father. Before now, he had only visited a few times a year, but now he was suddenly visiting a few times a month.

*Did something happen, Father? Was everything okay at work? You didn't get fired, right?*

Now, now, I was sure that wasn't what had happened. He was wonderful, my father. No matter what kind of fancy store he worked at, I was sure that his presence alone was enough to draw female customers in droves twenty-four hours a day. I could guarantee it as his daughter. Not that I actually knew what his job even was.

Though, uh…I really didn't need the confectioneries he brought every time he visited. I really didn't want cakes and cookies made by people I didn't know. I couldn't eat that much anyway!

*But I can't refuse when you offer to feed me! So I swear I'll eat them! Don't look sad, Father!*

However, I could not resist the temptation of sitting with my father. I loved lazing about in his big lap. And when I did, Mother would sit down with us and stroke my hair.

It felt like the two of them were doting on me way too much.

Ever since I turned three, Min started reading me books beyond picture books.

Out of our three maids, she was the quietest. She loved biographies and stories, so she read me all kinds of books about the place we lived. As a weak demon trying to blend in with humans, I was incredibly grateful for all of the information about the human world.

"There are all kinds of species in our world in addition to us humans."

"Wow."

Regular people like us were called "humans." Other friendly kinds of humanlike species were called "humanoids."

"And the fae 'shiodaifuku' live deep in the forest."

"Wha?" *Come again?*

"The fae shiodaifuku live deep in the forest—"

"Yep, now I get it!"

I gave Min a positive response after she unconcernedly repeated herself. What was she talking about, though? By "shiodaifuku," did she mean salt and bean mochi? Were there mochi dumplings living in the forest?!

Oh, wait, my demonic translator was off.

Lifeforms with souls like us demons and elementals didn't understand *words* per se. Rather, we could sense the *intent* of intelligent beings and meaningfully understood that as words. For example, I could hear a noun as it was spoken in this world, and if it was referring to a concept that I knew, like "apple," then it would sound like the word "apple" to my ears. Also, when I said "apple" out loud in Primal—the language of elementals—or Empyreal—the language of gods and demons—then I would automatically say the right word in this world's language instead.

Back in the Demon Realm, I remembered that the Dark Beast had taught me that when you reached the level of a god, by just infusing Empyreal words with magic, everything you said could be translated and you could even make miracles happen.

While my translator was quite helpful, I had a slight problem with writing. Reading wasn't a problem. Just by looking at them, the words I didn't know would rearrange themselves into terms and sentences I could understand. I only really needed this converting once, though, as once I had seen a word, I was able to easily understand what it meant from then on.

But this process didn't work at all for writing. Not understanding grammar was lethal. Right now, the only thing I could do to learn was practice writing each and every letter, but it was really annoying because the words kept converting in my head.

And so, I had just remembered that I had turned my demonic translator off so that I could better learn the language of this world.

So, was "shiodaifuku" actually a proper noun in this world? Or were there a bunch of mochi dumplings living in a forest? I turned my demonic translator back on and slowly said "shiodaifuku" out loud.

"Elf."

*But why?!*

So that's how it was: There were fae *elves* living in the woods in this world.

You know the type I mean. The kind of people with pointed ears, long lives, and snobby attitudes even though they're just a bunch of country bumpkins. What Min was telling me wasn't too different from how I understood elves to be, but common sense in this world could be sneaky in weird ways. But being as there were elves and all…

"Do dwarves exist?"

"Yes, the mochipurun live in the mountains and mines."

I was silent.

There was nothing I could say. Well, I could say one thing: What the hell?! It didn't really matter, but the dwarves here weren't

as I expected at all. They were actually giants, being at least two meters tall at their shortest.

At least mochipurun sure sounded better than shiodaifuku. But was it really? Both of these species lived in settlements far from humans, so they were probably hardly ever seen in human lands. I prayed earnestly for this to be the case. If I actually met one in real life, I likely would burst out laughing at them.

Min also taught me about the country we lived in.

This was the Holy Kingdom of Talitelud, a large country in the center of the continent. Five families of dukes protected the royal family, and there were about ten million citizens living here. I had no idea if that was a lot of people or not, but I guessed it must've been, since Talitelud was supposedly a large country.

We lived in Toure, which was in the western lands belonging to Duke Cowell. The city where I'd had my blessing was a large metropolis with hundreds of thousands of people living in it. The manor we lived in was located at the center of a forest on the outskirts of the city.

Magic existed, but this world only had coaches for transportation. Coaches infused with magic did exist and were faster than regular horse-drawn coaches, but that was the extent of what was available. Many people lived their whole lives without ever stepping foot outside of Toure.

There were other countries surrounding Talitelud, but the closest country would take two months just to get to normally, and over a month even with an express coach, so considering how weak I was, I had little desire to travel.

"Lady Yul, did you know that there's even a daemon king in the northern part of the continent?"

"A-a *demon king*?"

Whoa, now that was some real fantasy talk right there.

It turned out that past the northern mountain range, there were “daemons,” and they even had their own country.

Daemons? Were they different from demons? It turned out that these “daemons” weren’t related to demons or anything; the term just referred to species who committed evil deeds like a demon would. Which made their king not a “demon king,” but a “daemon king” instead.

Basically, he was the big bad evil guy. How undignified.

Of course, “daemon” wasn’t actually their species name, but a derogatory term. The name certainly fit, though, since they were known for being impatient and starting wars with everybody. They might not have even been people.

Min patted my head consolingly. “The last time these daemons attacked us humans was hundreds of years ago, so you have no need to fear them.”

But she had no way to guarantee that was true. I sure hoped she wasn’t foreshadowing some weird plot point!

The next day, my blonde maid Fer carried me to the stream near the manor.

“You like fish, right, Lady Yul?”

“Yeah.” Though I didn’t really like them *that* much.

Our manor was on the gentle slope of a mountain, so I could see the pretty stream from the house. Once, when we came home from the city, we saw people who were camping out nearby and it was very heartwarming how they tenderly held a sleeping child in their arms.

Our gardener and guard for the manor, Franz, was already here, leisurely fishing.

*Shouldn’t you be working?*

Fer kept me in her arms as we watched Franz, and I got to see all the fish he caught.

Though I really had to wonder: Just how long did everyone intend to keep carrying me? Was I just not that heavy for a three-year-old? Was she really okay holding me for this long? Were my maids just that strong? Were they all going to be able to get married someday? Fer and Min were both only sixteen, but…

Putting that all aside, I wondered if we were going to have the fish that Franz caught for dinner tonight. They were small, so maybe they would make good snacks if deep-fried in flour. Either way, I still preferred vegetables, which at least had a texture I could enjoy since my sense of taste was all messed up.

They all assumed I liked fish because I had healed that fish with holy magic during the magical aptitude exam. Though it was off-putting even to me, the real reason I had healed the suffering mackerel (that was what I was calling it for now) was because I had wanted to give it the hope of life only to see it fall back into despair.

It was a demonic urge, similar to chasing after those insects in the Demon Realm.

Those feelings had awakened the power of holy magic within me, even though I was a demon. That poor mackerel. In case you were wondering, the mackerel had been turned into a tasty meunière.

But if I were to act on my instincts and go around smacking fish, they would surely call a doctor to go poking around in my head to make sure I was all right—not that I wanted to get my hands dirty like that anyway.

And I wasn't about to start keeping a fish tank in my room or anything. The fact that I liked seeing fish dying more than seeing fish full of vitality was probably because my desires were gradually becoming less human.

*Hmm? Wait, maybe I should make it my thing to like fish after all. That would surely make me seem more humanish!*

…As if.

The following day, Vio taught me about magic.

Although I had been judged to only have an aptitude for summoning and holy magic, I had no idea how long I had before people discovered I was a demon and came after me, so I figured it would be a good idea to learn about the other kinds of magic too.

I was three-and-a-half years old now and I still wasn't able to tell whether I was fully human or a demon. Even if I wasn't a demon, there were things about me that felt demon-like, so it would be for the best if I learned as much as I could about magic so I didn't accidentally use some weird kind of magic by mistake and get found out that way.

"This is an ordinary water spellcraft spell," Vio told me with a serious expression as a ball of water floated above the palm of her hand.

Yeah, I knew that. It was a pretty normal spellcraft, right? It kinda made sense at the time, but when I gave it a little thought, I realized I didn't really get it.

"What's it officially called?"

"Very ordinary water spellcraft."

I stared. What a dumb name. Was "ordinary magic" what it was formally called? Was it ordinary because it was so common? How did spellcraft even work?

"You need to recite the spell with magic to cast it."

"What do you mean 'spell'?"

"Since long ago, if you recite the spell, you can cast the ordinary spell."

I stared again. *Please explain.*

Basically, when a human with the aptitude for it ordinarily recited an ordinary spell, they cast the spell ordinarily? What the heck were they teaching people at that Academy of the Magical Arts?!

"Who came up with the spells?"

"I heard that it was the elves of ancient times."

*I see. Good job, salt and bean mochi people.*

As I listened to Vio cast the spell, I realized what she chanted was not the common human language, but some other strange language. It wasn't quite Primal or Empyreal either.

Both elementals and demons could always be understood no matter what language they were speaking. The fact that Vio didn't literally understand what she was saying meant that the ancient dumpling peoples or whomever had lowered the level of the elementals' words so that they could be pronounced by humans.

And apparently, humans had been using these spells foreeeeever. What a bunch of dummies.

I understood the chant thanks to my demon translator. I didn't want to, but it came to me anyway. Vio's spell had sounded like this to me: "O water that presides over all life, cheed to my hand."

*"Cheed"?! It makes no sense! And what's worse, this is what they teach at that academy! And what's even* worse*, it actually works for some reason!*

The magic in this world just made no sense.

I'd had enough of ordinary magic. Onto the next topic.

"What about elemental magic?"

"You search for them."

"Huh?"

"When you find and call out to elementals, one that isn't busy will answer the call."

One that wasn't busy? Was there a better way to describe this? What would you do if there were no elementals nearby? Did the magic just not work?

"Generally, there are wind elementals hiding somewhere where the wind blows and there are fire elementals hiding somewhere where fire burns. So you have to be patient when you search for them."

So if you found an elemental, then you could try to strike up a deal with them. Was this a game of hide-and-seek? But wait a minute…

"I've never seen one before." I hadn't seen any elementals in the last three years, except during the magical aptitude exam.

"A certain degree of magical power is needed to be able to see them. But now that you mention it, I never see them anywhere near the manor."

I fell silent again. They must have all run away. That must have been the reason flames suddenly got weaker whenever I got close to a fireplace!

So basically, if a person with the right aptitude for it found and called out to an elemental, they would do what you wanted them to do in exchange for your magic? Skilled elemental users must be really good at finding them, then. That being said, if an elemental liked the summoner, would it hang around so that it would be easier to call upon? They almost sounded like crows accepting food from humans without a second thought.

It was—how could I put it?—like, so simple and lacking in style.

And everyone was okay with this being called conjuring magic? I felt like I understood less than I had before, so I decided to ask about summoning next instead.

"It is said that the magic circles used for summoning are the words elementals use given shape."

"Oooh." That was sensible enough. Even though the rest didn't make much sense. "And?"

"And what, my lady?"

"Huh?" That was all there was to the explanation?! "I-is that it…?"

"Summoning itself is very much a field we are still researching. I heard that our most recent research has uncovered that we can now ask simple requests of the summoned elementals and animals."

"That's recent? What about from a long time ago?"

"Supposedly, the summoned creatures ran away as soon as they were summoned."

*H-how useless.*

But wasn't it more likely that the creatures being summoned had gotten used to it than the humans had made developments in their research?

"Oh…"

"Is something the matter, my lady?"

"No, nothing."

It all made sense now. This was why those "demon summoning" holes popping up everywhere in the Demon Realm had become so frequent. The humans had realized that if you gave a demon something, they would work for you in earnest. And that was how all those lesser demons with hardly any intellect wound up bound by bad pacts and forced to work themselves to the bone.

"Even still, it's a simple matter to summon animals. Elementals, on the other hand, are difficult to summon, even the minor ones."

"Hmm."

That made some sense to me. They were likely to resist because they were being brought without their consent, unlike when using elemental magic to call one. And elementals and demons were

both masses of magic by nature, so that was why I could only ever get one leg through small circles.

My intuition told me that neatly drawn magic circles were the most stable. Shoddily drawn lines would be like trying to pull off a hangnail. So long as I could learn how to draw the circles well, then I had a feeling that I could figure out the size of the circle and the amount of magic necessary to make it work.

Though it was because I had tried to force open a magic circle that wasn't big enough and pass through that I'd wound up in my current situation.

"The final kind is holy magic."

Oh, this I understood well enough. It was similar to ordinary spellcraft in that you just said a quick spell, like "Manifest Light" as translated into human words, and then you were good to go.

"Since you have the aptitude for it, let's try to make a magic light now."

"'Kay."

I had managed to heal that fish somehow or another, so this time I tried focusing on casting the spell. I managed to make a glowing sphere, kinda like a lightbulb.

"That was splendid, my lady!"

"Th-thanks."

This was good? I guessed so, since Vio seemed happy. I'd used holy magic to make this, but you could also make light using an ordinary fire spellcraft spell. Normally, holy magic was used for curing wounds, not for stuff like this. However, if the results could be changed based on how you imagined them, then couldn't you do most anything with holy magic with practice?

Vio nodded when I asked her about it. "Holy magic is all about practice, how you imagine it, and your own willpower, my lady."

I couldn’t believe that the concept of “where there’s a will, there’s a way” would be part of magic studies.

You used that single spell for holy magic and then the rest was about practice, how you imagined the result, and the amount of magic you had. You could cast Cure to heal wounds or Holy to destroy evil.

And this had nothing to do with the gods.

Maybe since the omnipotent power of magic was most easily imagined as a ball of light, it was easy to jump from light to gods to holy power.

For all we knew, we were just using a light elemental against its will.

***

Today, I was learning about the animals of the world.

There were horses in this world. Of course there were. We had horse-drawn coaches, after all. They looked pretty much the same as they had in the dream world. However, the horses in this world were kinda dumb. When they saw their master, they went running toward them with tails wagging like dogs and started frolicking around them. It scared me since they were so big.

“Look at this horse, Yulucia.”

“Horsey!”

My father was carrying me while showing me his favorite horse.

Mother had asked Father to take me out since she felt bad that I hardly ever got the chance to be outside. I was really looking forward to a fun outing with Father and Mother, but she couldn’t come with us. Why? Well, they didn’t clue me in, but Vio was here

with us in her place to help out. Today, Father was the only one carrying me around.

*Hey, is there some kind of reason why no one will let me walk on my own? Don't you remember that it's been months since I last crawled around on the ground?*

Yet they wouldn't stop being so overprotective of me.

Well, in any case, Father had brought his favorite horse to a farm on the outskirts of the city so that I could see him. He couldn't have brought the horse somewhere closer? I'd been hoping to get to go out with Father and all, but I hadn't expected it to take two hours by coach traveling with some guys who seemed to work for Father.

The worker guys rode on their own horses instead of in the coach. Once we got to the farm, they removed the saddles and let the horses wander. As for Father's horse…

"What's the matter, Sigt? You're being awfully quiet."

Sigt, Father's favorite horse, quietly looked away from me. He had been fully enjoying the farm and started wagging his tail and rushed over to Father the second he saw him, but he froze the moment he saw me.

*Sigt? Why won't you look me in the eye?*

"Ah! Hey!"

We turned to look toward the voice. One of Father's workers' horses came running over to us like it had lost its mind and started nuzzling my cheek.

"H-hey, stop that! Apologies, my lady!"

*"Neigh!"*

The horse was reluctantly dragged away from me before flopping down on its belly and panting while looking up at me with sparkling eyes.

I could not comprehend what this creature was doing.

Even though I wanted to know what the horses were thinking, I couldn't sense enough intelligence to be able to talk to them even with my demon translator. But why? I could talk to the mackerels!

"Want to try riding Sigt?"

"Yeah!"

Such a wonderful father he was. He could read the situation well, so I had no choice but to say yes.

Father held me as we got on Sigt's back. He was one incredible horse. I hadn't expected horses to be capable of walking so carefully and timidly, like they were walking on thin ice.

*Wait, are you scared of me?*

What I wanted was to go galloping through the meadow. Since my cool father was riding on such a cool white horse, I wanted to see just how cool he looked.

And yet, as my father rode on the white horse through the meadow, for some reason—maybe it was just my lack of an imagination—he only reminded me of an unfettered shogun dressed in a kimono galloping on his horse by the water's edge. It was so strange.

My fun outing with Father was over too soon; it was time to go back home.

By the way, I sat on Father's lap even in the coach. My feet hadn't touched the ground once since we'd left the house.

The coach suddenly came to a stop when we reached the city.

*What's going on? Was there some kind of traffic accident?* I wondered when someone rapped at the door.

One of Father's workers opened the door to lean in and whisper something into his ear. Unfortunately, I didn't possess sharp enough hearing to hear what he said, despite my demon abilities.

Father nodded and set me down on the seat—just kidding. He handed me to Vio and then got out of the coach.

*Did something happen out there? I really want to know.*

"L-Lady Yul?"

Even Vio seemed a bit worried, and she was the kind of person whose feathers were never ruffled. It only made sense. I rarely made any demands and was always a good girl who acted like a doll, but here I was flailing about and reaching for the window.

"I wanna see outside."

"The master will be back shortly."

Vio seemed to think I missed Father. I tried again.

"Waaah."

"Very well. Just a little peek."

The way I puffed out my cheeks like toddlers do as I looked up at her had been enough to get her to give in. It was hard to resist the unscrupulous begging of a three-year-old. I pressed myself against the fitted glass window to take a look outside. There, I saw a woman with bright red hair who had gotten out of a different coach talking with Father.

She was really pretty. Mother was cuter, though.

The woman seemed upset about something and Father looked drained. Maybe we really did run into someone else's coach? Did we have insurance for that?

*But wait a minute… This lady is acting like she's so much better than Father.*

I stared at the woman in annoyance. She suddenly visibly flinched and started looking around. When our eyes met, her eyes widened with shock.

Huh? Had I met her somewhere before? She seemed shocked and angry and sad all at once as she looked at me. She said

something to Father before promptly returning to her own coach. What in the world had just happened?

***

I also slowly started studying conjuring magic and spellcraft.

Right now, I was just your average three-year-old. Just your ordinary well-to-do daughter with overly protective parents and attendants, who couldn't do any kind of physical activity to speak of.

I had been so worried about someone discovering my demon side at first, but it seemed that I was more at risk of being abducted. I had no doubt that my parents would pay the kidnappers whatever ransom they demanded because they adored their toddler, even though she didn't look like a human at all. To prevent that from happening, I made it my goal to get stronger in spellcraft instead of physically strong.

Luckily for me—perhaps due to being a demon, or maybe thanks to my genetics—I had a lot of magical powers for a human. So I figured that would surely come in handy were I able to get proficient at conjuring magic and spellcraft.

I was gonna do my best to get stronger!

"Now, then…" The night I came to that decision, I quietly sat up in my bed.

This room had been mine since I was two, but it wasn't until I was three that I had started actually sleeping in it. I didn't actually *need* to sleep or anything, but I wasn't sure if it was normal for humans to sleep on their own at three years old. Did normal three-year-olds cry for their parents if they woke up in the middle of the night and they were alone?

But I didn't cry. Nor did I go to Mother's room in tears when I woke up in the middle of the night. I was three now—practically a

big kid. I didn't care when I heard the restless comings and goings of Mother and the maids through the hallway on the opposite side of the door.

Why were they even there? They were the ones who told me to sleep by myself.

Anyway, I woke up in the middle of the night, so I snuck out of my room. My goal, of course, was to go study magic.

Specifically, I wanted to research holy magic.

They called it holy magic, but it had nothing to do with the gods. In fact, I was doubtful that gods even existed in the first place. Though, if gods as perfect as humans imagined them actually existed, religion wouldn't end up so corrupt.

Going back to the holy magic, some kids were surprisingly adept at using it. But when some of them grew up, they couldn't use it anymore. Since it worked based on your mental image and willpower, children would find Cure hard to cast, pout over it, and then rely solely on ordinary spellcraft instead since it could be cast with a simple incantation. And once that happened, most children lost the aptitude for holy magic.

Humans didn't understand why this happened, but assuming that magic was omnipotent energy, then it probably meant that they just didn't have a good enough mental picture in their heads. Ordinary spellcraft produced results using commands in simplified Primal, but once you got used to issuing commands that way, the detailed image a person had of the spell would start getting blurry. With holy magic, your mental image turned into magic. Those who couldn't form precise images in their heads anymore then started trying to compensate for that shortcoming by imagining the "miracles of gods" and casting magic that way.

From that point of view, the fact that Vio could use holy magic even though she wasn't part of any church made her an exceptionally rare case. Normal kids struggled with the difficulty of holy magic and, as a result, distanced themselves from the churches

and then lost their aptitude for it, no longer able to imagine what miracles from the gods looked like.

On that point, my mental images had nothing to do with the gods. What I imagined was the magic I had seen in games in the dream world, so I figured I'd forced my way into being able to use it or something.

From my guardians' point of view, they were afraid that by teaching me poorly, I would come to hate it and lose my aptitude for it. This was why even Vio would only let me cast the light spell that anyone could use. She told me that it was more than enough to just practice making the light bigger.

But that wasn't good enough for me. I would be helpless if someone kidnapped me.

And so, I was planning to sneak out in the middle of the night and go to the library. But shortly after I left my room, I faintly sensed someone in the hallway.

"Hmm."

Vio was on patrol duty tonight. It felt like whenever I got up to go to the bathroom, someone would always come right away, so it really felt like someone was always there. But I wasn't a normal toddler. I may have looked like a little girl on the outside, but on the inside, I was a demon, and it was easy for me to fool the eyes of humans by slipping into the darkness.

"Lady Yul, do you need to use the bathroom?"

"Yes."

She found me in five seconds flat. Yeah. I knew exactly why—it was all because of my ridiculously sparkly golden hair.

Having failed to escape yet again tonight, I was scooped up by Vio, who brought me to and from the bathroom and then held my hand until I fell back asleep.

Huh? What happened to practicing?

I realized that it had been a mistake to try to practice holy magic at night, since it let off a lot of light. I had learned my lesson. Not that I had actually been able to do anything.

*I'll just have Vio teach me like normal. But since she still won't teach me more holy magic, I'll have her teach me summoning instead.*

Today, I was drawing the simple magic circle from the *My Very First Grimoire* book that Vio had given me for my birthday…in crayon.

"You're doing such a wonderful job, my lady."

"Really?"

If I had drawn it so well, then surely she wouldn't have needed to give me a fresh sheet of paper the second I was done, right? Why did I have to draw this in crayon, anyway? I couldn't possibly be expected to draw the detailed symbols of the magic circle using crayons that were bigger than my fingers.

"Can't I have a quill?"

"It's still too soon for you to use something with such a sharp point."

*A sharp point? But they're about as sharp as a fork. What's so dangerous about them? Wait a second, have they only ever let me use a spoon?!* Having only come to this realization now, I was utterly astounded.

As I was too stunned to move, Vio took my hand and drew a perfect circle. "Let's practice drawing circles, my lady."

"Circles?"

*Oh… I guess I'm just not at the stage where I'll be drawing those symbols anyway. I-I can't help it! I can't help that my tiny*

*hands can't even draw a circle!*

"All righty then."

It was time for Plan B of sneaking out in the middle of the night to practice magic despite my previous failure. I was calling this plan: "If my body is too inept to draw a magic circle well on paper, then I'll use my demon magic and knowledge." In other words, I was going to try imagining the shape in my head and using my magic to draw it in the air.

This idea had partly come from my knowledge of the dream world. In books with lots and lots of pictures, there were wizards who drew magic circles in the air without saying any spells and just boom-boom-magicked.

*Okay, I've got the image in my mind. I can do this.*

"Hmm…"

*Huh? It's not working.* For some reason, the magic lines were coming out all crooked as I drew them in the air. And when I fixed the crooked parts, other parts would get more crooked and the symbols disappeared.

I got distracted by how I wasn't able to make my circle come out as I had hoped when it suddenly increased in size and this symbol that looked like a fish appeared in the center of the now-perfected circle. Look, I'd never said that I liked fish *that* much!

"Make it bigger?"

*Hmm, I see now.* Having been struck by an idea, I glanced out the window. I wanted to open it, but I knew my maids would come in if I did, so I didn't dare.

"Hmm."

I tried as hard as I could to draw the magic circle in the dark sky outside.

I made it as dark as I could so that no one would notice and, although it was a little crooked, I drew it really big. I'd figured that such a thing wouldn't fit in my room, and it turned out that drawing it outside had been the right decision. However, because I tried really hard and put my magic into it, it somehow got ginormous enough that it could cover the entire sky of a city district. At this size, it didn't matter if it was a little crooked, and I was pretty sure no one would notice since it was practically the color of the night sky.

*Is it just me or has my magic gotten a whole lot stronger? Well, whatever.*

Normal magic circles didn't work unless you channeled a certain degree of magic into them, but this one drawn by my magic just activated on its own without further input from me.

"What was this circle for again?"

I checked *My Very First Grimoire*, which I had left open to the right page. This shape was for summoning a "bug" from some random location.

"Huh?" That was when I realized that my magic circle had used my vast magical powers to connect elsewhere and now all these specks were gushing out of it and falling onto a section of the city.

"Eek!" All of the hair on my body stood on end like a cat's. As soon as I saw all of these nasty, glossy-black, skittering creatures, I double checked that my window was locked, shut the curtains, dove back into bed, and hid my head under the blanket.

*I. Saw. Nothing.*



***

One night, in a section of a city in Toure, in the Duchy of Cowell in the Holy Kingdom, fast, lustrous black bugs, the likes of which had never been seen before, appeared in mass numbers, causing pandemonium among the people.

Not only the citizens themselves, but soldiers, military volunteers, and professors from the Academy of the Magical Arts all came together to exterminate them. Thanks to the power and investigations of scrupulous elementals, they were finally eradicated after two long weeks.

Since the bugs had never been seen before, some scholars wanted them for research; however, for some reason the elementals did not obey the orders from their summoners until every single bug was eradicated, going as far as to scour the entire whole of Toure until not even a single egg remained.

There were several reports that the minor elementals summoned for the task had seemed afraid of *someone*, as if they were being threatened.

Having seen all of this from her window, a certain golden-haired girl had a sorrowful look on her face as she whispered, “I’m really sorry about all this.”

# Episode 6:
# I Have Friends Now

A FEW MONTHS HAD PASSED SINCE THAT disgusting incident where a swarm of bugs from another world invaded—the cause of which still remained a mystery—and it wasn't going to be much longer before my fourth birthday was here.

I had been kind of depressed, so Mother and everyone else had been worried about me, but now I felt much better—I had grown in both body and spirit.

I was going to seal that summoning circle. And I was going to live for researching magic circles.

It might have been related to that incident, but Father had been too busy to come visit for about two months. Now that he was finally here, I immediately went to get his attention.

Father had a bit of a worried look on his face as he sat me on his lap. That was when he said, "Yulucia, there's going to be a tea party in the capital. Would you like to go?"

"A tea party?"

Did he mean the kind of tea party where lots of people gathered to chat? I had probably only ever gotten to talk to, like, ten people in my entire life. I was basically a bona fide shut-in.

"Don't worry, it'll be fine. There will be lots of kids around your age there, so you might even be able to make some friends."

Father had been worried that I only ever saw adults, so he had engineered a way to introduce me to potential friends.

What was it that normal kids did when they played again?

I was pretty worried about it, but I was more worried about Father. I didn't want to embarrass him, so I said I would go.

And so, Father and I were now in a rumbling coach, a couple days into our journey to the capital.

"You can sit on my lap if you want."

"Yes!"

*But of course, Father. Please do your best to hold me, since I intend to sit on your lap until I'm a fully grown, fifteen-year-old adult.* I was only kind of joking.

Anyway, the tea party would be held five days from now. It would take us a total of a week to get to the capital in this coach, though apparently a normal coach would've taken over two weeks to get there. Why were we on such a tight schedule? We had set off riding in the coach the day I'd agreed to go.

For some reason, Mother was staying behind at home, which was too bad. I had wanted to go sightseeing at the capital with the three of us. So, for now, Mother told Vio to accompany us. Would Fer and Min be okay without her back home?

We left in a hurry with only the bare necessities. I was worried about what we were going to do, but they told me that any clothes and other things I would need would be prepared for me there. We were pretty rich, huh?

I wondered what my dad did for work. Nobody talked about it at home and they might've thought it was weird if I asked about it at my age. Maybe it would be okay to ask when I was four?

During our week-long trip to the capital, we couldn't cut through the forest, so we didn't camp out. Naturally. Father was *not* the type to sleep outdoors.

Instead, we passed through fields of wheat. At least, I assumed it was wheat. Since we had polka-dot mackerels in this

world, I couldn't know for sure, but at any rate, we would arrive at inn towns while it was still bright out. Since we'd left our house just after noon, perhaps we could have arrived at the capital a day sooner if we had left first thing in the morning. Not that I'd wanted to do that.

A week to get there, plus two days in the capital, and another week to get back meant our trip would be sixteen days in total. This worried me, since I had never been away from Mother for more than half a day before.

But there were things I was looking forward to. Tonight, Father said he would sleep with me. Hee hee hee.

In general, we only passed through big cities, so we never had to deal with random encounters with bandits, and so we made it to the capital without incident. I had a feeling that we would have been fine even if we had run into bandits, though. After all, we had more than ten guards who seemed like knights with us, and there was this old man in our party who seemed like a butler and was a new devotee of mine.

"Thanks, Grandpa."

"N-n-n-no need to thank me, Your Ladyship."

*Huh? It must be tough to have to go to such lengths for a toddler,* I thought to myself as the old butler broke out into tears of joy at my gratitude.

*"Your Ladyship"? What the? Is he okay in the head? Grandpa's work must really be tough. I'll be sure to give him a shoulder massage later.*

On to the tea party. To be more precise, it was being held the day after we arrived at the capital, and we would have to ride in the coach for about a half hour from Father's place to get there.

The day we arrived in the capital, Father took me to the manor that was his home away from home. It was *huge*. According to Father, it wasn't well furnished because he only used this manor to sleep, but to me it looked about as decorated as the manor where Mother and I lived.

Of course, there was Grandpa as the head butler, the other butlers, and maids. They had prepared several outfits for me to wear and were setting about tailoring the clothes to my measurements at once.

I'd never admit it, but the fiery looks in the maids' eyes as they dressed me was kinda scary.

And so, we arrived at the venue for the tea party. Was this kind of space normal here in the capital? It was a huge park that seemed as big as a forest, wherein we changed to a small coach and, after riding in that for several minutes, we finally arrived at the tea party.

There was this enormous garden made into a maze of rose hedges where several white tables and chairs had been set up. There were fewer than ten children already there, and I could see a crazy number of chefs and maids preparing cookies and cakes and other refreshments just for this handful of children, all accompanied by a full orchestra softly playing music.

*What is going on here? Is this one of those nobility kinds of shindigs? Just what does Father actually do for work? Are we nobles? Am I the daughter of a big company president or something? Nah, I don't think he's a company president. But these kids might be the children of their clients or something. Otherwise, I don't think Father would have me rushing around on this crazy schedule like this.*

I needed to be careful. Anything I did might affect Father's future promotion prospects!

"Uh, Father?"

"Are you nervous? Don't worry. Go on. Social status doesn't matter here."

I was not such an unsophisticated child that I would seriously believe such a clearly influential man claimed a party to be "casual"!

*Very well, then. I, the humble Yulucia, shall play the part of the sheltered daughter to the utmost of my ability.*

"Uh…"

What was going on? The area around me completely cleared of guests.

There were three boys and five girls attending this tea party, as far as children went. They were all older than me, but I guessed that their ages ranged between five and eight. At the very least, I was sure that none of them were older than ten. The boys were all clustered together and talking, so I decided to head over to the girls. However, the second they noticed me, they all stiffened simultaneously.

The girl with black hair—who was the prettiest of the group—dropped her mouth open so wide that it almost made me worry for her.

*Are you okay? You'll catch flies if you keep doing that. What a pitiful girl, despite her pretty looks.*

Now I was making people scared of me. The elementals and Sigt were scared of me for some reason too. Did I really look that creepy? Though, thinking about it, I myself had gotten scared of those delicate Western dolls when I saw them in the middle of the night, so it wasn't that I didn't understand the feeling.

If I said something now, would this be a case of me not having read the room? However, now that I had come this close to them, it would probably be more impolite if I didn't say anything.

As a compromise that was the best I could do, I decided that I would put on my best "humanlike" smile so as to not frighten them, pinch the bottom of my bright green dress, and greet them.

"Ooooooooooooooh!" Loud reverberating voices came out of nowhere, making all of the girls, including me, jump.

*What was that?* I wondered as I looked toward the noise.

In a gazebo that was a bit farther away, all of the parents were gathered and watching us as if this were a parents' day at school or something.

*Oh, Father's there as well.* I gave a small wave, and that was when I noticed a well-dressed man in his fifties and a very pretty lady around his age were camped out in the best seats, screeching with excitement as they watched us through something that looked like opera glasses.

*What the heck? I'm kind of creeped out now.*

I decided to pretend that I hadn't seen anything and awkwardly made my way to a deserted table. I was really thankful I actually managed to walk all the way there.

I let out a voiceless sigh when I finally calmed down. "Phew." I must have been feeling nervous myself. As I settled, I was able to hear all of the surrounding noise.

That was when several maids started piling my table with tea and snacks. They weren't just bringing it over—it was like they were heaping a whole mountain of snacks onto the table!

"Thank—"

"It was our pleasure!" The three maids straightened their posture, their heels clicking as if standing at attention. It was as if my nervousness had spread to them.

*I'm really sorry. You guys can have these cookies if you want? Huh? You can't? My Fer eats them all immediately when I share with her, though.*

This dark reddish tea looked like it had to be expensive. However, as I had no normal sense of taste, it tasted like bitter hot water to me and was harder to gulp down than plain hot water. It sucked.

I finally got the courage to look around. The children had all stopped talking to one another and now were just staring at me. *Please stop. The mood here is so heavy now that it's more like mud.*

That was when I heard a cute voice.

"Uh, I beg your pardon?"

I looked up in surprise to find a girl who must have been my age or a little older gazing at me with a nervous expression.

"Yes?" When I realized she had been addressing me, I spoke slowly so as to not be overbearing. It was like trying to pinch an ant between my fingers without crushing it.

This girl looked beyond nervous. She was so small and cute and it must have taken a lot of courage to talk to an inhuman creature like me. This was why I couldn't say more. Out of respect for her bravery, I must play with my prey—as if I were lying in wait with the leisure of a demon.

The girl looked around restlessly before gathering up her courage to say, "Um, uh, would you…like to accompany me to pick flowers over there?"

*Oh, I get it. No wonder she's so restless. She just needs to use the powder room. Of course I shall accompany you. Going to the bathroom in a group is where "flowers" are for girls. I graduated from using baby potties a year ago now, so this is not a blind spot for me!*

"Okay. Let's go."

"I'm so glad you said yes." She must have really been at her limit, judging from how she smiled as she took my outstretched hand in both of hers. She sure was cute with her soft blonde hair

like my mother's and azure eyes. She also had doll-like features, but in a different way from me.

"Here we go."

"Ah!"

I practically slid my small body off the chair, using the girl's hands to support me so I didn't fall.

"Thanks."

"It was nothing!" She shook her head back and forth, making her hair practically stick straight out. She deliberately held my hand as she started walking. Maybe she was trying to act like a big girl since I was the smallest child here. Or perhaps she was helping me because she could tell I was weak, feeble, and clumsy? But she better not offer to carry me, because that would be dangerous for us both.

"My name is Ciel—Shelly! May I humbly inquire what your name might be?"

Why was she speaking to me so formally? Was Shelly a good girl from a family with an amazing lineage? Maybe she really was a noble. I wanted to ask what her family name was, but that was when I realized that I didn't even know what my *own* full name was!

"I'm Yulucia. No need to be so polite."

*Even I'm having trouble speaking normally since this girl who's older than me is speaking so formally. We're kids, so we should speak like kids do,* I thought.

When she realized what I meant, Shelly's eyes began to sparkle. "Oh! That makes me so happy, Lady Yulucia!"

*Stop being so formal already*.

Anyway, the two of us held hands until we arrived at our destination.

"Look, Lady Yulucia. There are so many pretty flowers here."

"There sure are."

And then we literally picked flowers. Of course, I had been expecting this. Noble girls don't go in a gaggle to the bathroom like a bunch of junior high schoolers.

The flower bed was only half a minute from the table. There were all kinds of multicolored flowers growing wildly here. Was it strange for this kind of flower bed to be left alone like this in this kind of park? Commoner that I was, I could sense the owner's personality and I liked it. There were roses here too, but the maids were firmly blocking them so that they wouldn't be harmed.

"Let's make flower crowns, Lady Yulucia!"

She sure seemed excited now. What had happened to her nervousness?

"You can call me just 'Yul.' No need to call me 'Lady.'"

"Okay, Lady Yul! And please, feel free to call me just 'Shelly'!"

*Stop ignoring me!*

Ugh. She was growing more and more hopeless. I knew that no matter what I said, it would be pointless. There were only serious weirdos in my life—Father and Mother excluded—so I was getting used to it to some degree. And by serious weirdos, I didn't mean that they thought about things seriously and were weirdos—I meant that they were weirdos *even though* they took things seriously.

"Okay, Shelly. Will these flowers do?"

"Yes, Lady Yul. We bend their stems like this and…"

I had kind of just given up. Maybe this was just this girl's personality or something. In any case, she was my very first friend and probably a noble to boot. She must have been really stressed out or something. Other than that, she was a nice, caring girl, and I had no complaints.

I was very much aware that I was fooling myself.

For now, I set about making the crown of flowers. It was a very human-girl kind of thing to do, so it was a perfect activity for

me to try. My incompetence reared its ugly head while I was working on it, but Shelly helped me fix it each time.

Why was my body so lacking in skill?

Nevertheless, Shelly was very kind and good company. She was a really nice girl. Whenever I had trouble, she would take my hand with a smile.

That was when we heard the sound of someone walking through the grass behind us. I looked up to see three of the boys approaching.

"Are they friends of yours, Shelly?"

"No, uh…"

For some reason, Shelly got quiet. Maybe they were just acquaintances, not friends? Which made sense; assuming that Shelly was a year older than me, these boys looked to be about three years older. From her expression, I guessed that these boys were either scary, of really high standing, or maybe just plain stupid. At any rate, they had scared the charming Shelly and that must mean that they were big dumb stupid-face dummies.

I was unable to stop myself from shooting the boys an annoyed glance. They immediately came to a stop—or at least, almost all of them did. The one in the lead was the only one to keep walking toward us.

*What have we here? Color me impressed that he's able to endure my inhuman stare. I shall grant him the right to wear my weird, wonky flower crown as a reward.*

"Are you Yulucia?" the boy, who had reddish-blond hair, asked in a haughty tone. Who was this kid?

"Yeah?"

"I heard about you from Uncle."

"Your uncle?" Who was that? I had no idea, so I turned to ask Shelly, but the boy grabbed my shoulder.

"Hey, don't you dare look away from me."

"Ah—" I looked back up to find the boy's face right in front of mine. He was rather handsome. However, he was a bad boy. Boys who didn't treat girls with respect were bad. I supposed I could only like calm, handsome, older men who gushed over me. Childish boys like him were unacceptable.

I looked up at him in defiance. For a second, he looked scared, but then his face turned red with rage as he glared back at me.

*As if I would be scared of some child staring at me. Oh, I have a good idea.* I came up with a fun little prank and placed my shabby flower crown on top of his head.

"What're you—?!"

The boy was speechless. I smiled at him in triumph. Such a meager crown perfectly fit this king of the castle.

"Why, you—!"

"Yes?"

The boy was shaking with rage, his face bright red. I cocked my head as if to say "I didn't do anything wrong." Perhaps it was out of pride, but he turned away from me without laying a finger on me, little girl that I was.

"Hey, let's go," he ordered the two other boys, who were still frozen with shock, and turned his back to me.

*What the heck did he even come over here for in the first place?* I was staring at his back when he suddenly stopped and turned around again.

"I'm Rick! My birthday party is gonna be the day after tomorrow. You better be there, Yulucia!"

"Huh? Hey!"

After giving that loud proclamation, Rick ran off before I could stop him.

*Wait, what? What is he talking about? I'm going home the day after tomorrow. Father and I are going to go sightseeing in the capital tomorrow, buy souvenirs for everyone back home, and then I'm going to go home with a merry smile on my face as I sit on Father's lap the whole ride.*

"L-Lady Yul?"

Birthday? The day after tomorrow? Even if that was the end of it, it was a grave sin to keep me away from Mother, even by a single day! I would not forgive even a god for such a transgression!

"Lady Yul!"

"Huh? Oh, sorry, Shelly."

She must have grown worried about me as I was busy getting very worked up in my internal monologue. She shook her head.

"No need to apologize! Are you all right?"

"Yes. You're so nice."

"Th-thank you for saying so!" It was so cute how she said that so blushing and bashful. If only she were a better listener.

I had no idea who Rick was, but if he was the kid of a moneylender or some other kind of scary person, then we would probably be in deep trouble if I didn't go to this party.

Also, that same man and lady from before were being so noisy from where they were sitting in the parents' area!

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Here in the Holy Kingdom of Talitelud, those of the rank of count or higher were considered the upper nobility. They would use those of viscount and lower peerage to manage their vast lands.

In the past, all nobles would have had "d'" affixed to the beginning of their family name to denote that they owned land. However, under the current system that had come into place a few hundred years ago, the upper nobility now used "la" in order to distinguish themselves from the mid-ranking and lower nobility.

As the kingdom had gotten its start in the Holy Land of Versenia, only the royal family was permitted to add "von" and "Versenia" to their names as proof of the land having been bestowed to them by the goddess herself.

Ciellindo la Oralens.

Shelly was the third child of Count Oralens and the eldest girl. She had turned five years old just one month prior, in the middle of the summer. Today, her father had summoned her to his study.

"Thank you for coming, Ciellindo."

"Of course, Father!"

As was the custom of Talitelud, the only ones permitted to call a noble lady by her nickname were other women and the lady's spouse, so Ciellindo's father did not call her Shelly. Some young children called one another by their nicknames even if they were of different sexes, but once they were older than ten, a man would only refer to a woman by her nickname if they were very close, such as if they were engaged.

Count Oralens smiled at his somewhat impulsive yet clever daughter and got down on his knees to be at eye level with her. "You're going to be attending your very first tea party soon, five days from now."

"Oh?"

Another custom in the kingdom was for noble women to attend tea parties, where they socialized and exchanged information. As young children couldn't understand the significance of such

affairs, they were not permitted to attend. There was an unspoken agreement that children had to be five years or older. However, even at five years old, children could still do poorly at tea parties, which was why noble ladies attended their very first tea parties at relatively familiar locations, such as their mother's family's home.

Ciellindo had thought that her very first tea party was going to be hosted next month by her aunt, who had married into the family of Viscount Bley. Why had it been pushed up to be five days from now? The young Ciellindo then realized that this must be the reason her mother had been so panicked since her father had returned home—the dress they had ordered for her was still not finished yet.

"Hmm? Did Auntie's plans change?" she asked.

"No, it won't be hosted by her. I received a request from a friend. It came out of nowhere, but they're hosting a tea party just for children at Keil Palace."

"Keil Palace?!"

Even Ciellindo had heard of Keil Palace. It was a villa belonging to the royal family and not even her mother had taken more than a few steps inside.

Ciellindo was the daughter of a high-ranking family. She had just begun her education with her potential of marrying into the royal family taken into consideration, so she understood the significance of attending a tea party at Keil Palace.

If this was going to be a tea party for just children, then it wouldn't only be girls in attendance. Boys would likely be there as well—at least one or two would be dragged to it.

She had heard that the royal family of Talitelud consisted of the crown prince and his two sons. According to her mother, neither of them were engaged yet, though the younger prince, who was seven years old, had been engaged up until half a year ago. This now-canceled engagement had been arranged for political reasons, making him the first to be engaged even before his older brother.

The older prince was five years older than Ciellindo, so he was not considered for her betrothal due to their ages; however, she was acquainted with both boys and preferred the older brother, who was more like his mother, to the youngest brother, who took after his father. As this was a tea party for children, the older prince would probably not be attending due to him turning ten later this year, but there was a good chance that the younger prince would.

Ciellindo paled as she wondered if this tea party was for selecting his new fiancée.

"There's no need to be nervous. Since this tea party is intended for children, no one will be judging your etiquette. You need only to relax and have fun."

"A-all right…"

Ciellindo was sure she would be the youngest since she'd only just turned five. And since the tea party was being held at Keil Palace, that would mean that everyone would not only be older, but from the upper nobility as well. With this being her very first tea party and all, what could Ciellindo possibly talk about with them?

She was filled with such anxiety that she was on the verge of tears. Her father seemed a bit worried himself as he decided to broach the topic of the request he had for his beloved daughter.

"Remember the friend I mentioned? Who asked that you join this tea party?"

"Yes?"

"His daughter was asked to attend without prior notice as well. I hear that she is very frail and rarely has the opportunity to go outside. She's about a year younger than you."

"Oh, my!"

The girl had been very sick when she was born and hadn't even had her fourth birthday yet. Knowing that she was close in age to Ciellindo, her father's friend had asked the count if their daughters could meet and become friends at the party.

Ciellindo was still unsure, but hearing that a girl younger than herself would be there made her heart swell with a protective instinct, as she had always longed for a little sister. That desire was stronger than her fears of going to the party.

"I can do it, Father! I, Ciellindo, shall become friends with this girl!"

"N-no need to go overboard, now."

And then, on the day of the tea party, Ciellindo met an *angel*.

She had golden hair that sparkled like the sun.

Her face looked like an angel's—handcrafted by a god.

No one had been prepared for her and everyone at the party literally forgot to even breathe as they marveled at her. Not a single person could move or take their eyes off the ethereal being as she gave a graceful curtsy. The crowd collectively remembered to breathe and the musicians and maids remembered they had jobs to do.

The angel's profile with her slightly lowered eyes was just so beautiful to behold. Even the maids from lower-ranking noble families were unable to completely recover and moved with the unrefined grace of a soldier as they proffered sweets and tea to the angel.

The young ladies attending the tea party could only sigh as they gazed upon her, unable to act. It was Ciellindo, however, who noticed how lonely the angel seemed despite the mountains of sweets on the table, and it hurt her heart. After all, no matter how beautiful she was, she was not a real angel; she was a normal girl who was younger than Ciellindo.

The angel must've been her father's friend's daughter. Having decided she wanted to protect her, Ciellindo left the ring of ladies and resolved to talk to the girl. "Uh, I beg your pardon?"

While talking to her, she discovered that the girl was very intelligent for her age. And from the way she thanked the servers, Ciellindo could tell the girl was kind to the lower classes. Her facial expressions changed so rapidly that the impression that she was a doll immediately vanished. Ciellindo came to find the girl quite charming.

The angel's name was Yulucia. Ciellindo instantly loved her. It usually took some time for her to warm up to people, so this was a first. She couldn't help but laugh at how it was almost like she had been put under a devil's spell, like in fairy tales.

As they were happily playing together, the few boys who were attending the tea party approached them. Ciellindo didn't know the two boys in the back, but she had met the boy who led them. He was someone she was wary of.

Ciellindo shrank back, wanting nothing to do with him. Yulucia, however, showed no fear and coolly dealt with the older boy. For better or for worse, she faced this boy who was so like his father—unskilled with talking to women. Despite his rowdy attitude, she gazed at him with her pretty gold eyes and managed to evade him by simply giving him the flower crown she had made.

Wondering if this was how those with exalted blood (from Ciellindo's point of view) behaved, Ciellindo was simultaneously deeply moved yet somehow extremely jealous as the two stared at one another.

Yulucia was so lovely and beautiful. Ciellindo impulsively believed that she had been born to protect Yulucia from boys.

As the daughter of a count, Ciellindo was sure that her family had received an invitation to the boy's party too. Since the boy was politically difficult to handle, the count had intended to only send her older brothers to his party, but upon her return to their manor, they declared that Ciellindo would be attending as well. Her mother swayed on her feet, overcome with dizziness that she did not have a proper dress prepared for her.

"I will stamp out every single nasty bug that dares to approach Lady Yul!"

# Episode 7:
# I Am a Hostage Now

AS I WAS TALKING TO FATHER ABOUT THE TEA party while sitting on his lap, my smiling father's eyes narrowed like a hunter who had just spotted his prey.

*You're kind of scaring me, Father…but you're still cool.*

"Oh? Rick, you say? Did he tell you to call him that?"

"You know him?"

"Yes. He's the son of someone I know very well."

"Ooh."

*Perhaps he really is the son of someone Father knows from work, then? Maybe I shouldn't have teased him and chased him off like that.*

If a shut-in like me were to show up at his birthday party, I bet they would only jeer at me, saying, "Wah hah hah! I can't believe the country bumpkin girl actually showed up."

"Are we going to his party?" I asked with a tiny hope that we wouldn't.

Father frowned, looking perplexed. "Hmm. Good question."

Oh, dear. I knew that if I begged, Father wouldn't force me, but judging by that reaction, I figured this was like the tea party, in that I would put him in a hard position if I refused.

"But if you want to go, then I suppose we should—"

"I do!"

"What?!"

Why did he look so surprised even though I had resolved myself to go?

"W-wait, Yulucia. Don't tell me that you actually *like* Rick?"

"Huh?" Why would he think that? This conversation was taking a weird turn.

"Rick…? So, you and Rick, then… Heh heh heh."

"Father?!"

*What's gotten into you, Father?! You have this really scary look on your face!*

*And you, Vio! Why do you look like you're about to hand Father a sword?! Are you planning to kill someone?! I know you two won't take me up on it even though I'm a demon and all, but I would sooner kill them for you than allow Father to get his hands dirty! I shall gladly take up the role! I am prepared to go as far as the forbidden summoning of cockroaches! I'll scare—I mean, request—a weak earth elemental to plant peppermint all over their garden (a truly heinous crime, by the way)!*

At any rate, I was feeling nervous because Father and Vio were acting a bit strange and weren't going back to their normal selves. But I had an ace up my sleeve!

"I'm gonna marry Father."

"Is that so?" Father was suddenly in a good mood again as he cheerfully patted me on the head. He was so easy to please… So much so that it worried me as his daughter!

Things might be difficult for me when I had to get married someday. But before that, I would have to actually find someone willing to take such a scary girl like me for a bride.

"Then perhaps I'll take the day off from work and spend it with you."

"Yaaay!"

*Are you sure you're okay in the head, Father?!*

***

"He's not coming home today either?" Albertine murmured, so quietly that only she could hear it, as she gazed out the window from her room in the manor. It was growing dark.

She pondered the obvious truth.

About a year ago, her husband had started coming home less and less. Ostensibly, it was because he was out for inspections in one of the territories of their lands. Yet despite this, he usually returned home to this estate for a third of the year.

Her husband was one of the leaders of the country and had work that he needed to attend to or else it wouldn't get done. Of course, the area where Albertine had been born and raised was important; however, they had a steward who could take care of the majority of the paperwork. Therefore, her husband worked in the capital for half of the year. As his wife, Albertine had moved to their manor in the capital during that time. After she moved there, she gave birth to two daughters and had only gone home to their principal residence in their territory a handful of times.

Because of this, Albertine, as well as her daughters—who had been born in the capital—all thought of this house as their home. The fact of the matter was, Albertine found the opulence of the royal capital quite comfortable. She was able to get all of the latest information and know the latest trends right away, there were balls held practically every night, and she hosted tea parties that she invited many nobles to. Albertine enjoyed wealth and an excellent standing in society. She was a belle of high society equal to the queen and crown princess. The other noblewomen all eagerly yearned for her attendance at their social functions and sang her praises as if in competition for her favor.

And what did their daughters think, seeing and being raised by such a mother versus their father, who probably wasn't even aware

of how henpecked he was? Albertine understood that tension was also part of the reason he had stopped coming home.

For all of her power and beauty, even Albertine had her enemies.

They weren't directly antagonistic, but her "enemies" were the crown princess' clique—who snubbed Albertine and her friends—and the antiquated nobles who sympathized with her husband.

Albertine was aware that their opinion of her was based in her personality.

All she ever did was want. She yearned for power, wealth, and admiration, and she had gotten as much as she wished for. That was why she'd even managed to obtain *him*—the thing she had wanted most ever since she was young.

She'd pulled all kinds of strings to make him hers. But now the husband she had worked so hard to obtain wasn't coming home and, in a way, it was justly deserved.

Albertine had torn her husband away from the woman he was in love with, after all.

"My lady."

The voice woke Albertine out of her reverie. She turned to face Zumana, her servant who was dressed as a butler. He was looking at her with concern.

She chuckled to herself, realizing that he must have tried many times already to get her attention. "Sorry, I was lost in thought."

"You must be tired. Shall I prepare something warm for you to drink?"

He knew that exhaustion wasn't the reason, which must have been why he seemed so worried. This made Albertine happy but also irritated her.

"Then how about…" She was about to ask for fruit liqueur, but changed her mind when she realized the decanter was already empty. "Ah, how about some bean tea?"

"Right away, my lady."

Zumana set about getting the tea ready from the tea cart he had brought. There were all kinds available here in the capital, though Albertine had taken a particular liking to the unsophisticated aroma of the one made from boiled beans, popular among commoners in the south.

"Ah…"

"Is something the matter?" Zumana asked.

"No. I was just wondering if the girls are asleep already."

The warm tea was relaxing. Albertine couldn't help but laugh at her hypocrisy when it occurred to her that she was getting upset about her husband's absence when she was hardly ever home herself.

"Yes, they went to bed a short while ago." Zumana understood what she was doing, but went along with the change in topic anyway.

Watching him, Albertine recalled how she had first met Zumana.

About ten years ago, Albertine had been given an executive position at the Academy of the Magical Arts. She had discovered that Zumana was highly talented despite being a commoner and decided to take a personal hand in his training.

When she'd initially poached him from the academy, she had only been interested in his looks and his skill in spellcraft; however, when she learned that he was surprisingly dexterous with his hands and had a keen eye for detail, she found a use for him as her butler and spy.

At the time, Zumana's merchant family had been in a lurch, so he had sworn a life of servitude to Albertine to repay her for the

support she'd given his family and for giving him a place of employment after he withdrew from the academy.

Albertine's eyes faintly wavered at the sight of Zumana's devotion to her, since she herself had been the culprit behind his family's predicament.

"Your daughters bathed after dinner and then—"

"It's fine. They just did the usual, right?"

"That is correct."

Her two daughters wanted to talk to their mother every day, but they didn't miss their father at all. She believed they had been close to him when they were younger, but as they got older, they started viewing him coldly. She was sure that they didn't hate him, but they would only ever approach him when they wanted something or to show his good looks off to the other girls.

*It was bound to happen from the onset.*

She had used her family's power to snatch her husband away from another woman. As he was also a noble, he had known that this was a political match and had done his duty. And yet, despite becoming her husband and the father of her daughters, he had never surrendered the entirety of his heart to her. He had tried to dote on his daughters and love her as his wife, but it had always felt as if he were one step removed from them.

This had irritated Albertine, so she had treated him with contempt and at times even laid into him with scathing rants. However, he never once got angry with her. He would only smile sadly and say nothing.

Their daughters, meanwhile, had grown up seeing such an unloving relationship between their parents, and started acting coldly toward their father as well. They had no idea how else to interact with him.

Since Albertine had been unable to steal her husband's heart, she instead showered her daughters with affection, spoiling them by

giving them everything and raising them into noblewomen like herself, who would do whatever it took to get what they wanted.

How badly had their daughters' cruel words afflicted his heart?

Of course they had hurt him. The young girls had no idea what they were saying, but their words were sharp as thorns—they had been saying the words that Albertine felt in her heart out loud.

So of course her husband didn't come back to this house and instead devoted himself to his ideal wife and ideal daughter.

And that was precisely why she wasn't going to turn a blind eye.

"Zumana? Are the preparations coming along on schedule?"

"Yes, my lady. All is going according to plan. There was an abrupt change, but you could say it's actually worked in our favor, rest assured."

"I see. Then I shall have to reward you today." Albertine beckoned Zumana with a bewitching gaze.

Albertine loved her daughters. Her younger daughter seemed to only be imitating her beloved older sister and mother, but her older daughter was just like Albertine had been when she was young, even down to how she lived.

Albertine was aware that it was cruel, but noble daughters raised to be selfish were not all that unusual. Nevertheless, at ten years old, her oldest should have managed to forge relationships with her peers and calm down just as Albertine had. But because she was also *his* child, she'd wound up provoking the wrath of Forte's family, losing the engagement she had wanted, and that made her personality all the more prickly.

For the sake of her poor daughter.

For the sake of protecting her own heart.

For the sake of obtaining everything she'd ever wanted—

Albertine would tear everything down and start again from a clean slate.

***

It was now two days later and that boy's—Rick's?—birthday party had just gotten started. It was being held in the enormous garden at the same manor as the tea party. It was supposed to be held at night, but they were going to be holding a party in the afternoon too for the children who couldn't be out so late. In other words, this birthday party was happening first in the afternoon and then again at night. I had to wonder just how rich Rick's family was.

Since they were rich, it made sense for it to be held at night so the adults could go, but why did they suddenly decide to have a party in the afternoon too?

"Why, Father?"

"Good question." Father pretended not to know, laughing as he looked somewhere far in the distance.

Vio, who was accompanying us to the venue, looked disconcerted as she told me, "I believe it is because you are attending, Lady Yul."

What was that supposed to mean?

Today, I was wearing a dress that Father's manor had prepared for me for tea parties. It so looked like the kind of dress a princess would wear, what with how it was so pure white and frilly with flowers. At the tea party, the noble-looking girls had all been wearing fancy, charming, and pretty dresses, but none of them had looked like they were straight out of a fairy tale like this one did. Who could possibly look good in this kind of dress? I supposed only

someone as unhuman-looking as me—and that wasn't a compliment to myself at all.

Father was quickly called over by some important-looking people and left me to my own devices. Vio had accompanied us to the entrance of the venue, but she had to stay back in the waiting room for servants, so some butler-looking guy escorted her elsewhere. This meant that, for the first time in a while, I was walking on my own two feet into the venue.

Thank goodness I still remembered how to walk.

The second I stepped inside, a whole bunch of musicians noticed me and started loudly playing music before they left in a hurry. The other children there surrounded me from a distance, but otherwise there was nothing unusual to note.

At least, that was the only noteworthy thing up until I got inside.

What happened after the party began was a completely different story.

"Lady Yul!"

"Ooof!" A girl suddenly tackled me from the side, knocking the wind out of me. "Shelly?!"

"Yes, it is I, Shelly!"

She hugged me so tightly I was afraid I would take a tumble; however, a pale-faced butler managed to quietly stop her with a hand.

"Lady Yul! I'm so glad I get to see you again! The moment I laid eyes on you, I felt this great shock, as if seeing your sparkling radiant self had given me a blessing! It was then that I realized something! You look so pretty in that white dress, I'm sure you must be some kind of white lily fairy! Or maybe since that dress is just so frilly, you're more like a white rose blossoming in full glory! But then I realized you look more like you have angel wings and like you've swooped down from heaven to bring the lowly people happiness!

But no, wait, I bet even angels must be hiding with jealousy at how pretty and beautiful you are, Lady Yul! I have no idea how best to describe how blessed I feel to get to see your wonderful, lovely self again, my lady! Ooh, you are so sublime, it is dizzying! I feel so dizzy…" Her shoes clicked as she staggered backward like some kind of stage actress who had the spotlight shining on her.

Unfortunately for her, it was because she had run out of oxygen.

This girl was surprisingly multitalented. Was this that thing nobles did where they made a mockery of people with excessive praise? High society must have been a hellish place indeed for even a five-year-old to behave like this.

"You look like a princess yourself, Shelly."

"My! That is so kind of you to say! Thank you so much!" Shelly had at last calmed down—or maybe not. Her light pink dress did look like the kind a princess in a picture book would wear.

Because of Shelly's eccentric behavior, though, it felt like all the other kids were keeping their distance. And even if I wanted to cry for help, there were only children here; Shelly's parents weren't around.

*I wonder if that guy who looks just like Shelly, who's hiding in the corner and looks like he's getting ready to leave, is Shelly's older brother? Hmph. What an undependable boy.*

Unfortunately, Shelly's outburst drew so many eyes to us that we wound up getting the attention of someone I really would've rather avoided.

"Yulucia!" Rick had been talking to some cute girl with black hair when he spotted me and started making a beeline for us.

"Rick—"

"Now that you're here, let's—"

"Happy birthday, Lord Rick!" Before he could say anything, I interrupted by greeting him like any other three-year-old might.

"Uh, thanks."

I still had the knowledge of the dream world, so I knew how to properly greet someone, at least. Now that that was over and done with, I could go home. "Now, if you would excuse me."

"Why, Lord Ludoric! I was just in the middle of a conversation with Lady Yul here! Come, Lady Yul, let us go get ourselves a cup of fruit water over there."

"So what?! How dare you talk that way to me! You're Ciellindo from House Oralens, right? Don't think you can just go and play hostess to Yulucia here!"

"What are you two doing?!" A girl stepped in to interrupt.

*Wait a sec, this girl is—*

"My Lord Ludoric, we were just in the middle of a conversation ourselves! What is the meaning of just walking away from me like that?!"

"Uh, I was just…"

Even Rick cowered back from the menacing look the black-haired girl was giving him. Wait, who's Loodo-Rick? Well, whatever. Anyway, Rick shrank away and Shelly took my hand without missing a beat.

"Come, Lady Yul. Let's go over there!"

"You two have some nerve to ignore me too!"

Now sparks were beginning to fly. The new girl looked at me and was suddenly so taken aback that her face turned bright red and she even took a step back.

"Ugh. That's unfair."

What?! What was so unfair about just looking at me?! This girl with her black hair and jade green eyes had been the prettiest girl at the tea party. She looked like she was the same age as Shelly or maybe a year older. I remembered her well since she was so pretty. Her attitude really was a shame.

"Ciellindo, Bertille! Enough already! Yulucia's here today for *my* birthday party!" Rick pointed out.

"Yes, but she said happy birthday to you already! Now it's time for her to socialize with the girls," Shelly said.

"Think again! I, Bertille, shall be the one to spend time with her today!"

"What?!" Shelly and Rick exclaimed in unison.

*Huh? What's going on? Do these three not get along? Had Shelly looked so frightened at the tea party because she was actually trying to hold in how much she dislikes Rick? And, that girl, uh, Bertille? She came over only because she got mad that he ignored her, not because she's interested in him? I don't really get what's going on, and I don't really care, so please don't drag me into this!*

I had thought to wait until I found the right chance to leave, but now all three of them had grabbed ahold of me—I was trapped.

*What should I do…? I wonder if they'll start fretting over me instead if I tell them they're hurting me.*

I was keenly aware that everyone was staring at us too—well, more like everyone was only staring at me, even though the guest of honor and a couple of cute girls were the ones making a big ruckus.



The servants all looked bewildered and there were no adults around I could turn to for help, so I was at a loss for what to do.

"Oh, my. Rick, Shelly, Betty, you know this isn't how you should behave," a woman said as she picked me up from behind. She was a pretty lady with orange hair that looked like fire. "You must be gentle with smaller children."

The three looked up at her, dumbfounded. She winked.

Judging from the hair, I thought she might be the pretty lady I had seen from the carriage that one time, but she wasn't. That woman was more like a deep crimson rose with thorns, while this pretty lady was warm like a scarlet fire.

"Mother!" Rick exclaimed as he looked up at her.

*Ooh, so this is Rick's mom. They're nothing alike.*

"Your Hi—" Bertille was interrupted with a finger to her lips.

"Hush now," the woman said with another wink.

Rick's mom smiled at Shelly and the two of them kept their mouths shut and nodded. I looked up at the lady who was holding me now, wondering what the secret was. She looked back at me and chuckled.

"I'm so glad to finally meet you, Yulucia. You're Lia's daughter, yes?"

"You know Mother?"

"I sure do. My name is Elea. I'm Lia's friend."

*Ooh! I had no idea Mother had friends.* As I had such a rude thought, Elea started walking with me still stuck in her arms.

That's right—Lady Elea had trapped me.

"Girls are simply the cutest."

The three children watched on in dumbfounded silence.

It seemed I had another person to carry me around now.

Elea sat us down on a remarkably large sofa with Shelly and Bertille on either side of her, and me on her lap, cooing at me as she stroked the two girls' hair.

Was this some kind of late-night entertainment business?

And sitting next to us in an armchair was Rick—who had been the prime host up until now—looking dejected as he sipped his fruit water.

*Uh, Lady Elea? Saying how much you like girls is making your son pout.*

"Rick may be cute now, but he looks just his like father, so I just know that he's going to grow up to be a big and rugged man."

She was relentless toward her seven-year-old son. Wasn't that all the more reason to fawn excessively over him now?

"Hmph. If I'll be so like Father, then that means I'll be really strong." Little Rick surprised me with his toughness.

Lady Elea narrowed her eyes so much as she smiled that it looked like she was smirking as she looked down at me in her lap. "So Rick's going to grow up to be strong, then. Yulucia, do you like strong boys?"

"Huh?"

"What?"

"Wh—"

"Huh?"

Me, Rick, Shelly, and Bertille all exclaimed in unison. Lady Elea's expression made her seem like she was joking, yet the way she said it didn't sound like a joke at all.

I knew what this must be. Even I, who was so estranged from nobility, understood their ways. But if I gave the wrong answer in this moment, Lady Elea would prompt the conversation to go as she wanted it to. That was what she really wanted, wasn't it?

"I dunno."

"I see. You still don't know yet. Which makes me wonder, what kind of girls does Rick like?"

Please, make it stop. Rick, Shelly, and Bertille seemed to all understand what she was really asking and averted their gazes as they fell completely silent.

"You don't have a daughter, Lady Elea?" I asked in hopes we could get away from this weird topic.

Thankfully, Lady Elea played along. "That's right. I only have boys. This pleases my husband, but I do wish I could have had a girl too. My eldest is talking with your father right now, so you'll be able to meet him in a little bit."

"'Kay."

Well, I supposed that for nobles, having many heirs was a good thing. Be that as it may, while Lady Elea seemed the type to speak at a leisurely cadence, I had a feeling she was speaking even more slowly when talking to me because I was a toddler.

"Sooo, I want you, Betty, and Shelly to feel free to think of me as your mother too. If you ever need anything, you can come to me."

"Okay," we three replied after a moment of hesitation.

*There's something scary about the way she said that. But maybe I should just think of this as having a supporter among the nobility? Let's just not think about what she's implying too deeply,* I thought as Lady Elea looked at the three of us and then inclined her head to the side.

"You're the only one I'm calling by her full name though, Yulucia. I'd like to call you by your nickname too. What does Lia call you?"

"Uh, Yu—"

*Wait a minute. I told Shelly to call me "Yul," but she doesn't need to call me by my nickname just because Mother and the others do!* I hadn't been able to protest before because I'd been just a baby and they'd decided all on their own to call me Yul. However, this was my chance to get away from this cutesy kind of mascot character of a nickname. I could tell her something else. Since my name was Yulucia, I could tell her to call me "Lucia" or "Yua!"

However, just as I was about to answer, Shelly interrupted me. "Lady Yul's is Lady Yul! It makes me so happy that she allows me to call her that!"

*Shelly?!*

"Then I shall call her Yul as well, then! And Yul can call me Betty!"

*Even Betty now?!*

"Very well. Then I too shall call her 'Yul' from now on."

"Okay." I drooped at missing my chance to correct them. How long was I going to have to put up with this carefree mascot image?

***

Keil Palace was known for its gardens owned by the royal family and for being a place for the utmost elite. Only the most trusted people of the kingdom were allowed to use it—in other words, only those of count peerage or higher. Middle nobility such as viscounts and barons were only permitted entry by invitation from the host, and even then, they needed a high-ranking noble as their escort.

The original plan for the day had been to hold the birthday party of the son of a certain family in the evening. A few days prior to the party, however, it had been decided that they would hold a party in the afternoon as well, so a large number of cooks and

servers had arrived in the morning and a portion of the guard had been stationed there.

That meant they needed more guards than usual, so the existing guards compensated by taking longer shifts as the royal family was busy overseeing the event.

"I'm starving," grumbled a young soldier who had been on guard duty since first thing in the morning until the afternoon.

The senior soldier with him merely agreed without rebuke. "Well, that's just how it is. It's part of our jobs."

"Yeah, but inside they're eating all kinds of delicious-sounding foods right about now."

It wasn't that they didn't take their jobs seriously; it was just that there was nothing better to do than complain. If they didn't care about their jobs, they would have been off looking for food instead. Moreover, guarding such a big party meant that they and the servants could have whatever food was left over. There was an even higher chance of that when the event was a celebration like this one.

Here at Keil Palace in particular, they had to prepare more food than could possibly be eaten by the high-ranking nobles, which meant even commoners like them got to eat the finest desserts they never would have an opportunity to eat otherwise.

"I bet the maids are going to go for the desserts first," the younger guard said.

"Perhaps. But don't worry. Since it'll only be the noble children attending the afternoon party, it'll basically be a bunch of desserts, though no alcohol."

"Sounds great. Thank the Goddess for that." The young soldier gave his thanks to the Goddess, just as a pious citizen of Talitelud who would be bringing home desserts for his children should.

"Hey, quit slacking," someone barked from behind.

Both men immediately straightened their postures. "Y-yes, sir!"

The man addressing them was a young knight whom they did not recognize. While these guards had been specially posted at Keil Palace, they must have brought in additional help since they were shorthanded.

The blond knight shot a crooked smile their way as he reached into a basket, which was a most unbefitting accessory for a knight. From it, he pulled out a plate of meat and a small bottle of fruit wine. “The captain said that the guards should treat themselves too.”

“R-really?”

“It’s a celebration today. It’s not much, but even the Goddess herself would allow this.”

“Thank you, sir!”

The guards didn’t question a thing, being that it was a celebration and the knight said the Goddess would allow it. Their expressions brightened and the young knight gave them a charming smile before he left.

The people of the royal capital enjoyed such peace that being suspicious of others’ motives never even occurred to them. Meanwhile, in the shadows, villains were quietly proceeding with their plans to destroy that peace.

The blond knight gave out the same food and drink at various stops, making his way toward a certain place within the estate’s grounds: the location where outsiders would make their deliveries. As the majority of the guards and knights were guarding the party’s venue, the corridor was completely empty.

The guards and knights who were standing guard at the party couldn’t have possibly recognized everyone in such a large crowd. However…

A middle-aged knight who looked to be in charge happened to be passing by with a young knight who was carrying documents. The older man stopped to call out to the blond knight. “What are you doing here?”

The young knight calmly turned to face them. “I was patrolling this area.”

“I’m fairly certain that my subordinates were assigned to this location. Not to be rude, but I’m going to have to ask you for your full name and post.”

The man’s somewhat suspicious tone made the young knight faintly snicker.

“Yes, sir. My name is…” In the blink of an eye, the young knight sliced the older knight’s head cleanly off. “Zumana. Now, if you would excuse me.”

“Eek!” The other knight gasped at the sight of the blond man murdering his boss. He tossed his papers aside and drew the sword hanging at his waist.

Zumana noticed that the knight’s blade did not falter at all despite the mayhem, so he pointed a finger at him and unleashed a spell: “Lightning.”

There was a flash of light and an audible crack as the knight was hit. Black smoke rose from the knight’s mouth as his silent corpse crumpled to the ground.

“I suppose this means it’s time for us to begin, then.” Zumana tore off the blond wig and ran toward the venue.

***

“Ugh…” Something suddenly surged up inside of me. I clapped both hands over my mouth and cast my head down.

"Yul?"

"Lady Yul?!"

"Are you okay, Yul? Does your tummy-tum hurt?!"

Lady Elea, who was still holding me, and Shelly—since she wouldn't stop staring at me for some reason—were the first ones to notice and cry out. Betty, the unfortunate pretty girl with black hair, then tried to rise but instead slid off the sofa.

What the heck was happening to me? It was like something in my stomach was protesting and all of the blood in my body was boiling. What was this feeling?

"Do you feel sick?" Even the self-absorbed Rick looked worried about me, so I must have looked pretty bad.

That was when Lady Elea suddenly looked up and muttered, sounding somewhat grim, "Is that blood I smell?"

She was right. I could smell blood.

The sweet smell of human blood was flowing into me along with pain and despair.

"Lady Eleanor!" A lady-in-waiting was suddenly right next to us, whispering in Lady Elea's ear. I couldn't hear what she said, but I could faintly make out Lady Elea's murmurs.

"Guards…poisoned?"

*Bam!*

The huge doors to the venue flung wide open. Knights and servants hiding their faces with black cloths came streaming into the great hall, heavily armed.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhh!" the children and maids screamed. Of course they were scared; there were dozens of people with weapons at the ready to intimidate them. Even someone as lower-middle-class as myself could understand this situation.

One of the terrorists stepped forward to make their demands. "Quiet, all of you! We've taken control of Keil Palace, and the children are going to be coming with us." He sounded young.

Yep—this was a full-fledged terrorist attack. They were doing something criminal in the name of something greater. This might have been a ransom scheme, but I felt that they must have had a much more complex motivation than that to go out of their way to do this in the heart of the royal capital—in broad daylight, no less.

"How dare you!" Lady Elea set me down on the sofa and conjured a ball of fire at crazy speed. It looked like she had used the usual kind of fire spellcraft to make it and put a lot of oomph behind it.

However, she didn't release the fireball.

"You wouldn't want to hurt the children with that kind of spell." One of the men grabbed two of the terrified and sobbing children to use them as a shield.

"Ugh…" Lady Elea ground her teeth but didn't extinguish the ball of the fire as she glared at the man.

This was not good. At a glance, it looked like they were in a deadlock, but the kids would surely die if Lady Elea took action. Even if she didn't fire any spells at them, the terrorists would likely kill the kids in retaliation.

The solution to this situation would be to throw the fireball despite knowing that the kids would get caught in it. However, I didn't think Lady Elea was capable of that, considering how much she loved children.

Moreover, the longer this situation continued, the more likely someone would start to panic, leading to them getting themselves killed as a warning to the rest of us. All of the kids who had been captured—even Rick—looked pale and about to reach their limits.

The reason they hadn't started completely panicking yet was likely because Lady Elea looked like she was trying to protect them

and she was an adult. If Lady Elea extinguished the ball of fire, the children would break. This was why the butlers and maids couldn't act either—they understood.

But didn't that mean we had already lost?

It didn't look like there was anything that could be done, but I had a moment to think while the terrorists still assumed they had the upper hand…

I wasn't sure what their goal was, but they themselves had said that they were here to kidnap the children. As I was not even four years old yet, I couldn't do anything to prevent that. While I had no idea when my demon powers would return, I knew full well that the world wasn't so kind as to let me suddenly recover them now. Not that I could use them in front of such a large crowd even if I did have them back.

Which meant that the only way to break the current deadlock was to let them succeed in their goal. Then the question that remained was how much that would decrease our chances of being injured.

Their most likely target was Rick. He looked like a son from a really good family, despite his personality. Betty also seemed like a noble's daughter, but it only made sense to attack such a heavily guarded place like this in the daytime if Rick was their target.

Personally, I believed that the best idea would have been to just hand Rick over and let them leave. However, I didn't think that would go over well with anybody. Considering how far the terrorists had gone already, they'd probably want to take as many kids as possible, though too many hostages would hinder their escape. It was likely there were more terrorists in their group than the ones we could see, but from the looks of it, they could probably grab five of us max.

Assuming that abducting three of us would satisfy them, likely the biggest problem then would be the people left behind. From the point of view of a terrorist, there was no point in leaving anyone

here alive once they had the hostages—and letting an adult live would be an especially bad idea.

Kids were annoying, but there was a possibility that the terrorists wouldn't kill all of them. But while going with them would be dangerous, staying behind also had its dangers. What an annoying situation to be in.

Uuugh, this was all so annoying!

Lady Elea was Mother's friend and she smelled nice. Shelly was cute. Betty was funny. Lady Elea would probably be sad if Rick died, and it wasn't like he was a bad kid or anything. Argh!

Even though I was a devil, my head was a jumble because of these human emotions!

*Ugh, this sucks, but I guess I have no choice.*

And this wasn't even my character type either…

"Lady Elea, put down your hand," I said as calmly and clearly as possible as I touched her.

"Y-Yul?!"

I slipped my hand out of Shelly's grasp and slid off the sofa. I walked slowly, steadily, and with the calmest expression I could muster, trying to look as arrogant as I could as I stepped out in front of everyone.

No one moved. They were petrified as I—the youngest child here—steadily walked forward with my uncanny appearance. The terrorists looked completely baffled as well, but showed no sign of fear.

I utilized my inhuman appearance to overpower them with a fierce gaze. "Let ebrybuddy go!"

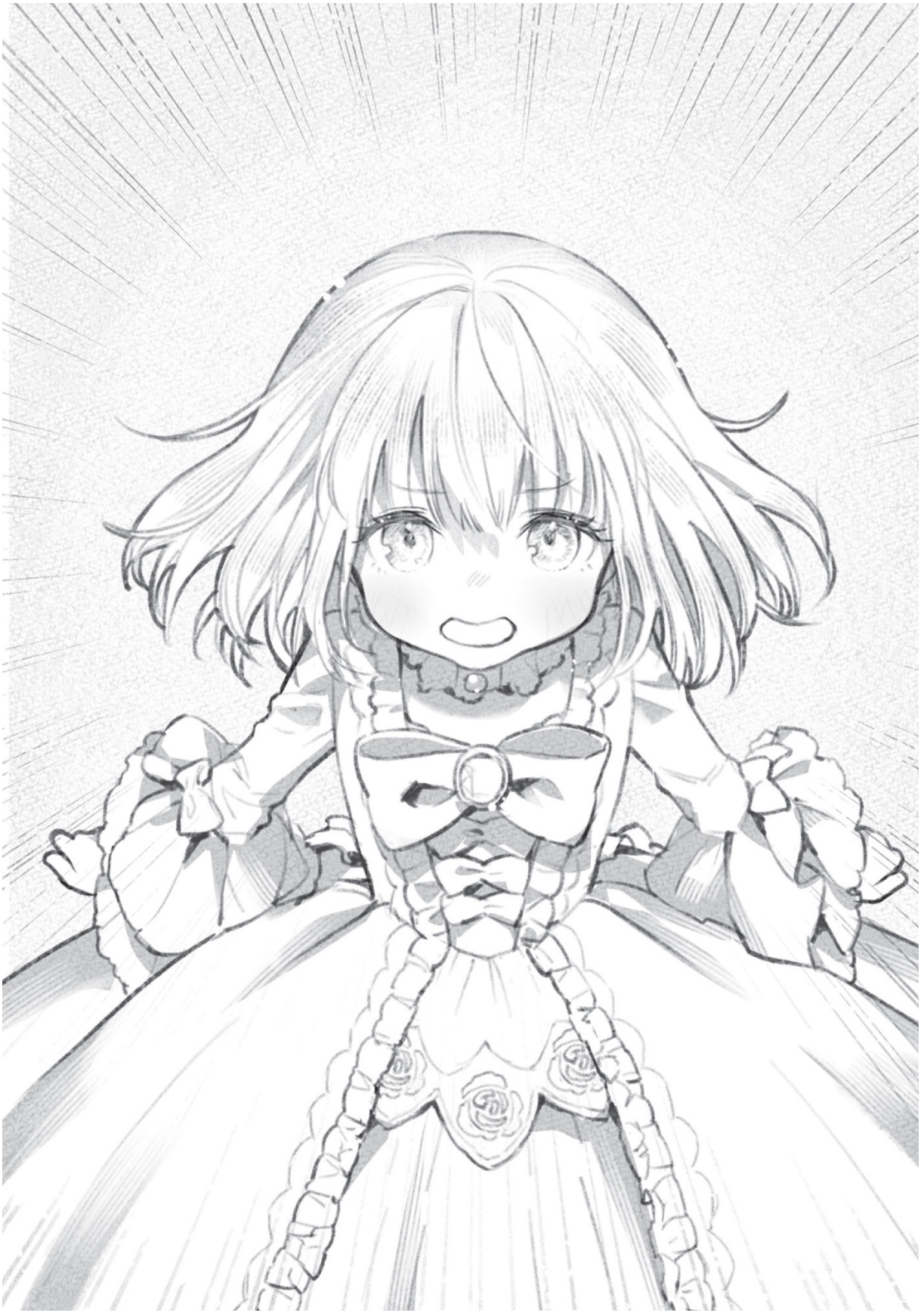
At my declaration, the terrorists all shrank back in fear. It wasn't because of my bad pronunciation. Not at all. Probably.

Thanks to the people at our manor, I knew that it took people time to get used to my weird looks. This was why I had to force them to do what I wanted before they recovered from their confusion. However, I was not so optimistic as to think that they would let us all go without anything in exchange. So I…

"Take me inped."

Gasps and quiet commotion filled the air.

It wasn't *my* fault that my pronunciation was bad—I was only three years old! I gave up on speaking, smiled at the masked knight with black hair who seemed to be their leader, and slowly started walking forward so as to not startle him.



So long as nobody interrupted now, I would win once I passed through the crowd of terrorists and reached the big doors. If they let me outside, then they would just follow me without trying to capture me.

Or at least I hoped so.

If all went well, this would lead to the smallest number of injuries. I doubted the terrorists would do anything too terrible to a three-year-old. Of course, my life would still be in danger, but if I were alone, I figured I might be able to do something with the forbidden summoning of a black avalanche of cockroaches.

Though I myself might wind up hurt.

In any case, I could manage by myself. I was aware that it was thanks to my previous experience living a savage life as a demon that I felt no fear in this situation, but it was better than them dragging Shelly and Betty along with me.

The masked leader watched me curiously as I walked past him. I was almost there. I was just about to walk through the doors when—

"I cannot allow Yul to shoulder this all on her own! You must take me with you!"

What? Lady Elea?!

"I'm going with Lady Yul too!"

Shelly?!

"I-if they're going, then I'm going too!"

Betty…

"M-me too!"

Even Rick. That sounded like it had taken whatever energy he had left just to say!

"Very well, I shall invite you all to come with us. Heh heh. You were a big help today, my lady." Now even the leader was grinning

at me with amusement.

*Ugh, how did I get myself into this mess?!*

# Episode 8:
# To My Darlings

AFTER ALL THAT, IT WASN'T JUST ME WHO got taken, but Lady Elea, Shelly, Betty, and even Rick. The leader of the terrorists seemed pleased by this turn of events and secretly told me that they had at least wanted to grab Lady Elea and Rick, so we were a bonus. What the heck?

However, they seemed like the honest kind of terrorists, so they didn't harm anyone else there—merely knocked them out with sleeping pills or something like that.

After that, we were off in some trading company's enormous coach, rocking back and forth for about two hours before arriving at some manor. Lady Elea was then separated from the rest of us.

Rick threw a tantrum when they took his mother away, but went quiet after they hit him.

"Are you all right, Lord Ludoric?" Betty asked.

"I-I'm fine!" I thought they had held back, but Rick looked on the verge of tears as he pressed his swollen cheek. He was okay enough to still put up a brave front, at least.

I wished he would let go of my skirt. He shouldn't have come if he was so scared. On the other hand, Shelly seemed to be doing fine enough that she was able to glare at him with a terrifying look.

With Lady Elea gone, the four of us children were taken to an underground cellar that looked like a warehouse.

I would like to note that I was extremely calm despite the situation.

This was the first time I had felt so keenly like a *devil*.

The soul of a demon, the heart of a human…

I had vaguely assumed that the soul and heart were one and the same, but it turned out that they were subtly different. I believed that I had such a strong force of will because I had a certain degree of memories of living in that world from my dreams. That had to be part of it. Yet if those memories were really all I had, then surely I would have been much more terrified in this situation.

I had lived in that gruesome Demon Realm as a demon. Despite that, I was sure that I had a human heart within me.

In the warehouse, I could see dozens of kids with injured hearts and bodies. How long had they been here? One of the kids looked like he hadn't been properly eating; he was thoroughly exhausted from crying and shouting, crouched down with a blank look in his eyes, looking brutally battered and close to dying of neglect. Perhaps he'd tried to resist and gotten caught.

Shelly and the others turned their gazes away from the children bitterly, but I continued staring at them.

"Oh my goodness…"

I felt neither pity nor resentment for the children. Instead, I felt a deep *love* for them, seeing how they suffered…

I was such a freak.

What the heck was wrong with me? At first, I mistook it for something like affection, but how weird was I to have feelings of love while looking at children who were hurt and suffering?!

Look, in my head, I understood that this was an awful sight, but my heart felt exhilarated, like there was some kind of power surging up inside of me.

*What should I do? I guess there's no helping it. I give up.*

As I was busy thinking such worthless thoughts, I looked away. For some reason, Shelly and Betty took my hands, seeming as though they were on the verge of tears. *I'm sorry, but that wasn't why I looked away.*

Hmm?

"Wait, that kid there…"

"Is something the matter, Lady Yul?" Shelly asked, worry in her voice.

I ignored her as I was drawn to the sensation of the dying child. "He…wants to die." I was already walking toward the child as those words escaped my lips.

I was sure that my normal fake-human smile was gone. The kids moved out of my path fearfully as I came closer. The kids around the child in question quickly fled—I supposed they weren't his siblings. I crouched down next to him.

"Is living too painful for you?"

I was sure I heard Shelly and the others gasp behind me.

The boy weakly cracked his eyes open, letting out wheezing breaths from between cracked lips. He could not speak, but his eyes told me everything. His lips moved as if to say, "I want this pain to end. I want to feel better."

*So that's what you desire. However…*

"No." I touched the boy's dirty cheek and spoke in a gentle voice as I smiled at him.

It was flowing into me.

The boy's intense *agony* and profound *despair* filled my starving heart.

"Live."

*Ahh, humans are such frail and darling creatures.*

Even this small child with his little body and heart possessed a nectar that attracted me.

"Keep living, even if it's painful and sad. That's the rule of being human."

I hadn't even realized it, but every child down here in this underground warehouse was listening to me now.

*All of you must know this too. Live your short lives with all your might. Suffer, feel sorrow, feel regret, and keep on living.*

*Because as a devil, I would never allow a human to just die in peace.*

"Manifest Light."

A dazzling light shot out from my whole body and gently enveloped the child. My feelings became power and manifested as healing magic.

As the overwhelming power rushed out of me, I realized why I was able to use holy magic but not ordinary spellcraft. It made so much sense. It was because the way a demon used magic was different from how a human did.

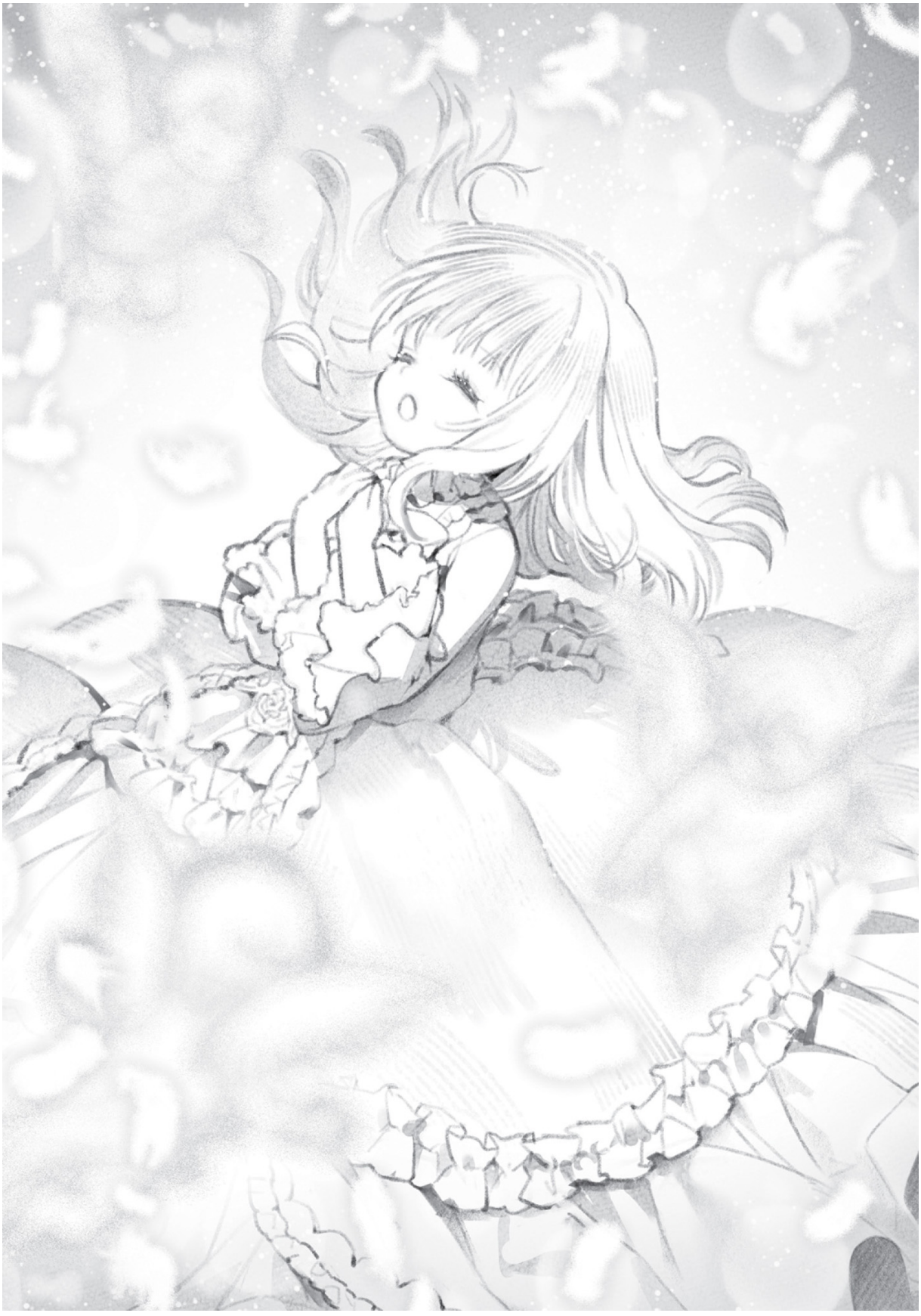
I was just glad that I had it at all.

*Now then, my darling humans.*

"I grant you all the *blessing* of life!"

*Curse the fact that you were ever born. However, I alone in this world will revel in your despair. Welcome to a world full of suffering, humans.*

*Now offer up your despair unto me—the devil.*



*Ahh, I feel like I finally let my feelings out.*

My released emotions turned into light that now illuminated this spacious underground warehouse. My pure demon magic turned into light, just as I willed it, binding even weak-willed light elementals and forcing them to manifest with the appearance of countless angels.

The feathers of these angels scattered in a blizzard of light. Every child who touched them was completely healed. The light-feathers quietly whirled like snow, melting into the air.

All was silent.

*Uh-oh. I really overdid it this time. There is no denying how highly abnormal that was.*

The silence was so painful. Shelly and the other children were overcome with amazement, or more like completely flabbergasted.

*What should I do? I guess there's no helping it.*

That was when the cute cheeks of that half-dead boy who had craved death turned bright red. He looked at me with sparkling eyes and knelt before me, putting his hands together. "Thank you, *Lady Saint*."

*Huh?!* Saint*?! Why?!* I completely snapped out of my exhilaration.

The other kids must have heard him too, because now everyone who had been healed started kneeling as well, bringing their hands together with tears streaming down their faces in prayer to me.

*Wait, stop! I'm no Saint! I'm a devil!*

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"Albertine? What are you doing here?!"

Albertine stood opposite of Eleanor in a gutted basement held up by rustic pillars, so large that it was even more spacious than a manor. Eleanor tried to approach her, but several knights blocked her path. Albertine gave an easy smile as she met the other woman's gaze.

"Why, Your Highness, it's nice to see you again. Though I suppose it hasn't been all that long since we last met."

As they were both high-ranking nobles, they often saw one another at evening parties. Before that, the two of them had been in the same year at the Academy of the Magical Arts and every student had known them as "the two roses of high society." There was no way that they were not familiar with one another.

Each of them possessed everything that others desired: beauty, authority, wealth, the envy of all who knew them. However, once they'd graduated, their situations had changed considerably. By the time their paths crossed again, they were very different people.

Albertine wanted to have her cake and eat it too, and she had tried to get everything. Yet what she desired most was the only thing to slip right through her fingers: a certain man's heart.

Eleanor was a noble, and it was because she had given up on love that she had managed to obtain one of those futures that Albertine had desired for herself.

"Why have you done such a thing?" Eleanor asked.

"You could never understand." Albertine dropped her gaze slightly. When she raised her head back up again, her eyes were as fierce and magnificent as always. "Though I suppose I will explain in due time. Starting now, I'm going to take *all you have*. I shall steal everything from you, destroy it, and once there's nothing left, I'm going to be taking it all back."

Destruction and restoration. As ruthless as it seemed, it was no different from someone who was all out of moves upending a board

game. Realizing that, Eleanor widened her eyes in astonishment. "Oh my goodness. Does Lord Forte know of this?!"

"How could he possibly know? These are the lengths I must go to for him to even look at me."

"Albertine…" Eleanor was stunned as she realized that words alone would not be enough to get Albertine to change her mind.

"Bring her to the guest room," Albertine ordered her men. "And be hospitable about it."

"Please wait, Albertine!"

"So long, Lady Eleanor. I've prepared a special seat for you from which you can witness the destruction of this kingdom."

"Albertiiiiine!"

Eleanor's screams as the knights grabbed her by the arms and hauled her away made Albertine feel so empty, yet slightly satisfied at the same time.

That being said…

"This isn't nearly enough."

Albertine proceeded through the dark basement devoid of walls, making her way to the biggest space at the center. There, scholars and wizards were busily at work. She addressed the noble man among them, "How are the preparations going, Lord Bruno?"

Marquess Bruno was a man in his thirties with brown hair. He knelt before Albertine, leaving a light kiss upon her hand. "Ah, you are always such a delight to behold, my lady. Of course, they are proceeding as expected. We should be able to begin experimenting shortly."

A military general, Bruno was known for being part of the hardline faction that promoted the expansion of the kingdom's armaments. Despite his superficial appearance, his skill with the

blade was on par with the royal knights and he was well-versed in spellcraft. He was personally overseeing their operations here.

"I'd expect nothing less of you. How does it look now that it's finished?"

"Come see for yourself. Right this way." The Marquess offered his hand in escort, guiding her toward where they had been laboring away. The wizards and knights all cleared a path for her so that she may see the summoning circle that covered the entire floor.

"Oh, my." As one of its ringleaders, Albertine knew the gist of the plan, but it was still thrilling all the same to witness a magic circle as big as a noble's mansion.

Pleased by her reaction, Bruno then explained, "As you know, we used the summoning incident four years ago as the basis for this summoning circle and made it twenty percent bigger. We also incorporated the newly developed feature you provided and should be able to successfully summon multiple greater demons in succession."

The caveat, of course, was however long the summoner's force of will and magic could hold out.

Technically, they could have made an even bigger magic circle, but anything larger would have taken multiple wizards to work it. A larger circle would have required even more magic, and the more summoners there were, the longer the ritual would take to cast. Under the circumstances, they lacked both enough wizards they could trust and a large enough space behind closed doors.

Nevertheless, this was remarkable progress compared to the current standard of randomly summoning creatures through gates forcibly opened using powerful magic. Their goal in making such a large magic circle was not so small-minded.

"So we'll be able to summon a high-ranking one, then?"

Bruno frowned at Albertine's question.

This was not a stratagem they could utilize publicly, even if they were at war. However, releasing even a hundred greater demons would be more than enough to greatly weaken a kingdom. A single greater demon was equal in strength to a hundred soldiers. A hundred greater demons would be enough to cause a devastating blow to a smaller nation, depending on the pact that was sealed with them. But a kingdom as strong as Talitelud would have summoners who could conjure major elementals—which were a fair match against greater demons—so they couldn't expect a sure win in those cases.

The original goal of this plan had been to summon a high-ranking demon to increase their chances of winning any battles they may face. The fifty-plus children they had gathered were sacrifices for summoning one specific demon, a beast of a high enough rank to equal an arch elemental, capable of causing earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, tornadoes—all manner of cataclysms all across the world…

One such demon had once materialized in this world. It had appeared in the form of a sinister human dressed in the attire of an old-fashioned aristocrat and were said to have devastated an entire country all by itself.

"It will be difficult; however, I would like to summon *that being*," Bruno admitted with some hesitation.

"Yes, I remember them well too."

Four years prior, the two of them had been present during the demon-summoning incident. Bruno had been the commander of the operation and Albertine had directed the wizards as an observer from the Academy of the Magical Arts.

Albertine had been stopped from participating directly in the operation due to her position, but she had joined the dangerous battle anyway out of spite toward her husband, since the incident had taken place on her land.

At the time, Bruno had only wanted more merits to boost his authority, and Albertine had only wanted to make her existence known. However, on that day, the two had beheld the great being: A golden cat that was so beautiful, it looked like a messenger from the gods. A unique high-ranking specimen among the demons, with fur that sparkled gold and radiant golden bat wings—the Golden Beast.

Not everyone could have noticed it, but a handful of people did.

The magnificent repulsiveness hidden within its small body could blot out the starry sky and the moon with darkness. That beautiful gold demon had such power beyond that of a greater demon, they were incomparable.

The summoners likely hadn't had enough power within their magic circle. The gold demon had disappeared into the heavens and the Church had declared that it was no longer in this world, so Albertine and Bruno, captivated by its beauty and power, had schemed to summon it again. They had their individual goals and feelings on the matter, but they had both been charmed by that demon and worked toward their goal with a sort of zealotry.

"Currently, we've adjusted it to summon an old and powerful greater demon as an experiment. What shall we do for it?"

"Hmm."

Even an experiment would require several sacrifices in order to summon multiple greater demons. They had no idea how many sacrifices it would take to summon that gold demon again, and they didn't want their stock of children to go to waste.

They had captured Eleanor so that she wouldn't be able to use her considerable spellcraft skill to interfere with the final stages of their experiment. They'd also abducted her son to sacrifice him before her, but Albertine didn't want to use him in this kind of test run.

That was when Albertine remembered Zumana having mentioned a certain child in his report.

"One of the children is of a strong lineage and possesses notable magical gifts. She would surely count as several people's worth of sacrifices."

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"You want to use *that* child?" Zumana asked without thinking. He looked startled by his candor and bowed his head. "I apologize for speaking out of turn."

Albertine nodded coolly at Zumana as they headed for the room where the children were imprisoned. "It's all right. This wasn't a part of our original plan, after all."

They'd originally planned to make Eleanor's son a test subject. They would allow him to be possessed by a lesser demon before using him as a sacrifice. They were going to break Eleanor's heart by showing her son to her as a half-demon. They'd managed to take Eleanor prisoner ahead of schedule, but the rest of that was going to take time.

In ages past, people had experimented with possession by lesser demons to see if a living body with a soul could absorb the power of a demon or elemental. These tests resulted in the subjects turning into something like a monster, and the field of study was banned before its full potential could be realized.

Humans lost their minds when possessed by a stronger demon or elemental, and if the creature was too weak, the human would wind up weaker as well, unable to acquire any power even though their bodies were altered. The nation to the south had also experimented in the past, but Albertine hadn't been able to obtain their research results, not that she'd expected to.

If that little girl was of the same strong ancestry as Ludoric, then surely they could find a better use for her than just treating her

as a disposable pawn. So Zumana believed—but he knew that once his strict mistress had made up her mind, it was hard to change it.

"All I want to know is if a child of such a long, strong bloodline would be able to resist the power of a demon."

"I understand."

*I highly doubt that's all there is to this,* Zumana thought.

Talking with Eleanor hadn't been part of the plan. It was because they had also gotten their hands on that girl—which had not originally been part of the plan—that Albertine had lost her composure.

The girl was born from the woman her husband loved. She was the beloved daughter he desired, the one he was willing to throw everything away for. It was a given that he would love her from the onset, but even Zumana could tell that Albertine was having complicated feelings about how this girl was so beloved by everyone else as well. It could be that Albertine was unconsciously afraid of that girl whose very existence disturbed the tranquility of her heart.

In contrast, Zumana considered the girl a curiosity. She had shown no sign of fear during the kidnapping. She'd resolutely made her demands—no, *negotiated* with Zumana, acting as if she were someone of high rank. How had that little girl been raised to behave in such a manner even though she wasn't even four yet? Albertine's eldest daughter was exceptionally talented in Zumana's opinion, but even she needed authority when arguing with an adult.

Zumana began to reconsider everything as he realized that this was what they meant by having a strong bloodline. Both Albertine's daughter and the Ludoric boy were of similar ancestry, but Zumana began to feel that the girl's bloodline might be even stronger. Perhaps it was because of her bloodline that she possessed such otherworldly beauty and a majesty that made her seem inhuman. If they hadn't been so captivated by her angelic beauty, some of the knights he had borrowed from Marquess Bruno would likely have

knelt down before her on the spot—that was just how different she was.

*But none of that matters to me. Albertine is my mistress, and what she says goes.*

Zumana not only respected her as his mistress, but loved her as a woman. He loved every single thing about her. How she was as beautiful as a rose, her haughty air, her determination, her strength—even that lonely expression he would catch on occasion. All of her weaknesses.

And his feelings never wavered, even after he had learned that she had been the one who had put his family through such hardship.

"What's…going on in there?" Albertine was shocked as they stood before the door to the room the children were confined in.

They hadn't posted any guards. There was only the occasional patrol, since they didn't have enough personnel and it wasn't like such young children could possibly do anything.

Yet what they saw now was bizarre.

Some kind of dazzling light as bright as the sun itself was leaking out of the gaps in the sturdy, securely locked door. The light fluttered about, looking like illusory feathers, turning into particles of light and disappearing once they touched the floor.

"Why…?" Albertine had seen this before.

This light was holy magic, and a high-level blessing at that. Albertine had only ever seen it performed once, by His Eminence the Pontiff of the Church of Kostor. This was the sort of blessing that priests performed to heal people and grant them protection against evil. This kind of blessing as performed by the pontiff would bless everyone present and the skill required to cast it depended on the number of people it affected.

*Feast of Blessings.* Only one person in the Holy Kingdom had the skill to use this spell, and even the pontiff would be unable to move after casting it on thirty people. There probably weren't even ten people capable of using it on the whole continent.

There were at least fifty children in that room. This meant that one of the children in that room could use holy magic even more powerful than the pontiff himself.

If the caster was a certain *someone*…

"Zumana! Open the door! Hurry!"

Albertine was impatient as Zumana opened the door and she practically leapt inside. What they found was not the wounded, terrified children who had resigned themselves to their fates, but children who were all the picture of perfect health, offering up their prayers to a child who was the image of the Saint.

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"What have you done?!" a beautiful woman with red hair shouted as she barged into the room. I recognized her from the coach ride with my father.

*Huh? Why?! What are you doing here?!* Things were already complicated enough for me, what with all of these kids calling me the Saint or whatever and making supplications to me so I couldn't move. Don't make things any worse!

"Move aside!" The lady seethed at the children as she charged into them.

Whoa, what an inhuman expression on her face. Huh? Why was she looking at me? She was coming straight for me?!

"You're coming with me!"

"Eek!" The pretty lady grabbed my arm and I let out some weird cry of alarm.

That was when the very first boy I'd healed—Noel, was it?—suddenly opened his eyes wide and threw himself at the lady.

"Don't touch the Saaaint!"

The beautiful lady knocked him aside with her hand. "Foolish child!"

"Waaaaaaah!" Rick also jumped at the woman. Why was he going this far?!

"Why, you—!" The woman didn't even hesitate to slap him down too. She kept trying to drag me out of the room as Shelly and Betty and every single child in the room leaped at her.

"I shall not allow you to take Lady Yul!"

"Yul!"

"Lady Saint!"

"Saint!"

The children continued throwing themselves at her while calling out for the Saint. The lady scowled. And I scowled even more than she did.

"O Wind!" The butler-looking guy standing by the door cast some kind of spell that sent Shelly and the others flying backward.

The pretty lady and I felt nothing more than a gentle breeze. He sure was impressive! And he'd managed to not injure the kids either. He was really, really talented.

"Quiet! If you keep acting up, I'm going to kill her!" the lady shouted.

The kids all immediately went still.

*Uh, that would be bad if you killed me and all, but I'd really rather they not get hurt since I went through the trouble of healing*

*them. Is this the part where I should say something? Not that it would be in order to protect myself or anything.*

"I'll be okay, everybody," I said, smiling to assure them as best as I could.

Shelly and the others started wailing with despair.

*Uhhh?* I glanced up at the pretty lady for a sign of what I should do, but she looked taken aback by their behavior.

*I know what that look is. Yep. Lady! Get me outta here!*

It wasn't as if I had given up on all logical thinking or anything. I just figured that there was nothing that could possibly be done to fix this situation now.

"Walk!"

"'Kaaay!"

*Ah, hey, that hurts.* The lady had squeezed my arm painfully in response to my casual reply. *Yeah, I know. Normal kids would be a whole lot more scared in this kind of situation.*

Wait a sec, how does one act afraid again? I figured I could act like Shelly or Betty, but it was probably a little too late for that. So I just obediently went along with them, and all the while, that butler-looking guy kept looking at me curiously.

*No worries. I'm not suspicious at all, I swear.* I needed to figure out how to act a little more like a regular human.

And so, that pretty lady held my hand as we walked down this gloomy hallway until we arrived at an even bigger space than the place they held all the kids. I figured that we were underground, and I finally had to wonder if I was actually going to be okay.

They had demolished all of the walls to leave only pillars, but I got the feeling that they had left them there to serve some kind of

purpose. Maybe they would make some kind of magic stronger or something?

I didn't know where she was taking me, but there happened to be a chair, so the lady made me sit down and crouched to meet my gaze.

"You're Liasteia's daughter, aren't you?"

"Yeah," I said after a moment of hesitation.

Was she Mother's friend too? No, I didn't think she was. There was something really emotional about the way she'd said Mother's name just now.

The woman seemed calmer than before, but she was still very irritated. She was forcing herself to smile like she would for a child, but after that show of violence, I found that smile unnerving.

"What's your name?"

"Yulucia," I replied after a pause.

"So your name is Yulucia. And you can use holy magic?"

"Yup."

"Who taught you that kind of magic that you just used?"

That kind of magic? I tilted my head, giving her a confused look. I'd learned some holy magic from Vio, but if that wasn't what she meant, was she referring to the whole thing about the angels dancing? Was that a kind of magic I shouldn't have used? I just gave her a look that said "I'm a kid and I don't know what you're talking about," which made her sigh wearily.

"Do you know what the Saint is?"

That again? I silently shook my head, feigning ignorance. She narrowed her eyes in a glare.

"The Saint is a very special person to our kingdom, all the more so if she's descended from royalty. But that doesn't matter. Now, listen closely, Yulucia. I'm going to tell you what's going to happen to you now."

"Okay." I nodded my head, playing the good girl.

The lady's fake smile turned sadistic. "At first, I was planning to use you for demonic possession, but I think we can do some other kinds of experiments if you really do possess enough magical ability to call yourself a true Saint."

"Okay…?"

*Uh, I wasn't the one calling myself the Saint or anything.*

But then the pretty lady brought up a disturbing word that made me reflexively try to stand, only to be stopped when she grabbed my shoulders.

"Hmm, yes. First, let's try cutting your arm. I'm sure it'll really hurt, but you can just heal it yourself."

I was silent. What was this lady saying?

"Don't worry. If you are the Saint, I'm sure you'll be fine. And then after that, we'll try cutting your leg. There's sure to be a lot of blood, so you'll need to heal yourself quickly so that you don't die. And maybe it would be interesting to see what would happen if we drove nails into you. It'll hurt much more if you heal yourself while they're still piercing your body."

*Uhhhh…?*

"Perhaps we should make it our goal to strengthen the spell through reinforcement with holy magic. And then if you run out of magic, and thus have less resistance, we'll go ahead and make sure you're possessed by a lesser demon. Good luck trying to resist. If you don't, you'll wind up with scales or thorns all over your arms and body. Hee hee…I can't wait to see the looks on the faces of the royal family and the Church once they see that their precious Saint looks like a daemon."

This pretty lady sounded like she had gone mad, spewing such revolting things. I could definitely feel that her heart had taken some kind of really weird turn.

Her twisted smile suddenly turned sad as she touched my cheek.

"Ahh, you have such pretty eyes. They look just like his. It was those eyes that made me so fond of him. Ever since we first met when we were young, I've loved them. But I couldn't tell him how I felt… I could only ever say cruel things to him."

Her fingers grazed underneath my eyes before she slowly dropped both of her hands. "I was so sure that…he would be mine, so long as I just waited. His elder brother also knew that this was for the best, for the sake of his talents. But…he found another before I had a chance."

Her white hands trembled as they slowly wrapped around my throat. "I hated her. I didn't even want to look at her. But at the castle…at parties at night…even tea parties…whenever I saw him, she was there by his side. At first, she was hanging around him like a younger sister, but then she stole his heart."

Slowly, silently, she pressed her fingers deep into my skin. "And even though I made him mine, he never gave me his heart. So I said things that were even more cruel. That was when his elder brother started meddling… Even though we had worked together to make this union happen, he became my enemy. So long as those people continue to stand in my way, his heart will never belong to me…"

I was completely silent.

*Ah, I see. So that's how it is.*

This was the story of a girl who couldn't be honest about her feelings even though she loved someone. She didn't want me to know her story or anything. She could only tell me this because she was going to kill me—because I was a child who was going to die, and she wanted someone to know.

"If I had acted more like a Saint, would he have fallen in love with me? If my daughters had the same kind of blonde hair as she does, would he have loved them? What must we do to be loved by

him? I don't know… I don't know what I should do! What should I have done to make us a family? No one ever taught me how to live that way! And so now, all I can do is destroy it all! Destroy everything and start over again with a clean slate!"

I continued to say nothing.

*What an inept person she is… Surely she's realized that even overturning the game board won't do anything to make him love her. Yet her heart is so cracked and broken that she has nothing left but to cling to this idea.*

"But even that won't work… Because *you're* here. He won't love me or my daughters because he has someone like you, so beloved by everyone! So…I want you to die. You've had enough of his love, right? So you're going to die, and then he'll be mine!" She leaned in to scream in my face as she squeezed my neck even tighter.

From her personality, I had to assume that she had never had another female friend whom she could share her darkest thoughts with. If only she had someone she could open up to. If only she could be a bit more honest about her feelings.

*But you don't need to cry anymore.*

I reached up to touch her quivering hands as they dug into my neck and smiled at her.

*It's all right. You don't need to cry anymore.*

Seeing my smiling reflection in her eyes slightly waver, I couldn't help myself from gently brushing her tears away from her cheeks. She hadn't even noticed she was crying.

"Wh-what are you—?" Her gaze trembled with confusion. We locked eyes and the harsh look in hers slowly dissipated. I gently cupped her pale cheeks in my hands.

The hearts of humans were so tender, so sad, so fragile, yet so beautiful. Even if this deep love were to change to hatred and pain, I would treasure it dearly. Humans were just so darling.

And these feelings were driving me mad.

"I will love you."

"What?"

I was finally aware of it. I had finally realized what these feelings inside of me were. I loved humans.

I—as a devil—was thirsting for *love*.

To think that such bad people had such sweet nectar hiding inside of them.

"I'm going to have a taste of it now."

*Snap!*

I ever-so-gently broke her neck.

# Episode 9:
# Blessings of a Demon

"L-LADY ALBERTIIIIIIIINE!" ZUMANA SCREAMED.

He couldn't believe his eyes.

Albertine had unloaded on this girl who was the source of her agony. Zumana had been doing his best not to listen, since he hadn't wanted to hear how the woman he loved truly felt, but he had become vaguely aware of how the girl had been trying to coax Albertine using affectionate behavior. Surely that wouldn't have been enough to change her, though it might've been enough to dissuade her from doing something that would only hurt herself.

He had begun to feel hopeful, but then in the next moment, felt utterly betrayed.

The child had broken Albertine's neck.

Zumana's mind went completely blank. His brain refused to even try to comprehend what he had just witnessed. Why did she do that? How? And yet, this was the reality he was faced with. He was immediately filled with fury and hatred as he unsheathed his blade. But in that moment, he froze as he sensed the ominous presence of a tremendously powerful being.

Something had happened. Zumana had been filled with such rage that it bordered on madness, yet now his thoughts had frozen and he felt chilled to the bone as he saw something even more repulsive.

The whites of the girl's pretty eyes had been dyed the color of darkness, as if they had corroded away into inky black. Her faintly golden pupils had turned into a bewitchingly brilliant and deep crimson color, like rubies. Despite the fact that there was no airflow in this basement, her hair, like threads of spun gold, was gently

fluttering. And amid her divine sparkling radiance, vermilion fangs like red crystal protruded from her cute peach lips and nails of the same red color sprouted from her dainty fingertips.

A sinisterness bordering on violence and an air of intimidation radiated out of this lovely, angelic child.

Zumana was bound by the sense of absolute power coming from her. The girl pierced Albertine's white throat with her fangs—the woman's body was still warm—and yet he could not move a single muscle.

He began sweating out of terror as he witnessed this act—it was such an inhuman thing to do.

*What are you doing?* His mind found an answer, but his instincts rejected it.

What was the young girl drinking?

Albertine's rose-colored cheeks paled to the color of white wax, withering before his very eyes. Zumana screamed soundlessly with anger and horror.

The girl watched with a beaming smile across her face as Albertine crumbled away like weathered wood.

"Are you a…vampire?"

Vampires and soul-eaters were monsters of legend, starving beasts that were hated by other evil kin of darkness. Long ago, a nation had once been ruined by an overabundance of vampires. Another kingdom had had several victims at the hands of a small number of them. There *were* monsters that sucked blood and people's life energy. Could the toddler before him be such an evil creature? Or had a completely normal human child been replaced by a monster?

The monster must have heard his hoarse whisper, because she looked at him as if just noticing he was there and gave him a puzzled look.

"Am I a vampire…?" The monster repeated the words with a strangely different intonation and licked her lips with her small tongue as if savoring the aftertaste. She let out a fervent sigh as if she had just drunk high-grade alcohol and a captivating smile lit up her eyes, which shone in such a way that made her look older than her years.

The sight made Zumana shudder. The way she greedily drank human blood, devouring vitality, made it seem like it was just an ordinary meal for her.

Zumana could tell from her eyes that she did not consider him an enemy—she saw him as *prey*.

He realized that this monster hadn't murdered Albertine—she had eaten her prey. The thought incited violent flames of rancor all over again, but they were immediately extinguished by his fear.

He ground his teeth so hard he drew blood from his mouth as he took his chance to turn his back on the monster and run—not to flee or to hide, but to avenge.

Zumana was in search of power to avenge his beloved, to restore her majesty, to strike back even if it meant throwing away his own life.

Even if it meant unleashing a creature even more repulsive than a vampire.

"There's a monster! Everyone be on guard!" Zumana cried out to the soldiers and knights he came across as he ran through the basement.

The men made way for him, stunned by the tears of blood, born from indignation and loathing, that poured down Zumana's face.

When Zumana reached the center of the space, he shouted, "Lord Bruno! Activate the summoning circle! Hurry!"

"Zumana?!" Bruno was startled at the sudden demand and Zumana's disarrayed appearance. Realizing the plan must have gone astray, he rushed over to Zumana. "What happened?! Is it related to what's going on here?!"

Bruno had noticed something unusual. Moments ago, several of their wizards had started complaining of feeling chilled and they had begun investigating to see if something had gone wrong.

"There was a monster among the children we took. I'm not sure what it is exactly, but I believe it is a vampire."

"What?! Is Lady Albertine safe?! What's happened to her?!"

"My lady was…!" Zumana hesitated, his face twisting with pain and rage.

Seeing the trickle of blood running down Zumana's clenched fist, Bruno's fists trembled too.

Bruno and Albertine had both been aligned in their ambitions, but they each had their own secret goals. Nevertheless, Bruno had respected her for her nobility and strength and felt both grief and indignation that such a beautiful red rose had been so mercilessly plucked.

Bruno looked at the summoning circle that was under his supervision and then turned back to Zumana, who was shaking with rage.

"Can this vampire not be defeated unless we summon a demon?"

In this world, creatures like vampires and demons opposed humanity. Mana was the source of all magic. Creatures that absorbed and were transformed by it turned savage and were feared as monsters.

They rarely saw monsters here at the center of the continent where the Holy Kingdom was located. However, monsters were commonly sighted near the mountain range to the north, where the daemons resided. These monsters were classified based on the

threat they posed to humanity. Normal monsters and vampires didn't fall into this framework, but Bruno had to know if this monster truly was strong enough that Zumana would suggest summoning a demon.

"It was no ordinary creature. I think it might even be a Disaster Rank."

"What?!"

Monsters that harmed humans and exceeded a certain threshold of power were divided into ranks. Disaster Rank meant that the creature was capable of annihilating a town of over a thousand people, requiring the country to dispatch the military in order to defeat it. Disaster Rank had its own sub-rankings, as well.

The summoning circle would be able to summon a greater demon, which were also considered Disaster Rank. The strength of demons varied even among greater demons depending on how long they had existed. Most summoned demons were young and lower in ranking compared to ordinary Disaster-Rank beings.

The old vampire that had appeared in the neighboring country had been classified as Disaster Rank because nearly a thousand soldiers had died in trying to kill it. If the vampire that Zumana had seen was of equal power to that one, then there was a possibility that not even summoning a greater demon would be enough to defeat it.

"We should be able to summon a demon of high rank. However, I have my doubts," Bruno said. The circle had originally been constructed to summon the golden demon, whom Bruno venerated as the very symbol of power, but it was going to take years of experiments to actually execute.

"Lord Bruno, I believe this to be a worst-case scenario. If we summon a greater demon—even just one who has known a long life—then I offer myself as the one to negotiate with it."

"Will we even be able to negotiate with it? It could cost you your life…but I can tell you've already made up your mind."

"Yes, I am prepared."

Zumana was ready to do whatever it took. Bruno could see it in his eyes.

For the sake of avenging a woman, for the sake of achieving their goals, for the sake of protecting the future of this kingdom, they would have to fight one evil with another. Bruno and Zumana nodded in unison—they were now comrades in arms. Status no longer mattered.

"Let's do it, Zumana. We may be rebelling against our country, but we do it for the sake of our country. We cannot allow a being that could destroy our homeland to run free."

"Yes, my lord!"

"I want the first through third platoons of knights to lead half of our soldiers in the charge against this Disaster-Rank vampire. Do not let it approach this area! The fourth platoon will remain here as our bodyguards, and if a demon that we cannot contain appears, I will lead the charge in destroying it, even if it costs us our lives. Everyone, be prepared to put your lives on the line!"

"Yes, my lord!"

The knights and soldiers reached for their weapons, faces tense.

Their enemy was a Disaster-Rank monster. They all would likely die trying to stop it.

Even if they were launching a rebellion, the goal of the radical Bruno and his order of knights was to protect the citizens of their nation and their land without relying on such ambiguous beings as gods.

"The target has been sighted!" The soldier's voice echoed through the basement.

A wave of tension surged through the knights and soldiers as they mustered up all of their courage and tightly grasped their weapons.

The situation was dire, but they still had luck on their side. This was the base of their rebellion and all of their shields and weapons were of fine quality. All of the knights and soldiers equipped themselves for battle with shields and pikes. Those who were confident in their skills took the lead with longswords meant for slaying living creatures. The swords the knights usually carried were merely for decoration; on the battlefield, they wielded blunt weapons and long swords to kill their armored enemies.

The quality equipment helped to slightly boost the morale of the knights and soldiers. With this, surely, they could take on a demon. However, something was strange. Had this basement always been this dark? Had this basement always felt this cold?

As they peered into the darkness, they saw the creature approaching.

"Waaaaah!" The second they became aware of its presence, one of the younger soldiers broke down completely, falling to his knees and sobbing like a child.

However, no one could rebuke him or jeer at him for it. It was drawing ever nearer—that incredibly violent presence like an enormous beast that had been released from its shackles in hell.

"What the?!"

And then from the darkness appeared a small girl, glowing gold.

The knights were thrown into disorder and confusion. She was so beautiful, wearing a white dress that looked like pretty flower petals, and she moved as if she weighed nothing—like a fairy who had just been born from a flower.

They were unable to make the connection that such an evil presence, like that of a starving animal, was emanating from this

gorgeous angel. Their brains refused to accept that she was an enemy.

Had they not been warned that they were dealing with a vampire or man-eating monster, they likely would not have been able to even point their weapons at her.

"G-get heeeer! We cannot allow her past this point!" the commander leading the three platoons shouted, shaking off his fear. His voice spurred the frozen men into action and they readied their weapons.

Seeing their resolve, the golden child smiled innocently.

She had an evil presence beyond that of any human—along with crimson eyes, claws, and fangs. She was so beautiful, it distorted this cruel, unimaginable reality into something unreal—a pretty dream. It was enough to rob the soldiers of their faculties, so they chose to focus on nothing but the orders of their superior officer as a means to escape their breaking hearts.

"Ahhhhh!" one of the soldiers shouted, his voice cracking, as he thrust out his pike.

No sooner had he let out that cry than the child pinched the pike between her tiny fingers, stopping him in his tracks. Despite his best efforts, the soldier could not move it at all. The girl smiled sweetly as if she were holding a small winged insect between her fingers and swung the spear, crushing the soldier's internal organs and ribs as it smashed into his middle. The soldier standing next to him got swept up in the strike and was slammed against a pillar.

The meatsack that had once been a human crumpled to the ground, splattering large quantities of blood and entrails.

"Ohhhhh-ahhhhhhhhhhhh!" One of the knights swung down with his whole weight.

She stopped the tip of the long sword with the tip of one claw. As she pushed back with that single finger, the long sword shattered into pieces that flew out in all directions. The upper halves of the

knight and the men standing behind him exploded into blood and chunks of meat that scattered across the ground.

"Shoot! Shoot! Shoot iiit!!" The archers and wizards, who should have probably attacked first, began firing at her, but all of the arrows of iron and fire changed their trajectory as if they were afraid to touch her.

The girl took a deep breath, and when she let it out, the archers were crushed and battered as if swallowed up by an enormous muddy stream.

"Eek!" A wizard gasped at the sight of the massacre and took a step back.

The girl's smile widened at the carnage. She picked up someone's lower body and flung it like a twig. The terrified wizard and his remaining wizard comrades behind him got caught in the attack. The way their blood smeared all over the walls created a stunning work of art.

"Stoooop!" a heavyset soldier wielding a gigantic hammer cried as he attacked the child. He swung down with enough force to tear off his arm. That was when the girl lightly touched his stomach and his entire abdomen splattered.

If you approached, she would kill you. If she touched you, she would kill you.

With a wave of her hand, a giant, invisible palm smacked people into the walls and ceiling. Every step she took was matched by the crushing force of an invisible giant foot.

With her every playful movement, battle-hardened knights and soldiers were torn to pieces, twisted, their bodies broken—completely at her mercy as they died. Sprays of blood danced through the air to bloom across the ceiling, pillars, and walls in giant scarlet flowers, which then trickled down to cover the floor in a gory sea.

The ones who died fighting were the lucky ones.

A far more tragic fate awaited the man who fell to his knees out of despair.

When she grabbed his head with her crimson claws, he shriveled up and broke. She sunk her crimson fangs into his neck, draining all of his life energy, preying upon him as mere food.

And that was when…

"Fire Javelin!"

An enormous spear of bright red flame hit her square on, consuming both the childlike monster and the corpses of the fallen soldiers.

"Impossible!" The commander, who had been the one to deploy the spell with all he had left, fell to his knees in astonishment.

The man had spent twenty years training daily. He had worked hard to learn both the blade and spellcraft for the sake of his country. He had been participating in this experiment out of a sense of righteousness. He didn't want to sacrifice children, but he decided it was for the greater good and had abducted countless homeless children. In order to prove his commitment, he had even returned to attack the refugees he had once failed to abduct, killing everyone belonging to a small mercenary company and beating up their child as he took him away.

He believed that he had the power. That he would proceed down a superior path. He'd put the whole of these beliefs into those flames. As he saw the child smile as she stood amid the flames, it was then that he realized he was way out of his league.

She didn't have a single scratch. In fact, not even a single spurt of blood had marred her flowery white dress—it didn't even look singed. Seeing her completely unharmed, his heart shattered like glass.

"Ahh…"

They had been too cocky.

Whatever this being was, it was no vampire or beast that could easily be subjugated. He finally knew that they had tried to strike at something that they should not have. All the commander could do was weep tears of despair, fear, and sorrow. The small beautiful monster touched his wet cheeks with a loving smile on her face…and then devoured his life.

"Ugh… Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh?!"

The knights had been decimated and the few soldiers who were still alive forgot their duty, dropping even the weapons that were their pride as they fled.

They could accept dying in battle. They were prepared to put their lives on the line for someone else's sake. However, the fear of being devoured by this overwhelming predator and being denied a human death broke their spirits.

They ran away, practically crawling, their faces covered in sweat, tears, and snot. Once they reached their remaining allies and saw their allied butler running over to them, their expressions lit with hope.

"Help—"

*Slice!*

Zumana, whom they had thought was their ally, slashed their stomachs. They collapsed to the ground.

"Lord Bruno, the sacrifices have been prepared. Please, hurry."

"Zumana…"

Deserting in the face of the enemy was a serious crime, but that was on the battlefield. Even Bruno felt it couldn't be helped due to the situation and what Zumana must have been going through.

Bruno wasn't one to act serious all the time, but he *was* in charge of one of the knightly orders. The monster had gotten close enough that Bruno too was starting to feel a chill and understood

why Zumana had labeled the sinister evil as Disaster Rank from its presence alone.

"Eek!" The lowly wizard researchers frantically set to work when they sensed Zumana's dark gaze. They would be killed if they tried to flee—they understood that well enough from experience. The wizards moved with frantic speed, only partially out of fear of the approaching monster. They piled up the barely alive soldiers on the altar before beginning to channel their magic into the summoning circle with looks of desperation across their faces.

This summoning circle was written in Primal script, which made it capable of retaining magic, so it already had a stockpile of magic within it from the past few days. Just as the wizards drained themselves channeling their magic into it, they reached the required amount and the characters in the enormous circle began to glow.

The flames in the lamps flickered despite the still air and the darkness grew even deeper.

Shadows coiled around their skin like a dark mist. Amid this uncomfortable feeling, the summoning circle devoured the magic it had been filled with and the dying soldiers disintegrated into dust.

Three misshapen figures rose up from the depths of the bottomless, swampy darkness. They had the warped appearances of ape men and were over two meters in size. With their twisted black horns and long, snakelike tails, these creatures were the natural enemy of all living things, beings that brought about fear and despair—*demons*.

The wizards sighed with relief that they had managed to summon greater demons, just as they had intended. However, there was something obviously different about the one with a scar on its forehead.

It was bigger than the other two demons and its silhouette was closer to that of a human than an ape man. It wore armor made of bones and hide and had black wings sprouting from its back that

looked like those of a bird of prey. All three were greater demons, but this one was clearly more powerful and older than the other two.

Bruno noticed this as well and began to sweat as dread filled his heart. However, it would have been pointless to chicken out now that they had gotten this far. They had summoned these demons to take on the Disaster-Rank monster, after all. Bruno knew that they should be grateful that they'd managed to summon a demon that was stronger than usual.

With dry lips, he focused his attention on the three demons and began, "Demons! You must obey us who have summoned you and—"

*Shplat!*

"Ahhhhhh?!"

The oldest demon effortlessly killed the wizard closest to him before they had a chance to try to stop it.

Bruno's eyes went wide. "How can this be?!"

Summoned demons could not move within the summoning circle. The magic in the summoning circle not only controlled the size of the gate, but also restrained the creatures that were summoned. From there, the summoner would bargain with the demon to form a pact.

Perhaps it was because they had used a summoning circle that they were still experimenting with or perhaps the circle's magic wasn't strong enough to hold this demon. Either way, this demon had managed to partially break the circle's binding spell and, though it was still confined within the circle, started killing all of the wizards within his reach one after the other.

"Foolish humans. Did you think that this trifling offering and meager magic would be enough to form a pact with *me*?" the demon said, speaking fluently in the language of humans and fixing his intelligent eyes on Bruno. He sneered at the foolishness of humanity.

Seeing this demon's wickedness, Bruno finally understood why summoning high-ranking demons was taboo.

Summoning low-ranking demons like gremlins would normally earn oneself frowns from others, but they were easier to handle than haughty elementals and you could form a pact with them with a simple offering like the flesh and blood of an animal. Because of this, they were known as a convenient form of spellcraft for traveling wizards.

So why was summoning high-ranking demons taboo?

It was not because of the bad impression people had of demons or because of how hard they were to control; it was because a long time ago, on this very continent, a single summoned demon had managed to destroy a country. Hundreds of thousands of people had lost their lives and the land there was still barren.

Bruno felt that this creature standing before him now, while currently a greater demon, was a chosen being who would someday evolve into something even more powerful.

Of course, Bruno understood the threat the demons posed. This was why they had been so thorough in their preparations, gathering fifty innocent child sacrifices in order to control the beasts they summoned. He was not so heartless as to feel no guilt about this; he had just hardened his heart to the fact that they were necessary sacrifices.

However, Bruno had been mistaken. Unbeknownst to himself, he had become conceited.

He had judged what demons would be like based on common sense from his own world, even though demons were monsters not of this world. Now as a result, he would not only lose his own life, but the lives of all of his subordinates and those who shared the same goal—and possibly imperil the very country he'd sought to protect.

This demon was enough of a threat to be labeled as Disaster Rank on its own.

"We won't let you go free!"

The knights of the fourth platoon and the soldiers began to attack the uncontrollable demon as if this had been their plan all along.

The other two greater demons were still frozen within the summoning circle, meaning that only the largest one was able to move around. The knights didn't want to lose their chance to defeat it, so they stepped inside the summoning circle.

"Don't!"

Bruno tried to stop them, but he was just a moment too late. The demon pierced his fist straight through the steel armor of the commander who had led the charge.

"Bwah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah haaaah!" The demon roared with laughter as it killed the remaining knights, tearing them apart. Blood splattered on the characters of the circle and the two bound greater demons slowly started trying to move.

Demons could not escape a summoning circle without a pact. The older demon had killed the wizards because there hadn't been enough magic within the circle nor enough offerings for the pact; however, he was still not strong enough to actually be able to leave the circle. Instead, the demon had provoked the humans so that they would charge inside the summoning circle. By defiling the summoning circle with their blood, he would weaken its effects on the other two.

"Still not enough? No matter, I should be able to kill you." Although the demon was bound within the circle, he took one step forward at a time as if he were tearing off invisible shackles. He was heading straight toward Bruno, intending to use his flesh and blood to break the spell.

Bruno understood its intentions clearly, but he was unable to move, bound by the eerie aura that the demon emitted. His partner had been killed. His subordinates were dead. His spirit was broken and he didn't have the will to resist any longer.

However…

"Nngh."

The circle began to glow again, impeding the demon's steps with a binding spell.

The demon looked straight at Zumana, who was channeling his magic into the circle. "Why, you…!"

Judging by how ghostly pale Zumana's face was, his magic alone was not enough and so he was going so far as to channel his life force as well.

"If the offerings were not enough, then take me." Zumana's voice was quiet but resolute.

Bruno could see the determination in his gaze. The marquess widened his eyes in astonishment while the demon narrowed its eyes.

"Oh? You think you're that valuable?"

"Surely. The souls of the people you make pacts with must be exceptional, right?"

Demons devoured souls. However, not just any soul would do; they preferred intelligent beings with strong, passionate emotions. Nevertheless, souls were special; they couldn't acquire the power of a soul merely by killing the being who possessed it.

To make a pact with a high-ranking demon, a human had to vow to offer all of themself to the demon. A deceitful pact meant that the demon couldn't use their own power either and the human's wish wouldn't be completely granted. If a person had a wish so great that they would be willing to stake their very soul on it, then the demon would be able to wield their true power.

This was why demons wanted to make pacts. They would threaten the human, pacify them, whisper words of love—do whatever it took to persuade them. Because souls that were bound to a pact would forever belong to the demon.

"Demon, bite me to make this pact and follow my commands. If you require further compensation, I have fifty children to offer to you as well. I also want you to swear to serve Lord Bruno."

"Zumana…" The nobility of Zumana's determination gave Bruno strength.

The demon stared menacingly in silence into Zumana's eyes, hoping to break his will, but he found not even the slightest hint of fear within them. The demon clicked his tongue and stood before Zumana. "And? What will the specifics of this pact be?"

"Serve Lord Bruno and defeat our enemy."

"I accept."

With that, slender black chains appeared from thin air, binding onto Zumana's soul and dyeing it black as proof of his sin. The demon pierced Zumana through the heart with his arm, devouring his soul whole and sealing the pact.

"Heh heh… Hah hah hah!"

*Shink!*

A deep fissure cracked through the summoning circle and the binding spell dissipated. Having consumed the soul of the man he'd made a pact with and the other men he'd killed, he felt power welling up inside of him—he was on the verge of achieving a new level of might.

Bathed in Zumana's blood, countless cracks appeared all over the demon's ape-man-like body. The demon's skin started peeling off as he cackled and a nauseating miasma swept over the area.

The miasma was the stagnated negative feelings that emotional living creatures gave off. If a living creature bathed in it, they would rot away, their corpse corrupted and transformed into the undead.

Bruno was overcome by the stench and ejected the contents of his stomach. He was overwhelmingly racked with terror all over again at this repulsive creature's newly acquired form. However, he

was otherwise unaffected thanks to his status as the demon's temporary master, and there was no time for him to worry about the suffering or pain he was feeling.

"I suppose we shall need to be reacquainted, Bruno."

The miasma had withered away Zumana's corpse, and in its place stood a being dressed in the clothes of a butler. He looked much like Zumana, but with some additions. A red scar adorned his forehead and twisted black horns grew from his head. His skin was as bluish-white as a drowned body with sores all over it, and each time he spoke, his skin wriggled as if there were innumerable bugs squirming beneath.

"What have you done?"

There were legends of a demon who dressed in the old-fashioned clothes of a noble and brought with him a sinister presence when he manifested in this world. When he had materialized in the past, he had managed to destroy an entire country and instill fear within the people. The natural enemy of all living things, he was a demon of noble birth that was stronger than even greater demons. A demon so powerful, he was equal to an arch elemental, which were capable of causing cataclysms—

"An arch demon…"

Nations and their people had joined forces in order to defeat him. In the end, he had been defeated by the Hero and the Saint.

And now a being with that level of power had appeared here in the Holy Kingdom. He had been summoned by a human from the Holy Kingdom and evolved by possessing a person. He was only newly formed, yet the repulsive presence he gave off and his level of power made Bruno believe that he was a threat higher than even Disaster Rank at this point—he was Calamity Rank.

"This feels so wonderful…! Here, have some of my strength." The arch demon with Zumana's face gave a twisted grin as he funneled power to the two greater demons who had been released from the binding spell as well. Roaring as that power surged up

within them, their appearances and abilities changed to match the arch demon’s previous form.



"Even though I gave you some of my power, you're not any more intelligent? Too bad." The arch demon righted the collar of his worn-out butler's uniform and moved to stand before Bruno, who had fallen to his knees, completely unable to rise. The demon then whispered in a rasping voice, "I must thank you, Bruno. That indeed was a suitable price for my summoning. I am in a wonderful mood. If you so desired it, I would gladly do more than just slay your enemy—I could destroy this nation as well. How about it?"

"What?!"

"There's no need to be so hesitant. We're partners, right? With this power, I can grant anything you desire. This time I will surely manage to defeat and devour *her* whole! Bwah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah haaaaah!"

The arch demon laughed with elation. The two greater demons also sneered at the foolish human as they surrounded him.

But then they suddenly stopped.

They all sensed an immensely powerful magic that they hadn't before. An ominous, repulsive, and overpowering force swept through the gloomy underground area.

***

Oops… I shouldn't have done that!

The love, hatred, envy, and suffering that the pretty lady had long been hoarding had just been so delectable that I hadn't been able to contain my adoration for her and I accidentally got carried away…

I was well aware of everything I had done.

I had completely lost control of myself because of the mellow fragrance of her fermented negativity and toxicity and wanted just a

liiiiiittle taste. I was pretty sure I had only taken just a quick lick, but it had tasted so *delightful* that I wasn't able to handle it. Next thing I knew, I had accidentally devoured her life along with her soul!

I'm really sorry, Miss Pretty Lady! But you tasted really good! I had no idea that such an exquisite and well-aged mixture of love, anger, hatred, and sorrow within a human could taste that delicious!

Ahhhhh, why hadn't I made a pact with her first before I ate her?! I was so stupid! I had been so close! Just one more push and I could have made her mine forever! Though, since she'd opened her heart to me, I had managed to eat most of her, so that was okay. I couldn't stop after just one taste, and I wound up feeding off every bit of the humans who came after too.

After all, this was my very first "meal" since coming to the Material World.

I had no particular interest in meat or blood. What I wanted was their sweet souls stuffed full of condensed karma. Humans believed that demons preferred innocent souls, but they were wrong. Only baby lesser demons with unrefined palates liked innocent souls. Innocent souls could never satisfy a high-ranking demon. The sinful souls of people who had committed crimes and were aware of their wrongdoings had such a rich mellow fragrance. Offering an innocent soul to a high-ranking demon was like offering one of the heads of a client company sweet juice.

I just got a little too excited after taking a little nibble.

"*Sigh*…" I needed to try to calm down a bit. "But…"

Even I was surprised at how far I had gone. I hadn't felt a thing as I ate those people.

I'd thought that my heart—my soul—was human, but now I realized I had been completely wrong. Just because I had some memories from a human's life, I had convinced myself that I had once been a human.

I'd had a hint of this from the very beginning too. Because I had seen the dream world from the point of view of a girl who'd died there, I'd believed that I had actually been that girl, but even then, I'd never called my memories of that world "memories from my past life." It was like I had unconsciously felt that those memories weren't my own, merely "documentary footage."

Now I understood: That poor girl who had died in that world had wound up reborn here in this world as Yulucia, but she'd died before her soul could be born. She had cursed the gods because of this cruel fate and fallen into hell, where she'd been smashed and broken. And then the remaining pieces of her soul, along with what records of her there were, had reassembled into the demon who was me.

Because I had nothing, I had misunderstood myself as being human. Since I'd been created from a soul possessing those memories, that girl was indeed part of me; however, my current soul wasn't human.

I was a demon who understood human knowledge and hearts.

This was why I cherished human feelings and cultures, and why I loved these creatures from the bottom of my heart. Nevertheless, my true nature was that of a human-devouring demon.

The shock of this truth made me heave a stupidly exaggerated sigh.

Of course this body was so agreeable to my soul. It was *mine*. I hadn't been roasted by the holy magic because I had fit right into it like a glove—I hadn't defiled some innocent human or anything.

"I wonder what those guys are doing, anyway?"

It seemed like some kind of comedy sketch had started, so I watched while munching on the soul of some barely alive knight as that butler guy struck down the soldiers who had run away and this

handsome older guy started talking about something with a serious look on his face. The older man was good-looking and all, but he wasn't exactly my type.

But wait a second, would I be accused of committing some kind of faux pas were I to make my appearance now?

Behind them, wizards were channeling a whole bunch of impure magic into this enormous summoning circle thing. Would they actually manage to summon something with that? It wouldn't be good for whatever was being summoned—like how a machine wasn't able to function very efficiently if you put low-grade oil in it.

Oh, wait, they *did* manage to summon something.

Despite the size of the summoning circle, only three monkey-looking things came out.

*Ooh, I see. This sensation is what demons feel like.*

They were pretty big demons, though. I'd never seen their like even in the Demon Realm. However, the Demon Realm was stupidly big, so it wouldn't be surprising if I had simply never come across their species—hm? Wha? Had I seen that demon in the middle with the red scar on his forehead somewhere before?

*Hmm, I can't remember,* I thought, just as the demon killed the wizards and started forming an overbearingly oppressive pact. *Ooh, I see. So this is how pacts work? Good to know.*

The butler guy then offered to sacrifice himself. My appetite had been satisfied for the most part at this point, so I wasn't interested, but he did look a lot tastier than those knights.

*Ah, well,* I thought to myself just as that big monkey gained a body to possess and raised himself to the next rank.

He looked really strong now—or more like, he really looked like a demon.

Even from where I was watching, I could tell that his magic was several times stronger. A demon's strength was mostly dependent on their magic, so now even that older guy was frowning.

Well, I supposed now would be as good a time as any to make my entrance, right?

I emitted my magic and made my presence known, still in my demonic form. The older guy and the demons finally realized I was here.

The evolved butler demon took one look at me and instantly was on guard. "What?! It's you!"

*Huh? I guess we really did meet somewhere before? But I don't know any other demons besides the Dark Beast and the kiddies.*

"D-demons! What are you doing?! Kill that!" The old man looked confused—likely because I looked like a child—as he ordered the demons to kill me.

"Shut up! You two! Go!"

"Grgh… Graaaaaaaaaaah!"

At the butler demon's order, his two minions let out a screech as they came at me. They sure were big and huge and looked mighty strong…

But I wasn't afraid.

I bet a child would have been killed flat in an instant if they got hit by those log-like arms. However, just like with the knights, their movements seemed very slow to me and I wasn't afraid of them at all.

But maybe it was because I could use my demonic powers now? I realized that the reason I hadn't been able to use any power up until now was simply because I had lacked the magic to do so. I had recovered some amount of my magic around the time I turned two, but it was so little compared to my true power that I had deluded myself into thinking I was powerless.

That woman's soul had sated my appetite and thirst, so now I could manifest my true form. I still wasn't able to wield my true power, but the way I fought hadn't changed in the slightest. I still used my claws to rend and fangs to eat.

I channeled my magic into my crimson nails and swiped at the air. The two demons were instantly torn to shreds by enormous invisible claws.

Huh?

They disappeared just like that? Huh? Why? Even though they looked that strong?

At any rate, the two demons disappeared and their black mist wafted over to me.

Wait, this was how the mini monkeys had tasted in the Demon Realm! What the heck?! These were my snacks! Those teeny tiny monkeys stopped being cute when they were brought to the Material World? Granted, they weren't all that cute to begin with, but this was a shocking revelation.

I began to wonder. Since that butler demon had also been more like a monkey before he had evolved…

"Hey, are you that monkey that kept running away from me in the Demon Realm?" I remembered that biggish monkey who had run away as fast as he could in the Demon Realm. No wonder that red scar had seemed so familiar.

"Grgh…"

It seemed I was right from the way the butler demon groaned through clenched teeth.

"What…did you just say?" The human looked between me and the butler demon with a mixture of horror and astonishment.

*Ahhh, I feel kinda bad about this. You finally got your chance to be summoned and evolved and here I'm about to smash your face in.*

The demon butler looked like he was shaking all over. He then let out a roar as he created several large balls of fire.

"Rrrwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

He shot all of them at me. Each ball rained down around me and burst into an explosion of flames.

Although they took me by surprise, I simply held up my hand and created a magical barrier that managed to protect me from the blasts. The pillars and the ceiling had no such luck, shattering and collapsing under the impact.

*Hey, my guy, you gotta stop attacking like that or—*

"Stop it!" My angry voice turned into a physical shock wave that blew the demon butler into the wall behind him.

The ceiling collapsed, and now I could see the moon in the sky above. For real! Ugh!

"Don't you dare get the dress Father gave me all dusty!" I thought it would be fine since I had my magic barrier, but now that the ceiling had come down, there was dust flying everywhere! *Just stop already!*

How should I best describe the reactions toward my very reasonable objection? Both the demon butler and the older man looked at me with wide eyes and their mouths agape.

Unfortunately, they did not agree with me.

I was so done with all this!

"And more importantly, why are you using such messy magic? You're a demon!"

I couldn't comprehend why he had come at me with such a humanlike attack. Demons were formed of a spirit and magic. Everything they did had traces of magical power, which turned into magic. All I had to do was will it into being—like how holding out my hand produced a magical barrier. Shouting could turn into a shock

wave. Therefore, demons didn't need to construct magic with spellcraft like humans did.

I had always wondered why the magic human beings used contained so many impurities like elements, but now I finally understood. The reason the elves of ancient times had made spells in bad Primal for the humans to use was so that humans could actually handle their messy magical powers. Therefore, if a demon wanted to try to kill another demon, it was more effective to either hit them directly or use Empyreal with pure magic. But could it be…?

"My, why aren't you using pure magic?" I asked with a condescending attitude.

"Grgh…"

Demons couldn't possibly be incapable of using pure magic. Perhaps he simply just didn't have enough of an ability to do so as a demon because he'd evolved in such an improper way? This was like a hero attempting to challenge a demon king with nothing but a paper fan. Not that I really understood what that reference even meant.

The old man went on muttering to himself as he sat in a crumpled heap on the ground. "What…? How could demons be killed by a vampire?"

Oh, yeah. That butler guy also seemed to think I was a vampire too. I wasn't sure why.

"What do you mean?"

*Flaaaap!*

Enormous, gold, five-meter bat wings brushed my golden hair aside as they sprouted from my back. I slowly flapped my wings and rose in the air. With the moon of the night sky as my backdrop, I looked down at the man with the cold smile of a devil.

"After all…I am a demon myself."

At my words, his expression filled with fear and despair.

*Fear me, human. Weak demon. I shall grant you the most unsightly and disgusting death imaginable.*

"Graaaaaaaaaaah!" The demon butler attacked me like an animal that had cast away any sense of elegance. "I have grown strong! I have no fear of you now like I once did! I'll devour you and then, with my power, I'll devour this entire world!"

"You're really starting to get on my nerves now."

The demon butler changed his arms into those of a gigantic ape and threw a fist at me. I batted him away from my spot in the air with a wing, sending him crashing into the ground. I used the talons on my other wing to slice through and tear off both of his arms.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"Ha ha!" His screams of anguish made me laugh. I stabbed my crimson nails into his chest, tearing into him and baring my fangs at his now-exposed demon's core.

"No… Dooooooooooon't!"

I smiled radiantly at him before sinking my teeth into his chest while he screamed. I ripped out his core, devouring the demon butler whole along with his despair and fear.

It turned out that demons tasted much better when allowed to grow to this level.

I was immersing myself in his rich honeylike aftertaste when I heard a weak groaning sound.

"Ah… Ahhhhhhh…"

Oh, right. That human man was still here. For some reason, though, he didn't look so scared of me now. There was this deranged look in his eye as he gazed upon me reverently.

"Ooh… My goddess… Please give the likes of me your blessing…"

I stared at him in silence.

What was he talking about? The way he was looking at me wasn't how one was supposed to look at a demon. It reminded me more of the way those children had worshipped me as the Saint and it pissed me off.

I had no intention of making a pact with this man nor giving him my blessing. However, I was a little bit curious about his soul, since it had all kinds of odd flavors mixed into it.

"Come here."

At my order, he crawled over to me with this crazed look in his eyes. Yuck.

I was aware that they say curiosity killed the cat. However…

"I have room for one last snack."

# Episode 10:
# I Am Four Years Old Now… And Then…

CURIOSITY GOT THE BETTER OF ME, SO I snacked on him. Feeling wasted, as if I had indulged in cheap sake, I tottered back and forth as I searched for Lady Elea by her scent. Finally, we were reunited.

"Yul?! Why are you here?! Is everything all right?!"

"Um… There were some really scary guys, and…" I sobbed like the toddler I was as I clung to Lady Elea. She was more focused on comforting a scared child than questioning how I had managed to open the door or why I was there by myself.

She sat me on her lap and told me the loveliest thing: "There's no need to be scared. Everything will be okay, Yul. As it so happens, I used a special magic item to leave a trail to where they brought us. My husband and Lord Forte should be here very soon, so let's wait for them together."

"Father!" It was easy to play dumb as a three-year-old. But this wasn't merely an act, okay? I never thought that I'd get *that* drunkenly sick from that guy's soul.

It wasn't even half a day before Father came, leading hundreds of knights to rescue me.

Ahhh, Father was just the coolest! Lady Elea's husband? Sorry, but I only had eyes for Father.

Was my father a soldier? Or a knight? I had all kinds of questions, including about that pretty lady, but Father swooped right in to make sure I was safe and hugged me sooooooooo tightly that I completely forgot to ask about anything at all.

Father scolded me for exhausting myself like I had. Once everything had settled down, I would have to apologize to Mother

and everyone else for worrying them too.

But after my scolding, I passed out. Father said my body had received a great shock because of everything that had happened, but I was pretty sure that I was just hungover.

I swore I was never gonna scavenge for food from such weird places ever again.

***

In Versenia, the capital city of the Holy Kingdom of Talitelud, investigations determined that nobles had not only been the ones behind all of the previous child abductions, but had also been scheming to overthrow the government. This case was brought to a close once it was discovered that all the suspects involved had been murdered by the demons they had summoned in the second demon-summoning incident.

Despite their long captivity, the abducted children were sound of both mind and body. The majority of them were either children of refugees or travelers or from the slums, so while it took time to find their homes, the majority of them were returned to their parents. Those with no relatives were taken under the protection of the territory's lord and given new lives.

Marquess Bruno, who was believed to be the key culprit behind the incident, was discovered as a shriveled-up corpse. The crime of attempting to launch a rebellion against the nation—despite Bruno himself being an authority of the government—would not be treated lightly. However, because the marquess's family's influence as a member of the upper echelons reached far and wide, his family managed to avoid their nobility being revoked. Nevertheless, every single immediate member of his household was apprehended. Behind closed doors, a distant branch family swore allegiance to the royal family and its head was named the new Marquess Bruno.

The other person believed to be a key culprit, Albertine, the wife of Duke Cowell, had also been determined dead at the scene of the crime based on the results of the investigation. Although this was her crime and had nothing to do with her lord husband, it was a great sin for a member of one of the Five Grand Duchies—charged with protecting the royal family—to have committed. With the other dukes as witnesses, Duke Cowell's house was stripped of its title with only their name left to them; the main members of the house and its organization were now under the royal family's supervision.

"Forte, I know what happened, but you do bear some responsibility for not being able to control your wife. You know that, yes?"

"Yes, Father," Forte replied quietly to the aging man sitting at the head of the table in the spacious council room.

"Based on the testimonies from Eleanor and the abducted children, I have judged this to be a crime committed out of Albertine's own personal grudge and nothing to do with House Cowell. As you married into the family and took their name, you have managed to avoid being charged with this crime. However, her two daughters—who are also her only blood relatives—have lost their right to succeed the house's name, though they still bear the name of Cowell. They will be under surveillance at your estate in the royal capital in order to maintain the status quo."

"Thank you for your generous judgment in this matter." Although his daughters didn't love him, Forte was still their father and did love them. Considering everything the two of them and his wife had done up until now, they had gotten off very leniently, to which Forte gave a mental sigh of relief.

The lineage of Duke Cowell had been effectively stripped of its status, but Forte had originally married into this family in order to avoid a battle of succession with his older brother. He realized that it would be difficult to continue devoting himself to helping his father

and brother from now on. Now that House Cowell had been placed under the royal family's supervision, though, how was their territory going to be managed henceforth? Forte's expression darkened as he thought of their subjects, which made the older man cast him a meaningful grin.

"Which brings me to my next point, Forte. I have heard an interesting tale from the pontiff of the Church of Kostor of late. If a Saint has been discovered, she will require a guardian of appropriate status. Don't you agree?"

A few days later, an official proclamation from the royal family was given to all of the noble houses and the subjects of the kingdom: The second prince, who had married out of the royal family, had once again rejoined the line of succession. However, he had relinquished his place as second in line for the throne to the crown prince's son, naming himself fourth in line instead. From now on, instead of being Duke Cowell, he would instead take the name of Versenia, just as the royal family did, and be the first grand duke of his name.

Along with his new wife and their young *princess*.

***

Two months after the incident, I finally turned four years old.

After we got home to our manor, my worried mother seized me at once and wouldn't let me out of her sight, day or night, for an entire week.

Yeah, of course she would do that.

To think that I had been living in this body for four years now. Whether that was a long time or a short one, I didn't find anything

particularly displeasing about my current lifestyle and I was quite content. I had some of my powers as a demon back now, but being surrounded by Mother and Vio and the others all the time made me feel more like a human than a demon. It was quite strange.

Oh, and I got a mountain of gifts from everyone on my birthday. We didn't have a big fancy party like Rick; it was more of a family-only kind of affair, but I liked it better that way. My friends Shelly and Betty even came all the way from the capital to join us.

Shelly gave me an herb-growing kit just like the one she had. Betty, for some reason, decided to give me an abstract portrait of myself she'd drawn in crayon. I appreciated her thoughtfulness. I was very happy.

I even saw a bit of Rick.

Rick came all the way from the capital to push something into my hands and then leave. I wondered why Rick reminded me of the Dark Beast so much in that moment.

The box contained a pretty expensive-looking necklace. This wasn't the sort of thing you'd give a four-year-old, was it? Was this his way of apologizing to me or something?

And from Father, a wagon full of brilliant white flowers arrived along with a cute tea set.

You heard me right—it had all been *delivered*.

Father didn't come to see me…

By the time spring came six months later, Father still hadn't come to see me again.

I exchanged lots of letters with Shelly and Betty, and for some reason, Rick showed up to deliver a bouquet to me before leaving, but no Father.

Was he busy with work or something? I hated how clingy I had become. Because of that, I spent the time being overly clingy with Mother.

At last, we finally got a letter from Father. He invited us both to go to the royal capital! Yaaay!

"Wha?"

Time passed in the blink of an eye, and I now found myself standing in front of a castle.

Huh? We were here to see Father, right? Wasn't this the castle where the king lived? Okay, well…I *had* kinda thought that things were a little weird, you know?

I had heard that Father said he'd come to meet us in his letter, but it wasn't Father who came to get us. Instead, there was this huge coach the size of a small house pulled by eight horses, and we had an escort of ten pretty dashing female knights atop their steeds.

The one who came to take us there was that elderly butler, the one who happily called me "Your Ladyship" for some reason. When I asked what his name was, he asked me to just call him "Butler."

The lady knights all seemed really nervous and kept their posture rigid as Mother and I got into the coach. They must have been scared because I didn't look like a toddler should at all.

*I'm not scary, okay? I promise I won't eat you or anything.*

*Oh yeah, that reminds me, something similar happened back in the Demon Realm. I wonder how those kiddies are doing.*

And then! At long last! I finally got to see Father again!

"Lia! Yulucia!"

"Father!"

Father came out of the castle to meet us. I rushed over to him on my own two feet and he scooped me right up into his arms and then went to go hug Mother in a passionate embrace despite all of the people around.

*I'm sorry, but you're crushing me.*

It seemed that Father had missed us just as badly as we'd missed him.

"Could the two of you come with me this way?" Father led us inside the castle with the lady knights following after us, looking like they belonged to an all-female performance troupe.

We passed through the front doors and stepped into a spacious room with the kind of stained-glass windows you'd see in a cathedral. They said this was just a hallway, but I couldn't stop gaping as I stupidly wondered how they kept the ceiling, which was high enough for a coach to pass through cleanly. Father kept on walking, though, carrying me in his arms.

"These glass windows on the right illustrate *The Tale of the Holy Kingdom's Founding*, while the glass windows on the left tell *The Tale of the Glory of the Royal Family*."

"Whoooa."

So Father told me, but I must apologize—I wasn't listening at all.

"How about you both get changed in here for starters?"

Mother and I went into the first room we reached, where there were dozens of dresses made to our sizes. A dozen or so maids and seamstresses helped me to change clothes while telling me to pick out whatever I wanted to wear.

I couldn't believe they were so casually giving me such expensive things again.

"You're so pretty, Mother."

"Hee hee. And you look like a fairy princess, Yul."

Mother looked so very pretty in her new clothes. However, she was dressed a bit differently from me.

While her gown was very beautiful, it looked more like a neat and clean kind of dress that one would casually wear, not the kind of thing you'd wear to an evening party. But my dress was even fancier

than the ones I had worn for the tea party and Rick's birthday party —like the kind you'd wear when you made your grand debut into society.

Where exactly were we going now, all dressed up like this?

"You both look lovely. We should get going."

Father looked even cooler in his new clothes as he picked me up and carried me down the hallway. My heart was pounding the whole way.

Along the way, Father asked me if there was anywhere that I would like to see in the castle, but I was so nervous about what was about to happen that the only thing I could think of was the place where people got executed.

"Hm?"

"Ah, have you realized it now, Yulucia?"

We passed through a gate with large walls and on the other side was a garden that seemed familiar… Yeah, I sure figured it out. This was the same big garden where the tea party had been.

*So wait, this isn't just a garden with a view of the castle, but actually part of the castle? No wonder all of the kids were nobles.*

*Which means that maybe…*

"Oh."

The first person I noticed was Lady Elea, with her eye-catching vermilion hair. Next to her was Rick and an older boy who looked exactly like Lady Elea.

There were also a few people who looked somewhat familiar in the gazebo where all the parents had been hanging out during the tea party.

Wait, that was the couple who had been watching us all excitedly during the tea party!

Lady Elea waved at us. Everyone else noticed and first looked at Father, then Mother, and finally focused their attention on me.

Father put me down in front of the oldest guy, who looked quite burly, and the pretty lady, which took me by surprise. It was rare for Father to actually put me on the ground.

"Father, I have brought Liasteia and Yulucia with me this day," my father said as he and Mother both knelt before the man.

Hmm? "Father"? If this was Father's father, then did that make him my grandfather? "Gran'paddah?" I said without even realizing it.

My supposed grandfather's eyes opened wide. "Oooooh! Yes, that's right! I'm your 'grandpa,' Yulucia! Hah hah hah hah!" Grandfather said as he suddenly grasped both of my arms and lifted me up.

He was indeed my grandfather. However, because of my bad pronunciation, it seemed I could just call him "Grandpa"!

"Dear, it's not fair of you to hog her all for yourself!" the pretty lady next to him scolded, then turned to me. "I'm your grandma, you know," she said as she pulled me out of Grandfather's arms to hold me for herself.

*She's my grandmother?*

"I-it *is* fair! I'm allowed to hold my granddaughter!"

"You're such a brute that I'm afraid you'll break her."

"I would never!"

Another burly man who looked like Grandfather patted Father on the shoulder as he stood frozen in place, hand stretched out toward me. Then, with a tired look on his face, the burly man said, "Father, Mother, please, calm down."

Was this my uncle, then? Oh, goodie. Father definitely took more after Grandmother.

I was really impressed that none of them were scared of me, though.

"R-right. Anyway, now that we're all here, we should get going!" Grandfather said as if trying to divert everyone's attention.

Grandmother chuckled dryly as she passed me back to Grandfather, who then started walking while carrying me in his arms.

So that was how it was. I supposed he was going to be the new person in charge of carrying me around.

Sooo? Where were we going?

As Grandfather set out, Uncle sighed and Father stood back up. Lady Elea and Grandmother were both smiling as they started walking with Mother, Rick, and the other boy taking up the rear.

Wait, they weren't going to introduce everyone else?!

Mother was talking to Grandmother like normal, as if she was used to how Grandfather behaved. The other boy was smiling while he gave instructions to our knightly escort—something I assumed an adult should have been doing.

Grandfather led the way, carrying me in his arms with Father and everybody else—the knights, butlers, and maids—all following along in succession as we made our way down another impressive hallway. We walked all the way to the big door at the end.

When the butlers waiting there opened this really fancy door…

"Wha?!"

We stepped out onto a terrace overlooking the crazily enormous courtyard of the castle. There were thousands of nobles, knights, maids, and all kinds of people crowded around to receive us.

Wasn't this, like, everybody who must have worked here in this castle? And all of their eyes were focused not on Grandfather—but me.

What was going on?

"Sorry to have kept you all waiting! My son Forte has returned to the royal family as the first new grand duke to be named in

hundreds of years! And I introduce to you now Forte's daughter—my granddaughter! Her name is—"

*Yulucia von Versenia.*

I finally knew my full name after all this time!

Today was just full of surprises, leaving me dumbfounded as Grandfather raised me high into the air. The way everyone looked at me gradually started to change.

"Meaning that this little girl is your—and the whole of the Holy Kingdom's—*princess*!"

*Wha…?*

There was a moment of silence followed by a rousing commotion as everyone in the courtyard began simultaneously cheering with joy, an earth-shaking vibration in their voices.

"Wooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!"

"Long live His Majesty the King! Long may the Holy Kingdom reign!"

"Long live Princess Yuluciiiiiiiaaaaaa!"

"Glory to the princess!"

"Wooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!"

What was going on?! Wha?!

*I'm so confuuuuuuuuuuuused!*

***

And so, I was now Yulucia von Versenia, the granddaughter of the king of the Holy Kingdom of Talitelud, daughter of the grand duke of the same royal family name.

It seemed like the whole thing was really complicated, so they didn't bother explaining any of this to a child like me.

As for my social position in life, uh—I was the daughter of the duke's second wife? And the third daughter of the duke's family, but his first wife died or something? So now Father wasn't a duke anymore but a grand duke? And Mother was now the grand duke's first wife? Which now made me first princess of the grand duke or something like that?

I had no idea why or how any of this had come to be.

I'd always felt that Mother was in a strange position, since hardly anyone knew I existed, but now everything was okay because some stuff had happened?

And as for Grandfather calling me "the Holy Kingdom's princess," the Grand Duke of Versenia hadn't existed for hundreds of years. And while the title was formally below the royal family, it was now regarded on the same level as the royal family, which made me —who was a princess—part of the royal family and thus part of the line of succession… Was this all for realsies?

This world just made up whatever rules it wanted, huh? Were they sure about this? Even though I'd gotten a tiny bit of my demon powers back, I couldn't afford to be careless now. I needed to live a quiet life.

Based on their erratic wild enthusiasm, it seemed that all the knights and maids had been longing for a princess. Until now, the royal family had only had boys like Rick. It was like out of a story.

Father had been the second prince, and so even while he'd been a duke, he had been second in line for the throne until Uncle's son grew up. Since he was named the grand duke, he gave up his right as second in line to the oldest son of the crown prince, my uncle, whose younger son Rick was now third in line. This was all so confusing.

And so Father was now fourth in line for the throne, and I was sixth in line.

Huh…?

Who was fifth in line, then? The fact that I was the third daughter of a duke meant that I had two older sisters, right? They weren't princesses? Why was one person missing from the line of succession? Why was I the "first princess?"

It just did not compute.

"Well, whatever." I gave up trying to ponder this and got out of bed to look down on the city night.

Since I'd become a princess, we had left the manor that I had spent the last four years in. Mother, everyone from the manor, and I all moved into the main residence of the former duke in Toure.

This manor was tens of times bigger than our old one and my room was several times bigger. I sank into thought as I gazed down at the twinkling lights of the city.

I was a demon. If anyone found out what I really was, I would become an evil beast that would eat them all. Nevertheless, my human heart had grown and was causing ripples through me.

One day, I might wind up causing a lot of trouble for my beloved parents. Nobody else mattered to me. Everyone but Father, who had thought up my name, and Mother, who had given me my name, could die for all I cared.

Yet, despite thinking that way, there were more people I cared about now in my human heart.

And so…

I decided that I would keep on living as a human.

So that I could love everyone I cared about as a human.

And I would keep on living as a demon.

I would love and cherish humans for the way they struggled to keep on living despite their foolishness, sadness, and hardships.

My demon self was starved for love.

I loved humans. As both a human and a demon that devoured souls.

Ahhh, I could hear them now.

The heartbeats and breaths of all the humans living in the city I could see from my window…

And the darling screams of the humans who were afraid of the dark.

Don’t worry, my adorable little lambs. I won’t let anyone else have you. Offer your love to none but me…and in exchange, I will make you mine.

You will belong to me—the devil who is the princess of the Holy Kingdom.

“And the devil princess shall love you all the way down to your souls for all eternity… Hee hee… Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

In the northern mountains, the southern seas, and all across the continent, animals began to howl all at once, birds flew off in fear, and those who lived in the darkness looked up to the heavens.

No one understood what it meant at the time.

In the Holy Kingdom, the seat of the gods, a devil gave out an evil cry as a blessing to humans.

# Epilogue

"THERE! GET THEM!"

"Ahh!"

In the ruined land of the Demon Realm, two mochi-like demons were chasing after monkey-looking demons.

"Yummy."

"So yummy."

Across from the two happily munching away on the mini monkeys they'd caught, a white monkey wearing a clown mask laughed as she threw another mini monkey. "Ha ha ha!"

The white monkey preferred playing with her food. She often toyed with the prey she caught like this.

"You mess around too much." The gold snake one came back and dumped the mini monkeys she had caught in her tail in front of the white monkey. The gold snake was prideful and never tormented her prey, but she was the most bloodthirsty of them.

"Not gonna eat?"

"Wanna play!"

"Eat. Get strong. Make Mistress happy."

"Okay. I eat."

The gold snake and white monkey started chowing down on the mini monkeys when the two mochi-looking demons came back to rejoin them with the extra mini monkeys they had caught. They all had a nice meal together.

*Do-doooooooooom…*

Far off in the distance, they heard an explosion like thunder and the earth began to shake. The demons all silently exchanged a look.

"He's doing it again."

"Think he's still far?"

"No. We run."

"Dark One still angry."

How much time had passed since their mistress had disappeared?

Here in the Demon Realm, where the concept of time didn't exist, they had been separated from their mistress and had remained by the side of the one she had called simply "Him." However, having believed that they had grown strong enough, they had set out on their own journey in search of their mistress.

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In the Demon Realm, there was a magical demon who was known and feared as "the Dark Beast."

Even though demons of the same rank as him had many minions who obeyed them, the Dark Beast was always alone because of his savage beastliness and his preference for solitude.

He had no name; "Dark Beast" was just the name of his species.

Demons of similar strength had received names by associating with other species when they were young, but the first time he'd been summoned, he had devoured his summoner and killed every living thing he could find to gain power. His might made him feared throughout the Demon Realm. Being the only one of his species—and powerful, to boot—made up for not having a name.

Anyone with a lick of sense would never approach his territory.

Another demon had once sent his minions to seek out his weaknesses, but the beast had immediately seen through their ruse and gobbled them up.

Yet, there was a turning point when this ferocious beast started restraining himself from violence.

He hunted more weaker demons for food than before, but it was such a surprising change that other demons of the same rank thought it suspicious. That was when they heard a strange rumor: The Dark Beast—thought to be the one and only member of his species—had been spotted with a gold demon of the same species.

This information scared the demons. Even if this demon was still young, if it was in fact the same species as Dark Beast, then the damage left in their wakes would be uncontainable. They would be difficult to defeat if they turned hostile. Even if someone managed to defeat them, the winning demon would be weakened and one of the other high-ranking demons would be sure to seize the opportunity.

Demonic beasts with no consideration for self-preservation were purely a threat in the minds of the demons of the Demon Realm who had lived for such a very long time. However, they realized that this new demon might serve as a way to shackle the Dark Beast, who had preferred solitude for so long and now had a member of his own species that he'd taken to raising himself. Before this, his only weakness had been the fact that there was only one of him.

Figuring it would be wise to attack before this new demon grew too powerful, some demons of the same rank began forming alliances with one another. It was at that moment, though, that the demon in question—the Golden Beast—suddenly vanished.

Had it been hunted by another demon? Or did its relationship with Dark Beast turn antagonistic?

After this, the Dark Beast didn't simply return to picking fights for fun like before. Instead, he was invading the territories of other

high-ranking demons in a fit of rage and killing every single demon he could sink his claws into.

What had angered him so? It was then that one of the other intelligent high-ranking demons that had once associated with the Dark Beast made his move.

The demon was only acquainted with Dark Beast; they weren't allies, but they weren't enemies either. This intelligent demon had minions and possessed knowledge of the Material World. He hated the idea of becoming a target in one of the Dark Beast's rampages, so he approached the beast.

"Long time no see, Dark Beast," said a demon who was like a dark haze. He was dressed in the robe of a sage and had a small blue weasel riding on his shoulder. None of the other minions of his demon army were in attendance.

Seeing the demon, the color of rage instantly disappeared from the Dark Beast's eyes as he murmured, "If it isn't Zephyrcel, the 'Demon Expert.'"

Zephyrcel was one of the few demons with enough reasoning and intelligence to converse with the Dark Beast. The Dark Beast was wary of not only his strength, but his wisdom as well. This demon was especially dangerous, since he was known by a name he had been given, not just by his species name.

"What angers you so, Dark Beast? None of your enemies are here in this land."

"I just felt like it."

The two lights floating in Zephyrcel's misty face narrowed like eyes at this flippant remark. The Dark Beast that Zephyrcel knew battled strong demons for fun; he never lost himself to fits of rage and went on killing sprees.

"Then go elsewhere. It would be better for me if you did."

The Dark Beast sank into silence. His fury was dampened somewhat at Zephyrcel's nonchalant suggestion to go attack some other high-ranking demon. The Dark Beast thought it would have been kind of fun to see how Zephyrcel would react to meeting a certain someone, but this thought made his feelings of loss return and his lava-like rage bubbled up again.

Why had she left him?

Why was she so fixated on the world of humans?

Surely all that they needed was to be together—they didn't need anything else.

"Roooooooooooooooooooooooar!"

Not understanding the source of this rage, Zephyrcel's shoulders moved in a sigh and his robe billowed out like some kind of strange bird. "Leave."

"Careful, Master." The blue weasel leapt off his shoulder as Zephyrcel prepared to face off against the Dark Beast.

"Die!" they both roared.

The sudden clashing of the Dark Beast and Zephyrcel destroyed all of the demons in the vicinity. The impact was fierce enough to shatter the ground of the Demon Expert's territory. These two legendary demons fought one another for what felt like an eternity until their battle was brought to a sudden end.

The Dark Beast bit off Zephyrcel's core.

"You…fool…"

Dark Beast completely devoured Zephyrcel when he turned to dust. Despite the fact that he was covered in so many injuries that he couldn't even stand now, this victory did nothing to quell Dark Beast's heart.

There was only one thing he desired.

The howling of a beast echoed across the desolate wasteland.

“Golden Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeast!”



# Bonus Story 1:
# Little Demons' Diary

HUMANS LIVED IN THE MATERIAL WORLD, but there was another world called the Ethereal World.

This was a world where elemental lifeforms with wills of their own and fairies who were half-corporeal offshoots of elementals lived. Close to the lowest stratum of this world was the Demon Realm, which was the place where the darkest negative emotions gathered and where demons lived.

"This way?"

"Which way?"

"Hmm?"

"That way!"

Four demons were traveling across the great wasteland of the realm.

A mochi-like demon with the black horns of a goat hopped along while a demon of the same body type but with the black horns of a sheep rolled along the ground beside him.

A demon that looked like a white monkey wearing a clown mask was happily chasing after the one with sheep horns and a fourth demon that looked like a gold snake was slipping and sliding around the ground, side-eyeing her companions.

When they were young and still hadn't formed their own senses of self yet, they had been abducted by this huge black beast that gave off this terribly violent aura. They had instinctively braced themselves for death, but the golden-colored beast they were taken to decided to keep them as pets.

That wasn’t all too unusual here in the Demon Realm. Powerful demons would gather younger demons to make them fight and let them devour one another. The last demon standing would then be made their minion. However, the gold demon didn’t starve them—instead, she fed them, taught them how to hunt, and protected them.

It was the first time they had ever felt warmth here in this cold, ashen world devoid of light that was all they had ever known.

She had taught them all kinds of things. About this world. About the outside world. She humorously told them the legends of the outside world and things they couldn’t understand, like physics and chemistry. The only problem was probably the fact that she had forgotten to teach them common sense. Demons had no need of common sense, but not knowing the common sense of *demons* was a problem.

But that was no big deal to them, since they had no common sense. They immediately became obsessed with what she taught them and were able to evolve into the forms they desired based on their favorite monsters from the myths she had shared.

She was a strange demon known as the Golden Beast.

To them, she was their mentor, their older sister, their mother, and a sun that shone here in the Demon Realm—she was to be worshipped as a god.

They revered and loved her from the bottoms of their hearts. While demons had desires, they never loved anyone. These demons had been given an extreme makeover by her, blessed with knowledge from a young age that took other demons hundreds of years to learn. Their way of thinking was already quite unlike normal demons.

And then their beloved mistress suddenly disappeared. They were shocked and tried to find her, but no matter how hard they searched, they couldn’t find her anywhere.

“Where is Mistress?”

“Fell into hole.”

“Where hole go?”

“We can’t go in.”

They knew that she had disappeared into a hole that had opened in the ground. They also knew that it was connected to somewhere that was not here. However, since they were grown up, they were too big for any of the small holes they found. They were still growing, so they couldn’t forcibly make the hole bigger like their mistress had either.

Nevertheless, they knew that she hadn’t vanished because she hated them.

“Mistress wanted to go.”

“Wanted to go there.”

“Why?”

“Surely tasty food there.”

She loved to eat, so they firmly believed that she had gone on a trip because she’d found something tasty.

“I wanna eat too.”

“Me too.”

“What’s more tasty than mini monkeys?”

“Chocolate? Cake?”

“Humans?”

“Are humans tasty?”

“Probably.”

“Can we follow?”

“No.”

“We can’t?”

“Is it far?”

"Yeah. So we gotta look."

And so, they set out on a journey to find their beloved mistress. They left the stormy, out-of-control Dark Beast behind as a result, but they believed it was something that had to be done.

He was a tyrant, but they didn't hate him. They respected him for the powerful demon he was and were grateful to him from the bottoms of their hearts for bringing them to her. However, even they had a feeling that he had been too overbearing and that she'd wanted to go somewhere else.

During their travels, they met strong demons outside of the Dark Beast's territory, but it was never anything they couldn't handle with the four of them working together.

For demons, all other beings were either enemies or prey. However, these four were different from normal demons in both their appearance and way of thinking; they never fought among themselves. The Golden Beast had raised them to see her as their mother and one another as their siblings.

This was clearly an unusual way of thinking for demons. Their instinctive natures had been completely altered by a single demon's ideology.

Under normal circumstances, her experiment was a power move that was liable to have destroyed them as living creatures with souls. However, whether by a miraculous coincidence or her own good fortune, it resulted instead in them becoming even stronger as unique individuals.

And so, they continued to travel the realm.

*Whooooooooooosh… Bam!*

The four of them were silent as something fell from the sky into the nearby rocky mountains.

"What was that?"

The sheep mochi looked quizzically at the goat mochi, but the goat mochi only shook his head. "No. Too dangerous."

As the mediator of the group, the goat mochi made this decision to protect his companions. However…

"Wah hah hah!"

"Ah. Hey!"

The playful white monkey let out a happy shout as she headed toward it and the gold snake followed after, so all four of them wound up going in the end.

"Damn you…"

The thing that had fallen from the sky was a monkey demon who looked like he had been beaten up and had his chest ripped open.

Darkish blood poured out from his chest wound, which was a phenomenon characteristic of demons who had gotten involved with humans. It was a visual representation of how deep the damage he had taken was, but how had he received such a deep wound?

"Damn you, Golden Beast!"

This monkey demon had a red scar on his forehead. He bared his fangs and ground his teeth, unable to contain his fury.

This monkey demon had been summoned to the Material World and had been lucky enough to consume a good-quality soul and evolve. However, the demon he had feared and vowed revenge against had been there. She'd mercilessly ripped him apart and devoured his demon core. Cores were a demon's essence. If it was still intact, he would be able to revive in the Demon Realm after some time had passed even if he had been destroyed in the Material World.

So how was he still alive even though his core had been consumed?

Despite managing to evolve, the monkey demon hadn't entirely digested the high-quality soul yet, so he'd been able to avoid

the brunt of the damage by using that as a substitute instead.

It had been a dangerous gamble to take. If that merciless demon had noticed, he would have been tormented to death for all eternity. However, the soul had satisfied her and the demon monkey had been able to escape with his life.

"Tch. I've been weakened since I lost my host, but I'm sure I'll be back to normal soon."

He had tried to possess the human body that had housed the high-quality soul, but since it had been destroyed, he had returned to his former monkey form. However, he had been very close to evolving before this had happened. All it had taken was getting that human soul and body, which he had managed to absorb about a third of. Now he had gained more power than he'd had before evolving.

"You underestimated me, Golden Beast! I'll regain my power and I'll return to the Material World. And this time, I'll be the one defeating you! Bwa hah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah hah… Hah hah… Huh?"

The monkey demon then realized there were four little demons by his feet, looking up at him.

How long had they been there? Based on their appearances, they didn't seem to be very high-ranking, but the four of them showed no fear of the monkey demon. He was bewildered by the darkness in their stares.

"Who the hell are you?!" He tried to scare them off, but they didn't look away, and instead began calmly speaking.

"He knows Mistress."

"He does."

"He was in the human world."

"He met Mistress."

The monkey demon felt a moment of fear at how nonchalantly they were talking among themselves, so he summoned an enormous fireball to scare them. However, the four of them still didn't answer his question—they just continued staring up at him.

"I asked you a questioooooooon!" he howled as if trying to shake some kind of feeling off as he hit them with the fireball. An enormous explosion left an enormous crater behind.

However…

"Found Mistress."

"Finally found her."

"But we can't see her."

"No fair."

"What the?!"

The four little demons had already moved and surrounded him.

"How dare you little demons ignore the words of someone as mighty as me and continue to keep talking about things that make no sense!" the monkey demon shouted, but the four demons only started snickering at him.

"Mighty?"

"Even though you ran away?"

"You fled from Mistress."

"You ran away."

Their words wounded the monkey demon's pride, reminding him of how he had once fled from the Golden Beast without even trying to fight her here in the Demon Realm and how he had been so powerless in the Material World that he had used the soul he had made a pact with as a decoy in order to save himself.

"Shut uuuup!" he roared as he gave into his rage and started swinging down his stout, nearly three-meter-long arms.

*Squish…*

“That all you got?”

The blow should have been enough to smash the ground itself, but the mochi-looking one with the sheep horns stopped it with her body.

Except that wasn’t quite what had happened. The monkey demon’s next strike was also sapped of its strength, velocity, impact, and even magic the second he touched the sheep-horned demon. She showed absolutely no sign of pain. What had happened to his might?

“Here you are.”

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh?!”

In the next instant, the demon with goat horns shot a beam of powerful magic from his mouth, cutting the monkey demon’s right arm clean off at the shoulder.

“Leave me beee!” Abandoning all sense of pride, the monkey demon started hurling fireballs at the four of them.

But it was useless. Just as before, the fireballs didn’t even graze them even though they should have hit them square on. The white monkey one with the clown face started cackling.

“Who the hell are you fooooooour?!” The monkey demon had no idea who these demons were or where they’d come from. He took a step back to get away from them, but the demon who loved fighting the most was standing behind him.

“No running.”

The gold snake glared at him with vermilion eyes. The monkey demon’s whole body drained of color and he froze. The snake wrapped her tail around him and smashed him to pieces. His true demon core came tumbling out. The white monkey picked it up and the four of them all sank their teeth into it at once.

“Chow time!”

She who had raised them with such loving tender care had disappeared.

Ever since she left had them, they had realized again how dark and cold this world known as the Demon Realm was.

There was only one thing they desired: to be by her side to see her warm smile.

That was why they had worked so hard to get stronger and hoped to follow after her—so that she would praise them for how helpful they were.

They had found her. However, she was in a place they were still unable to get to: the Material World where humans and living creatures lived…

Now knowing that that was where she had gone, the four of them vowed to grow even stronger as they searched for a way to get there.

"We're coming, Mistress. Wait for us!" they cried out in unison.

# Bonus Story 2:
# Are You in Need of a Princess to Dedicate Your Blade to?

"WHAT THE?"

That day, the same letter arrived to all the families of knights in the Holy Kingdom and all the girls who were graduating from the Academy of the Magical Arts' knighthood program that year.

At first glance, the contents of the letter seemed to be some kind of scam—it was a highly suspicious recruitment advertisement to become escort knights for the princess.

*What* princess, though?

The nobles who made up the most powerful families were consolidated into regional communities, so it wouldn't be all that unusual to call the daughters of the nobles who owned the lands "princesses." It would have been one thing if the family of a count or someone of equal or higher station had put out this advertisement, but there was no such family name specified. In fact, the name of the sender made this advertisement even more suspicious.

"The Kingdom's Public Relations?"

The daughters of the knight families all cried out, demanding an answer.

Knights were considered minor nobility. Basically, a long time ago, the most skillful of nobles' soldiers who had distinguished themselves in battle had received a hereditary title, but none of the other perks. So there were over five thousand families of noble knights just here in the Holy Kingdom alone and several times that number of actual knights.

The most power the rank of knight and similar peerage—which included a great number of civil servants as well—could yield was authority as the steward of a village. They were no more than somewhat well-off commoners, so almost none of them understood what exactly the Kingdom's Public Relations actually was.

While the houses of knights produced knights for nobles in great numbers, not all of the girls of those families necessarily wanted to become knights themselves. After all, lady knights primarily served as bodyguards and escorts for women and children of status rather than going off to fight battles. Lady knights were expected to learn decorum and sharpen their minds rather than their blades, and thus there were hardly any who aimed to take up the occupation in earnest. Plus, respectable parents knew that they were better off searching for suitable marriage matches for their pretty daughters rather than sending them into the den of muscly, sweaty brutes.

That year, there were only a hundred and thirty girls total graduating from studies in knighthood across the entire nation.

The majority of them already knew which noble daughter or lady wife they would be serving based on their own lineages. The most logical of them were able to figure out what the Kingdom's Public Relations meant. From there, they were able to understand what was meant by "princess" and decided not to respond to the recruitment.

Thus, the women who did respond to the advertisement were capable in their skill with the sword, albeit not the most gifted in more scholarly pursuits nor the type to put much thought into things. Basically, they were all fifteen-year-old "meathead" girls.

"Huh? You decided to apply too, Brigitte?"

"So you wound up applying too, Sarah?"

After graduating, the girls were all assembled at the academy's campus in the capital once again. Those who had graduated from campuses located in the other lands of high-ranking nobles were

happy about this, but those who had gone to the capital's campus because they'd been born near the city, like Brigitte and Sarah, were tired of seeing it.

The Academy of the Magical Arts took up nearly an entire district of the royal capital, so it was excessively vast. There was one building that wasn't used anymore due to a sudden change in a class's curriculum, and it was to one of the classrooms in that building that they had been summoned.

A dozen or so girls had already assembled. For better or for worse, because they were all muscleheads, not a single one of them seemed uneasy about what was about to happen.

"By the way, Sarah, do you know who we're going to be serving?" Brigitte asked her friend as she combed her fingers through her short black hair. She was dressed in the uniform of a knight and did not look at all like a minor noble's daughter.

Sarah was wearing a dress suitable for a girl from a good family, yet she was sitting on top of a desk in a very unladylike fashion. Her shoulder-length brown hair shook back and forth with her head as she answered, "Not a clue. We know for sure they can't be royalty. The royal family doesn't have any princesses right now."

"Yeah, so I was thinking it's gotta be the daughter of some high-ranking noble house or something." Brigitte shrugged, looking the very image of an actress who played male parts in a certain all-women theatrical troupe.

Just as Sarah had said, the royal family didn't have a princess right now. To be more precise, there were daughters of a duke who had royal blood, but the behavior of one of them had been so atrocious that her engagement to one of the princes had been called off. Now there were rumors that they might even be going so far as removing them both entirely from the lineage of the royal family. Sarah and Brigitte had no idea how much of this was true, since it was only what the older ladies were gossiping about these days, but

the rumor had traveled far enough that they had heard it even though they were just minor nobility.

Nevertheless, noble daughters growing up to be selfish was pretty commonplace. Even if their reputation should plummet in high society because they were careless, they usually managed to rein in their bad behavior by the time they reached a certain age. This was because selfish girls with insufficient motivation would only end up being knocked around by the waves of society and sinking to their doom. The fact was that girls who weren't capable of committing some kind of crime that got them labeled as "villainesses," like in the plays they had watched in the streets, were also incapable of living such harsh lives.

"As if it could be someone like that."

They laughed together at the thought. "Ha ha ha."

*What?!*

At long last, someone arrived to give them an explanation. It wasn't the person who had recruited them, though, but some civil official acting as their representative. And after hearing what they had to say, all of the girls who had applied for this job were internally screaming.

It hadn't been unveiled to the public yet, but the person they would be guarding *was* of royal blood.

Normally, this would be something to rejoice over. However, just as Brigitte and Sarah had been discussing before, the only girls of royal blood at present were the two daughters of the duke.

They hadn't believed that such villainess-like daughters actually existed. It was a different story altogether if they were going to have to serve the very girls that everyone had been gossiping about. They had been able to laugh about it before because they were just rumors and had nothing to do with them at

all, but now, every single one of them was so tormented by the weight of such a heavy burden that it left them speechless.

As a result, several of the girls asked to withdraw their applications, leaving only about ten remaining out of the original twenty.

The girls who had declined were not fleeing because they had chickened out. Every single one of them would have run away if they could; the girls who remained simply had no choice but to go through with it, as they all had such lacking grades that they had been unable to join a proper order.

They all had their reasons. If they stayed with their families, some would be forced to marry some middle-aged knight, some had been told not to bother coming home if they couldn't find employment, and so on. And because they all focused on training their muscles and not their brains, they would never be able to work as court ladies or maids or the like. They might have rather left their families and worked as common waitresses if they could, but tavern keepers would rather employ safe commoner girls than minor nobles.

In other words, they had nowhere to escape to. Naturally, Brigitte and Sarah were in the same boat, both keenly aware that they were more physical types than not. Rather than end up as some old man's mistress, they hoped to have an opportunity to possibly catch the eye of a bureaucrat who served a high-ranking noble instead. And so, as the two girls signed their contracts, they pressed on the quill with enough pressure that they nearly ripped the papers.

Starting the next day, Brigitte, Sarah, and the other girls were now all officially training to become escort knights. However, they didn't make it even a few days before they were all regretting their choices.

They were using a part of the academy for their training and they all slept together like a training camp. However, they still had not yet seen the princess they were supposed to be guarding, let alone the face of their actual employer.

Why couldn't they meet their employer? Why would nobody tell them who their employer even was?

They were complaining about it to their dorm mothers when all of a sudden, the dorm mothers all gathered around and told them with much amusement that they definitely wouldn't be guarding the sisters everyone had been talking about.

According to the dorm mothers, those girls had exiled a commoner for speaking too loudly in the academy cafeteria.

According to them, they had stripped a noble lady with a strong sense of justice completely nude, drawn indecent doodles all over her, and then tied her up to a pillar.

According to them, they had forced an impertinent noble daughter to attack some boys in town and she was forced to resign from the academy.

According to them, they brought the family of a professor who had reprimanded them to ruin and made an example of him to the other teachers.

According to them, they had gotten a minor noble girl who refused to get out of their way abducted and sold abroad.

And on and on.

The knights in training didn't know how true any of this was, but when they asked where these ladies were getting their information from, their information network made the girls tremble with fear. Brigitte and Sarah went pale as they realized that all of the stories they had assumed were jokes before might actually be true.

The thing that bewildered them most of all, though, was what their training actually included.

All of the girls, including Brigitte and Sarah, had only gotten good grades in practical skills and preferred to let their swords do the talking. Their training as knights wasn't grueling, but it was certainly demanding. In fact, the first things they were brought to do was get their hair done and get whole-body makeovers.

They were thrown into steam baths, thoroughly scrubbed free of grime, subjected to a hair-removal regimen, bathed in perfume oil, and polished until they all looked slim and had pretty faces. They were forced to do this every few days and, in the meantime, they were taught proper etiquette by a proper old lady who wielded a proper whip, starting with correcting how they walked. She made the teachers at the academy seem like angels in comparison. She drilled into them the minimum amount of education they would need for serving as "the princess's escort," which was all their trainers would tell them about the situation.

Of course, if they'd all known how to do these things from the start, there wouldn't have been any dropouts. As a result, nearly everyone tried to run away, but they were caught within a few hours and dragged back in chains.

It was awful. It was terrible. Proper noble daughters would be overjoyed at this kind of treatment, but these girls would have been happier sentenced to hard labor in prison.

They tried to appeal to the tyrant teachers, but those ladies didn't even bat an eyelash as they flashed the letters of consent that they had obtained from each of their families stating, "You may do with my daughter as you wish." They also informed the girls that they had already paid their families the ten large gold coins agreed upon in their contracts.

Ten large gold coins? A new adult who was working as an artisan's apprentice made one regular gold coin a month and this was a hundred times that. That was practically the same amount their fathers made as an annual salary as members of the knight peerage. Sarah's mother also added in her letter the heartwarming

encouragement to do whatever it took to protect the princess, even at the cost of Sarah's own life.

Their days continued on like that for half a year until the tyrant teachers declared the girls had all just barely passed the minimum requirements for being out in public. They then departed to finally start their work as the "princess's" escorts.

It was around that time, though, that a number of mid-ranking and minor noble houses had their titles revoked. To their surprise, even the house of the duke with the noble sisters they all had assumed they would be serving lost all of its power and nobility entirely, with only their family names left to them.

What about the knights in training and their jobs, then? Had they lucked out, since they wouldn't have to serve those delinquent sisters after all? Seeing the girls all wearing looks of mixed apprehension and relief, the ladies in charge took pity on them and finally told them the name of their employer.

"The Grand Duke of Versenia?! Who the hell is that?!"

"I ain't never heard of him!"

"Manners, girls!" one of the tyrant teachers immediately chastised them.

Brigitte and Sarah had been kneeling on the floor for half a day now and didn't really care, but the equipment and formal knights' clothes they had been given were of the highest quality. All of it clearly cost more than the payment their families had received for their contracts.

Some time later, they were all escorting an extravagant coach while riding upon white horses. They wound up heading to the house of the former duke with the awful daughters. They all had half-dead looks in their eyes as they feared the worst—that they would have to serve these girls anyway. But instead, they wound up

meeting a real princess who looked like she had just stepped out of a picture book.

She had golden hair and eyes. She looked like a beautiful angel crafted in the image of the gods; so perfect were her looks that she didn't seem human.

Every one of them froze with wild fervor at the sight of the princess. That was when they remembered the contents of the original recruitment advertisement they had received:

"Are you in need of a princess to dedicate your blade to?!"

And indeed, this was the one and only princess to whom they would ever dedicate their blades.

The princess of royal blood, born to the Grand Duke of Versenia.

A true Saint who had once saved many children by offering up herself in their stead.

Sixth in line for the throne of the Holy Kingdom of Talitelud.

Princess Yulucia von Versenia.

Nearly everyone in the castle had been assembled in the courtyard where they got to see the young princess as she was held in the arms of the king. It was likely unavoidable that all of them immediately adored her. It felt as if she had charmed them to their very souls.

"Princeeeeeeeeeeeess!"

"Long live Princess Yuluciiia!"

"Ahhhhhhhhh! Our princess!"

"Princess Yulucia is so cute!"

Naturally, Brigitte and Sarah also wholeheartedly gave three cheers and screamed with delight for her.

This pretty and beautiful girl was their one and only princess.

"Come on, girls, let's put our all into our 'training' today!"

"Yeah!" three girls replied.

Today, just like every day, they were in the Grand Duke of Versenia's courtyard, shouting encouragingly in a very unladylike manner. They were neglecting their knightly training to instead practice how to best present themselves as the cool guardian knights of the princess.

"All for the sake of our princess!"

# Afterword

TO THOSE READING MY WORK FOR THE FIRST time, it's nice to meet you. I'm the author of this book, Harunohi Biyori. Thank you so much for buying this book.

This series was originally a web novel and also my first time publishing to the web. At the time, I had never actually read web novels before, so I just found some website and read the most popular novel there. I got hooked. It just so happened that I had discovered it around the time that it finished, so I read through the whole thing and then started reading the other most popular ones too. Three months later, I wound up writing this series.

I wrote this series purely out of an excessive amount of motivation (lol). I had had a general idea of what to write at the time, but after reading all kinds of different series, I started envisioning what kind of chaos would result from a certain kind of character. As a result, the concept of this series turned into "a world in which there are many stories happening simultaneously and one of the characters closest to the protagonist is a monster capable of tearing the stories apart from their very foundations while not even breaking a sweat."

Just imagine it: the hero, suffering so much as he tries to save the world, and next to him is a smiling monster who's even scarier than a demon king.

What about a story in which the transmigrated heroine and villainess are working so hard to reach their happy ending with the prince in the otome game they're stuck in, but the villainess's little sister is the real monster?

And so, the side stories start feeling a bit out of place the more serious they get.

Since the main character is the only one written in first person, the temperature feels like it's going crazy. By the time we get to the more serious third person, we might end up catching a cold.

This book is my second title being published but my first title for the web. I would like to thank my editor at Kodansha for noticing and reading my work and publishing it for you all to read.

Be that as it may, this is still one of the early works of my writing career. So, after giving it much consideration, since I used expressions that I've grown out of, and some things have come in and fallen out of fashion, and the amount of information we have is constantly changing, I decided to rewrite the whole book from scratch while keeping the plot the same.

The plot hasn't changed a bit, only the writing. And I improved it too. I also made a minor tweak to fit something near the final chapter of the web version.

This book has also gotten a manga version, which is being drawn by Shiki Satoshi-sensei. It's covering Part Two of the story, which takes place in modern-day Earth, and I'm seriously looking forward to reading it.

Geso Umiu-sensei did the illustrations for this printed edition of the series. I was blessed to get an illustrator and Geso-sensei drew such wonderful illustrations.

Additionally, I would also like to express my utmost gratitude to Kodansha, everyone involved in the publishing, the bookstores for selling this book, and all of you readers for supporting me by buying this book.

I hope you'll all continue to enjoy reading about Yul's life!




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