1

Chapter 1

Shall I start with a slightly provocative sentence?

My family is dead. Ah, and as a bonus, so are my friends, colleagues, and even the subordinates I cherished.

I know exactly how they died, but I have no idea why they had to die.

Maybe they displeased someone, or maybe they were just unlucky. Something like that, I suppose.

Hearing that someone has died always feels strikingly intense, doesn't it?

Since I had been living as passively as water-diluted water or alcohol-diluted alcohol, it gave me a reason to take more active measures.

Honestly, if it were just my parents who died, I might not have cared so much.

"Ahaha."

But my beloved younger sister died too.

Right in front of my eyes.

It’s not that important of a story, though.

I’m not one to waste time complaining about something that’s already happened.

But unfortunately, life isn't something you can live doing only the things you like.

I finally got up.

"Ellen..?"

A girl who had just woken up asked me a question.

She asked where we were.

And who were the masked men standing next to me?

She looked scared, a comical expression of fear on her face.

"Kyaaah!"

At my signal, the men hoisted up the girl, who had been lying down, and hung her upside down.

She was wearing a skirt, so her striped underwear was on full display.

"Ellen, what the heck..? Put me down! What do you think you're doing?!"

I didn't answer her question about what I was doing.

After all, the one who needed to know wasn't her, but me.

I decided to start with a simple question.

"What's your name?"

"…You already know that, don't you?"

"What's your name?"

"Ethel. Ethel Rosenberg."

"Ethel-Ethel doesn't sound like a name. So, what's your real name?"

At those words, the girl gritted her teeth, her anger palpable.

Not exactly a model attitude.

"…It's Ethel Rosenberg."

"Your age?"

"…17."

"Your age?"

"I said I'm 17!"

The girl, who called herself Ethel Rosenberg, seemed unhappy about being dangled upside down.

"Ellen, quit fooling around and let me down! Everyone can see my underwear like this!"

It had already been five minutes, so I'd have to let her down in about 15 minutes to prevent the blood from rushing to her head.

"Ethel, how long have we known each other?"

She took a moment to think before answering.

"…It’s been three years since you enrolled, and we’ve been together since then, right?"

"Then, considering the time we’ve spent together, I’ll be gentle, so please answer sincerely and respectfully."

"You're talking about respect after dragging me into this dark basement and hanging me upside down? Just cut it out. It’s not funny."

I felt a little wronged.

I was already being gentle and respectful.

Not that she’d notice in this soundproof basement.

"You’re not 17. You’re 16."

Does she not even know her own age?

Maybe her parents lied to her.

Anyway, she tried to channel her magic to cut the rope binding her, but it was futile.

About five minutes of silence passed.

Her head was probably starting to feel light as the blood pooled.

Predictably, she was the first to speak.

"Forget my age or whatever. What the hell is this?! Why did you bring me to a place like this and hang me upside down?!"

She shouted, her voice echoing in the small room so loudly that it felt like my ears might burst.

Tears streamed down her face as she glared at me with an expression full of rage.

Does she still think we’re friends?

Friendship can only exist between equals.

Before we even get to the idea of equality, though…

There’s a chance this girl isn’t even human.

But at least the shouting didn’t last long.

With a swing of the club I was holding, I struck her in the solar plexus, and the noise naturally died down.

Ah, I didn’t kill her, if you’re wondering.

She’s just coughing and pretending to be in more pain than she is.

"Lie her down and tie up her arms and legs. Or just pin her down with brute force."

The two masked men nodded and untied her from her suspended position, laying her on the ground and tying her up.

Fortunately, the floor was lined with soft cushions, so she wouldn't smash her head and die.

"Now, where did I put the towels… which drawer was it in again?"

I heard the sound of her grinding her teeth.

Was she upset because she got hit? Or because she was caught and tied up here?

It might not be either.

I opened the second drawer of the black cabinet in the room and took out a clean, white towel.

It was folded so neatly that I felt a little bad about using it.

"Ethel, a lot of people died, didn’t they? Only 12 people died at the academy, but still."

I placed the towel next to the bound girl, then filled a four-liter water jug with water.

Only cold water came out of the faucet, and my hands felt numb from the chill.

"A massive incident like this happened, but there’s still so much we don’t know."

I unfolded the neatly folded towel and folded it again into a rectangular shape.

If it’s too long, it’s inconvenient to use.

"From what we know so far, about ten thousand people died in the capital. What a horrific tragedy."

The number of deaths across the country would be far greater.

I placed the rectangular towel over Ethel’s face.

Realizing what I was about to do, she began shaking her head violently.

It wasn’t a problem. Her arms and legs were already bound, and she couldn’t use her magic either.

Before pouring the water, I leaned in close to her ear and whispered softly.

"People are looking for answers, Ethel. And so am I."

"What are you talking about?!"

"Are you too stupid to understand? Fine, I'll make it simple for you. How did your parents meet the demons, why did they help them, and where did they run off to?"

"I-I don't know! Even if you ask me about my parents all of a sudden, how could I possibly kn—"

Her words were cut off by the sound of choking and spluttering.

Maybe she really didn't know. But even if she didn't, there was always someone else who did.

Since the floor was soft, I pinned her neck down with my knee, pressed her forehead with my left hand, and slowly began to pour water from the jug with my right.

I thought there'd be some gasping, splashing, or a gurgling sound, but instead, it was more like a bizarre, alien noise — a kind of glooorp-glooorp sound.

Once all the water had been poured, I removed the towel. Ethel spewed out water from her nose and mouth, coughing and sobbing.

Her wailing echoed throughout the room, making my head hurt. I brought the damp towel close to her face, and she shivered before quieting down.

"H-how… How could you do this to me…?"

To prevent any water from filling her lungs, I propped her up, helping her spit out whatever water was still in her mouth.

I watched her closely to ensure her pupils weren't dilated and her eyes weren't out of focus. Fortunately, she still seemed lucid.

Good. That meant I could keep this going for a while longer.

"E-Ellen... W-We're friends, right? You said we're friends... Can't we just… just talk it out…?"

"Friends. Hm. Are we still friends?"

"I-I don't know…"

"If you want to be set free, then give me an answer. The location where your parents were hiding and helping the demons, and the reason behind it. Tell me where they fled to."

Excessive pain can break a person, so it's important to be careful.

After all, I'm not here to kill anyone. I just want answers.

I signaled one of the masked men to refill the jug with water. Then, I placed the cold, filled jug next to Ethel’s head on the right.

"Since you keep saying you don’t know, I’ll offer you a helpful reminder that might jog your memory."

I crouched down beside her and spoke softly.

"Back in the day — I mean, a long time ago — there was a saying where I came from."

I kept my gaze fixed on her without blinking.

"Don’t you want to hear it?"

"I don’t care, but whatever. What is it?"

"Water knows all the answers."

I placed the towel back over her face.

It was strange how, even with her mouth covered, she managed to speak so clearly. Must be some sort of ventriloquism.

She probably didn’t think I’d pour the water again.

For a moment, I had unintentionally let my guard down, smiling at her words about friendship.

"Ellen, Ellen, Ellen! No! Please, please don’t! Don’t do this! I’m begging y—"

"Shh, shh. Stay still. If you move even a little, I’ll pour it all at once, got it?"

A few days ago, the demons had launched an attack across the empire.

It wasn’t like they formed an army and marched in, no. Instead, they hid in the sewers and alleyways of the cities, ambushing anyone — men, women, children, it didn’t matter.

Even slaves working on farms ran away, and circus performers, once bound to their routines, were suddenly set free.

They’d all been oppressed for so long. It was only natural that, when unleashed, they would vent their rage on everything in sight.

Unfortunately, my parents, who had been watching a play at the theater, were burned alive in the chaos.

They were my second set of parents, but we had no ill relationship.

Sure, I'd been scolded a lot when I was younger and spanked a few times, which made things awkward between us.

But I figured it was just part of being raised and educated. Even so, some memories still sent shivers down my spine.

That, however, wasn't enough to serve as my motivation for what I was doing now.

"Ethel, say something. Anything. You're the one who bragged about your parents to everyone, about how important they were, about what they were doing. You talked about it like it was some kind of achievement."

"I don't know anything about demons! I really don't! Please, just stop this, please…!"

Her desperate plea was cut off by a glooorp-glooorp sound as I pressed the towel firmly over her face and poured the water again.

Whoever first came up with the idea of using a towel and water like this was definitely a genius.

I didn't even have to exert much effort or look directly at her pained expression. No need to use brute force.

"I'm trying to help you, you know. But if you keep this up, how am I supposed to save you?"

I poured a little more water and tilted my head.

"You know, His Majesty had to pull a lot of strings to get me out of being thrown onto the guillotine. It wouldn't look good if I didn't produce results, would it?"

"…Stop it…"

"Don't you have any ideas? Not even a hint?"

"I… I don't know, I swear… Hicc… I didn't even graduate from the academy, so what kind of important job would they give me…?"

"Then you have no idea where they might have fled to?"

Ethel nodded, tears streaming down her face.

If this dragged on for another week, maybe the "hero" would come searching for the "heroine."

I figured I'd lock her up for four more days, then release her.

"Friends, huh? How useless."

Her expression crumbled at those words.

Her eyes filled with shock and disbelief, as if her world had come crashing down.

2

Chapter 2

It might be a somewhat common story.

Like being born into a game you were playing.

I wasn't a hardcore player, but since it had dozens of different endings, I played it about three or four times.

They say it's a game where random events occur, leading to completely different storylines…

But I wasn't that interested, so I just played it a few times to see the endings and that was it.

The graphics weren’t all that flashy, and if I wanted to experience a romantic vibe, there were far better games for that.

Gamers who had practically lost themselves in the game would always say, "You can play for thousands, even tens of thousands of hours!" But I had a job.

Unfortunately, I didn't have much money either, so I couldn't afford to sink my limited free time into that game.

Who brought me here?

They could have just left me running on the hamster wheel.

Or if they were going to bring someone, they should have picked someone who knew this world better than me.

That person would have come up with a solution in no time.

Anyway, I don't know much.

Other than things like who the main character is and who the heroine might be.

Maybe someone from this world crash-landed on Earth and decided to make a similar story into a game.

Either way, fortunately, I was born as a noble whose wealth overflowed to the point of rotting.

The only complaint I have is that I ended up as a noble who, to put it bluntly, is the emperor's hunting dog. If you put it nicely, I’m a noble who can kill other nobles if given permission.

Of course, that's officially impossible.

Still, thanks to that, I was able to attend the academy alongside the main character.

By sticking close to them, I might even be able to call them a friend. Yeah, maybe I could call them a friend.

I even made a real friend.

Saying it aloud like this makes me feel a bit embarrassed.

Even though, just now, I locked that friend up in the basement and waterboarded them.

Not that it matters. We don't even have proper classes.

There seem to be quite a few teachers who were caught up in various incidents.

Despite that, I still went to school.

The main character, for whatever reason, wants to drag incidents around with them every single day, diligently attending school like a model student. So, if I want to stick with them, I have to stay on the move too.

That way, if the world ever faces a crisis, they might just save me.

Honestly, it feels like we're in a crisis right now.

Anyway, during the day, I had some "slightly coercive conversations" with Ethel and a few other friends in the basement. Before dinner, I left the basement.

My hands were drenched in water.

“Uweeeek!!”

But it's fine. The door is a thick iron door, and the inside is packed with sand, so no sound from inside would reach outside.

So I vomited freely.

Good thing I skipped breakfast and lunch.

“Miss, are you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m fine, Marco.”

“…If it’s too much for you, it’s okay to leave it to us.”

Marco said that as he looked me in the eyes.

“You guys wouldn’t hold back, though.”

They'd probably half-kill them without a second thought, not caring if they lived or died.

“……”

Marco, despite being a servant, had probably buried more people than anyone else around me. He didn’t respond.

After a while, he spoke with a slightly hesitant tone.

“The family head is worried that the young lady may be overworking herself.”

“This is something I’ve always done and something I’ll continue to do.

Just because the target this time is a friend, it doesn't mean I'm going to let my emotions mess things up.”

The official name is the Imperial Security Bureau, but in reality, it's just a secret police force.

If you asked how it differs from a normal secret police force, a normal one wouldn't be able to enter places outside of their jurisdiction. But I have access to every single "conversation room" throughout the entire empire.

Of course, we don’t use words like torture room or underground solitary cell.

It’s like how people call mental hospitals "the white house on the hill" to make it sound less ominous.

It’s just unpleasant otherwise.

"Clean things up and head back to the mansion.

There’s not much to do, anyway."

He nodded and headed to the bathroom to get a mop.

I sat on the chair placed in the hallway, closed my eyes, and breathed for a while.

Even so, the numbing sensation of guilt clinging to my body didn’t go away.

Ethel was… yeah, she was my friend.

The first friend I made after enrolling at the academy.

Even though I was the one who drenched her with water while she was covered with a towel, she still called me her friend, rather than hurling hateful words at me.

She even said she didn’t understand why I was doing this.

If I’d just invited her over for tea and had a relaxed conversation, maybe things could’ve been resolved peacefully.

Or maybe, if I appealed to our friendship, she would have explained what her parents were up to or what connection they had with the demons. If I'd brought the main character along, we could've asked her together.

Yeah. Maybe. Just maybe.

How about I offer a pathetic excuse that no one will believe?

I don’t trust myself.

As far as I know, the game was supposed to be a story filled with hope.

Sure, there were some dark and sometimes despairing moments, but those could be overcome with a simple save and load.

In the end, it was about a brilliant protagonist saving beautiful kids, building relationships, and defeating the villains. That’s how the story ended.

I never imagined that a filthy bunch like the demons would pull off something on this massive scale.

If you look for intelligent demons among them, the only ones you’ll find are succubi who just spread their legs for men.

So how was I supposed to know something like this would happen?

If I had known, I would have just holed up in my room playing games.

For hours, for tens of hours, for hundreds, for thousands of hours.

Sure, there were moments in the game where demons caused trouble, but it was never this bad.

Honestly, my parents deserved to die.

They were awful people.

But maybe, because of some faint sense of family loyalty, the fact that they’re dead still puts me in a somber mood.

And because I was incompetent, my sister died too.

My sister, who told me to wear pretty dresses, go on trips, eat good food, and date someone instead of dealing with gloomy criminals all the time.

If I’d known it would end like this, I would’ve stood right in front of her and worn a pretty, fluttering skirt at least once.

Her final words as she lay dying were, "Don’t cry."

Because of that, I couldn't even cry. Instead, I just sat in the hallway, sniffling and dry-heaving like a mess.

"Don’t forget me," she said.

Isn’t that one of the cruelest things you could ask of someone?

Because it forces you to be sad about them for the rest of your life.

And so, I began to hate a lot of things.

Myself, everything related to demons, and all the incompetent fools who couldn't even stop one uncivilized demon.

I wiped the corners of my eyes roughly with a white handkerchief and gazed at the hallway lights for a long time.

A bug, having somehow slipped in, circled around the light. It flew too close to the gas flame and burned to ash.

I glanced at the watch on my wrist.

"About an hour left until the senior comes out, huh."

If I work for 30 minutes, clean up for 10 minutes, and walk back, the timing should be just right.

I opened the door to the room right next to where Ethel was being held.

Instantly, a foul stench stabbed into my nostrils.

The person in charge must have stepped away for a break, as the lights in the room were off.

I felt my way along the cold cement wall and switched on the light.

With the faint crackle of electricity, the light flickered briefly before finally turning on.

In the center of the room was a man, his mind seemingly elsewhere. He was on his knees, his ankles bound to the floor with shackles.

"Julius, you look terrible."

"...Did you come here just to mock me?"

His entire body was covered in long wounds, with blood still dripping from them, but his gaze had not lost its fire.

I suppose he's different from his weak little sister.

"I'm sure you've heard this over and over, but I'll ask you again.

Why did your parents shelter and aid demons, and where did they flee to?"

Spit.

The sound of him spitting was louder than expected.

It echoed faintly throughout the room.

The bloody phlegm splattered onto my clean white clothes.

"You really shouldn't do that, especially considering who's locked up in the room next to you."

"……"

"Don't know? I just had a little chat with your little sister a moment ago, with these very hands."

"...You... That child has nothing to do with this. You know that, don't you? She's someone you'd come over to play with when you visited our house."

Even invoking old memories, huh?

"I used to enjoy teasing you, Julius. Watching you two siblings like that made me think, 'Ah, they're so close.'"

I pulled out a fresh, white handkerchief and roughly wiped my cheek and the front of my clothes.

The handkerchief would have to be discarded, and I'd need to change into fresh clothes.

"I had a younger sibling I loved too… no, used to love."

People like this won't open their mouths even if you submerge them in water, pour a mix of spices and chili powder into their nostrils, or even chop off parts of their body.

They have too much to protect.

So, in the end, it's easier to target what they're trying to protect rather than them directly.

Did I forget to inform the handler that I had already locked his sister up?

"Do you know how heart-wrenching it is to lose an only sibling?

But you’re not sad yet, Julius.

So just confess.

We’re a little too old to be playing water games with our friends, you know."

"...All I did was take in some people with nowhere to go, feed them, give them a little money, and send them back on their way."

"Yeah, yeah. We’ve already heard that story.

I’m asking you where those damn parents of yours ran off to."

"I don’t know."

"Every time you spit out that useless crap, I’ll feed one of Ethel's fingers to you.

You can answer ‘I don’t know’ about nine more times.

She’s already lost one, after all."

"…That’s…"

Well, it’s not like there’s any way for him to know that.

"Think it over carefully."

I left the room for now.

By tomorrow, he might have a different perspective.

It was time to change into fresh clothes and return to being an ordinary girl.

3

Chapter 3

I stepped into the cramped bathroom, tossed my clothes carelessly into the corner, and began washing my body.

Sometimes, when prisoners get too filthy, they bring them here to clean up. The stench — that sickening mix of blood and filth — was overwhelming.

At this point, though, I'd grown too used to it to frown or wrinkle my nose.

When I first enrolled in the academy, the task my parents gave me had been incredibly simple.

They told me to attend the academy and casually jot down the names of students who spoke suspiciously.

They said I wouldn't have to do anything beyond that.

But now, here I am, having "coercive conversations" with people I once considered friends.

I splashed water on the grimy, film-covered mirror and stared at my reflection.

When I'm unsure of who I am or what I'm supposed to do, I remind myself.

I think about how my sister died.

Steam clouded the mirror, and with it, my eyes grew hazy as well.

I shook my head slightly, gathered my snowy white hair, and wrung the water out of it.

Then, I pulled a neatly folded towel off the shelf and roughly dried my hair and body.

My personal shelf was filled with clean clothes.

I pulled out a crisply folded uniform and put it on, walking out of the dreary "conversation room."

Although this space was technically inside the academy, it was tucked beneath an abandoned building no one visited, so there was no risk of being caught.

There were even three separate exits.

In normal circumstances, we'd just drag them to the basement of our mansion. But given the current state of things, every single conversation room across the country, including ours, was already filled with detainees.

In the end, they had to refurbish an old basement beneath the academy and put it back into use.

Not bad, though.

It was efficient since I could still get work done after classes started.

For the half-dazed "friends," all I had to do was drag them to this building, knock them out, and haul them downstairs. Clean and simple.

It must have been around 6 o'clock.

After waiting a few minutes, a boy with a towel draped around his neck walked out, spotted me, and waved.

“Ellen, were you waiting for me?”

“Not really. We didn’t have any plans, and I just decided to come on my own, so you don’t need to think much of it.”

“By the way, Ethel still didn’t show up today. Same with the others.

I wonder if they’re all sick or something.”

Even though he probably knew the answer, he tossed it out there because there was nothing else to talk about.

I had just seen Ethel myself, so I couldn't really relate to his concern.

I nearly let my expression slip, but I covered it up by pretending to wipe my eyes with my right hand.

“It’s probably more normal for us to be attending like this than them. Both of Ethel's parents died, after all.”

They probably fled somewhere, given that no one’s found their bodies.

Or maybe they burned to ashes somewhere along the way.

He opened his mouth as if to say something, then shut it again.

Was it because I mentioned how my parents burned alive?

"……Sorry."

“Anyway, I’m sure they’ll be back in a few days.”

To avoid suspicion, two days was about the limit.

“There’s no class, no teachers, and barely any students, so why are you even coming to school?

Didn’t they say classes wouldn’t resume for another month?”

“There's no better place for training than here. What about you?”

“Boredom. You’re the only person I can meet these days, Theo.”

“…That makes me feel oddly pressured.”

“Good to hear.”

I thought I was so insignificant that I wouldn’t be able to weigh on anyone’s mind, even a speck.

Or maybe, since I was the only person around, he was just throwing me a line to make small talk.

The front entrance, where countless students once came and went, was still half-collapsed and awaiting repairs.

I walked slowly next to Theo, sticking close to him like a shadow as we passed through the wreckage.

After all, if I’m going to be next to someone who drags incidents around like a magnet, I might as well listen to what’s been going on lately.

This area used to be a bustling commercial district where students often hung out.

They say it’s being restored, but the atmosphere is still bone-chillingly eerie.

I scanned the surroundings as we passed by the scorched path.

Furious, restless people — people with nothing to do but wander — were yelling and making a commotion.

“Kill them!”

“Burn them alive! Burn them alive!”

“Give me back my son!”

“Kyahhh!”

A girl, around my age, was being swarmed by a mob of people, beaten without mercy.

The only differences between us were that she was prettier, and she had horns growing from her head.

Her clothes were in tatters, but they looked like they had once been expensive silk.

She wasn’t a demon, though.

Most likely, she was the daughter of some succubus who’d struck it rich.

Watching the scene unfold, Theo’s face twisted in despair. He glanced at me, grabbed my wrist, and started tugging me toward them.

“Ellen, we have to stop them!”

“Can’t we slow down a bit before doing that?”

“What the hell are you talking about?!”

It didn’t look like the crowd had any lustful intentions toward the girl.

Their eyes weren’t filled with desire — just pure hatred.

Men and women alike yanked at her hair, slapped her cheeks, and pummeled her with their fists.

Someone came back with a long rope and tossed it over the gaslight pole, forming a noose.

They were getting ready to hang her.

“Do you really think charging in there alone is going to change anything, Senior?”

Theo sprinted toward them, his body moving with frantic urgency.

I quietly whispered as I jogged alongside him.

“Lucky if you don’t end up hanging right beside her. Or are you planning to kill everyone there, huh?”

“Then what the hell am I supposed to do?!”

What are you supposed to do, you ask?

Well, I wonder.

That girl is probably a heroine.

I mean, she's pretty.

Her clothes and underwear are tattered, but from the looks of it, she’s probably a virgin.

Blue light shimmered at the tips of her fingers as she gripped the noose.

She clearly knows how to use magic, but she’s letting herself be hit.

Even so, that must hurt a bit.

It won't kill her, though.

Maybe she's planning to play dead, wait for the crowd to disperse, and then escape.

"Demons are pretty tough, you know. They're not as fragile as humans. Do we really need to save her?"

"...Even so! How can we just leave a kid like that?!"

"Then say it, Senior. Ask me to help. I can handle it in no time. Oh, but I'm adding it to your debt."

"Debt or not, I don't care, just help her."

Then maybe I can ask him to forgive me for what I did to Ethel later.

But he won't, will he?

"…Whatever it takes."

I approached the mob.

They were enraged, pointing fingers and throwing things at the girl.

I pushed my way forward until someone who seemed to be leading the crowd blocked my path.

"Don't tell me you're planning to help that demon?"

Instead of replying, I pulled a gun from my coat.

Then I aimed it at the girl.

The bullet hit the rope squarely, and the girl collapsed to the ground, gasping for air.

I glanced at her briefly, then pointed the barrel at the man blocking my way.

At that moment, the excitement and rage in his eyes dimmed, and he regained a sense of reality. His body flinched slightly.

He doesn't seem worth killing. It doesn't look like he gathered this mob on purpose, so there's no reason to drag him to the conversation room either.

"Just keep your mouth shut and let this slide. You're not supposed to be gathering people and causing chaos, hanging up half-demons as if they're real demons."

"Even if she's half, she's still a demon…"

“Hey, old man. Nothing good will come from catching the attention of people in high places. That little girl over there? She’s probably the daughter of a succubus under some noble. If you kill her, do you think you’ll be able to handle the fallout?”

“...That’s…”

“Then I just saved your life.

I won’t charge you for it, so let it go and move on.”

What a stupid mess.

Angry people always turn stupid.

The onlookers, now regaining their senses, began to scatter.

The fiery rage that had been brimming moments ago quietly dissolved into a subtle fear.

I approached the girl lying on the ground.

I reached out and touched the horns on her head.

They were soft and squishy. And since she didn’t have a tail, she was clearly part human.

Once the people dispersed and went about their business, the girl cautiously spoke.

“...You’re one of us, aren’t you? A disguised kin.”

Despite the private punishment she had just suffered, she brushed herself off nonchalantly and stood up.

“Why do you think that?”

“Because no ordinary human would ever save me. Unless you were a man.”

“A man asked me to save you, actually. But I doubt it was because of your unimpressive body.”

At those words, the girl scowled, her face twisting into an expression of pure annoyance.

“You didn’t have to help me, you know. My body’s strong, just like my mom’s.”

“Oh, how impressive. Truly fitting for a filthy, disgusting demon.”

“...Who are you, exactly?”

That’s such a typical thing to ask.

She probably wants to hear about my birthplace, my childhood, how my parents met their end, how I watched my sibling die right before my eyes, and what my life was like before I woke up to this world.

Sounds like something straight out of a novel.

Ah, my head's starting to feel muddled.

Is it because I'm looking at a beast who dares to talk like a person?

"There's no need for you to know. If you want to hear sob stories, go chat with the handsome guy behind me."

Honestly, I wanted to throw stones at this girl too.

She wouldn't die even if I did.

But since the protagonist was watching, I simply shoved her aside and walked over to Theo.

Since he's far better-looking than I ever was, she'd probably lower her guard and start chatting and laughing with him.

If I stayed nearby, I might accidentally ruin the moment, so I decided to leave.

"What are you doing? Go console her if you want to keep her as a pet."

"...That's too harsh."

It's not like I'm wrong.

4

Chapter 4

I pulled out my notebook and checked off every item in today's to-do list with a red pen.

✓ Wake up early in the morning
✓ Chat with a friend
✓ Attend school
✓ Talk with Theo
✓ Don’t get depressed and cry for no reason
✓ Smile cheerfully
✓ Don’t drink or smoke
✓ Don’t touch any drugs or suspicious substances

I thought about quitting this pointless ritual, but I couldn't. My little sister used to nag me every day and write down my daily tasks like this when I was always lazing around and oversleeping.

All I have left now is a grave, a few belongings, and these memories.

The weight of those old memories keeps me bound.

Anyway, I’ve accomplished so much today.

I wanted to reward myself by going home and resting, but there were still things I had to do.

Instead of calling for the driver, riding the steam car back home, and greeting the family head—who was probably still wracking his brain over documents—I decided to head to the basement first.

After chanting a spell at the iron door on the ground, I walked down into the neatly organized underground corridor.

I spotted Marco, sitting dazed on a chair in the hallway. He looked exhausted from work.

Even though he was wearing black clothes, I could see the bright red stains splattered all over him.

When he noticed me, he stood up, gave a slight bow, and lowered his head as a gesture of respect.

"I told you, you don’t have to do that."

"Young lady, one must always maintain proper etiquette.

Whether it’s for smooth communication or simply for a decent life, manners are essential."

What’s the point of polite words if you can’t back it up with actions?

"Anyway, Marco, do we have any guests who can be handled a little roughly?"

He pondered for a moment, then his face brightened slightly as if he had someone in mind.

“…Ah, yes. What kind of person are you looking for?"

"Female, preferably in her late teens.

It would be even better if she’s a noble girl with well-manicured nails."

"Try room 5-2."

"Thanks. You're doing great as always!"

"Yes, you too, young lady. Oh, by the way, she hasn’t had any conversations with anyone yet, so she might be a little frightened."

"Why’d you bring her in?"

"Apparently, she sheltered and protected demons who were being hunted down by an angry mob of citizens."

"Wow, that’s horrendous."

"Isn’t it, though?"

Room 5-2, huh?

I tilted my head back and started checking the plaques above each door.

Once I found 5-2, I strained to push the heavy iron door open.

Inside, a girl was sitting on the bed, trembling with fear.

A soft bed, a bathroom, even books.

They were practically treating her like a guest.

If they’re going this far, they might as well hire a chef to cook her meals, too.

I scanned the room with a sarcastic gaze, and that’s when the girl spoke up.

“…Hey, are you Ellen, by any chance?”

“Oh, senior. I thought you were dead, but here you are.”

I didn’t expect to run into someone I knew.

And I certainly didn’t expect it to be someone who was practically considered dead.

“Dead? Where even is this place?”

“You don’t need to know that.”

"Wait… You’re telling me I’m one of those twelve missing people?"

“Oh, so you’re one of them, huh? No wonder they said it wasn’t a problem.”

She wasn’t a librarian, but she was always at the library counter managing the books.

Since there was no official librarian, and she oversaw everyone who borrowed books, it was safe to call her one.

She had a gentle heart, a pretty face, and a large chest. People confessed to her all the time.

But since she preferred books over people, she rejected them all.

She used to meet up with Theo often, so she might have had a crush on him.

After all, she was one of the heroines.

“It’s so annoying dealing with people you know.”

“…Ellen, can’t you just explain something to me?”

What do you want me to explain?

That, technically, you’re already a dead person and that no one will come looking for you even if I bury you right now?

Or maybe you want me to explain why you’re even locked up here in the first place?

“Yeah. Why am I here? I really don’t understand.”

"That’s why you’re locked up here — because you don't understand.”

She fell silent at that.

Her eyes glared at me with a tinge of resentment.

“Why did you bring demons into your house and protect them?”

"…Wait, I’m here because of that?”

“Answering a question with a question isn’t a great idea.”

“Those people weren’t doing anything wrong! They were surrounded by a furious mob and were nearly killed!

If you had any sense of decency, there’s no way you’d just sit back and watch that happen!”

“…People?”

"Yeah, people.

If you don’t believe me, you can go ask them yourself.

I saved the old man who sells fruit, a mother and daughter from the house next door, and the boy who delivers newspapers.

Are those acts of charity a crime now?”

“Hmm. You’re not making any sense. Are you mentally ill?”

There’s no point in talking to people who are mentally ill.

Usually, I’d just brush it off as nonsense, but unfortunately, this person was a guest of our household.

I grabbed a restraint for her wrists, fastened it on her, and dragged her by the restraint to lock her down on the floor.

She’s supposed to be an academy student, yet she’s this weak?

“Well, I didn’t come here to have some deep philosophical debate about whether demons are people or not, so it doesn’t really matter. But since you’re someone I know, I’ll be as gentle as I can.”

I opened the enchanted shelf, which was kept cold by magic, and took out a vial of medicine and a syringe.

Normally, this kind of thing is only used on people who are about to die.

The needle would sting a bit, but it wouldn't hurt nearly as much as having a finger chopped off.

The girl was muttering something, but I didn’t really hear it. My ears had grown numb to that kind of noise.

That’s why it’s important to behave properly at all times.

“If Theo finds out you’re doing this…”

“And what’s Theo going to do if he finds out?

We’ll just invite him in as a guest and give him a little persuasion.”

I inserted the needle into her arm and pressed the plunger.

In a few moments, she’d start losing feeling in her hands.

“...Didn’t you like Theo?”

She sounded genuinely shocked.

Apparently, the fact that I didn’t like the protagonist surprised her more than the ridiculous situation of being dragged here for helping demons.

Why would I like him?

That self-righteous, exhausting, and irritatingly competent person?

“Why would I ever like that guy?”

“Because you’re always following him around and sticking by his side wherever he goes.”

“He’s the most dangerous student in the entire school.”

“Dangerous? Him? That kind, gentle boy?”

“That’s exactly why he’s dangerous. He’s kind and competent.”

Fortunately, while this girl might be kind and naive, she wasn’t as competent as Theo.

If Theo were thrown into a basement, he’d probably kill every single one of my subordinates and break out.

“Have you really been thinking like that every time you were hanging out, eating, and attending classes with the other students?”

That one stung a bit.

I didn’t know how to answer, so I just smiled and brushed it off.

“Who could live like that 24/7? I just stick to my role and do my job.”

This is why I hate interviewing people I know in the conversation room.

It feels like the “me” above ground gets pulled down into the same filth as the “me” down here.

It’s like bloodstained hands dragging me down.

“Oh, right. If you somehow survive this, just know that everything I’m doing here is obviously a secret, okay?”

Now, where did I put that hand axe?

I searched through the drawers for the axe, but it was nowhere to be found.

I hate using knives — they don’t leave a clean cut.

But since I had no other choice, I took out a small dagger and slammed it down on her pinky finger.

She didn’t scream.

Instead, she stared at her own hand, dazed, as if her mind couldn’t process what had just happened.

She probably didn’t feel it because of the anesthesia, but once that wears off, it’ll sting a bit.

Well, it’s not like she’d need her pinky finger anyway. She’s a bookworm who spends her life eating through pages, not someone who does manual labor.

“This is for… something I need it for. I’ll tell the next person who comes in here to treat you a little more gently, so just spill the location of those demons you were hiding and end this.”

“...You’ll kill them if I do, won’t you?”

Come on, it’s not like that.

As long as they don’t resist, we won’t kill them.

Besides, His Majesty is already furious. Do you really think we won’t find them eventually?

No matter how long it takes, they’ll be found.

I wrapped her severed pinky in a handkerchief and stuffed it into my pocket.

By the time the sun sets, I should probably check in on Ethel’s brother.

I really didn’t want to go to the academy twice in one day.

“Anyway, hang in there. I hope we meet again!”

The girl looked at me like she had something to say.

Her eyes were filled with sorrow and a flicker of anger.

“You got something to say?”

“You… you’re a bad person.”

“…Huh. I expected something more creative than that.”

I strained my body, pushing the iron door closed, and locked it.

“You took a while, young lady. Did you get everything you wanted?”

“Marco, have you been slacking off this whole time instead of working?”

“Slacking off? No, I was taking a break while the young lady did the interview for me.”

Getting called a "bad person" must have jabbed at my conscience a bit.

I found myself saying something I normally wouldn’t.

“Are you going to get rid of her?”

“If she doesn’t open her mouth, probably.”

“Go easy on her. She’s my friend.”

“Ah, I see. Since you used anesthesia, I suppose it’s fine to let her rest and pick up again tomorrow.”

“You sure are considerate of your subordinates’ rest time, young lady. You’re the best.”

“If you love it so much, keep her alive. And if possible, make sure her eyes and mouth stay intact so she can still go to school.”

“Of course.”

“I’ll head to another interview. See you later.”

“Take care, young lady.”

With a heavy heart, I made my way back to school.

5

Chapter 5

I've come to a very clear realization — carrying around someone's severed finger is far from a pleasant experience.

Even more so when you're walking to school.

If I bump into one of those soldiers patrolling at night, it's going to be a hassle. I'll have to explain who I am, show my identification, and even give an account of where I'm going and why.

Dodging the beams of their flashlights, I managed to slip inside the school building.

I made my way underground.

The only light down here comes from man-made flames. Sunlight never reaches this place. If you black out a few times, you lose all sense of time — you can't tell how many days have passed or even if it's day or night.

That's why I need to make sure I don't show signs of exhaustion in front of Julius.

He probably thinks it's nighttime.

I grunted as I heaved open the heavy iron door, stepping inside and flicking on the lights.

Zzzzt.

The sound of the flickering bulb echoed, and dim light gradually filled the room.

Julius was slumped forward, tied up and kneeling on the floor, fast asleep.

His wounds had healed. Either they brought in a priest or doused him with a potion.

These days, even healthy people have to wait in line for treatment. Surely, they didn't actually bring in a priest for him, right?

"Wake up."

He didn't stir, even with the lights on and the noise around him. Must be in a pretty deep sleep.

Or maybe, in the meantime, he loosened the restraints around his wrists and ankles and was biding his time for an opportunity.

Sure enough, I pulled out my gun, aimed a sharp kick at his gut, and he shot up like a spring, grabbing my leg.

The moment he noticed the gun in my hand, his grip went slack.

“Even a rookie wouldn’t fall for that. Come on, no complaints — put the ankle cuffs back on yourself.”

Surprisingly, he followed my instructions obediently.

He slid his ankle into the restraint and pressed the locking mechanism.

Honestly, I didn’t expect him to listen.

Even if I had a gun, it wouldn’t mean much to someone like him.

How did he even get these off in the first place?

I took a closer look at the restraints. They had loosened to the point that a bit of effort could snap them.

He probably wouldn’t have made it far, but still.

“…Are you going to kill me?”

It’s probably because of his little sister, Ethel.

I didn’t think too hard about it.

“You just saved my life, didn’t you? So, I’m bringing you a gift in return.”

I pulled a handkerchief-wrapped item from my coat pocket and revealed the severed finger.

I shook it in front of his face for a moment before casually tossing it onto the floor.

If he stares too long, he might notice that it’s not quite what it seems.

“You’ve got guts, showing me something like this after catching me.”

“Then kill me if you’re so angry. I’m curious to see how far you’d get, Julius.”

His eyes darted wildly, his gaze trembling with madness.

Once someone’s expression crumbles like that, they’re already halfway broken.

Anyway, only eight left now.

This whole process is exhausting, you know.

Wouldn’t it be easier if you just talked?

Ethel might start saying I'm not even her friend anymore.

If I start shouting or making threats, people tend to steel their resolve instead. That's why I keep quiet and just watch him.

Since it's past midnight, I should flash him a cheerful smile. That way, I can check off another item on my to-do list.

When I glanced at my watch, I saw that I'd already spent ten minutes with this nonsense.

This was starting to get boring. And I should probably check on Ethel to make sure she isn't left alone for too long.

I turned around, intending to wake her up, and began to push open the iron door again.

"...I'll talk."

The man's voice echoed from behind me.

"Just spare her. Kill me if you want, but at least spare Ethel."

I sighed and closed the heavy iron door behind me.

The soundproofing was good, but damn, this door was unnecessarily heavy.

"Why would I kill you? I'll let you live too, Julius."

"Besides, if you'd just told me from the start, your sister would still have all ten fingers."

I reached into my coat pocket, searching for something, but I couldn't find it.

Right, I'd quit smoking.

My sister used to nag me about it constantly.

"It's bad for your health," she'd say. "It stinks, and if you keep doing it, you'll never get married."

Back then, I'd laugh it off.

But after she died, I just couldn't bring myself to smoke anymore.

I tried once. I bit down on a cigarette, lit it, and watched the smoke rise.

For a moment, I swore I saw her face glaring at me through the smoke.

She was always like that.

She made me clean up my act and then left me behind.

If she’d just stayed alive, I wouldn’t be stuck doing filthy work like this.

“…If you’re having a hard time talking, do you want me to bring you some paper and a pen? Although, with your nails ripped out and your joints broken, it might be hard to write.”

“...Forget Ethel. What happens if my parents are caught?”

“They’ll probably be dealt with on-site. If they surrender without a fight, they’ll be brought here. They’ll be released if they cough up enough money.”

“Don’t worry — I’ll make sure Ethel has enough money to keep attending the academy.”

“...I see.”

He slumped forward as if his strength had left him.

"So, where are your parents hiding?"

"There's an underground tunnel beneath the family’s sorghum farm, and a large underground crypt beneath the church our family sponsors."

"...And if they're not there?"

"Then I don't know."

"Alright, let’s do this. We’ll spend three full days scouring both places, using our time and manpower just for you. If they’re not there, I’ll toss Ethel in this room with you."

"...What?"

"Of course, without any food. But don’t worry, I’ll make sure you have plenty of water.

I’m curious to see how many days it takes before one of you eats the other."

I’m not a psycho. I wouldn’t actually do that.

If I were going to kill them, I’d just use poison and make it quick.

This is Marco’s preferred way of “persuading” people.

Besides, that finger wasn’t even Ethel’s.

In a little while, I’ll knock him out, grab the finger, and put it back on the librarian girl.

If the potion doesn’t work, I’ll just call in a priest.

"Those two places are the only ones. So please… spare Ethel."

"I already told Ethel this, but people are very angry right now.

Of course, I’m not a demon, but I’m pretty angry too.

What do you expect? The entire country is in a frenzy, calling to kill every last demon on this land — and even cross the sea to kill the Demon King on the eastern continent."

I have a feeling I’ll spend my whole life hunting demons.

People need a reason to live.

Sure, most of the time, people can live just fine without one. But as soon as something bad happens — depression, misfortune — they give up on life far too easily.

Before she died, my sister told me to live a long, healthy life.

And to do that, I needed something to focus on.

I’m lucky that I’ve got the perfect target for my rage and grief.

"Are you sure there’s nowhere else they might be hiding?"

"You’ve already searched the entire mansion, haven’t you?

There’s a hidden room behind one of the bookshelves.

If you missed it, check again."

The idiots downstairs better not have missed something so obvious.

If they did, the one in charge of the search is getting their pay docked.

"Looks like we’ve run out of things to talk about, Julius.

I wish you the best of luck. Oh, I’ll even get you a bed and proper meals, so rest easy."

He gritted his teeth hard enough to make a scraping sound.

If it were anyone but me, they’d probably string him up by his ankles and pour boiling water mixed with chili powder and spices straight up his nose.

Marco would probably love to do it himself.

"Fine."

I unlocked the restraints on Julius’s legs, his wrists, and even his chains.

Sure, I had a gun in my hand, but I knew it wouldn’t matter.

This man could shatter my skull way faster than I could pull the trigger.

That’s what it means to face a skilled ability user.

I reached into the cold drawer and pulled out a vial and a syringe.

"Hold out your wrist."

He complied without a word, holding his arm out.

After pushing the needle in, I slowly pressed the plunger, injecting the drug into his veins.

His eyelids grew heavier with every second.

"Did Ethel ever tell you what you look like right now?"

"Don’t care."

"You look like a devil wearing human skin. Acting like everything’s fine while doing things like this…"

He trailed off as he fell asleep.

It’s the first time I’ve seen someone fall asleep mid-sentence.

For a moment, I considered moving him onto the cushioned floor, but since he just insulted me, I decided against it.

Let him wake up with his back and neck all cramped.

"A devil, huh."

Hearing that from someone is a little painful when you’re a frail girl like me.

Anyway, I took the chance to grab the finger I’d tossed onto the floor and wrapped it back in the handkerchief.

Even if it starts rotting, you can still reattach it with magic.

That’s probably why no one cares much when they lose a limb anymore.

I’ll tell Marco tomorrow morning to bring in a bed and some proper food for Julius.

He’ll handle it.

I left the stifling, foul-smelling conversation room and made my way back to the surface.

It’s ironic.

We claim to be "hunting demons," but in the end, we’re the ones torturing ordinary people.

I wonder what I was going to say just now.

Acting like it’s nothing, huh.

I don’t like this job either.

But who gets to choose their job, anyway?

If you’re born as the son of a baker, you’ll probably end up running a bakery.

If you’re born to a farmer, you become a farmer.

Sure, if you’re talented, you might get a little leeway.

I did think about doing something different.

But my parents didn’t want that.

The only exception was my little sister.

She had this… pure, bright energy that didn’t feel tainted by the eerie, ominous atmosphere of our family.

Our whole family adored her.

Me, my brother, and even our parents.

We would have supported her no matter what she wanted to do — as long as she didn’t end up with some no-good man.

Heavy footsteps echoed as I trudged my way home.

I was planning to wake Ethel up just to mess with her sense of time.

But I forgot.

Was it guilt? Or had I just become stupid?

Feeling the heat rise to my face, I rubbed my eyes.

I guess I’ll just mark off my to-do list with some lies.

I need to do what needs to be done.

Whether it’s right or wrong.

Whether it’s fun or miserable.

6

Chapter 6

"…I don't want to go to school."

Those were the words I muttered out of habit as I opened my eyes in the morning.

I really didn't want to go to school.

How on earth does that lunatic Theo manage to attend every single day without fail and still find the energy to train like a maniac?

I dragged myself out of bed, walked to the bathroom in my pajamas, washed up half-heartedly, got dressed, and left the house.

Come to think of it, I haven't run into anyone in the house lately.

Maybe it's because the whole atmosphere feels gloomy and twisted.

After arriving at school and sitting in the classroom, I cracked open a novel I'd read before.

As I was flipping through its uninteresting pages, someone placed a hand on my shoulder.

"Ellen! Long time no see."

I closed the dull book and greeted them back, "Yeah, it's been a while."

It wasn't like Ethel was my only friend.

If you want to wander around the academy, gather information, and stay in the loop, you need to get along with a variety of people.

Still, Ethel, Theo, that rude magician, and this person in front of me were the ones I was closest to.

We used to stick together constantly.

"Are you the only one who came to school today?"

"Besides Theo-senpai and the usual people who like to use the training facilities, yeah, pretty much."

"Then why did you come?"

"Nothing to do at home. Thought I'd come to the library and read some books.

What about you, Isabel?”

“Same here. Had nothing to do at home and figured I’d swing by. Then I spotted you.”

I closed the book I’d been reading.

Once I lose interest in a book, I don’t feel like picking it up again. This one was a theory book on magic, and I wasn’t in the mood to force myself through it.

I was planning to finish it and head out to work, but I guess I can spare a little time to chat.

Before dealing with things in the shadows, I should prioritize the version of me that exists under the sun.

“Where’s Theo?”

“Probably swinging his sword around in the training area. Either that, or playing with something he picked up yesterday.”

“Picked up?”

“You know how Theo-senpai is.

If he sees someone in trouble, he can’t just leave them alone.

He saved a demon girl who was surrounded by an angry mob.”

“Hmm… What about Ethel and the others?”

“They didn’t come.”

At those words, Isabel let out a long sigh, then plopped down not in a chair but on top of the desk in front of me.

She fidgeted restlessly, like a puppy whining for a walk.

“Wanna grab some coffee?” I asked.

“I don’t want coffee. I want something else.”

“Fine by me.”

I figured I’d humor her for a while, get her a drink, and once I got tired of her, I’d send her off to Theo.

We stopped by a café we frequented near the school.

The young worker who usually manned the counter was nowhere to be seen.

Instead, an older man was there, waiting to take orders.

Isabel tilted her head in confusion and asked him where the usual guy went.

The old man's reply was simple and blunt: "He's dead."

After taking a moment to process that, we ordered our drinks.

I got a sweet drink made with strawberries and coffee.

With drinks in hand, we picked a seat at a comfortable spot.

I sat by the window, staring outside.

The roads were still charred in places, and there were stores with broken windows that still hadn't been replaced.

"It wasn't like this before," Isabel muttered.

Her voice was lively, like a cheerful girl caught in a moment of reflection.

Fortunately, she said no one in her family had died.

That's probably why she could still act like this.

Good for her.

As for me? I prefer it this way.

The less things change, the more peace I feel.

"Yeah, it wasn't like this."

There weren't many people left to capture in the first place, and it's not like I had to go out and do the work myself.

"Still, don't you think things will eventually go back to normal?"

"That would be nice."

Maybe it's because the person brewing the coffee changed, but it felt excessively bitter today.

Well, at least it'll wake me up.

Once it cools down, I'll just down it all in one go.

"I just want to go back to the old days when we'd hang out, wander around together, and sometimes spar for fun.

But everything's a mess now."

"I can spar with you."

"…You collapse in less than ten seconds."

"That's the problem, yeah."

I thought it was a decent attempt at humor, but she didn't laugh, so now it just feels awkward.

"Besides the librarian, none of the people we know have died — or gone missing, right?"

"Right."

"You look tired, though.

There aren't any classes, so you should get some rest.

If you don't get enough sleep, your skin will suffer."

"I sleep just fine, don't worry."

Isabel squinted at me with a slightly hazy look in her eyes.

Did I get dark circles under my eyes or something?

"You know my father's a war hero, right?"

Suddenly boasting about her family?

That's not like her.

She's never really brought this up before.

"He's a legend. They say he charged headfirst into battle and pierced through dozens of enemies at a time."

"Yeah, but he never talked about it when he got home.

He never once bragged.

Instead, he said, 'War is hell. Don't even think about going to a battlefield.'"

The cheerful, lively girl from earlier was gone.

Now she looked at me with the calm, stern face of someone conducting an interrogation.

Thankfully, this wasn't a conversation room.

And I wasn’t the one being interrogated.

"…So what are you trying to say?"

“He said it with a smile on his face, but his expression looked exactly like yours.”

I didn’t know how to respond.

So, I just plastered on a fake smile like always.

“Just thought I’d mention it!

Anyway, I should probably go see Theo. Thanks for the drink! See you later!”

Wait, I’m paying?

Fortunately, I remembered to bring my wallet.

Isabel… probably likes Theo.

Maybe.

I’m not entirely sure, but that’s the vibe I get.

What’s strange is that, despite her energy and forward personality, she never makes the first move.

She just hovers around, like she’s waiting for something.

Like she’s watching someone’s reaction.

When I first met her, she was a wild whirlwind of energy.

I remember thinking that the phrase “troublemaker” must have been invented just to describe her.

That’s why it’s kind of confusing now.

This doesn’t feel like the same person.

Maybe she saw something that changed her — like one of those corpses lying on the street.

Or maybe it’s my face that’s changed.

I haven’t looked in a mirror in a while, after all.

Should I start doing makeup again?

I took a sip of the coffee, but it still hadn't cooled down.

Maybe I should go check on Ethel.

As I picked up the cup of now-lukewarm coffee, I realized my right hand was trembling slightly.

When I got back to school, I decided not to go looking for Theo today.

My to-do list was already a mess, so taking a break for a day shouldn't be a big deal.

It's a bit of an excuse, but since I stuck Isabel with him, things would probably be less chaotic if I stayed away.

As I stepped into the conversation room, the damp underground air and the musty smell hit me.

It's a smell I'm painfully familiar with.

Before entering the room, I sat down on one of the chairs placed between the doors and waited for Marco.

I needed to ask him if he'd done everything I ordered.

About 15 minutes later, the iron door creaked open, and the smell of blood hit me in the face.

From inside, I could hear something — no, someone — mumbling, "Help me, help me…"

It was hard to tell if it was a person or a lump of meat.

I guess they hadn't gone too hard on him yet.

If he's still able to ask for help, that means he's still got some fight in him.

"Took you long enough."

"They just won't open their mouths, you know.

Do you have any orders for me, young lady?"

"Did you reattach the finger properly?"

"Yes. When I went in, she was sleeping with puffy eyes like she'd been crying."

So she probably thinks our little encounter was just a bad dream.

That's for the best.

If she flinched every time we saw each other at school, it'd get annoying.

Not that I’m in any position to complain about guilt.

“Did you put the bed and food in her room too?”

Marco nodded silently.

Then, as if something had suddenly occurred to him, he spoke.

“Oh, right. We already found that hidden room in the mansion you mentioned.”

“Seriously? If they couldn’t even find a hollow wall, I would’ve had them fired on the spot.”

“True enough.”

“Anyway, after the interview is over, we’re heading to the sorghum farm.

Prepare five competent interviewers for me.”

“Understood. What about weapons?”

“If they’re hiding, they’re probably unarmed.

A gun is enough to catch them.”

“Still, just in case, wouldn’t it be better to have a mage on hand?”

“They’ll just get hurt a little. It won’t be that serious.”

He didn’t reply.

“…Understood.”

I reached for the handle to the interview room’s door but paused as a thought came to me.

“Hey, Marco. You got any sweet snacks or something?”

“Just some sugary stuff. Want me to bring it?”

“Yeah, bring it.”

Marco brought me some cookies wrapped in paper.

I stuffed them into my pocket and pulled open the door.

Inside, Ethel was sound asleep, breathing softly.

If she keeps sleeping like this in the middle of the day, her internal clock is going to be all messed up.

I'll have to wake her up.

I activated the lights with a flick of magic, filling the room with a sharp, artificial glow.

Then I filled a water bottle and splashed the water onto Ethel.

Splutter! Cough, cough!

She coughed and gasped as she shot upright.

"…Why are you here?"

"Julius spilled everything.

Thanks to him, we're wrapping this whole thing up.

Once it's all settled, I'll let you out soon."

"You didn't come just to tell me that, did you?"

It hurts a little to have my sincere intentions dismissed like that.

I was honestly being pretty gentle with Ethel.

Unlike Julius, I hadn't said anything particularly cruel to her.

"Why, want me to lay you back down and splash more water on your face?

Playing water games with a friend doesn't sound too bad, does it?"

Ah… she wet herself.

Was she that scared?

I didn't want to make her feel ashamed, so I filled the bottle again and poured water on her.

The water ran down her face and body before draining into the floor.

"…Don't smile like that.

That's not how Ellen smiles."

Her voice trembled as she shivered from the cold.

"Was it?"

Well, no matter what happens, I'll still let Ethel and Julius go.

I’m not a psycho like Marco.

I won’t do anything like that.

There’s no real harm in letting them go.

But if I let them go too soon, I might miss out on catching any demons they might know about.

That’s why this is just "a little coercive conversation."

No one’s seriously hurt.

The demons in hiding will all be hunted down and killed.

There’s no problem.

There can’t be a problem.

All the problems come from those wretched demons.

Ah, I forgot to give her the cookies.

7

Chapter 7

I'm exhausted.

Not physically — mentally.

But it’s not as bad as it was before.

That suffocating sense of guilt didn’t rise up this time.

My heart just felt a little heavy, like an uncomfortable weight I could still carry.

It was as if all of this had never been a big deal to begin with.

And I hated that.

It felt like I had developed a new fear.

The fear of getting used to it.

The fear of becoming indifferent.

The first time you do something, it’s always a shock.

The first time I sat in a conversation room to "interview" a guest, or the first time I watched someone else do it, or the first time I witnessed a disposal — the shock of it didn’t fade for an entire week.

The second time, the same unease and trembling stuck around.

By the third time, I started getting used to it.

And after that… it was just routine.

That first "conversation" with Ethel had been a brutal shock.

After all, I’d never been assigned to handle someone I actually knew.

But now, even that feels mundane.

My head feels dizzy.

My hand is coated in crumbs from the cookies I was supposed to give to Ethel.

They were crushed to bits, probably when I pulled them out of my pocket.

My fingers felt sticky, so I shook them off.

That’s when Marco, with his usual nonchalance, struck up a conversation.

I had cookie crumbs on my hands, but Marco’s hands were covered in something red.

"Looks like I’m the one who’ll have to clean that up in the end, huh?"

Is today's work already done?

Come to think of it, with my parents gone, Marco is the most skilled person left in the household.

He’s also the person who's had the most "conversations."

That’s why I decided to ask him something.

A question I probably shouldn’t ask.

"Hey, Marco, are you ever scared?"

Marco knew exactly what I meant, but he still gave me that "I-don’t-want-to-talk-about-this" look and tried to dodge the question.

“...Without context, that’s a hard question to answer, young lady.”

“Conversations, disposals, all that.”

The air grew quiet for a moment.

Marco scratched his chin, thinking it over.

"Yeah, I get scared."

"Then how do you do it so easily, like it's nothing?"

"Are you accusing me of being heartless, young lady?"

"No, I’m just curious.

Here I am, a pathetic girl trembling just because I splashed a little water on my friend’s face."

"Young lady, how long have you been doing these ‘conversations’?"

"Since I was fifteen, so… two years."

"Stick it out until you’re thirty, and you’ll be numb as stone.

That’s how it was for me.

Some people adapt in a day, though. There was this one guy who got used to it on his first day."

Marco casually pulled a cigarette from his coat and lit it.

Knowing that I used to smoke too, he offered me one.

I shook my head.

"Look at the world, young lady.

How many people out there just refuse to be reasoned with?

There are still mages out there using human sacrifices for magic.

There are those filthy half-demons who eat human flesh.

And recently, demons have been setting off bombs and causing chaos in the streets."

His face, which had been smiling as usual, settled into a cold, expressionless mask.

"Not all of them are like that, sure.

But the ones who get dragged in here? They're always the bad ones.

If you don't believe that, you won't last long in this line of work."

"Yeah, but how do you believe that?"

"You already know the answer, young lady.

You know there are demons out there who are perfectly normal.

If every demon on this continent went wild at once, we'd have ten times the number of dead bodies we do now.

But despite knowing that, you still treat every single demon like they're…"

"Shut up. I get it."

Marco shrugged, flashing me a look that could only be described as smug.

"Just following orders, young lady."

I wanted to call him a bastard, but I held my tongue.

The question I asked had crossed the line to begin with.

So all I did was glare at him.

“I’m heading to the sorghum farm.”

“Take care, young lady.

Oh, by the way, there was no one under the church.”

“…And how do you know that?”

Marco didn’t answer.

“The family head heard about your work, young lady, and sent someone to investigate.

He also assigned a mage to accompany you to the sorghum farm.”

I had only mentioned wanting to send a person, but it turns out they even went to the underground crypt beneath the church.

It’s not a bad thing since it saves me some effort, but still.

I would’ve preferred to check it out myself, just for peace of mind.

"Well, that’s considerate of him."

***

When I walked out of the basement, my subordinates were already waiting for me inside the building.

They must’ve come all the way in since there weren’t any students around.

“The sun hasn’t even set yet.

And this isn’t even the meeting spot.”

“The family head was concerned, so he told us to head over early.”

“What’s there to be concerned about?

If you get caught sneaking around, that’s when it becomes a problem.”

“…Didn’t think of that.”

This is why I hate working with guys from the front lines.

They follow orders like they’re battering rams with no brain to think for themselves.

My brother seems to like them that way, though.

"Five men sitting around in a café with one girl is just embarrassing.

Since you’re here, let’s head out now."

I went back down to the basement and changed my clothes.

Wearing a white school uniform draws way too much attention.

Instead, I put on a dull brown dress — the kind a girl from a modest but respectable household might wear — and tied my hair back with a ribbon.

I tucked a mask into my coat.

It’s too conspicuous to wear it on the street, but I’ll have it ready.

The mask had a crow design painted on it.

Just like Julius knows my face, Ethel’s parents probably know my face too.

I can only hope they don’t recognize my voice.

If they realize it’s me, they’ll start whining about their sob stories, begging me to show mercy.

It’d be better if they surrendered quietly when we found them.

Of course, any demons they’re sheltering will be handed over immediately.

If we search both locations and find nothing, that’s not too bad either.

I’ll just erase the whole ordeal from my memory and move on like nothing happened.

There will always be more demons to hunt.

I led the group as we walked, letting my mind wander.

At some point, the sun set, and we were surrounded by the vast expanse of farmland.

I pulled the mask out of my coat, put it on, and asked my subordinates a question.

"Think anyone we know would recognize me like this?"

“…Are we heading to someone you know, young lady?”

“Yeah, it’s a friend’s parents.

So, what’s it to you?”

“They won’t recognize you.

At least, I hope they won’t.”

“Good.”

There were no demons working in the sorghum fields, just a sea of withered stalks.

The labor force to harvest them was gone, and even the burned parts of the field were left untouched.

Off in the distance, a small house stood at the edge of the fields.

That’s probably where the entrance to the underground tunnel is.

"Anyone here been to the church basement?"

The mage raised his hand.

“Marco said there was nothing down there, but did you notice anything unusual?”

“It was just a regular underground crypt.

Bones scattered all over, covered in dust.

Doesn’t look like anyone’s been down there in a long time.”

“Then let’s hope this is the spot.”

If not, everything I’ve done so far will have been for nothing.

I went through all that with Ethel — the crying, the shouting, even the water games — and if we don’t find anything, it’ll all be pointless.

A patch of wildflowers bloomed by the roadside, their yellow petals bright against the evening sky.

By the time we reached the little house, night had fully fallen.

I took a deep breath and pulled out my pistol.

There’s probably no one inside, but just in case.

In a confined space like this, long weapons like swords or rifles are more of a liability.

That’s why one of the subordinates who knew magic wasn’t carrying a long sword but a shorter one, about one meter in length.

Three others carried pistols like mine.

Even if their sword skills aren't as good as a mage’s magic, at least they can deflect arrows or bullets in a pinch.

That’s why I had one of them lead the charge.

We don’t need overwhelming force to drag people out of hiding.

Back in the day, people like him were called "knights."

But if you don’t ride a horse, how can you call yourself a knight?

"Just a swordsman," I muttered to myself.

I knocked on the door and spoke softly.

"Is anyone home?"

No response.

I stepped back, and the swordsman kicked the door in.

As expected, there was no one inside.

Now, we needed to find the entrance to the underground passage.

But there was no need for us to knock on the floors or scour the place inch by inch.

A single spell from the mage would reveal it in seconds.

Sure enough, the mage quietly muttered a spell, and moments later, he nodded and signaled to us with his eyes.

The swordsman swallowed hard, nodded back, and stomped on the spot.

CRACK!

The floorboards splintered with a loud, echoing snap.

From beneath the floor, we heard the faint, ragged sound of breathing.

They must think they’re being clever, holding their breath and hiding down there.

Pathetic.

We stepped onto the stairs and slowly descended into the underground chamber.

It was warm.

They must have just turned off the lights.

“Turn on the lights,” I said to the mage.

In an instant, the dark basement lit up.

They'd gone through a lot of effort.

The brick walls had been sealed tight.

A thick mat was spread across the floor.

Though covered with a sheet, I could see a pillow and a blanket crammed in the corner.

There were plates with fruit, potatoes, and corn scattered on a small table.

Until just moments ago, someone had been sitting here.

“Come on out.

We already know you’re here.

This is the Imperial Security Bureau.”

Silence.

I fired my pistol into the air.

The sharp crack of gunfire echoed through the cramped underground space.

The powder ignited, filling the air with smoke and the acrid smell of gunpowder.

If they weren’t scared before, they were now.

I scanned the surroundings.

There were tiny air holes drilled into the walls for ventilation, but none of them were large enough for a person to fit through.

No escape routes.

They couldn’t have run away.

“Rosenberg.

We know everything.

Your son was so moved by our sincerity that he told us everything.”

Still no answer.

This was the most dangerous moment.

Even a cornered rat will bite a cat when it has no way out.

If they’re a demon, they could burst out of nowhere.

They could pop out of the floor if they wanted to.

If I can see them, it’s not a problem.

But unseen threats are the worst.

“If you don’t come out right now, I’m going to fill this place with firewood and light it up.”

Finally, someone emerged.

“…Please, spare the children.”

8

Chapter 8

As I pulled the living out of the underground burrow, a thought crossed my mind.

I’m not some lunatic who enjoys tormenting others.

I don’t take pleasure in "coercive conversations."

If possible, I’d prefer to solve everything with a smile.

Of course, that doesn’t apply to anything involving demons.

I’m just a little angry.

Angry because I can’t understand why the person I loved most in this world had to die.

I mulled it over, turning it in my mind until I came up with an answer.

It’s because demons are hideous monsters.

That’s it.

Anyone who protects these monsters is a twisted devil in human skin.

If I didn’t believe that, I wouldn’t be able to accept any of this.

That’s why it’s so troubling that Count Rosenberg doesn’t look like a monster.

I know full well that this is just self-justification, arbitrary reasoning, and illogical nonsense.

But I cling to it anyway.

Because if I don’t, I’ll collapse.

I can’t stop now.

The moment I draped a cloth over Ethel’s face and poured water on her to flush out hidden demons, there was no turning back.

No matter how much I wish otherwise, I can’t return to laughing and playing with Ethel like we used to.

She flinches and wets herself just from hearing the word "water" now.

And that’s my fault.

I did that to her.

I shelved those nauseating thoughts for later.

I'll think about all that once every last demon in the Empire is gone.

For now, I had to deal with something far more surprising.

I hadn't expected to find this many living creatures hiding in that tiny underground burrow.

After Count Rosenberg crawled out, his wife followed — along with fourteen demons.

"…Quite a crowd you've got here," I muttered.

"They're just children.

They had nothing to do with the rebellion," the count said in a pleading tone.

If he started talking about how "the children are innocent," I'd blow his brains out on the spot.

I've seen it with my own eyes.

A "child" with horns on his head, gleefully using my subordinate's severed head as a soccer ball.

They're demons.

Born demons, raised as demons.

Whether they participated in the rebellion or not means nothing.

They just didn't get the chance to join in.

"That's something we'll sort out later.

There's no need to bind them.

Just follow along quietly."

I had expected maybe six people to be down here.

I never imagined there would be sixteen.

I glanced at my watch.

Dinner time had already passed.

I'll have fish for dinner tonight when I get home.

We marched up the stairs, and I lined them up in two rows.

At first, they kept breaking formation, so I fired a few warning shots near their feet.

After that, they marched like soldiers.

"It’d be nice if you all just followed orders while I’m still being kind," I said.

I walked next to Count Rosenberg, prodding him with small remarks to see if I could get anything more out of him.

You never know what someone might blurt out when they think their world is crumbling.

"Harvest season, huh?

This whole situation must be a real headache for you."

He didn’t rise to the bait.

Instead, he asked a question of his own.

“I don’t care about the harvest.

What happened to my son?”

Of course.

Sugar cane isn’t as precious as a son.

"He’s alive. Arms, legs, eyes, nose, mouth — all in one piece."

“…Thank the heavens.”

“Unfortunate about your daughter, though. She was killed by one of the demons she was trapped with. Real shame.”

Of course, Ethel isn’t dead.

I just said it.

People only open up when they’re pushed to the edge — when they think something precious to them might be lost forever.

I watched as the life drained from the count’s face.

His wife, meanwhile, flew into a rage.

Tears streamed down her face as she grabbed her husband by the collar and shook him, screaming at him.

"I told you! I told you we should have left! We didn't have to protect those demons! Were they more important to you than our daughter?!"

I placed a gentle hand on Count Rosenberg's shoulder and whispered.

"They weren't worth it, were they?

If you're hiding anything else, now's the time to speak up."

"…There's nothing else," he muttered.

"Well, that's a relief."

His hollow gaze didn't seem to be lying.

But still…

"Demons are everywhere, Count.

Why focus on us hiding down here…?"

"Because you're hiding," I said bluntly.

"Easy prey gets thrown to the angry mobs.

The ones that hide? We get them."

The count didn't resist, and neither did his wife.

The children followed in silence, as did the demons.

It was all so peaceful that it almost felt like the Rosenberg family could be a happy family again.

They were all still alive, after all.

That's enough, isn't it?

Julius only told me where his parents were hiding so he could protect his family — to protect his sister.

I'm sure he'll understand.

Parents should respect their child's choices.

They shouldn't lock them up and whip them like my parents did.

I pressed down on the crow-marked mask, making sure it wouldn't slip off.

It started to rain.

Unfortunately, I hadn't brought an umbrella.

The rain soaked my dress, making it cling tightly to my body.

It was uncomfortable.

Embarrassing, even.

"Why did you bother hiding them in the first place?" I asked.

"Because people would've killed them the moment they saw them!"

"Well, they're demons. Of course people would."

"They worked on my land!

They tilled the soil and helped with the harvest!

I've known them since they were children.

Would you abandon someone you grew up with like that?"

The middle-aged man spoke passionately, his voice growing louder with each word.

I listened half-heartedly.

"'Someone' refers to a person, Count. No matter how loyal or hardworking a beast may be, if it bites, you put it down."

"…Bite, you say?"

Yeah, he wasn't hiding anyone else.

If he were, his reaction would have been a little more… defensive.

We continued to walk for a while, passing through the sorghum fields.

Then, perhaps realizing what would happen if they continued to cooperate, two demons — likely the parents of the smaller ones — made their move.

Each of them clutched a child in their arms, and with feral desperation, one of them tore out the throat of one of my subordinates.

Then they ran.

I inhaled deeply and steadied my aim.

With one eye closed, I took my shot.

Bang!

The first shot missed.

I clenched my shaky right hand with my left, steadying it.

Then I pulled the trigger again.

The bullet pierced the head of the father demon.

Unfortunate.

I hadn’t intended to kill him.

The other shots missed.

This is why pistols are so unreliable.

Once the target moves far enough away, they’re impossible to hit.

Even so, the mother demon stopped running.

She sat beside the body of the father demon, still holding her child tightly.

At least she didn’t try to run any further.

She wouldn’t have made it anyway.

If the sorghum fields had leaves, maybe she could have hidden, but the fields were barren.

We could see everything.

Even if I missed, the mage would have caught them in no time.

"Count Rosenberg, one of my men just died because of you.

What do you propose I do about that?"

The count closed his eyes tightly, refusing to answer.

One of my subordinates gently closed the eyes of his fallen comrade.

We wouldn’t be able to carry the body back with us.

We’d have to send someone later to retrieve it.

Was I careless? Or just exhausted?

There was no stench of blood in the air.

Only the wet, earthy smell of rain and soil.

"Drag them in.

If they resist, shoot them."

"Understood."

I stood there in the rain, staring at the body of the fallen subordinate for a long time.

Maybe it was the gloomy weather.

Maybe it was the rain soaking me to the bone.

Count Rosenberg muttered quietly, barely loud enough for me to hear.

“…Even if they resist…

Please, just… spare the child.”

I turned to look at him.

Is this man eating his years with his backside?

I stepped forward and slammed the handle of my gun into his jaw.

Crack!

Several of his teeth scattered onto the ground.

He deserved it.

"One of my men just died. Why should I care about the life of some filthy beast?"

Just then, the demons — the mother and child — were dragged back to us.

“Monster! You murderous monster! You’ll burn in hell for this, you—”

She was speaking clearly.

Not growling.

Not hissing.

Her words were clear, like a person’s.

Too clear.

I pressed the barrel of the gun against her forehead.

She kept struggling, shouting at me, cursing me.

I pulled the trigger.

Her body went limp, like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

I pressed the barrel of my gun against the child demon’s temple.

"Ugh, this is exhausting," I muttered.

I hesitated for a long moment, the count’s plea echoing in my mind.

In the end, I lowered the gun.

The little demon glared at me with seething hatred, his tear-streaked face twisted with rage.

"You’ll regret this! I’ll find you! I’ll rip you to shreds, you hear me?! I’LL KILL YOU!"

How adorable.

I’m wearing a mask, and this brat thinks he’ll somehow find me.

Even if he did, what could he do?

This is why demons are hopeless.

Just because I killed his parents, he’s screaming about revenge.

I didn’t see him shouting like this when my little sister died.

And his parents killed one of my men.

But sure, he’s the victim here.

My mood soured, and I fell into a sullen silence.

One of my subordinates muttered a complaint.

"Next time, give us a warning before you start shooting, young lady.

You scared the hell out of me.

Anyway, what should we do with this mess?"

"Sorry. Dump the body by the roadside."

"Got it.

And what about the kid?

He’s over there yapping about ripping you apart and whatnot.

Want me to literally tear his mouth open?"

"Leave him. The count begged us to spare the kid."

Capturing demons doesn’t always mean killing them.

There are other ways to "dispose" of them.

We left the sorghum fields and trudged along the dirt road.

Our carriage was waiting for us up ahead.

Now all that’s left is to load them up and move them.

After knocking them out, of course.

The method is simple:

A firm blow to the back of the head with something hard.

If one of them dies, well… that’s just an unfortunate accident.

I’d originally thought there’d only be six people to transport — maybe ten, at most.

Turns out, there were more than I’d planned for.

It looked like a hassle, but it wasn’t my problem.

Moving them was the subordinates’ job, not mine.

"Where should we take them?"

"Take the demons to the mansion’s conversation room.

Take the count to the academy’s conversation room."

"Understood.

We'll head there first, young lady."

I checked my watch. It was midnight.

If I went home now, I'd arrive in the early hours of the morning.

Getting up tomorrow would be a pain.

When I'm this exhausted, it's tempting to just use a teleportation scroll to warp straight home.

But I hate that method.

It's much more comfortable to ride a carriage driven by someone else.

I should have just ridden with them.

Then again, the carriage would have been cramped with all those bodies.

After trudging back home, I cleaned myself up and collapsed into bed.

The warmth of the sun woke me up.

I blinked a few times, letting the sunlight fill my vision.

Then, like it was any other day, I got dressed and headed for the academy.

As if nothing had happened.

9

Chapter 9

After arriving at school, I unpacked my things in the empty classroom, exchanged a brief greeting with Theo, and then moved to the conference room.

When I told the Count and Countess that their daughter was actually alive, their son was unharmed, and that they would both be released soon, they absolutely refused to believe it.

When I mentioned that they would be sent back to the mansion in a few days, they fell to their knees and begged me not to kill them. It was honestly a bit embarrassing.

Unless it’s a demon, we don’t kill people so easily.

Anyway, the demons who dragged them away must have locked them up safely in the livestock pen.

Once I’ve captured them, my work is done.

I heaved open the heavy iron door with a grunt and stepped into the room where Julius was being held.

He was lying comfortably on a bed, nibbling on a snack while reading a book.

At first, I’d thrown him into a barren solitary cell with nothing, but then I slowly improved his treatment. It’s far more effective than treating him well from the start.

"One day, or was it two days?" he asked with a slightly tense expression.

Was it because of the threat I’d made to him last time?

I don’t resort to such barbaric acts, but to think he’d taken it so seriously.

"Thanks to selling out your parents, you’re alive, your parents are alive, and your little sister is alive too. Smart choice. How could the value of blood relatives ever be the same as that of demons?"

"…So, you captured them all in the end."

"Of course, they’re all caught."

"Would you tell me how my parents are doing?"

"Other than your father losing a couple of teeth, they’re both in good health."

"…I see. So you saved the family by handing over the children."

"Children? Your family’s humans really have a strange way of thinking.

Anyway, I’ll be letting them go in a few days.

The official story is that while you were searching for your missing parents, you collapsed at a cottage on a sorghum farm."

"That doesn't sound like a very convincing excuse."

"It’s the official story, so who cares? Just don’t go around blabbing about it.

If you do, one of my subordinates might bring you back and pull out your tongue."

"…I’ll keep that in mind," he said, his face a mix of bitterness and relief.

Since I wasn’t the one directly handling the interrogation, I didn’t feel much guilt even while looking at Julius's face.

"You're not hiding anything else, are you?"

"No, I’m not."

"Congratulations on making it through this whole thing with all your limbs intact and not a single scar. Let’s never see each other again once you're out of here."

With that, I grunted as I shut the door once more.

Next, I had to go speak with Ethel.

I really didn’t want to. Just thinking about seeing her face or talking to her drained me.

How am I supposed to face her every day like this?

Ugh, maybe I should just drop out of school.

Since my parents, who sent me to this place, are dead, I suppose it wouldn't really matter.

Regardless, I entered Ethel’s room and greeted her.

"Ethel, it’s been a while."

When I entered the conference room, Ethel was seated there, draped in the kind of pure white cloth that counselors usually wear.

Not that it made a difference since the lights were off, and it wasn’t like there was anything to do.

"Ellen, what now…?"

"I came to tell you that I’m letting you go."

Normally, when people hear that kind of news, their faces brighten, and they start bowing and thanking me profusely, but Ethel only raised an eyebrow slightly.

"…Letting me go, you say?"

"Do you have a problem with that?

You’ll be released soon anyway, so I’ll answer most of your questions if you have any."

At those words, Ethel sneered and shot me a sharp glare.

"Looks like your big demon-hunting operation went well, huh?"

"Yeah, it went smoothly. They were hiding underground on your family’s farm like maggots."

"…So you locked me up and tormented me just to catch the people who used to work for my family?"

"People? No, they were demons that had to be captured, of course."

"You see a few horns and a bad temper, and you immediately think they’re demons, huh?"

I felt a bit caught off guard.

Up until now, Ethel had been acting like she didn’t know anything, like she didn’t even understand why she was here. But that version of her was nowhere to be seen now.

"You knew, huh."

She’d been feigning ignorance, playing the innocent.

Not that it was surprising.

To figure out something like this, you’d have to have a long, drawn-out conversation, bit by bit.

If I’d done that, maybe I would’ve been the one who broke down first.

"Of course I knew. I’d have to be an idiot not to.

Ellen, you’re completely insane. You’re nothing but a lunatic," Ethel said, her voice quivering as she began to cry.

Crying wasn’t going to help in a situation like this, though.

"Lunatics are your family, not me.

What were you even thinking when you decided to hide those guys?

If you'd just confessed everything, you'd have been released immediately."

It's not like labor is irreplaceable.

"Confess to what, you crazy wench.

If someone like you, a raving lunatic threatening to kill all the kids playing on the farm, came to me, would you honestly expect me to tell you anything?"

"Kids," huh. She sure talks as if they were people.

Honestly, with this many people around who just don't see things my way, it's exhausting.

"Ethel, I haven't released you just yet, so maybe you should watch your mouth a little," I said softly in a quiet, gentle tone, and her words were free of curses this time.

"…Even demons wouldn't do something as twisted as kidnapping a friend and using them to hunt down humans.

The students who went missing from the academy—aren't they all in your basement right now, Ellen?"

I was about to say something but stopped when the image of the librarian sister suddenly came to mind.

Seeing that, Ethel seemed to gain confidence and resumed speaking.

"Did you ever think of me, the kids, or Theo as friends while attending the academy with us?

I… haah… I trusted you.

You laughed and joked with us on the surface, but behind our backs, you were thinking about locking us up in this basement all along, weren't you?"

It wasn't about locking them up. It was about monitoring, observing, and recording persons of interest.

At least, it had been—until all of this happened.

"…I did think of you as a friend. I'm not sure anymore, though."

Seeing me hesitate slightly, Ethel finally brought up the heart of the matter.

"If we're still friends, at least spare the kids you caught this time."

"That's not possible."

"Why not!?

Those kids weren’t even in the city that night—they were just working on the family farm!

They’re the ones I grew up with since we were little… So please, I’m begging you."

"That doesn’t matter.

The only thing that matters is that they’re demons."

"You really are insane."

"As long as my sister doesn’t come back to life, there won’t be a single demon left alive in this empire.

Even if they exist, I’ll track them all down and kill them."

I stepped right up to Ethel, jabbing my index finger in front of her face and spitting out my words.

I have no idea how I look right now.

The prophets, who once spoke of reforming demons through labor after capturing them, had said:

—"As long as they remain demons, they have no right to live among us."

Honestly, it was far too generous a policy.

Letting them work on farms, eat, and even have children was far too merciful.

They were even allowed to beg on the streets or do manual labor in the city.

Even dogs and cats understand gratitude, yet here we were, showing mercy to ungrateful beasts.

It was excessive.

Eventually, the Empire and the enraged people proposed the final solution to the demon problem.

—"Demons have no right to live."

"Ethel, your whole family is still alive, aren't they?

Your brother, your parents—they’re all alive.

How is a person supposed to stay sane?

The one person I thought gave meaning to my existence in this world died, you know?"

So why am I not smoking, drinking, or taking drugs?

Why am I not even crying?

Why am I still alive, without tying a noose around my neck and ending it all…?

Why do I play these stupid little games every day, pretending like it’s just another task on my to-do list?

Alicia wasn’t some “heroine” or “character” in a story.

She was Ellen’s precious, cute little sister, born into this world.

I didn’t need to "grow closer" to her or "try to get along" with her.

She was a child I could love unconditionally from the start.

"…Stop making excuses. In that case, you could’ve just killed the ones who caused the disturbance back then.

But you’re going to kill kids who had nothing to do with it too, aren’t you? You’re nothing but a deranged murderer."

"You keep talking about killing, but who said I was going to kill them all?

I’m just going to carve a spell into their necks so that if they resist even a little, they’ll explode in an instant."

The mages have been having a rough time lately because of this.

That’s why the grand head of the house was so surprised when they sent a magician.

Half of them end up dying during the process, but that’s only because they resist.

If they’d just sat still and accepted the procedure quietly, none of that would’ve happened.

"If only Alicia were still alive, I wouldn’t care about demons or whatever.

But that’s not how it is, is it?

Just don’t get in my way."

"In that case, maybe you shouldn’t let me out of here.

If you do, I’ll run straight to Theo and tell him exactly what kind of person you are."

Was that supposed to be a threat?

"Then, at least the way he looks at you might change a little…"

I cut off her clumsy threat mid-sentence.

"Go ahead."

"Huh?"

"Do it. Tell him.

Then I'll lock you up here again, along with Theo and anyone else who hears the story."

"…What are you even talking about?"

I don't care.

Let her tell him, or don't.

Let her get caught, or don't.

"Ethel, your fingers and toes are all still intact.

Your arms and legs are all perfectly fine, too.

You don't even have a single scar on you.

I'm treating you like a friend, you know. You should be grateful."

I pulled out a pistol from my coat and poked at the parts I'd just mentioned with the muzzle.

"But next time, what do you think will happen?

How do you think I'll treat Theo? Or Isabel? Or Lea?

I guarantee it won't be as gentlemanly as it was this time."

Ethel seemed to be afraid of the gun, so I put it back into my coat.

Then, I wrapped my arms around her and whispered softly into her ear.

"Ethel, you didn't see anything. You didn't hear anything.

I didn't say a word, did I? Now, nod your head."

Tears streaming down her face, Ethel nodded.

"Even after you leave this place, we’re still good friends, right?"

This time, she nodded again.

Her whole body was trembling, though.

I felt a little guilty.

"…Heh, good girl."

Out of sheer spite, I flicked her on the lips like a playful punishment.

10

Chapter 10

After finishing my conversation with Ethel, I returned to the classroom and found Isabel lying on a makeshift bed she'd built out of desks.

"Oh, Ellen? You weren’t around this morning—where did you go?"

"I just went for a walk to get some fresh air."

"By the way, you seem especially tired today. Don’t tell me… did you get yourself a boyfriend or something?"

I had assumed Isabel wouldn’t be attending the academy until classes resumed, but she’s been coming every single day.

It’s a bit of a problem.

Normally, I’d just leave it to the other friends to deal with, but right now, I don’t have that option.

"…It’s just, a lot’s been going on."

"Is it something you can’t tell me about?"

She leaned in, closing the distance between us, as if trying to pry into my secrets.

"It’s because my parents passed away. It’s been tough."

"…When you say that, it makes me feel like I’m the bad guy for asking."

Even when I gave her a difficult answer like that, she didn’t seem to have any intention of backing off.

"I’m just kidding. I figured you wouldn’t be coming to school until classes resumed, but here you are every day. It’s a little surprising."

"I was worried about you."

That’s not good.

She should be worried about something—or someone—else.

I’m used to being the one leading conversations, but it’s been a long time since I’ve let someone else take control like this.

"Hearing something like that makes me want to fall for you."

"Anyway, want to go see Theo?"

"He’s probably training right now. We shouldn’t interrupt him…"

"Training? More like flirting with some demon girl."

"Ah, that must be that thing he picked up and started raising."

Theo treats demons and humans with the same kindness and righteousness.

It wouldn’t be surprising if she’s already fallen for him.

She’s half-human, so there’s no need to get rid of her, and I suppose it’s fine to leave her be.

"‘Raising’ her? You’re talking about a person like she’s livestock."

Ah, right.

This is the academy.

To the world, Ellen is just a normal, frail-looking girl.

Not a counselor who "lightly disposes" of disobedient demons and trains them for re-entry into plantations.

Lately, I’ve been going out too often at night to capture demons, dispose of them, and have conversations with the antisocial guests who hide them.

I’d almost forgotten.

Or maybe this is because I just finished facing Ethel.

I’m not really sure.

Now that I think about it, I lost my composure in front of Theo the other day too.

In moments like this, the best course of action is to blush, act embarrassed, and twist my body like an innocent girl.

If I do that, they’ll believe me without question.

"Ah, um, I was just reading a novel earlier, and it had that kind of story in it."

"Oh… So, it was one of those novels, huh?"

"You really don’t need to bring it up like that."

"Anyway, I’ve been so sluggish lately since I haven’t moved around properly for a while."

"How about a sparring match for old times' sake?"

"Uh, o-okay."

***

When I went with Isabel to the training grounds, I saw the "half-wit" we rescued last time, watching as Theo trained his body.

Every now and then, she'd casually touch his arm muscles.

Maybe they're already dating.

If he really does start dating that girl, how would the story play out?

If it's going to be about saving oppressed demons… I don't even want to think about it.

How many people would I have to send after Theo to capture him?

He's already one of the top-ranked fighters at the academy, so killing him would be no easy feat.

Should I invite him to the mansion and dispose of him there?

As I frowned and stared at Theo, Isabel spoke up in a loud, excited voice.

"Look at her, isn't she super pretty?

She might just steal Theo away from us at this rate!"

She nudged me with her elbow as she spoke.

Seems like Isabel likes Theo.

Not that I have any intention of helping her.

Besides, no matter how "pretty" a pet is, it's still a step below a human.

Unless, of course, the person in question is a depraved beast-lover.

I suppose I could throw a few encouraging words her way just for fun.

"Then you should try to get even closer to Theo than that pretty thing.

Why don't you just snatch him up for yourself? Beat her to it, and it's all yours."

"Y-you think I could? It'd be okay for me to get that close to Theo too, right…?"

I shrugged.

"Why are you asking me? Do whatever you want."

Meanwhile, the half-wit sidled up even closer to Theo.

She slipped her arm through his and pressed herself against him.

Disgusting.

No, no.

It doesn't matter to me who gets involved with pets or how they do it.

My job is to capture and punish demons, not to go after insane humans engaging in unspeakable acts with beasts.

Anyway, after hearing what I said, Isabel called out in a loud voice, "Theo!" and ran toward him like she was throwing herself at him.

For some reason, after talking for a bit, the two of them suddenly started sparring.

Is that how they communicate? With their bodies?

Theo fought with a weapon in hand, but for some reason, the two of them were engaged in a fistfight.

Or maybe they were practicing some sort of martial art.

I wasn't particularly interested in their fight.

Anyway, I sat down in a suitable spot inside the training ground and watched them from a distance. That's when Theo's pet spoke to me.

"You're the one who saved me last time, right? Thank you for that."

I didn't expect her to start talking to me first.

"Hm, if you're grateful, just keep your mouth shut. Getting a thank-you from a demon is just disgusting."

Her face twisted with mild irritation, and she barked back.

"Ah, um… I just wanted to say thank you, that's all…"

"I said I don't need it."

"Did I do something wrong to you?"

"Yeah."

"…I don’t remember doing anything, though."

"You’re still breathing, aren’t you? If you’re so clueless, go hang yourself right now, or get lost, you filthy whore."

Her lips quivered, and she bit down on them, clearly furious.

If I cut off those horns sticking out of her head, she might look a little cute.

Neither Isabel nor Theo was in sight anymore.

"Calling a succubus a ‘whore’ is a serious insult, you know."

"You’re not even a succubus. You’re not human, either.

Wherever you go, you’ll be rejected.

You have no use in this world beyond spreading your legs, so why don’t you quit talking so much?"

Grind, grind.

It’s been a while since I’ve heard the sound of teeth grinding like that.

Is that just a trait of demons?

The ones leading their little band of thieves last time also ground their teeth like crazy when I cursed them out.

"…For someone who looks so innocent, you sure have a foul mouth."

"And for a pet that’s been locked up by its master, you have a surprisingly refined way of speaking. Didn’t your mother teach you the kind of words prostitutes use?"

"She’s dead. Your humans beat her to death on the street. After that, my father completely broke down."

"Sounds like things worked out nicely for you."

"I hope your whole family died that day too—"

I drew my pistol from my coat with my right hand and grabbed her throat with my left as I lunged at her.

Her head hit the ground, but she’d be fine—she’s sturdy, after all.

Probably.

I slammed her face with the grip of the pistol and let out a deep sigh.

I really need to get this temper under control.

With the muzzle pressed against her forehead, I felt a sudden urge to pull the trigger and shut this filthy beast's mouth for good.

But then I remembered—this isn't the conference room.

This is the academy.

"What's wrong? Are you actually going to shoot me?"

This sly demon knew all too well that I wouldn't shoot her.

"Who knows? Even if I did, it wouldn't be a problem for me."

"My father is a Count—ugh!"

I shoved the muzzle of the pistol into her mouth.

It looked almost fitting, like she was sucking on something she was well-practiced at.

"I don't care if your father is a Count or a Marquis.

It doesn't matter.

I'm not scared of him, and even if I killed him, there'd be no consequences for me.

So why don't you take this opportunity to learn to keep your mouth shut?

If you so much as tell Theo, I'll have my men carve up your father first."

Of course, it would be a real pain if she actually did tell him.

Even when surrounded by people with a noose around her neck, she barely showed a reaction.

But the feeling of cold metal pressing against the back of her throat must have been a first for her, as she coughed and gagged violently.

When I finally pulled the muzzle out of her mouth, she gasped for air, her senses seemingly returning.

"Gathering up anyone even remotely connected to demons into one place, are you…?"

"Shut up. What are you going to do about it if you know?"

I’m irritated.

Something about this is bothering me.

And, as expected, Theo and Isabel walked into the building.

Good thing I’d pulled the gun out of her mouth in time.

That was close.

As always, I have a sharp sense for these things.

Maybe I’ve got a Spider-Man-like sixth sense or something.

Theo and Isabel approached, looking a bit awkward, like they’d been doing something behind the building.

"Ah, um, d-did you two have a little chat while we were sparring?"

"Just a light conversation. But why are you stuttering all of a sudden, senior?"

"Ah, I was just sparring with Isabel for the first time in a while, so… it’s a bit, y’know, different."

Did they hook up or something?

Why is he being so awkward with his words?

And with Isabel’s face a little flushed, it’s possible they just kissed or something.

"By the way, Theo, Isabel.

I’m thinking of staying home until classes resume.

I think I’ve caught a cold or something—I’ve been feeling really tired lately."

"Ah, if you’re sick, you should rest! Right, Theo?"

"Y-yeah, yeah."

Why are they both stuttering like this?

Their faces are a little red, too.

They’re probably planning to do something as soon as I leave.

Not that it has anything to do with me.

If it were the old me, I might have found it a little amusing.

Love stories are either beautiful or scandalous—either way, they’re entertaining.

Before heading back to the mansion, I took a detour to the slums.

If I hunt a few demons, I’ll be able to sleep peacefully without tossing and turning.

Just a few catches, then I’ll head to the underground conference room and relieve some stress.

I felt a presence behind me, but I was too lost in thought to pay it any attention.

11

Chapter 11

There’s a large livestock pen in the basement of the mansion.

Although the creatures inside resemble humans to some extent, it’s still a livestock pen.

To be honest, it’s a bit of a stretch to call it the basement of the mansion, considering how far it is from the main building.

But since it only takes about ten minutes to walk there, calling it the mansion’s basement shouldn’t be too much of a problem.

After all, it’d be unpleasant to think of them as living under the same roof as us.

To calm my nerves after the unpleasant encounter with that half-wit earlier, I began heading toward the basement.

The mage who had accompanied me to the sorghum farm last time was there, busy engraving spells onto the livestock.

— "You lunatics!! Let us go!!"

— "Mom, how much longer do we have to stay here? I’m hungry."

— "Please return my son! We were inside our house that night, I swear!"

— "Filthy human scum, as soon as I get out of here, I’ll lead my comrades and—"

"Drag out the one who just called us filthy humans."

"Yes, ma’am."

One of my subordinates, wielding a menacing iron club, yanked out the impudent demon who had been running his mouth.

Several of his kin—maybe family or friends—tried to shield him, but they were struck down by the club and crumpled to the ground.

If they had been human, their skulls would have burst open without a doubt. That’s how strong the blows were. These monsters really are something else.

My subordinate dragged the demon over and forced him to kneel before me.

He looked like he had just barely become an adult.

He was probably feeling confident in his own strength, which likely made his sense of self stubborn as well.

"What were you trying to say? Finish it."

Instead of answering, he sneered at me mockingly.

"Looks like this mansion is so short on workers that they're even dragging in little kids to do the job."

There's no way he mistook me for a subordinate.

"I'm not being used. I'm the one doing the using.

Of course, I wouldn't expect someone as stupid as you to understand that concept."

Ptuh.

It wasn't me who spat.

Instead, I got hit.

I wiped my face with the damp, white towel handed to me by one of my subordinates. The stain was so red it was hard to tell if it was really spit or blood.

We're supposed to treat the captives as gently as possible.

Judging by this one's nasty temper, that's going to be a tough order to follow.

Still, for now, I took the iron club from my subordinate and brought it down on the demon's left knee.

The club was so heavy that, even without much force, his knee was completely pulverized.

"Ugh... You accursed wretches.

That night, urgh… It wasn't just our people. The human vagrants were burning down buildings all over the place. Yet there wasn't a single human in sight here!"

What a stubborn one.

"Livestock go in pens. People go in prisons."

"You sure talk like a real piece of trash."

With a mouth like that, he must have committed some kind of crime.

There's no way he didn't.

If they’re not being supervised by a master, demons live by stealing, robbing, and killing.

If someone asked me what’s dirty, vile, repulsive, and evil, I’d say demons without hesitation.

It’s no wonder our ancestors called them "the kin of demons."

They wouldn’t have come up with that name just because they have horns and tails.

Ignoring the demon’s retort, I turned to my subordinate instead.

"Didn’t I say to execute all the ones who were active that night?"

"…He was in prison, so I think they just watched him from behind the bars."

The prison was half-burned down, yet he’s still alive.

This guy’s pretty lucky.

"Ah, is that so? Why was he locked up in the first place?"

"The prison records were all burned, and he’s refusing to talk."

"Then just dispose of him."

"Marco said to leave the decision to you, my lady…"

"Well, if that’s the case… How should I handle it?"

The demon, apparently annoyed that we were discussing his fate without him, opened his mouth without any sense of discretion.

"One day, we’ll reclaim our freedom.

If you nobles keep oppressing us like this, there’s no guarantee something like that night won’t happen again."

So, he’s at least a little educated, huh?

"Ah, is that so."

I suddenly felt a shift in the air.

Countless demons were staring at me.

It seemed this one was some sort of leader among them.

Maybe he’d been a well-known bandit before all the chaos broke loose.

I don’t get it, but demons are technically allowed to attend the Academy, so it’s possible he graduated from there.

Not that it matters. No matter how much they study, the males end up as bandits, murderers, and marauders, while the females become thieves or prostitutes.

Why do we even bother to educate them?

"How long do you think you’ll be able to treat us like livestock?

You nobles once looked at farmers like livestock too, but now you call them commoners and treat them like people.

Someday… someday, we’ll be free too."

"Did you graduate from the Academy?"

"Yeah."

"Then tell me what you want. I’ll grant it."

"…If you think I’d believe you just because you say that, you’re dead wrong."

"When someone offers you a chance, you’re supposed to be grateful and ask for what you need."

If there’s a leader in a group, it becomes much easier to control them.

These idiots are so dependent on their leader that if he ordered them to jump off a cliff, they’d probably do it without question.

If the strange beast kneeling in front of me were to suddenly tell them to riot, they’d most likely follow along, even if it seemed hopeless.

That would be a real hassle.

It’s more expensive to kill them than to keep them alive.

If they’re alive, I can make them walk on their own two feet to some mine or farm and lock them up there. But if they’re dead, I have to clean up, burn the corpses, transport them, and bury them…

"…At the very least, we need a space where everyone can lie down, enough food, a place to wash, and a change of clothes."

"You sure want a lot. I’ll give you food and clothes."

Of course, the food will be rotting scraps, and the clothes will be nothing more than filthy rags.

Still, it’s better than nothing. They’re probably on the verge of starving to death right now.

I deliberately gave the order to distribute the food that way.

It’s something that should have been done anyway, but if it looks like I’m the one improving their conditions, they’ll be more obedient.

If not, well, I’ll just have to dispose of them.

"But there’s a condition."

"Let’s hear it."

"Do you think you have the right to refuse? Just shut up and listen."

"…You really have a foul way of talking."

"You seem like the type to run away…"

I raised the iron club in my hand and struck his remaining good knee.

His body was so sturdy that, rather than his knee breaking, the club bounced back.

The shock made my wrist tingle.

"Is it alright if I tenderize your legs a bit?

If I do that, at least the demons here will get food and clean clothes."

"…If it’s just my legs, then do what you want."

As I continued striking his legs with the club, the demons behind the iron bars began to make a commotion.

Some spat at me, while others hurled curses.

Then I heard someone start cursing my family.

As if the situation wasn’t exhausting enough, hearing that kind of insult made me feel even more drained.

I tossed the club aside and leaned back in a chair behind me to catch my breath.

"Bring me some water."

One of my subordinates asked the mage for a cool glass of water and brought it to me.

After quenching my thirst, I gave my next order.

"Separate the ones who just caused a ruckus and throw them in the incinerator."

"Should we kill them first? Or toss them in alive?"

"Why are you asking the obvious? If you kill them here, we'll just have more mess to clean up."

As I continued smashing the man's mangled legs, he let out only shallow, ragged breaths. He didn't scream.

In contrast, distant screams echoed from the incinerator.

The voices were loud—loud enough for me to hear them begging for mercy and promising never to do it again.

That's the fate that suits those kinds of creatures.

They have the nerve to bare their fangs at humans.

"…Do you really see us as livestock or beasts?"

The man's voice trembled as he spoke.

"Or should I call you something grander, like a demon?"

"Answer the question. Do you truly see me as livestock or a beast?

Look at me. I wore a school uniform just like you. I lived like a proper person. Do I really look like an animal to you?"

"Of course you do!"

"…I can't understand how you can be so sure."

"Does a cat stop being a cat just because it can talk?

If a dog can understand human speech and even learn to write, does that make it any less of a dog?

It's just an unusual cat. Or a dog that's so smart, it's unsettling. That's all."

Up until now, the man had kept a blank face, never screaming, not even when his legs were being crushed.

But now, his face had gone pale.

Was it fear?

I wasn't sure.

If a demon feared me, though, that was more than enough.

At least it meant they wouldn’t try to devour me or burn me alive.

"By the way, can’t you at least scream or groan a little while you’re in pain?"

"…You really are a demon."

"No, the demon here is you."

The man, looking at me without backing down, closed his eyes for a long moment. When he opened them again, there was a faint flicker of anger in his gaze.

"You’ll keep your promise, right?"

"Of course! Unlike you lot, I don’t tell lies."

If I leave him like this without treatment for two days, his legs will never recover.

If the infection spreads and kills him, that’s none of my business.

I made sure to order that he not be kept with the other demons.

You never know if there’s one among them who can use healing magic.

Following my order, my subordinate locked the man in a cell on the opposite side of the pen where the demons were kept.

It put me in a surprisingly good mood.

With this, there shouldn’t be any more disturbances in the basement.

With manpower already in short supply, it would be a major problem if many of them started rioting at once.

If that happened, they might end up devouring all the humans working here—including me—and the demons would be set free.

If that happened, it would be like that horrible night all over again.

I’d better finish up this job as quickly as possible.

Or maybe I should just burn them all.

…But why is there mud on the stairs leading up?

There isn’t a single dirt-covered spot around the house.

It’s not like someone stepped in from the top of a flower pot.

"Come out. Unless you want your whole family to be captured and killed."

I didn’t hear any shaky breathing or other signs of movement.

Was it just my imagination?

I’d like to strengthen security, but we’re short on manpower.

I headed back to the house, carrying an uneasy feeling with me.

12

Chapter 12

Ellen is acting strange.

No, maybe it’s the world that’s strange.

For two days, demons rampaged across the entire empire.

As a result, an uncountable number of people died.

On the first day, there were so many corpses on the main roads that the streets were littered with them.

Even some of the teachers at the Academy died. So, just like the Empire as a whole, the Academy couldn’t keep running as usual.

In the end, they announced that classes would resume a month later.

I wonder what those officers—who usually wear blue uniforms, carry pistols on their hips, and walk around wielding clubs—were even doing during all that. But to be fair, they were up against a bad opponent.

There’s no way they could stop a mob of rampaging demons with nothing but wooden clubs.

The imperial guards, who were supposed to protect the Emperor, didn’t even come out that night because they were busy guarding him.

It was the right decision, but... commoners are the kind of people who remember every bit of bitterness and resentment, storing it deep in their hearts.

If even a few hundred guards had been unlucky enough to get caught up in the chaos, they might have been wiped out entirely.

Thanks to that, half the capital was set on fire in a single night.

Along with the daily lives of the people.

I didn’t care much since there wasn’t anything important to learn from the Academy anyway, but I hated the atmosphere.

It felt like the streets were filled with death, even though there wasn’t a single corpse in sight.

The faces of the passersby were devoid of happiness, instead filled with despair and crushing hopelessness.

Charred debris lay scattered along the roadside, blood splattered on the walls remained unwashed, and furious people wandered from place to place, hunting down demons.

They also targeted the homeless and any suspicious-looking humans.

It wasn't like someone had orchestrated the whole thing.

One group of demons started rampaging, which led to other groups doing the same.

Then some vagrants, beggars from the slums, and escaped criminals joined in, turning that one night into a nightmare.

The Emperor declared that it was all the demons' doing, but I couldn't deny what I'd seen with my own eyes.

That night, I had no idea how many people I killed.

There were those who recklessly assaulted women on the streets, groups that ran at me yelling that they'd burn me alive just because I was wearing clean clothes, and demons who stopped noblemen's carriages only to set them on fire with the people still inside.

Those kinds of lunatics even broke into our house.

Fortunately, when they saw the sword I was holding, they immediately left.

Because of that, there were injuries in my family, but no one died.

But Ellen wasn't so lucky.

Her younger sibling and parents died.

She acted like it didn't bother her, but her faintly trembling hands told a different story.

When she spoke about it, a single tear streamed down from her left eye, and she didn't even seem to realize it.

Ellen was a junior known for her lack of emotional expression.

She rarely smiled and had a perpetually blank face, only lifting the corners of her mouth on rare occasions when she made some silly joke.

She felt like an old man who had already seen everything there was to see in life.

Most of the time, we only ate together. Otherwise, she'd spend her time reading books alone or enjoying her cigarettes.

But after that day, it was like Ellen had erased her expressionless face entirely.

She started smiling constantly.

It was as if she'd made some kind of rule for herself.

She'd never been one to show up to school on time in the morning because she was always oversleeping, but now she arrived early at the Academy—despite there being no classes.

She started talking to people she normally wouldn't bother with and even stuck by my side, chatting idly about whatever came to mind.

When I asked where her cigarettes had gone, she said she'd quit and throw them away.

Even when talking about her family or the friends who hadn't shown up at school, she brought it up with a beaming smile, as if it didn't bother her at all.

At first, it was jarring.

But I figured it might be her way of coping with grief, so I pretended not to notice.

When she brought up Ethel, her face would return to that familiar, cold, expressionless look, but it only lasted for a moment.

If I had to pick the biggest change, it would be the way she looks at demons.

In the past, if she'd seen Petra surrounded and attacked by people, she would have run over to help without a second thought.

But now, she just stood there and watched like it was only natural.

Only after making a meaningless joke about "keeping it as a debt" did she finally step in to help.

Even after helping, she wore an expression that made it seem like she regretted doing it.

I tried not to think too much about how much Ellen had changed and just kept spending time with her like usual.

Then Isabel approached me.

She dragged me outside, using sparring practice as an excuse, and said something that, honestly, wasn't all that surprising.

Ellen would probably think we'd gone to get our weapons, so she wouldn't be suspicious.

"Hey, Theo. Don't you think Ellen's been acting really weird?"

"…Why do you say that?"

"We never used to see her in the mornings, but now she comes to school early every day.

She’s got dark circles under her eyes like she’s been up all night, and she looks exhausted."

"She’s probably just been reading late at night.

Or maybe she’s been crying too much to sleep."

"After she gets to school, she doesn’t even hang around the Academy like we do. She just disappears somewhere else entirely."

"Where would she even go? There aren’t many places to hide, are there?"

"I followed her once. She went into one of the old, closed-off buildings.

So I followed her in, calling her name while searching the whole place, but she was nowhere to be found!"

"…Even if you say that, it’s not like we can just confront her head-on, right?"

Isabel let out a sigh, sounding frustrated.

If it were anyone else, we’d probably just go up to them and ask directly.

But even though Ellen spent time with us, it always felt like she had drawn an invisible line between herself and the rest of us.

There was one time someone suggested we all hang out at Ellen’s house.

She practically had a seizure and adamantly refused.

She never visited anyone else’s house, either.

At most, she’d just walk with us around the Academy or go to the shopping district nearby.

That was it.

If you asked me if we were friends, I’d say yes. But if you asked if we were close, I wouldn’t be so sure.

Maybe that’s why I always tried to reach out to Ellen.

Now, it’s the opposite.

Ellen is the one who keeps approaching me to chat.

"You’re right."

After wrapping up our talk about how strange Ellen was acting, we headed back to the training ground. Through the large, open window, I spotted Ellen and Petra.

It looked like they were talking.

Oddly enough, neither of them were making eye contact. Their mouths were moving, but their eyes were focused elsewhere.

They continued talking for a while, but then Ellen moved so fast it startled me.

In one swift motion, she pulled a pistol from her coat, grabbed Petra by the neck, and shoved her back.

Before I could even process what was happening, she jammed the barrel of the gun into Petra's mouth.

When people are faced with something they can't comprehend, their minds go blank for a moment.

Ellen was smart and articulate, but she was slow to act and avoided physical conflict as much as possible.

Yet here she was, subduing Petra like a trained soldier and holding her at gunpoint.

The sight was so shocking that both Isabel and I froze, unable to process it.

"…See? She is acting weird."

Instead of responding, I grabbed Isabel by the wrist and walked straight into the training ground.

I had no idea what they had been talking about, but by the time we got there, everything had already settled down.

Petra was sitting quietly, far too calm for someone who'd just had a gun shoved in their mouth.

It was as if nothing had happened.

Ellen glanced at me, her face briefly twisted into a cold, harsh expression.

Then, she brushed a hand across the corner of her mouth and smiled like usual.

I approached Ellen, trying not to sound confrontational, and spoke as if I were just curious.

"Uh, hey. Looks like you two were chatting while sparring."

For some reason, my words didn't come out right.

I must have been more shaken than I realized.

"We were just having a light chat. But what's up with you, senior? Why are you stammering like that all of a sudden?"

Did I just hallucinate?

How could she act like absolutely nothing had happened?

"Ah, I was just... having a sparring match with Isabel after a while, so I guess I got a bit... flustered."

The suspicion in my mind only grew stronger.

Seeing me stammer like that must have been too much for Isabel, because she stomped on my right foot.

"By the way, Theo, Isabel."

Ellen spoke up, her tone as light as ever.

"I'm planning to rest at home until classes start again.

I think I caught a cold or something—I've been feeling a bit tired lately."

When I tried to respond, Isabel stomped on my foot again before cutting in.

"Ah, yeah! If you're feeling sick, you should rest! Right, Theo?"

"Y-yeah, of course."

"Hey, Theo."

"What now?"

"Go comfort that girl over there."

Isabel motioned toward Petra, who was sitting by herself, sniffling.

She was probably trying to act like she wasn't crying, but it was obvious.

I didn't bother asking if she was okay.

Of course she wasn't.

I thought about saying something comforting, but I didn't know what to say.

So, I just sat next to her in silence.

Petra leaned on me for a moment but then suddenly blushed and said she should get going. She quickly left.

Isabel watched me with a teasing grin.

"I told you to comfort her, not seduce her."

I could see why she'd say that, so instead of arguing, I just kept my mouth shut.

"Anyway, you saw it, right? I'm telling you, Ellen's acting strange."

"So, what do you want me to do about it?

Maybe she just grew to hate demons after all that's happened."

"You think someone can hate something so much that they stop seeing it as human and start seeing it as a bug or a beast?"

"…No."

"Then let's follow Ellen."

"If that's what you wanted, you should've said so earlier so we could follow her right away."

"She won't even let us visit her house. Obviously, we have to follow her in secret!"

Normally, I would have called that idea insane.

But I didn't hesitate for long.

I nodded and followed Isabel as she walked in the direction Ellen had gone.

Yeah, Ellen is definitely acting strange.

No, she's changed.

13

Chapter 13

We followed Ellen.

But something about her destination felt off.

At first, she walked down a relatively clean street. Then, suddenly, she turned left, heading straight toward the slums.

The only things you'd find in the slums were rats, cockroaches, demons, and vagrants.

I couldn't understand why she was headed there.

Still, we kept following Ellen.

Isabel was unusually fixated on learning more about Ellen.

It was to the point that she didn't even acknowledge my suggestion that we should head back.

While we were watching her from afar, wondering where she was going, Ellen suddenly turned around.

My heart froze.

If we had followed her all the way into the slums, we definitely would have been caught.

"There's only one bridge in and out of that area. Let's wait for her here," Isabel muttered quietly, crossing her arms. Beads of sweat were forming on her forehead, probably from the sudden scare.

If someone were to look at us now, they'd probably just think we were a couple standing close together.

We stepped into a nearby cafe, ordered some drinks, and sat on the terrace where we could see the bridge.

Not long after, a pristine, well-kept carriage rolled across the bridge.

It was the kind of carriage you'd never expect to see entering a slum.

Isabel, sipping the last bit of her strawberry drink, furrowed her brows and spoke softly.

"That carriage… it's got some kind of emblem on it."

"Let's just keep watching for now."

About 30 minutes passed.

The carriage that had gone into the slum came back, this time loaded with large burlap sacks.

Without a word, Isabel and I glanced at each other.

Then, at the exact same time, we leapt over the terrace railing and ran after the carriage.

The carriage passed by a large mansion and stopped at an open clearing within its grounds.

Men wearing hoods stepped out of the carriage, followed by Ellen.

Then, a large underground entrance opened before them.

Ellen started giving orders to the men unloading the sacks from the carriage, gesturing as if instructing them on what to do.

"…The sack just moved," Isabel muttered.

"It moved?"

"Yeah, look closely at that one guy carrying it. It’s wriggling like crazy."

I focused on the man holding one of the sacks.

Sure enough, the sack was squirming and thrashing violently.

The man pulled something from his belt and struck the sack with it.

The sack stopped moving.

"That… that’s a person, isn’t it?"

"…No way."

The pieces started coming together.

They had gone to the slums.

The sacks were about the size of a person.

And they were wriggling.

It was impossible to push away the suspicion.

Ellen and the men disappeared into the underground entrance. Moments later, the door that had been wide open closed shut.

When we got closer to inspect it, we noticed that the top of the door had been covered with dirt and grass.

If we hadn’t seen it open with our own eyes, we never would have known it was there.

"…Should we go in?" Isabel asked.

I nodded.

I didn’t know why, but it felt like if we stopped here, we’d regret it forever.

After seeing all of this, it’s not like we could pretend we hadn’t.

I pulled out a handkerchief, hoping it was big enough to cover my face, but it wasn’t large enough to cover more than my mouth.

We grunted and groaned as we pried the door open. Stairs leading downward came into view.

After slipping through, we carefully closed the door behind us and tiptoed down the stairs.

"Isabel, cast any spell that might be useful," I whispered.

In response, Isabel chanted a spell.

Suddenly, our footsteps became completely silent.

Even the sound of our breathing disappeared, as if it had been wiped away.

Unfortunately, this also meant that I couldn’t hear my own voice when I spoke to Isabel.

Dim light leaked out from further down the hallway. We gestured to each other using hand signs and decided to stick close together.

The underground area was so vast that we couldn’t figure out where Ellen had gone.

We couldn’t exactly walk up to someone and ask where she was, either.

With no other choice, we wandered aimlessly.

There were so few people in the underground facility that we might not have been noticed even without Isabel’s spell.

Everyone here looked incredibly busy.

One man in an office was buried in paperwork, signing document after document with a pen.

Nearby, several mages were lining up scrawny demons and chanting spells over them.

"…Sir Mage, what exactly is this spell you’re casting?"

One of the demons, a middle-aged man, asked the mage while being subjected to the spell.

The mage didn’t answer. He continued casting the spell in silence.

"If you keep engraving spells into me without saying anything, I can’t just—"

Bang!

A small explosion echoed through the corridor.

The next moment, blood poured from the middle-aged man’s nose and mouth.

He collapsed where he stood.

The demons lined up behind him covered their mouths with their hands, suppressing their screams.

"Ugh, damn it. 'Stay still,' he says. Stay still, my ass… Hey, Connie! Stop that paperwork and toss this one into the incinerator!"

"Did it blow up again?"

"Yeah, it blew up again."

The demon’s body lay limp on the ground, face down in a pool of his own blood.

"Of course it blew up, so get moving. Stop asking questions and clean it up so you can get back to work."

The mage shouted, and the man who had been buried in paperwork moments ago rubbed his eyes and sluggishly walked over. He grabbed the corpse and began dragging it somewhere.

We moved further down the corridor, passing through another door.

That’s when we saw it.

A prison.

Or at least, it was supposed to be a prison.

Could you even call that a prison?

The space was so cramped that calling it a prison felt too generous. It was more like a livestock pen filled with humans.

No, it wasn’t just "like" a livestock pen—it was a livestock pen.

— "P-please, save me…"

— "Let us out! My child… my child is dying!"

— "Please, please, at least give us water…."

Not even livestock would be kept in conditions this horrific.

Was this hell?

Everyone inside wore tattered rags, their bodies gaunt and skeletal.

Isabel started trembling as she looked at the scene. Then, she doubled over and vomited on the floor.

Instead of saying anything, I focused on patting her back.

She was still shaking when she finally stopped, but I helped support her as we continued forward.

Stopping now would only mean getting stuck in this nightmare.

We had to see Ellen with our own eyes.

I had to see her.

I had to see her and confirm that she wasn't the one behind this.

I refused to believe that the same Ellen who loved silly jokes, books, and quiet afternoons was involved in something like this.

It had to be someone else.

Maybe Ellen's older brother had gone mad after their parents died.

Yeah, it had to be the head of the Speyer family pulling the strings.

I pressed my fingertips hard against the corners of my eyes to calm myself, then kept walking.

The next area was different.

Unlike the people from before, the ones here seemed to be in relatively better condition. They looked healthier, more alert.

And right in the center of it all, Ellen sat on a sofa with her legs crossed.

In front of her, a tall demon man knelt on one knee.

"Livestock belong in pens. People belong in prisons."

"You really have a filthy way of talking."

I heard their quiet conversation.

Hearing Ellen say those words made me want to rush out there and demand to know what she was doing.

They talked for a bit longer before it seemed they had come to some sort of agreement.

Then, Ellen raised the iron club in her left hand and swung it down on the demon man's leg.

His leg twisted like a frog crushed under a cartwheel.

Even as his leg crumpled, the man didn't cry out.

He endured it in silence.

The grip on my wrist tightened, and I glanced at Isabel.

Her hand was trembling as she squeezed mine.

The demons locked behind the iron bars couldn't stay silent, though.

They screamed and hurled insults at Ellen, their voices echoing through the prison.

But Ellen didn't react.

She leaned back on the sofa, looking perfectly comfortable as she gave her subordinates orders.

Was that even Ellen?

I didn't know anymore.

The Ellen I knew…

The subordinates followed her instructions, pulling out the demons who had been causing a ruckus behind the bars and taking them somewhere else.

Not long after, the sound of blood-curdling screams echoed through the corridor.

We crept toward the source of the screams, being as quiet as possible.

When we reached it, we saw it.

Demons were burning alive in an incinerator.

Their bodies were writhing as the flames consumed them.

Isabel couldn't watch any longer.

She chanted a spell, and with a flash, she pierced the demons' foreheads.

They stopped moving.

I stared at the scene, my mind clouded with confusion.

Why… Why is this happening?

Then I saw Ellen.

She was smiling.

It wasn't the kind of fake smile you force onto your face.

It wasn't the kind of smile people put on to hide their pain.

Her grin was twisted, unnerving, and somehow sincere.

It was the kind of smile you'd see on a patient in a mental asylum.

I knew right then that I had to stop her.

I didn't know if the demons had committed any crimes.

But if they had, then they should be put in a proper prison, tried in a court, and sentenced to death or forced labor.

That's how things are supposed to work.

They shouldn't be locked up like this.

Not like animals.

Not like this.

At the very least, the children—the children—should be spared.

If nothing else, the children deserve to be treated with dignity.

How long had I been pretending that I knew her?

How much had I convinced myself that we understood each other?

It was painful to realize that, in the end, we didn't know a single thing about each other.

I didn't want to believe it, but seeing it with my own eyes made it impossible to deny.

At the very least, I believed that no human should ever treat another like this.

We had seen enough.

I signaled to Isabel that we should head back.

She nodded.

We retraced our steps, moving quietly through the corridors.

As we reached the stairs and began to climb, I suddenly heard footsteps behind us.

My heart stopped.

I froze.

Isabel pulled me forward just in time.

I would have been caught if she hadn’t.

The footsteps came to a stop at the bottom of the stairs.

Ellen stood there, gazing up the stairs in silence.

Her voice rang out, low and commanding.

"Come out. If you don’t want your family dragged into this and killed, come out."

I felt my body stiffen.

Has she seen us?

No, she couldn’t have.

If she knew where we were, she wouldn’t be calling out like that.

Isabel’s entire body was shaking now.

I had no choice.

I clung to her, wrapping my arms tightly around her to keep her from making any sudden movements.

We held our breath and stayed perfectly still.

After a long pause, Ellen slowly walked up the stairs.

We waited.

It felt like an eternity passed before we heard the sound of the door closing above us.

Once it was clear, we climbed out of the underground and into the fresh air.

Isabel staggered forward and threw up as soon as she was outside.

It was so bad that, for a moment, I wondered if she was going to die right then and there.

Her whole body shook violently as she emptied her stomach.

14

Chapter 14

A lot of time had passed.

It had already been over a week since Ethel and her family were released.

I didn’t bother going to see Ethel.

On the contrary, Ethel came to see me several times.

Each time, I sent a servant to turn her away.

The next time, she brought Theo and Isabel with her.

Of course, I sent them away too.

How did they even figure out where I lived?

They’d been coming by for days now, so I figured they’d show up again today.

I downed the coffee I’d forgotten to drink yesterday after setting it aside.

The aroma was gone, and it was ice cold, so it just tasted like bitter water.

Still, it woke me up completely.

I stood up and looked at myself in the mirror.

The person smiling back at me was still beautiful.

Not a single wrinkle, skin so pale it almost looked translucent, crimson lips, silver-white hair like flowing silk, and eyes as red as rubies.

I’m still fine. At least, for now.

When a person is under stress or gets beaten up, the first thing to break down is their appearance.

I threw off my clothes and stood in front of the full-length mirror.

Why do I look like this?

If I had a strong body like Theo, or if I’d been blessed with holy power and magic like Isabel, or if I had magical talent like Joanna, things might have been different.

At the very least, I wouldn’t have had to run around carrying my dying sibling, desperately searching for safety.

Instead of this toy-like pistol I keep tucked under my skirt, I would have had the power to cut down demons with a single stroke.

I pulled out the pistol I had tied to the belt under my skirt.

I unloaded all but one bullet from the chamber and let them fall to the ground.

Then, I spun the chamber, letting it whirl with a sharp click, click, click.

Looking into the mirror, I stared into my crimson eyes.

Even without pulling the trigger, it felt like blood was already pouring out of my head.

I pulled the trigger once.

Nothing happened.

A strange sense of deflation washed over me.

Empty again.

Not just the chamber, but me as well.

The idea of treasuring myself, the sense of humanity—both of those had vanished.

I'm not saying something childish like, "The world is so cruel, so I'll become a villain!"

No, it's not like that.

It's more like...

When you feel utterly exhausted with life, it's as if a hollow void opens up inside your chest.

If you're on a tall building, you feel the urge to jump.

If you see a rope with a knot, you want to dangle from it.

If a gun is in your hand, you feel the desire to blow your head off.

Knock, knock.

There was a knock on the door.

Looks like something's happened again.

I started toward the door but stopped halfway, realizing I was still naked.

I went back to the mirror and put on my clothes before answering.

When I opened the door, Marco was standing there, his expression faintly awkward as he glanced at my face.

"What is it?"

"The demons caused a disturbance in the underground, but they've been subdued.

One of our precious mages died in the process. How should we handle it?"

"…Did they die while engraving a spell, or did the demons kill them?"

"Judging from how their throat was torn to shreds, it looks like the demons did it."

What a headache.

At least it happened during the day, not in the middle of the night. I suppose I should be grateful for that.

We're already short on people, and now we've lost a mage on top of that.

It's frustrating, but it is what it is.

The fewer people we have, the harder it is to maintain control. If the demons killed one of our people, it's only right that they be dealt with accordingly.

"Do we have enough oil and firewood?"

"Already prepared."

"Then what are you waiting for? Burn them."

The demons stationed near the mages are already half-dead.

We couldn't even send them to the mines, so we'd planned to send them to the farm on the island.

They were also part of an experiment, being the first to have spells engraved on them.

I guess they wanted to show us that even if they're on the brink of death, a demon is still strong enough to rip apart a human with one hand.

But Marco isn't the type to report something like this just for the sake of it.

He probably used this as an excuse to bring up something else.

After all, Marco is the kind of man who treats people the same way he treats demons.

He wouldn't come all this way just to get permission for a routine culling of unruly livestock.

"By the way, your friends came to visit again today."

"…Send them away."

"I tried, but the one named Theo is literally lying down in front of the main gate."

"Then just leave him there."

"That’s pretty cold of you, especially toward a man."

"What else am I supposed to do? On days like this, when we have to cull a large number, I don’t want any outsiders here."

"Always quick with an excuse, aren’t you?

Anyway, young miss, I understand you’re dedicated to your work, but I think you should rest from time to time."

"Rest? With how short-staffed we are? You must be joking."

"That’s true. We are shorthanded.

Well, I’ll be on my way. I’ve got work to do."

Marco turned and walked away.

I closed the door, leaning my back against it.

Rest?

With everything that’s going on, who has the time to rest?

"Oh, before you go, how’s that young lady doing? You know, the one locked up right below the mansion."

Maybe it was because the students from the Academy had come by, leaving me feeling uneasy.

On any other day, I wouldn’t have asked such a pointless question.

"Are you talking about the one who 'borrowed' a finger from you last time?"

Borrowed? That wasn’t the right word. It’d be more accurate to say she forcibly took it and then gave it back.

"Yeah, her."

I had told them to treat her as "gently" as possible.

But "gentle" here only meant to avoid doing anything that would leave permanent physical damage.

In other words, it didn’t matter if her mind broke or if she went insane.

I only asked because I’d feel a little uneasy if she ended up like one of those lunatics who smears filth on the walls.

Not that my sleep wasn’t already terrible.

"Since you told us to be gentle, we’ve been handling her with care. We keep it simple — a little scolding here and there and plenty of disheartening conversations.

Lately, though, she’s been clinging to me, kneeling and begging me to let her go."

"And what did you say?"

"I told her to ask you herself.

But I’d advise against meeting her. Things have gotten… complicated."

"…Did you touch her?"

Marco’s face twisted in discomfort, as if insulted by the question.

"No, I didn’t.

You’ll understand if you go see her yourself."

If he says he didn’t, then I guess he didn’t.

"Alright."

"By the way, young miss, I think I’d be really sad if you died."

"…If you died, I’d probably cry for a whole day."

"That’s quite the honor. Well then, I’ll be off. Take care, young miss."

I waved my hand, signaling for him to leave.

After hearing Marco’s report, it felt like my eyes were rolling around in a furnace.

The back of my neck stiffened with pain, and my lower back felt as if it had been strained somehow.

For some reason, my knees began to ache too.

My vision blurred, and a wave of nausea hit me.

The problem is that every treatment and painkiller in this world is basically a drug.

Even potions are addictive, and if you want painkillers, your only options are opium or cannabis.

Alicia used to tell me not to smoke.

Alicia used to tell me not to take drugs.

Alicia used to tell me to get along with my friends.

Alicia used to tell me to love and live a fun, happy life.

Or maybe she’s still telling me those things, even now.

Her voice still echoes in my ears, the same soft voice she used to whisper to me as she stroked my cheek.

"Ellen! It’s been a while! Come on out so we can see your face!"

I heard Theo’s voice yelling from outside.

Where does he get all that energy?

"Ethel said she had something important to talk to you about!"

I don’t have anyone to force them out.

There aren’t many people who can beat Theo, even at the Academy.

There’s no way anyone here could take him on.

Even if someone could, they’d be down in the basement, working hard.

If I leave him alone, he’ll probably get hungry and leave on his own.

But when I glanced out the window, I saw that crazy idiot eating bread in front of the gate.

Should I go out there?

I didn’t see Ethel or Isabel with him.

"Why is he just lying around out there?"

I couldn’t understand it.

I watched him for a while through the window.

Then, Theo looked up and spotted me.

He waved at me.

I pretended not to see him, closing the window and drawing the curtains shut.

I pulled a random novel from the bookshelf and started reading it.

But I didn’t read it properly.

I didn’t trace each word. I didn’t let myself remember anything about the story.

I just skimmed the pages, letting them blur together.

It wasn’t fun.

I tossed the book onto the bed and headed toward the basement.

When people hear "the mansion’s basement," they probably think it’s one connected space.

But there’s the basement directly beneath the mansion and a separate underground area beneath the clearing in front of the mansion.

They’re connected by a narrow corridor, but they’re still two different spaces.

Even when I walked into the conversation room, I didn’t hear any screams.

Well, we’d already captured most of the troublesome ones.

I made my way to the room where the librarian sister was being held.

The room was much cleaner than I expected.

Marco had made it sound like a whole group of people had taken turns tormenting her.

"I-Is that you, Ellen..?"

"Who else would it be?"

"…I thought I was hallucinating."

"Hallucinating, huh?"

"Heehee, that guy Marco said if I met you, I’d get a potion!

I’ve been a good girl, sitting quietly and waiting right here.

I even told you where the demons are hiding, so please, give me a potion. No, I beg you, please give me one."

I'd told them to "handle her gently" — to avoid physical harm and just extract information on where the demons were hiding.

But those bastards turned her into a drug addict.

Her eyes were unfocused, darting in different directions.

If I didn't give her a potion now, she'd probably lunge at me.

I didn't bring my pistol with me.

Dealing with someone whose reason has crumbled is dangerous without a weapon.

I unlocked the drawer and pulled out a potion.

The moment she saw it, she moved to lunge at me.

"…If you don't stop, I'll pour it down the drain."

"I-I'm sorry! No, I'm really sorry! I'll be good, I'll be good! So please, please give me that…."

"Damn it. How the hell am I supposed to send you back like this? Ah."

I realized.

I was never planning to send her back, was I?

I opened the potion's cap and poured its contents onto the ground.

Her eyes widened with desperation.

Without hesitation, she crawled off the bed on all fours and began licking the floor.

She didn't care if it was dirty or clean.

She even licked the single drop that had splashed onto my shoe.

I don't have a foot fetish.

"Disgusting."

The words slipped out of my mouth before I realized it.

There was a trace of contempt in my voice.

15

Chapter 15

After a while, the librarian sister’s face turned bright red.

Maybe she’d regained her senses, or maybe the potion she licked off the floor had brought her back to reality.

Well, considering she’d just been licking spilled potion off the ground like a dog, it was no wonder she looked so ashamed.

"P-please forget about that just now."

"And what if I forget to bring you another potion, too?"

"Ah, that’s…."

"I’m just joking. Anyway, sis, do you know who’s upstairs right now?"

"How would I know that?"

"It’s Theo. He’s probably here to rescue you, don’t you think?"

"…No, that’s impossible. No one even knows I’m being held here."

Smart.

I like clever people.

Of course, being "clever" doesn’t necessarily mean being obedient, but you get the idea.

"So, I have a proposal for you.

The truth is, sis, you’re already a dead person.

Someone who could be killed right here and now without anyone batting an eye."

Her face turned pale.

"I-I don’t want to die."

If she doesn’t want to die, then that’s perfect for me.

They say that people addicted to potions feel a surge of vitality and overwhelming happiness whenever they drink one.

If you can still say, "I don’t want to die" after experiencing that feeling, then there’s definitely something wrong with you.

"It’s not like anyone wants to die… Well, I guess there are some exceptions."

If I’d intended to kill her, I would’ve done it already.

Why would I bother being "gentle" with her?

Especially since she’s someone who’d hidden demons.

Calling my treatment of her "gentle" might be a stretch, especially considering I did borrow her finger for a while.

But since she hasn’t brought it up, maybe she convinced herself it was just a hallucination.

Or maybe she just doesn’t want to think about it.

My hands and mouth felt itchy.

Moments like this were when I used to light a cigarette.

Because of that habit, all my clothes—everything from my school uniform to my dresses—ended up reeking of cigarette smoke.

Alicia always hated that smell.

"Anyway, sis, while you were out of your mind, you told us where the demons were hiding.

So technically, there’s no longer any reason to keep you locked up.

And, you know, I’m not exactly some deranged lunatic who enjoys killing people for fun."

"…Then can’t you just let me go?"

I came here to let her go, after all.

I could just release her.

But it’s better not to do things for free.

More importantly, she’s seen my face.

Even if she knows who I am, she can’t be allowed to speak of it.

No matter how many Academy students know my identity, it’s an unspoken rule that none of them can say it out loud.

"There’s a condition.

I’m your savior, after all! I’m the one letting you live."

I know it sounds ridiculous, but what's she going to do about it?

"Alright, tell me."

"Just do me some favors. Be nice to me, and listen to what I say.

Don't act all prickly like you used to when I was hanging around Theo."

"Is that all you want..?"

"What else could I want?

If you're not planning to spread your legs and make money as a prostitute, you're honestly not that valuable."

"…Once I graduate, I could be quite valuable."

"Which one do you think earns more money: a charming, busty prostitute with sharp wit and a pretty face, or a pretty librarian with all those same qualities?"

"……."

Even if it's an obvious answer, people still hesitate to respond.

"Anyway, that's not my taste.

Besides, it's weird for students from the same Academy to do that kind of thing with each other, isn't it?"

"Y-yeah, that's true!"

"In a little while, Marco — you know Marco, right?"

She nodded.

"Marco is going to release you in the middle of the eastern district.

But of course, you won't know where this place is because you'll be asleep when it happens."

I'm not worried about her using money or connections to protect or free demons again.

Most of the demons have already been captured.

The Emperor may be a fool, but the Security Bureau isn't.

With people from the Imperial Guard and Imperial Castle working for them, they're more than capable of handling things.

I’m just a small part of it.

All I do is help with consultations and round up the stragglers.

The head of the family, on the other hand, scoops them up in batches.

If he wanted to, he could probably overthrow the Emperor — that lazy fool who spends his days drinking and fooling around with women.

Not that there’s any reason to overthrow him, so they leave him be.

I left the librarian sister behind as she thanked me over and over.

Come to think of it, what was her name again?

Doesn’t matter.

I went back upstairs, returning to my room to change my outer clothes and shoes.

The distinct smell of potions had seeped into my clothes, and the stench was unbearable.

I opened the curtains and looked outside.

The sun was setting, and the sky was painted with shades of orange and purple.

Down below, Theo was still sitting there, eating bread like it was the most natural thing in the world.

I pinched the bridge of my nose as a sharp headache throbbed in my skull.

Is he really planning to keep this up?

Obsessive men are scary.

Then again, obsessive women like Ethel and Isabel are scary too.

Honestly, they’re all scary.

With the way things are going, I have a feeling Theo will camp out in front of the mansion all night.

We already have so many people coming and going, and there’s still so much work to do.

If he blocks the front gate, it’ll only cause trouble for the servants.

I should just feed them dinner and send them away.

That should do it.

I left the hallway and entered the office where my brother — no, where the head of the family was.

Was I supposed to call him that?

Anyway, I walked into Julian’s office.

The place was a mess.

Unidentifiable trash was scattered across the floor. Piles of papers cluttered his enormous desk.

The window hadn’t been opened even once, and cigarette smoke hung in the air like a thick fog.

In the middle of it all was Julian, gripping his head and staring at the paperwork as if he were trying to bore a hole into it with his eyes.

"I heard the front gate’s in chaos."

"Yeah."

"Is that your boyfriend?"

"Maybe."

To that man, I’m probably just another "heroine" in his eyes.

If that’s the case, I’m more than willing to play the role of a tragic heroine.

If I’m going to be captured by the demons he’s released and die by being torn apart alive, then something in this twisted world should change, right?

Humanity’s "justice" would shift, even if just a little.

Unfortunately, even I used to think of demons as something like people.

At least, I did before I lost Alicia.

If I died this way, it wouldn’t be considered suicide, would it?

After all, it would be murder.

I’d get to listen to Alicia’s words one last time and kill a demon or two along the way. A double win.

"…Is he a commoner?"

"No, I think his father’s a low-ranking noble."

"Then it’s fine, I guess.

How competent is he?"

"Useful enough."

"So, why are you here? Ran out of money?"

"Money’s never an issue.

I just wanted to invite the people hanging around out front to dinner."

"The cook’s down in the consultation room, and with all this going on, I’m not sure we can put out anything decent."

"Tell them to take a break and cook something. They could use the rest, anyway."

Julian shrugged and answered casually.

"If that’s what you want.

By the way, are you doing okay?"

"Why?"

"If you’re going to visit your friends with that ugly face, you might as well lock yourself in your room."

"If I’m ugly, then that makes you ugly too, doesn’t it?"

"I wasn’t talking about looks."

"Then what are you talking about?"

Julian glanced at me, his face expressionless as he picked up a long pipe from the desk and placed it in his mouth.

A small flame flickered from his fingertip, igniting the tobacco leaves, and the smoke rose slowly into the air.

The momentary silence wasn’t awkward — just a brief lull.

Then, Julian muttered softly.

"Ellen, I heard you were thinking about offing yourself."

Out of nowhere, he dropped that on me.

"…What the hell are you talking about?"

"Marco came by whining about how you seemed mentally unstable."

"That’s not it."

The exhaustion that had been weighing down Julian’s face vanished in an instant.

His eyes sharpened, and he slammed his hands on the desk, springing to his feet.

He jabbed a finger at me, his voice booming like thunder.

"What the hell do you mean 'that’s not it'?! Marco found a stray bullet on your bedroom floor!

Do I have to lock up my one and only little sister in the basement because she’s gone insane?!"

I wanted to say something in my defense.

But for some reason, whenever I’m in front of Julian, my words always get stuck.

"…I was just… I’m sorry. I won’t do it again."

I stopped myself from saying that I just did it to shake off the lethargy.

If I’d said that, he would have thrown me into the basement.

"If I asked for your gun, you wouldn’t hand it over, would you?

If I asked, would you shoot me instead?"

"You’re my brother. I wouldn’t kill you."

"Heh. I wouldn’t kill you either."

He let out a hollow laugh and flopped back into his chair.

He glanced at the scattered papers on the floor and let out a breathy chuckle.

"I don’t care what you do, just don’t die.

You’re all I’ve got left.

The fiancée I’d barely gotten to know is dead, and you’re the only one left…."

"She’s dead?"

"Yeah. They ate her. Alive. Right in front of her parents."

The air in the room suddenly felt thick and suffocating.

I walked over and opened the window.

The fresh air felt a little more refreshing.

"I'll tell the cook, so have fun with your friends."

"Hey, Julian."

"I told you to call me 'head of the family.'

Or just 'brother,' if you insist."

"One of the people coming to dinner is someone I've 'consulted' with in the past.

Am I still her friend?"

"…Even if you ask me, how should I know? Did she figure it out?"

"We met face-to-face."

"Then you should've dealt with her."

"I'm not as heartless as you."

Calling him "brother" is hard.

It just doesn't roll off the tongue.

"Then ask her.

If you think it's dangerous, tell me.

I'll take care of it.

You're my precious little sister, after all."

"…I doubt it'll come to that."

Julian waved his hand, signaling for me to leave, then crouched down to pick up the fallen papers.

The sight of him like that — sitting on the floor, gathering papers — made me chuckle.

I left the room.

The smell of cigarette smoke clung to my body, and it seemed like the scent had seeped into my skin.

Even after leaving, I could still smell it.

I didn’t hate it, though.

When I reached the front gate, I saw Theo sitting there, looking as pathetic as ever.

When he saw me, his face lit up with a wide grin.

"Why are you sitting on the ground looking so pathetic?"

"Because someone looked me in the eye and still wouldn’t let me in."

"That’s too bad.

But I didn’t see anyone like that today."

"Yeah, yeah."

"Come in. I’ll give you something to eat… ah."

I spotted Ethel standing behind Theo.

Our eyes met.

My body froze.

16

Chapter 16

What should I say to them? Should I smile awkwardly and offer a handshake?

“This is my first time visiting Ellen’s house.”

“Oh, yeah. Right.”

The awkwardness spilled into my response.

“Are you okay?”

The question carried multiple layers of meaning.

I really disliked such questions. If anyone other than Ethel had said it, I would’ve definitely hated it. But now, uneasiness, fear, or maybe guilt, began to surge inside me.

“Yeah.”

Still, I didn’t let any of it show on my face.

“I’m hungry. Let’s head inside already.”

Come to think of it, this was the first time I’d had a friend visit my house since I was born.

I had permission from the owner of the house, so there was no issue, but it still felt burdensome somehow.

Once inside the mansion, the kids gawked at the interior as if they were amazed.

Looking at it now, if I measured wealth, I was probably the richest among us.

Even though most of the greedy, bloated parasites had been dealt with and their assets returned to the state treasury, it wasn’t like I wouldn’t get some scraps falling my way—legally or illegally.

Of course, it was about carefully skimming off without crossing the line.

“This house is... enormous,” one of them remarked.

“Didn’t I tell you before? I might look like this, but I’m a big deal.”

“Oh, uh, yeah, you did.”

You know those overused settings in games or novels, where everyone is supposedly equal in the academy? That nonsense.

Here, though, they actually adhered to it better than I expected. Lodgings, food, clothing, and most supplies were provided by the school, and they weren't of bad quality. So, there was little need to go out of one's way.

That's why, whether you were a crown prince or a street urchin from the slums, everyone seemed equal once they entered the academy.

At least within its grounds, everyone wore the same clothes and used the same items.

That's probably why no one, except Ethel, knew the scale of my family's influence, even if they had heard of my name or lineage.

I guess they might've realized something from the fact that I could just take a noble heir and lock them up at will. But even Ethel didn't know everything.

Anyway, I was just as hungry as the others, so I led them to the dining room.

To my surprise, there was only one person setting the table: Marco.

Marco, wearing a suit, was placing dishes and utensils on the table.

Not that I liked his face much, but I didn't want to prepare food for others with my own hands. I always handled dirty things, after all.

That must be why Marco was wearing gloves, too.

"Marco? What are you doing here?"

"Oh, miss. I heard you were dining with friends. The chef was whining about how overworked he was, so I thought I'd lend a hand."

"Ah, I see."

Marco brought out the last dish and placed it on the table, setting a large pair of scissors and four tongs beside it.

"All your friends are so handsome and beautiful."

"No one's going to fall for that flattery of yours."

"Haha, true enough. Well, I'll leave you to it and get back to work."

"Alright. Thanks for your help."

After taking one last dish from the kitchen and placing it on the table, Marco left the room, bowing slightly to me.

The kids, meanwhile, were staring at me with a mix of confusion and surprise.

“Let’s eat. Why are you all looking at me like that?”

“Oh, right. We came to eat.”

If not to eat, what else could we have come here for?

“By the way, you seem really close to that guy just now.”

“Yeah, he’s my boyfriend.”

Theo promptly spit out the appetizer he was eating.

Well, it must mean my joke was that funny. He must’ve laughed because it was genuinely hilarious.

“I’m joking.”

“…Haha.”

By the way, had Ethel told them everything that happened to her?

Unfortunately, I had no intention of shoving Theo, Isabel, and Ethel back into the parlor to talk about it.

Even if Ethel said I hit or bullied her, I’d just accept it and move on.

It wasn’t like Theo was going to take the lead in tormenting me anyway.

This time, it was Ethel who spoke up.

“By the way, Ellen. Soon, we’ll all be back at the academy together.”

“Yeah, we will.”

“Not sure if things will be like before, though.”

When Theo asked what she meant, Ethel vaguely replied that, after everything that happened, how could things go back to the way they were?

She hasn’t shared the full story yet, has she?

I could sense Ethel trying to steer the conversation, as if she wanted to take control and act as if she were in charge.

It’s a bit dangerous for a counselor to lose control of the conversation.

While she might be right about my moral debt, this was still my house.

And all the while, the others’ gazes were fixed on me.

Ethel would be disappointed, but I couldn’t show weakness.

Come to think of it, Marco brought the dishes and utensils but forgot the most basic thing: water.

“Why are you getting up?”

“To get some water.”

Ethel flinched.

I grabbed four cups and placed one in front of each person. Then I filled each cup with water.

For Theo, for Isabel, for myself, and finally for Ethel.

I kept pouring water into Ethel’s glass until it slightly overflowed.

“Oh, I was distracted and accidentally poured too much.”

It was my way of saying, Shut up and stay quiet.

Following someone else’s lead rarely led to anything good.

“…Y-Yeah, it happens.”

I glanced around.

As expected, the atmosphere was a little bleak.

If they knew what kind of person I was, should I lock them all up?

Or would they attack me right here, demanding how I could do such things?

Well, it didn’t really matter.

In the end, I was the protagonist of this mess, so I’d figure it out somehow.

Even if every single person in this mansion charged at us, Theo would win.

This is why strength is crucial.

For someone weak like me, the choices are so limited.

No, wait—it's too early to make such judgments.

My friends aren't demons, after all. They wouldn't treat me recklessly.

Especially since Ethel, who had hidden so many demons herself, still walked out of the parlor with all her limbs intact.

I smiled faintly, tore a drumstick from the chicken, placed it on my plate, and asked Theo, "So, why did you come here?"

"We haven't seen each other for a while, and I just thought of you."

"I see. The semester's starting soon, though. Wouldn't seeing me at school have been enough?"

"Well, yeah, but... Meeting outside the academy feels a bit different, doesn't it?"

The drumstick meat was quite tasty. Was it because I hadn't had it in so long?

While I was busy satiating my hunger, Isabel pointed at one of the dishes and asked, "Ellen, how do you eat this?"

It was a crayfish.

"I'll cut it up for you. You can eat the meat inside."

Had she never encountered it in school meals or nearby restaurants?

Maybe her upbringing emphasized faith so much that they avoided luxurious seafood like this.

Isabel cautiously snipped at the claws and the part connecting the body and tail, nibbling carefully.

It was amusing when she bit into the shell itself, made a weird face, and realized it wasn't edible.

In the slightly static atmosphere, we chatted about this and that as we diligently ate.

They seemed to be eating well, despite looking like they'd been nibbling on bread all day. At this rate, I wondered if they might clear out the entire kitchen.

"By the way, Ellen, your mansion is enormous."

"You already mentioned that earlier."

"No, I just... Houses this big seem like they'd have lots of secret rooms or something."

So they did know something.

But they didn’t know the full picture.

If they had realized I was gathering demons in one place, placing spells on their necks, and executing most of them, they wouldn’t be sitting here laughing and eating with me.

The same would go if they were aware of the coercive conversations and less-than-enjoyable water-based antics I’d had with Ethel.

This person, Theo, wore his emotions and thoughts plainly on his face.

Overly nosy, emotional, and self-righteous—a dangerous combination.

If he decided to stop me from executing demons, he’d do it. Even if it meant killing my brother.

After all, given the same value for lives, two lives would outweigh one.

I really hoped things wouldn’t escalate to that point.

“Senior Theo, I’ll stop asking why you came or what brought you here. I doubt you’d answer anyway, and I don’t want to leave you with a bad impression.”

“…Fair enough. But can I ask you one thing?”

“What is it?”

“If you answer honestly, I won’t pester you further.”

“In that case, go ahead.”

“What do you think of demons?”

Did he already know everything?

Or was he here to stop me?

Maybe he saw a carriage entering the mansion?

Or perhaps someone else had tipped him off?

“The dining table isn’t the place for heightened emotions. So I’ll answer calmly.”

I cast a meaningful look at Ethel.

Understanding my intent, she shook her head.

Well, if she hadn’t said anything, then she hadn’t.

“Except for those who have gone through appropriate education and re-socialization processes to rehabilitate them, I think all demons should be disposed of.”

“…I see.”

His expression shifted. My words seemed to have confirmed something for him.

“His Majesty issued an imperial decree, after all.”

A puppet fool, nearly killed by a succubus that wasn’t even particularly strong.

And that succubus was equally foolish. Did she think she wouldn’t get caught if she fled while everything outside was burning?

Anyway, this meant Theo didn’t know the full details.

“If you’ve all finished eating, should I call for dessert?”

Isabel’s face lit up, but Theo shook his head.

“No, it’d be rude to stay too late. I’ll get going now. See you next time.”

Rude? Lying down in front of someone’s gate is what’s rude.

“Alright. See you next time.”

17

Chapter 17

As expected, they were suspicious of me.

Considering the traces of magic left around the mansion, signs of outsiders entering, and the mud that had been smeared all over the staircase the other day, even a child could tell someone was investigating this place.

So, who could it be that suspects me?

Ethel didn't seem like she had told anyone about her experiences.

Theo wouldn't have sat idly by if he had heard those stories—he's not that kind of person.

Isabel?

Maybe. It's possible she found my frequent disappearances in the mornings, even while still attending the academy, suspicious.

With her holy power and some knowledge of magic, she might've been the one who investigated the mansion.

Or perhaps it was one of the few noble families still capable of maintaining their influence, who had previously had a lengthy discussion with us.

Honestly, that seemed like the most reasonable explanation.

Except, of course, for the fact that this world has a "protagonist."

A villain who seeks to massacre abused demons—what a perfect one-time episode plotline.

No matter who it was, I had to muddle through and keep my secrets hidden.

What I was doing.

How I was wringing out every ounce of this family's power to carry out such an unproductive task.

It wasn't normal to bring in stray demons or those considered private property on such a large scale and forcibly subdue them.

The idiotic emperor had decreed that demons should be dealt with appropriately, punishing those who did wrong.

Dragging them all here, putting magic seals on their necks, and killing the disobedient ones—while not technically disobedience to the emperor's words—could easily be seen as overstepping my bounds.

In a case this big, even with my esteemed parents gone, it wouldn't be impossible, though difficult, to topple my brother, who had just seized power.

These thoughts lingered as I bid farewell to the children.

Ethel stepped forward from Theo's side, standing in front of me again, while Theo and Isabel, slightly startled, waved goodbye.

"Ellen, can I stay the night?"

"What if I say no?"

"Then I'll give up and leave. What else could I do?"

"Come in. You seem to have a lot to talk about."

I led Ethel to the guest room and then went to the bathroom to wash up.

Was it because I'd done so much today? My body felt heavy and sluggish.

At first, the showerhead only spouted hot water, but after a while, it balanced into a comfortable temperature.

By the way, would Ethel even know how to use this?

Well, she'll figure it out.

I called a passing servant and told them to bring tea to the guest room in case Ethel got thirsty while we talked. Then, I headed back.

After quickly washing up, drying my hair, and changing into a simple gown, I went to the room I'd assigned to Ethel and knocked.

She opened the door with a slightly stiff expression.

As I stepped inside, I heard the sound of running water.

"Did you leave the faucet on in the bathroom?"

At my question, Ethel's tense face turned a little red.

"I didn't know how to turn it off…"

I walked into the bathroom and turned off the faucet. Dragging a chair to the center of the room, I sat down and propped my legs on the table.

“So, what made you want to stay the night? I can’t imagine our talk in the parlor was pleasant enough to relive.”

“…It still haunts me when I try to sleep.”

That was a rather troubling answer. It wasn’t something I could smile about.

“Judging by Theo’s demeanor, you didn’t tell him about it. Why not?”

“If I did, do you think Theo would’ve let you off the hook?”

No, he wouldn’t have.

But that would’ve been it.

“He might’ve tried to do something, but it wouldn’t have worked. He wouldn’t even be able to force a tough conversation with me.”

Unless he put a blade to my throat, I wouldn’t stop.

“In the end, nothing would be resolved.”

As I pondered what to say next, someone knocked on the door.

A servant brought in a tea set with ice floating in the tea. I took it from them and resumed my conversation with Ethel.

“Where were we?”

I took a sip of the tea and frowned. It was horribly bitter and astringent.

The servant who usually made tea this bad must’ve died.

They’d probably poured boiling water straight in and left it steeping too long.

“Oh, right. Even if Theo knew, nothing would get resolved.”

“That’s why… I thought I’d try begging you instead.”

“Begging me? That’s unexpected. I thought you’d resort to threats.”

I had imagined her clinging to Theo, crying about how difficult it was in the underground, shedding tears to sway him.

He’s altruistic enough to save a halfwit getting mugged on the street.

“Threats? You’re the one who threatened me, Ellen. Don’t you remember?”

“Threatened? All we had were trivial conversations.”

Ethel bit her lip and stared at me.

Well, I could at least listen to her story—as long as it wasn’t too troublesome.

“Just so you know, I can’t help with anything too problematic.”

“The kids. Just tell me where they are, what happened to them.”

“What kids?”

“The ones you took with my parents. You know who I mean.”

“Oh, those?”

Ethel ground her teeth audibly.

“I don’t care if you call them beasts or demons. But to me, they were childhood friends—kids I played with before I even entered the academy.

And that couple you said you killed? They were people who welcomed me into their home and shared meals with me.”

The bitterness of the tea mirrored the weight of the story.

“Are they alive? Or are they dead?

To you, it might just be a grim story, but to me—and to the Rosenberg family—they were like family.”

Perhaps to the Rosenbergs, they were people—neighbors who were truly close.

Considering how non-authoritarian and approachable the Rosenberg family was, it wouldn’t be surprising.

Then what does that make my actions?

What does it mean for everything I’ve done up until now?

And what about what happened to me and my family?

Instinctively, warnings flashed in my head.

Don’t even think about entertaining such foolish thoughts.

“E-Ellen…?”

When I didn’t respond for a long time, Ethel called my name hesitantly.

Grasping my trembling lips with my left hand, I bit down hard.

The sharp pain of my canines digging into my lips, and the warm trickle of blood down my chin, brought me back to focus.

“Who cares.”

Living with pets that mimicked humans perfectly—what a lovely little story that would make.

But how would I know what happens to a dog after it bites a person?

I slammed the teacup I was holding against the table.

The cup shattered, shards scattering everywhere, and the vile tea spilled all over my clothes.

“Kyah!”

At least the scent was pleasant. I could pretend it was perfume.

Clenching a piece of the broken cup in my right hand, I squeezed it tightly.

As the pain registered, the trembling in my lips and the corner of my eyes began to subside, replaced by a sense of clarity.

“Ethel, when you throw trash into the garbage bin, do you bother remembering where it goes?”

Trash goes to the incinerator, or maybe it’s locked away in a cage somewhere underground. Who cares where it ends up?

“Ellen, wait—your hand is…”

“They’re probably still alive for now.”

Even as I released my grip, the shards of glass clung stubbornly to my hand, embedded too deeply.

The trembling in my lips had stopped, so I used my left hand to pull out the pieces stuck in my right.

“You’re bleeding! Let me—let me heal it—”

“Shut up!”

As I yanked the glass free, sticky sounds accompanied the drops of blood falling to the floor. Ethel gulped and instinctively stepped closer to me.

Pathetic insects, all of them.

Even now, Ethel cared more about whether I was hurt than whether they were alive or dead.

Yet I couldn't suppress a flicker of anger.

I wasn't even sure why I was so mad.

Still, I smeared the blood on my hand across Ethel's face.

"Go wash this off in the shower. Oh, and while you're at it, figure out how to turn off the water you left running earlier."

My gaze fell to the floor. Glass shards were strewn across the room.

Leaving a guest in such a messy space wouldn't do, so my petty act of revenge was already a failure.

I went to the bathroom, dampened a towel, and handed it to her.

When she didn't take it, I wiped her face myself.

Finally, she pushed the towel away and spoke. Her face, now clean of blood, returned to its usual pretty appearance.

This habit of lashing out physically when I'm angry… I really needed to fix it.

"This isn't the time for this!" she shouted.

If she meant I should rush down to the basement to look for those vermin she mistook for family, then yes, this was precisely the time for it.

Wiping the blood off her face took precedence over their survival.

"Want to take a fresh shower instead? The family just made a new batch of soap—it lathers really…"

"This isn't the time to be saying stuff like that! Look at your hand—it's injured!"

"Oh, right. The room's a mess. I'll send someone to clean it up and change the room for you."

"You need treatment first—"

"It's nothing serious—AAAGH!"

I slammed my fist onto the desk, shouting in frustration.

Ethel stared at me, her eyes wide with confusion, disbelief, and perhaps even a hint of fear.

Maybe she thought I was insane.

I hoped she did.

“Ethel, I’ll never understand you. Not because I can’t, but because I won’t.”

She didn’t respond.

“Get some rest. I’ll send someone to wake you for breakfast tomorrow. Enjoy your meal before you leave.”

I quickly left the room, closing the door behind me.

Then, I slumped down in front of it.

As I placed my hands on the floor to steady myself, the sharp pain in my palm surged again.

My vision blurred on one side, and for a moment, the world seemed to spin.

A nosebleed started.

I felt dizzy.

It hurt.

“Damn it.”

I muttered softly to myself.

18

Chapter 18

As I walked down the hallway after leaving the door, I noticed Julian standing there, his expression grim.

I tried to step around him, but he shifted slightly to block my way.

“Have I been working you too hard?”

“No, this is something I wanted to do.”

“Take a break. Don’t even think about stepping into the parlor.”

“Don’t you trust me?”

“I don’t. A counselor can’t afford to lose themselves in personal feelings.”

Julian grabbed my injured right hand and began reciting a spell.

My last remaining family member looked at my hand with a complicated expression.

In a world where injuries could be healed with a few simple incantations, did it really matter whether one got hurt or not?

“Hey, Julian.”

“You know, you could just call me ‘brother.’ No need to use my name…”

“I’m not the bad one here, right?”

Julian didn’t answer.

So, I changed the question slightly.

“...I’m doing all this because of the demons, aren’t I?”

“Yes, it’s all because of the demons.”

“By the way, did you really talk to that friend of yours? For someone who supposedly argued with you, she seemed awfully concerned about your injury.”

I didn’t expect to hear that here, of all places.

Just as Alicia had once said, I seemed to embody someone who had lost all dreams, innocence, and sentimentality.

“So, you heard the whole conversation in there?”

“You’re the one who put a spell on the guest room, remember?”

“Oh, right. I did.”

“From a young age, you always came up with ideas like that—delicate and focused ways of managing conversations, especially when dealing with people’s minds.”

Perhaps I needed to reflect on whether my methods were too brutal, even if the term “delicate” was an ironic description of something like water torture.

Even if healing magic could fix everything, I’d been far too rough with people.

I let out a dry laugh at the irony.

“You call that ‘comforting’?”

“Why, is there a problem?”

“If you’d said something like that to someone you were dating, they’d seriously wonder if you were fit to be in a relationship.”

“...That bad?”

“Yeah.”

Looking at my right hand, the trembling had stopped, whether from pain or irritation, and the flesh had slowly started to heal.

I watched my mending hand and muttered quietly, avoiding looking at Julian’s face. I didn’t know what expression I might be wearing.

“Anyway, whoever it is, I think I’ve been half-exposed. You must’ve seen the traces on the stairs and noticed how the flies buzzing around here have increased.”

“I caught a couple of those ‘flies’ and had a little chat. Turns out they were just idiots snooping around for some spare change.”

“When did you even catch them?”

“Regardless, if it’s your friends, you can just gag them for now and let them go later.”

“I doubt we can hold them. Even if thirty of you came, Theo would easily take you all on.”

“...That strong?”

Julian’s face grew serious.

It was an absurd claim, but Julian always took my words at face value. Everything I'd said or done so far had proven right, after all.

Theo really was a troublesome individual. Strong enough to pose a problem yet caught in that liminal space between boyhood and adulthood.

Adults are bound by duties and responsibilities, but boys aren't.

"If that wasn't the case, I'd have just locked him in the parlor and fed him water through his nose."

"We should proceed quickly, then."

"What if something goes wrong?"

"Things are already going wrong, and we're managing, aren't we?"

That's the limit of our current pace.

If we try to go faster and push harder, something is bound to break.

A mass escape of demons, another loss of a precious mage, or the nullification of the spells implanted in their necks.

We're already doing our best.

It's better to move slowly and keep things under wraps than to speed up and risk total failure.

But Julian seemed oddly impatient.

"Anyway, take a break for now. I'll handle everything."

"How?"

"Somehow."

And if all else fails, maybe I'll host an underwater wedding. Put them all on a boat, sail them into the open sea, tie their legs, and let them loose in the water.

At least we'd have dealt with the problem.

Where could I even get a boat? The family we were once allied with has fallen apart after losing not only their daughter but also their heir.

"...Alright."

Julian said no more and returned to his office.

It'll all be over soon. In a few days, I'll go back to attending the academy as usual, keeping a close eye on Theo. That'll be enough.

I glanced at my right hand. Only faint traces remained where the injury had been.

Returning to my room, I lay on the bed and closed my eyes.

I must've been more tired than I thought because I fell asleep quickly.

Though it didn't last. Nightmares woke me before long.

Still, an hour of rest was better than none.

As the morning sun rose, I sent a servant to deliver breakfast to Ethel. Today, I decided to follow Julian's advice and take a break.

But what does "resting" even mean?

Was staring out the window and watching the scenery supposed to count as rest?

Looking out, I felt an urge to go out and capture some demons.

Or maybe gather intel in the area.

What does it mean to rest?

Thinking about it, I realized I'd never truly rested since I first learned to walk.

As a child, I dedicated myself to learning how to live as a member of this household.

After that, I studied how to shoot a gun and picked up basic self-defense skills.

Even in my spare time, I constantly read books. Once I entered the academy, I always smiled and laughed with the other kids while endlessly observing them.

Watching for anything suspicious, anything dangerous.

Now, when told to take a break and left to do nothing…

I leaned back in my chair and took a sip of bitter tea. Not for its taste or aroma, but for the caffeine.

Ethel had stopped by my room earlier, but I sent her away—I didn't want to see her face. I suppose the next time we'll meet will be at the academy.

If only I could at least sleep. An hour of rest was rare, and I'd usually drift in and out of consciousness every ten minutes or so.

I sat and stared into the void, endlessly, constantly.

It was all I could do while not dealing with demons.

And so, a week passed with me doing absolutely nothing.

***

The day to resume classes arrived.

Wearing the crisp white uniform, which felt unfamiliar after so long, I headed to school.

The classroom, which had felt empty before, was now slowly filling up as students trickled in.

Enough time had passed since that day for the shadows on their faces to disappear.

Instead, there were only tired expressions from wanting more vacation, or fleeting glances here and there.

Once all the students had arrived, a figure who appeared to be our teacher entered the classroom.

It seemed our previous homeroom teacher had died or been injured.

“Hello, students. I’m your new teacher starting today.”

Apparently, the old teacher—a mage—had died, and she was here to fill the vacancy.

Most students showed little interest in the curvy woman’s self-introduction. Her face gradually twisted with disappointment at their lack of response.

Class began.

Since I already knew the material, there was no need to pay attention. I simply pretended to listen while seated.

At the academy, I was quiet, reserved, and model behavior incarnate.

Being too active would make me stand out and keep me from moving around unnoticed.

I spent a good while scribbling notes and brainstorming more efficient ways to handle demons until lunchtime arrived.

Feeling queasy, I intended to skip lunch, but Theo came to fetch me with his usual entourage.

“It’s been a while, Ellen.”

“It’s only been a week.”

“That still counts as a while.”

“‘A while’ is more fitting for Miss Diana over there. Long time no see, Diana.”

A useless mage.

Her magical power and talent surpassed anyone’s, but she had no solid will or goal to speak of.

Not someone I needed to be close to, but not someone I needed to avoid either.

Her family probably hadn’t suffered any casualties during the recent chaos. Her father had died when she was young, and her mother, a mage of similar caliber, was still alive.

“How long are you going to keep calling me ‘Miss Diana’?”

“Haha, it still feels a bit awkward to call you by just your name.”

Closing the book I’d been reading, I stood up and spoke with a slightly brazen tone as I joined Ethel by Theo’s side.

“Let’s just go eat.”

Lunch consisted of a simple stew and bread at a restaurant near the academy.

Perhaps because it had been a while, the students inside were laughing and chatting, their sorrows seemingly left behind.

I understood the notion of moving forward, leaving grief, hatred, and resentment behind.

But I was too weak to let go of the years I’d endured.

Instead, twisted thoughts filled my mind, resenting those who laughed and ate as though nothing had happened.

I forced bread into my mouth and chewed mechanically.

At some point, I realized the conversation had stopped.

Looking up, I saw everyone staring at me—silent, unmoving.

Theo, Ethel, Petra the half-demon, Isabel, and Diana.

Their gazes were fixed on me. Their eyes bulged unnaturally from their sockets, and their necks twisted at odd angles.

They smiled eerily, whispering in unison.

“You should just die already.”

“You should’ve died instead of Alicia.”

***

“I know… I know,” I muttered as I stood up.

My legs gave way, and I stumbled backward, falling.

Apparently, it was still the middle of class.

The teacher, my classmates, and Ethel were staring at me in shock.

I muttered an excuse.

“...It was just a dream.”

19

Chapter 19

Class ended, and it was time for a break.

Ethel, who had been sitting at a distance, approached me.

Our eyes met, but neither of us spoke first.

Should I ask if she enjoyed the breakfast I sent her that day?

I had told myself repeatedly that once the semester began, I'd act naturally, like we used to. But that was easier said than done.

"Is your injury okay?"

"Yeah, it's all healed."

"…I see."

If things were truly as they had been, we'd be exchanging meaningless small talk and laughing over trivial things by now.

That's what friends are supposed to do.

Ethel once said we were still friends, but that was just a pleasant lie.

A hollow, contradictory one at that.

"Ellen, that thing you said last time… was it true?"

Julian had told me to rest. Maybe I should stop, now that I am back at the academy. It was only ever a suggestion, after all.

Though I'd lashed out and shattered a cup in anger back then, I remembered everything I said clearly.

I had, without realizing it, told Ethel that the demons I'd taken might still be alive.

"I don't know what you mean."

Ethel's expression mixed desperation, anger, and perhaps sorrow.

"Besides, this doesn't seem like the kind of thing to talk about here."

"…You're right. Should we grab lunch?"

“If you’re paying.”

“…You’ve got plenty of money.”

I grinned and showed her my empty pockets.

“I forgot and left it behind.”

Ethel sighed and helped me to my feet.

“Come to think of it, didn’t Theo say he’d be looking for us at lunch?”

“Then we can go to a café afterward.”

“…Alright.”

A minute later, Theo appeared with Isabel and Diana in tow.

“Still walking around with women on both arms, I see, Theo.”

“‘On both arms’? They’re just friends…”

“If you asked a stranger, they’d never believe that.”

“…Fair enough. Anyway, let’s all go eat together. It’s been a while.”

***

We left the academy grounds and strolled toward the shopping district. The streets were bustling again, full of people and energy.

It was hard to believe this same place had been a fiery hellscape just a month ago.

Lost in thought, I was gazing around when Diana struck up a conversation.

She wasn’t someone I respected enough to call “senior,” so I just referred to her as “Miss Diana.”

“H-Hey, Ellen, it’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

In hindsight, the fact that Diana wasn’t stuttering should’ve tipped me off that something was odd.

“Yes, it has been a while, Miss Diana.”

“Y-You’re still calling me that? Why won’t you call me ‘senior’?”

“Because Theo could probably charm me in a heartbeat, so I call him ‘senior.’ You, on the other hand, are a senior and I don’t have to worry about charming myself.”

“Oh, s-so we’re close friends, then?”

Ethel shot me a tired look, likely because she knew this was just another performance of mine.

She probably found it unsettling, given everything I’d done.

The reason I wasn’t the head of the family was simple: Julian wouldn’t have let Ethel walk free.

He would’ve extracted every bit of information and killed her brutally. Even if he let her live, she’d never see the sun again.

Our parents had known the truth: I was weak, fragile, and incapable.

In the end, hadn’t I proven them right by failing and losing Alicia before my very eyes?

By the time I was struggling to manage my expression, we’d arrived at the restaurant.

Since Ethel was paying, I ordered the cheapest stew and bread. It wasn’t inexpensive, but it was the least costly option.

As we ate, Theo suddenly spoke up.

“Ellen, sorry for dropping by unannounced that day.”

I thought we’d already moved past that incident, so his apology caught me off guard.

“Oh, apologizing only now? I’d almost forgotten about it, but now it’s awkward again.”

“I just felt like I needed to say it.”

“You’re welcome to visit again if you’d like—just give me a heads-up next time.”

Theo’s face showed mild surprise.

“When you say ‘brother,’ you mean the head of your house?”

“Yes.”

After finishing the meal with casual conversation, I grabbed Ethel by the wrist and led her into an alley behind the restaurant.

“Ethel, about going to a café—oh.”

Ethel, who had followed me into the alley, was crouching down, trembling.

Even from behind, I could see the flush spreading up her neck, as if her embarrassment was making her overheat. She buried her face in her knees and muttered.

“Ellen, I’m scared of you.”

“I see.”

I’d thought I was closer to an ordinary girl at this moment than the counselor from the parlor.

What part of me reminded her of that role?

Maybe working with my face exposed had been a mistake.

“Why did you do that to me?”

Because her parents, the Rosenbergs, had taken so many demons and vanished.

Because I had to find them, cage them, or dispose of them.

“…Why did you do that to me?”

Her voice sounded like she’d burst into tears if I didn’t answer.

Feeling a bit dizzy, I responded instinctively.

“Because you were hiding demons.”

“For that? Those children weren’t even there that night!”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“Then why did you kill the Hanton couple?”

She must have been referring to what fled toward Sorghum Farm with its young.

“Because they ran away.”

“But Lady Hanton stopped, didn’t she? She didn’t even resist. So why did you blow her head off in front of the child?”

Did Count Rosenberg tell her?

I should have just dealt with him. There was little overlap between us anyway.

Anyone who survived the parlor is dangerous, especially if they have a voice or power.

“She ran once, and she resisted once. Something that happens once is bound to happen again. In that sense, I was simply solving the problem.”

I pulled Ethel to her feet and pushed her against the wall.

“E-Ellen…?”

Then, from inside my coat, I drew a pistol and aimed it under her chin.

“Remember this, Ethel. Stop poking around like this.”

I pressed the muzzle firmly against her jaw. Judging by her trembling hands, it seemed to have the desired effect.

“I’ll endure it once, even if you bring Theo into this or stir up trouble. But there won’t be a next time.”

“…So, you did know what I was asking about all along.”

“Yes. Those beasts you love so much are probably still alive. Do you know how bothersome and costly it is to kill something? Even the bullets I used on those Hanton fools were a waste.”

Finding them, capturing them, locking them up, feeding and clothing them, and slowly disposing of them so the incinerator can keep up—it’s a process that drains both time and money.

Even listing the steps makes me feel like I can hear the sound of money slipping away.

“Pretend you didn’t see anything. If you hear something, block your ears. If you feel like talking, bite your tongue. That’s your job. Don’t make me regret letting you live.”

I removed the pistol from Ethel’s neck and tucked it back into my coat.

Julian claimed he was handling things quickly, but it seemed there hadn’t been any significant problems yet.

If there had, I’d have already heard about the chaos somewhere.

I touched my face, feeling tears and the distorted expression there.

Scraping it away with my nails and adjusting my features with my hands, I restored the usual cheerful smile I wore.

Ethel looked at me with pity.

I didn’t understand why.

I wasn’t someone who deserved pity.

“Ethel, let’s stop this pointless, boring talk. Let’s go back to class.”

“…Alright.”

Her eyes hadn’t lost their spark.

In fact, her face showed a look of determination—a look I’d seen far too many times.

The kind of look those deluded counseling subjects had when they thought their connections could protect them.

Even when their nails were ripped out and their limbs broken, they’d say, “You’ll pay for this one day.”

If I left her alone, would she call Theo?

I stopped and watched her walk for a moment.

Noticing I wasn’t beside her, she turned back, her expression curious.

“Aren’t you coming?”

“Go ahead. I’m feeling a bit dizzy.”

Should I deal with her now?

If Theo came, I wouldn’t be able to handle him.

I raised the pistol again, aiming at Ethel’s head with one eye closed for precision.

“There’s no way I can do it.”

The gun slipped from my hand, clattering to the ground.

If I were the kind of person who could go through with this, I would have disposed of her back in the parlor.

What would I even do with my life when all this was over?

I had never once thought about what came after the demons were dealt with.

I hadn’t even considered that such a moment might come.

Worrying about an uncertain future was pointless when I was still acting as if my unfinished work was already done.

I could think about it later.

I picked up the dusty gun, brushed it off, and returned it to my coat.

Then, I made my way back to the classroom.

When I walked in, Ethel glanced at me but didn’t say anything.

It felt like it was time to start working again.

If I kept myself busy, moved more, and handled things quickly, these intrusive thoughts would disappear.

What does it matter?

Even if Theo came and killed me, I could leave a lasting mark on this world.

I could leave behind the version of myself that remembered Alicia.

20

Chapter 20

For the first time in a while, I stepped into the underground, and the familiar damp, musty smell filled my nose.

As I slowly walked through the corridors, taking in my surroundings, I spotted Marco rushing between the incinerator and the cages, wearing a mask.

“Oh, miss? What brings you here?”

“I’ve had enough rest. Especially during such a busy time. I’ve come to help.”

“Then don’t get your hands dirty. Get the lord’s permission and deal with the paperwork alongside the other ink-stained wretches. We’ve got too much going on—disguising shipments, transporting them, and racking up all kinds of costs…”

Marco, who usually looked robust, now had dark circles under his eyes and seemed half-dead.

We’d said the work needed to speed up, but this was the result—piling up tasks without adding more hands to handle them, grinding people down in the process.

It wasn’t necessarily bad, but mistakes became more likely this way.

***

After making an appearance before Julian, I headed to where the mages were gathered, diligently reading through and stamping document after document.

It must have been about two hours before one of the mages spoke up in surprise.

“M-Miss? When did you get here?”

“I’ve been here for a while.”

At the sound of “miss,” the other mages, buried in paperwork, glanced up to confirm my presence and offered their greetings before quickly returning to their tasks.

Though they were swamped, they kept stamping and signing without pause.

“Are they not implanting spells anymore?”

“Oh, that’s being handled by a different group. We rotate duties—this one’s easier on the body.”

Now that he mentioned it, there were some faces I didn’t see around.

I couldn’t cast complex spells, so I didn’t understand the extent of their difficulty, but it must’ve been more grueling than being buried in this mountain of documents.

“Where are the ones implanting the spells being sent?”

“They’re being returned to the farm we brought them from. A lot of them resist, thinking they’re being sent to be disposed of, and… well, let’s just say it doesn’t always go smoothly.”

“That sounds like a hassle.”

“It is. But once this is over, everyone will get to lock themselves away in their favorite spots and rest happily for at least six months.”

***

-“Aaaaaah! Spare me!”

-“What did I do wrong?!”

Screams echoed from outside, loud enough to shake the entire underground.

The mages, accustomed to this, barely reacted.

“Man, that guy sure has a loud voice.”

“The loud ones usually explode right after you slap a collar on them.”

“Don’t even talk about it. What’s worse is when a meek one suddenly goes pop after you collar them—it’s a mess.”

They must have been referring to the enchantments on the collars.

The ones being dragged off to die were mostly demons who had caused chaos that night.

Of course, there were innocents among them, but hatred and rebellion against humans spread quickly.

Like with chickens infected by disease, it was often best to bury the entire flock to prevent further spread.

-“You filthy beasts! Get inside, now!”

-“I won’t just die here—I’ll find a way to escape!”

-“Kill all the humans!”

The commotion grew louder, followed by the sound of a heavy impact and more screams.

“This isn’t good. I think we should check it out,” one of the mages said.

Setting down their paperwork, they quickly stood and headed outside.

Not knowing if I’d be of any use, I grabbed my pistol and followed.

About five people were attempting to herd what must have been nearly a hundred demons into a single area for transportation—likely onto a boat.

The manpower was absurdly insufficient. Their equipment wasn’t much better, with only a few metal batons and a single firearm between them.

While they worked tirelessly to subdue the frenzied demons, one of the workers was dragged into the chaos.

What followed was a horrific scream, and bits of flesh and blood sprayed everywhere as the demons tore him apart.

The mages responded by chanting spells and firing them at the crowd of demons.

There was no need to aim carefully—everything in front of them was a target.

The demons hit by the spells were riddled with holes, turning into leaking, crushed fruit.

Despite the carnage, the remaining workers resumed lifting subdued demons and continued the transport.

“Who’s cleaning that up?”

“We’re already short on janitors, and now this mess…”

“Poor bastard. At least he’ll get a decent payout. The compensation alone should be enough to send his kids to the academy.”

“That’s true. You could send them even if you stayed here, though.”

“Exactly. That’s why he’s the only one to feel sorry for.”

The mages clicked their tongues in pity for the deceased, then returned to the office, overwhelmed by the sheer amount of remaining work.

Not long after, two workers arrived to clean up the mess.

I watched them work for a while before heading back to the office.

By the time I had pushed the earlier events to the back of my mind and completed the remaining documents, most of the work was done.

I had no idea how many hours had passed, but my body felt stiff.

After fetching a cup of water from the shelf and taking a sip, I leaned against the wall, gripping my aching head.

One of the mages approached me.

“Miss, we can handle the rest. You’ve done enough for today.”

“Really? Then I’ll leave it to you. Good work. See you tomorrow.”

“Yes, goodbye.”

Despite my age, I was wasting away in this underground, grinding down my life. I’d have to talk to Julian or find someone myself to set me up with a proper match once this was over.

Someone handsome, poor, and uneducated from a lower noble family would suffice.

I wandered the corridors and inspected the cages.

Since the last time I’d dealt with a certain demon by breaking its legs and giving it some food and proper clothing, none of them seemed to be starving to death.

Still, since we’d be killing them soon, it might be easier to cut off their food altogether.

While lost in thought, I heard the sound of something rattling the iron bars.

Turning toward the source, I saw a demon who had supposedly graduated from the academy. The lower half of its legs were entirely rotted, and it gripped the bars as it glared at me.

“I cooperated fully, just as you said. I showed no resistance. And yet this is the treatment I get. It seems trusting you humans was a mistake after all.”

“Oh, um… Are you talking to me?”

"Sure, if breaking my legs meant you'd—"

“I never promised you good treatment or anything like that. I only said you’d get food and clothes. I understand wanting to remember things in a way that suits you, but I haven’t been involved in executions for a long time.”

“…Please, at least spare those who have nothing to do with this.”

“We are sparing them. If they undergo the procedure, they’ll return to the surface, farm, and live ordinary lives.”

“Living with bombs implanted in our necks, where even the slightest disobedience or resistance means death—can that really be called living?”

“For humans, no, it wouldn’t be a life. But for livestock, it seems fitting, doesn’t it? Judging by your refusal to wear the collar, I think you already know how this ends.”

“…I’d rather die than live as a slave.”

“Not a bad choice. One less thing to deal with makes my job easier.”

“You always manage to talk like such a complete bastard, don’t you?”

Looking around, I realized only two guards were stationed here. Neither of them were mages. If a riot broke out, they wouldn’t be able to stop it.

The real problem was the lack of people.

And that was all because demons had killed so many of our family’s people.

The reason I was working so hard, grinding myself down—it was all because of demons.

The demon gripping the bars seemed to lose its strength, slumping to the ground with a sigh.

“I should’ve made my move the day they brought me here.”

“This is simply you reaping the consequences of what you did that night. The only difference is that while you acted on savage instincts, we’re using the full power of civilization to commit the same kind of barbaric acts.”

“So, you’re at least aware enough to call it barbaric. You admit this is an evil act?”

Ah, that was a slip of the tongue.

Maybe I was more tired than I realized.

“I’m fully aware that this will go down in history as a foolish cycle of revenge or a terrible story. There are plenty of demon sympathizers out there. It’s a wretched reality, but there it is.”

“…If you know that, then why—?”

Good question.

I didn’t answer and walked out of the cages.

When I checked my watch, it was nearly sunrise.

I was a bit sleepy, but I could just open a book at the academy and nap. That’d be enough.

As I exited the underground, I suddenly felt the weight of a presence—or perhaps countless eyes on me.

I looked around, but there was nothing there.

It wasn’t my imagination.

Who could it be?

Unfortunately, I didn’t have Theo’s sharp instincts or superhuman physical abilities.

Nor did I have the overflowing talent for magic like Diana or Isabel.

And I wasn’t like Ethel, with a mind full of magical theories.

Someone like me, with no special abilities, could only observe.

I scanned my surroundings, but there was nothing.

Letting out a sigh, I walked back into the mansion.

After throwing on my uniform and grabbing my books and writing supplies, I got into the carriage and headed to school.

Exhaustion and annoyance were my only companions.

Perhaps they were my only friends now.

Not that it wasn’t my fault.

21

Chapter 21

About two weeks had passed.

It was becoming increasingly difficult to stick with others.

Since my parents—who had initially told me to keep an eye on people—were already dead, I had been spending breaks and lunch times alone lately.

Theo-sunbae was so persistent that even if I holed up in some corner of the school eating bread, he would still find me.

Aside from things like that, I thought I had been managing to live decently in my own way—but perhaps not.

After class, I had to walk home these days because all the carriage drivers had been reassigned underground.

And then, Theo-sunbae blocked my way.

Isabel, Diana, and Ethel were nowhere to be seen.

I thought he usually hung out with Petra and her companions after class, but perhaps I was wrong.

"…Ellen, how about we have a little chat? It's been a while."

"What kind of chat?"

"You've just seemed tired and stressed lately.

You've been deliberately keeping your distance and spending time alone. I wanted to check if something's going on."

"If we keep standing here on the street, people might think you're confessing to me, and they'll start giving us awkward looks. Shall we move somewhere else?"

It was meant to be a joke, but Theo didn't laugh.

Of course, it wasn't just empty words—I'd actually noticed some curious gazes.

So, we walked down the street together for quite some time.

Apparently bored, Theo couldn't hold back and asked, "Where are we going?"

"Anywhere. Your house, my house—it doesn’t matter. Or we could go to a café and get something to drink."

The streets were clean.

It was as if the horror from a month ago now only existed in people's memories.

The townspeople smiled as they passed each other on the street, and the marketplace bustled with shoppers.

Memory was a strange thing.

Before the loss came, I’d paid no attention to sights like these.

My focus had been only on the person next to me and the things I was interested in.

But now, I found myself looking around, comparing the present view with the scenes of the past, as if confirming whether they matched.

Back then, the scenery hadn’t mattered to me at all.

The landscapes remained vivid in my memory, but Alicia’s face was fading away.

Even though I had a photograph of her.

Maybe it was because she had been the only person who greeted me when I returned home, someone I hadn’t cared much for back then.

Now, I was walking alongside someone I wasn’t interested in, exchanging words I didn’t care about, with no Alicia by my side.

And even if I went home, there would be no one to welcome me.

Julian was hardly human anymore—he was no better than an empty shell of a corpse.

A robot living out a programmed routine after losing everything.

Where had Alicia gone?

I didn’t want to think about silly notions like her going to heaven or hell after death.

Life on the grand wheel created by the almighty already spun endlessly. If that life wasn’t even happy, it was nothing but torment.

"My house is nearby. Let’s go there," Theo said.

"And what do you plan to do with a grown woman at your house? Ahaha."

"That’s not what I mean."

Of course, I knew that wasn’t his intention, but wouldn’t it be better to just take the joke?

I could already guess what he wanted to say next.

True to his words, it took about two minutes of walking before we arrived at a modest house.

It was an ordinary home, one that wouldn’t feel too cramped for five people to live in.

When we entered, Theo’s siblings ran out to greet him.

A younger sister and a younger brother, it seemed.

"Welcome back!"

"Mom, Brother brought his girlfriend home!"

As his sister ran into the kitchen to announce this to their mother, Theo didn’t bother denying it; he just gave a wry smile.

Then, looking at me still standing at the doorway, he said, "What are you doing, not coming in?"

"Oh, uh. Right. I should come in."

The house was ordinary—nothing luxurious, but nothing shabby either. Just a regular home.

I was… envious.

Following Theo further in, his mother came to greet me.

"So, Theo really brought a girl home. Sweetheart, what’s your name?"

"Ellen Shu… Just Ellen is fine."

No need to mention my last name.

"Wait here in the room. I’ll bring you something to eat."

"Haha, thank you."

Theo’s room was as ordinary as the rest of the house.

Aside from a fancy sword hanging on the wall, it was just a desk piled with books and a single bed.

"So, what did you want to talk about, that you brought me all the way here?"

"…While you've been avoiding us, I've been doing some investigating."

"I don't understand what you mean."

"About the large underground area beneath your mansion…"

Knock. Knock.

The sound of knocking interrupted him, and Theo looked flustered.

His mother must have answered the door, as she soon came into the room holding a tray with two iced drinks and slices of cake.

"I know it's silly, but I couldn't help myself. Please take care of Theo in the future."

She placed the tray on the desk, waved to me, and left.

"What were we talking about?"

The tea was loaded with sugar.

I didn't hate it, but I didn't particularly like it either.

"I wanted to say that I know what's happening beneath your mansion. That's why I brought you here."

The determination in his eyes was apparent, his words unnecessarily grave.

It was a bit unpleasant.

"Ellen, you're not doing it willingly, are you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Theo stood abruptly, as if to yell, but seemed to remember where he was and merely rose from his seat, silent.

"Stop pretending. It's pointless."

Not doing it willingly? Then who was?

"If the head of the Speyer Family—your brother—is forcing you to do this, then help us."

So, he had figured it out.

I'd already sensed that, but I had been hoping it wouldn't be Theo.

And yet, even at a moment like this, he came to me with the ridiculous notion that I wasn’t acting of my own volition.

Such naivety.

Theo wasn’t stupid, but he was someone who wanted to believe in foolishly optimistic answers.

"What exactly do you want me to help with?"

He didn’t answer. Of course not. He didn’t trust me. Then why even bother trying to convince me?

Was I dragged here instead?

If things went south, I might consider taking a hostage—but the only viable option was his mother, who had just brought me this overly sweet tea.

I couldn’t harm children.

Not for any particular reason, but because it just felt wrong.

"You know what’s happening underground, so you must know what I’m doing there too."

"That’s all because your brother…"

I cut him off.

He didn’t even seem to believe his own words, so why say them?

"Theo-sunbae, as you probably know, forced work isn’t exactly efficient.

If someone were to try to make me do something against my will, I wouldn’t obediently comply."

"…So, are you saying you’ve been doing all this willingly?"

"Yes."

"Why on earth?"

"Who knows. Maybe it's what you'd call a purpose in life.

I just needed something like that."

The reason Julian had hastily set everything in motion without much thought was likely because he just wanted to end it all quickly and shut himself away in his room, giving up on everything.

I had Julian, and Julian had me, so neither of us would go as far as committing suicide. But living without doing anything? That much we could manage.

Even getting caught like this didn’t seem like such a bad thing.

What would they even do if I got caught? By now, I’d probably already killed half of them.

My throat felt a bit dry, so I took a sip of the overly sweet tea and crunched down on the ice.

A chilling sensation crept into my gums.

"I did it all because I wanted to. Because I felt like it.

No one else’s will had any influence on me whatsoever.

So, what exactly were you hoping to achieve by bringing me here in the first place?"

"What do you mean, 'hoping to achieve'?"

"You’re lucky to still have your family.

A kind mother, a healthy younger brother, an adorable little sister, and, if I’m not mistaken, your father is still alive too."

"…Are you threatening me?"

It wasn’t as though I was in any position to make threats.

All the manpower that could have been used to kidnap his family had already been ground to dust.

And even if I somehow did, it would only provoke Theo further; there wasn’t anyone who could stop him anyway.

He was a person impervious to bullets and magic—what more could anyone ask for?

"What kind of damn threat would that be, Theo-sunbae?

I’m just envious, that’s all.

If you drag me to your house and show me this harmonious scene, of course thoughts like that are bound to cross my mind."

I cut a small piece of cake with the fork and placed it in my mouth.

It, too, was annoyingly sweet.

"You brought me here saying you wanted to talk.

What exactly is it that you’re so eager to say?"

Theo annoyed me.

Because he was handsome and talented, he believed that just showing up and taking charge would solve everything.

And most of the time, it worked out for him.

Did he really think that pulling me aside for a serious one-on-one conversation would suddenly make me repent, betray my brother, and release all the demons?

"…You said you did everything because you wanted to, by your own will?"

"Yes."

"Breaking their legs, implanting explosive spells in their necks, throwing disobedient ones alive into the incinerator—did you do all that too?"

"What, do you think someone forced me into it?

I actually found it quite enjoya—"

Slap.

A dull sound accompanied by a slight loss of strength.

Theo had slapped me across the face.

My body flew back, crashing into the wall.

22

Chapter 22

"You enjoyed it? Herding people like livestock and killing them off like that?"

It didn’t even feel like he hit me that hard, but my body lifted off the ground and slammed into the wall.

How could anyone win against someone like this?

The loud noise must have startled his mother, as her footsteps soon approached.

She called out from the other side of the door, asking what had happened.

"I tripped while standing up and fell!"

I wasn’t sure if she bought it, but she said "Alright" and walked away.

It’d be nice if she just assumed it was some kind of lovers’ quarrel.

Honestly, if Theo was going to slap me while having this kind of conversation, he should have taken me to some secluded alley or bought a drink and brought me to a quiet spot.

At the very least, he should’ve prepared a sack and a carriage to drag me off if things went south.

"You should really watch yourself when you’ve got your family in the house."

It hurt like hell.

My jaw felt slightly unhinged, as though it wasn’t closing properly.

"That’s something you should watch out for. I already told you—I know what’s happening underground."

Rubbing my cheek, I continued the conversation.

"No need to compliment me, sunbae.

Anyway, let’s cut out the emotional sniping and start a proper dialogue, shall we?"

"…Dialogue about what?"

"You’re the one who brought me here saying you wanted to talk, Theo-sunbae.

Now that you’re flustered, you just go and slap me?"

Theo let out a scoff in response.

Honestly, showing this kind of reaction to a fragile girl like me could almost bring tears to my eyes.

"So even a lunatic who enjoys killing people gets hurt when slapped, huh?"

"I’m not interested in your moral standards, sunbae.

Let’s start with something basic. How’ve you been doing lately?"

He didn’t answer.

Maybe he disliked how forced the conversation seemed.

Inviting someone as unpredictable as me into his house—it was an incomprehensible act.

Then again, Theo probably thought he could subdue me anytime, so it didn’t matter to him.

"Fine, if we can’t have a normal conversation, how about we take turns asking questions? When did you figure it out?"

At that, the man in front of me scowled.

Showing your emotions during a conversation doesn’t really work to your advantage, you know.

"The day you shoved a gun barrel into Petra’s mouth during that argument."

"Oh, you saw that? How embarrassing. You should’ve said something."

"…When did you, or rather, your family, start doing this?"

"If you’re asking about when we started catching and disposing of demons, two days after that incident.

Of course, the interrogation rooms have always been there."

The sticky sweetness of the sugar still clung faintly to the ice, almost nauseatingly so.

Crunching down on the remaining ice, I swallowed it and posed the next question.

"Can’t you just let this slide?"

"If you’re serious about that, how about checking into a psychiatric hospital?"

"Fair enough. Got it."

Maybe I should bow down and lick his shoes.

I mean, I look pretty enough—it might actually work.

"Still, could you at least turn a blind eye for, say, a week? No, just three days?"

"Turn a blind eye? TURN A BLIND EYE?! People are dying in droves in that godforsaken basement right now!"

The more emotional he got, the more composed I remained.

"Sure, to you, they're people, sunbae."

"So demons aren't people, is that it?

Just because one of them killed your family?

If the person who killed your little brother had been a human, would you have dragged every single person in the slums off to be slaughtered?"

His raised voice drew his mother to the room again. She dropped off more snacks before leaving.

Following him here might not have been the worst idea, after all.

Theo scratched the back of his head and pulled a strange object from his drawer, muttering an incantation.

Probably some sort of soundproofing magic.

"Probably."

After his mother left, I answered quietly. Theo turned to me with a slightly dumbfounded expression.

"I know how you see me, sunbae.

Not that acknowledging it changes anything."

We sat in silence for a moment, sipping some overly sweet, lemon-infused tea whose name I didn't know.

Well, I sipped; he stared. Stared so hard it couldn't even be called looking anymore.

"I just want to wipe out every single one of those vile creatures, not leave a single one alive. And you just can't accept that, sunbae.

It's too late.

If the ones who killed Alicia that day had been the humans from the slums, there wouldn’t be a single living soul left there now."

For some reason, the way Theo had been looking at me up until a moment ago—it had been as if he were staring at something he needed to correct or admonish.

"So, you’re saying that just because someone has horns or a tail, they’re nothing but an animal? Is that really what you believe?"

"How many times do I have to say it?

That’s why we’re having this conversation.

What we need is negotiation, dialogue, and compromise."

"And you think dragging people off to that basement and committing atrocities can be resolved through conversation?"

I don’t know.

"Stop this, just stop. Right now, and go back to how things were…."

I brushed aside his plea.

It wasn’t worth considering.

I didn’t come here to stop.

"What’s there to stop, sunbae?"

"You’d better stop looking at me with that miserable expression."

"How about this: I’ll marry you in exchange for letting this go?

I’ll take good care of your parents, and your siblings will live happily ever after.

You can let this unsavory business slide and focus on broadening your options for the future."

"You’re insane, Ellen."

I shrugged, brushing off his words.

"Well, if that doesn’t appeal to you, should I just spread my legs?

I’m a virgin, never been with a man before.

It’s probably the most valuable thing I have, though it might seem a little cheap.

What more could you want? You greedy bastard."

As I said that, I began moving closer to Theo.

He shoved me away, his face twisted with revulsion.

"Or I can marry you and die the next day if that’s what you want.

I’ll leave everything I own to you in a will.

And no, I’m not joking."

Honestly, that stung a bit.

I’d been prepared to sacrifice myself for this—to free myself from the chains of past lives and do what I believed needed to be done.

But being rejected so coldly like this?

If this were a game, wouldn’t a choice prompt have popped up by now?

Accept her proposal or Reject her completely.

"You used to just be a normal kid who loved books.

When did you… when did you become like this?"

"I haven’t changed.

You just find my new face uncomfortable, sunbae.

Because outwardly, I used to be an approachable, ordinary, pretty girl. Someone easy to talk to."

"…I don’t even know what you want from me.

How could you even think to say, 'Let it slide'?"

Why is he asking me that?

"Of course you wouldn’t understand. You’re too perfect to ever understand me, sunbae.

No matter what you try, you succeed. People naturally like you. You’re flawless in every way!"

I stuffed more of the overly sweet snacks into my mouth, grimacing slightly.

Not from irritation, but because they were just that sweet.

"You’re right. I’ll never understand you.

And no one else will want to understand you, either.

Ellen, think about what you’re doing.

This isn’t something that can be resolved through compromise or dialogue."

I wanted to snap the finger he was pointing at me.

But unfortunately, I lacked the strength.

So I just picked at the cake with a fork, eating listlessly.

As his words grew more heated, I let out a soft scoff, mocking him.

Maybe I should provoke him a little.

"Why does it matter to you, sunbae?

Whether I burn demons alive or not, it’s none of your business.

What was your pet’s name again?

Was it Petra? I feel like tossing that pet of yours into the incinerator too."

Did the image flash in his mind?

Theo slapped the fork from my hand.

The cake and plate went flying.

"Crazy bitch."

Clatter.

A loud, dramatic sound echoed.

The plate had shattered. What a waste.

The magical item on his desk must be good—it blocked even this noise.

Otherwise, his mother would have rushed in for sure.

But Theo, who had been yelling furiously moments ago, now had a slightly different look in his eyes.

They were damp.

Not streaming tears, but glistening faintly under the light.

"Should I tell you a sob story instead?

Demons who could walk around with bullets lodged in their heads took a bite out of Alicia, and no one helped.

Even when I turned to the parents I hated depending on, they were burning alive.

That day… that damn day…

Did you see what those filthy bastards were doing in the square?

I'm not insane.

The ones who suddenly gathered there defied the guards and started devouring them.

How could anyone just stand by? How can you see them as people?"

If I started crying here, it'd turn into a cheap melodrama.

So I pressed my palm against my eyes, hard.

My eyeballs felt like they were about to pop out, but at least the tears stopped.

"Anyway, can't you just let it go?"

Normally, if a pretty girl cried and begged, people would cave.

Even though I had accidentally teared up during my performance—he had to give in, right?

"Go to hell."

Guess not.

I shrugged, trying to hide my frustration.

"You're impossible.

Want me to hand over my brother's head or something?"

"…If necessary."

"Well, do your best, then.

I'll put up a fight, but I doubt it'll make much difference."

I stood and walked out of the room.

Theo’s family, who had apparently been eavesdropping with their ears pressed to the door, toppled over as I opened it.

I ignored the ridiculous scene and kept walking.

It was a mess.

23

Chapter 23

I walked out of the ordinary house in silence.

If I were Theo, I'd have taken advantage of the moment I left to ambush me—knock me out or kill me.

Letting me escape freely back to my base was the kind of mistake only an idiot would make.

But our righteous protagonist didn't seem interested in detaining me, someone so deeply enmeshed in evil.

Perhaps he didn't see me as a threat even if I were free.

Regardless, I walked back to the mansion on my own two feet and entered Julian's office.

As always, Julian was buried in paperwork, stamping documents like a madman.

"You should really knock before coming in, Ellen."

"It's urgent."

"What's the issue?"

"We've been discovered. They've figured out everything we've been doing around the mansion over the past week."

At this, Julian feigned surprise, like an actor in a play.

The sight made me want to smack him.

"Oh my, who found out?"

"Those people who came to the house last time."

"They're just students, aren't they? Can't you deal with them?"

"I told you before—thirty of us couldn't take Theo-sunbae down."

"So, you're saying students were skulking around the mansion for a week, and no one noticed?"

Julian sighed and pulled a cigarette from his pocket, lighting it up as if to steady himself.

At least he didn't smoke opium. That would sap all his strength, leaving him unable to work—though, given his state, I wasn't sure how much that mattered.

As the nicotine started to take effect, Julian rubbed his temples and offered a faintly optimistic comment.

"Maybe they want the demons eradicated as much as we do."

"…You know that’s not even remotely true."

"I don’t like how you only call me 'brother' when it suits you."

Thud.

The sound of his stamp echoed through the room.

Hearing that we’d been discovered didn’t seem to faze him—he wasn’t even checking what he was stamping anymore.

"I refuse to believe a bunch of students could bring this place down."

"Well, what are you going to do if they rally everyone in the mansion? And with the academy head backing them?

Not to mention their close friends are all people with powerful connections."

This country isn’t normal.

It’s like a chimera, patched together by nobles surrounding the emperor.

If this were a proper nation, the army would have crushed any demonic uprisings long ago.

But even the military isn’t centralized; it’s fragmented and scattered.

The fact that Julian and I, mere upstarts with some money and influence, managed to round up and execute demons across the country without interference speaks volumes.

On paper, we’re loyal to a puppet emperor, but in practice, we’re a private organization, answerable to no one.

If someone decided to challenge us, Julian’s head could roll without much consequence—as long as they cleaned up the aftermath.

And if word of what we’ve done in the underground spreads, they wouldn’t even need to worry about the cleanup.

For us, it’s pest control.

But as I’ve said before, the world is full of demon sympathizers.

"So, we’re screwed?"

"Pretty much."

"In three days, this would've all been over. What a shame.

Well, I'll keep it in mind. Go rest in your room."

With that, Julian resumed stamping papers, unconcerned by the possibility of an imminent attack.

Like a machine.

I stared at him for a long moment.

I hated the emptiness in his eyes, as if he had already resigned himself to everything.

Even if I pointed a gun at him, I doubted he'd blink.

"You don't seem worried at all."

"I knew this would happen.

The work was rushed and sloppy. If it succeeded, great. If not, oh well.

And you knew this too, Ellen."

"Fair enough."

"Want to help me decide?

This room has rope, a gun, and a bomb.

I'm leaning toward the bomb—seems dramatic."

Julian spoke so calmly about something so extreme that I found myself walking toward him.

For a moment, I considered throwing the coffee cup on his desk, but the risk of ruining the surrounding documents stopped me.

Instead, I punched him square in the jaw.

I wasn't sure if I'd gotten stronger or if Julian had gotten weaker, but he crumpled to the floor.

Even though I'd hit him because I didn't like what he'd said, it didn't feel satisfying.

If anything, the emptiness inside me felt even stronger.

What had Theo felt when he hit me?

Was it satisfying for him?

Probably. I wasn’t family to him—just a crazy girl.

Not that it matters.

"…You told me not to die, Julian.

Said I was the only one left.

If you were just going to give up and die, why did you spout that crap in the first place?"

Julian rubbed his jaw, which was already swelling, though he didn’t seem to be in much pain.

"Because you are the only one left.

So I don’t need to stick around anymore.

I hate just existing. I’d rather run away."

If "running away" meant the afterlife, no one could stop him.

I hadn’t realized that’s what he’d meant by me being the only one left.

But I couldn’t bring myself to ask him not to die.

I wasn’t as shameless as he was.

Julian got up, dusted off his clothes, and sat back at his desk, resuming his stamping.

"You’re disgustingly irresponsible."

"Apologies for that. If I get hit one more time, I think I’ll collapse, so let’s put the fists away for now."

When will Theo come storming in?

Not that it matters—there’s nothing I can do to prepare anyway.

Julian is probably going to die. He’s the villain, after all.

"Ellen, from now on, capturing and dealing with demons wasn’t our work—it was my work."

If the demons hadn’t caused this mess, our parents would likely have been killed anyway.

By Theo, or captured by someone else.

Our family was a perfect villainous side story, conveniently discarded once the narrative moved on.

"When I die, don’t cry your eyes out over me."

"I’ll cry a little, at least."

"…Sure."

He didn’t seem interested in stopping me.

Our parents, for all their faults, deserved what they got.

Even if there was some faint familial bond, they had been excessively cruel.

When Theo arrives, will I die too?

The thought doesn’t bother me much.

After all, I have nothing left to lose.

But still, I didn’t want to see the people I knew die.

Especially not my family.

"Is it too late to run? I’ll help you. We’re family, after all."

Julian rubbed the spot where I’d punched him earlier.

"What’s there to help with? If they take my head, you’ll survive just fine.

You’re not much of a threat, and if they marry you off to some bloated noble, they’ll likely seize the rest of the estate."

"Julian, if I get married to some bloated noble, what are the odds I don’t hang myself?"

"Not a fan of riddles, but go on."

"Zero. Because I’d put a gun to my temple and pull the trigger."

"Fair point. Hanging does sound painful."

We forced a laugh at our bleak jokes, as if this would somehow make our final conversation lighthearted.

"If this was all revenge, then sure, I’ve killed plenty. But it’s not satisfying.

It’s just disgusting. Killing off those idiotic bastards who think learning some fake martial arts makes them bulletproof isn’t even fun."

"…Are you saying revenge feels hollow?"

"No, it’s not hollow—it’s fulfilling, in a way.

But it’s infuriating to think that the people I loved were killed by such trash.

That’s the disgusting part. And when I think about the people who’d leap to their defense, I want to puke."

Julian stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray.

The faint smell of burnt tobacco lingered in the air.

"Tell the servants they can take tomorrow off."

For a moment, he looked like he was trying to figure out what to do.

After muttering to himself for a while, he seemed to come to a decision, pulling a large key from his pocket and tossing it to me.

"Give them enough money to live comfortably for the rest of their lives."

"Even Marco and the old butler?"

"All of them. Even the apprentice maid who just sweeps the floors."

Saying this, Julian rummaged through a drawer.

"They’ve all worked hard."

Following his instructions, I opened the vault and retrieved a pile of gold coins to distribute among the staff.

I told them everything was over and they should return home with the money.

Even though we’d spent most of our fortune on this operation, there was still plenty left for the servants.

Marco accepted the coins with a smile, while the butler hesitated, likely worried about the family he supported. When I insisted, he finally pocketed them.

The rest of the staff seemed to have anticipated this outcome.

At least they appeared satisfied with the generous compensation.

The advisors and couriers who brought in clients were probably already hiding.

Once the family falls, who will take over the estate?

The world always revolves around the protagonist, so maybe the emperor will hand it over to Theo.

It’s absurd, but that’s just the kind of thing protagonists pull off.

The sun had set, and the moon hung in the sky.

From the hallway, I glanced out the window and saw familiar faces.

Instead of knocking, they drew their swords and sliced through the door.

The steel was over 10 cm thick, yet they cut through it with ease.

What a waste.

If this were a game, each turn would introduce new enemies, with Julian as the final boss.

I headed toward the mansion’s armory—not to fight Theo and his group, though.

There were still plenty of living things in the underground. Before Theo could free them, I needed to eliminate as many as possible.

Arming myself with as many bullets as I could carry, I descended into the basement.

There was work to be done.

24

Chapter 24

I opened the door leading to the underground and descended the stairs. The hallway, usually bustling with servants, was eerily empty.

Feeling my way along the wall, I searched for the light switch. Once I found it, I flipped it on.

The atmosphere was suffocating.

The bright light barely dispelled the eerie feeling, as if a ghost could leap out at any moment, and it wouldn’t seem out of place.

Walking down the first corridor, I reached the pens where the demons had been locked up two weeks ago.

The stench of filth was overwhelming. In one corner lay a rotting corpse—likely one of their own kind, cannibalized. The few still alive were mostly sturdy males.

"Please… spare me…"

"Food… I’m starving… please, anything to eat!"

"Let me out…"

"This place is hell… oh God, please have mercy…"

Hands reached through the iron bars, begging for food.

Some demons supposedly ate iron to survive, though I didn’t care enough to know their names.

Ignoring those on the verge of death, I aimed my gun at the slightly healthier ones and pulled the trigger.

Even with the barrel pointed at them, they neither dodged nor resisted. Perhaps they lacked the strength—or the will.

Aside from the leader’s pen, this was the state of most cells.

Filthy, foul, and reeking.

Come to think of it, I doubt we’ll need this underground space again. I might as well kill them all now and not bother with the incinerator.

Yeah, that works.

No cleanup, no burning, no effort wasted.

It’s all over anyway.

With that thought easing my burden, I walked briskly to the next cell.

There, I came face-to-face with a demon whose legs had entirely rotted away.

"…I saw the humans who were here earlier taking all their belongings and leaving."

"And?"

"No one’s guarding this place anymore…

It seems this madness is finally coming to an end."

"Well, I won’t deny it.

Anyway, a righteous student from the academy has stormed in to save you all."

"A student?"

"Well, technically a student. They’re tearing my house apart to rescue you."

Honestly, it was laughable.

I drew my gun and aimed it at the demon’s head before pulling the trigger.

It wasn’t often you encountered a demon capable of coherent speech.

Still, it was too dangerous to leave them alive.

The bullet barely grazed its forehead, drawing blood but failing to pierce.

Rubbing its bleeding head, the demon stared at me, visibly startled, and asked,

"Why…?"

Was it asking why I was trying to kill it now, or why I was trying to kill it at all?

Probably the latter.

"Do you really think I’d let an intelligent one like you live?

Did you honestly believe I’d spare you?"

At my words, the demon trembled with rage. Dragging its rotting legs, it crawled toward me, pointing a decaying finger as it growled,

"I miss the contempt I faced at school.

At least those humans who mocked me for being a filthy demon still saw me as one of their own."

"Is that so."

"I'll curse you even in death."

"How original. Got anything else?"

The demon didn't respond, glaring at me with eyes filled with hatred.

I checked the remaining bullets in my gun, then pressed the barrel to its forehead and pulled the trigger repeatedly.

A hole finally appeared in its skull, and its body shuddered slightly before going still.

My wrist ached horribly.

Chaos erupted from the opposite cell.

They screamed, cursed, and hurled threats, spitting every insult imaginable.

Apparently, this one had been their moral anchor—the one who sacrificed itself to bring them food and clothing, even graduating from the academy as an elite among demons.

The demons pushed against the iron bars, which groaned under the strain.

Better safe than sorry, I thought, as I aimed at the one gripping the bars and fired.

One collapsed, then another, until six fell, and the others finally retreated from the bars.

Killing, it turns out, isn't all that hard.

For Julian and me, the most difficult part of this job wasn't the act of killing but dealing with the aftermath.

Pulling the trigger was easy.

But the corpses had to be dragged away, burned, or buried. If any fluids spilled, they had to be cleaned up.

The incinerator could only handle so much.

Demons, like other living beings, were full of blood, which dampened the flames unless doused in fuel. And fuel was expensive—especially in the quantities needed to burn a body this size.

Burying them wasn’t an option, either. There was the risk of disease, and finding a place to secretly bury so many demons was nearly impossible.

We had even considered renting a large ship, loading it with the demons, and sinking it in the open sea.

But Theo stormed in before that plan could come to fruition.

Reloading one bullet at a time, I shot the demons beyond the bars.

We had given them enough food to keep them alive and decent clothes, but they dodged like pros.

Not that it mattered—I had plenty of bullets.

A few knelt and begged me not to shoot.

Not that begging would stop me.

I worked too hard dragging this box of bullets here for that.

The least they could do was make it easier by standing still when I aimed.

"Dad, Mom… And then, after them, it’s me, right?"

Sitting directly on the cold floor without even a cushion, I leaned back, aiming lazily as I pulled the trigger over and over. My back ached, but I wasn’t inclined to care.

One of the demons—a young one—approached me and spoke.

Looking closer, I recognized him.

Wasn’t he the one who had been caught trying to escape from the Sorghum Farm?

Slightly piqued, I decided to humor him.

"What’s wrong? Feeling wronged?"

"We haven’t done anything bad. So why… why are you doing this?"

He asked with a puzzled tone, as if genuinely unable to understand.

If he’d cried and screamed in hatred, pouring out curses, I would’ve put a bullet in his head right then. But this one was surprisingly calm—smarter than most.

His father had been too stupid to realize he’d get shot while running away.

"Beats me."

Bang.

Another demon, trembling on the floor, slumped over dead.

Even so, the young one didn’t flinch.

"There’s no reason.

You’re a demon, and you were in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Even if I explained that some demon he’d never met killed my family, he wouldn’t understand.

And why would I need a reason to justify this?

I do it because I want to.

He stared at me with hollow eyes.

The emptiness in his gaze irritated me. Just as I aimed at the bridge of his nose and prepared to pull the trigger, footsteps echoed from the distance.

"Ah, they’re here already."

Theo, armed with his sword, approached with Ethel carrying a staff, Isabel at her side, and Diana clutching a book.

"Sunbae. It’s been, hmm… how many hours since we last met?"

Glancing at my wristwatch, I realized it had been four hours since I’d left Theo’s house.

No wonder I was hungry—it was dinnertime.

"Four hours," I said cheerfully.

"……."

"Before we parted, you said you’d stop me, but I know my place too well for that to happen."

Theo’s expression was grim.

Ethel was looking at me with teary eyes, while Isabel wore a baffled expression. Diana’s face was utterly impassive, devoid of emotion.

Thanks to a recent reload, I had six bullets in the chamber.

That was enough for the young demon, the idiot pretending to be dead against the wall, and myself.

"…Ellen, put the gun down. Now."

The distance between us was roughly 30 meters.

Feigning compliance, I shifted my aim to the young demon and fired.

The bullet disintegrated midair, dissipating with a hollow futility.

As expected.

Magic, of course.

Ah, how I envied those with such abilities. If I'd had magic, this job would've been so much easier.

"Put it down!"

Theo lowered his sword and began walking toward me, each step deliberate.

I brushed the gun's barrel with my left hand. It was scalding hot from overuse.

As Theo closed the distance, I raised the gun to my temple.

Just as I was about to pull the trigger, my hand was severed.

"Ahaha, that hurts."

I staggered forward to retrieve my severed hand from the floor, but Theo kicked me, sending me sprawling.

Weak and fragile as I was, I crumpled instantly.

How dare he treat such a delicate girl like this?

"Why not just let me die?

Or do you plan to beat me to death? That's not really my thing, though."

"…Shut up, Ellen."

Glancing behind him, I saw Diana and Isabel tending to the injured demons, while the ones who could move were being ushered out.

Ethel embraced the young demon I'd been speaking to moments ago.

"Goddamn it. After all the effort I put into capturing them, you just let them go—"

Theo's fist slammed into my solar plexus, cutting me off mid-sentence.

I couldn’t even finish my thought, gasping for breath instead.

After a few moments, I managed to choke out words.

"Why are you letting them live?

I bet you’ve already killed my brother."

He didn’t answer.

"I miss Alicia."

"…Do you think killing these people will bring your sister back?"

"They’re not people. They’re not! How many times do I have to say it before you get it, you damn idiot?

Family or not, they all deserve to die!"

Theo bit his lip, then struck me across the face with his fist.

That was the last thing I remembered before losing consciousness.

25

Chapter 25

Alicia was dying in front of me.

Blood poured freely from her side, but she didn’t scream or cry in pain. She just held my cold hand tightly.

As my vision blurred and my heart pounded erratically, it felt as though my spine had turned to stone.

When I rubbed my eyes to clear the haze, Alicia stood up on her own feet, tears of blood streaming down her face as she wept.

"Ah."

It felt like a bad dream.

When I opened my eyes, I was lying in bed.

My right hand was intact, and my body wasn’t in pain.

A dream. It was just a dream.

Yet tears were streaming uncontrollably from my eyes.

Had my tear ducts broken? At this rate, my clothes would be completely soaked.

I looked up at the unfamiliar ceiling—no, wait. It was my ceiling. My room.

A small desk with books I’d been reading recently, a shelf neatly filled, and the bed I was lying on.

I felt like I’d been pinned down by a nightmare. I inhaled and exhaled slowly, trying to calm myself.

"…You’re awake?"

I turned toward the voice.

Ethel was sitting on a chair nearby.

"Ethel?"

"Yeah."

Her eyes were slightly red.

Her hands fidgeted nervously, unable to stay still, and her shoulders quivered faintly.

"Ellen, are you… okay?"

"This doesn’t seem like the time to worry about me."

"…You’re my friend."

"Is that a joke?"

"…."

Friends don’t waterboard each other.

Friends don’t lock each other in basements and hurl abuse.

Friends don’t kill each other’s pets, no matter how repulsive.

Friends don’t imprison each other’s brothers and parents to make them suffer.

Yet Ethel still called me her friend.

Why?

I couldn’t comprehend it.

"…If I said I pity you, would that make you angry?"

"No. I’d laugh in your face and tell you to know your place."

I’m not someone deserving of pity.

Ethel must be insane, a lunatic with a loose screw somewhere in her head.

What else could explain the first friend I made at the academy turning out like this?

Glancing around, I saw Theo in the room as well, seated silently.

So they must’ve carried me here after beating me unconscious in the basement.

As I began to feel a bit thirsty, Ethel handed me a glass of water.

For a moment, I wondered if she’d drugged it, but I drank it anyway. If I refused, she’d probably force it down my throat.

Thankfully, it seemed clean.

Looking out the window, I saw a lot of people moving in and out of the mansion.

Some were feeding porridge to the emaciated demons, while fools dressed as constables roamed the gardens.

Academy personnel were also present. Theo must have called them.

At least I didn't have to worry about outsiders looting the property. I'd already emptied the vault to pay the servants.

The house? Let it crumble. I wasn't going to manage it anyway.

It was all over.

Julian was likely dead—probably at Theo's hands.

Since Isabel and Diana weren't around, they were probably busy releasing the remaining demons.

As for who would take over the Intelligence Bureau…

With Theo involved, it'd likely fall to the Academy Director.

It felt like I'd cooked the porridge, only to hand it to someone else's dog.

"Sunbae, what happened to my brother?"

"…If you mean the head of your family, he's dead."

"I see."

We'd parted with smiles, so as far as final conversations go, it wasn't bad.

At least we hadn't wallowed in tears and smothered each other in gloomy emotions.

Maybe Julian had escaped to a happier world.

If his fiancée were still alive, he might've clung to life, no matter what.

I hadn't met her often, but every time he returned from seeing her, he'd be grinning ear to ear, muttering about how his future would be nothing but happiness.

"What did Julian say at the end?"

"…He asked me to spare his sister. Said he did it all alone."

"What a bastard."

There was no point in pretending anymore.

Everyone in this room had already seen through me, seen who I really was.

There was no mask left to wear.

"So, this whole thing will go down in history as Julian Speyer’s deranged solo massacre of demons?"

Theo nodded silently in response.

"Why?"

"……."

Even if people found out I was involved, hardly anyone would believe I had been the one kidnapping demons, killing them, and dragging people to the basement for coercive "conversations."

On the surface, I was just a normal girl.

"You’ve got to be kidding me."

"…Julian handed over everything in exchange for letting you live.

From the location of the basement to where the demons were held, even how to break the spells. All of it."

It was one of the most horrifying things I’d heard in my life.

"Damn it. There’s no need to keep a promise made with a dead man."

Everything had fallen apart.

At least the demons who survived would have spent their lives unable to defy humans. But Julian, that bastard, ruined it all before dying.

And now, he was dead, so I couldn’t even confront him about it.

It felt like I could storm into his office and find him buried under paperwork, smoking furiously as he stamped documents.

This unrelenting despair made me hate not just the demons, but my entire life.

I thought creating bullet holes in their heads was my new purpose, but now that felt impossible.

Did I ever ask anyone to care about my life?

Or was that what he meant when he said I was the only one left?

Had all of this—rounding up demons and torturing them—been nothing more than a meaningless task I took on because it was there?

Why? Why was being with me so unbearable for him?

Compared to Alicia, I probably was intolerable.

I looked fine on the outside, but deep down, I was just a boring girl who knew nothing except how to break people.

It should have been me who died, not Alicia.

At least with her, no one around her would have wished they were dead.

"Trapped in hell, you can’t see what’s happening here. You should’ve just finished me off."

Honestly, I doubt Julian ended up in heaven.

Not that I’d fare any better.

"You can’t do anything now. Why should I—"

Theo’s voice faltered.

But the truth had already slipped out.

"Ethel, what about you?"

I turned my head toward her.

I had tried to kill the young demon she cared so much about. Surely, she must hate me.

"……."

Ethel bit her lip, refusing to answer.

"Don’t you hate me?"

"…I don’t know."

"And you, sunbae?"

Theo didn’t respond either.

The servants were gone, and there wasn’t any money left to hire more. What was I supposed to do?

Even if Julian had survived, it wouldn’t have mattered.

With his fiancée dead, any hope of borrowing money or forming alliances with other families was gone.

Should I sell this mansion?

Rich, pretentious fools would love a historic estate like this.

"The head of your family left you a message."

"……."

"Alicia—your sister, I assume. She told him to make sure you lived.

She said to honor her last wishes."

Did he even understand what those words meant?

Probably not.

Expecting sympathy from someone who didn’t know how Alicia had died was asking too much.

Not that I wanted to explain it anyway.

I grabbed whatever was within reach and threw it at Theo: teapots, pencils, paper, books, clothes, blankets, pillows, even candies I used to enjoy.

My reattached right hand wasn’t moving properly, leaving me to fling everything with my left.

"Get out."

The items I threw were harmless—none capable of so much as scratching him.

Even if I hurled a heavy stone, Theo wouldn’t feel a thing.

I knew it was meaningless, but I couldn’t stop.

"Get out!"

Theo finally stood.

He picked up a notebook from the floor and walked over to me, grabbing my flailing left arm to stop me.

He pinned me down, preventing any further movement.

"What’s this? You didn’t want to offer yourself like a whore earlier, and now you’re regretting it?

Screw you. It’s too late now. I’d rather bash my head in and die than let you touch me."

He scoffed, his laugh dripping with contempt.

"Ha, are you even sane?

You’re hardly in a position to hold your head high and argue with me right now."

"What do you mean, I’m not?

There’s a lunatic saving disgusting beasts in front of me.

What’s that sword on your hip for? If I disgust you so much, just draw it and cut me down already."

If everyone but me believed demons were people, then I must be the crazy one.

But I couldn’t accept that.

I had to be the sane one.

I bit my tongue, letting blood pool in my mouth, then spat it in Theo’s face.

He retaliated by throwing the notebook at me.

It didn’t hurt, but it left me feeling utterly humiliated.

Theo opened the notebook and read aloud with a mocking smile.

"Wake up early. Chat with friends. Go to class. Talk to me. Don’t cry for no reason. Avoid alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs. Smile brightly.

Hah, do you follow any of these?"

Still holding my left arm, he poked my chest repeatedly with his right hand as he spoke.

"Stop whining like a brat. Just keep pretending to be the normal Ellen you made up. Do it for the rest of your life—until you grow old and die."

I stared at Theo for a long time.

The protagonist, the savior of everyone but me.

26

Chapter 26

I was living as Theo had said.

It had been about a week since he came to the mansion, and we had rolled around in bed together.

During that time, we acted as if nothing had happened.

The things Alicia told me before she died—Theo must have seen them as nothing more than a manual crafted by a crazy woman trying to look sane.

Not that it mattered what others thought. But when even the protagonist thought like that, it felt as though I was someone abandoned by the entire world.

First, I woke up early in the morning and got dressed.

My clothes carried a damp, musty smell, mingled with the stench of decay.

I had tried washing them myself with soap in the bathroom, but I must not have had any talent for it.

Now that I thought about it, I had never done laundry with my own hands before.

In my previous life, machines did it for me. After I was born into this world, it was the servants who always handled the laundry.

At some point, even that stopped. Instead, the mages began using spells to wash the clothes roughly.

That change came after the maid who used to impeccably clean the clothes had died.

She could return a blood-soaked uniform to pristine whiteness within a day, but apparently, her skills didn’t extend to putting entrails back inside bodies.

After putting on my foul-smelling clothes, I concealed a small pistol I had gotten from the back alleys at my waist.

With my disheveled appearance, I looked like a back-alley assassin—enough that even I might believe it when looking in the mirror.

Taking out a notebook, I checked off an empty box with a red pen.

- Wake up early in the morning ✓

I had finished preparing for the Academy.

Picking a passable pair of shoes, I stepped into the corridor.

The windows were so caked with dust that, even though the morning sun had risen, the sunlight barely entered.

As I passed Julian's office, where the door had fallen off its hinges, the sharp smell of chemicals wafted out.

Instead of blocking my nose, I pressed my palm against my eyes, feeling as though I might cry.

For a moment, I wondered if my eyeballs might pop out from the pressure.

Later, when I heard the full story from Ethel, I learned that Theo hadn't killed Julian.

On the contrary, he had tried to stop Julian from dying.

Though it was hard to believe that Theo, of all people, would do such a thing.

Apparently, Julian had begged Theo to let him live, saying he would hand everything over. Then he exploded and died.

It must have been quite the dramatic sound.

Like a bang! straight out of a movie.

After all, it had been a blast strong enough to make a person explode.

Truly, there was no better word for that bastard.

Thanks to Julian's explosive death, bits of what had once been Julian were splattered all over the room.

And no one had bothered to clean it up.

Not the Academy officials who came to the mansion, nor the inspectors, nor even the distinguished lords and ladies.

Not Theo, who had killed Julian, nor Isabel, Diana, or Ethel.

Theo was the one who killed him.

Otherwise, Julian wouldn't have died.

Even if it left the place a little emptier, in a few days, we might have been satisfied, having wiped out the demons entirely.

Even when Theo had his way with me, bits of what had been Julian were still stuck to the walls of that room.

So, one by one, I scraped them off.

I brought a bucket, splashed water onto the hardened stains, scraped at the crusted spots with a knife, and gathered the shattered bone fragments and flesh into a wooden coffin.

Julian would have wanted to be buried beside his parents or Alicia.

My brother—the head of the Speyer Family—had loved his family dearly.

Not equally, of course, but still.

It was fortunate there were still chemical supplies left in the basement, designed to clean up bloodstains and corpse remnants.

Without them, the mansion would have reeked of decay far worse than the chemicals themselves.

Seeing such a mess made me resolve something.

If I were to die, I'd choose a cleaner way to go.

Theo had smashed every door in the mansion, leaving it nearly impossible to find an intact one.

After a month of no cleaning, every corner was covered in thick layers of dust.

Even so, I didn't sell the mansion.

After all, the family graves were within the mansion's grounds.

If I sold the mansion, the graves—including Julian's—might be dug up, coffins and all.

As much as I had royal blood mixed in my veins, I was still a Speyer duke.

But with no money, power, or abilities, what good did that title do me?

No one thought of me as a duke—not even myself.

Now, all I had left was a dreadful curse.

The horrifying words Alicia and Julian had left behind.

Anyway, after walking a long way in my foul-smelling uniform, I finally arrived at the Academy.

Once again, I opened my notebook and checked off an empty box.

- Attend school ✓

I had attended school, but school life wasn't enjoyable.

What had been merely unpleasant had now become torment.

Not that it had ever been pleasant to begin with.

These days, thoughts of wanting to die entirely consumed me.

I had no backers, no particular talent, and no chance of fitting in with the brilliant people around me. I was just a pretty little thing wandering alone.

In other words, I was the perfect target for bullying—someone others could torment without consequence, someone who was easy to envy.

Jealousy and envy usually require some parity. Once, I might have qualified, but as someone entirely fallen from grace, I was merely a convenient emotional trash bin.

The reason these thoughts occupied my mind was simple:

After class ended, instead of going to lunch, I was getting beaten up.

Though they were just students, they had no finesse.

They kicked me with all their might, slapped my face, and punched my sides, fracturing my ribs.

"When else would we get to beat up someone so high and mighty?"

This one's father was a baron. Even if I killed him right now, it wouldn't matter much. He was a nobody who had earned his title in some war decades ago.

"To think you strutted around with Theo like you were something special. How laughable."

This one's father was a gigolo, and his mother, a high-end courtesan.

"I've never seen a loser who couldn't even talk back while getting beaten."

This one was the daughter of an Imperial scholar.

"You reek. Why don't you clean yourself up a bit?"

And as for this filthy beast with cat ears and a tail—I didn't care.

Whoever her parents were, they were probably just as disgusting, some hairy animal couple.

"You must take after your brother who exploded like a firework. So, Ellen, when are you planning to blow yourself up? You should die and apologize, shouldn't you?"

And just like that, Julian had become a complete disgrace—a man so pathetically incompetent and unmanly that he ruined the family by preying on the weak.

The children stomped on me for quite a while before splashing a potion over my head and leaving for lunch.

Using potions like that wasn't efficient and didn't even make the subject easier to interrogate.

Injecting it directly into the veins was best.

Anyway, I took out the notebook hidden in my chest and checked an empty box.

- Chatting with friends ✓

I had just been beaten up while exchanging a few words, and since classmates technically counted as friends, I figured it was fair to check it off.

Alicia might pity me and let it slide.

If not, well, there wasn't much I could do about it.

I stood up and brushed off the dust clinging to my body.

The clothes already reeked, so I didn't particularly mind them getting dirtier.

The only real issue was the bruises covering my body—not just blue marks but deep blood bruises.

I headed to the bathroom to wash my face and looked into the mirror.

Even without forcing my fingers into my mouth, I could craft a cheerful smile that made me look genuinely happy.

Perfect. Anyone would think I was a joyful girl.

After finishing up in the bathroom, I stepped out, took out my notebook again, and checked off another box.

- Don't get sad and cry for no reason ✓

- Smile cheerfully ✓

People addicted to drugs, alcohol, or cigarettes wouldn't be able to make such natural expressions.

Their senses gradually numb, and they become indifferent to stimulation.

- Don't drink or smoke ✓

- Don’t touch drugs ✓

So, I checked those off too, as a sort of promise to myself. No one was going to scold me for it anyway.

That said, the box for Talking with Theo was still empty.

I was supposed to grow closer by talking to my closest male friend every day. But instead of getting closer, we had reached a point where reconciliation seemed impossible.

So, for today, I just put an “X” in that box.

Not that I hated or resented Theo.

He had his own thoughts, convictions, and sense of justice firmly in place.

It wouldn’t make sense for me to try to dictate his actions according to my preferences.

After all, people are inherently worthy of respect, just as they are.

Even if I sometimes find myself questioning that respect when our opinions clash.

Still, I couldn’t help but let out a faint voice of resentment.

A silly daydream, really—thinking about how nice it would have been if he had saved me the way he saved the demons, the suffering humans, and the women who fell in love with him because of his devotion.

He’d probably find it burdensome.

Back then, I used to trail after him, watching his every move, observing what he was up to, and trying to piece together the game story I could barely remember. But now, I had no reason to do that.

It wasn’t as though my fallen family would rise again just because I kept watching.

Even having someone like Marco by my side would make things more bearable.

I wondered what Marco was up to these days.

He used to joke about taking a pile of money, buying ten high-class courtesans at a brothel, and spending an entire week buried among them. Maybe he was actually doing it now.

In the distance, I saw Ethel dragging Isabel around while looking for me.

I slipped away from the area, struggling to breathe as I felt the strain on what might be a fractured rib.

It left me feeling a little down.

Chapter 27

Though my life was miserable, I never said I hated it.

Most failures lead not to success, as the saying goes, but rather to a shortcut to suicide.

Still, I decided to see them as the foundation for eventual success.

Whining and rotting away in a room didn't suit my temperament.

Since being born into this world, I had never simply gone with the flow.

If things had gone as they would for most empty-headed noblewomen, I'd be giggling over romance novels and daydreaming about who my future husband might be.

But I left all that to Alicia.

From a young age, I worked hard to show those dreadful parents of ours that my mind was sharp by learning to read early and speaking as soon as possible.

I even begged to receive the grueling education meant for Julian or the eldest son.

At some point, even when I wanted to quit, I couldn't.

Julian sacrificed everything to keep me alive.

For days, I wondered why he did what he did. But in the end, Julian was just weak.

The way he handled things at the end, knowing someone else would inevitably discover the truth, showed he had simply given up and wanted to die.

Considering he begged Theo, who had come to kill him, to let me live, it was hard to think of any other reason.

Even if I occasionally sank under the weight of my weary body and battered spirit, I would not give up.

For those who hadn't experienced that night when the demons burned the city, it was just a distant, horrific memory.

Julian never witnessed that scene.

He simply stared blankly at Alicia, who lay dying in the mansion.

What could that bookworm, holed up in his study reading and researching, possibly know?

The idiot didn’t even understand what kind of beings the demons were before running away.

One day, if we burn together in hell, I’ll mock him as a pathetic loser and a coward.

Of course, that’s assuming I don’t fail.

“P-please, spare me! I-I’ll never cross over to your side again…!”

“You bastard! Where did you send them? Take off this blindfold and these cuffs right now, you damn piece of—!”

Ironically, the place in the slums where the most people gathered was known as the back alleys.

Maybe they weren’t physically dark but rather filled with people whose minds and souls were shrouded in darkness.

“P-please, w-water… Please…!”

“Do you really think you can stay alive here after kidnapping me!?”

“My boss will be here to save me soon!”

Those dim back alleys were full of things—drugs you couldn’t escape from once you tried them, stolen goods from nobles, mysterious meats said to boost stamina, and beautiful women.

Because of all this, the “dark” alleys always seemed to glow with activity.

“Who… Who are you!?”

Even the Speyer Family owned at least one house in these back alleys.

It wasn’t a basement, so Theo probably wouldn’t even know it existed.

It was a house above ground, so there was no need to confirm its location.

“I’m just a regular student who works in the evenings, studies hard in the mornings, and spends afternoons socializing with my friends.”

This wasn’t a basement.

It was on a hill, with windows positioned to let in sunlight. Clearly, its original purpose hadn’t been to detain criminals.

Oh, not criminals. Just beasts.

Perhaps Theo’s manner of speech was rubbing off on me.

Anyway, though a few stinking individuals had tried to move in while the place was unoccupied, I persuaded the humans to leave peacefully and dealt with the demons quietly.

“I used to have lots of colleagues working hard alongside me, but now I’ve got too much on my plate and have to handle things alone!”

“What does that have to do with me, you crazy— A-agh! Aaaaaaagh!”

I threw a dart into the eye of the beast that had cursed at me.

Perhaps my real talent wasn’t in anything grand but in darts.

The sharp spike pierced its eye in an instant.

Maybe it was thrashing around in its bindings, causing the dart to land, but no—it was definitely my skill.

“What does it have to do with me?”

Well, I needed to work hard at night, and your daughter wasted my time at lunch, leaving me exhausted.

Once this thing in front of me was dead, things should quiet down a bit.

The men tied up beside the dart-struck beast wet themselves, stinking up the place even further.

The house already reeked of blood; I didn’t want to add piss to the mix.

Thinking I’d cover the stench of urine with blood, I struck one of the screeching bats beside me—one shouting “How dare you hurt my boss!”—with a hammer.

His head was harder than I’d expected.

No matter how many times I struck him, my wrist ached, but his skull didn’t break.

They say there’s no tree that can’t be felled with ten strikes.

In truth, most trees don’t fall even after ten strikes, but I kept hammering away without much thought.

After about two minutes, my right wrist began to hurt, so I switched to my left hand. Around that time, his head started to cave in.

Blood began oozing from his head, which was now a mash of flesh and bone.

Even so, the stench didn’t go away.

“…I’ve been lying low for a while, but you—who hired you?”

Lying low, huh?

He must’ve been hiding behind some crime syndicate, afraid of being dragged under the Speyer Family mansion.

The people I caught in the slums were always just petty criminals.

Still, did this guy think I was a hired killer?

At least officially, I was still the head of the Speyer Family.

Even if the Intelligence Bureau had disappeared somewhere.

“Hired? Please.”

“And to think, I didn’t realize it was your father who was the hairy beast. What should I call your mother, then?”

A half-demon needed immense talent to get into the Academy.

Judging by this man’s appearance, he was quite the thug in the back alleys.

“…What nonsense are you spouting?”

“Dear Mr. Olga, your daughter has been exhibiting some very poor behavior at the Academy lately.”

I spat a blood-tainted glob of spit in the direction of the voice, but fortunately, the blindfold kept it from hitting me.

The stench of beasts was absolutely disgusting.

“You… You laid a hand on Olga!?”

It was just my opinion, but in this world, beasts seemed to care more for their offspring than humans did.

Based on the examples I’d seen so far, anyway.

Even Julian, who lacked any sense of familial love, abandoned me in the mud and ran off to hell on his own.

Taking a tightly rolled piece of paper from my pocket, I lit it on fire and inhaled the smoke.

“Phew, this doesn’t even feel like anything.”

Stress made me crave a cigarette.

But I couldn’t smoke.

I had to keep my promises.

“Answer me!!”

Thanks to the herbs I bought in bulk from the general store, I rolled them up like cigarettes and started smoking.

The aroma was pleasant, but it lacked the distinctive sensation of my mind snapping awake.

The creature began trying to wriggle its hand out of the manacles on its wrist.

Even if it managed to escape, its hands would be mangled. But since it was a demon, I couldn’t be sure.

I pulled out the pistol I had hidden and fired several rounds into its knees.

The sound didn’t escape the room.

The enchantment surrounding the area was far superior to the crude magical device Theo had used.

“I didn’t touch her. I won’t touch her either.”

“...Then what exactly—”

“Well, come to think of it, if she’s half-demon, that means one of her parents must be a demon, right?So, if I find her parents, I can find the demons! I must be a genius. Even in the midst of losing everything, I’ve come up with such a hopeful, brilliant idea!”

Handling the bullying at school and the demon issue simultaneously was an efficient plan, wasn’t it?

There was no need to release people or cooperate with those guard dogs to find demons.

Not that I had the power to do so anyway.

There were limits to what I could accomplish alone.

I couldn’t keep wandering aimlessly by myself forever.

Skulking around the capital, avoiding the eyes of the guards, was exhausting.

If I had a body as strong as Theo’s or at least some decent magical ability, it might have been a different story.

But all I had was a moderately healthy body, some basic self-defense skills, and a pistol that wasn't all that effective when fired.

"...You're one of those lunatics from the Duke's faction, aren't you? Another massacre of our kind is coming, isn't it?"

"Regrettably, I'm all alone. That's why I'm working so hard, single-handedly."

Even when lighting the incinerator, I had to drag the heavy oil cans myself, pour them around, and toss in oil-soaked wood.

Because of this, I spent most of my days sleeping instead of attending classes.

Since my parents burned to death and my last remaining family—my brother—died in a fit of madness, I seemed like a tragic girl.

The teachers didn't bother me much because of that.

Theo, ever the protagonist, looked like he'd been swept up in some incident again and didn't seem to care about me.

Thanks to that, I could resume my work uninterrupted.

When they realized I was acting alone, the bound men, forced to kneel, seemed to see a glimmer of hope.

They struggled even more, trying to free themselves from the manacles, even if it meant mangling their hands in the process.

Had they not heard the gunshots?

Olga's father, tied up with the others, shouted at them.

"S-stop it. Just stay still, you fools…"

Bang.

A sharper sound than a pistol rang out seven times.

I had spent a bit more money to acquire a quality rifle.

Apparently, it was enchanted to remain in top condition without any maintenance.

The rifle made a difference—if I had used a pistol, it would have merely dented the skull. This time, it left a massive hole.

"Do you have any last words?"

“Tell Olga I love her.”

“No.”

Bang.

Since he was part beast, his durability seemed similar to a human’s.

His head half-exploded, sticking to the wall.

Cleaning up was going to be annoying.

28

Chapter 28

What would you feel if you realized one day that you'd fallen into the world of a game?

I'm not sure how others would answer, but for me, it felt a bit horrifying.

I'd probably been sitting in front of my computer, clutching my chest, collapsing to the floor in an undignified heap, trembling all over, and then dying.

I likely didn't even realize I was dying when it happened.

When I opened my eyes, I was literally being cradled by an unfamiliar human.

Of course, it wasn't my mother—it was the midwife.

There were probably a lot of people at my funeral.

I had met so many people in my life.

Close friends, my parents, my younger sibling... Ah, and maybe the person I broke up with right before my death came too.

Though I'd rather that person didn't show up.

They would have gathered a little later than the day I died.

My parents and sibling lived in the countryside, and I didn't contact my ex after we broke up.

To be precise, I chose not to.

At first, I thought I had been born into some 19th-century European setting, but it didn't take long to realize I was in the world of the game I'd been playing before my death.

After all, it was an absurd world where people used magic, flew through the air, and swung swords around.

Maybe I was dreaming.

Or perhaps a god with a twisted sense of humor had shoved me into a monitor and was watching until I reached the game's ending.

That thought crossed my mind.

And simultaneously, I wondered if I might be able to return to my world when everything was over.

I used to laugh to myself, imagining what I'd look like if I returned.

I'd probably be lying on the floor in a T-shirt and track pants, looking ridiculous.

The pants would probably have some absurd cartoon graphic on the seat.

I missed things like Mountain Dew more than plain soda and mozzarella cheeseburgers from Lotteria near my house.

Though this world had delicious food, most of it was the type you'd find at fancy restaurants, and I was growing tired of it.

Running around town, using magic, and sparring with swords were fun, but I missed lying in bed, scrolling through novels or comics on my phone, laughing to myself.

There's nothing like sinking into a comfy bed, surrounded by pillows, and wasting time.

Watching cabaret performances in grand theaters was nice, but I wanted to listen to idol songs I'd been forced to memorize in the military.

It felt like something out of Moulin Rouge, a movie I used to enjoy.

By the time I grew up and entered the Academy, those thoughts had faded.

Life here had played out like a game.

There might have been small differences in detail, but I was born into a harmonious family, with a talented body and mind, and eventually enrolled in the Academy.

While I wasn't a failure in my previous life, I certainly hadn't been this competent.

Even at the Academy, nothing particularly troubling happened—aside from the occasional major event I already knew about.

Since I anticipated most of it, nothing spiraled out of control.

For some reason, I obtained the legendary sword hidden in the cave behind the mountain, just like in the game.

I coincidentally learned magic from a great wizard who was my father's friend.

Before I even got to school, I saved someone from being threatened by thugs on the roadside—turns out she was a princess.

But why was a princess even there in the first place?

Though something felt off, I even became close to Ellen, a duke's daughter I often encountered at my favorite café.

I experienced countless fortuitous events.

I met many people, grew close to talented kids, caught the headmaster's attention, and even bonded with his daughter.

I defeated the leader of the rebel demons, vanquished a ghost-possessed count, and more.

At some point, I started enjoying this world.

I started believing I was the protagonist—righteous, virtuous, and heroic. A ridiculous delusion.

Sure, there were pompous nobles strutting around, but I didn't pay them much mind.

This was a world where power justified everything.

No matter how monstrous someone was, they died just like anyone else if you separated their head from their neck.

This wasn't a rational society—not when individuals could be stronger than armies.

I would grow even stronger, and there weren't many who could beat me even now.

Titles like nobility were just a centuries-old game played by the highborn.

What truly mattered was ability.

Well, that wasn't my belief—it was the headmaster's.

The Emperor was a puppet controlled by wealthy low-ranking nobles, and the Empress was cavorting with some pseudo-mystic every night.

This country looked fine on the surface, but underneath, it was rotting, overgrown with weeds.

The Academy, however, was different.

It was like a small nation within the capital, established by the headmaster.

That's why commoner students with talent could rise and shine here.

Of course, that talent often caused problems.

Sometimes, people tried to threaten me using my family.

Most of the time, simply reminding them that their families could disappear just as easily solved the problem.

Those who valued their families were usually devoted enough to understand the importance of family.

Maybe it was because I only lived within the Academy, but I thought I was leading a life without major problems.

That was, until the demons, vagrants, and beggars gathered to wreak havoc.

At first, I thought it was just another game event.

A simple mission: protect my family through the night, find the villain, and take care of them.

But I realized it wasn't. That's when this world began to feel real.

Up until then, everything I had seen and experienced had mirrored the events I'd watched unfold from behind a screen.

Everything except meeting Ellen had been predetermined encounters with heroines or event triggers.

It felt vivid at times, but every time the exact same situations from the game unfolded, it chipped away at me a little.

It made me wonder if there were no real people here—only numbers moving as programmed.

The loving parents, the devoted siblings, the friends who showed interest in me, the people at the Academy who looked at me with trust, my teachers…

I started to think they might all be fake.

That thought began to eat away at me.

That is, until something happened that would never occur in a game!

Gradually, the villains I was supposed to kill stopped looking like faceless antagonists.

Whether they were from the lowest depths or the highest peaks of society, I started to see the suffocating weight of their lives.

Even the ghost-possessed count I had slain had only dabbled in dark magic in a desperate attempt to save his dying daughter.

The demons who caused chaos inside and outside the Academy started looking like people.

People starving to death, pouring out their resentment and hatred at the powerful.

But their methods, targets, and actions were undoubtedly wrong.

I could not forgive the slaughter of innocent citizens that night.

So, the vagrants, the slum dwellers, and the demons who took part all deserved punishment.

But not like cattle being slaughtered. Not so brutally.

If someone committed a crime and no longer had the will to resist, they should at least be given a summary trial before being executed.

I didn’t insist on finding evidence to process them—that would have been ridiculous.

That night, there was hardly anything left unburned. Before anyone could even start searching for evidence, the citizens would have set fire to everything, leaving nothing behind.

Besides, there was no need to look for evidence.

What people needed was a target to vent their anger about what happened that night.

Even so, women and children who had done absolutely nothing wrong should have been spared.

Despite witnessing the horrific events unfolding in the basement, I decided to talk to Ellen.

Most misunderstandings and problems can often be resolved simply by facing one another and having a conversation.

And Ellen was someone particularly special to me.

Excluding my family, Ellen was the only person who approached me first—I didn’t make the first move.

At a time when I was thinking even my parents might just be numbers following a set script, Ellen seemed like she might be the exception.

The first problem, though, was finding Ellen.

Even during class, she would disappear somewhere the moment break time arrived.

I never figured out why.

It wasn’t until after all the classes were over that I could finally go looking for her.

As usual, Ellen appeared ordinary and composed.

Just like a normal girl, as if she weren’t the same person who had done such horrific things to the demons in the basement. As if she knew nothing at all.

When I approached her, it felt like she already knew what I was going to say.

Her characteristic teasing jokes, her mask-like expressions, her calm demeanor even in tense situations—she carried herself with ease.

There was no heroine like her anywhere in the game.

Ellen seemed to embody the idea that this world was real.

And because of that, the thought crossed my mind: if Ellen were a terrible person, wouldn’t that mean reality itself was terrible?

If so, I hoped she could change, even if just a little.

Perhaps that was nothing more than my arrogance.

29

Chapter 29

I dragged the limp bodies one by one and moved them to the incinerator.

It took about two and a half hours to burn just one.

If the fire wasn't strong enough, it could take even longer.

I stuffed the corpses into the metal drum and lit the fire.

The acrid stench mixed with the smoke as it rose through the chimney.

The birds eating the ashes today might as well be feeding on demons, albeit in powdered form.

Just thinking about adding firewood all day made me tired already.

But if I left them half-burned, even though this was underground, the stench of rot would climb up to the second floor in no time.

Everything costs money—firewood, oil, hammers, guns, syringes, drugs, wooden posts, shackles, and handcuffs.

Every single thing drains money.

While the small-scale work I was doing now didn't strain my finances too much, eventually, the funds would run out.

Maybe I should rob Theo's house.

Since he's the protagonist, he must have it stocked with all kinds of valuable items.

While entertaining such foolish thoughts, I scrubbed the bloodstains off the floor with a rag and polished the shackles and chains until they gleamed, using oil-soaked black cloth.

I pulled out the wooden posts I had hung bodies on and tossed them carelessly into the yard.

The posts were all cracked, thanks to the struggles of the last ones who'd tried to lunge at me.

I could chop them up for firewood later.

God, it was exhausting.

For a week straight, I had to lure two or three people here every day.

I need a break for a few days.

My muscles were so sore that every move felt like my legs were being yanked painfully.

I couldn’t keep doing this work alone forever.

Maybe I should find a legitimate business to start.

Not that I had any wealth of knowledge to draw from.

The people who could provide information were all dead.

For now, I decided to handle things as quietly as possible.

I’d seen with my own eyes how Julian died.

Though it was basically an act of despair, if I rushed things, I’d end up with my neck in a noose thanks to Theo.

Wait a minute—did I even need to consider Theo such a threat?

If something poses a danger, the natural response is to eliminate it, whether with a gun or a blade.

Even as the Empire decayed, it still maintained enough of a military to crush its enemies.

If the opportunity arises, I should deal with Theo.

None of the demons I’d chained to the posts were weaker than me.

It was easy to approach them from behind and inject them with drugs.

I’d learned those skills from my parents in this very mansion.

The hard part came afterward.

With no one to help, I had to haul the large demon corpses up to the house on the hill by myself.

That meant using the underground passageway I’d dug.

To avoid suspicion while transporting them, I imitated the behavior of merchants stacking drugs and weapons at the gates.

But these demons were far too heavy to carry alone.

It was like hiking up a mountain with an 80-kilogram sack of meat.

The worst ones were the ones that woke up mid-transport and thrashed around.

Their bodies were annoyingly tough—beating them with the butt of a gun several times still left them writhing.

For those cases, I'd acquired a solid hammer.

Three or four good whacks, and they'd quiet down.

Still, I wasn't sure if drugs would work on Theo.

If they didn't, could I kill him?

"Hmmm~♫."

Since I couldn't go back and listen to music, I hummed melodies from memory as I worked.

Flipping over the burning corpses with a large stick while inhaling the smell of charred meat, I thought about this world's music.

There were upbeat, lyrical, and sometimes moving songs here too, but to hear them properly, I'd have to visit a noble's salon or café.

Since I couldn't play an instrument, I just hummed along.

There was a piano in the house, but I couldn't waste time playing it.

Time spent idling could be used to bring in one more demon to this mansion.

Right now, I carried a hammer in one pocket and a pistol in the other. Anyone seeing me would think I was an assassin.

"Hey, miss. I won't tell anyone, so how about letting me go? Ah, who am I kidding—you won't."

As I worked, lost in idle thoughts, a voice called out from the pile of corpses.

"Ack! What are you doing alive?"

"Hell if I know."

Was this what they meant when they said fathers with daughters are strong?

The demon touched the hole in its forehead, and sure enough, my finger barely reached the embedded bullet.

So this guy was alive, even with a bullet in his head.

I grabbed the hammer and began smashing his skull relentlessly.

Even after dozens of blows, the creature still had enough strength to raise an arm and block the hammer.

“S... stop. Just stop…”

When his arm finally gave out and fell limp to the floor, I decided to let him speak.

“Alright, talk. If it’s nonsense, I’ll toss you into the fire alive.”

Living demons were terrifying. Just the thought of being devoured sent shivers down my spine.

So I had to render them completely helpless before dealing with them.

“...This is insane.”

The demon stared blankly at the ceiling before speaking.

“I want to see my daughter.”

“No.”

“I don’t want to die.”

“That’s not happening either.”

“This is bullshit.”

“What can you do?”

The demon laughed, as if in disbelief, before coughing and giving its final words.

“I figured this life would end suddenly someday, but not like this. Damn it, at least give me one cigarette before I go.”

At his words, I pulled out one of my precious handmade herb cigarettes and placed it in his mouth, lighting it for him.

He took a deep drag, coughed a few times, then let out a bitter laugh.

"You know, miss, the thing is… you’re crazy because you smoke stuff like this."

"Agreed."

Still, Alicia told me never to smoke, didn’t she?

Even after hammering his face repeatedly, he only lost consciousness but refused to die. So, I went up to the second floor and fetched a rifle.

When I pressed the barrel against the crater in his skull and prepared to pull the trigger, he muttered.

"Olga…"

How predictable.

After pulling the trigger and leaving a gaping hole in his head, I dragged his body to the incinerator.

It didn't burn well, probably because it was soaked in blood.

I checked my wristwatch—time to head to the Academy.

Thanks to these bastards, I hadn't slept a wink.

Though it was a waste of oil, I tossed the remaining corpses into the incinerator, poured in two whole cans of oil, and added firewood before lighting it up.

If I'd been frugal, that much oil could have burned through thirty bodies. What a shame.

I went back upstairs, washed my body hastily with water, and changed into my white uniform.

Looking into the mirror, I wiped the bloodstains off my face with a handkerchief.

My fingers trembled, and for some reason, there were streaks of water under my eyes.

"Phew… hmm."

After washing my face with some standing water mixed with rain, I headed to the Academy.

It took a long walk, but I eventually reached the classroom door, only to find Ethel blocking my way.

"…Ellen."

"Ethel, move. I'm tired."

"You look exhausted. Were you doing something at night…?"

Ethel cautiously asked.

"Yeah, I've been working in the back alleys lately… No, forget it. Just drop it."

All I wanted was to collapse and sleep, so I pushed past her and flopped down at my desk.

I think I fell asleep the moment I closed my eyes.

When I woke up, Ethel, Isabel, and Diana were gathered around, talking.

I didn't get up but kept my breathing steady to eavesdrop.

"Ellen seems to be struggling a lot since her brother… you know."

"It's unfortunate that the head of the family died, but wasn't it his own fault to begin with? Ethel, you saw what happened there. Don't you understand why no one's saying anything, even though a duke was killed?"

Isabel started berating Ethel. Diana chimed in.

"People are staying quiet because they're afraid they'll be seen as lunatics too if they sympathize. But what's the point of bringing this up? Are we supposed to comfort Ellen, even though we practically killed her brother ourselves?"

"It's not about her feelings—it just seems like the situation itself is hard for her! Would you two at least listen to what I'm saying for once? I think she keeps sleeping like this because she's been working in the back alleys at night…."

Ah, I've never sold my body, for the record.

The food is awful, but I get by fine on three meals of rye bread and water.

Judging by the reddish hue of the sunlight, today's a two-meal day since lunchtime must have already passed.

Still, I really need to use the bathroom. When are they going to leave?

"So, I was thinking we could let Ellen stay at my place for a while…."

"No matter how you put it, Ellen's not going to listen to us."

"That's why I'm asking for your help with that part!"

"She still has that huge mansion, doesn't she? There's no way she's poor if she's living in a place like that."

Ethel went quiet, then took a deep breath before responding.

"I don't really know about that part myself."

This was my cue to wake up.

It felt like these people were planning something I needed to avoid.

"Yaaawn… Ethel, what are you doing here?"

"E-Ellen!?"

"Isabel, Diana—it’s been a while. Nice to see you! Although, I doubt we’re exactly thrilled to see each other."

I smiled brightly and extended my hand to Isabel and Diana for a handshake.

They hesitated before shaking my hand, their expressions a mix of reluctance and complexity.

"Anyway, I’ve got some errands to run. Sorry, but I have to go."

Before they could stop me, I quickly walked away.

Something about this felt ominous.

30

Chapter 30

I was just a typical tomboy from a rural village.

Even though my parents were nobles, they were just landlords. Unlike other families, we couldn't even dream of buying extravagant decorations, jewels, or necklaces as if they were everyday items.

While we were well-off compared to most, a rich, rotund commoner probably lived far more comfortably than us.

I always thought that, when I grew up, I'd stay in this village with my brother, find a partner eventually, and grow old peacefully. That was until I discovered I had a talent for magic.

We weren't exactly poor for nobles; we just weren't wealthy.

Still, my parents used the money they had saved for my future marriage to send me to the Academy, saying I could always earn more money once I graduated.

And so, I ended up enrolling in the Academy rather abruptly.

I was full of hope, imagining that I might make new friends or meet someone amazing on my journey.

But at the entrance ceremony, I quickly realized that most people already had their groups or cliques. I sat alone, sulking at a distance.

Honestly, as someone from the countryside, even if I tried to talk to anyone, it felt futile.

While I sat there nervously tapping my legs in frustration, Ellen approached me.

She asked if it felt awkward not knowing anyone or talking to strangers.

At first, I found it ironic since she was a stranger to me too, and I laughed out loud.

That was my first meeting with Ellen.

Over time, just like with other kids, we gradually became closer.

We grew so close that it was hard to imagine being apart, as we are now.

Though I never visited Ellen's house—when I once said I wanted to, she looked troubled and mentioned that everyone there, except her younger sister, was a bit odd—Ellen often came over to mine.

Unlike me, who was too scared to talk to anyone and sat quietly, Ellen quickly got along with my brother and parents.

How could she speak so naturally, so effortlessly?

How could she smile and enjoy conversations with people so easily, as if solving predetermined problems?

I'll admit I felt a twinge of jealousy when I found out Ellen had a close senior male friend. But I was certain we were still best friends.

And besides, they didn't seem to be dating!

Still, Ellen was so obviously interested in him, following him around like that. Was the senior oblivious, or just pretending not to notice?

Sometimes, when it was just me and Theo-senpai, his face made my heart flutter, but I didn't want to interfere with my friend's feelings.

Anyway, our group of five—Theo-senpai, Isabel-senpai, Diana-senpai, Ellen, and I—was always together outside of class.

We were so close that it felt like we should start a club or something.

Sometimes, it was just me and Ellen hanging out.

We'd sit across from each other in a café, holding hands and chatting over drinks.

Ellen would sneak up behind me, brush my neck, and whisper teasingly, or we'd accidentally get so close our lips brushed.

Ellen often played such mischievous pranks, to the point where it felt like we might be more than just friends.

That's why I naively thought Ellen would never hurt me, no matter what she did.

Then one day…

A few days had passed since the demons burned the city.

I didn't know much about what happened that day.

We'd been celebrating at the manor with the workers from the estate, eating, enjoying the harvest, and dancing to lively music.

Seeing smoke rising from the city, we just assumed it was a fire or maybe some rowdy festival revelry.

Furious citizens were lynching every demon they could find, tying them to posts and burning them alive.

My parents, fearing they might come to our sorghum farm, took everyone and hid in the underground tunnels.

They gathered as much food, blankets, and fabric as they could, thinking it might be safe after a month.

During that time, my brother disappeared.

He left a note on the table in someone else's handwriting, saying he'd gone to a nearby village to help our parents.

The next day, Ellen sent me a letter asking me to come to an abandoned building at the Academy.

I should have realized something was off, considering her handwriting was similar to the note my brother left.

But since it was Ellen, I would've gone regardless of how suspicious or strange it seemed.

Nothing would have changed.

I assumed she wanted comfort since she'd mentioned her parents and siblings had died. I brought plenty of sweet snacks and a few handkerchiefs, only to end up crying because of Ellen instead.

Life can be unpredictable, can't it? Though this time, it turned bad for me.

I thought Ellen was my closest friend.

I believed that, no matter what she said or did, I'd try to understand her.

Even if I couldn't understand, I'd at least accept it.

But that was probably presumptuous of me.

Ellen never confided in me, never revealed her secrets, never explained what she was doing or planning to do.

She just kept hurting me, acting as if killing demons was all that mattered, as if I didn't matter at all.

Despite this, I begged for mercy, asking her if we were still friends.

Rather than deny it, she said that if we were friends, I should tell her where my parents were hiding.

Her eyes were unsettling.

Even with light shining on her, they were unfocused, dull, and sunken.

They resembled the eyes of angry townsfolk hurling stones at demons but without the fiery emotion—just a hollow, broken gaze.

If I told her, my parents and everyone hiding with them on the farm would end up like those demons, beaten and killed.

So, I pretended not to know.

Ellen and I were friends.

From the day we met, to the day I was hung upside down, to the day she poured water over me and threatened me, even when she broke down entirely.

That “friend” tortured me with waterboarding.

She took my brother, cut off his fingers, and tortured him even worse than me.

Pretending not to know was no longer an option.

My brother must have confessed everything.

He probably valued my safety more than his own.

I felt a strange mix of gratitude and betrayal, crying endlessly.

Ellen imprisoned my parents in the underground tunnels and treated them cruelly.

She killed everyone we’d known since childhood.

She shot Mr. and Mrs. Hanton, who had always been so kind and shared their meals with us.

She even tried to kill the child I’d grown up with since I was little.

Then she released me, acting like nothing had happened.

Ellen pointed a gun at me and said she didn’t care if I told everyone she was a monster.

Though she also warned that anyone who heard it would end up like me—locked underground.

Was she still my friend?

I wasn’t sure anymore.

I went to the mansion to stop what my friend was doing.

It seems she killed her brother.

And after losing her family—perhaps, just maybe—she’s selling her body.

That’s probably because of me.

Even so, are we still friends?

Neither Ellen nor I outright denied it, but calling this “friendship” felt difficult, to say the least.

The first time I was strung upside down and punched in the solar plexus, I couldn’t help but think, why?

And as time passed, watching what happened to Ellen and witnessing her fall, I found myself asking the same question.

But I never said it out loud.

I didn’t know exactly what Ellen had been through or what she had seen that day.

Perhaps I was clinging to an illusion all on my own.

Ellen might think of me as nothing more than a stupid girl—not even a friend.

I resented her for the way she treated my brother, for forcibly taking my parents, and for slaughtering the people from the farm who were dear to us.

And yet, I still liked Ellen.

No one else in my short life had ever drawn my attention as much as she did.

Yes, Ellen was special to me!

I liked seeing her chuckle to herself while reading a book by the window, then glance around embarrassedly as if caught.

I liked how she’d subtly shift to the crowded side of the path so I could walk comfortably.

I liked how she’d dance to street music, trying out unfamiliar moves as we walked.

Her humming after enjoying a delicious cup of coffee was so pleasant to listen to, I sometimes thought she could be a singer.

I liked how, when a random child bumped into her and ruined her white clothes with snacks, she didn't get angry but instead bought the child another treat and handed it to them gently.

I liked her intelligence, solving questions even seniors struggled with and explaining them so effortlessly when we studied together.

And I liked the warmth I felt when we leaned our heads on each other's shoulders.

I liked the cool sensation of her hands when we held them.

That's what a first true friend is like, isn't it?

Sometimes, Ellen felt like a cool guy to me.

Maybe Ellen was an ideal or a role model to me—someone I looked up to.

And now, to think that such an Ellen might be selling her body!

I couldn't accept it.

I would help her.

Even if it meant forcing her to accept my help.

After all, Ellen had done the same for me.

31

Chapter 31

I left Ethel behind and returned home to wash up quickly.

The water seemed to flow through some spell I wouldn't understand even if explained, so there wasn't much issue cleaning myself.

I wish I could also do laundry properly. Should I join some manor and learn to work there?

But the thought of a newbie maid in a manor who couldn't even do laundry turning out to be a duchess—sounds like a story that wouldn't sell even as a novel.

I'd rather avoid such positions since I don't know what kind of harassment might await inside.

Well, I am pretty, after all.

No doubt, the head of the household, unsatisfied with their sons or lovers, would come after me.

Even just walking along the streets in clothes any ordinary woman might wear was exhausting.

Men with flushed faces would approach, asking for my name or where I lived.

If complete strangers act like that, it'd be worse in a workplace.

Sometimes, there were those who brushed against my chest or hips as they passed by.

When such trivial creatures made advances, I couldn't help but feel the urge to lock them away in the basement.

In fact, a few had already swapped the sunlight for dim basement lights, sipping water through their noses instead of cups.

Ah, I'm digressing.

Anyway, it'd be easier to take on assassination contracts than work a regular job.

A beautiful female assassin—it sounds cooler, doesn't it?

I tied my hair up with a red ribbon, staring at myself in the mirror.

These days, I work alone often, so my hair tends to stick to my body. I've been wearing a ponytail for convenience.

No matter how I style my hair or what I wear, it always suits me perfectly.

Striking a pose, I admired my face for a while to boost my self-esteem.

Once my hair dried, I put on a comfortable tea gown, but then I heard a noise outside.

It sounded like metal being struck.

Looking out the window, I saw Ethel, Isabel, and Miss Diana knocking on the half-open iron gate.

If they were attempting to “knock,” it was starting to irritate me.

The bell had been broken for ages, and the spell that transmitted voices to the front gate had dissolved long ago.

But I didn’t feel like going down there to tell them to get lost.

I’d just washed up; stepping into the cold air would give me chills.

It’s open, so they could just come in if they wanted.

Still, since they might barge into the mansion, I gave my room a quick once-over.

Aside from a blood-stained shirt and a noose I had made during a moment of gloom, there wasn’t anything too incriminating.

With no staff around and no one to chat with, I could hear Ethel’s group entering the mansion and walking down the halls.

Their footsteps echoed loudly, louder than necessary. Could they walk any quieter?

Still toweling my damp hair, I stepped into the corridor and saw the group staring blankly at the grand hall on the first floor.

“Excuse me, but I don’t recall inviting you in.”

No one replied.

Ethel casually changed the topic, as if trying to start a conversation.

“Ellen, why did you tie your hair all of a sudden?”

“It’s more comfortable like this these days.”

Why do your faces look so sour when I say I tied it for comfort?

“Anyway, Isabel, Miss Diana.

Wasn’t your brother enough for you?”

“...That’s not why we’re here—cough, not at all.”

Ethel murmured softly.

Dust was swirling around, perhaps because more people had entered.

Pressing my fingers to my temple, I said,

"That sort of thing."

It didn’t seem like the right term to use when referring to a dead brother, but that’s probably what was going through their heads.

Should I just shoot them?

My right hand twitched slightly before my lips curled into a faint smile, and I muttered under my breath.

“Just come to my room for now.”

No, that wouldn’t work.

This space is too big to mean anything.

I nodded awkwardly and led them upstairs to my room.

Meanwhile, I prepared warm water and brewed tea for my uninvited guests.

I considered adding a muscle relaxant, not a sedative, but realized I had moved all those supplies to the house on the hill.

“So, why did you all come?”

The tea wasn’t fancy, but it had a pleasant aroma.

I didn’t even know these tea leaves were in the kitchen. I should rummage around there more later.

Isabel spoke first.

“…We heard you’ve been having a hard time lately.”

“Hm.”

I hadn’t expected her to bring that up.

“Since that day, it’s been hard every day.

It doesn’t matter whether life is rich or poor.

Unless you’re here to join me in burning all the demons alive, just leave me alone.”

At my words, Isabel fell silent.

Miss Diana fidgeted nervously, her voice stuttering as she asked,

“Uh, by the way, where are the staff?”

“I dismissed them all. I won’t be hiring any more.”

“T-then who manages the place?”

“As you can see, I chose not to manage it at all.”

Isabel spoke up again.

“…Wouldn’t it be better to move somewhere cleaner and better-maintained? Living here must be tough.”

Living here, of all places?

I was born here. I lived here with Alicia.

If I were to think of more vivid memories, perhaps it’d be cleaning up what remained of Julian.

“Are you suggesting I move to a convent, Isabel?”

“Would you hate that?”

“How could I not?”

She fell silent again.

“I don’t want to live a life bound to someone.

Whether that’s to a god or the temperamental old spinsters at the convent.”

If it came to that, I’d rather put a bullet through my head or hang myself from the ceiling.

I needed to be free.

And I needed to send every last demon still alive to the afterlife.

In a convent, I wouldn’t be able to do that freely.

Anyway, as Ethel or Theo might say, killing all demons because my sister died might be insane.

Others might say I was obsessed or burdened with guilt.

That I was no different from Julian, who—officially—had tried to kill off an entire race out of grief.

But maybe, just maybe, they were wrong.

If there's a chance they're wrong, it means I could be right.

I'll only know once I try.

Until I send every last one of them to the dirt.

Anyway, the last time I talked to Theo, I reacted far too emotionally.

Because of that, the conversation veered off course, and we ended up misjudging each other, deluded into thinking we could convince one another.

"So, Ellen, how about staying at my house for a while?"

"Ethel, your brother would be thrilled about someone who took his fingers. And your father, who loves snorting water through his nose, probably wouldn't be too fond of it either."

"…I can smooth it over with them," Ethel said, biting her lip lightly.

"And that's something you think you can solve with words?"

Isabel and Diana looked as if they had no idea what we were talking about.

Now that I thought about it, they probably didn't know I had locked Ethel's family in the basement and disposed of every demon except for that one bastard.

Not exactly a pleasant story to share, so I decided to keep my mouth shut.

But really, how was I supposed to get these people to leave?

"…Anyway, Ethel, and all of you, stop worrying about me.

Your concern doesn't make me happy—it just pisses me off.

You've turned everything I wanted to protect into a wreck, shattered my family into pieces, and even blew up my brother. What more do you want from me?"

I stood up, pulled out the noose I had stashed in a drawer, and swung it lightly.

I didn't intend to hang myself, but if I threatened them with my life, maybe they'd leave.

If they didn't? Well, it's their problem if they die.

“It’s not that we want anything…”

“If Julian blew up and died, you should have just left it at that.

You took the bastards I should’ve killed and walked away, leaving me behind.

There were times I wanted to die, but damn it, not like that. I couldn’t let myself go like that.”

I was doing my best to play the perfect Ellen I’d crafted, so why were they so intent on breaking that facade?

I was even parroting back the lines their beloved protagonist used to say.

“Do you know how disgusting it feels to scrape off sticky chunks of flesh from the walls, scrub hardened blood with a brush until your arms ache?

And when fragments of bone get lodged in the walls, they’re so stubborn you can barely pull them out.

Do you know what it’s like to gather all of that into a bucket and pack it into a coffin?

Honestly, I want to kill every last one of you right now.”

I pulled out an aromatic herbal cigarette, but the thought that it didn’t even contain nicotine crossed my mind, so I crushed it in my hand instead.

Then I grabbed my pistol with my right hand, waving it in the air.

When Isabel tensed, readying her magic with a wary look, I pressed the gun to my temple.

“If you don’t want to see a corpse, get the hell out.

I don’t care what you say or what you want from me.”

But they didn’t look surprised.

It was as if they’d anticipated this.

“Diana, now!” Ethel shouted.

Diana raised her staff and cast something at me.

I slammed into the wall, my consciousness slipping away.

“…Shit.”

They couldn’t have found out, could they?

If they had, there wouldn’t have even been room for conversation.

I was just… deeply baffled by it all.

32

Chapter 32

I was still wearing the tea gown I had on when I collapsed.

The small daggers hidden within it and the poison I had planned to drink if things went south were gone.

The poison I had tucked into my school uniform and my usual casual clothes was probably taken as well.

The room was spacious.

A chandelier that seemed to use candles for light hung overhead, and an old desk, unused for a long time, stood in one corner.

There was a bed covered in pristine white linens, a table in the center, and a teapot with cups placed on top.

I checked my pockets. My gun was gone.

I must have dropped it somewhere.

If only I had a knack for magic. If I did, I could just wiggle my fingers and fire something like bullets.

The location was likely one of three places: the Rosenberg mansion, the convent where Isabel stayed, or Miss Diana's estate.

At least it wasn't Theo's house.

"...Ah, ugh…"

But then again, who knows?

Maybe a demon sorcerer disguised as someone I knew had kidnapped me.

They'd come for revenge, determined to deal with me before I could kill them all.

They'd burn the mansion, seize me in their monstrous grasp, and pull me apart until I was nothing but shreds.

If I tried to escape, they'd probably bite me in the side mid-run.

I wouldn't submit to them. Not even if I were about to die—or even after death.

The absence of a weapon in my hand made me feel like I was going insane.

At any moment, demons could burst in and tear me to pieces.

“AAARGH!”

My breathing grew rapid, and my vision spun.

A damned sorcerer must have cursed me.

This was exactly why I said all demons had to be wiped out.

“I’m not afraid. I’m not afraid.”

They came for revenge against me.

While I was this weakened, they’d devour me alive.

Stupid creatures too dim-witted to use a weapon!

Though some carried swords, those were outliers.

Demons were foolish, brutish, violent, useless, and the most worthless beings in existence.

So worthless that even the word worthless felt too kind!

Of course, fighting them barehanded might be a challenge.

I needed something to defend myself.

I grabbed the teapot from the table and smashed it against the table surface.

Though shards flew, none of them hurt me.

Holding a sharp piece forward, I prepared myself to fight whatever demon might charge at me.

I couldn’t use magic, nor was I physically strong, but I’d been trained from a young age to dispatch at least one or two cleanly.

“Hoo…”

I nearly lost it.

Without a weapon in my hand or pocket, I felt this unbearably vulnerable.

Footsteps echoed outside the door, growing louder.

I leaned against the wall beside the door, gripping the glass shard tightly.

The moment the door opened, I swung it.

But it was all for nothing. My wrist was easily caught and held still.

The skin of the hand that caught mine was just… human.

Though missing a finger.

It occurred to me—there were no demons here.

"…You wake up quite dramatically."

I counted the fingers—there were nine.

He'd found one to replace the missing one.

Or maybe we had given him one.

The man who opened the door was Julius.

If he decided to charge at me, I'd probably die.

If Julius was here, then this must be the Rosenberg mansion.

Not a place I wanted to be.

I had walked into a tiger's den and couldn't afford to let my guard down.

I'd have to keep up the mask I always wore.

"You look rather well.

The last time I saw you, you were so pale you seemed on the verge of death."

Julius looked at me with a strange expression.

There was a hint of pity in his gaze that I found deeply unpleasant.

The pitiful one here was him, the man who lost a finger in my family's basement—not me.

"I think it'd be best if you put that down," Julius said, gripping my wrist tighter.

I realized that holding a half-broken teapot shard in my hand probably made me look deranged.

"…Ah, right. You're right."

I dropped the shard, which fell with a faint clink, scattering pieces across the floor.

Barefoot, I'd probably cut myself on the shards, but it wasn't a big deal.

A potion would heal it, though I couldn't help but think about that librarian who became addicted to potions.

Not that I'd end up like that—getting addicted would take chugging ten bottles daily for days.

I neither had the resources nor the means, so it didn't matter.

Without much care, I walked over to the table, dragging a chair behind me, and sat down.

I felt a slight sting in my foot, but it didn't hurt much.

I'd just been so rattled a moment ago.

The fear that demons would eat me alive had consumed me.

I could still feel my heart pounding loudly in my chest.

"So, why am I here?"

"…Ethel brought you."

"Pity there's no basement, no shackles, and no pillar to hang me upside-down.

Still, if you're taking suggestions, kneeling someone, tying their wrists behind their back, and just planting a wooden post works quite well."

Julius frowned deeply.

He was strong enough to kick my head clean off in a single blow, though not quite at Theo's level, and the thought made me nervous.

I masked my fear with mockery and a smirk, making sure my lips curled upward and my eyes didn't twitch.

"Do you think Ethel kidnapped you?" Julius said, sounding incredulous.

But the one who should feel incredulous was me.

They'd stormed into my house, knocked me out, and dragged me here.

In situations like this, the best response is to drop your smirk, narrow your eyes, and curse—it usually has an effect.

The problem was, Julius wasn't tied up, and I was the powerless one here.

"Yes, if not, then what is it?"

Taking someone from their home against their will and forcibly moving them to another location—that's called kidnapping.

You barged into my house without permission, knocked me out with a spell, and brought me here. And you're saying that's not kidnapping?"

He didn't reply.

"And locking me up in some girlish room out of nowhere—what kind of twisted taste is that?

Julius, you and I haven't exactly been on good terms.

You couldn't do it out of fear back in the basement, but how about grabbing my neck and snapping it this time?"

I tilted my neck back as I spoke, and he bit his lip slightly before grabbing my waist and lifting me up.

Oh, he might actually snap it.

If he did, well, there'd be nothing I could do. But I still didn't want to die.

Instead of breaking my neck, he set me down on the bed and began carefully removing the shards of glass embedded in my foot with a conflicted expression.

"…Doesn't it hurt?"

"It does. But my head hurts so much I can't even feel the pain in my body."

After pulling out all the shards from my foot, he bent down and picked up the pieces scattered on the floor with his bare hands, disposing of them in a trash bin.

"Hearing you call me 'Julius' feels a bit unpleasant.

That's what you called me back in the basement."

"Would you prefer I call you oppa like before? Because I'd hate that even more—"

"Yeah. Like before, as if everything's normal."

As if. As if we could ever go back to how things were.

"There's no way we can."

"Probably not. After all, you're the one who destroyed it all."

"It was the demons."

He let out a dry laugh.

Someone as forward-thinking as me doesn't dwell in the past.

It was all because of the demons.

If only they'd been wiped out completely, and if people hadn't hidden those detestable creatures, we wouldn't have fallen apart like this.

"Ethel will be here soon.

We're not trying to imprison you—we just want you to stay here for now. So sit tight and wait."

"How is that any different?"

"Well, we're not cutting off any fingers or feeding you trash, are we?"

Julius flashed a casual smile, laced with sarcasm.

Hearing that now didn't stir any particular feelings in me.

It wasn't the worst arrangement, but I couldn't accept it.

"I don't need that. Let me go."

"No can do. Ethel specifically told me not to let you leave."

"I have things I need to do!"

"…What things?"

His face hardened as he asked.

If I told him I planned to continue the work my family had started—exterminating demons—even after the family had collapsed, what would happen?

I was certain he wouldn't release me just to help with that.

"Tell me. If it's legitimate work, I'll let you go."

There was no way they'd found out.

If they had, they would've come for me at the house on the hill in the backstreets instead.

They had no idea what I'd been doing.

"…Like I'd tell you that. You should consider how delicate a girl my age can be before demanding answers."

“Oh, my apologies, then.

In that case, this delicate girl will just have to stay here.”

Have these people’s intelligence eroded from living out in the countryside instead of the city?

What kind of thought process led them to believe keeping me here was a good idea?

I couldn’t understand Ethel at all.

If I were Ethel, I’d have eliminated a threat like myself right away.

Either by pushing Theo to do it or handling it alone.

For that matter, I still didn’t understand why Theo hadn’t dealt with me when he had the chance.

Sure, he’d promised Julian that he wouldn’t, but promises like that are easily broken.

“Don’t you hate me?”

If it were me, I’d despise someone like me.

Even now, I feel like throwing Theo into a basement if I had the chance.

“Hating a kid who’s not even fully grown—what’s the point?

It’s obvious your surroundings, the adults in your life, shaped you into who you are.”

For a moment, I felt the strength drain from my body.

I let myself collapse back onto the bed, lying there limply.

I murmured softly, almost inaudibly,

“You should hate me.”

33

Chapter 33

It seemed the Rosenberg mansion didn't have any potions, as Julius applied a pungent herbal ointment to the soles of my feet and wrapped them in bandages.

A little later, the creaking sound of hinges echoed from outside.

Perhaps the large door's hinges had rusted.

"Looks like Ethel's here. You two can have your talk."

"Is there anything to talk about?"

"How should I know?"

Soon, loud footsteps echoed down the hallway, and the door swung open.

Ethel, still in her school uniform, walked into the room.

Ignoring her brother entirely, she headed straight toward me.

Still, she was his sister. Wouldn't he feel a little hurt that she prioritized a friend over her brother?

"…Ellen, are you hurt again?"

"I'm not hurt. It's just a little…"

As I spoke, I realized I wasn't exactly unhurt.

"She broke a teapot by herself and stepped on the shards. Said she didn't feel a thing, though."

"And what were you doing instead of stopping her!?"

"I came running when I heard the glass break. How could I have stopped it?"

Thankfully, he didn't mention me swinging around the broken shards.

Ethel turned to Julius and muttered something under her breath.

It seemed like she was signaling him.

"Anyway, I'm leaving," Julius said.

Ethel stuck her tongue out at him in response.

Or maybe that was just my imagination.

It could have been a rude gesture, like flipping him off.

This was probably how normal siblings behaved.

Unlike my family, where all affection was one-sidedly poured onto Alicia, I understood very well that our dynamic wasn't like other families.

Ethel sighed deeply and sat down next to me.

She swallowed nervously, looking a bit tense.

There was a faint floral scent.

Whether it came from Ethel herself or from something fragrant used in her laundry, I wasn't sure.

She licked her lips briefly, steeled herself, and began to speak.

"First of all, Ellen, I'm sorry for bringing you here by force. But you're not in a good place to be alone right now, so…"

She was spouting words I didn't care to hear, so I interrupted her and got straight to the point.

"Ethel, just give me back my gun."

"…I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"……"

Ethel hesitated, her lips moving as if she wanted to say something, but she closed her mouth instead.

"Ellen, just for a while—just for a little while—stay here with me. Come to the academy with me.

Don't do anything; just stay with me. We can eat good food, go out, and relax together."

"And what's the difference between that and being a well-fed pig locked in a pen?"

"Well, if that's a pig in a pen, then you're a starving stray cat."

"…Do you really think that if you hand me my gun, I'll just shoot someone?

I'm not even asking to leave. Just give me back my gun."

“I said no!”

She seemed agitated.

For now, she was treating me decently, but what if her mood soured? Would she lock me up in some underground tunnel like the one beneath that farm?

Relying on someone’s goodwill was the most foolish thing anyone could do.

But Ethel, at least, might be manageable.

Julius wasn’t in the room anymore.

If the closest mage was a young girl who hadn’t trained in physical combat, subduing her wouldn’t be difficult.

Before making a move, I asked one last time.

“Ethel, are you seriously not going to let me go or give me back my belongings?”

“I won’t—urk!?”

As she shook her head and began to reply, I grabbed her face with my right hand and lunged at her.

I silenced her scream by clamping her mouth shut, twisted one of her legs around mine, and pushed her down.

If she struggled, her knee would snap.

“Don’t scream, Ethel. Just a bit of pressure, and you’ll be limping for a long time.”

I finally felt like I could breathe.

If it had been Julius, even with all my strength, I wouldn’t have been able to bend his knee—he’d probably just toss me aside.

His body was practically made of steel.

“To have a conversation from the same level as the person keeping me captive, this is the only way, Ethel. You understand, right?”

“Conversation, huh. I knew you’d pull something like this.”

Ethel didn’t look startled.

Instead, she sighed deeply and let her body relax completely.

The door opened soon after.

Julius stood there, arms crossed, looking at me with a faintly exasperated expression.

Shouldn’t he be worried about saving his sister instead of standing there looking at me like that?

Just a little more pressure, and her knee would twist.

“…I didn’t think you’d actually do it.”

Ethel spoke casually.

“Ellen, let’s just have dinner after you’ve had a bath. We can talk afterward.”

I released her and stepped back.

As I did, I noticed her fingers and legs trembling slightly—she must have been more scared than she let on.

“Fine. I suppose that’s reasonable.”

Honestly, I did want to change out of my sweat-drenched tea gown.

Ethel took my hand and started leading me somewhere.

I thought she might take me to a shower room with running water, but it turned out to be more old-fashioned than that.

The smell of burning wood filled the air. It seemed the water was being heated by a fire beneath the bathtub.

Ethel approached me and stripped off my clothes.

I didn’t feel particularly embarrassed.

There was no reason to be shy about a body anyone could objectively call beautiful.

If anything, I might feel embarrassed looking at Ethel’s naked body instead.

The "kidnapper" blushed faintly, her face slightly red.

Though perhaps it was just the heat from the warm water.

Ah, it didn’t seem to be an embarrassment after all.

“Bringing me to a place filled with water wasn’t the best choice, Ethel.”

“…Uh-huh.”

“Go ahead and wash first. I’ll bathe by myself.”

“You’re not going to try to escape or anything, right?”

“How far do you think I can run naked?”

I waited out of sight until Ethel was done washing. Once she stepped out, I splashed some water over myself with a bucket, then climbed into the tub.

After sweating for a bit, I lathered my body with soap, rinsed off with another bucket, and got out.

When I returned to the dressing area, Ethel was waiting with a pristine white dress in her hands.

“We’re about the same height, so it should fit you.”

I put on the loose-fitting underwear—it felt a bit roomy around the chest—and then slipped on the white dress.

Ethel could have just told me to follow her, but whenever we moved somewhere, she insisted on holding my hand and leading me.

It felt burdensome.

I didn’t particularly like physical contact with others to begin with.

Anyway, holding Ethel’s hand, I descended to the first floor, where Count Rosenberg, his wife, and Julius were seated at a large dining table.

Now that I thought about it, the Count and Countess probably hadn’t known who I was when they were dragged out of the underground pit and thrown into the mansion’s basement.

They must have only realized after Julian’s death that the person who had taken them from the Sorghum Farm was me.

The table was laden with unfamiliar dishes.

As expected of a landlord, the table looked bountiful.

“Ellen, sit next to me,” the Count said.

“…Okay.”

After a brief prayer, the Count stood up and began serving food.

He placed a leg of what seemed to be chicken onto my plate before sitting back down and speaking quietly.

“Back then, you spoke so nonchalantly about my daughter’s death.”

Julius chimed in.

“I thought all of Ethel’s fingers had been cut off back then.”

The Count glared at me.

I shrugged and took a bite of the chicken leg he’d served me. Hopefully, it wasn’t poisoned.

“…Dad, I told you, nothing happened to me,” Ethel said.

Did she leave out the part about being beaten and waterboarded? That’s surprising.

“That’s the only reason I agreed when you said you wanted to bring her here.

If she had so much as laid a hand on you…”

“I was locked up, sure, but I was well-fed and fine.

So let’s end this conversation here. What if Ellen loses her appetite?”

“Lose her appetite? She’s eating just fine.”

“Uh…”

Ignoring their conversation, I focused on stuffing my mouth with food.

It was the first proper meal I’d had in a long time, so there was no reason to hold back.

I needed to replenish my energy to prevent myself from collapsing from exhaustion.

I had survived on rye bread and cheese for so long that my body had started to feel weak.

This was a good opportunity, and I couldn’t waste it.

As long as I kept my body healthy, I could kill as many demons as I wanted.

Even if I couldn’t do it now, I’d figure something out once I left here.

I was young, and time was on my side.

After finishing my meal, I decided to be cheeky, afraid they might take the food away if I said anything they didn’t like.

“What are you talking about?

Julius just happened to find his missing parents collapsed at the Sorghum Farm.

And as for the demons working there—they were just victims of unfortunate accidents."

I thought they'd lash out at me, criticize me, or throw their raw, negative emotions at me. But instead, they looked at me with pity in their eyes.

I'm not some pitiful person.

I don't deserve their pity.

"Rather than looking at me with those eyes, I'd prefer if you got angry instead," I said, sneering at the Count.

"It's a bit complicated to get mad at a little girl for talking back," he replied.

"…Even though I killed all the pets you treasured so much?"

"Ellen, if you've come to the Rosenberg household, then during meals, we only discuss cheerful and pleasant topics.

No quarrels, politics, or talks of money. That's the rule."

The Count's expression hardened as he issued his warning.

If not during meals, when else were they supposed to have such conversations?

It's the only time families sit together and talk.

It felt strange—no, maybe this was normal.

But to me, this family seemed odd.

"Just kick me out already.

Why bother feeding and housing me?"

"Because I'm a man of faith.

Something about loving your enemies, wasn't it?

I've never had enemies before, so I wasn't sure how to uphold that teaching, but now that I have the opportunity here, I must follow it."

Being surrounded by lunatics makes me feel like I'm the abnormal one.

It was extremely unpleasant, and yet not entirely unpleasant, which made it all the more unsettling.

It was fear.

34

Chapter 34

After the meal, still wrapped in an unpleasant feeling, I found myself once again holding Ethel's hand as we returned to the room.

The old stairs creaked as we ascended.

Ethel walked beside me, carefully watching, as if afraid I might trip. She probably thought she was being discreet about it, but it was obvious.

The way she treated me felt like how one might handle a fragile preschooler—as if touching me the wrong way might break me completely.

It wasn't exactly a pleasant experience for me.

Back in the bedroom, before attempting to sleep despite knowing I wouldn't, I grabbed Ethel, who was already in her pajamas, and asked her,

"…Why didn't you tell them?"

"Tell them what?"

"What you went through because of me."

"…I don't know."

Ethel's expression was hard to read, making it difficult for me to press her further.

"I don't know why. I really don't."

"When I had you earlier…"

I almost asked her what she would've done if I had broken her neck instead of threatening her knee but closed my mouth.

In the past, I wouldn't have hesitated. Before Julius entered the room, I would've snapped her knee without a second thought.

Why would a limp matter, anyway? That's what I would've told myself.

If Julius had made any move toward me, I wouldn't have hesitated to twist his neck either. At least he wouldn't have died right away.

Saving Ethel would've taken priority over me escaping the mansion.

But I hadn’t done any of that.

Maybe I’ve changed.

Ethel forced a smile and said to me,

“Goodnight, Ellen. Just think of this as a chance to rest for a while.

It’s not a hotel in the middle of the capital, but….”

“…Yeah.”

Did she bring me here purely out of goodwill?

Religious teachings often preach loving others, but the fact that such things need to be taught means people naturally don’t do them.

It was hard to understand.

If parents who had always shown love suddenly strung up their child and subjected them to beatings and water torture, the child would surely resent them.

But Ethel and I weren’t even family; we were nothing more than a pair of first friends—a shallow bond at best.

People offer goodwill expecting it to be returned.

Yet, instead of goodwill, I’d “offered” Ethel waterboarding.

There was no way I could repay what Ethel had done for me.

In the past, I might’ve tried to repay her with money, but if I used up all my funds, killing demons would become an unattainable dream.

I returned to the room.

It wasn’t a guest room but seemed to be a space once used by someone who had lived here before.

It had a lived-in feel.

On the table sat a teapot identical to the one I had broken earlier.

The tea leaves in the box were a decent quality black tea.

I pulled out some of the dried leaves, stuffed them in my mouth, and began chewing.

It gave me a faint sense of clarity.

Maybe I should start looking for an escape route.

The room was on the second floor, so breaking the window and jumping out could work.

Ethel must've told the Count and Countess that I would stay here for a while, so walking out the front door might even be an option.

I clenched my fist, ready to punch the window, but closed my eyes and lay down on the bed instead.

Dragging a hand over my face, I let go of the tension in my body and, surprisingly, fell asleep much faster than I'd expected.

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I felt light.

There was no oppressive weight crushing me or nausea threatening to rise.

It was refreshing—a much brighter feeling than usual.

Perhaps taking a break now and then wasn't so bad after all.

It seemed Ethel had even brought my school uniform from my room on the day she kidnapped me.

When she handed me the freshly washed uniform just in time for the academy, it was unnervingly meticulous.

She wasn't kidding when she said she'd stay close. Even at the academy, she clung to me constantly, never once going to meet Theo or other friends.

"Hey, Ethel, are you planning to stick to my side even during class?"

"If I take my eyes off you for even a moment, who knows where you'll go."

"I'm not a kid….

And if you keep holding me like this, when do I get to work? After all, once you graduate, you'll be heading to the Mage Tower or some other job, right?"

Ethel frowned, as if upset.

"Then at least until we graduate…

No, even after that—until you find a proper job at least…."

She started mumbling something to herself.

If it came down to it, I could shut her up—no, I couldn't.

Even if I had a gun in hand, I couldn't bring myself to aim it at Ethel's forehead.

I briefly wished Ethel would leave me alone and go hang out with Isabel and Diana instead. But instead of her leaving, they came here.

"Oh, Miss Diana. You're not casting any spells on me this time?"

"Ah, haha… T-that was, um, because Ethel… asked me to…."

"I figured."

"So, would living with Ethel be better than the convent after all?"

"What kind of question is that?

The food there is awful, isn't it? I heard they eat nothing but grass every day."

"And you've been eating dried rye bread and water for lunch every day."

"There's a big difference between efficient nutritional intake to save time and eating for enjoyment."

"…You're ridiculous."

Ethel, uncomfortable with my bickering with Isabel, laughed nervously and changed the subject.

"Instead of arguing, why don't we stop by a café after class?

They've got a new dessert, and I was thinking of trying it out. What do you think?"

"Y-yeah, let's do that. N-no fighting, okay?"

Isabel and I both replied simultaneously that we hadn't been fighting.

After class, I got the cheapest coffee available and sat in a corner, half-listening to their chatter.

Apparently, a certain opera actor was all the rage these days.

Some boys had caused trouble at a cabaret and received disciplinary action.

Theo wouldn't be involved in something like that.

There was talk of elaborate firework spells becoming popular lately.

Even a few stories of Theo's exploits were mentioned.

But nothing about the catastrophe caused by the demons that day.

Was this out of consideration for me? Or was it just a fleeting topic they'd chosen to forget?

For now, everyone was laughing and cheerful, but if they heard that I'd dealt with Olga's father—the half-demon who had tormented me—they'd probably try to lock me up somewhere.

I let out an unsettling laugh, thinking about how to end this charade.

Throwing away the future for the sake of momentary satisfaction didn't seem rational.

Maybe I should start working after I graduate from the academy.

But if I settled for this, why did Julian have to die?

No, Julian didn't die for something like that.

Did he die telling me to give up and settle like this?

He destroyed the family entirely.

Dismissed the servants with generous severance pay.

Sure, I've killed many demons, but so many are still alive.

They said I faltered because I was swept up in my emotions.

Julian must've been so weak that even his emotions had dulled.

He just didn't show it.

"…Ellen?"

What am I even doing?

Am I blaming my brother now, trying to hate those who killed Alicia or my parents—those I already have plenty of reason to resent?

Julian, the one who at least tried to care for me, the one who made an effort to support me?

Julian was probably just impatient.

If he wanted to ruin everything, he wouldn't have buried himself in paperwork and worked so hard.

It was just bad luck, that's all.

Who could have foreseen someone like Theo would exist?

At the very least, I shouldn't deny Julian.

If I keep denying and resenting everyone around me, eventually, I'll end up denying Alicia too.

I'd either have to deny Alicia's death—or die myself.

Maybe I've let myself go mentally just because my body feels a little better.

"Ellen!?"

Isabel, who was sitting next to me, grabbed my shoulders and shook me.

"Oh, uh. What?"

Isabel was biting her lip, her teeth pressing into it slightly.

She looked like she was about to scold me but ended up with an expression that seemed ready to cry.

"…If you're in pain, say something."

"I'm fine. But what's with you all of a sudden?"

"You were just crying and shaking like there was an earthquake, so don't even try to play dumb."

Hearing that I'd been crying, I reached up to touch my eyes.

They were slightly wet.

"I guess… I was just a little tired."

"What would it take for you to let me heal you properly so you'd wake up feeling better…?"

"Look, sitting here at a café, joking around, chatting about this and that—it's all fine.

But you dragged me here against my will. You didn't care about what I wanted.

So, like always, just don't care and go back to whatever you were talking about before."

"You…"

That look she gave me wouldn't change anything.

I picked up the coffee in front of me and began sipping it slowly.

Maybe I should just quit.

It wouldn’t matter if I did.

But if I gave up now, I’d lose the excuse of being a harmless student and the future it could secure.

Someday, I might even get a job at the royal library, and that’s too good to throw away lightly.

Who would ever suspect that a mere librarian was secretly capturing demons, locking them in underground chambers, and incinerating their corpses in furnaces?

The risks outweigh the rewards.

I couldn’t sacrifice my future for the fleeting satisfaction of immediate liberation.

When I return home, I need to get my gun back first.

Then, slowly, I’ll start parting ways.

With comfort.

35

Chapter 35

"Ethel, it's about time you gave me back my gun."

I brought it up on the way back to the mansion.

There was no one else around—probably because the mansion was in such a secluded place.

"…No."

Holding a cup of tea with a lemon slice in it as I walked wasn't a bad feeling.

I had insisted I didn't need it, repeatedly declining her offer, but Ethel had seemed bothered by the thought that my cheap coffee had dampened the mood at the café. Eventually, she went down to the first floor and ordered a drink for me.

"At least give me a reason why you won't."

I might have liked the tea, but I certainly didn't enjoy this conversation.

"……."

"So, are you really planning to keep me by your side forever?"

It wasn't as if I hadn't realized this wasn't a joke.

That much had been clear the moment she brought me my uniform in the morning.

"…Yes."

What is Ethel thinking?

Why does she insist on keeping me close?

What's the issue here?

Just because I lost my family? No, that's not it.

I don't know… It's just… a little sad.

"Yesterday, I had plenty of chances to leave the mansion.

But I didn't. So, can't you just give it back to me now?"

"I already told you, no!

A normal student wouldn’t even carry a gun in the first place!

You’re not taking any special classes like Theo-senpai, either!"

"It’s just… I’m carrying it to protect myself."

"…How can you say that so confidently?"

"What do you mean by that?"

Ethel stopped mid-walk and sat on a bench by the roadside.

She glanced down at the ground before letting out a dry laugh, as if finding her own words ridiculous.

"The noose I found in your desk drawer—what was that for?

…If you can give me an explanation I can accept, I’ll give the gun back immediately."

Does she think I’d shoot myself in the head if I got the gun back?

I suppose it wouldn’t be an unreasonable assumption.

Right before Diana hit me with her spell, I’d been ready to shoot myself rather than let them take me alive.

At the time, I really thought they had figured me out.

"The only thing you’d use a noose for is hanging yourself.

I’m not exactly a shepherd herding cows, am I?"

At that, Ethel stood and pointed her finger at me, raising her voice.

"How can you say that so casually? So, you really were planning to die!"

This isn’t the kind of argument I want to have.

I don’t want to be treated like someone who was brought here just because they seemed suicidal.

"Yeah, so what? I don’t see what’s so wrong about that.

If you lost your brother and your parents because of me, would you want to keep living?

That little kid had her side torn open and eaten alive. Right in front of me.

And my parents—they burned alive."

But Ethel had always treated me sincerely.

I didn’t want to hide behind mockery, sarcasm, or lies.

That’s the kind of thing a hero does, not me.

Still, if I laid everything bare, Ethel would hate me—or worse, try to stop me.

I wouldn’t tolerate anyone standing in my way.

This is just about killing demons. It doesn’t have to come to killing Ethel.

At least, I hope it doesn’t.

How am I supposed to deal with Ethel?

A light argument could help vent some pent-up tension. It’s not the worst approach.

"So, yeah. I joined forces with my living brother, put all our resources into it, and tried to wipe out every disgusting creature in this world.

Didn’t go as well as I’d hoped, though."

That was probably the most intense period of my life.

Every moment, I put all my energy into killing even one more demon.

"Your brother died because he tried to take out the Hanton couple and all those demons!

To me, he’s practically my enemy!

He killed Allet, Hanton, Mitch, Grandpa Gonzal, Neme, Aunt Lilven—do I need to keep going?"

If she’d thrown in a curse word or two, it might have made her rant feel less flat.

Anyway, Ethel started listing the names of demons I had probably killed.

None of them stuck in my memory.

I didn’t bother remembering them, and they weren’t worth remembering.

It’s like someone else naming their dog "Spot"—why would I care to remember that?

"If killing those beasts was wrong, then just kill me."

Ethel began crying.

At first, she tried to hold back her sobs, but eventually, tears began falling. She wiped them away with her palm.

"Kill you? What nonsense… I brought you here to save you, you idiot. You're my friend."

She was probably about to call me a "bad woman," but it came out softer than she intended.

I pulled a handkerchief from my pocket, wiped her tears, and handed it to her.

It wasn't much use to me—I hardly ever cried.

Alicia had told me not to cry, so I didn't.

It's just… how it was.

She said to live, so I lived.

She said to get along with friends, so I did my best to get along.

The men I used to care about don't occupy my thoughts anymore.

I hadn't seen one of their faces in ages—maybe they were just busy.

Alicia hadn't said caring about someone meant romantic love, so I figured it didn't matter.

After crying for a while, Ethel's emotions seemed to calm down, and she said something weak.

"Let's just forget about everything that happened before…."

"How could I forget, Ethel?"

There's no way I could.

If I tried, the leader of those demons would probably appear in my dreams, muttering resentful nonsense.

Trying to forget only leads to guilt.

And that guilt drives you insane.

That's what happened to most people who returned from the battlefield.

So I have to face the truth as it is.

Of course, I'd tweak the facts a little to suit my narrative.

"You and Theo came and killed my brother.

How could I forget scraping pieces of corpses off the walls?"

Sticky. It was disgusting.

The smell—don’t even get me started.

Maybe that’s why my negative thoughts about Julian had grown stronger.

I felt like I was about to lose control, so I steadied myself, speaking to Ethel in a way that sounded like I was comforting her—but in truth, I was trying to comfort myself.

"You asked me about the noose, didn’t you?

The day after I cleaned up what was left of Julian, I woke up in an empty mansion, and the thought hit me.

Empty halls, dust floating in the sunlight, the faint metallic smell of blood… and a sense of emptiness.

I wanted to die.

So, I went back to my room, made a noose, and hung it from the ceiling."

In truth, I’d even put my neck in it.

I felt the rope press against my throat but pulled my head out immediately after.

"And then, Ethel, here’s the funny part.

I got scared. Really, absolutely terrified.

I couldn’t bring myself to do it. I wondered if giving up everything and dying like that was the right thing to do."

I’d sat on the floor for a long time, staring at the rope.

If I’d been a little braver—or more despairing—I would’ve stood up and hung myself then and there.

But I couldn’t.

I had demons to kill.

Maybe that thought came to me because I wanted to live.

Otherwise, I had no reason to stay alive.

What a pathetic, miserable human being I am.

It’s utterly disgusting.

"…Ellen."

"After that, I just went about my work.

I didn’t have to worry about starving. If it got that bad, I could just sell one of the family’s buildings."

At those words, Ethel hugged me tightly.

"…Don’t go. Not to the back alleys, especially not at night.

You don’t need to work.

I’ll give you food, a place to sleep, whatever you need while you’re at the academy. So please…"

I could feel Ethel trembling slightly as she sobbed, her body shaking against mine.

There was a faint salty smell—maybe from all the tears she’d shed, or maybe someone had scattered salt nearby.

Her hair smelled like the same soap I’d used, as did her uniform.

Yet her scent was different from mine.

How could someone smell like flowers or fruit?

Maybe that’s why I felt drawn to her scent.

Holding Ethel close, letting her bury her face into my chest, I stared into the void and replied softly,

"Alright."

Of course, it was a lie.

"…Don’t die. Don’t even dream of suicide."

"Alright."

That, at least, was the truth.

I had no intention of dying.

"…And don’t hate the demons too much, okay?"

"Alright."

That was a lie.

"I think I like you too much, Ellen.

If you disappeared, I'd be devastated."

If she hadn't been crying and whining with her face buried in my chest, I might have fallen for her then.

But instead, I simply patted her soft hair.

"And more than just being alive, I want you to be happy."

"I am happy. Good food and a friend to be with—that's enough."

Ethel seemed to have an odd fixation on the word friend.

When I said it, she stopped sniffling, pulled away from my embrace, wiped her eyes, and smiled bashfully.

Her face, illuminated by the setting sun, was red—so much so that you wouldn't even know she'd been crying moments ago.

"But eventually, I'll leave.

Don't get the wrong idea, Ethel. I'm just humoring you for now.

You know I can leave anytime I want, right?"

"…Yeah."

"The gun—I won't need it for a while.

I'm not living alone, after all."

"Yeah!"

After we returned to Ethel's mansion, I went into the bathroom to wash up.

This time, I intended to wait until Ethel was done, but she grabbed my hand and pulled me inside with her.

Her hands trembled slightly, though she seemed to be trying hard to suppress it.

We washed silently—Ethel poured warm water over my hair, scrubbed every corner of my body with soap, and rinsed me off.

Afterward, we sat together in the tub for a long while without saying a word.

At one point, my gaze briefly drifted toward her slightly rounded chest, but I quickly looked away, feeling like it was something I shouldn’t stare at.

As the awkward silence stretched on, making me uncomfortable, Ethel broke it by speaking up.

"…Ellen."

"Yeah?"

"We’re friends, right?"

"Yeah."

"Good. That’s a relief."

"Yeah."

I wonder what’s so relieving about it.

Even though I answered, I didn’t understand.

It felt like I was brushing a problem to the side again, as always.

That kind of stuffy, uncomfortable feeling where you pretend everything’s fine and force a smile.

36

Chapter 36

After finishing a naked embrace in the bathroom, I got dressed and stepped out to find that the outside had already turned pitch black.

Feeling the cool sensation as the slight moisture on my face evaporated, I took Ethel's outstretched hand. Like a child holding their mother's hand, I followed Ethel down the stairs, trailing after her.

Count Rosenberg didn't seem particularly pleased that I was holding his daughter's hand. Or maybe he just wanted to hold her hand himself.

It reminded me of something my father used to say: Alicia would hold my hand and follow me around everywhere, but now that she's in her teens, she won't even consider holding his hand anymore.

What did I say back then? I probably teased him about how he used so many chemicals on his patients that his hands reeked.

The night I said that, it couldn't have been more than a coincidence that only my meal was laced with laxatives.

Anyway, we settled at the dining table and began our meal. Julius wasn't here.

Apparently, he'd gone out drinking with a friend. Thinking about it, he spent more time away from home than in it.

Ethel entertained the Count and Countess with exaggerated or downplayed stories from the academy, making them laugh.

As for me, I buried my face in my plate, eating as diligently as always. Truly, eating delicious food is a kind of blessing.

There's no better way to tame someone, either.

I suppose I'm the one being tamed here. But when the time comes, I'll leave on my own.

"Master! We've run out of bread and meat for the kids. I'm going to fetch some more!"

A small voice interrupted our meal.

Wait, were the Count and Countess raising another child besides Ethel and Julius?

So that's where all the mountains of food go. It wasn't just excess extravagance that was left to rot.

But Ethel didn't look good. Her complexion was off.

"Ethel? Are you feeling unwell?"

Ethel was spaced out, her gaze fixed on something. I followed her line of sight.

It wasn't a child who had spoken.

It wasn't even human.

It had one horn, the other broken off somewhere. Its oily face suggested it had been eating in this household.

It looked no older than ten years since birth.

"You… why are you here?"

It spoke to me, glaring.

I didn't know who or what it was.

But its pupils contracted sharply as it stared at me, and it didn't look away.

Could it be…

Were they raising something from the underground?

Couldn't shake their habit of hiding things in the cellar, I see.

After Julian's situation became public, people had largely stopped capturing and privately punishing demonic creatures. Moving them here must've been easier.

I looked at the Count and Countess.

Both of them wore expressions of surprise, as if they hadn't expected this.

The Count rose, as though to either calm the situation or lead the child away, and started approaching the creature, speaking to it.

Then he reached for his pistol. Damn it.

The creature defied him, screaming and crying, and eventually shoved the Count.

The middle-aged man fell helplessly.

Then the creature kicked off the floor and charged straight at me. It pushed past Ethel's frail frame and grabbed a knife from the dining table.

It hurled the knife at me.

The blade struck my arm, tearing my skin deeply, but at least it didn't hit my throat.

Expecting Ethel to take down that thing would be foolish.

She's delicate and would probably panic and collapse in a situation like this.

She couldn't protect me.

And I couldn't expect her to kill a demonic creature barehanded.

I had to act. Otherwise, I'd die.

It moved fast—like a large dog sprinting at full speed.

Grabbing a fork with its left hand, it lunged at me.

It stabbed at me a few times, landing a hit on my arm, but I managed to fend it off.

Its speed wasn't something human eyes could track.

It knocked away my defending hand and drove the fork into my neck.

I could feel the sharp object lodged in my throat.

The pain was absent, likely due to adrenaline, but the fork hadn't been pulled out, so I wouldn't die immediately.

The blood loss made my mind begin to calm.

I was meant to live like this—fighting demons in bloody fields of corpses.

Not enjoying a life of comfort in a mansion with good friends, fine meals, and soft beds.

This felt like punishment, a way of saying, "How dare you live so complacently."

Did it think I was dead? The creature collapsed, trembling hands falling limp.

It looked satisfying. Like it had avenged its parents or something. Killing me must have brought it joy.

I remembered the first time I'd mistakenly killed a rehabilitation target in the counseling chamber. Was I as dazed as it was back then?

But I wasn’t dead yet. Nor did I plan to die.

Instead of screaming in pain, I let out shallow breaths. Blood filled my mouth, and I began spitting it out.

Grasping the edge of the table with trembling hands, I tried to stand. The table tipped over, and I fell forward. Thankfully, the fall didn’t drive the fork deeper into my throat.

“E-Ellen, w-why now… of all times?”

With shaking hands, I grasped the fork’s handle and pulled it out.

I feared that removing it might kill me, but I had no choice.

The blood made it hard to breathe, so I spat it out.

Ethel rushed over, pressing her hands to my neck to staunch the bleeding. Her pupils were wildly shaking.

“W-wait. Just wait. I’ll stop the bleeding right now. And then… then we can… yes, we’ll find Isabel! She can heal anything. She’ll fix this.”

This must’ve been the first time Ethel had seen this much blood. I’d kept things clean during our previous counseling sessions.

Ethel ran off, returning with ointments and bandages that smelled strongly even from here.

She smeared the ointment on the wound and wrapped it tightly, slowing the bleeding.

“…Ethel. Everything I said… cough… was right, wasn’t it?”

They're all just beasts, after all.

That’s why I suggested we get rid of them, but no one listened to me, and now this has happened.

Well, I almost lost my resolve, but this has reignited my motivation. It hurts—a lot, actually—but it’s clear now.

“Don’t speak, Ellen! Just hold on, I’ll use a spell—”

I pushed Ethel away. She looked at me, tears streaming down her face.

Taking a quick look around, I assessed the situation.

The Countess was still frozen in place, unable to do anything.

The creature, even after being grabbed and slapped by the Count, still wore a twisted smile.

The Count looked like he might collapse at any moment, casting a glance at me with vacant eyes before muttering something to the demon as he restrained it.

With the bandage wrapped around my neck, I figured the bleeding had slowed enough. I wasn't going to die. An odd confidence coursed through me, convincing me of that.

I steadied my breathing and picked up the fork that had just been lodged in my neck and now lay on the floor. Then I lunged at the creature, driving the fork into its eye.

Unlike the throat, eyes are easier targets—they don't hold onto what's stabbed into them.

The creature had watched my movement, startled, but did nothing to block or escape—it just stood there and took it.

This is why calling demons stupid and dull isn't prejudice; it's common sense.

"Aaaargh!!"

Did it really think stabbing me in the neck with a fork would kill me? Sure, it might've killed me, but there's no time for satisfaction or shock in this game. People don't die that quickly.

How can anyone look at a demon child like this, one that seizes every chance to kill, and still think of it as a fellow human?

While it rolled on the ground clutching its eyes, I kept stabbing it.

I wasn't sure where I was aiming anymore. My vision had grown blurry, maybe from all the blood I'd lost.

Whenever I saw a lump of flesh, I struck with all my strength, bringing the fork down on it. With luck, maybe I'd hit its throat or something.

"Ah... ah... ah...."

Ethel's stunned breaths echoed faintly behind me. My strength was waning, and eventually, the fork wouldn't come out anymore.

I grabbed a plate from the floor and smashed it down on the creature's head. It didn't matter if my hands got cut on the shards.

I kept going, throwing everything I had into the effort, until Ethel finally pulled me away.

It seems people can't live idle lives forever. Once I started doing what I had to do again, a sense of fulfillment filled my entire body.

There shouldn't be any issue here. After all, I was the one attacked first.

Then again, demons are resilient. Could something like this really kill one?

My vision was hazy, but I could feel something warm and wet falling onto my face. Tears, likely Ethel's.

Crying, Ethel lifted my limp body and started carrying me somewhere.

Horribly enough, she also brought along the demon that had stabbed me with a fork, both of us suspended together.

That won't do. We'll have to sell off half the land and the buildings we own, sparing only the mansion.

Then I'll start a new venture.

Anything with a respectable front will do. Maybe even open an orphanage.

Nothing beats an orphanage for a pristine outward appearance.

It seems the break is over.

It's time to get back to work—much busier work this time.

37

Chapter 37

When I came to, it was, unsurprisingly, in a monastery.

A small statue stood in a recessed niche on the wall, bearing a symbol that resembled a cross overlaid with another, as if to make a point about avoiding plagiarism.

Looking around, I saw injured people—a young man clutching his stomach on a bed, a woman missing a leg, and others in varying states of harm.

My arm, once riddled with fork wounds and slashed by a blade, had healed almost completely, leaving only faint scars.

“Ah.”

I was alive. My body was intact.

Beside me lay the demon child that had stabbed me.

Instead of calling for someone, I quietly got up and walked over to it.

Its eyes weren’t sunken or damaged. They’d been fully healed, apparently.

If I’d known it would end up like this, I wouldn’t have fought back. I’d have played the pitiful victim instead.

Before reaching out, I took a deep breath to calm myself.

“Oh, you’re awake! Your friend who brought you here was so anxious waiting for you!”

A nun, leaning against the wall, spoke to me. She gave off the impression of a child trying to imitate an adult’s mannerisms—awkward but endearing.

With her watching, there was no chance to act on my impulses.

Noticing I was awake, she roused her snoring companion and sent them upstairs.

I glanced at the demon again, the one who had attacked me. And, strangely enough, I smiled faintly.

“Haha… What time is it right now?”

“It’s 4 a.m. You gave everyone a fright when you arrived in such a terrible state.”

“Is that so.”

My vision wavered slightly, likely from all the blood I'd lost. Still, I forced myself to move.

The nun tried to steady me as I stumbled, but I waved her off.

"You shouldn't be moving yet!"

She was probably right. With every step I took, my vision seemed to blur and sway.

Exiting the infirmary packed with patients, I came upon a space that looked meant for worship.

Though it was empty, likely due to the early hour, candles burned gently, casting enough light to guide my way.

The nun trailed after me nervously, her agitation palpable.

Finding a long bench, I sat down and addressed her.

"Could you bring me some water? I'm parched after just waking up."

"O-Of course!"

She seemed to be about fourteen or fifteen, probably at an age where she was growing quickly.

Yet here she was, sleep-deprived and tending to patients—proof enough that the church was indeed a haven for child exploitation.

After suffering a major injury, it's not uncommon for the body to refuse to move properly.

I'd experienced this often enough when hunting demons in the past—well, less than a year ago, really.

It had been a source of frequent frustration, though a stimulant usually solved the problem. Still, I preferred simple stretching over using addictive substances.

As I rotated my wrists and ankles, testing for stiffness, someone stepped in front of me.

It wasn't until they were practically in my face that I noticed them. Blood loss had dulled my senses that much.

"How did you manage to get here right after waking up?"

"Where's Ethel?"

"She's sleeping in my room."

"You have your own room here?"

"Of course I do. It's me we're talking about."

It was Isabel.

While I was glad she'd saved me, the fact that the demon child I'd stabbed was also alive didn't sit well with me.

Isabel sighed before sitting down beside me.

Instead of facing each other, we sat side by side, staring at the same view. It wasn't so bad.

"When I heard Ethel's story, I thought you were some kind of royal guard. She said you pulled a fork out of your neck and fought back."

"Is that a compliment?"

"No, I'm just exasperated."

"Well, that's unfortunate."

"The Ellen I knew was a girl who loved books, had a way with words, and was endearing in her own quiet way. She liked bitter coffee that didn't match her appearance and had a soft spot for Theo. In other words, you were a typical girl for your age, regardless of social status."

"I'm sorry to disappoint your expectations."

"…I see."

She glanced at the watch on her wrist.

"What time is it?"

"4:30 a.m."

"I'll need to be at the academy in four hours. Could you take me there?"

"You should rest for at least a day."

"Wake up early, chat with friends, go to school, talk to Theo, don't cry out of nowhere, laugh brightly, avoid alcohol and cigarettes, and don't touch drugs or anything like that."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"As you follow the teachings of your god, I follow the teachings of mine."

"……"

Isabel didn't respond.

She might think I was insane, or perhaps she understood what I was saying.

She probably considered us close, but to me, she was little more than a fleeting acquaintance.

“Every day in the basement, I could kill those vermin-like creatures with a single word. And yet, here I am, having been attacked by a mere child demon. Just think of this as venting. It’s a bit despairing to fall so low, even in ruin.”

The focus in my vision began to return.

Turning my head, I saw Isabel’s face. She looked troubled—perhaps even sad.

“Do not repay evil for evil, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘Vengeance is mine; I will repay,’ says the Lord.”

She recited scripture with the ease of someone raised in a monastery.

It didn’t resonate with me, and it didn’t seem like she truly believed it either.

“So, are you going to preach about loving your enemies?”

Isabel responded with a soft laugh, though her voice carried an undercurrent of sadness.

“Ellen, I grew up learning only this, so I can’t really understand what you’re saying.

I might playfully bicker with someone, but I don’t think I’m capable of truly hating anyone.”

I stayed silent. I didn’t want to agree.

One day, she might hold Theo’s hand and come after me again.

She spoke of not hating anyone, yet she had killed Julian.

Well, ‘killed’ might not be the right word—he handed over everything he had and self-destructed.

But to me, it was no different from killing.

It’s easier to just hate each other and avoid unnecessary conversations. No need for complicated thoughts.

“I’ve been here since I was a baby. All I ever learned was how to live compassionately.

Everyone in the monastery loved me, and I loved them in return.

Even on the night when the demons wreaked havoc and some of them died, I convinced myself it was all part of God’s plan and moved on.”

“It wasn’t God’s plan. It’s a problem that could’ve been solved entirely if the demons hadn’t been there.”

“The child who told us you woke up? That’s a demon too.”

Maybe I hadn’t recognized it because my vision was blurry.

So it must’ve noticed me waking up and acted like nothing was wrong.

It even called me “young lady,” which meant it might know who I am.

Or maybe that’s reading too much into it—I’m not exactly famous.

“That’s why I don’t really understand what it means to hate someone. I’ve tried to be sad and hate someone at the same time, but it doesn’t really work for me.”

“You don’t need to understand. For Isabel, the Bible is everything. All you have to do is live according to its teachings. When you meet someone who doesn’t align with you, you can just gently push them aside, like you did with me and Julian.”

And if they die, so be it.

“But that’s how the head of the family died!”

“So what? You said it yourself, Isabel—that he deserved to die.”

My words were sharp, intentionally provoking pity or guilt. I know this tactic well.

After all, a girl who’s not yet an adult might let such words slip when her emotions are stirred.

But once spoken, words take on a life of their own. It’s hard to respond to such statements, and they linger like heavy air.

That’s the power of words—you never know how or where they’ll be used.

“I don’t know if Isabel hates me, but I don’t hate her all that much.”

Which is to say, I do hate her, at least a little.

“There were some collateral damages, but it was something that had to be done.”

“And that ‘had to be done’—I just don’t…”

Isabel trailed off, closing her mouth mid-sentence.

She must have realized by now that no amount of candid discussion between us would resolve anything.

To Isabel, I’m nothing more than a ruined, impoverished young woman who can’t even afford to eat properly anymore.

Meanwhile, I'm preoccupied with plans to sell a few of my remaining vacation homes on my next trip to the academy, dreaming of crafting a new basement for myself.

But to Isabel, I'm just a pitiful creature—a weak, helpless, and unfortunate human being.

It's a bit cruel to expect an eighteen-year-old girl to grasp all this.

It makes deceiving her all the easier, though.

If that's the case, maybe she could change her views on demons, too.

"We've exchanged honest opinions all this time, but honestly, they haven't been very meaningful conversations, have they?"

I've never lied. I've only concealed certain truths.

My vision was sharpening again. I glanced at the watch on my wrist.

"It's about time we wake Ethel and head to the academy. Students should focus on their studies, after all."

Isabel nodded, trying hard to mask the expression of someone on the verge of tears.

She was still young—in more ways than one.

38

Chapter 38

It seemed even Ethel didn't have the audacity to ask me to stay at the mansion after what had happened there.

I, on the other hand, kept the truth about what happened in the basement neatly buried, pretending everything was fine.

It's clear now—being moderately kind just makes life harder.

Ethel, who had stayed by my side all day with a guilty look, eventually left, avoiding me like a guilty puppy after I told her to give me some space.

Maybe she didn't want to hear me express resentment or hatred toward demons.

If two close friends fought to the death with utensils in their own home, anyone would be unsettled.

When Ethel woke up in Isabel's room and saw me, she cried and apologized profusely. Her gaunt, sorrowful face looked so miserable that it was hard to even look at her.

What had I said to her then? Something like, "We've been spending too much time together. Let's take a little break."

It sounded like the kind of thing a couple on the verge of breaking up might say.

Her reaction to that was priceless. I thought about it now while staring at the teacher drawing something on the board during class.

Ding. Ding.

The bell rang, and class ended.

It was lunchtime.

Ethel looked like she wanted to approach me but hesitated. I deliberately turned my head away.

It was true—we had spent too much time together.

Still, there were benefits to having stuck with her every day.

After all, the person by my side was a girl destined for a high position in the church, a brilliant mage from a renowned family, and a beautiful magician at that.

Not that mages or church officials were untouchable, but getting involved with them always came with unforeseen complications.

I was living proof of that.

If I hadn't gotten involved with Ethel, my life wouldn't be this exhausting.

And yet, even if I could go back, I wouldn't kill her.

I'm too weak for that.

So in the end, with my support system gone, my meager power, and no backing, I'm just the perfect target for harassment.

***

"Looks like that girl doesn't even want to lay a finger on me today."

Thanks to that, I was being dragged to a secluded spot by some classmates and getting beaten up.

In the past, I might've thought, I've got a gun tucked away—if it comes to it, I could shoot them. The kind of juvenile idea a middle schooler might entertain.

But now, all I could do was raise my guard and take the hits.

It's infuriating, really.

Why are my choices always so limited?

"…What's it to you if Olga acts like this?"

One of them grabbed my hair, another stomped on my shoulder, and my once-white clothes were stained with dirt.

Feeling a surge of anger, I decided to tell them something Olga might find upsetting.

"Wonder what happened to that stray beast in the back alley. Heard it went missing."

The moment I said that, Olga, who had been idly fiddling with her hair in the background, froze and rushed over, her eyes wide.

"How… how do you know that?"

As she came closer, I spat in her face.

Blood mixed with saliva; I must've bitten the inside of my cheek.

I grinned slyly.

“Why would I tell you?”

“She—she’s the one who killed it! Just like what she did to my brother… to my father!”

Well, she wasn’t wrong.

It was odd to hear the truth come out so suddenly, but I suppose she was just guessing.

After all, her brother was Julian.

It wasn’t a bad assumption.

“Probably killed it and burned the body after. Your dad? He didn’t even make it to a proper grave. Just tossed out like garbage. But hey, given what his daughter turned out to be, maybe it wasn’t so far off.”

What followed was more kicks and slaps.

Honestly, taking a beating like this was almost helpful—it gave me time to sort through my thoughts.

It didn’t even hurt that much. These kids didn’t even know how to hit someone properly. They were just venting their emotions.

Still, the intensity of the violence had grown too obvious to ignore.

If I went to Ethel crying about how I’d been beaten, her esteemed mage friends would probably deal with these kids for me.

A little pain? I was used to it.

After all, my parents had done far worse to me growing up.

I used to hate it, thinking it was madness, but moments like this made me realize how it had its uses.

As I was lost in thought, I noticed a familiar silhouette in the corner of my vision.

A crazy student wandering into this secluded spot? No, it was Theo.

Had he come looking for me? But why would he?

We greeted each other when we crossed paths, but it was always a brief nod before he moved on.

It wasn’t like him to suddenly show interest.

The others stopped hitting me and turned their attention to Theo.

Not that I could treat him coldly.

Even if he'd shattered my wrist, ruined my mission, spewed cruel words, and killed my brother, he was still the protagonist of this story.

I had to treat him with respect.

Breaking the awkward silence, I was the first to speak.

My body was battered, but my mouth still worked fine.

"Ah, long time no see, Theo."

"I heard you got hurt. What's going on here?"

I shrugged, trying to sound nonchalant.

I answered in a way that I knew would provoke.

"Olga here is just mourning the death of a dog she grew up with. It's tragic, really… mmph!"

Before I could finish, Olga, unable to control her emotions, screamed at me to shut up and kicked me in the face.

I felt my head collide lightly with the wall.

It was starting to feel like I had some kind of curse where Theo's presence meant I'd end up slammed against a wall.

I bit my tongue mid-sentence, too. Lovely.

Once again, my mouth filled with the taste of blood.

My tongue hadn't been severed, just badly mangled.

Theo, seeing this, ground his teeth audibly before landing a punch on Olga and the other kids who had been tormenting me.

Though my head was still buzzing, muffling their words, I could tell Theo was saying something to them.

How could his punches send them flying like that?

"Ugh, my head… Thanks for the rescue, Theo."

"...You're not the type to just sit there and take it, though."

Leaning against the wall, I allowed Theo to help me walk, his arm supporting me.

We made our way to a quiet bench, and I sat down.

“I’ve already told you before. I’m not strong like you, nor do I have the magical talent of the others. Even my gun is gone—Ethel took it. What am I supposed to do?”

“And yet, I can’t picture you just staying still and letting this happen…”

Did he really believe I was some indomitable, proactive person?

“This life I’m living now—it’s what you wanted for me, Theo. No matter how ruined things around me became, no matter how Alicia’s story was reduced to nothing, you’re the one who told me to live like this. Well, I guess it’s better to be a powerless girl who gets beaten up by classmates than a young lady exterminating demons.”

It wasn’t a lie, but showing that side of myself to Theo wasn’t an option.

If he discovered that I hadn’t given up entirely, I wouldn’t be able to continue my work.

So I dug deeper, throwing out words designed to hurt him.

I wasn’t even sure if he had a heart to wound, but I’d try.

“It doesn’t bother me. Your punches hurt more than this. So if you’re here to offer pity, then leave. Who would want to sit around smiling with the person who killed their brother?”

If a slap or two and a little demon-hunting could smooth things over, I’d happily sit and smile with him. But that wasn’t going to happen, was it?

“...Even so, I don’t think stopping you and your family that day was a mistake.”

“Then stop paying attention to me and go find another girl. What about that Petra I saved? You could hang out with her. She’s from one of those easy-going species—get close enough, and she’ll spread her legs for you.”

“...Do you still hate demons that much? Even after killing so many of them?”

“Of course I do. I told you—they shouldn’t exist. But don’t worry. There’s nothing I can do anymore. Instead of you taking action, those delinquent classmates will corner me and beat me up as punishment.”

“...Ethel told me. She told me what happened.”

She must’ve told him I’d personally shot her parents, locked them in cages, and done all the rest.

“And? Are you going to lecture me about karma?”

Theo shook his head.

“I don’t know. The world I thought I knew—it wasn’t like this.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah.”

“Same for me. The world I knew wasn’t like this either.”

“You should stick with me—or at least with some of the others. You never know when they’ll try something again.”

“If it’s necessary.”

“Do you think we could ever… reconcile?”

If this were a game or a novel, maybe a heartfelt embrace would solve everything.

“Wow, you’re asking for a lot.”

“I guess I am.”

“So, what have you been up to lately?”

“I took down a criminal ring kidnapping kids to sell, and killed a monster that was eating people.”

“How are things with the others?”

“That Petra you hate confessed to me. Said if it didn’t work out, I should at least take her as a concubine. Ethel and Isabel, though? Thanks to you, they’ve been a mess.”

“Succubi are loyal enough. You might as well raise her well.”

He didn’t respond.

“You must hate me.”

“I don’t know. You did what you had to, just like I did what I had to.”

Resolution through understanding and conversation rarely happens in real life.

“We just have different perspectives. If you think the other side is wrong, you kill them and bury them. That’s all there is to it.”

That’s why demons are inherently wrong—their very existence is a mistake.

39

Chapter 39

After classes ended, I went to dinner with Ethel.

For some reason, we crossed paths with Theo and Isabel on the way to the dining hall.

Maybe they were on a date or something.

Of course, Ethel was paying for the meal. It might seem a bit shameless, but I figured I could make it up to her by treating her to something nice after I sold a few vacation homes. Maybe even that fancy hotel meal we talked about.

“Ethel, I’m going to ask you for the same thing I mentioned last time. Is that okay?”

“…What thing?”

Ethel looked dejected, like a scolded puppy, her mood utterly downcast.

It wasn’t her fault—just that damned demon’s. If anything, her only mistake was doing nothing when a beast attacked a person. But I couldn’t exactly hold that against her.

All I wanted was for this sweet girl to live happily, oblivious to it all. As long as she didn’t hide demons again, that was enough.

“The gun. Give it back.”

“…Okay.”

Hearing that, I smiled.

“By the way, the food here’s pretty good.”

In truth, it wasn’t all that great. But I needed something to talk about, so I forced it.

“Mm-hmm.”

“Hey, Ethel, I’m not mad, and I’m really fine, so you don’t need to keep beating yourself up over it.”

“…But it’s all my fault. If I hadn’t forced you to come here, none of this would’ve happened.”

“Well, if we’d exterminated all the demons from the start, this wouldn’t have happened either.”

I tore a piece of bread, spread butter on it, added a slice of meat, sprinkled some pepper, and popped it into my mouth. Prepared like this, even the slightly gamey food tastes better.

Dusting the crumbs off my hands, I continued the conversation.

“It was just an accident. Who could’ve predicted something like this would happen?”

“…An accident, huh.”

“Yeah, an accident. You can’t blame yourself for raising some ungrateful beast.”

I’d already said my piece, but Ethel, ever the kind-hearted one, would probably just feel guiltier rather than getting mad at me.

After finishing the lackluster meal, I walked Ethel back to her mansion.

I didn’t go inside, stopping at the front gate instead.

After a while, Ethel returned, carrying my neatly folded school uniform, my gun, and the substances that had been hidden in my clothes.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“…It’s nothing.”

Her expression seemed so pitiful that I reached out and patted her head.

“So, where will you sleep now?”

“Where else? Back where I’ve been sleeping.”

Why did she look like she was about to cry? My house wasn’t that unlivable. At least my room was clean, so it wasn’t too bad.

“Take care, Ethel.”

“…Bye, Ellen.”

It was an ordinary farewell between friends, but it felt more like a final goodbye.

Time to do something everyone would hate me for.

I walked for a long while, heading toward the bridge that led to the slums.

Along the way, I stopped by the mansion to pick up my hoodie, pulling it over my head.

It feels odd saying this about myself, but being as beautiful as I am tends to attract all kinds of beasts.

Walking past alleys where beggars sat begging and into streets that reeked of sewage, I eventually reached a brightly lit street of revelry.

It was a unique place—frequented by nobles, no less. A place where money could buy anything.

I entered a gambling den filled with servers wearing garter belts and barely-there outfits, their tops held together by mere strings.

Of course, I had to remove my hood before entering. Suspicious people weren't allowed to roam freely, lest they cause trouble for the esteemed patrons.

At the entrance, I handed my gun to the man collecting weapons.

"Is this all you've got?"

"Nope, hold on."

I handed over a dagger from my waistband and a vial of poison before being allowed inside.

I'd gotten my membership long before my family fell into ruin.

The air was thick with laughter, sobbing, shouting, and the unmistakable stench of drugs, tobacco, and alcohol.

In a futile attempt to freshen the place, someone had placed a large potted flower in the center of the room.

Winding my way deeper into the gambling den, I reached a secluded, large room. Inside, Marco sat surrounded by women, holding a bottle of liquor and laughing raucously.

As I approached, a guard stopped me.

"This area is for VIPs only. Little miss, go play roulette or something."

"…I've been here plenty of times before."

"Doesn't matter. You can't come in. Turn around and leave."

When the guard reached out to forcibly turn me away, I grabbed his arm and flipped him to the ground.

The commotion caught everyone's attention. Soon, Marco stumbled out, his face flushed with drink.

"What's all this noise?"

"Marco, long time no see."

"Oh, miss…? What brings you here?"

"I figured it was time to get back to work now that things have quieted down."

“Come on in.”

Marco handed some cash to the guard, who grinned sheepishly and pocketed it before getting back up. A guy his size wouldn’t have been seriously hurt by just being flipped.

“Sweetheart, who’s the kid?”

“Is she your type now?”

“She’s cute, even if her chest is smaller than mine!”

The women clinging to Marco chattered away, making snide remarks.

Marco shooed them off, throwing a wad of cash at them and telling them to leave.

“For someone they call ‘sweetheart,’ you must’ve spent a lot on them. They look expensive.”

“Well, I’m very capable, you know.”

“Too bad for you—I’m not interested in that kind of thing.”

“You’ll find someone great, miss.”

“I wouldn’t count on it.”

I reached for the expensive-looking liquor in front of me, but set the bottle back down.

I couldn’t drink. I wasn’t supposed to.

“Honestly, I didn’t expect you to show up so soon,” Marco said, raising the bottle to his lips and taking a swig straight from it.

“My paycheck would’ve lasted me a lifetime even if I didn’t get paid again. But with the counseling chamber exposed and all, is there anywhere left for you to work?”

“There’s a place not far from here.”

I pulled out an herb cigarette, lit it, and placed it between my lips. Marco casually took one from my pack, lit it, and inhaled deeply before grimacing.

“Ah, right, there is one. I heard one of the bosses handling collections nearby disappeared. That your doing?”

“Yeah, demon.”

“Well, technically a beastkin, but close enough.”

“I’ll sell a few more vacation homes to get some cash together. This is getting boring. I need to get back to having conversations with clients.”

It wasn’t as if I was starving myself and surviving on stale rye bread because I had no money. I just didn’t feel like eating anything enjoyable.

I didn’t want to experience pleasure through taste—or anything, really.

Especially not meat dishes. Anything with bones or visible red flesh was out of the question.

The only reason I’d let Ethel drag me around was because I’d lost my will to live. That pretty much explained it all.

Now wasn’t the time to wallow in self-pity.

I’d helped build a world where demons couldn’t roam freely on the streets without fear.

Not just because angry humans wouldn’t leave them alone, but because they now lived with the constant terror of being abducted and slaughtered like livestock.

All that was left was to drag these vermin out of their hiding places and kill them all.

Ethel’s family still had a few around, didn’t they? Those would need to be burned as well.

“Why are you grinning like that all of a sudden?” Marco asked.

“That’s an awfully cheeky tone. Can’t I smile if I think of something amusing?”

“Well, society tends to call that madness. Might want to dial it back a little.”

“Sure.”

Apparently dissatisfied with the herb cigarette, Marco extinguished it in his bottle of liquor. Then he put on the coat hanging on the wall.

“My late father always said, as long as the bloodline remains, loyalty must remain eternal. Shall we go, miss? I’m sure there are plenty of others you need to meet.”

His words sounded grand, but his drunken, unsteady steps dulled the impact.

“I also need someone to do my laundry.”

“You’ve been living alone for weeks. How were you managing it before?”

“The maids at a friend’s house handled it.”

“You’ve got good friends, then.”

“Don’t I?”

On the way out, I retrieved my weapons from the doorman: the pistol, dagger, and poison. I carefully tucked them back into my coat. Marco, meanwhile, was still stashing his arsenal.

He seemed to have at least ten daggers on him.

“Why carry so many?”

“In this line of work, you need enough blades to stick in the necks of ten demons just to keep from being robbed.”

“And guns?”

“Sometimes, things don’t go down with a blade. This is enough for me.”

Given his skill, I didn’t need to worry. Marco was someone who could handle himself just fine.

With all his weapons hidden in his coat, we walked out of the gambling den together.

The glowing backstreets always had a strange liveliness to them. They were, in their own way, uplifting. Something about the bright lights of the night stirred a certain excitement.

Taking light, energetic steps, I asked Marco a question.

“Where does the butler live?”

“He prefers to keep up appearances, so he’s probably in an ordinary residential neighborhood.”

“Sounds like it’ll take a while to get there.”

“Once we find the old man, the others will come to us on their own. It’ll be worth it.”

I suddenly felt the sensation of being watched and glanced back.

“Something wrong, miss?” Marco asked.

“Nothing. Just feels like a rat’s following us.”

“It’s probably following me. I’ve been spending money a bit too lavishly lately.”

“Let’s take a few detours. That should shake it off.”

With that, we altered our path and kept walking.

40

Chapter 40

The feeling of being watched disappeared after we took several winding paths familiar only to those used to navigating the backstreets.

Whoever it was—some amateur thinking Marco looked like an easy target—had clearly given up.

Lucky for both sides. We avoided getting our hands bloody, and they avoided getting killed. Not that I'd bother explaining that to them.

"Walking around with someone your age at this hour, miss—if the world weren't in such chaos, a constable would've beaten me senseless and hauled me away."

"True. So, what's the butler been up to these days?"

"Probably tending to a garden somewhere, just waiting to die of old age."

We finally exited the slums, and Marco led me into the residential neighborhood where Theo lived.

That was a bit unsettling.

"This place is surprisingly ordinary."

"That old man—he's more modest and unassuming than you'd think. Though, when he's working, even I can't help but feel a bit intimidated."

Among the counselors, Marco was likely the best at persuasion, but if you asked who the most dedicated one was, everyone at the mansion would answer, "the butler."

He was unnaturally passionate about his work.

Of course, working hard doesn't always mean being good at it. The butler was better at coordinating tasks and managing people than handling things directly.

There had been more than a few instances where his efforts completely destroyed the clients he worked with.

Even though this was a residential area, a group of people loitered in an alley, not sleeping. Thugs, probably.

They spotted us and started approaching, blocking our path. I could hear them muttering to each other about ditching Marco and "passing the girl around."

So much for safety in the capital. Then again, it's no surprise given the state of things. It'll take at least a year for the city to recover.

For now, it suits me just fine. It lets me roam as I please.

"And it'll stay that way."

"Hey, Marco, I'd rather not use the gun here."

"There are four of them. You expect me to handle all of them alone?"

"I'll take care of one for you."

"Fair enough."

We whispered quietly enough that the thugs didn't hear us.

One of them brandished a pathetic-looking knife, pointing it at us, while another sneered at Marco to get lost and gestured for me to come closer.

Marco feigned fear, playing the role of a drunken coward handing over a prostitute.

One of the thugs laughed and casually slapped Marco across the face.

And that's when it all started.

I plunged a blade under the chin of the thug who'd been slinging his arm over my shoulders. I didn't bother pulling it out—no point in getting my white clothes dirty.

I'd just have Marco retrieve it later.

Marco, meanwhile, snapped the neck of the one who had slapped him, then drew a knife from his coat and stabbed the thug in front of him.

The last one hesitated for a moment, then turned and fled, realizing he'd die if he stayed.

No loyalty among thieves, I see.

If you share a woman, you should share the grave too.

"Think you can hit his head?" I asked.

"Hmm. Might be tough, but let's see."

Marco grabbed a dagger, held it like a baseball, and threw it with all his might.

The blade sailed through the air and embedded itself in the back of the fleeing thug's skull.

“We don’t need to bother cleaning up the bodies,” Marco said.

He pulled the knife from the corpse and wiped it clean with a white cloth from his coat.

He was right—there was no need to clean up.

These weren’t well-connected gangsters or respectable locals. Someone would take care of the bodies, whether it was the city guard, rival gangs, or just rain washing the blood away.

“Can you pull the knife out from under his chin? I left it there so it wouldn’t mess up my clothes.”

“You sure ask for a lot, miss.”

Marco cleaned the dagger thoroughly before handing it back to me. Then we resumed walking.

“Is this the place?”

We stopped in front of a house, and Marco nodded.

I approached and knocked on the door.

A moment later, a hole opened in the door—and what greeted me wasn’t the butler, but a bullet.

“Ah…”

All I could do was clutch the wound and collapse. I wasn’t superhuman—pain was pain, and I had to curl up and endure it.

I wasn’t panicking or screaming in my head; it was more like my strength drained away entirely.

“Goddamn punks can’t even leave me alone at night—Oh, miss!?”

Standing there in pajamas, holding a large rifle, was the butler.

“Miss, what in the world are you doing here?”

“Never mind that! Get a potion, you lunatic! You do have one, don’t you?”

“Yes, yes! Right away!”

This wasn’t a fatal wound—not with a potion on hand.

Marco, looking annoyed, pulled a knife from his coat and dug into my wound, removing the bullet.

Moments later, the butler came rushing out with a potion in hand, wobbling as he ran. That wasn’t good for his joints. At his age, he should be more careful.

“Did you get the bullet out?”

After Marco removed the bullet and the potion was poured over the wound, it felt like drinking a cup of coffee spiked with stimulants—my body jolted awake.

I wondered how that librarian sister, who’d gotten addicted to these potions, was doing these days.

Her family was wealthy, so affording the potions wouldn’t be a problem. They didn’t harm her health much, just made her a bit… eccentric.

“Don’t fuss, Marco. It stung for a moment, but that’s it.”

The butler, clearly troubled by the fact that he had shot me, fidgeted nervously in a manner unbefitting his age. Still lying down, I spoke.

“Butler, I’m thinking of starting things up again. Will you help me?”

“If the young lady wishes it, this old man will go wherever you need me.”

“I do. But why did you shoot me in the first place?”

“Well, ever since I moved here, word got out that I had money, and some delinquents have been lurking around. Last time, they showed up in the middle of the night, so I assumed it was them and fired without thinking.”

The butler caressed the rifle lovingly, an unsettling sight that made me want to keep my distance.

“That’s hardly something to be proud of. Anyway, do you remember the house on the hill?”

The old man tilted his head, his bearded face creasing in confusion.

“You mean in the slums?”

“Yeah, that one.”

“I remember it well.”

“I’ll give you plenty of money to turn it into a proper place for work again. And gather people who can work with us while you’re at it.”

“And where will you get the money…?”

“I’ll sell some vacation homes.”

“In that case, I’ll contribute as well. The money you gave me last time is so much, I couldn’t spend it all in a lifetime.”

He laughed heartily, trying to act carefree. A lifetime wasn't very long for someone his age, though. He might as well leave it for his kids.

"After the young master passed, I thought you'd given up entirely. He wanted the family—and everything it represented—to end."

"Well, I'm not letting it end. Even if I have to strip the family bare and spend every last penny, I'll see this through."

"I understand."

Looking up at the sky, I saw the first hints of dawn. The dark horizon was tinged with faint blue.

"Ah, the sun's rising. I should get to school."

Looking down at myself, I noticed the blood-soaked, hole-ridden uniform I was wearing. Guess I'd have to stop by home first.

As I stared at the ruined clothing with a slightly troubled expression, the butler's old instincts kicked in.

"I can't fix the holes, but I can get the blood out. Come inside; my wife will assist you."

"Thanks, I'll take you up on that."

The butler's wife turned out to be a mage. Not a grand one, but the sort who specialized in small, practical magic—like a magical housekeeper.

With a snap of her fingers, the crimson-stained fabric turned white again, and the torn areas were roughly stitched back together.

While she worked, the butler prepared tea in the kitchen. The aroma was rich—he hadn't skimped on quality.

Sitting across from me on the sofa, he crossed his legs. It didn't look great for his joints.

"What scale are you aiming for?" he asked.

"Two hundred at a time."

"That's simple enough."

"But don't dispose of the bodies quietly. Burn most, but leave three or four torn apart and scattered. Back alleys, residential areas, in front of the academy, the main streets—anywhere will do."

"Is that really necessary?"

“It is. We’ve been working in secret for too long, and we overlooked something crucial. We didn’t make them afraid enough. They need to feel that simply existing is a sin.”

“One day, this will catch up to you.”

“Then it’ll be your job to make sure it doesn’t, butler.”

“You’re as ruthless as ever. The young master made us feel like mere bystanders while he let others die, but you…”

“Who cares? I’ll stop by tonight to pick up some jewels and property deeds. If you don’t like it, feel free to take them and run.”

I thanked them for cleaning my clothes and headed to school.

Classes were as predictable as ever—just numbers and memorization. I spent most of the day napping, tired from the sleepless night.

Even when lunchtime came, the kids who used to torment me didn’t drag me away this time. Getting punched by Theo and flying through the air must’ve left an impression.

The sun was setting when classes finally ended. Ethel approached me, looking hesitant and struggling to find the right words.

“...Ellen, where did you sleep last night?”

“Greet me first when you see me, Ethel.”

“...Sorry.”

Having spent much of the day lying down, my back felt stiff. I turned my neck, letting out a loud crack.

“I wandered around here and there last night. Why?”

“I was just curious. Even if we don’t live together anymore…”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m selling off all the family jewels and properties anyway. That alone could buy you several houses like the one you live in.”

“Oh… I see. That’s… good.”

She didn’t seem entirely convinced.

Ethel was terrible at lying—her face gave everything away. That might be an asset to me, but for her, it was a glaring flaw.

“Why are you so interested in me, Ethel? If this is about getting stabbed by your little pet, you don’t have to feel so guilty. I didn’t die, did I? Come on, let’s grab dinner. My treat—I got some pocket money yesterday.”

Marco had handed me a pile of gold coins from his gambling winnings.

I took Ethel to one of the more expensive restaurants near the academy.

Though she didn’t seem particularly cheerful, I found myself rambling, caught up in my own excitement about starting things up again.

As I stood to leave, planning to stop by the mansion for the documents and jewels, Ethel grabbed my sleeve, her eyes glistening with tears.

“What’s wrong?”

She shook her head.

“...It’s nothing. Goodbye, Ellen.”

“Yeah. Goodbye.”

41

Chapter 41

It’s been about a month.

The old butler successfully sold the jewels and the villa for a good price.

Thanks to that, the house on the hill was running as efficiently as the underground chambers of the old mansion.

With soundproof magic that ensured no noise would escape outside, a large incinerator sending smoke through the sewers, and even secret passageways that an elderly person who had spent their life in the slums wouldn’t know about.

The old butler managed to bring in the mages who used to work at the mansion in just about a week.

They set up the conversation rooms again and even constructed cages sturdy enough to withstand attacks from several demons at once.

It’s perfect!

We weren’t capturing demons recklessly like before, either.

Instead of the brute method of catching whatever we saw, we sent people to scout the surroundings and worked in a way that minimized detection.

If we went as big as we did back then, we could have wiped out thousands at once, but we wouldn’t have been this efficient.

With only about ten humans working in this house, there’s little risk of being discovered!

Yes, we had been too hasty before.

If we worked like this steadily for ten years, we could get rid of most of the demons one way or another.

Whether they fled in fear back to their homelands or ended up dead by our hands didn’t matter.

There wasn’t anyone who opposed killing demons like this, either.

Marco had lost the daughter of a prostitute, the old butler had lost one grandson and two granddaughters, and everyone working here had lost family to demons.

And I was working hard again today.

Restarting this work after such a long time was fulfilling and made me feel like I had value as a person.

After finishing my academy classes, I slipped into the alleyways, changed into black clothes at the house on the hill, and walked into the space full of conversation rooms. Marco greeted me and shared some welcome news.

“Miss, we couldn’t catch the one running the orphanage, but we’ve got his woman.”

“Where is she?”

“We tied her up in Room 4.”

“Her condition?”

“Haven’t laid a finger on her yet.”

“If it’s a woman, wouldn’t it be better if you handled her?”

“Well, she’s someone I know, so I felt a bit bad about touching her.”

Fair enough.

I shrugged and entered Room 4.

“Hey. Wake up, miss.”

I tried waking the interviewee who was asleep in the conversation room.

Even when I grabbed her shoulders and shook her, she showed no sign of waking.

“Hmm.”

I clenched my fist and landed a punch straight to her philtrum.

One hit, two hits, until her teeth wobbled slightly, and blood began trickling from her mouth. That was when she finally woke up.

“...Ah, ah...?”

She wasn’t fully lucid, likely drugged.

I took a stimulant out of the drawer and sprayed it into her mouth.

Though most of it dribbled out, at least some must’ve gone in.

After a moment, the woman came to her senses.

“Are you with us now?”

“Ah… where am I?”

Still dazed.

I hit her face again.

“Argh! Please! Don’t hit my face!”

Realizing her arms were bound, the woman shook her head violently and screamed.

“Sure, fine.”

Her arms were tied behind her back, and she was kneeling, secured to a tall pillar.

I could’ve just tied her up normally, but that felt a bit unsafe.

What if she turned out to have superhuman strength, broke the shackles, and killed me?

“...I’m just a prostitute trying to make a living! Why me!?

Oh, damn it, Marco! You sold me, didn’t you!?”

She may have called herself a prostitute, but she was more of a high-class escort, cozying up to the elite when they visited.

With about six months of hard work, she could probably bring in enough money to cover the price of Ethel’s mansion.

“Well, I don’t really care about you.

I’m far more interested in your sugar daddy.”

The prostitute’s face twisted with rage, and she clamped her mouth shut.

“Hmm, so he’s really your sugar daddy, huh?”

It wasn’t uncommon for them to just be their pimp.

I brought over a small hammer and some nails.

Her thighs were impressive, probably from her line of work.

After setting the nail in place, I looked at her face before striking with the hammer.

She seemed scared, but more than that, she looked furious.

Why?

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“...Are you going to keep living under that filthy bald baron’s thumb?”

What nonsense was this?

“As a prostitute, I can whisper sweet nothings for a night if I have to.

But kidnapping me because I refused to be a mistress?!”

It seemed being dragged to the basement had driven her mad.

“Look, just tell me where your sugar daddy is.”

“Screw you.”

I slowly drove the nail into her thigh.

I expected her to scream her head off, but instead, she clenched her teeth and let out a faint groan, tears streaming down her face.

Surprisingly resilient.

Does it take someone this tough to survive as a prostitute?

I guess that’s why she was into beastly things like bestiality.

Sleeping with horned creatures—unbelievable.

“Miss, don’t waste our time. Just tell me where your demon sugar daddy is.

You’ll talk eventually, so why make this harder for both of us?”

“Killing Zoph isn’t going to make me fall for that bald baron. I won’t talk, not even if I die.”

“Seriously, I don’t care about that baron or whatever. Just tell me where the demon is, and you’re free to go.

I hear they’re raising their kids somewhere, but I need to know where.”

Frustrated, I slipped into informal speech without realizing it.

This was aggravating.

We were completely misunderstanding each other.

High-class escorts often became mistresses for low-ranking nobles, after all.

It seemed someone had been eyeing this woman.

“I couldn’t care less who you end up as a mistress to.”

If she didn’t talk, she wouldn’t even stay in human shape, let alone become someone’s mistress.

She’d asked me to spare her face, so I would.

But this woman clearly wasn’t ready to have a proper conversation.

She needed to look at the other person, consider their position, use the appropriate words, and show respect.

Normally, one would assume that between an unarmed person and someone holding a hammer, the one with the hammer had the upper hand.

“I get that losing your mind over men is pitiful, but bestiality? Really?

Naming a wild animal Zoph and sleeping with it? What kind of nonsense is that?”

“...What the hell are you talking about?”

"I’m just asking where your pet, the one who knows about the place where the demons are gathering, is hiding."

The words weren’t getting through.

That look of incomprehension—it had been a while since I’d seen it.

Whenever I conducted an interrogation in the conversation rooms, the subjects would always look at me like that.

Pitifully, they never realized that the problem lay with themselves.

How should I punish a woman who found pleasure with beasts?

I spotted a small wooden barrel lying around, opened its lid, and took it outside for now.

Marco was juggling daggers idly.

"What, aren’t you working?"

"Why bother? I’d just be chatting with those demon bastards anyway. Might as well have some fun while I’m at it."

"Fill this barrel with gunpowder."

Marco took the barrel and filled it with gunpowder before bringing it back to me.

It was a little less than I'd hoped for, but it would suffice.

I returned to the conversation room and placed the barrel under the woman's crotch.

"Hey, do you have kids?"

Her eyes flickered with realization.

I liked that.

People with that kind of look were easier to deal with than those trembling in fear.

"...When Zoph was hiding out in my house, he once said that some noble went crazy and started dragging demons off to some unknown place indiscriminately. But that family's been ruined, hasn't it!?"

"Their power has diminished a bit, sure, but they're not ruined.

Now, answer me. Do you have kids?"

When she didn't respond, I punched her face a few more times until she finally nodded, admitting she did.

"If you already have kids, there's no need to make any more, is there?"

With that, I shoved the barrel into place. No need to describe where.

"From now on, I'm going to start shooting.

First, your fingers. Then your arms.

Next, your thighs, toes, and finally… Well, you get the idea.

What do you think is in that barrel?"

"You insane bitch—ahh!"

She hadn't screamed earlier when the nail pierced her thigh. Maybe she'd mentally prepared herself.

But when I fired the gun, she let out a piercing shriek.

Her fingers weren't blown off, but they were shredded.

Next, I aimed at her arm and pulled the trigger.

Then her thigh, her toes, and finally, I pressed the barrel of the gun near where the wooden barrel was positioned.

Her face was now a mask of terror, completely dazed.

"At the end of the day, it’s just a whore’s love. Just talk.

No one’s going to judge you if your mouth is as cheap as the rest of you.

You could die, you know! That barrel’s filled with gunpowder.

Of course, you’d also never have kids again."

"...Z-Zoph. He’s hiding in my house. No, he’s there."

Hmm, then there’s no way Marco wouldn’t have found him already.

"Isn’t there something else you’re not telling me?"

"Under the bed. There’s a basement under the bed…."

Selling her chastity for money—of course, she’d talk.

Unsurprisingly, this all ended with frayed tempers.

"I said I’d let you go if you talked, but maybe you’ll end up caught again like last time."

Given her connections to the nobility, releasing her might be a bit risky.

The thought came quickly.

I aimed at her head and pulled the trigger.

At least I didn’t shoot the barrel between her legs.

I had no particular hobby of tormenting people just to kill them.

I left the room.

Hearing the gunshot, Marco was sitting outside with a slightly bitter expression.

"She said there’s a basement under the bed."

"...Did Diana die?"

"What else could I do? If I let her go, who knows what might’ve happened."

"I'll take the old man and check it out."

"Alright, take care."

Operating in the slums had countless advantages.

Most demons in hiding lurked there, and bringing them in didn't attract much attention.

Of course, occasionally retrieving workers who had been sent back to the farms after a failed explosive spell was a bit of a hassle.

I went to the break room, closed my eyes, and dozed off for a bit.

It didn't feel like much time had passed when I was jolted awake by someone screaming.

The old butler was dragging a demon by its hair. Its right arm was twisted, and its face was swollen with bruises.

"Ah, you brought it in."

"Making an old man do this really aches my bones, you know."

"Good work."

"Then I'll leave it to you, miss."

Not wanting to touch its head, I asked the butler to carry it into the room.

"Your name's Zoph, right? Diana told me about you."

"...What did you bring me here for? I'm just a middle manager; I don't know anyth—"

I cut off its nonsense.

"I don't care about how your criminal organization is structured.

Just tell me where the orphanage is—the one where you gather and raise demon brats—and I'll let you go."

"...You're insane, thinking about harming the kids."

I figured as much.

Just in case, I smashed its knee repeatedly with a hammer, then stepped into the room where I'd killed the prostitute earlier.

I gathered the crushed fingers and toes strewn about and brought them back.

"Ta-da!"

At first, Zoph didn’t seem to recognize what they were.

Then, spotting the ring still on one of the finger stumps, it seemed to realize who they’d belonged to.

It started to cry, softly at first, then sobbing outright.

"…Why?"

"We’ll find that orphanage eventually. Just tell me now.

Otherwise, your lover dies too. Surely love is more important than some brats whose names you don’t even know."

A prostitute’s mouth is as loose as her other parts.

And her pimp, or rather, her sugar daddy, was no different.

People like them had no ideals, no principles, no common decency.

Their only concern was survival.

Thanks to that, I learned the orphanage’s location.

Apparently, Julian had once constructed a space near the sewers to avoid prying eyes, which they’d turned into an orphanage.

After finishing the conversation, I shoved the barrel that had been inside the prostitute into Zoph’s mouth and pulled the trigger.

Its head exploded quite spectacularly.

After cleaning up, I left the room and spoke to Marco.

"Marco, toss the prostitute and this demon onto a busy street. Somewhere with plenty of foot traffic."

That way, people would assume it was just another demon attack on humans and move on.

42

Chapter 42

I’m technically still a student attending the academy.

Thanks to that, I could use the cover of “a student wouldn’t do such things” no matter what I was up to. But I still had to take mandatory exams.

Not the usual type of exams where you sit at a desk and answer questions, but the kind where they gather students and make them duel.

I never imagined I’d be experiencing something I had only read about in novels before.

This world truly is contrived.

Half the capital burned down, and people’s reactions barely scratch the surface. The academy pointlessly forces students to fight each other.

It feels like a ragged patchwork of events forced together to move the story forward.

Moments like this always brought a sense of horrifying dissonance, followed by unease.

The only one who could resolve those feelings was Alicia.

Even when I thought Theo, Ethel, Isabel, and Diana might just be robots moving according to some predetermined path, Alicia alone...

Yes, Alicia alone was entirely different.

I’ll get to see her soon.

But for now, there’s a problem.

We tracked down the orphanage after dealing with Zoph, the demon pimp, but it wasn’t what I expected.

I thought it was just a place for demon brats, but that succubus had been raising ordinary children alongside them.

Even if succubi are despicable demons, if we simply dragged her off and killed her, the orphanage children would be left homeless, starving on the streets.

Last night, Marco and I banged our heads together trying to come up with a solution, but nothing worked.

If Julian and his family were still intact, our family could've stepped in to support the church and build a new orphanage. But we're out of resources.

After a sleepless night, we still hadn't come up with a solution.

Tonight, something would inevitably have to happen.

"Ellen, you look tired. Focus for now. What if you get hurt?"

"Ah, yeah. Right."

In a large auditorium filled with students, they made us fight one-on-one.

Match-ups were decided by drawing lots, with no consideration for skill level.

Even students who couldn't fight at all were forced to participate somehow, whether they forfeited or not.

At least we only fought within our own class. That was some small comfort.

I watched as Ethel effortlessly knocked her opponent down with a single spell. I crossed my arms and dozed off for a while, only realizing it was my turn when Ethel nudged me awake.

I meant to forfeit, but as my classmate approached me with a weapon in hand, I reflexively threw the dagger I was holding.

Thankfully, it didn't hit between his eyes.

It simply clattered to the floor, followed by a loud whistle.

Fascinating.

Was that a magic trick?

Maybe I overdid it.

The class was now staring at me.

I didn't like being the center of attention.

This isn't how I usually act.

This isn't the Ellen of the academy.

In the next round, I forfeited and faked being sick to go rest in the infirmary.

Since I'd already won one match, my grades wouldn't suffer anyway.

I felt like a clown dancing on a predetermined stage, only to exit when the act was over.

As evening came and the duels ended, Ethel chattered next to me until I brushed her off and headed to the slums.

I think we argued about something, but I can't quite remember.

What was it again?

Oh, right—she told me I should live in a monastery.

Ridiculous.

She also claimed to have followed me and seen me cozying up to some strange man in the alleys.

Right, she said she'd been tailing me again.

"Marco, maybe we could spare just one succubus."

"Of course, we should kill them… Wait, what? Spare one?"

"Forget it if you don't like the idea."

"No, it's just… I didn't expect something like that to come out of your mouth. Did you eat something bad?"

"Rude."

Marco gave me a puzzled look.

"Well, we can't just leave the children to die, can we?

We can't take care of them ourselves, either."

"…I thought you wouldn't care about that. Especially after you killed Diana so easily."

"Most of them will probably grow up to be delinquents or prostitutes, but they're still children.

I've decided. We'll deal with everything except the succubus. We'll take one demon, the one closest to death."

Even if most of them turned out rotten, there might still be one unpolished gem among them.

"Closest to death? There's more than one in that state."

"The female with long claws. And prepare some stimulants."

“How many people are going in?”

“Just you and me. Or you can go alone if you’d prefer.”

We’d be walking through the sewers anyway.

Taking one demon wouldn’t risk discovery.

Tracking them was difficult because they were well-hidden, but once found, they were easy to handle.

The deeper they hid, the fewer people could find them.

Taking demons from the middle of the street in broad daylight was bound to draw attention.

But dragging out ones living in sewer-adjacent hideouts wouldn’t cause much of a stir.

Even if they were killed, all that remained were traces.

“Why would I refuse?

Apart from you, no other girl would go on a date with a guy like me.”

“So be grateful.”

The more grotesque and grueling our work became, the more we joked to lighten the mood.

Whether interrogating in the conversation rooms, culling countless demons, or slaughtering humans protecting those demons, humor was our only defense against losing our minds.

Despite it all, I found satisfaction in the work.

At least I did. This is who I am.

The Ellen from the academy—the one Theo had meticulously crafted and told me to play—wasn’t really me.

We left the house on the hill.

Since wandering the alleys in awkward attire wasn’t an option, I wore a garter belt that left my legs exposed and a dress with a plunging neckline.

Marco placed his left hand on my waist and strutted confidently.

Of course, his right hand gripped a demon he was dragging along.

The demon had no strength to escape and had been sufficiently threatened that its head would be blown off if it tried.

I wore a cloak and mask to hide my face.

The mask was the same one that Ethel’s parents had failed to recognize me through before.

That time, too, I had been hunting demon brats. It felt oddly familiar.

We walked through the alleys and down toward the reeking sewers.

Technically, it was a sewer, but it wasn’t so filthy as to make me retch, so it was bearable.

“How long are you going to keep clinging to my side?”

“Too bad. Did you see the way people on the street looked at us earlier?”

“They were green with envy.”

“Something about those stares feels strangely satisfying.”

The demon with cat ears seemed to have a cat’s nose as well, as it kept retching while we passed through the sewers, apparently unable to bear the stench.

After walking for a while, we finally arrived at the orphanage. It was quite elaborate for something built underground.

For a structure that was destined to rot away someday, the wooden door was adorned with flowers planted in front of it.

When we opened the door and stepped inside, the stench of the sewer disappeared in an instant, replaced by the scent of flowers.

The space inside was unexpectedly ordinary, so much so that one might forget we had just walked through a sewer.

In the middle of the area stood a large house.

This wasn’t an illusion—it was real. They had even transported soil to make it feel like an actual surface environment.

"Where’d they get the money to set up enchantments like this?"

"Probably from prostitutes leaving their children here and sending money to support them."

"That’s quite a profitable business model."

"Not really. Taking care of kids isn’t easy."

"Why don’t we set something like this up? A garden like this in the break room would be great for resting."

"You’d just laze around in it all day, so no."

"That’s a shame."

It was 9 PM, according to my watch.

The children weren’t asleep yet, so the place was lively and bustling.

Dragging the demon we had brought, we entered the house.

Looking around, I noted that the only way out was the same sewer entrance we had used.

No one would be escaping.

The children, who had been running and playing energetically, froze and stared at us.

As per our information, a succubus holding a child stepped out with a dazed expression. Her eyes met mine.

"Who... who are you...?"

"Marco, give it the stimulant."

I whispered softly, gripping the demon with cat ears by the cheek with my left hand while aiming my gun at it with my right.

Marco injected the prepared stimulant into its neck.

"Your name was Zoph, right?

Kill three of your own kind here, excluding the succubus, and I’ll let you go immediately.

You don’t even have to tell me where your family is."

Not that it mattered—I had already learned about their whereabouts when it was delirious under the influence earlier.

Apparently, they lived in some semi-basement as if they really believed they were cats.

I hadn’t sent anyone after them yet.

The drug seemed to be taking effect as its eyes began to redden.

"Will you do it?"

It nodded.

To prevent the succubus from interfering, I shot her in the arm.

No matter how much its family’s safety was at stake, I couldn’t fathom how it could so brutally kill its own kind.

The demon spared the ones with animal ears but clawed the horned ones to death.

When it finished, it turned to me with a wide, grotesque grin, as if asking for praise.

Disgusting.

I returned the smile, feigning approval, then immediately aimed at its forehead and pulled the trigger.

Its smile remained frozen as its pupils dilated, and it collapsed face-first to the ground, dead.

"Marco, there are more kids here than I expected."

"You’re telling me."

The succubus didn’t scream, You murderous monsters! Instead, she gathered the children into a corner, shielding them with her outstretched arms.

I thought to myself that sparing at least the succubus might not be a bad idea.

After all, wasn’t Petra spared as well?

Seeing her protect the children so loyally was oddly moving.

Sure, there were some demon brats among the children, but still.

Whoever trained her must have been a respectable human being.

Even after being shot in the arm, she didn’t complain about the pain; her first thought was for the children.

This wasn’t because the succubus had some noble spirit. It was because her master had trained her well.

"...There’s nothing of value to loot here.

Just leave. The parents of these kids will hunt you to the ends of the earth for this."

"Oh, come to think of it, we haven’t really disposed of anything directly yet, have we?"

"Now that you mention it, no, we haven’t."

A misunderstanding, perhaps?

She seemed to think I’d shot that lunatic to stop him from killing the kids.

It was a rather unpleasant misunderstanding.

When you put effort into something and the other person doesn’t recognize it, it feels disheartening.

I emptied the chamber and slowly reloaded the gun, one bullet at a time, taking my time.

There wasn’t anyone here who posed a significant threat.

Then, I placed my finger on the cold trigger, ready to pull.

There was no way she could protect all those children just by standing there with her arms outstretched.

At that moment, my eyes met one of the childrens.

They were crying.

A wave of nausea hit me.

The trigger wouldn’t budge, as if the gun was jammed.

"Ugh, ugh... Ugh..."

Stomach acid dripped from my mouth.

"Miss, perhaps you should step outside."

"...Sorry. But no, I won’t leave."

This was my mess to clean up.

Marco drew his sword and approached the succubus.

Since we had decided not to kill her, he only pretended to swing before twisting his body and kicking her in the side.

She flew across the room, unable to get up, though she tried to crawl back to shield the children.

And with each demon brat Marco killed, the succubus let out a heart-wrenching scream.

She screamed like a mother watching her children die.

"Stop! STOP IT!!!"

Crying, screaming, wailing, the grotesque sound of lives ending, blood, gleaming blades, Marco gritting his teeth, my imperfect self, trembling hands, the nauseating stench, children fleeing.

Demons need to be killed.

I’m trash, unworthy of life, for being unable to pull the trigger.

Why couldn’t I pull it?

What am I even doing?

I...

I feel sick.

43

Chapter 43

After dealing with all the demon brats at the orphanage, I returned to the house on the hill.

Still feeling nauseated, I stepped out onto the terrace on the second floor to get some fresh air.

Marco followed me out.

"It’s far too late to back out now, miss.

You dug back into the mess that was swept under the rug with the young master’s life."

It sounded like he was accusing me of disturbing Julian’s grave.

He may have said it without much thought, but his words hit the mark.

Marco lit a cigarette from his pocket.

I wanted to ask him for one, but instead, I pulled out a pack of those lousy herbal cigarettes and tried to calm myself with their smoke.

"Who said I was quitting? It’s just… I’m having a hard time.

Yeah, it’s because today’s duel was tough. The class was tough…."

Marco patted my head and gave my back a few reassuring taps.

I’d let myself get weak for a moment.

I shouldn’t be showing this side of myself.

"If you say so."

That thought made me push Marco away.

When I glanced down below, I noticed someone watching us.

Even though it was the slums, it wasn’t the sort of hour you’d expect people to be awake.

"What’s wrong?"

"Someone was watching from below."

Marco stubbed out his cigarette on the railing.

"Guess they’re envious of a house like this.

I’ll head back inside and toss the remains into the incinerator."

"…Alright."

If I jumped over the railing right now, I’d probably just break a leg, nothing more.

Even that would heal quickly.

Shaking my head to dispel the thought, I went back to work.

This picturesque hilltop house ran much more efficiently than the old underground mansion.

We no longer bothered with vague standards like sparing obedient demons or implanting explosive spells in the brats before releasing them.

Now, we simply disposed of all of them, cleanly and without exception.

The old practice of sending them back to the farms with explosive implants had been absurdly inefficient.

Julian had stubbornly insisted on it, but without that hassle, things were much simpler now.

Demons or humans who knew anything about their kin or their hiding spots were locked in the conversation rooms.

The rest were beheaded on the guillotine and hung upside down for a day.

Draining their blood made them burn better.

The blood went straight into the sewers.

The stench of decay in the sewers was so strong that a little rotting blood wouldn’t draw attention.

Back then, burning everything whole had been far more nauseating.

Once the ashes were cleaned up, they were also dumped into the sewers.

Simple and efficient.

Compared to the massive manpower and extravagant spending of the past, the efficiency of this method was worlds apart.

If we’d operated this way back then, we might’ve eradicated the demons entirely by now.

But there’s no "if" in the past.

This system wasn’t entirely my idea.

It came about after long discussions with Marco, the butler, and myself.

The demons were beginning to fear us again.

Even in the back alleys, there were no drunk demons openly loitering in bars. Those still on the streets wore hoods or robes.

The thuggish demons with massive builds who used to strut around arrogantly were mostly dragged up to this hill. They were nowhere to be seen.

At this rate, perhaps they’d all leave this country soon.

A country so ragged and patched that calling it a nation feels embarrassing.

But it’s still Alicia’s home.

It thrilled me to know the demons were afraid again.

Seeing them roam the streets as if Julian’s death meant their worries were over had filled me with such hatred.

With those thoughts swirling, I continued the work in this blood-soaked room—decapitating demons and hanging their heads upside down.

"Miss, it’s about time to head to the academy."

"Ah, already?"

"Yes, you should get cleaned up and changed."

A hot shower, scrubbing myself with soap, might help clear away this suffocating feeling.

I went to the shower room, washed thoroughly, and put on my academy uniform before leaving the house.

Instead of using the secret passage through the slums, I took the regular roads to avoid smelling of sewage.

When I entered the classroom, Ethel, her face heavy with dark circles, approached me as if to speak, then slumped back into her seat with a sullen expression.

Another day of endless lessons.

Lessons, lessons, and more lessons, even during lunch.

I didn’t move from my seat, staring blankly ahead.

Not that I was paying attention to the classes.

For some reason, last night’s scenes wouldn’t leave my mind.

It was just a bit more intense than usual. That’s all.

There’s nothing wrong.

Demons deserve to die, after all.

That’s how it’s supposed to be.

I was probably just unsettled because I’d handled it too ruthlessly.

In front of children, you’re supposed to be careful even when killing a single rabbit.

Someone said something to me just now.

I didn’t catch it.

When I didn’t respond, they walked off somewhere.

I was a little hungry.

Maybe I’d use the money Marco gave me to buy a sandwich later.

"…Hey, come with me."

As I was lost in thought, a demon put a hand on my shoulder.

That filthy beastly smell, those damn animal ears, those inhuman eyes.

It must be lunchtime.

The classroom was empty of other students.

Didn’t it learn its lesson after Theo beat it last time?

Demons often don’t learn, no matter how much you educate them.

I grabbed the hand on my shoulder, pulled its arm, and drove my knee into it as I stood.

The arm twisted into an unnatural angle.

As it screamed at the sight of its broken arm, I kicked its face.

I was about to finish it off when I remembered we were inside the academy.

I handed the half-blood over to two frozen-on-the-spot students.

"Take it to the infirmary. It was just a little prank; I didn’t think the arm would break."

The two seemed like they might protest but eventually carried the half-blood out without complaint.

Then I resumed my thoughts.

The conclusion? Who cares?

But someone had been watching.

"…Ellen."

"What, Ethel?"

"I can't just leave you like this anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"I told you—I saw you in the slums last night, hugging some man. Not at your mansion."

"Did you now?"

I stood up from my seat.

Walking over to Ethel, I placed a hand on her waist and casually led her out of the classroom.

If we kept talking here and someone else walked in, the conversation would get interrupted.

I took her to the spot where the kid whose arm I twisted had tried to hit me earlier. It was nice and quiet.

Not the best memory of being here, though—getting hit was disgusting.

"Alright, so what is it you’re trying to say?

Do you think I roll around in bed with Marco for money?"

I leaned in and whispered into Ethel’s ear, speaking softly as if I were one of those cabaret dancers in lingerie, delicately mocking her.

"...Isn’t that exactly what you’re doing?!"

"It’s far more sophisticated and, dare I say, more active than that.

I’ve told you this time and again, but you’ve never understood."

"Don’t talk in riddles, Ellen."

It’s not riddles; it’s the truth.

Honestly, what could make her think I was selling myself to Marco at my age and with my status?

Has she been reading too many trashy romance novels? Or is she just naturally this dim?

No, she’s always been like this—her mind is a field of flowers. That used to be endearing.

Now, though, it’s starting to grate on me.

"It’s not a riddle—it’s reality. But what do you expect me to do about it?

Just stop worrying about how I live my life."

"...I’ll tell Theo about this. He’ll make sure you’re restrained, even if it has to be by force."

"And what does he have to do with this?"

"Before you turned into this, all you ever did was trail after Theo like a lovesick puppy!"

Yeah, I changed.

That’s why I’m starting to hate Ethel.

But what am I supposed to do when even I hate the person I’ve become?

"Do whatever you want. If that guy has any shame, he won’t even show his face in front of me.

By the way, Ethel, all of this—everything I’ve become—is because of the demons, isn’t it?"

I pushed her against the wall and locked eyes with her.

I didn’t hit her.

I didn’t draw the gun from my pocket or pull out a dagger.

This was just a conversation.

"I lost my family, and even when I was doing fine with you, a fork still found its way into someone’s neck.

It wasn’t my fault. It was all because of the demons.

So why are you acting like this is somehow my doing?"

No.

No.

Ellen isn’t someone who lets her emotions rule her, who can’t distinguish what should and shouldn’t be said.

I scratched the back of my thigh with my right hand.

That helped me snap out of it a little.

I buried my pitiful expression deep in the trash bin and plastered a bright smile back on my face.

"Forget what I just said—it was a joke.

Anyway, Ethel, you’re in no position to judge me. Neither is Theo, nor Isabel, nor Diana."

I turned and walked away.

Ethel stared at my retreating back like she wanted to bore a hole through me.

I half-expected her to cast a spell at me.

Thankfully, she didn’t.

I sat in silence for a while, killing time, before finally heading to the slums on shaky legs.

Not a single demon could be seen on the streets.

To this magnificent world, I raise a toast.

Though sadly, I had no drink in hand.

Ahahaha.

Ethel’s Perspective

My friend is selling her body.

No, it’s probably even worse than that.

She goes out at night to meet strange men, embraces them on balconies in plain view, wears scandalous outfits with only a robe to obscure her face, and lets others hold her by the waist as they walk.

Every time I saw her, I was furious.

But I couldn’t bring myself to intervene, thinking maybe this was something Ellen had chosen for herself.

Then there was her face—the same face she wore when she was dying inside.

Her lips were cracked, with traces of blood as though she’d bitten them.

Her once-bright eyes were shadowed and dull, and her shining white hair was lifeless and brittle.

Her crimson eyes, which used to glow under the light, now seemed dim even in the sun.

I knew.

I knew telling her to stop and join a monastery wouldn’t work.

Ellen always acted like she cared about us, but she kept a line we could never cross.

If we tried to approach, she’d just retreat further.

That’s why I once crossed the line completely and had her live with my family.

But all it did was make her convictions stronger.

She was right—I’m stupid and naive. Just a girl living a girl’s life.

It was my fault.

My fault Ellen turned into this after we visited Theo’s mansion.

If only I’d said the right things.

If only I’d cared for her more.

If only I’d kept her from meeting the Hanton couple’s son.

Even so, no matter how much of this is my fault, I can’t accept what she said.

She once told me, "If you think you’re freeing me from my pimp, shouldn’t you also respect my freedom not to be free?"

At the time, I was too stunned to reply, but that statement—it was just a lie dressed to look like the truth.

How can I leave her alone?

If Ellen were content with her life, I’d keep quiet.

But when someone is so visibly falling apart, you have to stop them.

I stared at Ellen's back as she walked out of the classroom.

Blood was dripping from her thigh.

She looked so utterly broken that I started to cry.

She must have been blackmailed by some gang.

Otherwise, someone as strong as Ellen wouldn't have fallen apart like this.

She didn't look like this when she hit me or poured water over me.

She would've brushed it off like it was nothing, with a faint smirk.

And yet, I couldn't just leave her like this, no matter what harsh words she said or how cruelly she treated me.

It's funny, I suppose, that I didn't confront her directly. I couldn't handle her alone.

So, as always, I went to Isabel, Diana, and Theo, begging them to help Ellen.

To save her from whatever situation she was trapped in.

Ellen once accused me of arrogance, of presuming I could save her.

But I thought about it anyway.

I will save her.

From meaningless hatred and from this wretched reality.

Whether it's the right thing to do, I don't know.

44

Chapter 44

Since that day, Ethel hadn’t spoken to me.

It had been about two weeks, maybe.

Isabel and Theo had come by to talk about something, I think... but I don’t really remember.

I hope they’ll take this as a sign to leave me alone for good.

What good has ever come of Ethel being involved with me?

I’m nothing but a useless, cruel person who brings harm instead of help.

Someone like me shouldn’t be anywhere near someone as kind as Ethel.

I have only one task.

What else could I possibly do besides disposing of demons?

"What did I do to deserve getting caught? I only handled garbage in the dumps, my lady."

This one must’ve been a junkie.

Considering Marco didn’t tie him up, he probably wasn’t very dangerous. His horns were small, too.

"My lady?"

I decided to mimic the common mannerisms of a guard, leaning into the disguise the mask provided.

I lowered my voice as much as possible—it shouldn’t sound like a girl at all.

It’s quite convenient, being this ambiguous. Perhaps that’s why magic so easily molds to its users.

"Someone reported a dealer peddling drugs recently."

"What? No way! The streets have been too dangerous lately for anyone to try that!"

"If there weren’t, you wouldn’t be here."

"Well, this place is..."

Did I say something off?

The look in his eyes suggested he'd realized something strange.

I opened the drawer to grab a pair of pliers to rip out his fingernails but forgot that I hadn't tied him up.

He lunged at me, wrapping his hands around my neck.

As I struggled to free myself, my mask slipped off.

"…What's a kid like you doing here?"

His grip slackened.

Taking advantage of the moment, I reached for the dagger strapped to my thigh and stabbed him in the side.

The problem was, the blade wouldn't come out when I tried to pull it back.

"Wait, hold on. Spare me! I don't hurt kids!"

I pushed him off me, grabbed a hammer from the drawer, and smashed it against his head.

Don't speak.

Don't beg for your life.

Don't look for your mom or dad.

Don't apologize to me.

Don't act human.

It's because you thought I was just some naive girl that you let your guard down like this.

You were going to kill me.

But now, doing this... who's the demon and who's the human?

The wet sound of a blood-soaked shard falling from the hammer to the floor echoed in the room.

"Ugh, uh, hah."

I tried to stifle my nausea with laughter.

After thoroughly scrubbing myself clean in the shower, I got dressed.

Then, a loud noise startled me.

Two gunshots rang out in rapid succession.

It was likely the old butler’s rifle—his favorite.

Marco burst out of the conversation room, startled by the sound.

"Miss, were those your shots just now?"

I shook my head.

With blood covering him from head to toe, Marco—unbothered by the mess—adjusted his coat, weighted down by hanging daggers, and headed toward the sound.

"You might want to hide in the secret passage, just in case."

"We’ll see."

"Not that there’s time for jokes, but if the old man is shooting inside, it must be serious.

If I die, I’ll guide him in hell as his senior."

So much for no jokes.

I watched Marco’s retreating figure.

Unlike with other kids, no complicated thoughts came to mind—just the faint impression of blood.

I sat in the break room, brewed myself a cup of coffee, and took a sip.

The haze in my mind seemed to clear with each drink.

Leaving the break room, I found familiar faces waiting.

A now-familiar pattern.

"Got caught again."

The floor was splattered with blood as if it had erupted like a fountain. In the middle of it, a severed head dangled, barely attached.

Wait, that’s Marco.

So he wasn’t joking after all.

Ethel looked as if she was about to cry but was oddly relieved.

Isabel gazed at me with pity.

Diana covered her mouth, clearly nauseated.

And Theo.

That damn bastard.

Ah, I must look like a prostitute finally freed from her pimp’s grip.

Well, if that’s the case, a hug wouldn’t be out of place, would it?

I cried.

Was it because Marco was dead? Or because I’d been caught yet again?

Maybe it was because I understood Julian, somehow.

I approached a confused Theo and hugged him.

Clinging to him, I muttered through my sobs about being strangled, mistreated, and even struck.

Of course, it was all done by demons. I just didn’t specify the subject.

Theo wiped the blood off his sword, sheathed it, and gently patted my back.

He must’ve thought I needed comforting.

While he stroked my head with one hand and patted my back with the other, I drew a blade from my waistband and stabbed it under his armpit.

His resistance was weaker than expected.

Marco must’ve put up a good fight.

After the armpit, I slashed his side, then dragged the blade down to the back of his thigh.

If I couldn’t even make a clean cut at this range, I didn’t deserve to carry a blade.

He wouldn’t die. Probably.

"No, Theo, stop!!"

Isabel quickly assessed the situation and prepared a spell against me.

Diana was slower than her, so I threw my dagger at her first.

The distance made the throw land in her chest—unfortunately fatal.

But at least she wouldn’t be able to cast anything.

I fired a shot at Isabel next but missed as she dodged dramatically, stumbling in the process.

There were five bullets left.

I aimed carefully, avoiding anything lethal, and shot her in the shoulder and thigh.

One bullet left.

No need to worry about Ethel. She wouldn’t be able to do anything in this situation.

I aimed for her shin and pulled the trigger.

Ethel collapsed, shocked beyond words, not even screaming.

"E-Ellen, why...?"

"Yeah, I suppose so."

Even as blood gushed from Theo like a fountain, he kept moving toward me.

"I came to save you…."

"Who asked you to?"

Since none of the injuries seemed fatal, I figured we could have a little chat.

Maybe Julian felt the same way back then.

I loaded my gun slowly, one bullet at a time, and continued the conversation.

"Judging by the blood still streaming in the halls, I suppose the old butler, Marco, and all the others who worked so hard are dead too."

At that moment, a bloodied demon, its skin entirely peeled off, staggered out from the conversation room Marco had left open.

The sight of it made me feel a bit queasy. It must have been painful.

I aimed at its head and ended it with a single shot.

"How did you even find this place this time? Oh well, what does it matter?"

At least they hadn’t managed to save a living demon—that was a small mercy.

Here, we killed them the moment they were brought in and drained their blood right away.

"Find it? That demon just now, it was..."

Theo seemed to have pieced together the situation.

"Yes, it’s dull, isn’t it?

Repeating the same thing twice—it’s tedious and makes you feel disillusioned.

Anyway, that’s how it is."

For good measure, I stabbed him in the knee a couple of times.

Isabel tried to pick up her staff to heal Theo’s wounds, but I quickly shot a hole through her hand to stop her.

Honestly, how lightly do they take me?

"…You should’ve died back then, too."

Isabel’s voice trembled as she cried.

It was as if she hated herself for ever looking at me with any affection, even briefly.

"Isabel, we had a conversation at dawn, remember?

We shared our honest thoughts, and you convinced yourself I had already fallen apart. That’s why you left me to my fate."

Even if she spat at me now, it wouldn’t reach.

"Yes, yes, I know.

These demons, they’re people too.

Even that kid who helped me back then—he was a demon, wasn’t he?

And that woman who risked her life to protect the children? She was a demon too."

I kept my tone flat, stripping my words of any emotional weight.

I didn’t want to imbue them with feelings.

"Think of it as a brat throwing a tantrum. That’s all.

They killed Alicia. They killed my life.

So, this is a kind of revenge.

Although, calling it that feels far too pathetic."

A faint sense of despair mixed with longing surfaced.

"Not that it matters. Listen to my story for a moment. You won't get another chance to hear it."

They didn't have a choice in the matter.

"It might sound random, but this world? It's awful.

At least, it was until I got close to Alicia and opened up to her."

These tasteless herbal cigarettes...

Ah, Marco probably had some decent ones in his pocket.

Though they were likely soaked in blood by now.

"What's fun about this place?

I loved games, anime, movies... especially John Wick.

I even got a special poster.

That scene with the shotgun spitting fire from the ceiling—it's unforgettable.

Not that you'd understand what I'm saying."

For some reason, Theo's lips moved silently.

Was he too weak to speak?

"You'll never understand me."

I put the blade I was holding down.

"Just being born was hell."

I slumped to the cold floor.

"My parents were psychotic maniacs who wanted to mold me into the same.

I went along with it because, well, dying was scary."

I hadn't thought about this in a while.

"They called it training, but I just got the crap beaten out of me.

How old was I then? Four, I think.

They kicked me, punched me, stabbed me until my bones shattered, and then dragged me to a priest for healing magic.

Sometimes, they even tore me apart."

When my broken body healed perfectly, I'd stop crying out of sheer fascination.

"Sure, it hurt, but it was fascinating, you know?

My fingers were practically diced into cubes, but they reattached like nothing happened!"

How much had I cried back then? I couldn't remember.

"Why the hell was I born into this shitty world when I was perfectly fine where I was before!?"

Life had been satisfying before.

I never needed to be born into this mess.

"That's why I hate the church.

They'll do anything for money.

Isabel, you'd spread your legs for cash too, wouldn't you?

Well, maybe not. Who knows?"

Now I was just spewing nonsense.

"Thanks to all that, I turned into someone who barely reacts when hit or insulted.

I got used to it."

Though pain still hurts the same—it just doesn't make me scream anymore.

"Julian's balls probably got crushed, you know.

God, just thinking about it is horrible."

That was the first time I was actually glad to have been born a girl.

"Sometimes, they'd throw us two knives and make us fight.

I won most of the time."

Julian was terrible at anything involving physical activity.

"For training, they made me gouge out someone’s skull or eyes with a spoon.

If you combined all the severed fingers and toes I cut off for practice, it would fill more than twenty buckets."

That was when I became desensitized to the pain of others.

"They’d file their teeth down halfway and burn the gums with fire or zap them with electric magic.

It made people squirm and jump—it was effective. My parents even praised me for it."

It might sound grotesque, but I remember feeling strangely good about it.

"I never imagined they’d say I had talent.

To feel satisfaction after being complimented by such insane people—it was absurd."

But it was also the first time I’d felt acknowledged in years.

"Ahaha, don’t worry about it. Just venting. That’s all this is."

I waved it off lightly, then shifted the tone.

"Anyway, there was one normal person in that family!"

My beloved little sister.

"For some reason, Alicia grew up as a normal child, untouched by the family’s training.

I envied her. I was jealous, bitter.

Sometimes, I wanted to twist her neck and kill her."

Because I was suffering so much while she lived so blissfully.

"But even so, Alicia accepted and loved me.

She trusted me, called me her sister, and relied on me."

How could I have pushed away someone so precious, who trusted and leaned on me?

I could never hate Alicia—not truly.

"I was ready to just drift through life until I grew old, or maybe down a load of sleeping pills and go out quietly. But Alicia saved me...

And then she died.

Horribly."

Isabel finally spoke, breaking the silence.

Theo, meanwhile, had been sitting in a daze since earlier.

"…Are you asking for sympathy? What's the point of telling us this?"

"Why am I telling you this?"

Why, indeed.

"Ah, well, because I'm going to die soon anyway."

Isabel's face twisted in visible confusion.

Her expression practically screamed, What is she even saying?

"Don't you already know?

Theo, Isabel, Diana, Ethel—you won't let me keep killing demons."

"How could you even—!"

"You'll keep trying to make me human again.

Or you'll kill me.

Between being killed and ending things on my own terms, I'd much rather choose the latter."

That's how it was.

"I should've died long ago.

I never intended to live after doing all of this."

I chuckled, but it sounded hollow even to my ears.

"It's terrifying, isn't it?

Even as Alicia was torn apart, bitten by that demon, she begged for it to spare me—her sister.

How could she even do that?"

A bitter laugh escaped my lips, but it quickly turned into a sob.

"No. Ha. No. Ah. Ugh. Ugh."

I glanced at Ethel.

She was still frozen, unable to move.

"Ethel, I’m sorry. I can’t endure anymore."

The last sensation I felt was the faint taste of gunpowder residue lingering on the barrel.

A moment of pain.

My consciousness began to fade.

It felt as though a transparent window was rising above me, blocking out the world.

45

Chapter 45

A corpse of someone who took their own life was far more horrific than one shot and killed by another.

The arms that had been moving just moments ago now hung limply, and blood gushed uncontrollably from the crown of her head and her nose.

Even so, Ellen’s faint smile remained, giving her face an uncanny look.

Moments later, her body hit the floor with a sickening thud, amplified by the pooling blood beneath her.

Her half-lidded eyes and faint smile made her seem no different than she had been before that night fell.

Isabel shakily raised her staff and cast healing magic on us, but her legs gave out, and she collapsed where she stood.

She sat there, her mouth slightly open, staring at Ellen’s lifeless body.

Diana, on the other hand, seemed unaffected—or maybe she was just pretending.

She was the first to get up, walking toward the room where the skinned demon had emerged.

With a spell, she unlocked the door.

I don’t know what she saw inside, but she fell to her knees immediately.

The metallic scent of blood, already heavy in the air, intensified the moment the door was opened.

It must have been a horrific sight.

"Is this something a girl our age could even handle...?"

But Ellen said it herself—games, anime, and movie posters.

She even told us how she lived.

“Why the hell was I born into this shitty world when I was perfectly fine where I was!?”

Honestly, I think I might’ve been happier being born here.

Listening to snippets of her story, it’s impossible to grasp the full weight of her suffering.

She mentioned liking John Wick.

I haven’t seen it, so I don’t know much.

I just remember my friends going on about how great it was.

"…I preferred musicals over action films," I muttered, my voice trembling as blood pooled in my mouth.

Chicago, Moulin Rouge, The Greatest Showman...

I’d been stabbed through my back and lungs; the blood gushed up to my mouth and splattered onto Isabel’s face as she tried to heal me.

I used to be so cheerful.

When did I become so dark?

It’s my fault. I left Ellen alone.

"Theo, don’t speak," I said weakly.

Theo nodded.

The pain and sensation of my wounds knitting together were strange yet familiar—like my body being reassembled.

I’d always thought it fascinating, the way life seemed to return even to those who’d been shredded.

Sure, it hurt, but it was... mesmerizing.

How could you find pain anything but unbearable?

Yet Ellen must’ve endured worse every day of her childhood, every single day.

It all made sense now.

The time her arm was torn off, and she remained calm without screaming.

The time she was beaten and trampled in the academy’s back alleys but didn’t flinch.

What is this feeling?

Emptiness?

Despair?

Before the demons caused all that chaos, life had been simple.

There was a clear villain to fight, and no matter how hard it got, defeating them meant everything was resolved.

It was like a student solving a straightforward test and feeling accomplished afterward.

But now, everything feels so complicated.

If someone asked me, Who's the evil one here?, I'd have to say Ellen.

Yet, was this truly the best outcome?

Looking at Ethel clutching Ellen's body and sobbing, I can't believe that.

"Isabel, you can heal her, can't you?

You can heal any wound, so why aren't you healing Ellen?! Fix her, please!"

"…She's already dead.

And even if she weren't, I wouldn't bring her back. Not ever."

Ethel's tear-streaked face froze, her expression hardening like stone.

Tears continued to fall, but her voice came out quietly.

"Why not...?"

Isabel didn't answer, instead pointing toward where Diana had collapsed by the room.

"Wh-what does that matter? She's still our friend... she's Ellen!"

"Shut up, Ethel. Healing magic doesn't bring the dead back to life."

Ethel stopped crying. She gently closed Ellen's eyes and used a handkerchief to wipe the blood off her face.

When she laid Ellen flat, the blood that had been flowing like a faucet from her nose and mouth finally stopped.

"Theo, stay lying down for at least ten minutes."

"…Alright."

"I'll check the rest of the house.

There might still be survivors, like last time."

With that, Isabel began searching the sprawling house.

No matter where you looked, it didn’t feel like a place where people should have lived.

I shouldn’t think this, but...

Maybe I’m weaker than I thought.

For the sake of my own comfort, I’m ready to say something that will surely wound someone else.

"Ethel, you were the one who said Ellen must’ve been forced into this by her pimp, didn’t you?"

"…Y-yeah. I did."

"If we hadn’t come to ‘save’ her... if we’d left her alone..."

I trailed off.

"I bet she would’ve been fine.

Ellen was better than anyone at pretending everything was okay."

"Right! She could’ve kept pretending, and—no. No."

A sudden gunshot from the old butler had convinced us Ellen was trapped here against her will.

And yet...

Would someone as skilled as her captors stoop to human trafficking?

We should’ve known better.

It’s my fault.

It’s all my fault.

But I don’t want to accept that.

I wish someone else were to blame.

I wish it were all just the villains’ fault, as it had always been.

But no—it’s my fault for leaving Ellen alone.

This is all my fault.

Unable to find solace in either resolution, I’ve become a half-hearted mess.

I should've either ignored Ellen's deeds and locked her away under heavy restrictions or... killed her outright.

Bringing her into my home or hiding her far from demons might've worked.

But maybe she'd have found a way to die even then, claiming such a life wasn't worth living.

She would've gone through with it, wouldn't she?

It's all so complicated.

I can't see any answers.

Why does the enemy have to be someone I cared about?

"AAAAHH! AHHHHHHHH!!"

Isabel's scream rang out from deeper inside the house.

I quickly grabbed my weapon and sprinted toward the source of Isabel's scream, kicking the door open.

But Isabel was unharmed.

She was clutching the pendant on her necklace, eyes wide open, unable to even close them as she muttered prayers through sobs.

Her lower half was soaked, likely from fear.

When I turned my head to the left, I saw the headless corpses hanging upside down.

Covering my nose, I stepped into the room.

Inside, a large box was filled with demon heads, and a guillotine-like contraption stood in the center.

How could someone live in a way that allowed them to do this so casually, as if it were second nature?

The iron cages in the mansion basement almost seemed humane compared to this.

This was nothing short of a slaughterhouse for livestock—except the livestock was people.

Feeling my resolve falter, I quickly left the room.

"How could you possibly think Ellen should live after seeing this!?"

Isabel stood up and stormed toward Ethel.

She kicked Ellen’s corpse, still cradled in Ethel’s arms, before grabbing her by the collar and screaming in her face.

"Save her? Save her for what!?

If you so much as glance inside that room, you’d never utter those words again!

Even the horrors in the mansion’s basement—those weren’t the head of the family’s idea. It was Ellen’s, without a doubt!"

"So what!? What do you want me to do about it!?

Why are all of you—Ellen, Isabel, Theo, Diana—always blaming me!?"

Ethel’s voice cracked as tears streamed down her face.

"Why does it matter if I feel sad about Ellen dying instead of people whose names I don’t even know?

Yes, she did terrible things, but am I not allowed to mourn her?

Did I ever say what Ellen did was right!?"

Diana sat silently, unable to join the argument, watching the fight unfold with a vacant expression.

I wasn’t much different.

"Those nameless people—Ellen killed countless of them here.

And she did it willingly, leading the charge in those atrocities!

…This isn’t right. It can’t be."

"I’m so tired of this.

Who’s right, who’s wrong—it’s all so exhausting.

Ellen, Isabel, Theo—I’m sick of all of it."

Ethel and Isabel kept arguing.

Their words had no meaning, no weight.

It was just a shouting match fueled by raw emotions.

Isabel, ever the devout nun, likely felt compelled to guide a wayward lamb back to the path.

Ethel, of course, hated that.

It was a meaningless argument.

Not worth listening to.

I sat down, exhausted, and looked at Ellen’s corpse, her face still frozen in a smile.

But something faint—like a translucent screen—hovered above her head.

Had Ethel not noticed it while holding her earlier?

[BAD ENDING no. 4: A Deeply Regrettable Extreme Decision]

[Tips: Remember, heroines are human too. Be mindful of their stress levels!]

The words were written on the transparent screen.

When I reached out, my hand passed through it as if it were a hologram.

"Wow. Just... wow. Fuck."

Diana’s quiet sobbing, Ethel and Isabel’s heated argument, the stench of blood wafting through the open door, and the sound of dripping echoed around me.

"I’m going to lose my mind."

And the tip?

Completely useless.

It didn’t help at all.

46

Chapter 46

"Sis, isn't it about time to head to school? Are you planning to be late again?"

The person shaking me turned out to be Alicia.

"You said we'd go hang out downtown tonight, remember? Don't get scolded for being late and come home late because of it. Get up and get dressed!"

"Ah, yeah."

I had to go to school.

Today, I needed to observe the protagonist and the people around them closely again.

It had been quite entertaining lately to watch what they were up to.

"If it’s to hang out with that guy, I might let it slide!"

"Are you talking about Theo? It’s nothing like that."

"Besides him, you don’t even hang out with any other guys! At the academy, shouldn’t there be tons of handsome and capable people walking around everywhere?"

Had she fried her brain from reading too many romance novels lately?

It was too tiresome to respond properly, so I just brushed it off.

"Yeah, sure."

I reached for the table beside my bed, grabbed the cigar I had half-smoked last night, and lit it again.

I couldn't stomach coffee on an empty stomach, but smoke went down just fine.

"If you're going to smoke, at least open the window. The walls turned yellow already, and it's barely been any time since we had them redone!"

"Yeah, I will."

Alicia kept going on about something, but the drowsy feeling washing over me made it hard to get up.

This feeling was oddly familiar.

It was like looking at a scene I thought I'd never see again after a long time.

Even though it was a cigar I smoked daily, something about smoking it now felt unfamiliar.

"I'm off to the academy."

"Okay, have a good day!"

As I stepped out of the main gate, my personal carriage was waiting.

It was only a 30-minute walk, so why the fuss with the carriage?

Were they trying to flaunt wealth? Or was it a veiled threat, reminding the young masters with family crests strutting about that I was ready for a chat anytime?

"You look a little unwell today for just one night, Miss."

"Marco? Slacking off instead of working again?"

"Not slacking off, Miss. Who would be available for a chat in such peaceful times? When there's no work, I might as well drive the carriage."

I chuckled and climbed into the carriage.

Inside, there was a large sofa, a fitting novel, and on the right door, rows of cigars, cigarettes, and bottles of alcohol.

On the left, however, there was an arsenal of firearms and blades that were far too intimidating for a girl like me.

It had only been a day, yet it felt like a long time.

Was my brain malfunctioning? I put the cigar back in my mouth.

Tears were streaming down my face.

Had my tear glands broken?

It wasn't like I was overcome with emotion or anything.

After all, this morning had been entirely normal.

I guess some days are just like this.

The carriage came to a stop.

I roughly wiped away the tears with a handkerchief, stepped out of the carriage, and walked through the main gate into the academy.

There weren’t many students heading in.

Well, around this time, classes might not have started yet, but the teachers were probably out chatting with the students.

Fortunately, my class teacher didn’t seem particularly eager to discipline me or provide me with any sort of special education.

On the contrary, they were pretty accommodating.

After all, I was objectively excellent.

I was beautiful, smart, polite—basically, I played the ideal girl from my own mind flawlessly.

Well, aside from the faint smell of tobacco.

But even that could be masked with some nameless perfume, so it wasn’t a big deal.

As always, I just pretended to pay attention during class.

I had learned so much from my parents growing up that there wasn’t much for me to gain here.

The real reason I came was to keep an eye on Theo and the people around him.

If it weren’t for that, I might have quit already.

There was no real need for me to be a student.

When lunchtime arrived, Ethel and I went to a decent restaurant by ourselves for the first time in a while.

"Ellen, why don’t you come to my house tonight?"

"Your house?"

"Yeah, my parents said they wanted to see you again when we were having dinner last night."

"They were interesting people. Didn’t they say they sometimes worked alongside farmers?"

Although they lived on the outskirts, it was remarkable for nobility to work shoulder-to-shoulder with demons, who were despised by almost everyone.

"Lady Hanton said she’d give you some apples she harvested if she sees you again!"

"I don’t think I quite get it when you say it like that."

Even hearing their name didn’t ring a bell. I don’t think I had ever exchanged names with any demons.

I responded while scooping up the rich risotto that tasted overwhelmingly of mushrooms.

This was the best dish on the menu here, but it was a shame the chef had passed away….

"You know, the family we met under the fruit tree last time."

Something felt off just now.

"Ah."

Maybe it was just my imagination.

Anyway, that kid had a strangely cute look.

Their little horns poking out didn’t feel all that out of place either.

"But I’m spending tonight with my family."

"Well, then, it can’t be helped. Let’s hang out another time!"

"Yeah. By the way, what about Theo?"

Ethel popped a tiny piece of cake into her mouth as dessert.

"Who knows? He said he was off to deal with some evil count or something.

He told me not to come because it’s dangerous."

I bet he took Isabel and Diana with him.

After finishing our meal, we went to a café and started drinking.

The staff there were well-dressed, and the coffee they brewed was impeccable.

Even when they mixed milk or sugar, or blended it with tea, the proportions were spot on.

Half of the second floor was just rubble now, wasn’t it?

"Ellen, what’s on your mind? You seem deep in thought."

"Just some random things."

"Are you worried about Theo?"

"Ha, that's quite a funny joke.

Even if you threw him into hell, he'd probably come back after chopping off all the demons' heads."

Whether hell actually existed, I didn’t know, but he was the kind of person who could pull that off.

The second floor had curtains, but it was lined with large windows, offering a clear view of the bustling street below.

A couple sitting on a horse-drawn carriage, students in the square eating snacks by the fountain and exchanging trivial jokes, and children running energetically ahead of a man and woman holding hands—perhaps out for a family outing.

There was also a student wandering around alone, eating candy, while another strolled hand in hand with a girl wearing dog-like ears, who shared the same academy uniform as me.

It wasn’t that I particularly liked these scenes; they were just novel to me. They hadn’t existed before, after all.

It’s only in recent years that demons and humans have started getting along so well. Not long ago, such a thing would have been unthinkable.

Apparently, even among demons, there are distinctions like beastfolk and devils, but that wasn’t my concern.

To me, they were all just people anyway.

The upper world was truly beautiful.

After all, below was nothing but the conversation room and the discipline room.

Here, you could hear leisurely music wafting from the café, but the sounds down there were nothing but screams, pleas, and cries.

If even half the people emerged alive, that would be considered fortunate.

Sometimes, I wondered if I was the one who had risen from hell.

Given how my oh-so-great parents lamented me being confined to the conversation room and sent me to the academy instead, I supposed I should feel grateful.

"This is nice. I didn’t like it at first, but seeing things like this makes me realize it’s not bad."

"What are you rambling about all of a sudden?"

"There are some things you little kids wouldn’t understand."

"Heh, you’re the same age as me anyway."

"Whatever, I’m off. I need to head back now."

"Okay, see you tomorrow, Ellen."

Waving her off, I left my coffee on the table and stood up.

I looked up at the sky.

I liked the way the sun looked before it fully set, much more than when it was blazing high above.

It felt warm, yet the colors seemed sharper and more vivid.

Even though the sun hadn’t yet set, drunkards were stumbling out of pubs, throwing chairs, and starting brawls in the streets.

An old man, dressed in tattered and worn-out clothing, begged a tax collector to let him pass without paying, clearly unable to afford it.

A burly man, likely someone’s pimp or husband, was beating up another man who clung to a half-naked woman.

A hooded woman—her face obscured—hurriedly placed a child who looked about three years old into a large basket before abandoning them on the ground and fleeing.

A skeletal-looking little girl was selling flowers, but not in a metaphorical sense—those who bought her flowers likely spent a night with her in a warm home.

The so-called law enforcement officers, dressed in blue, looked more like thugs as they carried batons and cleared anyone they deemed an eyesore from the streets and buildings.

This was one of the better scenes to behold. The slums were truly beyond bearing.

This area was supposedly where people could scrape by and keep food in their mouths, but that was hard to believe.

Still, compared to places where mutilated corpses lay out in the open, it was a relatively beautiful world.

I needed my cigar.

After all, without smoke, a human couldn’t stay optimistic.

The trip home didn’t take long.

"You're late, Sis!"

I checked my watch upon hearing that but found that I wasn’t late.

It was just a small pocket watch with a leather strap.

"I’m not late."

"But you need to wash up, dress nicely, and wear something pretty! At this rate, you’ll just have to wash up quickly and head out."

"I planned on doing just that."

At my response, Alicia pouted, looking a bit sulky.

"You’re so pretty, Sis. You should put in a little effort to dress up."

"I’ll think about it."

"That’s your way of saying you won’t. Ugh."

I washed up quickly, threw on some clothes, and got into the carriage.

Our parents handed us a pouch of money, saying they were going to see a play together for the first time in ages.

For some reason, I felt like I shouldn’t go.

Especially not to the bustling downtown area.

Chapter 47

A faint dizziness came over me.

It felt like something… something I had experienced before. A fleeting sense of déjà vu, but all it left behind was an unsettled, nauseating feeling.

"Ellen, what's wrong? Do you want to go to the theater too?"

Mother's gaze sharpened slightly as she asked the question.

She was the kind of person who could immediately sense unease in others.

Even now, despite being fully grown, she still frightened me sometimes.

I shook my head and replied, "I think something I ate at lunch didn't agree with me. I'll be fine soon."

"You didn't drink again, did you?"

"I'm not some delinquent. I wouldn't drink in the middle of the day."

I was around fourteen when my parents decided I had learned everything I needed to and loosened their grip on me.

If I wanted something, they would provide it; if I wanted to leave and live independently, they gave me the money to do so.

Because of that, I started drinking and occasionally smoking cigars—or even opium.

Inside the carriage, we maintained the appearance of a normal family engaging in everyday conversation.

At least, that's how it sounded to an outsider.

"Julian, I wonder if the guests were satisfied with how the recent issues were handled."

"After a serious discussion with their daughter, they seemed content. Voices were raised, but they agreed to resolve minor problems swiftly."

The faint smell of blood lingered, suggesting another nobleman's daughter had likely had her fingernails pulled.

Why Julian put so much effort into things he didn't even enjoy was beyond me.

"It would have been better if they had just been a bit more generous from the start."

"They expressed their remorse by offering us control of the pub district."

"That’s acceptable."

It seemed like another tax collector had gone too far and ended up dragged underground.

Judging by the relatively lenient resolution, they were probably a low-ranking noble.

The pub district would be profitable enough—so long as the collectors didn’t get beaten to death by drunkards.

"Ellen, has anything noteworthy happened at the academy lately?"

"She’s been getting closer to that commoner senior, Theo, these days."

"Ah, the one she mentioned meeting at the café?"

"Yes. He seems like the type who could join the Imperial Guard one day."

"If he’s that capable, why not invite him over? It wouldn’t matter whether he came as a guest or someone we hosted."

"There are still too many unresolved matters here to bring him home yet. Besides, he’s highly favored by the headmaster."

"True. And that man does have quite the temper."

The problem wasn’t the headmaster. Unlike Marco, that man would likely try to destroy our household if he learned the truth about it.

Still, it seemed they were planning to bring Theo to the estate eventually and assign him some work.

Our family was known for bestowing hollow honors on those with talent but without status or prestige, then putting them to use.

Some might call it exploitation, but I didn’t think it was entirely that.

We paid generously, after all.

Of course, it was often done by taking away their means to earn money elsewhere or setting up connections that would crumble if they lost an arm or a leg.

Alicia watched curiously, as if she wanted to know what we were talking about, but she was used to being excluded from these conversations.

She simply kept quiet, swinging her legs absentmindedly.

Occasionally, she would complain about feeling left out, asking what kind of work we did, if she could see the basement, or even just understand the topics of our conversations.

But those were things that could never be shared with her.

A child only needed vague hopes for the future to carry them forward.

Alicia, at least, had enough wealth and power to recover if she stumbled.

As long as she didn’t fall for the wrong kind of man, she would be fine.

Before I realized it, the carriage had arrived at its destination.

As they had said, our parents walked hand in hand toward the theater.

"Julian, where are you headed?"

"Mm, I should look at some jewelry since I’ll be getting married soon."

"The money our parents gave us won’t be enough for that."

"Who do you think I am? Don’t worry about money—just go have fun with Alicia."

"And who do you think you are? A pushover who always loses to me in a fight."

"I beat you last week!"

As I teased Julian, Alicia suddenly looked serious and asked, "What do you mean by 'fighting'?"

Ah, I got carried away and forgot myself.

It would be better not to tell Alicia anything about family matters. She was too smart for her own good.

"Just verbal arguments, you know. Seeing who’s smarter or knows more. That kind of fight."

She didn’t look entirely convinced, but she responded with her usual bright smile and an "Okay."

"Only met her twice, and he’s already head over heels."

Recently, Julian had gotten engaged.

It wasn’t out of mutual affection; our parents had simply deemed the other family ripe for assimilation and personally arranged the match.

For them, it was a kind of blessing—they could now flaunt their ties to the Speyer Family.

"…She is beautiful and cute, though."

After meeting her once and going on a second outing alone, he'd fallen completely for her.

To be fair, even I thought she was stunning.

It wasn't just Julian who was charmed—they seemed mutually smitten.

I should probably be grateful for that. If they didn't get along, life would have been much harder.

She seemed a bit naive, but in a place like this, naivety could be a blessing.

As long as Julian handled himself well, she wouldn't need to know the inner workings of our estate.

She already seemed quite frail.

"Her hair is blue, right? Get her a ruby necklace or a reddish topaz—it'll suit her.

And for the ring, just go with the most expensive and elegant one."

"Ah, yeah! Thanks, Ellen."

Julian could be ruthless when dealing with people, but in moments like this, he seemed like an innocent young man.

"Seeing him like that is kind of…"

"Creepy, isn't it?"

Alicia shook her head in disagreement, so I playfully pinched her cheek.

"No! Not that bad. Just a little unsettling."

It couldn't be helped.

I used to wonder why Julian's ex-girlfriend had found him so unnerving despite his good looks.

Now I realized it was just a visceral reaction.

Maybe it was because I had seen all of Julian's insides—not metaphorically, but literally.

After all, a week ago, I lost, and we ended up playing a gruesome game of "show your guts."

I supposed our concept of "seeing each other's worst" took on a very different meaning.

"Shall we walk?"

"Okay!"

We strolled through the bustling streets.

There weren’t any residential houses here.

The only places to sleep were hotels.

Because of that, there were no messy commoners getting into drunken brawls, nor were there any half-dead poor people wandering around.

The destitute might exist somewhere, but not here.

Looking toward the cabaret—well, the tavern area—I saw demons wearing collars and little more than underwear, swaying their hips and beckoning people inside.

They probably left the ones who didn’t mind being touched by passersby out front.

Out of curiosity, I once went there with Marco, but it wasn’t anything special.

All it involved was people watching women dance in underwear or with their chests exposed while drinking or eating.

Ah, the tobacco they offered was exceptional, though. That was about it.

What other street could be this extravagant?

Here, the impoverished and beggars whom the moderately wealthy found distasteful were nowhere to be seen.

Well, they likely couldn’t afford the toll to enter in the first place.

A tolerable world can only exist by shoving unpleasant sights into metaphorical trash bins and ignoring them.

"Ellen, why do you look like that…?"

"Like what?"

"You look a little sad."

"Maybe I’m just hungry. Want to grab some snacks?"

"What kind of snacks?"

"How about some candy? We can pick up one of those romance novels you like or even catch a play."

Honestly, neither option was particularly appealing to me, but watching Alicia enjoy them was always entertaining.

As I mulled over the idea, I pulled out a freshly trimmed cigar and lit it.

"Ellen, I heard those aren’t good for your health. Can’t you not smoke?"

"Geez, you sure ask for a lot."

Still, since she asked, I should probably put it out.

I cut off the burning tip with a knife and tucked the rest back into my pocket.

The street was littered with scraps of paper, and a few people with dull, lifeless gazes were sitting around.

"I lead a pretty diligent and proper life, you know."

"A 'diligent and proper' person who drinks every night and clutches their head in the morning while running late for school every day?"

"…I don’t really have a comeback for that."

We stopped at a general store, where I bought two lollipops. I popped one into Alicia’s mouth and the other into mine.

It tasted like nothing more than a lump of sugar, but Alicia seemed to enjoy it.

Well, she did have an enormous sweet tooth.

After crunching through the lollipop, we wandered around looking for a bookstore.

There weren’t many books inside that caught my interest, so I left Alicia to browse while I stepped outside to smoke another cigar.

Before long, Alicia emerged with an armful of books, having finished her purchase.

I stubbed out the cigar on the ground and tossed it aside.

"Did you get everything?"

"Yeah! They had so many novels we didn’t have at home!"

"Good. Let’s get something to eat."

"Let’s go somewhere that serves pudding for dessert!"

Pudding, huh?

I glanced in the direction of the restaurant that served pudding as a dessert.

Black smoke was billowing up from that area, faintly illuminated by the dim glow of gas streetlamps.

48

Chapter 48

There were no visible flames, but the massive plumes of smoke billowing upward were unmistakable.

"Alicia, it looks like we won’t be able to have dinner out.

Let’s head home, and I’ll make us something to eat."

Alicia glanced at the smoke and nodded.

"Y-yeah."

Since she had nodded, there wasn’t much need for her verbal response, but that was just like her.

The clustered small buildings obstructed the view, making it hard to see what was happening.

For some reason, my hands and feet were trembling.

No, it felt like I’d experienced this before.

Something about this was deeply familiar, though I couldn’t place why.

Since earlier, I’d been plagued by a sense of déjà vu, as if my mind was slipping into madness.

Any moment now, I expected to hear something explode.

And as if on cue, the sound of a massive explosion rang out.

Alicia instinctively recoiled, taking a step back.

What happens next? What comes after?

My mind was foggy, as though enveloped by dark clouds, and I couldn’t recall anything further.

Was someone attacking us?

Or could it be a neighboring nation conspiring to raid the capital?

But with our military standing right in front of them, what would they hope to achieve?

Even if they succeeded, what then?

Killing the emperor wouldn’t change much—the country was already run by the nobility.

The emperor was just a puppet, and they'd replace him with another—perhaps a grieving, gullible son—to keep up appearances while retaliating against the surrounding nations.

No matter how corrupt and dysfunctional this nation was, its technology and manpower were far superior.

The explosion's source appeared to be the restaurant next to the hotel.

But what could anyone gain by attacking here?

Sure, wealthy people gathered here, but…

"Ellen, I hear screams over there."

Alicia stared, dazed, in the direction of the sound.

When I closed my mouth and focused, I could faintly hear the screams of many people.

These weren't the cries of someone restrained and in pain—they were the panicked, terrified shrieks of a crowd. The sound sent chills down my spine.

"We need to return to the estate."

There was no time to figure out what was happening.

I needed to find my parents.

With them, it wouldn't matter if soldiers or unknown enemies approached—they'd handle it.

"Alicia, stay close to me."

I hadn't brought even a small blade, let alone a gun.

Who carries weapons while wandering around for leisure?

At least I wasn't drunk. Not that I would've been, given that I was with Alicia.

The road to the theater was chaotic.

People fleeing from the fire ran in panic, some collapsing with partially burned limbs, begging for help from those around them.

"P-please, help me! Just help me up—I can lean on the wall and walk on my own! Please!"

Alicia looked at me, her gaze questioning.

As much as I wanted to act indifferent, I couldn't let Alicia see me as anything less than a dignified, brave, and just older sister.

Initially, I considered leaving them behind. But when I hinted at the idea, Alicia’s expression darkened, and I had no choice but to relent.

I had to give her what she wanted—as long as it wasn’t too dangerous.

I helped a succubus who had been dancing outside the cabaret, wearing only her underwear, and aided others lying injured by the roadside.

"What’s happening here?!"

"The beggars and demons—they suddenly showed up in hordes! A-and my daughter… I left my daughter behind. I… ah…."

The man collapsed to the ground, utterly distraught.

After helping him up, seeing him fall again was frustrating. What was I supposed to do now?

A strong sense of unease told me staying here any longer would be dangerous.

After helping a few others nearby, I forcibly pulled Alicia, who was still worried about the injured, and started dragging her away.

When she resisted, trying to run back, I grabbed her by the collar with enough force to keep her in place and slapped her.

"Alicia, we might die here.

Julian and our parents might already be dying.

We don’t have time for this—stop whining and follow me.

You can blame me all you want later."

"…Okay."

We ran for what felt like ages before finally reaching the theater.

The building was partially ablaze, but the fire was on the outside.

Though it was made of stone and unlikely to burn completely, the flames could eventually spread to the wooden interiors, causing serious problems.

Inside, past the large entrance, would be rows of seats and private rooms, each equipped with a bed and table.

Our parents often dined on the third floor while watching performances, so they were likely there.

Though the building was burning, I told myself it would be fine.

Those two wouldn’t die.

They were the ones who had so mercilessly cut down countless others and raised me through their relentless discipline.

To me, they were almost like gods—rewarding those who pleased them and punishing those who didn’t.

Aside from the chancellor, who manipulated the emperor like a puppet, everyone else trembled before them.

I ascended to the second floor.

The fire was beginning to spread inside, but that hardly seemed to matter now.

From the third floor, I could see them. My parents were fighting against a group of attackers.

These must have been the assailants who started the fires in the capital.

Each one was armed, their weapons glinting in the flickering light.

My parents were surrounded.

My mother was already dead, a sharp wooden shard embedded in her neck as she lay beneath a bed.

My father, wielding a small blade—likely taken from one of the attackers—was desperately fighting back.

There was no escape.

Jumping from the third floor would surely break my legs, and breaking through those numbers without a weapon was impossible.

Would it be right to leap forward and try to help?

Even if Alicia and I went to their aid, what could two defenseless girls possibly change?

Judging by the blood pouring from his abdomen, my father had already been stabbed.

Could I even manage to get a wounded person and Alicia back to the estate safely?

But I didn’t have to make the decision.

Those people—those monsters—kindly erased my options along with my hope.

They doused my father with something from a bottle—alcohol or oil, I couldn't tell—and then threw a torch. Flames engulfed him instantly.

The fire consumed the man who had ground me down with a single blade, taught me everything I knew, and shaped me into a proper member of the Speyer Family.

I had always thought that even if something like this happened to him, I wouldn't feel anything.

After all, he had always seemed like someone who wouldn't bleed even if stabbed.

Though I never understood why he was so soft with Alicia.

To me, my father was nothing short of a god.

He was a god who granted rewards when I pleased him and dealt out horrific punishments when I displeased him for reasons I often didn't understand.

He was an idol to be worshipped and emulated...

They call a creature that toys with dinosaurs, drops meteors when bored, drowns humans, and sets them ablaze a god. If that's the case, why shouldn't my father be called one?

When a person burns, the flames first consume the outer layers, but the human body isn't as flammable as one might think.

The heart pumps blood vigorously through the body, and as long as some strength remains, the person screams, writhes, and struggles against the flames.

Once the flames subside, leaving behind tattered clothing and revealing the skin beneath, it's pale—almost unnaturally so.

I couldn't tell if it was because the outer layers had peeled away or if the white was bone.

The muscles cooked by the fire caused the fingers to stiffen, curling into claws, and the body to hunch like a cat's back. All that remained was the faint hissing sound of air escaping.

If the fire had been stronger, it would've burned the body to a crisp, leaving the posture intact. But with just oil or strong alcohol as fuel, this slow, horrifying end was inevitable.

In the end, my father wasn't a god—he was just a man.

A man who died when set on fire, bled out when stabbed, or suffocated when hanged.

It wasn't just him; countless others were enduring horrific fates.

Most of the women were being assaulted, while the men were burned alive or forced to kill their wives with their own hands.

These attackers weren’t acting with some grand purpose or lofty ideal.

They were filled with rage and had simply found targets to unleash it on.

It was grotesque and repulsive, but for most people, such scenes invoked terror.

I was no exception, nor was Alicia.

Even without saying a word, it was clear from our pale faces that we were terrified.

Alicia was sobbing silently as she clung to me, watching what was left of our father, his lips faintly moving even in that charred, pitiful state.

I held her close and began descending the building with her in my arms.

The streets were a nightmare.

To describe them as "a mess" felt almost insulting—like the term fell laughably short of capturing the horror.

What made it worse was the eerie familiarity creeping in.

For reasons I couldn’t understand, the unfolding reality felt… normal.

Chapter 49

We continued making our way toward the estate, step by careful step.

I had always wondered why I needed to learn how to move silently and stay hidden. Perhaps it was for moments like this—moments when staying alive depended on it.

The streets were pure hell.

The attackers had no clear leadership or coordination. Even among themselves, they would get into petty arguments, which quickly escalated into fighting and killing.

Inside a large building, people had barricaded the entrance with furniture in an attempt to hold out, but the attackers set the building ablaze.

Most of the occupants would likely die from the smoke before the flames got to them.

"Alicia, stay low. Don’t turn your head no matter what sounds you hear."

"But, Sister… Father…."

"…Shh."

Alicia bit down on her handkerchief, stifling her sobs.

At least her crying wasn’t loud enough to draw attention.

"Let’s see if those fancy nobles can survive a little hole in their guts!"

"Look at this bloated pig of a man! The nerve!"

They had skewered a man wearing a lavish uniform on a long iron pole. Laughing as they mocked him, they shoved the pole deeper from below.

The man screamed that he was a count and promised rewards if they freed him, but his pleas only seemed to amuse them.

I quickly covered Alicia’s eyes to shield her from the grotesque scene.

No one could witness such horrors and remain unaffected.

"If only you’d given me a piece of bread instead of flaunting that pretty dress…"

A demon with glassy, drugged-out eyes was strangling a woman while assaulting her.

Even in the midst of his atrocity, he seemed to feel some semblance of guilt, spouting excuses as if trying to justify his actions.

"Mommy! Mommy! Aaaaahhhh!"

Nearby, a pack of demons with animal ears tore a mother in half in front of her child, ravenously devouring her entrails.

They weren't eating because they were hungry or enjoyed the taste.

They were doing it to mock the child, to instill despair.

If that wasn't the case, they wouldn't have spat out chunks of flesh after chewing them.

I couldn't save them.

No one could.

That child would die soon, and I tried to erase the thought from my mind.

At first, Alicia whimpered, but once she realized this was happening everywhere, she smartly clamped her mouth shut and followed me without question.

"Tear me apart! Just end it already!"

Demons with horns were slowly gnawing on a man's legs, their sharp teeth tearing off chunks of flesh with each bite.

These demons had always complained about being treated as beasts just because of their horns and animal ears. Yet now, they weren't treating humans as people either.

It made no sense to me.

How could they unleash such unrestrained rage just because others had lived better lives?

"The army will be here by morning. Shouldn't we grab the loot and hide?"

"Who cares? If they were coming, they'd be here already!"

Even in the slums, beyond the glittering backstreets, people starved to death in droves. Diseases claimed many who could only languish in misery until the end.

But none of that was the fault of the woman being devoured right now.

She was merely unlucky to be born a demon and raised in the slums.

I had always thought that being born into the Speyer Family was both my fortune and my curse—just a matter of chance.

I’d suffered under my parents’ cruelty but had never considered killing them, nor had I blamed them for my plight.

They were simply terrible people, and I accepted that.

Anger might drive someone to kill or burn something down, but this… this wasn’t anger.

This was inhuman.

Sooner or later, the guards would come.

The mounted guards who patrolled with clubs, swaggering around in their authority. Where were they when all of this started?

Before I could finish the thought, I heard the sound of hooves.

The guards arrived at the square, mounted and armed.

But even at a glance, it was clear that thirty guards weren’t enough.

The victims, the ones being chased and attacked, swarmed the guards, pleading to be saved, demanding protection. Some even declared their noble status, ordering the guards to take them to safety.

This wasn’t going to end well.

"The guards are here, so we can go to them…!" Alicia spoke with a hint of relief, but I quickly clamped my hand over her mouth and shushed her.

"…If we go there, we’ll die."

The guards could swing clubs and ride horses, but they were no match for these insane monsters tearing people apart.

Even if they had guns—though I doubted they did, given how easily weapons went missing into corrupt hands—it wouldn’t help.

And the army? Most of it was stationed outside the capital, leaving only the palace guard.

The puppet emperor wouldn’t send troops to protect the citizens; he’d never cared before, so why now?

As I crouched lower and scanned the surroundings, it became clear that while some poor humans were participating, most of the truly vicious acts were being committed by demons.

Physically, humans couldn’t match them in a fight.

"Drop your weapons and lie on the ground immediately!"

The leader of the guards, his face flushed—likely drunk until moments ago—shouted his orders.

And for that reason, perhaps, the situation only grew worse.

They clearly hadn’t grasped just how many demons were lurking nearby.

At the guard captain’s command, some demons and a few humans scoffed, letting out mocking laughter. A few loud voices rose above the crowd:

"The gods are with us! These goblin-like humans have exploited us and thrown the world into chaos!"

"They impose their gods upon us, blaspheme the skies, shun magic, and neglect their ancestors! Burn their buildings, tear down those who lord over us from high places, and exact revenge on those who have taken everything from us!"

"Once the emperor cowers in fear, the nobles and clergy will fall silent. Let us drive out these vile creatures and reclaim our ancient lands!"

Ancient lands? That was a story from a thousand years ago.

There was no point in taking the ravings of madmen seriously, but I couldn’t help feeling lightheaded as their words echoed in my mind.

Cultists, criminals, vagabonds— It was as if every piece of trash had crawled out of the gutter to swarm the guards.

These were people who had only ever extorted pedestrians or stolen supplies. There was no way they could fight effectively, especially while surrounded by desperate civilians begging for help.

The guards didn’t last long.

Before long, the mob had them surrounded, reducing them to chunks of flesh.

Some must have borne deep grudges, as they left no part of the guards’ bodies intact.

This was our chance. While everyone was distracted, we had to escape.

I tightened my grip on Alicia’s hand and gave a small nod.

I wasn’t sure if it was a signal to her or just a way to reassure myself that I could do this.

Then we ran.

It didn’t matter if people started chasing us; we kept running.

Whenever I encountered someone standing helplessly, begging for help, I shoved them aside, making them stumble into the path of the demons.

The demons would target them instead, giving us a better chance to escape.

Alicia kept running despite her tears, though she looked horrified at my actions.

She yelled, cursed, and asked if I'd gone mad, but I held her hand tightly, not letting her pull away.

If we stopped, we'd be caught.

And Alicia… she'd face a fate far worse than death.

If we could just run for an hour without stopping, we might make it to the estate.

The situation was beyond grim, but I clung to irrational optimism.

I told myself to think of this as a musical.

The demon smashing a person's head in with his fist was just the beat of a drum.

The pleading cries of those crawling on the ground, begging for mercy, were trumpets and saxophones.

The cracking and crashing sounds from the burning buildings were the deep, supporting notes of a contrabass.

The screams and shouts of the crowd could be imagined as the soft melody of a piano, their meanings drowned out in the harmony.

Yes, it was all just a play.

"Sister! Look out ahead!"

Lost in thought, I barely noticed the shovel flying toward my face.

Instinctively, I shielded Alicia, pulling her into my arms instead of dodging.

The shovel, though blunt, was sturdier and sharper than it looked.

It tore through my face and neck, leaving my skin hanging loosely.

This could be fixed later—if I survived. For now, it didn't matter.

The assailant raised the shovel again, swinging with inhuman strength.

Though their skeletal frame looked starved and frail, their swings had an unnatural force behind them.

Blocking the shovel with my left arm, I felt something crack. I kicked the attacker hard, disarming them.

Grabbing the shovel, I swung it back at their head.

Only when their skull caved in and they stopped moving did I lower the weapon.

"Sister! Are you okay?!"

"No, I'm not. That's why we need to get back to the estate."

I tried to pull the shovel out of their head to use as a weapon, but it was lodged too deeply.

My vision blurred slightly. I could only hope the wound on my neck hadn't hit an artery.

Contrary to popular belief, severing the carotid artery doesn't result in a fountain of blood.

But if blood trickled out like a water gun, it would mean trouble.

When my steps faltered, Alicia panicked, trying to support me. I pushed her away gently but firmly.

"…Alicia, just focus on yourself.

Don't worry about me, even if I die. You're the most important thing right now."

"……."

Her expression was far from convincing.

I met her gaze, though my vision was clouding, and spoke again.

"Alicia, if you die, I'll die too. So don't even think about doing anything reckless. Got it?"

I tried to smile, but my lips were torn, and my face wouldn't cooperate.

All I could manage was a weak smile through my eyes.

Taking her hand again, we started moving.

I was walking steadily now, but if I slowed down too much, I'd have to tell her to leave me behind.

50

Chapter 50

As we left the bustling main streets and entered a quiet residential area, a sense of calm returned, albeit tenuously.

Smoke rose from various places, and demons moved through the shadows, but the area seemed navigable if we avoided trouble.

My vision blurred slightly, and my steps wavered.

Alicia, following close behind, stopped me and tore a strip of fabric from the hem of her skirt with her teeth.

"…What are you doing?"

My words didn't come out as clearly as I intended.

"I have to stop the bleeding, of course.

And don't say things like you'll die if I do."

She wrapped the makeshift bandage tightly around my neck and tied it with a firm tug.

It probably wouldn't help much, but since Alicia had gone to the trouble, I'd keep it on.

My precious little sister, trembling and holding back tears, forced a hopeful tone into her words.

"Once the sun comes up, everything will be fine!

So, after this is over, you'll wake up early in the morning and keep going to the academy, right?

You'll get along with that cool-looking senior, and make more friends, like the one you just made!

And someday, I'll join the academy too!

When we meet in the halls, we'll smile and greet each other warmly… like a family!"

A single tear fell from my right eye.

Despite the dirt on my hands, I reached up to wipe it away. Her skin felt warm against my touch.

Then we ran again.

If I’d known this would happen, I would’ve shoved a few dozen candies in my mouth earlier when we stopped to buy them.

"Burn those cowardly turtles hiding in their houses!"

"They lived in luxury while our families starved to death!"

The voices, so familiar now, filled the air again, and I deliberately turned my head away.

"It’s the demons’ fault!"

"I always knew those bastards would cause trouble one day!"

The demons flooding in from the main streets had collided with the local thugs.

The thugs dragged demons living in the residential area out of their homes, beating them to death with clubs. Meanwhile, the demons retaliated, reversing the roles.

The moonlit night illuminated the chaos.

I caught a glimpse of my reflection in a nearby window.

I looked filthy, utterly disheveled.

How had things come to this?

Wasn’t this world supposed to be like a game?

A place where hope prevailed, and the protagonist defeated evil to make everything right?

Things like this weren’t supposed to happen.

Still, I ran.

I didn’t want to die.

I wanted to protect Alicia, yes, but I also wanted to live by her side.

After all, isn’t the desire to live universal?

No one truly wants to die. No one wants to kill either.

And yet, I think I loved those wretched parents of mine.

I must have, or this hollow feeling in my chest wouldn’t exist.

They were people who deserved death, and they had died pathetically.

When my father extended his charred arm, what had he been reaching for?

Salvation? Or just anyone’s help?

As my adrenaline faded, the pain in my shoulder flared, but I didn’t show it.

If Alicia saw, she’d worry.

I simply clenched my partially torn lips tighter, ignoring the searing pain.

"Are you hurt, Sister?"

"I’m fine."

Ten more minutes, and we’d reach the estate.

I glanced at the watch on my wrist—it had taken two hours of running to get here.

Once we were back, I’d arm myself with as many weapons as possible and barricade us inside a room. No matter what came, we could hold out.

"Huh?"

Alicia’s startled voice snapped me out of my thoughts.

I turned around.

Her arm—no, just her hand—was on the ground.

A thug with a large blade had severed her arm in one swing.

Alicia collapsed, staring blankly at the stump where her arm had been. I didn’t even have time to call her name.

She wouldn’t die from this. A prosthetic arm, enchanted with magic, could replace it.

Without hesitation, I grabbed her severed arm and swung it at the thug’s face, striking him hard.

He didn’t fall, so I threw it at him before tackling him head-on.

Pain shot through my tattered shoulder as I used my legs to choke him, targeting his carotid artery.

"Ack… grgh… gahk…!"

He panicked, stabbing backward with his blade, but my already mangled arm took the hits.

Blood poured from the wounds, pooling around us.

"Alicia, run!"

There was no time for her to sit there dumbfounded, staring at her severed arm.

These thugs never traveled alone.

"You’re not going to die just because you lost an arm, so get up and run to the estate NOW!!"

Sometimes, the world feels like it’s moving in slow motion.

When struck by a massive blow to the abdomen, a hammer to the head, or when faced with a shocking sight, time seemed to slow.

Alicia struggled to her feet, clutching her severed arm. Beside her, a black cat lay lazily, seemingly unfazed by the chaos.

The cat sensed something approaching and leapt out of harm’s way. Alicia, however, wasn’t as fortunate.

A demon with large horns and piercing blue eyes lunged at her, gripping her by the throat with one hand and dragging her toward me.

Blood stained her dress, the vibrant red spreading from her left side—her ribs, likely torn open.

I couldn’t lose my composure.

Revealing emotions here would be idiotic.

"Hey, lady," I said, keeping my voice steady. "That’s my childhood friend you’ve got there. We grew up together. Why not let her go? Let’s call it even—I’ll let you and your buddy go free too."

Like hell they’d believe that.

Any fool would ask if I was serious and get stabbed in the back for their trouble.

I tightened my hold on the thug’s neck. One twist, and I could snap it.

"…Kill me, and I won’t let you go easily."

The blade was still in the demon’s companion’s hand.

The two exchanged glances—unsurprising, given their gutter-born origins.

The thug holding Alicia hurled her aside and charged at me as the other swung his knife.

I twisted my legs, breaking the neck of the one I held, and wrenched the knife from his grip to slash at the approaching demon.

My movements were sluggish, my strength failing me.

"…Shit."

Was the demon mourning his dead friend?

These bastards weren't human.

They were filthy beasts—unlearned, vile creatures that reveled in eating, burning, and tormenting people for pleasure.

"Filthy gutter trash should rot where it belongs. Why the hell do you crawl into places where people live and act like you own the place?

You know what? By sunrise, you'll all be dead. I'll see to it myself."

"…Fuck you."

The knife in my hand felt unwieldy, my grip weak.

Feigning a charge, I hurled the blade instead.

By sheer luck, it sank deep into his abdomen.

Even with the knife lodged in his gut, he wouldn't be able to overpower me, especially not with one of my arms mangled.

I lunged forward, sinking my teeth into his neck.

A vile taste filled my mouth—filth, rot, and then the metallic tang of blood.

"…St-stop! You bastard…!"

As I bit into his throat, his fists pummeled my face. My right eye was bathed in red, and my left vision blurred.

When his blows slowed, I shoved him away and stumbled toward Alicia.

Her side was a mess of exposed intestines, spilling from her torn-open abdomen. Blood poured relentlessly from her severed arm.

If we could just get to the estate, the priests could save her.

Ignoring the weight, I lifted her in both arms.

How her shattered body still moved was a miracle in itself.

If we could just make it to the estate…

Pain faded from my awareness, replaced by a surreal surge of strength.

Maybe God was blessing me. If so, I'd praise Him to the ends of the earth—so long as Alicia survived.

"Alicia, don't talk."

"…I, I thought you… didn't cry…"

"I'm not crying. Something just got in my eye."

"…It… hurts."

"Remember what we said? You're going to wake up early, make new friends, and go to the academy with me.

I'll quit drinking, stop smoking—anything you want.

I'll introduce you to Theo, that handsome senior, and Ethel, my beautiful friend.

You'll love them, so just hang in there, okay?"

She had to survive.

"…Promise?"

"Yes, I promise! Everything will be fine!"

The estate came into view. Relief flooded me as I saw it.

Soon, we'd both be saved, healed, and safe.

"A-ah, Lady Ellen!?"

Marco aimed his rifle at me before realizing who I was. His stunned expression turned to worry as he approached.

"Take Alicia, now," I ordered, passing her to Marco's steady arms as I limped behind him.

Marco's expression shifted oddly, but I ignored it.

Nothing was wrong.

Nothing could be wrong.

But then, why the hell was the priest lying dead, a gaping wound in his chest?

"…You son of a bitch! Get up! Heal my sister!"

I screamed, shaking the corpse in a futile rage.

That damned priest, who'd only healed me after making me suffer—why wasn't he alive to save Alicia now?!

I turned to Alicia, lying motionless on the ground.

Her breaths were faint, her gaze weak. Slowly, she raised a trembling hand to touch my cheek.

Then she pulled me closer, whispering clearly:

"I love you. But if you die because of me, I'll hate you, even in death."

Her eyes glazed over, and her pupils dilated into lifeless pools.

I smiled.

Instead of crying, I smiled.

51

Chapter 51

Am I going to die like this too? I did lose quite a lot of blood.

Either way, if Alicia is dead, there's no reason to live in this kind of world.

It's meaningless.

If I had to pick something of value, I suppose it would be Julian and the friends I made at the academy this time.

No, that's not right. Alicia couldn't possibly be dead.

Even as Marco carried me to the bed, my thoughts wouldn't stop.

Speaking of which, this bed is probably soaked with blood. I'll have to throw it away.

A person eating another person? No way. Ha.

No one would gleefully crush someone's hips or rip out their chest.

They wouldn't set buildings on fire, block the exits, and listen to the screams of those burning alive.

They wouldn't tie a single arm to a pillar, light a fire beneath it, and watch, cackling as the person burned.

They wouldn't crush someone's eyes and violate the socket, nor would they force a mother's corpse upon her child.

They wouldn't hang severed heads on poles and parade them around, nor would they throw people into boiling water alive.

They wouldn't drive iron chains through shoulder blades and lock people in cages.

They wouldn't rip infants from their mothers and smash them onto the ground, nor would they take pleasure in dismembering bodies.

They wouldn't gleefully bury people alive.

They wouldn't peel scalps off living people.

They wouldn't twist every joint in a living person's body, laughing as they did it.

That's just how it is.

People couldn’t possibly do such things to other people.

They wouldn’t bury naked women upside down in the dirt and swarm over them like beasts. They wouldn’t cut someone in half and stitch them onto another person.

They wouldn’t beat someone like a dog just because they had a club in their hand.

What have I done?

I tried to save Alicia, but I shoved those people who were fleeing, making them fall and get caught by the rioters.

"There’s no way people could do things like that."

"…Miss, you shouldn’t be speaking right now."

A nameless butler standing with a gun spoke.

He didn’t seem to be the old butler. Maybe he was newly hired.

Maybe I was never human in the first place.

I couldn’t even protect Alicia. Those people I pushed into the demons’ hands—they just died like dogs.

If Alicia had survived, I would have made excuses, calling it an unfortunate but necessary sacrifice.

What a vile, disgusting human being I am.

I wish someone would come and take me away.

Lock me in a basement, cut my flesh away piece by piece, and burn me.

So I could never come back—turn me into ashes.

What have I done?

Alicia is dead.

She’s still warm, but she’s already gone.

What do I do? What should I do?

Honestly, I don’t know.

Well, I won’t cry.

Back when I got beaten and locked myself in my room to cry, Alicia had just started learning to write. She patted me and told me not to cry.

So I stopped crying from the next day on.

When my arm got scalded in boiling water, I did shed a few tears, but I didn't sob, so Alicia let it slide.

Now, she's gone somewhere beyond reach.

My thoughts are jumbled, my words lack coherence.

I feel dizzy.

A faint drowsiness washes over me, and I close my eyes.

Even so, I have no time to whine about how hard this is.

Even if my limbs are torn off, even if my skin is flayed, I must not stop thinking.

There's no time for pain.

Sadness can be dealt with internally.

There's no need to display heightened emotions or act out.

Then, what can I do?

"…Miss, I've brought a priest from the church."

Marco spoke with a face on the verge of tears.

On his back, a young girl hung limply. If she were merely asleep, she would at least be breathing softly. But since she was hanging there like that, she was probably dead.

The pain, which had been distant in my foggy mind, slowly grew sharper.

Was it because I was regaining consciousness?

To keep myself from screaming, I spoke to Marco.

"Marco, what happened?"

"…Religious fanatics, thugs, and people who just hate life all crawled out and are still running wild.

Most of the killings happened in the shopping districts and the bustling streets."

"You don’t even know how many are dead, do you?"

"……"

"What about my brother?"

Marco’s response was slightly delayed.

I didn’t think Julian would be dead… Ah.

Come to think of it, I always called him Julian, not ‘brother.’

Why am I suddenly calling him that now?

Maybe I unconsciously considered him my brother all along.

"He survived and made it back alive."

"Did he lose an arm or something?"

"His limbs are intact, but he’s not in his right mind."

"Ah, he went to order rings and a necklace."

Perhaps I looked deep in thought, because Marco naturally pulled out a cigar from his pocket.

"Shall I light it for you?"

"No, I won’t smoke."

At my words, Marco put the cigar in his own mouth and lit it instead.

"I didn’t say you could smoke it."

"Ha, leaving something this valuable unused is a crime."

Marco carried the child on his back into a room inside the mansion.

The priest finished his treatment, bowed to me, and left to treat others.

I touched my face. The large wounds that had been there moments ago had all healed.

My eyes hadn’t been gouged out either. My left and right eyes could see just fine.

Now, back to the main issue—what can I do?

Julian, who will become the next head of the family, the ability to manage that family, a vision for the future, setting goals, and executing them.

What was the head’s position again?

Director of the Security Bureau. A position meant to uphold order and eliminate threats in the nation.

The Imperial Security Bureau.

That name sounds ridiculous in this country.

It’s not even a proper organization—just a noble family contracted to handle counterintelligence.

Still, what if I expanded its scope?

For example, to target demons.

My thoughts were organized.

For now, just a little. Just a little rest should be fine.

It’s not like I can move my body anyway.

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My daughter is dead.

Not that I was ever much of a father to her.

I asked a close friend to let her work at a cafe instead of keeping her in a brothel with her mother, but now, it all just feels pointless.

Losing something precious doesn’t make me angry. It just makes me feel empty.

And the reason she died is absurd.

Those bastards threw stones at the cafe, and one hit her in the head.

I laid her in the designated room for the dead, gently stroked her hair for a long time, and then stood up.

Then, I returned to the young miss.

I took deep drags from the stolen cigar, enough to suffocate myself in the smoke, before speaking with difficulty.

"The master and madam have yet to return."

The young master is alive, but the young lady, regrettably, has already passed away.

Even so, the lady I had served since birth showed no emotion, only a faint smile.

The right word escapes me.

Perhaps self-mockery describes it best.

She had always been calm, and though Julian was exceptionally intelligent, she was no less remarkable.

When we first spoke, I thought I was conversing with a child wearing a mask of innocence.

That changed after the master and madam’s education took hold, turning her once playful chatter into somber musings.

Yet, when she was with Alicia, glimpses of that innocence would resurface.

Now, she had become a dull shade of gray, an immutable figure.

People don’t change.

As if to confirm that, she murmured softly.

"I saw my father burning alive, and I witnessed my mother’s death firsthand. Don’t expect them to return."

If she had seen it with her own eyes, it must have been horrific.

For a fleeting moment, I wondered if she had found satisfaction in it, but I quickly discarded the thought.

With fanatics and criminals rampaging together, cruelty was inevitable.

They had swarmed the busiest districts. The fact that she had survived was a miracle.

"Marco, what did you say before the carriage departed?"

That it was peaceful.

That there was no work, so you might as well drive the carriage or sweep the yard, you had joked.

"…I don’t remember."

I wanted to exchange lighthearted banter even now, but there was no room for it.

Even a dark jest would have been welcome.

"You said there was no work because it was a peaceful time."

She answered in my place.

"Now, there will be no end to work."

As if stating the obvious, she gave a faint smirk.

"So much work you'll wish you were dead."

There was only one response I could give.

Having failed to protect the young lady, if she had ordered me to put a bullet through my own skull, it would have been no different.

"Yes."

52

Chapter 52

Thinking about something doesn’t mean you can immediately act on it.

If you let emotions take the lead and only think about harming someone, all you’ll end up doing is grabbing a small blade, making a scene, and getting subdued or arrested.

For now, I have to wait until Julian wakes up.

In the end, he will make the final decision.

Checking the time, it’s around noon.

I wandered into the empty kitchen and shoved a dried-up piece of white bread into my mouth, then took a walk around the mansion.

The old butler rushed over, insisting I should be resting, but even he must know this isn’t the time for that.

My objective has direction, but it isn’t precise.

Where do we draw the line on who needs to be apprehended?

One thing is certain: every last demon must be eliminated.

I can’t deny my personal grudge, but as we’ve seen, leaving them alone leads to catastrophe.

If we compromise and merely punish them, this will happen again.

If the same thing is bound to repeat, wouldn’t it be better to remove the problem entirely?

If I were a demon, I’d be furious, but I’m not.

I’m in a position far more advantageous, powerful, and capable of wiping them out.

At least within this country.

Those nuisances can be sent back to their so-called homeland in the distant east—or to some neighboring minor state.

But not before they pay for their crimes.

I entered a large storage room at the far end of the mansion grounds.

I grabbed a handful of daggers that fit snugly in my hand and secured them in my belt.

Then, I picked up a suitable pistol.

If I had this that night, I could have saved Alicia.

Regret is pointless.

Dwelling on the past brings nothing but emptiness.

What matters is not making the same mistake again.

If I've identified the problem, I must correct it—not ignore it just because it's inconvenient.

Alicia is gone.

"Originally, I only meant to buy a gift and return."

Julian sat curled up on the bed, murmuring barely audible words.

Waiting beside him had finally paid off.

Not that I had anything else to do.

"But after buying the jewels you mentioned, I suddenly wanted to see you.

It was a late night, but the moon was bright and round—it was a beautiful night."

Was it?

I wouldn't know.

When you're happy, even the weeds along the road seem beautiful.

By that logic, the nights before Alicia died must have been beautiful.

"You were unusually gentle that day, and everything seemed radiant."

It was a rare chance to go out.

I had plenty of money and planned to buy a nice meal and gifts for Alicia.

I had even thought of getting the cosmetics Ethel mentioned.

"For a moment, I thought the future could be bright, that I could live with the person I loved and have something to look forward to.

You and I… we've had it rough.

Father was a terrible man, but he somehow found a perfect match and lived happily.

I thought I’d finally found someone I could love."

Though we shared a bond, our relationship was not built on deep trust.

Looking at each other only reminded us of painful memories.

"Is this our punishment? Were we born into this house just to suffer?"

"Julian, it’s not a punishment."

What did he want to hear?

"…Then what is it?"

"It’s just as you said. A problem. Think back to that night."

"…Madmen with torches setting fires. Angry mobs throwing stones. Demons preying on the fleeing."

"Marco told me barely any of them went into the residential areas.

Filthy slum dwellers gathered and invaded the main streets—our district."

People remain in the slums because of their own incompetence.

"What are you trying to say?"

"The demons are the problem. We let them live in the slums, and this is what they did.

They repay kindness with betrayal. And those who sided with them are no better."

Julian alone has the power to command this house, to allocate resources, to make decisions.

It’s not about worthiness or succession—I simply lack the means to do it myself.

All I have is cunning.

Julian can make things happen.

I can only persuade, manipulate, and wield a blade to get what I want.

That’s all.

In a way, I’m no different from a courtesan—selling smiles, words, and pleasure to get what I need.

A courtesan, at least, is far more respectable.

Like a woman playing coy, I leaned against Julian’s side as he mumbled under the covers.

Then, I whispered into his ear.

"None of this is your fault."

"…It’s all my fault. I could have saved them.

The bastards broke into the mansion, and I couldn’t even protect them!"

I failed Alicia too. I brought her here, yet I couldn’t keep her alive.

If you lose someone dear, shouldn’t you do something for them instead of just grieving?

I had already decided—the demons had to be eradicated.

Whether it was possible didn’t matter.

Would the dead even care about such things?

Memorials are for the living.

For those who remain.

The dead are useless, but if the living collapse under grief, they become even more worthless.

Even the offerings placed on a memorial table are for the living.

No one sets up an elaborate ancestral rite just to throw the food away.

They eat, stuffing themselves, too busy enjoying the meal to dwell on loss.

In the end, I do this because I want to.

If I ever feel overwhelmed, I can dress it up as something noble—for Alicia’s sake.

Disgusting.

"I could have saved Alicia.

If only I had killed every demon in sight.

But I didn’t. In the end, it was a disaster. Is that all my fault?"

But that’s just who I am.

Without Alicia, I am nothing but a revolting, wretched human being.

I was born here, raised this way.

Trained and molded into this.

This is simply returning to what I was meant to be.

And someone raised like me isn’t supposed to grieve.

Alicia told me not to cry, after all.

With no parents, I must play that role for myself.

Since I failed to protect Alicia, I should punish myself later.

A failure like me holds no value.

Julian’s lips, dry and cracked, parted slightly, making a faint rustling sound.

I should feed him something.

"…No."

"Then whose fault is it?"

I’d blame the demons and the deranged humans who helped them.

"I don’t know."

"It’s all because of the demons. They were the ones who did this."

There were humans involved, but they had likely been corrupted by the demons they lived among.

If handled properly, they would repent and recognize their sins.

"Julian, what do you do when a dog bites a person?"

"…You put it down."

"Saying ‘kill’ makes it sound too human. You dispose of it.

Beasts that devour people, burn them alive, and laugh about it cannot be considered human. Don’t you agree?"

Julian’s eyes wavered before he finally nodded.

"Then what are you waiting for?

Instead of whining, get up and get to work.

She would have preferred that."

Of course not.

She wouldn’t even kill an ant unless by accident, let alone approve of slaughter.

If I said we should wipe out every last demon, she would have recoiled in horror.

Julian knows this too.

But emotions are fickle things. They make you believe what you want to believe.

It’s no different from the demons believing that killing nobles and the wealthy would make their lives better.

A moment’s thought would tell them otherwise, but they never bothered to think at all.

"We have to dispose of the filthy demons. Every last one of them.

A Speyer should be working, not wasting time crying."

"…How."

"That’s what money is for.

Who cares if we go bankrupt? Expand the detention facilities and build a structure capable of holding every demon we capture.

Something designed for efficient disposal."

"…I’ll spare the ones who deserve it."

"Do whatever you want."

Julian got up.

He checked the mirror on the wall, wiped the crust from his eyes, and changed his clothes.

Then, after staring at me for a long moment with sunken eyes, he left the room.

It won’t be long now.

Soon, I’ll have work to do.

53

Chapter 53

Even though I spoke at length with Julian, my main occupation remains that of a student.

The academy is closed for a month, so there isn't much to do in that regard either.

Julian has gathered a group of mages and is buying up land around the estate, constructing a massive building. With all the plans already in place, the construction should be completed quickly.

Like in a game, where buildings pop up instantly as long as you have the resources.

The speed is a direct result of the mages exhausting themselves in sacrifice.

Hiring them normally would be far too expensive.

They are linking underground tunnels beneath the city to funnel all the demons into a single holding facility.

For now, the ones I've captured are locked in the basement's interrogation room. Most of them are brothel pimps or enforcers from criminal organizations.

None of the real big names have been caught yet.

Standing in front of the academy, I found myself lost in thought.

If they had sent even half the academy's security to the city center, or if Theo had coincidentally been nearby that night—

Theo must have come to school.

The facilities are still accessible, so he's probably inside training.

I shake my head.

Thinking about it won't change anything.

I walk around, observing the streets.

Angry merchants who lost their businesses and grieving families roam in mobs, lynching any demons they find on the streets.

They string them up from gas lamps and balconies, pelting them with stones.

Sometimes, they douse them in oil or strong liquor and set them ablaze.

The thought of my father flashes through my mind, absurd as it is, but I push it aside and take in this magnificent scene.

If demons burned everything in the night, why shouldn't humans return the favor?

In truth, humans are far better at burning and killing than those barbaric creatures.

Who do you think invented high-proof alcohol and incendiary oils?

Mass cremations of thousands have always been a hallmark of war.

Demons are mere amateurs.

If humanity truly wished to raze a city, they wouldn't leave it half-destroyed like this.

Though, those demons hanging up there had likely cowered inside their homes, hoping to be spared.

"…Ellen?"

"Ah, Theo-senpai. I'm glad to see you alive."

"Why are you here…?"

"Attending school. It's a bit early, but still."

His expression darkens.

Did someone close to him die?

Not that it concerns me.

"Again, you…"

Would he let me continue with my plans?

Probably not.

There's a chance he might even cut me down as some villain to be purged.

Why?

I haven't done anything worthy of such hatred.

"Why are you gripping your sword's hilt?"

"…Just a habit."

"A habit? Strange. You never did that around me before.

That night must have been horrifying. I understand."

Theo hesitates before finally speaking.

"…What happened that night?"

"Just lost a few family members, that’s all.

Happens all the time. Ah, but maybe not where you live—perhaps there weren’t many demons in your district."

He seems relieved?

Is it because I didn’t mention my parents?

I don’t know.

But seeing his calm face, I assume the residential areas remained relatively untouched.

Most demons and rioters had stormed the noble and commercial districts.

Because of that, the once-flowing wealth has come to a standstill.

"Is your family safe?"

"My mother was injured, but she’s fine."

"Shall I send a potion—"

His eyes suddenly darken, as if recalling some potion-addicted wretch.

Potions rarely cause addiction, but his hostility is palpable.

"Why?"

He shakes his head and enters the academy without another word.

Something has changed, though I can’t pinpoint what.

"No."

"No? Something definitely happened.

Let’s sit on that bench, like always, and talk it out.

I’ll listen to anything."

His face is conflicted.

Why?

"…Is your family okay?"

There’s fear in his voice.

Something feels off.

Like he already knows something about me.

It’s unsettling.

For now, I lie.

Truth is irrelevant.

"They were injured, but they’re fine.

Nothing life-threatening."

I smile—innocently, as if I were simply a worried girl.

"…Ah."

He relaxes.

Why does the idea of my family surviving bring him relief?

"That night was awful, wasn’t it?

The following day too, but at least people pulled themselves together and purged the rioters."

Casually, I link my arm with his and step into the academy.

"So, what brings you here on a day like this?

No sparring partners, the place is empty."

"It’s a chance to reflect."

"I don’t quite get it.

I think I’ll just read."

What was that?

Dealing with people makes you sensitive to emotions.

Or numb—always hiding behind a smile.

I pry into others, digging for truths.

Sometimes, I fix stubborn minds with a hammer and nails—call it counseling, or maybe therapy.

Why did Theo look relieved when he heard my family survived?

I don’t understand.

Normally, I’d press for answers, but now isn’t the time.

I leave Theo and head for the library.

The librarian’s desk is empty.

Did she die?

Unlikely. She lived in a rundown part of the residential district, untouched by rioters or demons.

She was a noble once, but fallen from grace—no one would have bothered with her.

I pull a dusty novel from the shelves and sit down, crossing my legs.

Reading is just a way to kill time until the construction is complete.

They told me to stay low and wait.

But then, from the inner library, I spot the librarian.

She’s seated, nervously biting her nails, her expression uneasy.

"Ellen..?"

"Why are you hiding?"

What was her name again?

I can’t quite remember.

"I was looking for a place to hide, and the academy was the only option…"

"From whom?"

"People."

The librarian clung to me as she spoke.

"Ellen, even if the academy preaches equality, we both know that’s just empty rhetoric.

No matter how much you smile and brush off people’s words, everyone knows you’re one of the highborn."

That look in her eyes—what did it remind me of?

Ah. The same desperate gaze of a man who had lost everything in a rigged poker game and was about to bet his house deed.

"People are furious.

They’re killing everyone on sight, even harmless servants.

Even children!"

Ah, so that’s it.

"You mean the demons."

She nodded.

"I suppose it’s a bit extreme.

The demons that attacked that night were all scum from the slums."

Her tense expression softened slightly.

The woman who had been trembling in fear moments ago was suddenly more at ease.

"If you want my help, I need to see who I’m helping.

I can’t do much if you keep them hidden."

"Ah, um… Pamela, it’s okay to come out now."

A demon girl peeked out from behind the bookshelf, her appearance slightly disheveled from hurriedly hiding.

"Uh, um… isn’t Pamela cute? People were throwing rocks at a child like her…"

She kept talking, but her words barely registered.

A sharp ringing filled my ears, drowning out the noise.

"She is adorable."

A blue-haired girl clutching a stuffed animal that looked like a giraffe with a torn neck.

Judging by her frilly maid uniform, she must have been a house servant—probably treated as a mascot of sorts.

She trusted the librarian deeply, showing no fear towards me, only curiosity.

A child? No.

That thing wasn’t human.

One day, she’d grow up and devour Julian and me.

If she ever visited a theater, she’d be the one burning alive instead.

Enough of my personal thoughts—I had a job to do.

Could the librarian use magic?

She was still a student, not even an adult yet. Killing her outright seemed excessive.

I swiftly drew my pistol, struck her in the philtrum with the handle, grabbed her shoulder, and drove my knee into her stomach.

Just enough to knock her unconscious.

Then, I turned to the demon and pulled the trigger.

Our eyes met for a split second before the bullet pierced her forehead, leaving her eyes lifeless.

I looked away slightly, not wanting to see it.

"Ah, how am I going to clean this up?"

I’d made quite a mess.

54

Chapter 54

Fortunately, there were still people hard at work in the interrogation room beneath the academy.

"Miss, what brings you here?"

"I made a bit of a mess in the library. Send someone to clean it up."

"Understood."

This place seemed quite relaxed compared to the mansion, the commercial district, and the underground quarters near the slums, where everyone was overworked to exhaustion.

Then again, I'd heard that there hadn't been many deaths in the academy.

"By the way, Miss, your hands are shaking terribly. Are you feeling unwell?"

That couldn't be right.

I turned my head to check, only to see the hand that had pulled the trigger trembling violently.

"Huh. Get back to work."

I was supposed to feel nothing.

I could have handled it more cleanly, but I let my emotions get the better of me.

All I had to do was lure them here under the pretense of shelter.

Pathetic.

I can't do anything right. I make a mess wherever I go, screwing up every simple task.

At least my parents used to punish me for my failures.

Since they're no longer here to do it, I'll have to do it myself.

I rolled up my sleeve and placed my arm over the drainage channel.

Neat and efficient—that was the best part.

I drew my dagger and drove it into my left arm, dragging it down with full force.

The sharp steel tore through flesh and muscle, scraping against the bone, ruining my arm.

It’s fine—my father suffered far worse.

The counselors never spoke when his fingers and toes were cut off, but when they started burning them instead, they became much more cooperative.

That silent man had screamed until his death. It must have hurt quite a bit.

"…Hah."

My head cleared slightly.

I entered the interrogation room and retrieved a healing potion from a shelf, pouring it over the wound.

The gash sealed almost instantly.

By then, the subordinate I had assigned the task had returned.

"Is it done?"

"The body was small, so it didn’t take long."

He had the librarian slung over his shoulder.

With most students absent, he must have just carried her out openly.

It might be an academy, but with a month-long break, no one would question it.

"Should we take her to the interrogation room?"

"Yeah, but don’t rough her up too much. Just coax her."

"And if she resists?"

"What else? Things will just get a bit more intense.

Dispose of her if necessary, but extract all useful information first."

There was no reason to keep her alive.

I had learned firsthand how dangerous those who sided with demons could be.

"Speaking of which, we captured an—no, a long-lived species."

"…Aren’t those just myths from books?"

"We found one while pursuing escapees through the underground sewers.

You should check it at the mansion yourself."

"Alright."

Come to think of it, there had been a lot of demons near Ethel’s house.

I wonder where they all went.

For her sake, I’d have to round them up and separate them for disposal.

I returned to the mansion.

No servants greeted me; no butlers bowed.

Everyone was too busy running around, handling their tasks.

I stepped on the slightly worn red carpet and entered the office.

"You were supposed to knock."

I rapped on the already open door mockingly.

Julian, busy writing and stamping documents, momentarily set his pen down and stood up.

He took out a cigarette and lit it, smoke curling into the air.

"The long-lived species—is it real?"

"It is."

"Interesting."

"Among demons, aside from the horned ones, it seems they follow it.

Some even disguised themselves, attending the academy."

"And you want me to handle it?"

"Yes. They had an entire hidden village. There are quite a few of them.

We have others managing them, but you’re the best at detecting lies."

Lies.

I wasn’t sure about that.

"I’ll send a letter first."

I needed to talk to Ethel anyway.

She was still my friend, so I'd treat her properly.

Or perhaps I should just bring her entire family here.

That would be quicker.

I had already seen plenty of demons near her estate.

Even that foolish librarian had tried sneaking her pet demon into the academy.

There were bound to be more hiding somewhere.

And I'd find them soon enough.

Julian nodded.

Now, what should I write in the letter?

I suppose I'd ask her to meet me at the academy.

A bit unnatural, but it would do.

Ethel was naïve enough to take my words at face value and come.

I wrote the message, sealed it in fine stationery, and handed it to a servant.

For some reason, couriers always remained functional, no matter how chaotic the world became.

Probably because the protagonist always needed a way to send letters to their love interest.

A long-lived species, huh.

They're a staple in fantasy games—elves.

I had never seen one before, assuming they didn't exist within the empire.

None had been caught previously.

This headache was getting worse. Maybe I'd need to punish myself again later.

"Oh, Miss?"

"What? Slacking off again?"

Her face was slightly damp—she must have just taken a shower. I threw out a casual remark, half in jest.

"It’s just routine. By the way, among our new guests, there’s one who stands out. I saved them for you."

"How remarkable are they?"

Marco shrugged.

"I got spit on the moment I walked in."

"Which room?"

"Room 7-2. Good luck."

"You too."

I had heard they spit like llamas.

I considered changing clothes but decided against it—washing would suffice.

I thought about bringing tools but figured I should see the target first.

Inside the interrogation room, a seemingly ordinary girl with slightly pointed ears sat quietly.

Blonde, blue-eyed, pale-skinned, and pretty.

Her chest and hips were a bit lacking, but she could be as marketable as a succubus.

Perhaps she wouldn’t need to be disposed of—just sold at a good price.

If she could be tamed.

"A girl?"

Hostility flickered in her expression.

"A girl? You look younger than me."

She wasn’t restrained, and the tray of food beside the bed suggested she was being fed well.

Why waste resources on a mere demon?

"Why did you come?

You abduct us from our peaceful lives—do you plan to play princess with us?"

Princess? She should be saying ‘imperial princess’ by now.

How old was she?

"Your speech is oddly archaic. Are you mimicking an elder?"

I tapped her cheek lightly.

She slapped my hand away, scowling.

She wasn’t in a position to show emotion. Did she not understand her predicament?

"I’ve lived two hundred years longer than you. Show some respect, child."

Long-lived species or elves—either way, they weren’t human.

Just long-lived demons who could talk well.

If she was caught in the sewers, she wasn’t even of noble birth.

"Respect? Demons might not understand the concept, but humans have a clear and effective way to command it."

I rummaged through a drawer but found nothing useful.

So I pulled a gun from my coat instead.

I’d already put one down this morning.

"You’ve lived comfortably without ever paying taxes."

I aimed slightly off-center, making the bullet graze her.

Her reaction was weak. She trembled slightly but remained expressionless.

It must have hurt. How could she be so stoic?

"You humans always do this.

If your opponent isn’t strong, you skip conversation and start with threats."

"And you demons are any different?"

"…Demons?"

"The horned ones, the ones with animal ears—you know who I mean."

Her face twisted.

"Don’t lump us in with those vile creatures."

"Ahaha. Vile? What are you saying?

Whether you have horns, tails, or long ears, you’re all just demons."

I pulled out a pair of scissors.

Fear flickered in her eyes.

"Maybe if I cut off those ears, you’d look more like a proper girl."

She leapt from the chair, trying to retreat.

"Y-You think that would frighten me?"

It already had.

She was shaking.

"Conversations require mutual understanding."

I grabbed her by the hair and snipped off the tip of her pointed ear.

Just the flesh.

I was too softhearted to cut it entirely.

She screamed, so I drove the scissors into her thigh.

Maybe now she’d be willing to talk.

She had been rolling her eyes, deep in thought, from the start.

55

Chapter 55

The demon with a slightly severed ear fiddled with the torn piece for a while before murmuring in a resigned voice.

"I heard from the elders…

This way, your kind will lower our value as merchandise…"

It felt like watching a child who had just joined a cult, awkwardly reciting a script without understanding it.

Even their tone was unnatural, as if they were merely repeating something they had been taught.

"Hmm. You're not merchandise at all."

I could sell them if I wanted to, but was there any reason to?

With the large buildings being constructed and demons being disposed of en masse, funds were dwindling, but selling this one wouldn't make a dent.

Old records mentioned that demons had been kept as slaves, but officially, slavery no longer existed in this country.

And those who did practice it had long gone into hiding.

If money ran short, I could always carve open the bellies of weak nobles and take what was inside.

"I think you might be mistaken about why you were brought here.

Can you tell me why you think that is?"

I humored the absurd lie, pulling the scissors from their thigh as I asked.

A wet, squelching sound followed as the blade withdrew.

"…Weren't we taken to be made slaves like before?

Men castrated and sent to the palace, women taken as concubines?"

They were trying to put on an authoritative expression, but with that face, who would take them seriously?

Unless there were armed soldiers backing them up, that is.

Cowering in a corner, staring at a severed ear piece—laughable.

If they wanted to sound commanding while lying, they should at least hold their expression steady and not let their lips tremble.

"You really don’t know what’s been happening above for the past month, do you?"

They nodded, as if ashamed.

What exactly were they ashamed of?

If hiding underground like mold embarrassed them, they shouldn’t have hidden in the first place.

"Your kind set the city on fire in the night.

Countless people died.

So I made a decision—to get rid of all demons."

"…Dispose of?"

I nodded.

At first, they didn’t seem to grasp the meaning of the word.

But as the silence stretched on, their once-expressionless face twisted in horror and despair.

This was likely the first time they had heard the full truth.

They may have known the city burned, but not what followed.

"Dispose of… you mean, kill all of us?"

"‘Kill’ sounds a bit harsh."

These creatures seemed far removed from violence.

Had they been like the back-alley demons, our men would have suffered losses capturing them.

Instead, they had surrendered without resistance.

"We did nothing!

We’re not like those demons you speak of!

We never left our village, we just lived peacefully—"

I punched them.

Blood trickled from their nose, an odd contrast to their otherwise delicate features.

They tried to feign innocence, but they couldn’t be unaware of what had happened aboveground.

"Shh. The room echoes.

Show some decorum when speaking."

Their earlier arrogance about living two hundred years had long disappeared.

Now, all that remained was a trembling, doll-like figure.

"W-We just wanted to live in peace…"

It was my first time seeing a long-lived species in person.

Not that it changed anything.

They were still demons.

Horns, tails, animal ears—it made no difference.

"Shut up."

I struck them with the handle of my gun before kicking them in the stomach.

They whimpered but stopped crying when I fired a shot at the ceiling.

Finally, they were ready to talk.

Demons always acted arrogantly until they were put in their place.

I was being far too kind, resolving things with words instead of simply executing them.

When told to be silent, they should obey.

Or they should die.

Then again, what was the point of living so long if they never left their tiny hole?

If all demons looked like this, perhaps there wouldn’t be so many wars.

Beauty had a way of quelling anger.

"If you lived so peacefully, why the hell did those demons flee to your village?"

They were caught while chasing escapees—if they were truly innocent, why were fugitives running in their direction?

Even when cornered, demons always tried to deceive humans.

They acted submissive when weak, but the moment they gained an advantage, they bared their fangs, eating mothers in front of their children like savages.

Even this so-called long-lived species was no different.

I pressed my boot down on the wound on their thigh, twisting it slightly.

I didn’t want to hear them scream.

I didn’t enjoy violence much, after all.

Really.

Sometimes, I liked watching others fight while eating snacks.

But committing violence myself? Exhausting.

Not satisfying in the least.

Perhaps I should comfort them.

They might reveal useful information about hidden demon settlements.

Julian had trusted me with this task for a reason—because there was something to uncover.

"I’m sorry for raising my voice. I have a bit of a temper.

I may look young and delicate, but don’t think you can fool me with such a ridiculous excuse."

"…A-Ah…"

I stroked their hair as I spoke, but their eyes trembled in sheer panic.

Hyperventilating, unable to even take a breath.

The quickest way to solve this would be to break their ribs until they coughed up blood, then heal them with a potion before they died.

"I take it you’ve never been hit before."

"P-Please, stop…"

Though their body was intact, their dead eyes and limp posture made them seem lifeless. I grabbed their hair, dragging them to the bed and tossing them onto it.

Then, I took a jar filled with ground pepper and poured it into their nostrils.

As they coughed and sputtered, I pressed their forehead against the mattress to steady them, then dumped a pitcher of water over their face.

"From now on, you'll only speak the truth.

And by 'truth,' I mean what I want to hear."

"E-Ek! Ack—Achoo! Agh—"

"Disgusting."

When their coughing wouldn't stop, I struck their chin with the gun handle.

Guns truly were magical tools.

Pointing one at someone turned even the most unruly into obedient lambs, curing all sorts of ailments along the way.

"Let's hope our next conversation is a bit more productive."

I'd leave them be for now.

A daily ration of water and a few fingers from their fellow demons would be enough.

In a few days, they'd be begging to talk.

After leaving the room, I took a quick shower and returned to find Marco sitting in a chair, his clothes drenched in blood, smoking a cigarette.

"Miss, did you get anything useful?"

"They tried dodging the truth, so I had to be a little more persuasive.

What about the demons you handled?"

"…Apparently, they had never been hit in their entire lives."

That made sense.

They acted as though they were experiencing pain for the first time.

"And yours?

They were supposedly some kind of elder among their kind—a leader, perhaps."

A leader?

Didn’t seem like much.

They had spent centuries entangled among themselves, stagnating without any real progress.

"They created their own little paradise underground.

Probably never even paid taxes."

Marco wiped the blood from his face with his sleeve before sharing something interesting.

"Some demons apparently visited them seeking wisdom."

"Wisdom?"

"The usual nonsense—‘they’re old, so they must be wise.’"

"I doubt they had anything worthwhile to teach."

"Depends on how you spin it."

After all, some hear ‘live happily’ and conclude that they must steal from others to achieve happiness.

"For the next week, their meals will be water and their fellow demons’ fingers."

"Cooked?"

Hadn’t thought of that.

"Too much hassle. They won’t eat it anyway. Raw is fine."

Marco nodded and rose to resume his work.

As I opened the door, I heard desperate apologies from within, followed by a piercing scream before it shut.

Routine.

This was life, now and until the demons were gone.

Still, a full week without work felt suffocating.

Doing nothing made me feel like a leech.

Handling Ethel’s matter would be a good way to pass the time.

It felt like an eternity had passed.

Like I was stuck in a cycle, repeating the same thing over and over.

When reality felt too much like a game, that eerie dissonance always sent me to Alicia, where I would hold her in silence until the feeling passed.

Now, when the unease crept in, my only solace was punishing myself.

I traced a small cut onto my arm but stopped, wrapping it in a fresh white bandage instead.

It was just a scratch—nothing serious.

Alicia wasn’t coming back, anyway.

56

Chapter 56

The next day, Ethel came to the building above the academy’s conversation room.

Right at lunchtime.

Should I cover my face?

No, I won’t.

I had a slightly arrogant thought that even if I were recognized, what could they do? But more than that, I didn’t want to reveal myself to Ethel as someone wrapped up in layers of lies.

If necessary, I could lie as much as I wanted.

Come to think of it, I should have eaten before getting to work. I had chosen the wrong time.

The building was dark, making it difficult to see who was standing in front of me.

"Ethel. It is you, right?"

Judging by the silhouette, it seemed like her.

"Ellen? Why did you suddenly ask to meet in a place like this?

Wouldn’t it have been better to meet at my house ins—huh?"

A subordinate, who had been hiding behind her, injected something into Ethel’s side.

It wasn’t harmful—just a sleeping drug made from ground-up, still-living medicinal herbs.

If anything, it might even be good for her body.

"This place doesn’t have great facilities. Could you transport her to the mansion?

Put her in the best place available. If possible, somewhere with an intact bed would be even better."

"Understood, my lady."

"Oh, and don’t cut anything off."

"Yes."

In the morning, I had exchanged greetings with Theo-senpai, and by lunchtime, I was bringing the friend I was closest to at the academy into the conversation room.

Well, once the building was completed, I'd have fewer tasks to deal with.

Honestly, I had no idea what Theo-senpai was thinking.

Whenever I approached and greeted him, he looked at me differently than usual—his eyes showing a mix of fear and hostility.

I didn't think I had done anything to scare him.

Yet, every time he looked at me, he deliberately averted his gaze, like someone pretending not to know something.

I bought a piece of bread from the ruined streets and ate it on the go.

I should probably just wander around for a bit and then head home.

There was no need to walk home with Theo-senpai.

The still-angry crowd was eagerly capturing any demons that looked weak and pelting them with stones.

"Was her name Petra…?"

A girl was clutching the noose around her neck, trembling and whimpering.

The people found joy in it, pressing torches against her feet and throwing hard or sharp objects at her.

Why did I even know her name?

Maybe we had met before.

She could have been one of the prostitutes Marco frequently visited.

What a heartwarming sight.

Demons dangling from gas street lamps, charred buildings, and filthy debris everywhere.

Corpses beaten to a pulp, left to rot because no one cleaned them up, their stench beginning to rise—while demon sympathizers clung to them, weeping.

And the crowd, treating even the better-looking ones differently from demons—not violating them, but simply burning them first.

I had promised Alicia that I'd stop drinking, but how could I not raise a toast in a world as magnificent as this?

It took fire and destruction for people to finally realize what had gone wrong.

They called us "secret police," but everyone knew we existed.

They just didn’t know who the police were—aside from the chief.

Even if I pointed at the slightly foolish-looking Marco, who worked as my coachman, and said, "This man is actually part of the secret police," how many would believe me?

We worked tirelessly under the name of the Security Bureau, yet the ones who should be capturing and punishing demons or vagrants were the ones lazing around.

Not because they had suddenly grown a conscience, surely.

The mounted police who arrived that night had been no help either.

Their faces were flushed red, completely drunk.

They had painted the streets even redder than their faces.

Dragged along with the horse they cherished like family, until there wasn’t even a recognizable form left.

Considering how much demons had suffered at their hands, it was obvious they had been brutally suppressing them for years—so why hadn’t they seen this coming?

Even if those bastards said, "You didn’t see it coming either," well… our job was to handle high-ranking individuals.

To put it bluntly, we had neither the time nor the need to concern ourselves with the lower classes.

If that wasn’t the case, we wouldn’t have to go through all this trouble—we could simply flood the streets with mounted police, round up every demon in sight, or kill them on the spot.

At least the citizens were angry enough to take matters into their own hands, slaughtering the demons in the streets. That was a relief.

I had been lost in thought for a while, and before I knew it, I had arrived at the mansion.

I glanced at my reflection in the mirror.

A chillingly blank expression stared back at me, so I adjusted it into a bright smile.

Now that was a much better look.

"You’re just standing there, grinning at the mirror like a creep. Have you finally lost your mind?"

"What? Aren’t you supposed to be working?"

Julian walked in as I was smiling at the mirror.

"The butler said you came back looking unusually cheerful. I wondered if you had made some progress."

"Progress in what?"

"Finding out who orchestrated that night’s incident, or rounding up another batch of demons."

"Neither. By the way, what do you mean ‘orchestrated’?"

"Something like that wouldn’t have happened naturally.

You yourself said someone must have been leading them."

There probably were leaders behind it.

If it had just been a few dozen demons, maybe not—but with that many swarming the city’s main streets and noble districts, of course there had to be.

But I didn’t see any need to track them down specifically.

This was bound to happen eventually, and those people had simply lit the match over an already drenched pile of fuel.

All we had to do was make sure it never happened again—by exterminating every last demon.

That way, there would be fewer people left to grieve, like me.

"Ah, that? But why does it matter?"

Julian’s face changed as he looked at me, as if I were something incomprehensible.

"…What do you mean?"

"They’re all going to die anyway.

Not a single one will remain in this country.

It doesn’t matter who started it or who’s to blame—they’ll all be gone regardless."

"…That’s true."

"If you understand, go do your job, Julian.

It’s about time I got to work too."

It wasn’t like I was seeking revenge.

No, this wasn’t some grand, dramatic act of vengeance.

We were simply taking on the work that other noble families should have done before us.

After sending Julian away, I entered the room where Ethel was confined.

"Ellen…?"

Maybe the drug had been ineffective, or perhaps Ethel had a surprisingly strong resistance to toxins—whatever the case, she wasn’t asleep. She was awake.

"Yeah, Ethel."

"…Where am I?"

To have a calm conversation, I took some tea leaves out of the drawer. It wasn’t the prettiest teacup, but I dropped the leaves into a metal cup, brewed some tea, and handed it to her.

"My house."

"…House?"

"Forget that. Instead of a stiff conversation, why don’t we just talk like friends for a bit?

I’ve been working too hard lately, and I’m feeling a little tired."

"…You dragged me to a place like this, and I have no idea what you’re even saying."

"I heard that Count Rosenberg and his wife—your father and mother—took a bunch of demons and went somewhere.

The problem is, I have no idea where they went."

If she asked me how I knew, it’d be a bit troublesome.

I couldn’t just expose the identity of someone who worked hard for that information, and I didn’t want to lie to my friend with such a guilty conscience.

I dropped a cube of sugar into my tea.

It wasn’t my preference, but when doing mental work, it helped to replenish some sugar.

"Oh, and Julius Rosenberg will be placed in the room next to yours.

If you press that button on the wall, you’ll be able to talk to each other."

And you’ll be able to hear the screams, too.

"M-My parents just wanted to at least protect the children…."

"Mm-hmm, I'm sure they did. Whatever."

Truly admirable people.

They were noble souls who pitied those filthy, wretched beasts, eating dirt from the fields to survive.

"So where do you think they went?

Ethel, I want to stay friends with you.

So just answer me. There's no need for either of us to get hurt over this.

I'll make sure your parents return safely too, okay?"

"I-I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Of course, you don't. You lied to me before too—wait, before?"

A sudden wave of nausea surged through me.

Luckily, there was a toilet in the room.

What came up was nothing but stomach acid, but that alone made my throat and mouth burn.

Ethel, startled, rushed over and patted my back.

The look on her face showed complete confusion—she had no idea what was happening.

Come to think of it, I hadn't even tied her up.

Not that chanting a spell would let her escape, but still, I could've killed her if she tried.

"Haa… Hey, Ethel. We're friends, right?"

"…Yeah."

She still couldn't process the situation.

Well, of course.

She had been knocked out, dragged to some unknown place, and when she woke up, she found herself locked in a tiny room alone with her friend.

"Then tell me. You know where they're hiding. If you don't…"

"E-Ellen…!?"

I pulled out my gun and aimed the barrel at her.

"No, I couldn’t possibly shoot you."

Instead, I pretended to aim at Ethel but unloaded the entire cylinder into my own arm.

All six shots roughly tore into my left arm.

Rather than leaving neat holes, the bullets shredded the flesh—"tattered" was a more fitting description.

The only reason I wasn’t aware of the blood pouring out was because it kept flowing without pause.

"W-Wait, Ellen. Just… put that down for a second…."

Her eyes trembled violently, her lips unable to close.

"You see, I lost quite a lot, so I need to do something new.

If I can’t work, I might just fall into despair and die."

If I was about to collapse, I could just douse myself in a potion.

The sensation of new flesh growing was always a pleasure.

"…Hurry up and tell me. I know you know."

I pried her lips open, pressed the gun barrel against her cheek, and pulled the trigger.

That was when Ethel lunged at me.

57

Chapter 57

At this point, even seeing a status window didn’t surprise me.

A bad ending? What kind of bad ending?

Not only did she massacre demons, but she also drugged Afren—who used to slack off with me at the library—and abducted and killed countless ordinary people. She was a villain through and through.

"Status window! Status! Status window!! Argh!!"

Even if killing demons wasn’t a crime, as Ellen had claimed, how was she going to justify murdering ordinary people?

She killed people for hiding demons. She killed them for marrying demons and having children. She killed them for simply falling in love with one.

She dragged in people who had nothing to do with any of it, tortured them into revealing the whereabouts of demons they considered family—or who were, in fact, their family—then killed them anyway.

Why?

A heroine? If that was a heroine, then that game would’ve flopped instantly.

"Heroines are people too! Please be mindful not to stress them out." What kind of bullshit was that?

What now? Should I turn around and run straight to Ellen and kiss her?

Or should I do to her what she did to Afren—get her addicted to potions and keep her happy with a constant dose?

That’d just be returning the favor, wouldn’t it?

"…Theo, what’s wrong all of a sudden…?"

Heroine or villain, she must have been someone from a normal world like me.

She wasn’t born into this twisted world—where the surface seemed bright, but filth seeped through every crack.

She liked games, anime, movies—especially John Wick.

Yeah, she was probably just a regular person.

If I had grown up in the same environment as Ellen, maybe I would have become just as twisted.

…Even so.

Even so, could a person really hate and kill others to such an extent?

If she had only killed demons, I could have at least understood on some level.

But I couldn’t comprehend Ellen at all.

She said that hating someone was much easier and more convenient than trying to understand them, but that was just her opinion.

I could never slaughter people as effortlessly as she did.

I would break down before I even got that far.

"Theo!?"

Isabel shook my shoulders, snapping me back to reality.

"…Where are we?"

"We’re almost at the count’s mansion. Are you feeling uneasy?"

Isabel looked at me with concern.

If we were this close, even if we turned back immediately, we wouldn’t reach the capital until morning.

Still, the thought that I needed to get back as soon as possible kept flooding my mind.

The count wasn’t much of a problem.

Just another lunatic who kidnapped children and boiled them alive in an attempt to bring his daughter back to life.

"…Yeah."

The unease came from Ellen.

I kicked off and rushed into the count’s mansion.

"Hey, wait, Theo! We need to check from the outside first and make sure it’s safe!?"

"There’s no need for that. Just follow me, Isabel."

I ignored the few servants I saw and headed straight for the basement.

I stomped on the floor repeatedly until the wooden hatch shattered, revealing a staircase leading downward.

Walking through the dark corridor for what felt like an eternity, I finally approached a middle-aged man slumped in a chair.

"Did they find us?"

"Yeah."

"Who was it? The Security Bureau? The National Police? The Capital Task Force? The Defense Corps?

The army wouldn’t send the military police for something like this… Or was it the puppet emperor? That wouldn’t make sense."

Annoyed, he scratched his head furiously—before I blew it off.

I stared for a long time at the bubbling pot in the center of the room, its rancid stench filling the space, then shut my eyes tightly.

Did I come too soon?

Isabel and Diana finally caught up and entered the basement.

"What if something had happened? Why did you run in alone!?"

This wasn’t the time for an argument.

For a moment, I could swear I heard Ethel and Isabel bickering in the distance, and the bitterness in my throat rose.

I bit down lightly on my lip and forced myself to speak.

"…We need to get back to the capital. Fast."

"Even if we left right now without resting, we wouldn’t arrive until morning.

We’ve already booked an inn nearby—are you really going to leave immediately?"

Inn or not, I had to go.

Ellen had said it.

She did all those things because her younger sister died.

That as long as her sister was alive, nothing else mattered.

"You guys stay here. I have to go.

No—don’t come back for a while. It’s going to be dangerous."

"All of a sudden?"

I wasn’t good with words.

I wasn’t persuasive, nor could I explain things logically.

So I just said what I needed to and forced my will onto others instead of trying to make them understand.

And this was no different.

I had decided to live as someone from this world, forgetting about past lives and reincarnation.

But after witnessing Ellen’s suicide with my own eyes, I suddenly found myself back in this timeline.

Like I had hit a save point.

A strange sense of dissonance settled in.

As if this world wasn’t real.

The horse I had ridden was exhausted.

I spent all the money I had to buy a fresh one from a stable on the outskirts and rode straight to the capital.

The journey itself had no issues, but I must have been too late.

The capital was still burning when I arrived in the morning.

The demons had passed by our house, but there wasn’t much worth looting, so only a few came and left.

One of the rocks they threw hit my mother, fracturing her arm slightly, but that was the extent of the damage.

Last time, I had cut down the ones who tried to enter the house—so what had changed?

Or maybe those demons were just random thugs, and it didn’t matter anyway.

Even if I hadn’t been there, my father would have taken care of it.

I climbed onto the rooftop and sat down, staring at the distant screams and the burning buildings.

What could I even do if I went there?

I'd just get caught between the raging crowd and the demons.

I didn't even know where Ellen was.

What kind of confidence had brought me back to the capital?

Did I think I could save Ellen if I came here?

No.

No.

Something had changed.

Since the demons loitering in front of my house were gone, maybe something had changed for Ellen, too.

I wanted to believe that.

I didn't want to see another basement filled with corpses—humans and demons alike.

I didn't want to see people explode and die right in front of me as if it were nothing.

I didn't want to have to pick bone fragments out of my cheek again.

I didn't want to fight with someone from the same world as me—someone I was once close to.

I didn't want to see that lunatic glare at me with bloodshot eyes, swearing to kill every last demon, even after being slapped and slammed into a wall.

I didn't want to get stabbed when I had only gone to rescue her, thinking she was trapped by some brothel owner.

She had been sobbing, so I tried to comfort her—but in hindsight, the fact that she was walking around that house so casually should have made me suspicious from the start.

I should have realized that every word she murmured in my arms was a lie.

When a blade suddenly slides under your arm, all you feel is shock—your body won't even move.

The pain only hits later, and by the time you register it, another blade is already buried in your side.

And then there's that sickening sensation of flesh tearing, the blade cutting downward through muscle and skin until it reaches your thigh.

I never wanted to remember that feeling again.

Getting stabbed hurts.

I had broken bones before, had my fair share of injuries, but I had never actually been on the verge of death.

If I hadn't been stabbed in the side, I probably would've just broken down crying, whining about the pain like an idiot.

But when your body is sliced from underarm to knee, you can't even move.

And even then, Ellen had been right there, shooting at Isabel, Diana, and Ethel.

Maybe that was why.

Two days later, when I saw Ellen again, I found myself instinctively afraid.

Come to think of it, it was never me who approached her—it was always Ellen.

If we fought, I wouldn't just win—I'd easily overpower her.

And yet, I was terrified.

To the point where I thought I should just kill her right then and there.

But if Ellen died, wouldn't everything just reset again?

What if things kept twisting further every time I came back, until my family ended up dead, too?

That thought made me hesitate, so I tried talking to her first.

She said she did all of that because her younger sister had died.

Fortunately, though my parents had been injured, my family was still alive.

Just like how things had changed slightly when I returned to the city, maybe something had changed for Ellen, too.

Even if that wasn't the case, I was going to believe it.

I mean, why would she lie about her family being dead if they weren't?

Everything would be fine.

No matter what happens from now on.

I'd just stay holed up in the academy, dealing with whatever evil villains popped up now and then.

Like that count.

The one who kidnapped village children to boil them alive, all because he wanted to resurrect his already-dead daughter.

If only everything could go the way I wanted, like in a shonen manga.

Receiving a fateful encounter at the right moment, having sudden realizations that made me stronger—things like that.

But in the end, those were just excuses.

I just didn't want to die.

I was scared.

Because it hurts.

I wasn't some great person like people said.

I was just a coward. A normal person.

58

Chapter 58

I pulled the trigger faster than Ethel could lunge at me.

Thanks to that, I ended up with holes in both cheeks—just about big enough for a finger to fit through.

I had always wanted to try this at least once.

Since I usually fought with blades, even if I cut someone’s face, it would just get shredded rather than leaving a neat, humorous hole.

"I do like women, but I’m not really into being forced like this."

Hmm, it didn’t hurt as much as I expected.

It felt more like getting a piercing.

Or maybe I was just too exhilarated to fully register the pain.

"I don’t care about your kinks—just get treated already!

We need to find a priest…!"

Kinks?

I was a perfectly normal person with a girlfriend.

And besides, I hated priests.

There was no existence more useless and vile than those who blindly believed in gods.

At least among humans, that is.

Demons weren’t human, after all. That’s right.

"…If I get treated, will you tell me?"

If she looked away now, that meant she knew.

How predictable. Cute, even. My clumsy little friend.

"What does it matter? Handing over a few filthy demons won’t cause any real trouble."

"…They’re practically my family.

Hand them over? What the hell are you even talking about!?"

"And what if they suddenly turn on you and tear you apart?

They’re not even people—they’re beasts.

No one raises stray dogs or pigs in a home where they plan to have children.

For the sake of the future, it’s better to cull them now."

"Beasts? What are you even saying?"

"Ethel, where were you that night?"

"…At home."

"Far away from the main streets and the noble districts, I assume."

Ethel nodded.

"I watched my little sister get eaten alive.

I watched my mother and father burn to death.

And they laughed. They laughed like it was the funniest thing in the world."

There were humans among them, but those were just lunatics who thought they were demons themselves.

Luckily, even though there were laws here, they bent according to the whims of the elite—so no one was spared just because they were deemed insane.

They all danced in the air with their legs kicking, just the same.

The slums became noticeably quieter after that, except for the back alleys.

"…But not all of them are like that."

"No exceptions. They’re all filthy, disgusting scum.

That’s what I’ve decided, and that’s not going to change.

So just tell me, Ethel."

She looked a little scared.

I suppose it did look a bit grotesque—me talking so casually while my body was a mangled mess.

My left arm was shredded, and my thigh had a hole in it, but Ethel was close enough that I could overpower her in an instant.

I wrapped my legs around her neck and used my weight to pin her down, flipping our positions.

"Otherwise, I'll have to get a little more forceful. You okay with that?"

"…Y-You really think I'd talk just because of this!?

You even said before that I was beautiful!

Madam Hanton—Madam Hanton said she'd give you an apple—KYAAAAH!!"

Bang.

I twisted Ethel's finger, forcing her to pull the trigger.

It wasn't my heart—just somewhere around my chest.

It didn't even make breathing particularly difficult, so it probably hadn't hit my lungs.

Ethel stared at her own finger, bent at an impossible angle, then at my bullet-ridden body—her pupils widening in shock.

"…Ethel, I know you don't like me, but shooting me is a bit much, don't you think?"

"N-No, I didn't—I wasn't the one who—don't! Stop it!"

This time, I forced her middle finger back onto the trigger guard, nudging it ever so slightly—just enough to hint that I might snap it.

What if she actually shot me in the head?

Well, if I died in front of Ethel, at least it would leave an impression.

She'd remember me forever.

And Alicia's name would be etched into her memory, too.

Because Alicia was the only reason I was doing this.

"Ethel, you're the reason I'm dying.

If you had just talked, none of this would've happened.

Hurry up and tell me.

What will you do if your dearest friend dies because of you? Huh? What then?"

"…Ah, ah. Stop, hic, stop, Ellen, this isn’t—AAAAAAGHHHH!!"

This was one of the conversational tactics my parents had praised.

I had thought people were just too stupid to realize how simple it was—but in reality, humans simply lacked imagination.

It felt a bit odd being on the receiving end, though.

Anyway, since a bullet was lodged in the center of my chest, blood was gushing from my mouth in thick spurts.

A small hole like that could spray blood like a water gun, drenching Ethel’s face.

"Ugh, urgh, Ethel, you’re seriously, reeaaally mean…

…If you don’t hurry up and talk, I might really die, you knooow? Uueegh."

"E-Eugh, uh, Mom, Dad, ah, ah…."

"You just need to tell me where the demons are, uugh! That’s all…"

I slipped Ethel’s trembling ring finger onto the trigger guard.

Her hands were shaking badly, but they were stiff enough that it wasn’t difficult to guide them into place.

Normally, people would struggle desperately in a situation like this—unless they were in shock.

This worked particularly well on lovers, parents and children, or married couples.

For nobles, it was even more effective to bring in their children or lovers instead of their spouses.

"I-I’ll talk! I’ll talk, so stop!!"

She sounded a bit dazed, but she had definitely agreed.

I loosened my legs from around her throat and staggered to my feet.

Then, I walked over to the drawer, pulled out a potion, and left the room.

I kept coughing up blood. It was getting hard to breathe.

I’d have to clean the blood off the walls later.

I followed the sound of screaming—loud enough to pierce through the room’s soundproofing—and knocked on the door.

The door opened, revealing something still writhing, showing off its insides while still alive.

"What happened, my lady!? It doesn't look like we were attacked, but why are you so injured?"

"J-Just working. Bullet. Uuuegh. Get it out."

Marco dumped a half-bottle of potion over the still-conscious long-lived demon, then carried me over to a bed.

He dug out the bullets lodged in my body one by one and poured potion over the wounds.

I vomited up the pooled blood inside me, then tried to stand—but I had lost too much blood and collapsed.

Of all places, I had to land face-first into a puddle of demon blood. Disgusting.

"So, who was it that made you go this far?"

"My friend."

"…The first girl you befriended at the academy?"

"Yeah. You saw her, too."

—"Let me go! No, just kill me instead!!"

"Our guest is asking to be put out of her misery."

"As you just saw, I was having a rather intense conversation.

She doesn't seem to know much, but at least I managed to get a rough idea of what's going on in that underground village beneath the waterway."

"I should be able to find out where a bunch of demons are hiding soon, too."

"That's good news."

"Anyway, thanks for pulling the bullets out."

"Think nothing of it."

Most bullets get pushed out naturally as new flesh regenerates, but every now and then, if luck isn't on my side, they stay lodged inside, sealed over by skin.

In that case, I'd have to cut them out with a knife, which was a pain.

And it stung a little, too.

When I stepped back into the room where Ethel was confined, I saw her sitting on the blood-soaked bed, gnawing at her fingernails, trembling uncontrollably.

"Why are you acting so pathetic?

If it’s the mess that’s bothering you, I’ll call someone in later to clean it up."

"…You don’t even feel pain?"

Ah, so that’s what she meant.

Now that I thought about it, I had left her fingers broken like that.

My bad.

I checked the drawer—only two bottles of potion left.

I’d have to tell the servants to restock when they came to clean.

I opened one and poured it generously over Ethel’s mangled hand, watching as her twisted fingers snapped back into place.

"It hurts. It hurt a lot.

And the one who did this to me was you, Ethel."

"That’s because you—!"

"Anyway, you said you’d talk. If you don’t, I’ll have to pull this again."

I pressed the barrel of my gun against her temple.

I didn’t know what I was hoping to gain from this, but my body moved on its own.

"…There’s a cave under Sorghum Farm.

And beneath the cathedral in the territory, there’s a large underground crypt…."

"And if they’re not there?"

"How would I know?!"

I shrugged casually and spoke as if it was no big deal.

"Well, this was a pretty mild approach.

Still, I’m sorry, Ethel.

If they’re not there, I’ll just hunt down your brother and parents and kill them all instead."

"…What?"

"There’s probably something there. No need to worry too much. Haha."

"W-Wait…"

"Unless you’re holding out on me? Is there another place?"

"T-There’s… an empty space inside the mansion… Ah, ugh, AAAAAAGH!!"

I drew my knife and plunged it into Ethel’s right arm, the same one she had just used to grab my sleeve.

"And what else?"

"It hurts! It hurts! Take it out, take it out!!"

"And? Anything else?"

I carried multiple daggers, so using one like this wasn’t a big deal.

Besides, people were surprisingly resilient—as long as I didn’t pull the blade out, even a critical wound wouldn’t kill her immediately.

"Ethel, we’re not really friends, are we?"

I brushed aside her flailing left hand and drove another blade into her stomach.

What a shame. Poor baby’s first time getting stabbed wasn’t by some handsome man, but by cold steel.

"Th-There’s nothing else!! AAAAAAGHH!! IT HURTS! IT HURTS!!"

"You know what happens to liars, don’t you? People like that deserve to die…."

Ethel could do nothing but sob.

I yanked the knives out and poured potion over the wounds.

"Hrk, hic, ugh…"

That should be everything she had to say.

If not, I’d just deal with it when the time came.

With that thought, I patted and stroked Ethel’s head as she cried.

59

Chapter 59

I didn’t want to keep watching Ethel in pain.

Her family was alive, her home was intact—there was no reason for me to personally embed awful memories into her mind.

I only messed with her a little because her lie was annoying.

But lying? I did that too.

Ah, but my belief that liars deserve to die hadn’t changed.

That much wasn’t a lie.

If someone asked whether a person like me, who would stab friends and torment ordinary people when necessary, had any right to live, I’d have to say no.

Anyway, I sent my subordinates to check out the places Ethel mentioned.

There were plenty of men itching to get out and stretch their legs rather than rot in the conversation room reeking of blood, so finding volunteers wasn’t difficult.

According to the reports, there was no one hiding in the cathedral or the hidden space within the mansion.

Which meant, fortunately for Ethel, the demons were most likely in the underground cave beneath Sorghum Farm.

They didn’t go in, worried they’d be detected, but they confirmed that several living beings were moving around inside.

Julius Rosenberg had also been captured, but he wasn’t much use anymore.

…Maybe I’d just feed him a nice meal and let him go.

No need to see him in person.

I had already gotten all the information I needed.

He hadn’t done anything wrong, after all.

There was no reason for him to be treated this way.

He just needed to hand over those filthy demons and go back to his normal life.

As for farmhands… well, they’d figure something out.

"Uweeegh."

I hadn’t eaten or even been lying down, yet it felt like I had developed acid reflux.

Even the slightest stress sent stomach acid surging up my throat.

If I could spew acid strong enough to melt concrete, it would have been useful—but all it did was burn my insides.

It was useless and painful.

In any case, whatever happened to the Rosenbergs from now on wasn’t my concern.

I had no reason to feel guilty.

I spared them—that was enough. I didn’t need to concern myself further.

Hiding demons was already a crime beyond forgiveness.

With that thought, I headed to the room where Marco was working.

I knocked on the door, and as it opened, I was greeted by the same old familiar sound.

—"Kaaaaah! Just kill me already!!"

"Hearing that over and over doesn’t get a bit tiring?"

"Well, I won’t say it doesn’t."

Marco then repeatedly slammed a hammer into the tied-up bastard’s shoulder, and the moment he screamed, Marco socked him right in the jaw.

"Sir, I suggest you keep it down a little."

He mimicked the exaggerated speech and gestures of high-ranking nobles, his voice laced with mockery.

But why the hell was he posing like that while hammering someone?

It was clearly meant to be funny, but sometimes, I truly didn’t understand Marco’s sense of humor.

Did working in this field for so long twist everyone like this by the time they started growing gray hairs?

If even the butler, Noe, only looked normal on the surface, then maybe my guess was right.

"…That was weird and cringy."

"If I dress up nicely, style my hair, and use this accent at a tavern, not a single lady would be able to resist, my lady."

"I didn’t need to know that."

That was just because he was built well and decently handsome.

Plus, he had money—so of course, they’d go along with him.

And when they ended up pregnant, they’d whine and cry… Ah. Right. That one had died.

Good thing I didn’t bring it up.

Just as I was being considerate of Marco, he was also being careful never to mention Alicia.

If I was receiving consideration, it was only natural to return the favor.

"Anyway, gather some men to check out that underground cave beneath the farm."

"You could gather them yourself, my lady."

"I need to wash up and change.

You stole my cigarette last time—let’s call it even."

"…Fine."

Biting one’s tongue wouldn’t kill them, but on rare occasions, a severed tongue could block the airway and cause suffocation.

To prevent such accidents, Marco gagged the long-lived demon, bound its limbs tightly, and left the room.

"So, didn’t have any fun this time?"

"What if she ended up pregnant?

I may not look it, but I have a soft heart—I wouldn’t be able to bring myself to harm my own child."

"…Anyone would feel that way."

"I suppose so."

I stepped into the shower, washed up, and changed into a loose dress suitable as sleepwear.

The roomy fit made it easy to hide things underneath.

I wouldn’t bother concealing my face.

I had already shown it to Ethel, so what was the point?

Two pistols, three daggers.

A decent supply of bullets.

I smiled at my reflection in the mirror before stepping lightly into the hallway.

"Wow, you already gathered them all?"

"They just wanted an excuse to leave the stinking conversation room and get some fresh air."

"Hmm, makes sense. Let’s go."

Walking alongside a group of rugged men, who only ever did rugged things, made the atmosphere feel a bit dull.

And with me, the only pretty girl in the middle, the contrast was striking.

"Maybe I should’ve worn a mask."

"Hmm, you are drawing a lot of attention."

"Honestly, it’s probably more because of the giant gun you’re carrying."

If someone casually strolled through town in plain clothes while lugging around a huge firearm, of course, they’d attract stares.

There wasn’t a single normal person left in the mansion—only oddballs.

After a long walk, we climbed into the large carriage we had prepared earlier.

For some reason, it felt like I was a soldier crammed into a military truck.

Not exactly a pleasant sensation.

The carriage rattled for a long time before we finally arrived at the Rosenberg Family’s Sorghum Farm.

Had they been in the middle of harvesting sorghum?

The fields had already been set ablaze, leaving nothing but charred husks—no crops to be gathered.

"Where was it again?"

"The wizard who came here with us last time mentioned a hidden space beneath the villa."

"How big is it?"

"Well, we won’t know until we go in."

"What, you think you’re gonna die?"

"Even if demons come charging at us, we’ll shield you with our bodies, my lady, so there’s no need to worry too much."

"That just means fewer workers for me.

Don’t go thinking death will be an escape—live and suffer through your work instead."

I deliberately spoke like one of those over-the-top, villainous landlords from a stage play.

I even stuck my belly out for effect, but since I didn’t have any belly fat, I couldn’t quite pull off that signature pompous stance.

"As if you don’t always talk like that."

"There’s no way out, right?"

"Yes, there are air vents, but this is the only entrance big enough for a person."

We stepped into the villa in the middle of the farm.

The scent of rotting wood filled the air, and every step I took was met with a loud creak from the floorboards.

I started stomping around to find the entrance to the underground, and soon enough, a hollow sound echoed beneath one spot.

I pointed at it with my finger, and my subordinate nodded before kicking it with all his strength.

The wooden planks cracked open, revealing a tunnel leading downward.

A torch had been lit just moments ago.

Someone had put it out in a hurry, but the lingering smell of oil and burnt wood was impossible to erase.

And I could sense movement.

Some of them were so scared they were already panting.

"We know you’re in there, so come out quietly."

Silence.

So I fired a shot inside.

"If you don’t come out right now, I’ll pour oil down there and set it on fire."

That finally got them moving.

A handful of emaciated demons, Count Rosenberg, and his wife slowly emerged.

"Y-You’re the one Ethel brought…!"

"Shh. I’m here to rescue you from these demons."

Where did those filthy creatures get the nerve to climb out ahead of humans—of nobles, no less—while glaring so defiantly?

Annoyed, I kicked one of them in the gut, sending it rolling backward, then pulled the count and his wife up first.

"Is there even a need to bring them back?"

"His Excellency plans to keep a few docile ones alive to use as labor…

But if you wish, my lady, you’re free to dispose of them all."

My subordinate seemed to be hoping for that outcome.

His wife had been killed, after all.

She had been a maid, one who did laundry remarkably well.

What a shame.

We smashed up the wooden furniture in the villa and tossed the pieces down into the underground tunnel.

Once I doused it in oil and lit it up, they’d all burn to death on their own.

"W-Wait! The children—at least spare the children!"

"Escort the elders back to the mansion."

What children?

I didn’t see a single human child in there.

Even as dust and smoke billowed out from below, I locked eyes with something unsettling—those eerie, animal-like eyes, glowing in the dark like a cat’s or a dog’s.

That alone was proof enough they weren’t human.

"Freshly grown apples, huh…"

"…Pardon?"

"Nothing. Did you bring the oil?"

"Yes, it should be loaded onto the carriage."

"What were you doing while we were stacking firewood? Hurry up and get it."

Grumbling under his breath, my subordinate hummed a little tune as he walked briskly to the carriage.

A few demons tried to crawl out in the meantime, but they were quickly shot down.

One bullet wouldn’t be enough to kill them outright, but they were too slow to get away.

Once the oil was poured down, I struck a match and tossed it inside.

The air filled with the acrid stench of burning flesh, mixed with the scent of singed hair.

Some of them tried to claw their way out, screaming, but I kicked them back down and fired until they stopped moving.

An hour later, when the work was done, I turned around to see an old man sobbing.

The sight was… well.

Pathetic.

60

Chapter 60

There were no problems.

Nothing had been left behind that could cause trouble.

The massive building behind the mansion continued to spew smoke from the burning corpses of the disposed demons. It was a little busy, but everything was running smoothly.

Julian had spouted some nonsense a few times, but that was nothing new.

Something about implanting spells in the throats of submissive demons and young ones.

As if we had the time and resources to recruit mages just to implant explosive spells in their necks before sending them off to work.

Of course, it was possible.

Money wasn't an issue—we had more than enough.

But where would we find the people to do it? Where would we get the spells?

Everything costs money. If I were going to spend it, I'd rather buy more bullets to kill demons instead.

Did he not love his fiancée?

How could he be so soft when the person he loved had been slaughtered by a beast?

Just kill them all and let the farms collapse—who cares?

The price of bread would skyrocket to the point where people's hands would tremble just buying a single loaf, but what did that have to do with me?

It didn't matter if commoners starved to death.

I was wiping out the demons infesting the streets for their sake.

When I opened the conversation room door, a hand grabbed me by the collar.

And in an instant, I was hoisted into the air.

…This was unexpectedly scary.

My breath hitched slightly, but I didn't let it show.

"Uh, wouldn't it be better to put me down and have a proper conversation first?"

"…Ethel told me everything. You’re here to kill me, aren’t you?"

Ah. Maybe I shouldn’t have installed that communication hole.

I should have kept them separated.

"Haha, no, no way. I’d be the one dying first. Just put me down—it’s nothing like that."

I lightly patted the hand holding me up.

"Hey, if you keep this up, you’re gonna flash me. Don’t you think it’s a little inappropriate for a grown man to be treating a girl the same age as his little sister like this?"

It was the same as before—tying this guy up was useless.

"…Shut up."

He let go of my collar.

And at that exact moment, I collapsed onto the floor.

Not because I was being strangled—

But because a wave of nausea and dizziness slammed into me.

"Uweeegh."

At this rate, my esophagus was going to corrode completely.

The retching wouldn’t stop.

It felt like I had been through this before.

Like I had been doing this for an unbearably long time.

I pushed myself up, dusting off the wrinkles in my dress where my collar had been grabbed.

"I sent your parents back to the mansion safely.

I came here to let you go, and the first thing you do is grab me by the throat? Come on, Julius!"

"Which means… they’re all dead."

I didn’t bother responding. I just nodded.

His face remained expressionless, but his jaw trembled as he clenched his teeth.

Then, without hesitation, he slapped me.

Being lifted off my feet and sent flying wasn’t exactly a pleasant sensation.

I caught myself against the wall, barely managing to stay upright.

One of my subordinates aimed his gun at Julius and was about to pull the trigger when I yelled.

If he died now, what would that make of the words I had told Ethel?

"I’m the one letting him go, so don’t shoot, you idiot!"

Fortunately, my subordinate didn’t pull the trigger.

He simply glared at Julius for a long moment before finally lowering his gun.

"Ah, yes! My lady!"

Clearing my throat, I opened the door to the conversation room where Ethel was being held.

She sat there, looking dazed.

The moment our eyes met, her gaze began trembling violently.

I hadn’t cut off her fingers or toes, hadn’t electrocuted her nerves.

What was there to be so scared of?

The worst I did was twist her fingers. That wasn’t anything out of the ordinary.

It was something anyone could experience at any time.

Or maybe she had just been raised more delicately than I thought.

Anyway, I clasped my hands behind my back and spoke in a light, breezy tone.

"Everything’s done now. This is my house anyway, so you can just head upstairs and go home.

Oh, but unfortunately, I can’t lend you a carriage. They’re all in use."

Ethel’s trembling gaze flickered to the right.

Seeing Julius seemed to reassure her, and tears began pooling in the corners of her eyes.

"…Brother."

Julius, trying his best not to show any emotion, stiffened.

I patted his back and flashed a friendly smile.

Wow, I was really letting them walk out of here just fine.

Too kind, if anything.

"Yeah, you can go back with Julius.

Your parents are already at the mansion, so don’t worry!"

Hurry up and get lost.

So I could stop pretending to be cheerful.

Smiling was exhausting.

"Ellen, were you always like this…?"

"What do you mean?"

"From the moment we first met at the academy—were you always like this?

Did you just pretend to be clueless, playing dumb like an actor in a play?"

I had just chosen a persona.

If I had shown people the real me—the person I was at home—I wouldn’t have been able to make friends with anyone.

Ethel being a "heroine" was just an excuse.

I needed a friend.

Someone I could talk to casually.

Someone I could discuss normal topics with.

And I had just erased that person with my own hands.

"Look, Ethel, if I were you, I’d be asking that question with Theo, Isabel, and Diana sitting next to me.

I let you live, so stop whining and just go home.

And don’t get involved in my business."

If she got caught up in this, she’d die.

This wasn’t the kind of work that allowed for personal considerations.

If Ethel had, say, a nephew who had tried to assassinate the emperor and got captured, I could've arranged for a new identity and smuggled them into another country.

But this wasn't that kind of situation.

The fact that I used the word "disposal" instead of "killing" already said enough.

"…What about all those times you said we'd always be friends?"

It was just a hope.

Just as Alicia was my only hope in life, Ethel had been my brief respite at the academy—a place to take a break from constantly watching Theo.

"…You know I like you, don't you?

Ah, probably. Even if I hated you, I'd still like you.

But then, how am I supposed to look at you now? How am I supposed to treat you?"

The way she looked at me now, as if I had betrayed her—

I guess I never really deserved to have something like that in the first place.

Well, it is what it is.

Her words sounded like something out of a messy breakup between lovers who had been together for years.

We weren't that deep… were we? Maybe we were.

She was the closest friend I had among my peers, after all.

"…At least call me crazy or something. Say something."

But she wasn't family.

If she was going to accept the consideration I had given her, she should do so quietly and leave.

I didn't want to hurt Ethel any further.

I had already lost my little sister—I had no right to want anything more.

"Julius, Ethel seems a bit shaken. Make sure she gets home safely.

If you're still here in thirty minutes, my men might start shooting, so be careful."

I turned away to leave, but as soon as I took a step, a wave of dizziness hit me.

I stumbled slightly but forced myself forward, heading toward the room where the long-lived one was confined.

Before entering, I sat on a bench and stared at the floor for a while.

"There’s no time to rest. No time. No rest."

I had no passion for anything.

Maybe that was why I sometimes envied people like Ethel, like Isabel from the church, and that so-called protagonist—people who had goals.

There were moments when I wished I could live like them, be like them.

But not anymore.

I didn’t need to think about such things.

I didn’t have a future that required them.

Whether Ethel was still watching my back or not, I escaped into the room where the long-lived one was kept.

By now, even though a week hadn’t passed yet, their mind should be starting to crumble.

I shut the heavy iron door behind me and turned my head.

Lying on the bed was a frail, doll-like figure, completely out of it.

They had their hand on their stomach—probably hungry.

But they still hadn’t noticed my presence?

"Get up."

At the sound of my voice, their eyes barely flickered before they sluggishly sat up.

Tears welled up faintly in their eyes as they trembled and spoke.

"…Ah, ah… Haa, uh… Please, give me food…"

Their lips were cracked and dry, and they reeked—probably because their stomach was completely empty.

The fingers I had given them were scattered across the floor.

I guess they’d thrown them away in frustration.

I picked one up and handed it back.

"Here’s your food."

They shook their heads.

I nearly slapped them on reflex but stopped myself.

At this point, if I so much as tapped them, they might actually drop dead.

Unlike other demons, the long-lived ones didn’t seem particularly sturdy—I had to handle this one carefully.

After watching them shake their head at the severed finger for a while, I left the room.

Upstairs, I went to the kitchen, scooped a handful of flour into a cup, and returned to the conversation room.

If they ate it raw, they’d probably get a stomachache at most.

Whether they lived or died wasn’t my problem.

"Eat it with water."

They stared at the flour suspiciously.

"It’s just flour. Eat it before I take it away."

Only then did they start grabbing handfuls, stuffing it into their mouth, and gulping down water in between.

This wasn’t out of pity.

It was just—

I wouldn’t be able to have a conversation with them otherwise.

If this didn’t work, I could always starve them longer.

61

Chapter 61

Now that I think about it, my tone changing wildly depending on my mood has always been one of my chronic issues.

Just look at Marco—he maintains his manners and keeps the conversation going no matter who he's speaking with.

"So, have you changed your mind a little?"

I took a deep breath and calmed myself down before looking down at it again.

Maybe it was because I had the target for disposal right in front of me, but the dizziness I felt just moments ago had already faded.

"…Yeah."

"Already giving up on formal speech just because you're a little full? Guess you weren’t starving that much after all."

"S-Sorry."

"Whatever. You know why I came, right?"

"…I don't."

"Honestly, I don't really care whether your village orchestrated what happened that night or not.

After dealing with so many demons, I came to realize—it was bound to happen eventually anyway.

Unfortunate that I got caught up in it, though."

It must have been starving.

It was diligently scraping the flour off the rim of the cup with its fingers and sucking on them.

The only reason this conversation was still going was probably that it hadn't started gnawing on its own fingers yet.

If even a little flesh had been torn, I might've lost my temper without realizing it.

"Just answer. Are there any hidden demons or concealed villages?"

"……."

Silence was an excellent answer.

It meant there was more to say, but it couldn't bring itself to speak.

And figuring out where they were was ridiculously easy.

"Hmm, then how about this? I'll offer you a condition.

You called the ones with horns and animal ears 'vile creatures,' didn't you? I'll only dispose of those friends for you!"

"…You're saying, you'll let us live? No, you'll graciously let us live?"

Obedient, small-framed, weak. They just live long, that’s all.

I could keep it alive for now and kill it later when I got annoyed.

"Of course, you'd have to come under our control. But if you want to live, that's a small price to pay, isn't it?"

"You're basically telling us to become slaves…."

For fuck's sake, why is it so bad at understanding words?

"Hmm, slaves? I'm not asking for anything that grand."

I stood up mid-sentence.

Was there still a potion left in the drawer?

Unlocking it to check, I found five bottles neatly stocked—probably refilled by my subordinates.

I pulled out several long ropes and kicked its bewildered face before slowly tying its legs together.

After binding its arms forward, I fashioned a noose and secured it to the hook protruding from the ceiling.

It had been a while since I last made one, but since I’d done it so often, the knot came together beautifully in an instant.

Since letting it die now would be a waste, I adjusted the length so it could still breathe if it struggled.

Then, grabbing its hair, I shoved its head through the noose as it let out a faint scream.

"The thing about starving them is, it makes things so much easier.

They’re already too weak to struggle, so there's no need to waste any effort."

Then, I lifted its bound arms and tied them to the rope connected to the noose, making it raise them as if in surrender.

It really did have a pretty face.

If I left it with Marco, he might actually end up having a kid with it.

Maybe that’s why they left it to me.

I could just break its spirit and sell it on the black market. Would make for some nice pocket change, at least.

"Wh-Why only me…!"

"Hmm, you're probably getting the least painful treatment out of everyone.

That one who got caught with you—the one you serve? We turned their skin into wings, stretched their organs here and there, and are keeping them alive with potions."

I struck a match.

"Honestly, it stinks, it's messy, and it's exhausting. I don’t really want to do this."

"T-This is exactly why we ran! Why did we fled underground!

You humans always hide behind noble words, but in the end, you treat us like this!

Demons or not, all you want is to enslave us again!

Just because we live long and happen to look pretty—ugh, uuaaagh! Aaaaaaaah!!"

I told it not to be mistaken.

I shoved my hand into its mouth to keep it from biting its tongue, then transferred the flame from the match to a small piece of wood before pressing it under its armpit.

It screamed, biting down on my hand, but all it did was graze my skin.

"That hurts."

It was infuriating to see it sobbing, mucus running down its face, as if it actually wanted to be treated like a slave.

Slaves were at least treated as property.

And officially, in this just and equal Empire, there was no such thing as slavery.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to be mistaken?

I don’t need slaves. Just tell me where the demons are.

They'll be found eventually anyway, so isn't it better to think about the future instead of dying meaninglessly?"

Ah, I just realized—I hadn't removed my hand.

I pulled my hand out of its mouth, washed it with water, and wiped it roughly with a towel in the room.

Still, it felt like the smell lingered.

Maybe I should add "terrible breath" to the list of characteristics for its kind.

Then again, when humans starve, their stomachs empty out and make them smell too. So, I guess it’s the same.

We’re somewhat alike, in a way.

"Pain is unpleasant, isn't it?"

"…You’re monsters."

"You should be calling us angels, if anything.

All your kind is being studied for how mysterious your bodies are, but we’re at least keeping you alive.

As a demon, you should be grateful for that."

Even as it looked at me like I was insane.

Still, it didn’t seem like it was going to talk.

Amazing how it was willing to endure this much pain for its kind.

Was it because it had lived too long, or was it just naturally like this?

I wasn’t sure.

Well, even the noblest humans eventually beg when they’re burned.

I fetched a gag with a soft ball just big enough to fit its mouth and fastened it on. Then, I took out a hollow iron rod from the drawer.

I sprinkled some bliss-inducing powder into its nostrils, doused it in potions, then stuffed a few wooden chips inside the rod, poured in some oil, and set it alight.

Now, all I had to do was bring it near the sensitive spots.

Armpits, groin, ribs—sometimes, even the eyes or the philtrum worked well.

It was a bit tedious, but directly pressing fire onto flesh was too troublesome.

Smoke, stench, and the risk of accidentally killing it made it more hassle than it was worth.

Just like how, when having fun with water games, you put a towel over the person's face first.

Pouring water in directly could flood their lungs and kill them too soon.

To block out its screams, I tore a white handkerchief, rolled it up, dampened it, and stuffed it into its ears.

"Ah, how unpleasant."

I could still hear it faintly.

When its eyes fluttered shut, I doused it with more potion.

Judging by instinct, this was usually the point where breathing slowed, and the body went limp—as death approached.

By the time I had used three out of the five bottles, the iron rod had cooled completely.

I shot the noose’s rope with a gun, watching as the frayed strands sizzled and snapped.

It collapsed, utterly powerless.

I removed the gag from its mouth and resumed our conversation.

"…Guh… St-Stop… please… hhic, uuugh, hhk…."

"If you built such a large village in the underground waterways, doesn’t that mean other demons must be living the same way?"

I opened the cleaning compartment beside the drawer, wiped the floor with a rag, and aired out the room.

I had no desire to keep smelling burning flesh.

"Are you going to talk now?"

Still no nod.

So devoted to its kind, yet so weak to pain.

Come to think of it, it might actually be useful.

Maybe I should try persuasion next.

"How about this? If you help us capture all the demons and assist in disposing of them, we'll exile your kind—just the long-lived ones—into the forests beyond the Empire when this is all over."

"…Help? With what?"

"I told you, disposal.

By tomorrow—no, maybe in two days—the building will be complete.

If you help us as instructed, we'll release you once it's all over.

For someone with all the time in the world, it's not a bad deal, is it?"

There was only one door leading in and out, and the windows were too small for a face to fit through, tightly secured with iron bars.

Even if they worked inside, there was no way they could escape.

Well, I could turn the empty space into living quarters for them.

"How… how can I trust you…?"

There it goes again, dropping formal speech.

Should I just kill it now?

No, no.

This was a creative idea I hadn't come up with in a while.

I couldn't let my emotions get the best of me and ruin it.

"There's no proof I can give you.

But would you rather stay trapped in this miserable place, only to die a horrific death?

I went easy on you today since you haven't eaten in a while."

I gently stroked its cheek, whispering by its ear.

My fingers brushed against the severed tip.

Right, I could use that to categorize them.

Cutting the ear tips would make it easier to distinguish the obedient from the defiant.

"If you refuse to eat, we'll force-feed you—mixing it with potions if necessary.

And everything you just went through? You'll experience it over and over in new, creative ways until you die.

By the way, we have more potions than your kind could use in a lifetime."

The mages were working hard to produce them, after all.

Terrified, it hiccupped and finally gave in.

"Hic… I-I have… a condition."

Pathetic, but I decided to humor it.

"I'll do my best to accommodate!"

"Don't treat us cruelly… and provide proper meals…."

That was much more modest than I expected.

I smiled.

"As much as you'd like."

Julian would handle it somehow.

He was always the one who turned my ideas into reality.

Chapter 62

When I told Julian about the matter with the long-lived species, he flicked my forehead, saying I'd brought him yet another headache.

But in the end, this would reduce the amount of work for people, so really, I was being considerate of Julian.

Instead of realizing my grand plan, he just whined about me giving him more work. So petty. No wonder he always loses whenever we argue.

Of course, I was joking.

Seeing Julian buried under stacks of paperwork, stamping and scribbling all day, was honestly a bit pitiful.

I didn't understand how disposing of demons increased his workload so much, but if Julian said it did, then it must be true.

Either way, my deal with the long-lived one was going well.

Through our conversation, I discovered that there were even more villages hidden in the underground waterways than I initially thought. And thanks to that, I could redirect some of the workers from the interrogation rooms to other tasks.

Honestly, even if we had wiped out the demons in the slums and those hiding in mansions like Ethel's, they just kept popping up like cockroaches, and I might not have been able to get rid of them all.

I'd frequented the back alleys often enough, but I never imagined there were this many.

With nothing to do for a while, I took some sleeping pills and slept for two whole days.

I didn't notice anything while I was asleep, but when I woke up, I felt surprisingly refreshed.

I hadn't been able to sleep properly because of my insomnia, so the effectiveness of the pills amazed me.

No matter how horrific my nightmares were, my body kept sleeping.

Like a time loop, I watched Alicia die over and over again.

No matter where I ran, whether I held a gun, or even if I realized what was about to happen, I could never stop Alicia from dying.

It was as if someone had predetermined that Alicia must die, and they kept showing me new and creative ways for it to happen.

Good thing it was just a dream!

And then, classes at the academy resumed.

Going back was fine, but a lot of little inconveniences had piled up.

At least they were personal problems—nothing too serious.

I didn't oversleep, but since all the carriages were in use, I had to walk to the academy, which made me late.

Because of that, I couldn't even greet Ethel in the morning.

So, I patiently waited until lunchtime and then approached her to say hello.

"Ethel, it's been a while."

Like before, I smiled gently, waving both hands wide.

"…Ah, a-ahh…."

The moment our eyes met, she shuddered and quickly walked away.

I stood there, my hand still outstretched, watching her retreating back.

Was I reaching out to stop her? Or was I grasping at the despair of realizing we weren't even on greeting terms anymore?

Not that it mattered.

Even if I had reached for her, I wouldn't have been able to hold her back.

How could I, when I at least had some sense of shame?

Even when I threw noble parents into the interrogation rooms and stripped them of everything, I never met them again afterward.

Mostly because they weren't in a state to be called nobles anymore.

It's not like I physically hurt them, though.

But if they said it hurt their hearts, well, I wouldn't have much to say to that.

When would all this work finally be over?

At this pace, the demons in the capital would be wiped out soon.

That alone would be satisfying enough for me to put an end to this story.

It all started with some tragic nonsense about demons killing my family.

But from a distance, what seemed gruesome and grotesque was really no different from a dark comedy.

Life, whether seen up close or from afar, was utterly ridiculous.

There was no such thing as tragedy—only comedy.

That's why the world was so beautiful!

It's why I was always smiling.

A pretty little girl exterminating demons yet behaving just like them—it was almost poetic.

And if, by some unlucky accident, I ended up being disposed of along with the demons, that would be the perfect ending to a black comedy.

I wasn't British in my past life, but I did enjoy their humor.

Maybe I should slap a little mustache under my nose like Charlie Chaplin.

At any rate, I used to feel alienated by magic, potions, and the healing spells of priests. But these days, I was grateful.

Without mages, the buildings wouldn't be going up so quickly, and handling all these affairs would have been a pain.

Of course, Julian was the one suffering the most.

As for me?

I just went into the interrogation room, trained the beasts, had counseling sessions with the consultants, disposed of demons, and threw them into the incinerator. That was it.

As usual, I took out a book to read.

Though, it was less about reading and more about letting my eyes skim over the words, passing the time.

I didn't feel like eating.

Even when I did eat, I would just tear up some bread into milk and drink it.

Lately, every time I ate properly, I'd end up throwing up.

Maybe the demons I killed were clinging to me, cursing me.

Of course, someone like me wasn't meant to have friendly, cheerful conversations with others.

That much was obvious.

Ethel was a normal girl from a normal family, raised with normal love and normal education.

She wasn't like me—a disposable piece of trash born to do nothing but filth.

I was the one at fault for pretending to be normal and approaching her in the first place.

She must be disgusted.

Probably ashamed she ever laughed alongside a piece of garbage like me.

When the only thing I was good at was causing pain and killing people, could I really even be called a person?

I lowered my head, muttering under my breath.

"Haha. Ha… fuck."

I was supposed to be laughing, but my lips kept turning down.

Even when I forced a chuckle through my lips, it was the same.

This wouldn't do.

I stood up.

The teacher glanced at me but said nothing, pretending not to notice.

Well, it wasn't like he had to care. His job was just to teach.

If he dared mark me absent after this, I'd drag him to the interrogation room and cut off all his fingers.

I entered the bathroom and walked to the sink.

Staring at the mirror, I pulled out the dagger hidden in my coat and drove it into my right arm.

The wrist was a bad spot.

If I hit an artery, the blood would spray everywhere.

It was strange—sometimes, even if I stabbed the right side, the blood would spurt in a full 360-degree arc.

Cleaning up afterward was a pain.

At the mansion, I could just order a subordinate or servant to take care of it, but here, that wasn't so easy.

If I asked the academy to handle it, my men wouldn't even need to sneak in. They'd proudly march in with the family crest on their uniforms, mops in hand.

Last time, when I told those idiots to fetch the librarian, did I… let her go?

Well, they probably handled it fine.

Still, just to be sure, I'd check on it later.

I let the blood flow into the sink for a while, stopping just before class ended. Then, I poured a little potion over the wound.

If only I had carried one when I was with Alicia.

Afterward, I went about my week as if nothing had happened, not even greeting Ethel when our paths crossed.

The building was complete, and the long-lived ones were diligently helping us slaughter their own kind.

Their tasks were simple—moving captives into pens before disposal, feeding the incinerators, and stepping in when riots broke out.

Now that I thought about it, they did a lot of work.

And the best part? It meant fewer casualties among my servants and soldiers.

As for me?

I had absolutely nothing to do.

So, there was no reason for me to be alive.

Well, not that I was planning to die.

Still, people say you need something to do to feel like you're really living.

After class, I settled into a random café.

I swirled my drink absentmindedly, reminiscing about the taste of coffee I used to enjoy.

And yet, here I was, stuck drinking this disgustingly sweet, fruit-flavored garbage.

A perfect setup for feeling sorry for myself.

I didn’t want to drink it, so I just held the cup, staring at the foam on the surface, when someone called my name.

"…Ellen, do you have a moment to talk?"

I turned my head to see Isabel standing there, looking slightly tense.

"It’s been a while!"

"…We saw each other at lunch."

"Did we? Oh well. So, a conversation, huh? Sounds great! It’s lonely being by myself. Have a seat!"

Isabel took the seat across from me.

Had Ethel said something?

No, that couldn’t be. I told her that if she spoke a word, not just her brother, but her parents, too, would die.

Ethel loved her family too much for that.

Or was she just trusting Theo and coming at me like this?

"So, what did you want to talk about?"

"I haven’t seen you and Ethel together lately.

Even when we go eat, you two don’t even look at each other.

I thought maybe you had a fight…."

"Ah, well. I made a really big mistake.

I’m just waiting until Ethel forgives me.

Or, you know, we might just end up never seeing each other again."

"…What did you do?"

"That’s a secret."

So just leave. Go stick to Theo and hunt down whatever evil people you want.

Just don’t get in my way.

"…Anyway, I should get going."

"Already?"

"A badly injured elf—or, well, some kind of demon—was brought in.

We don’t have any potions left, and I’m the only one who can properly use healing magic, so I need to head back to the church."

Hmm.

"Hey, Isabel. Can I come with you?"

"It’s probably not something you’d want to see…."

"I need to check it for myself."

Isabel looked at me with clear confusion but nodded.

"If you insist."

Why so soon?

Was I just destined to get caught?

Like some inevitable game quest?

Hah.

Fuck that.

63

Chapter 63

"By the way, how did you know that demon was at the church?"

Isabel looked a little embarrassed.

"…A kid from the same church came to tell me during class.

The other priests told me to take my time, but since class is over, I should head there right away."

A nun showing up in the middle of class and it not being a big deal—what terrifying authority.

This is exactly why I hate church people.

Society treats them as if they must be understood because they serve their god, no matter what they do.

Bullshit.

They'd happily watch as my flesh was torn apart, only deciding to heal me when I was on the brink of death—all in the name of their god.

"Ah, I see."

"What's with that exaggeratedly polite reaction?"

She was still a church person in the end.

No doubt her insides were just as twisted and rotten.

It was always the ones outside the church who displayed true sacrifice and devotion.

The moment you put a knife or hammer in front of a priest, they'd start babbling everything—truths, lies, whatever they thought would save them.

"Well, I can't not react at all, can I?"

There's no such thing as fate.

If there were, that would mean a god existed, and if a god existed, I would've been struck down long ago.

I followed Isabel toward the church, not quite remembering the way.

I suppressed my distaste as much as I could.

What if I walked in and had a violent episode, gunning down everyone in sight?

Not that I'd actually do that—my skin was too pale for such reckless behavior.

"…Ellen?"

"Yes? Why are you calling me?"

"We're here. I was telling you to come inside…."

Isabel was holding the church doors open, waiting for me.

So this was why Julian had stopped giving me work lately.

Why Marco always intervened when I tried to get involved.

But life was so boring.

Without work, all I did was think about Alicia.

The inside of the church was as gaudy as it was plain.

I remembered sitting there, talking with Isabel.

Wait, when?

I'd never been here before.

"Ugh, mmph…."

"Ellen, are you okay?!"

"It happens sometimes. Don't worry about it, ahaha."

"Still, you should check if you're sick—"

Isabel's worried words were abruptly cut off.

A scream rang out.

—"Aaaaaagh!! A-Are you torturing me?! Humans really are all—AAACK!!"

"L-Let's go, quickly!"

I nodded and followed Isabel as she rushed ahead.

The long-lived one lay tied to a bed, their wildly beating heart practically visible beneath their skin.

They must have thrashed too much during treatment, so they restrained them.

Hah.

This was useful.

Imagine dragging some useless priest here and forcing them to cast healing spells all day long.

With their lack of skill, they wouldn't actually heal anything—just maintain the suffering.

Watching, receiving, and administering such treatment would be equally hellish.

They were still strong, though.

They were only just starting to feel pain—probably because Marco's anesthetics had worn off.

Or maybe all the happy drugs had finally left their system.

Huh. So they even taught magic to talentless nobodies like this.

The fact that their ears were still intact meant they had refused to cooperate.

Defiant ones were usually sent to the mansion's underground.

All the valuable ones had already been moved to the new facility, so I guess no one was properly managing this place.

Our eyes met.

I remembered this one.

I had watched Marco have a rather interesting conversation with them.

"Y-You! You're from the mansion…!"

They had been alive while The Wonders of the Human Body was being explored.

Marco liked inflicting pain, sure, but he preferred making people watch themselves be taken apart, piece by piece.

That must've been why he left them in that state.

"Isabel, don't heal this one."

"…Huh? Why?"

"Just don’t."

"…We can’t just leave someone to die."

Despite my warning, Isabel cast her healing spell.

Wounds that had refused to close moments ago suddenly disappeared, skin knitting itself back together in an instant.

"So why didn’t you want me to heal them?"

"Kyaaa!"

The long-lived one suddenly sprang up and bolted.

They shoved a nun aside and ran for it.

Shame.

They could’ve at least clung to Isabel’s side, pointed at me, and screamed about how evil I was.

That would’ve made things more interesting.

But I understood.

When fear took hold, your mind went blank.

I knew that feeling well.

I’d experienced it countless times as a child.

Like when my mother came at me with a dinner knife—so dull it barely cut flesh.

I pulled out my gun and shot them in the back of the head.

Isabel stared at me, wide-eyed and slack-jawed.

To clear up any misunderstandings, I scratched the back of my head and explained.

"You know what my family does, right?"

"Uh… yeah. Not exactly, but roughly…."

Even better.

It would’ve been a hassle if she did know exactly.

"That one escaped from an execution a few days ago.

Didn’t expect them to still be alive.

You heard about what happened that day, right?"

"…Yeah."

"That day, the group that one belonged to was plotting against His Majesty the Emperor."

Of course, there was no execution ground or anything like that.

But when words come from wealth, power, and noble lineage, even lies can become truth.

Sometimes, even a bullet to the back of the head isn't enough to kill them.

So I walked up to its collapsed body and fired one into its spine, then two more into its head for good measure.

"I’ll send a servant later to clean up the mess."

Isabel still hadn't said a word, staring at me, utterly dazed.

I put on a slightly sorrowful expression and asked her,

"Oh, now that I think about it… do you also believe I deceived you, Isabel?"

Crying would be too much, but looking troubled seemed appropriate.

Isabel's expression showed nothing but confusion, as if she had no idea what I was talking about.

"Ethel told me.

She said I was her closest friend, and she never imagined I’d be this kind of person.

That killing people so easily meant I wasn’t normal…."

"I-I never said—"

Ah, that delivery was awful. The line was bad, too.

Improv really wasn’t my thing.

Moments like this made me appreciate Marco—he could spin a story effortlessly.

Still, Isabel was gullible about these things.

Sharp when she needed to be, but the moment emotions got involved, she turned into a fool.

Should I just drop this?

She was with the church, after all—no one would care if she died.

No, this was our mistake.

If we had done our job right, that thing wouldn’t have escaped.

Maybe I had been too generous when I claimed we’d spare all the long-lived ones.

The uncooperative ones were too much of a hassle to keep locked up.

Most weren’t as strong-willed as the one that just died, so that was a small relief.

Someday, Theo would come looking for me.

Since we had a friendly relationship, he’d probably want to talk before trying to kill me.

"Anyway, I’m done checking things here, so I’ll get going.

Sorry for causing a scene."

And if things went south, I’d just pretend to cry and throw myself into Theo’s arms.

Even the strongest swordsman couldn’t swing a blade properly with a dagger lodged in their armpit.

***

I arrived at the newly built facility.

The massive chimney overhead showed no sign of stopping its smoke.

At least it was the tallest building around, so the stench didn’t reach this far.

Inside, things were moving along far faster than expected.

"Look at their ears—those things aren’t even human, so why are they over there?"

"Fucking demons—why the hell are they…?!"

"You two whispering over there—step forward!"

The sight of demons obediently lining up and calmly marching to their deaths…

Yeah, putting the long-eared ones in charge was the right move.

As I wandered through the building, inspecting the progress, I came across the leader of the long-lived ones.

They were sprawled on a sofa, lazily flipping through one of Alicia’s favorite novels while snacking.

"…And what exactly do you think you’re doing?"

"Eh—wh-what?! Why are you here…?"

"I asked what you’re doing instead of working."

They fumbled for words, stammering.

I reached into my coat and pulled out my gun, holding it in my right hand.

That got them talking.

"I-I can’t hit people properly… I’m bad at cursing too… so they said I was useless and kicked me out…."

"…Huh."

Didn’t see that coming.

Just how useless did they have to be for the others to kick them out, despite being a so-called "elder"?

"B-But still! I tried to help the ones who got abused for resisting!

I even visited them in the interrogation rooms sometimes!

And, um, I got spat on and slapped for being a traitor…."

"I don’t know what to say, but… sounds rough."

No need to use formal speech anymore—this one was mine now.

Strange, though.

They took hits well but couldn’t throw a punch?

"By the way, that escapee—was it you who let them out?"

"Huh?"

Gone was their old arrogance—they were practically groveling now.

It was amusing.

They had no idea what had escaped.

Well, made sense.

They could lounge around here all they wanted, but they weren’t allowed to interact with their kind freely.

Especially not the ones who still had their ears intact.

"Never mind."

At least, on the surface, there was no sign of any issues.

Nothing had happened, was happening, or would happen.

Not now.

Not ever.

Leaving the room, I headed down to the first floor.

Rows of demons were being transferred by the long-lived ones, their wrists bound with rope.

Most of them would be taken to the guillotine, their blood drained before being burned.

The ones with useful information would get a proper conversation.

Just another normal day.

64

Chapter 64

The demons were nowhere to be seen anymore.

Before, if I walked through the rundown streets, I'd at least spot a few. But now, it was nothing but people.

Even the village by the bridge leading to the slums.

At this point, we had killed nearly all of them.

Finding a living demon was harder than finding remnants of half-burnt bones.

It had already been a month since I resumed attending the academy, and I had been actively avoiding Ethel and Isabel.

Even so, they still hovered around like pesky flies.

I thought it was clear that I didn't want them approaching me, yet they seemed desperate to get close.

Whenever they came near the mansion, I simply handed them a cup of tea and sent them on their way.

They tried to talk to me, but there was no reason for us to have a conversation.

Not working made me feel a little guilty, but damn, life was comfortable.

I was lucky to have assigned subordinates to keep an eye on Theo.

Oh, and I managed to smooth things over with the librarian and sent her back to the academy.

I had forgotten about her, and she was nearly losing her mind.

But in that state, she wouldn't dare speak about me, so in a way, it worked out for the best.

Lately, I had picked up an interesting new hobby.

Or rather, I had been searching for something.

I borrowed a few demons from the facility and started testing different ways to kill them in the interrogation room.

I wanted to know the fastest, least painful method.

Poison seemed painless, but the aftermath was ugly.

Hanging was worse—the disgusting stench of waste, the swollen tongue, the bulging eyes dangling grotesquely.

I didn’t like it.

After spending quite some time experimenting, I realized it was already past dinnertime.

No wonder I was hungry.

I went to the kitchen and caught a chef who hadn’t gone to bed yet, ordering them to bring me whatever they had.

I felt a little bad, like I had stolen their midnight snack, but I was hungry—what else could I do?

After finishing my meal, I returned to my room.

"Ugh—cough, cough!"

I bit down on a cigar, even though I hadn’t smoked in a while.

Alicia ignored my plea not to die, so I figured she wouldn’t mind this much.

Still, I wouldn’t drink.

Alcohol clouded my thoughts.

"I love you. But if I die because of you, I’ll hate you even after death."

That’s what she had said.

I had promised not to smoke, to quit drinking, to wake up early, to make friends, to attend the academy together.

Ah, I guess I failed to introduce her to Theo and Ethel.

"Didn’t you say you were quitting?"

"Knock before you enter."

"You don’t do it either, so it’s a little unfair to expect it from me."

I got up and dragged a chair over for Julian to sit.

Then, I crawled under the bed, pulling out a dust-covered box.

"…If you’ve finally lost your mind, you don’t have to do it in front of me."

"Shut… cough, cough… shut up."

Inside the box, the bottles of alcohol I had hidden were neatly arranged.

I took one out and tossed it to Julian.

If he dropped it, it would be a disaster.

"I always wondered where all your allowance went.

Why is this in your room? Even I have to ration mine."

It was expensive.

I had emptied my pockets without much thought.

Julian examined the bottle for a long time, like a kid receiving a gift, before a question dawned on him.

"Are you really giving this to me?"

"I don’t drink anymore, so why would I care?"

He still looked unconvinced, so I casually threw out an excuse.

"If it really bothers you, bring me a stash of cigars from the office."

"Fair enough."

Julian glanced around my room.

His eyes lingered on the noose, the gun, the pile of medicine bottles, the drugs, the knives scattered carelessly across the floor without even being cleaned.

Then, he opened the bottle, looked for a glass, and realized there was nothing but teacups.

So, he poured the liquor into one.

The strong, burning scent of high-proof alcohol stung my nose.

He pulled out a cigar, fiddling with the flame for a full minute before finally taking a long inhale.

That was going to stink up the place.

"Are you trying to die?"

"I don’t know."

We sat in silence for a while.

Julian seemed to be losing his sense of purpose, just like me.

If we both died, everything would probably fall into the hands of some nameless fool.

Or the emperor would simply take it all for himself.

"By the way, that boyfriend of yours, Theo—he’s been poking around everywhere.

Are you just going to let him be?"

"Where’s he been?"

"Tried sneaking into the facility the other day but got caught.

And lately, he’s been causing a commotion, desperate to run into you."

"Must like me too much."

"Bullshit.

No one acts like that unless they’re preparing to storm the place with weapons."

I should start getting ready to meet Theo soon.

Who would die?

If I was lucky, I’d live, and Theo would die.

If I was unlucky, it’d be the other way around.

Now that I thought about it, I had become the final boss, hadn’t I?

Controlling an entire noble house, committing atrocities that made me the villain in Theo’s eyes.

"Anyway, if you have time to sit here drinking with me, I guess things are wrapping up.

You’ve been busy, haven’t you?"

"Don’t even start.

Who would’ve thought there were so many villages hiding underground?"

Julian had been laughing just a moment ago, but now, his expression completely crumbled.

His face twisted into something almost inhuman, and he started crying—tears he hadn’t even shed when his stomach had been sliced open.

Then, he poured so much alcohol into the teacup that it overflowed and downed glass after glass like it was water.

"Hey, Ellen. You know what?

We shouldn’t be alive."

His hands trembled as he took another drag from his cigar, the liquor barely going down anymore.

"We killed too many.

Too many.

And fuck, the worst part is, I never even killed anyone myself—that’s what makes it even more horrifying."

Sometimes, people needed to break down like this to feel human.

"Kids, adults, women… a-all of them.

Not a single one left behind.

And killing them won’t bring them back."

"Did you think killing them would bring back the woman you loved?"

At that, he stopped crying.

He poured another drink, but instead of finishing it, he set it down beside him.

After a moment, he took a sip and let out a heavy sigh.

Then, as always, he took a long drag of his cigar and spoke in a quiet voice.

For the first time in a while, I saw Julian as he was—buried in paperwork, suffocating under the weight of our choices.

"…I guess that's just how I felt."

So, sentiment, huh? Guess he hadn’t lost it completely.

Sometimes, there were fools who dabbled in necromancy, claiming they could bring back the dead.

But without extraordinary talent, it was impossible.

And if you lacked talent? Then you'd have to compensate with time and sacrifices, bashing your head against the wall to make it work.

And where exactly would you find those? Hah.

We had the means to drag every demon out of the underground and slaughter them, but we didn’t have the power to bring down an entire empire.

Even if we beheaded the emperor, some unknown noble with his bloodline would be propped up like a puppet, and the game would continue.

This empire wasn’t a real country.

It felt more like an exclusive club for aristocrats.

Maybe I felt that way because I had lived in a functional place before.

Well, that’s probably why no one cared how we treated demons.

***

"In two days, there won’t be a single demon left in the capital. Maybe not in the provinces either."

"Perfect."

"Is this what you wanted?"

"If you ask me like that… not exactly."

"What do you mean?"

"I was just looking for something to do.

People fall apart if they don’t have something to do."

"That so?"

"Yeah."

"Honestly, I don’t even know what that means."

"Neither do I. Just forget it."

"Goodnight."

"You too."

Julian staggered slightly as he left my room.

"Smells like booze."

The stench of alcohol was so thick that I opened the window.

Drenched in an odd sense of unease, I collapsed onto the bed and fell asleep.

As always, I went to school and took my seat.

I spent the lessons half-asleep, then rushed off to some random diner for lunch.

After eating, I just had to wait for the day to end.

It should have been just another ordinary day.

But unfortunately, I got caught.

I was at a café, drinking my usual coffee when Theo and his group found me.

"…Ellen, can we talk for a bit?"

"Why do you sound like a heartbroken ex-boyfriend?

Friends can talk anytime."

Especially when they come armed.

Did they know?

They didn’t have the full picture, but they must have known something.

You couldn’t exactly hide the fact that carts loaded with demons kept entering buildings and leaving empty.

I had also heard that a few of my subordinates had run into Theo in the back alleys.

"You came here to talk, didn’t you?

Then stop standing there. Order something and sit down."

At my words, they hesitated before shuffling downstairs to grab their drinks.

It was almost funny.

If they knew even part of the truth, they should’ve been trying to take me down by now.

What should I do?

A gun wouldn’t work in this situation, and they were too far for a knife.

Theo was glaring at me.

Like someone who had barely escaped death by my hands.

As if I had done something unspeakable.

I wanted to sit still, stay composed.

But his next words hit harder than I expected.

"…No matter where I look, I can’t seem to find your brother or your parents."

I couldn’t reach for my gun.

There was murder in Theo’s eyes.

65

Chapter 65

My parents and my little sister—yeah, that was something worth asking about.

"Since when were you so interested in my family affairs?

They’re alive. They were severely injured, so they’re just recovering."

Of course, that was the official story.

I had already built their graves and placed fresh flowers on them every day.

"…I didn’t see them anywhere in the mansion."

"What exactly are you trying to say?"

"You dodge questions about that building behind the mansion, you lie every time I ask about your family, and I’ve seen carts full of demons enter that place, only to leave empty.

Even the demon you executed at Isabel’s church got swept under the rug…."

"So, what do you want?"

I could see both fear and anger in his eyes.

Like someone utterly terrified.

It made him look a little pathetic, but that was when people were most dangerous.

You never knew what they might do.

"I… I don’t want to believe it.

You said they were fine, that they were alive.

Are you really doing that same disgusting shit again…?"

Muttering like a madman, his hand drifted to the sword at his waist.

He hadn’t drawn it yet, but it was only a matter of time.

Hmm, if I fought Theo, I’d probably die.

He was stronger than most of the so-called elite fighters.

"You should take your hand off that sword."

Not that I was too worried.

For all his strength, he had morals.

Ah, should I call him the protagonist or, wait—righteous dumbass might be a better fit?

Whatever. The point was, he cared too much and tried too hard to protect what he held dear.

"Ha, and what exactly can you do?

Aside from lying, deceiving people, and ambushing them?"

How did he know?

So much for my crying and throwing myself into his arms strategy.

Maybe the name was too stupid.

"Hmm, I can do a lot more than that."

"Then explain it to me.

What happened to all the demons that went into that building?

And if your family is alive, why haven't I seen a trace of them?"

"Do you really need to hear this?"

He nodded.

And this was exactly why I hated impudent bastards.

Speak politely to them, and they start thinking they're above you.

Theo himself was incredibly strong—my subordinates were no match for him.

But the ones following him?

They were strong, sure.

But they had… vulnerabilities.

For example, if they were distracted listening to someone, completely unguarded—

And then suddenly got ambushed by armed men.

"Fine. My parents and little sister are dead."

I took a sip of coffee as I spoke.

He better appreciate the effort it took to say that out loud.

"You already know why.

You guys weren’t even in the city that night.

The records show you were here, Theo, but you arrived a little too late."

"So, you decided demons weren’t even people and slaughtered them like animals."

"Wow, you catch on quick.

Don’t worry, soon enough, there won’t be a single one left in this city."

Theo unsheathed his sword.

The glint of the blade was as terrifying as ever.

"Haha, calm down.

What exactly do you think drawing a weapon will solve?"

"At the very least, it’ll rid the world of a monster like you."

"You won’t be able to."

I didn’t like fighting.

I was weak, after all. A delicate, innocent young girl.

I smirked, mocking him, and the sword lunged toward me.

If I reached for my gun, my wrist would be gone before I could even aim.

Not that I knew why he was so wary of me.

I never showed him how I fought.

Then again, he was the protagonist. Maybe he had some weird sixth sense.

I let out a long sigh, relaxing my body.

Then, I finished my coffee.

And at that moment, the subordinates stationed around the café sprang into action.

Theo managed to take down one of them immediately, but Isabel, Ethel, and Diana were quickly restrained.

With a blade pressing into their sides, there was no way they wouldn’t get caught.

"Don’t kill them. Just cut their shoulders.

If they try casting a spell, then you can kill them."

"Miss, isn’t that a bit cruel?"

Marco, dressed in his usual suit and hat, smirked as he taunted me.

As if he wasn’t going to do exactly as I said.

That smug face of his—it made me want to put a bullet through his skull.

"If you don’t, that terrifying hero over there will split your head in two."

"Oof, now that would be unfortunate."

My men did as I ordered, slashing their shoulders and holding their swords to their throats.

The three girls screamed in pain.

Hearing them cry out wasn’t exactly pleasant.

Especially since, at one point, we had been friends.

But after a month of barely speaking and avoiding them, could I still call them friends?

I had even let them live and sent them off safely, only for them to cling to Theo like parasites.

How annoying.

Of course, I couldn’t do the same to Theo.

Who could do anything to that walking monster?

"Now we finally have a proper setting for a conversation.

If we’re going to talk, the conditions should at least be equal, don’t you think?"

"Holding hostages and calling it a conversation—"

I expected him to say something like that, but hearing it still pissed me off.

"You were about to split my skull open.

So don’t act like you’re above using people.

If you don’t like it, just kill me and abandon them."

I pulled out my gun.

Not to aim at Theo—there was no point.

In this state of high alert, he’d deflect it with magic or some unknown technique.

No, my target was Ethel, Isabel, and Diana.

"Ugh, my throat feels a little dry.

Ethel, mind if I take a sip of your drink?"

Ethel glared at me, eyes brimming with tears.

Well, she didn’t say no, so I guess it was fine.

I took a sip of the sweet lime juice she had ordered, but the overwhelming sweetness made me spit it out immediately, wiping my mouth in disgust.

The three of them continued chattering, spewing their little insults at me.

"Shut them up. If they don’t, just kill them."

Finally, a little silence.

Of course, if a blade did sink into their throats, I could always pour a potion on them afterward.

No need to kill them just yet.

I could threaten to, though.

Ugh, I really was too kind for my own good.

"Anyway, I do appreciate you handling that corrupt baron in the countryside.

And that lunatic count who tried to resurrect his daughter through dark magic.

That was originally our job, but after we leaked the information, you dealt with it for us."

"You… What the hell are you?"

Still talking, even with a blade buried in his side. Guess it didn’t hurt much.

"Marco, go downstairs and bring me some coffee."

"And what about the young lady I'm holding?"

I pulled the trigger.

A soft, almost disappointing bang echoed through the air.

A bullet lodged itself into Ethel's shoulder, splattering Marco's face with blood.

Of course, she wouldn't die from that.

It would hurt, though.

"That good enough for you?"

"For fuck's sake, at least warn me before you shoot, miss!"

"Shut up and get the coffee."

Marco was smirking even as he complained.

Theo almost lunged at me, but he held back when he saw the gun aimed at Ethel's head.

"You've solved quite a few incidents in the academy.

And you took care of some villains who crossed the line."

"What's your point? Quit rambling."

"I had a feeling things might go this way, so I sent some people to your family's estate.

They're all safely gathered in the guest rooms by now."

A lie.

I had sent people, but just now.

They would be in the guest rooms soon.

Marco returned with the coffee. I downed it in one go, then pulled out a cigar, taking my time lighting it.

"Senior, just stay put for a few days.

It'll all be over soon.

After that, you can do whatever you want—rip my head off, if that makes you feel better."

That overwhelming sense of déjà vu had been screaming at me, warning me that Theo would attack.

If not for that, I might have actually messed this up.

Was something finally going my way for once?

Ever since Alicia died, everything had been horrible.

At least this was cathartic.

After all, our great hero already had everything.

A loving family, women who adored him, overwhelming strength.

And me? All I had was money and power.

My family was dead.

The person I loved was gone.

Julian was nothing but a hollow shell now.

So I deserved this much.

It’s not like he lost anything because some demons died.

But this was all I had left.

"Or, if you’d rather play the noble savior, you could cut me down right here and now.

Just make sure you’re okay with your kind, loving parents and adorable little sister burning alive in their home.

Oh, and your little harem here?

They’d be lucky if all that happened to them was getting their throats slit."

"I… why did I ever…?"

I didn’t care to hear the rest.

Must’ve been nice.

To live a life where everyone loved you.

To be believed without question.

To deal with enemies by simply cutting them down, no complications.

"No time for hesitation. Make your choice."

Theo silently sheathed his sword.

"Hah. Pathetic."

I stepped closer, gently patting his cheek with my bare hand.

Then, I tapped the ashes from my cigar onto his head.

And I smirked.

Theo trembled, biting his lip hard enough to draw blood—then he punched me.

I was knocked to the ground.

But honestly?

I couldn’t stop laughing.

"Don’t stab, don’t stab. I’m fine, see?

Let’s let the ladies go and head back to the mansion, ahaha."

Blood dripped from my nose as I wiped it, but even pain felt pleasant now.

Ah.

Now, this was a beautiful world.

66

Chapter 66

Three days had passed since I had a deep conversation with Theo at the café.

Julian had said that within two days, the remaining demons would all be dead, but I realized something—longevity species were also demons.

So, including the time it took to seal the entrance and burn down the building, it ended up taking a total of three days to deal with the remaining demons.

There were some who managed to squeeze through the tiny bars and crawl out, but my subordinates and I shot them down relentlessly, so there were probably none left alive.

Julian seemed to be trying to keep them alive somehow, but why?

They might have been the very culprits behind that night.

Not that it really mattered whether they were or not.

If I killed them all, the culprit would be gone too.

It wasn't like innocent demons could exist in the first place.

Anyway, my childish tantrum was completely over now.

It wasn't even something I could call revenge, so finishing the job didn't bring me any sense of relief.

Instead, it just left me with a thick, suffocating feeling, like a noose tightening around my neck.

Even if I had stuck my head into a noose and hung myself, it probably wouldn't have felt this constricting.

When I looked in the mirror, my already red eyes were now bloodshot, making them look even more ominous, and my pale face showed no hint of color.

The face of someone with no future.

I looked like a drugged-out prostitute from a slum full of junkies.

I killed all the demons at the cost of abandoning any shred of humanity that might have made me worthy of being treated like a person, so I guess that description wasn't too far off.

The difference was that a junkie would do whatever it took to stay alive and keep getting high, whereas I was trying to escape this stifling reality.

Whether that meant suicide or being sentenced by Theo, one of the two would happen.

If Theo was the one to kill me, I hoped he'd do it as painlessly as possible.

There had been fewer days in my life when I wasn't in pain than when I was, but I still hated pain.

Either way, it was about time for me to face the consequences of my reckless rampage.

If I really wanted to live, I could just keep Theo's family hostage and continue this charade.

But that would be pathetic.

I kept lying, saying I was fine, but honestly, I wasn't fine at all.

Thinking that this life would finally be over soon made me feel much lighter.

But what was this strange sense of déjà vu?

Like I was trapped in a loop, repeating life over and over again.

Who knew? Maybe the protagonist had been save-loading all this time.

If that were the case, it would be truly horrifying.

All I could do was sit back and watch.

"Um, does the food suit your taste?"

"...You took me as a hostage, but you're treating me so well?"

"Ahaha, the hostage thing was just an excuse. I brought you here so Theo wouldn't be able to kill me.

Sorry for getting you involved in this, Mother."

"Theo, my son... with a girl like you..."

The children, oblivious to their parents' burning distress, were happily enjoying their meals.

I had taken them by force, but it wasn't like I was going to treat them badly.

They weren't in my way, nor did they have any power to do anything.

The children ran freely around the mansion, and the parents were allowed to use the facilities as they pleased.

It would have been laughable to see how, despite coming to this mansion with murder in mind, Theo’s family was living comfortably here.

Honestly, I was a little jealous.

Because their family was still intact.

After the meal, I sipped tea and had a conversation with Theo’s mother.

We talked about Theo’s life at the academy, the friends he had, just everyday things.

Of course, she knew very well what I had done.

I had explained it to her myself.

She still didn’t seem to fully believe it, though.

But if she didn’t accept it, she might try to stop her son from killing me.

And a mother shouldn’t stand in the way of her child’s path.

Even if that path was the wrong one.

Still, killing me wasn’t exactly the wrong path.

After all, I was a villain.

A truly evil one.

One who had annihilated all the demons.

There might still be a few lingering in the countryside, but whatever.

After some time, Theo appeared, his sunken eyes bloodshot and red.

"Oh, welcome! I was wondering when you'd show up, haha."

"...I stayed put, just like you asked."

"As for your family, they're comfortably settled in the mansion... Ah, look, there they are."

The children were laughing and playing in the hallway.

The mansion had always felt gloomy, but with the children running around, it somehow seemed livelier.

"...Didn't you say they were hostages?"

"When did I say that? I only said I was inviting them as guests."

"I don’t understand you. Not at all. Some parts of you seem normal, but other parts are more twisted than even the worst lunatics."

The children, noticing Theo, waved and ran toward him.

"Is that so."

Honestly, it was irritating.

Ethel was like this too, and now Theo.

To hold on to the last shred of my humanity, I never touched innocent people—especially not children—but hearing something like this made me feel a surge of emotion.

A vile feeling, the kind that makes you want to take away what others have just because you don’t have it yourself.

I merely suppressed it.

"So, what do you plan to do now?

You’ve got your family back, so it’s time for you to slay this atrocious villain."

"...Even if I kill you, nothing will change."

Something felt off.

It sounded like he wanted to kill me but knew it wouldn’t make a difference.

"Or what, are we just going to go back to school like nothing happened?

Maybe you’ll be like Ethel, trembling every time you see me and avoiding me.

Or should I be the one trembling and running away?"

I grabbed Theo’s sleeve and led him to my room.

I sat him in the same chair Julian had sat in before and lit a cigar as I perched on my bed.

"Time is such a strange thing.

Back at the café, you were dying to kill me, but now, just a little while later, you're this calm."

I pulled a pistol from my coat and tossed it to Theo.

"If you don’t kill me, I’ll order my subordinates to kill your family, as well as Isabel, Ethel, and Miss Diana."

"...Did it really have to come to this?"

Of course, it had to.

If I had only killed the demon that murdered Alicia, or just the ones who were there that night, Theo wouldn’t have gone this far.

But in the process of capturing demons, so many people had died.

Even when I tried to act rationally, when anger took over, I shot innocent people without hesitation.

Some were torn apart just because they had mingled with demons.

"What else could I do? I was furious.

And I don’t know how to express my anger properly. I can only show it through action."

That’s why it was called a tantrum.

"Oh, and Julian—so even if you try to go after the family head, just know that everyone around you will die first."

Who knew?

Maybe Julian would just believe that I had ordered it.

"Isn’t there... any choice where you just live instead?

Rather than..."

Theo cut off my words and spoke.

"Have you gone soft? Even if you have, I’m not going to spread my legs for you.

Don’t think I’m going to do something like atonement. I don’t believe I did anything wrong."

Well, I could understand why he might not want to kill me.

Everything was already over, and killing me wouldn’t change anything.

"If you kill me, there won’t be any consequences. I promise."

"...Next time, next time, I’ll stop you. No matter what."

Theo, unfamiliar with handling a gun, tossed it aside and drew the sword at his waist, pointing it at me.

"Hold on a moment. Let me finish this first."

The cigar Julian had given me tasted incredible.

It seemed to be mixed with oak and some other leaves.

Regardless, it was the perfect last smoke.

After about ten minutes, once I had nearly finished the cigar, I gestured for Theo to strike my neck.

He looked at me like I was insane, but in an instant, he beheaded me.

The sensation of spinning through the air was quite novel.

Something I had never experienced before.

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I hadn’t wanted to kill her.

But if I left her alone, Ellen would die anyway.

Or maybe she’d do something crazy again.

She was too dangerous to be left alone.

She had promised not to harm the people around me, but how could I trust her?

She was someone who could hide the fact that her family had been killed, show no emotion, and lie effortlessly.

It was frustrating.

No, more than that—it was fucking infuriating.

A pathetic human like me didn’t need proper words to describe this situation.

Even after being beheaded, Ellen was still smiling, and above her severed head, a spear hovered in the air.

[BAD ENDING no.3: What returns to a trustworthy person is...]

[tips: Rather than fighting, try solving things through dialogue! Conversation is always the best solution!]

"Ha."

I—I hadn’t done anything.

I was just living my life as usual.

"Conversation, my ass..."

Trust?

Did Ellen even have anyone she trusted in the first place?

At most, the insane head of her family and her dead little sister.

But certainly not me.

She could look me in the face and lie so naturally, as if nothing had happened.

Could she even trust anyone?

Even if I turned back time and killed Ellen again, this would just keep repeating.

What was I supposed to do?

Feeling utterly powerless, I couldn’t even express my emotions.

I just sank down and stared at Ellen’s severed head.

This was exhausting.

Chapter 67

Alicia was dead.

No, not yet. She was still alive.

She was gasping for breath, clutching my hand.

A blade was lodged in her stomach.

The handle was sticky, and if I pulled it out, I would probably see rusted patches all over the filthy blade.

But soon, she would die.

The priest who could have healed her was already dead, his abdomen torn open, and by the time I ran to the mansion’s vault for a potion and returned, she would be gone.

How ironic.

I kept bringing Alicia to the mansion, vowing to save her, only to always watch her die.

"Miss, at least stop the bleeding—"

"Marco, step back. I’m feeling frustrated.

What if I decide to vent my anger on you and shoot you instead?"

Marco looked at me for a long moment before nodding.

"...Understood."

How many times had this happened now?

Far more than ten, that much I was sure of.

If someone asked how I knew Alicia would die, the only answer I could give was that I had experienced it before.

Experience. A fucking awful experience.

At least this time, she looked intact on the outside.

Alicia was beautiful, and I hoped she would stay that way.

With time, she would only become more beautiful, but maybe some deity above was jealous.

Not even once had they let her live.

Ahaha.

I wanted to see her grow up.

She wouldn't bring home someone I approved of, but I still wanted to see her fall in love, smile happily with a boyfriend by her side.

Someday, yes, someday.

Maybe she would grow taller than me, holding a beautiful child in her arms, one who would undoubtedly be adorable, just like Alicia.

She would show off that child to me, beaming with pride.

Just thinking about it now made my heart ache unbearably.

But at least I could stay by her side until the end.

Dying alone was lonelier than most could imagine.

It was absurd.

Absurdity—it was the perfect word for this meaningless existence.

Like a rat running on a wheel, I kept moving forward in this ridiculous cycle.

But how long could I keep going?

Was death really the end?

This wasn't some philosophical question, just a statement of fact.

How many times had I gone through this?

If death was truly the end, I would have simply lamented the meaningless life and accepted it.

I had done that several times before.

Yes, I had died countless times.

I didn't know the exact number.

The causes varied.

Once, after Alicia died, I immediately hanged myself to see her again.

Most of the time, I just blew my brains out with a gun.

It was simple.

At some point, I didn’t even make it back to the mansion.

I died in the streets.

Me, Alicia, or both of us.

Maybe I was being punished for resisting.

When I took Alicia to the bookstore and smoked a cigarette by the entrance, an explosion would echo, followed by screams.

The commercial district would erupt in flames.

Then, I would take Alicia and head back to the mansion.

At first, she would panic, cry, collapse in despair, wondering why this was happening.

But she had stopped giving up.

At the very least, I wanted her to die in the mansion, not in the filthy streets.

Maybe she could survive.

That hope kept me moving, but no matter what, Alicia always died.

Whether I managed to escape with her or slaughtered every demon in the way.

The causes of death varied, too.

Shrapnel from a building explosion.

A stray blade from nowhere.

Oh, and the time she tripped over a rock and cracked her skull still pissed me off.

I had fought through hordes of demons, dodged countless attacks, only to watch a pebble kill Alicia right in front of the mansion gates.

Feeling my emotions rise, I let out a sigh and habitually pulled out a cigarette.

The conversation I had just shared with Alicia no longer mattered.

I was going to die soon anyway and return once more.

"This will happen again.

Eventually, even these emotions will fade."

"...Un, nie."

Alicia, still gasping, weakly called my name.

"No matter what, I'll always be by your side at the end."

I stroked her head as I spoke.

Her hair was as soft as ever.

"And like always, I'll tell you that I love you."

As time passed, her pupils slowly lost focus.

Even this sight would eventually become something I got used to.

The thought made me sick.

It wasn't shocking anymore.

I had experienced it too many times.

It was just unpleasant.

Was it the act of Alicia dying that no longer shocked me?

Or was it that I already knew I could see her again as soon as I died?

Memories always came back slowly, accompanied by a sense of déjà vu.

A faint unease before heading to the commercial district.

Then, the explosion.

Slowly, so painfully slow, as if someone was mocking me.

At first, I raged, cursing at the sky, unloading bullets into humans and demons alike.

Theo had locked me up in prison once, but that was nothing—a bullet to the head was all it took to escape.

Now, I just sat there, resigned.

I had lost count of how many times this had happened.

Only vague memories remained, like something from a distant past.

I remembered being young.

Maybe four years old.

The first time my father stabbed me.

A searing pain in my stomach, my guts spilling out, crying and begging to be saved.

I must have crawled desperately, clutching my torn abdomen, surrounded by my own entrails.

After a week, I stopped crying.

For a while, I couldn't even eat sausages without feeling sick.

Now, I eat them just fine.

Time passed, I started fighting with Julian, and getting stabbed became routine.

That's how it felt now.

A miserable situation, not good, but so familiar that I couldn't even cry.

And the fact that I accepted it as normal made me feel even more pathetic.

Maybe last time, Theo blew my head off before I could even try anything.

He would probably show up soon.

That fucking bastard.

So perfect, having everything—yet incapable of doing anything.

If I were you.

If I had been born as you... yeah, I probably would've been just as dumb.

I would've grown up fine, happy.

I wouldn't have played those stupid games, testing people while making small talk.

I wouldn't have even met Alicia, so this whole scenario was pointless.

Still, why? Why the hell weren't you in the capital today?

If you had mastered some great magic—teleportation or whatever—you could've at least saved Alicia if not me.

Then I wouldn't have done anything stupid.

I'd do whatever you wanted. Even if it meant burying my face in a plate and dying on command.

I've already slammed my head into the ground and died before. What's one more time?

Even though I knew it was pointless, my thoughts wouldn't stop.

People say "what if" scenarios are meaningless, but to me, they became everything.

Who would have guessed? That dying would just send me back in time.

At first, I killed every last demon, but I knew it wasn't revenge.

Revenge is when a victim repays the perpetrator with what they suffered.

What I did was just mindless rage, fueled by paranoia.

I wasn't planning to stop.

The demons killed Alicia!

I knew I was the problem.

But I had no intention of fixing myself, so did it even matter?

I was born a wretched fool.

Alicia was all I had.

It was my fault.

I was a loudmouthed idiot with no real power to protect anyone.

After dying so many times, my body had gotten used to it.

This time, I was in decent shape.

Only my right arm was shredded.

"...At least you came quicker this time. Just a bit earlier would've been better. Heh."

Theo stood before me.

Covered in blood, wielding a massive sword.

His hands were shaking.

Was it despair? Or exhaustion from having to deal with me again?

Anger? Fear?

I didn’t know.

Understanding others was hard.

For me, only hazy yet vivid memories remained, but this man remembered every single thing I had done.

"Haa... So, when does this finally end?"

I took a long drag from the now-exhausting cigar, exhaling smoke as I muttered.

I didn’t know if he even heard me.

I was too drained to enunciate properly, my words tumbling out in a mumble.

68

Chapter 68

Theo spoke with a hint of sarcasm, as if even thinking about spouting nonsense required effort.

He had to think before talking nonsense—what an absolute fool.

"Looking at everything you've done, you don't exactly seem like someone who wants this to end."

Of course not.

If it ended, then Alicia would truly be gone.

"Same goes for you, senior. If it pisses you off so much, you could've just hurried over and saved Alicia."

Ah, is it time to hurt each other again?

We had exhausted every possible insult, so neither of us really reacted to anything anymore.

It didn't matter who spoke—me or him.

We would just look back at our miserable circumstances, lament how useless we were, and call it a day.

"...If I could have, I would have done it already."

Tiring.

Even getting angry felt like too much effort now.

Before, I would have grabbed the nearest weapon and lunged at Theo. Now, I didn't even feel like doing that.

Rather than screaming and tearing each other apart, mindless chatter seemed like the better option.

"Sure. Just sit down. Stop looking down on me."

I closed Alicia's eyes.

If I stared at those empty pupils too long, I'd feel hollow too.

"First time seeing Alicia in person?

You’ve always just seen her buried underground.

She’s beautiful, isn’t she?"

I stroked her pale face, now drained of blood.

Even if Theo collapsed in despair before me, I wouldn’t offer him comfort.

That was his job, not mine.

I was the grieving, unstable heroine here.

If he comforted me, maybe his favorability would rise just a little.

Out of 100, maybe by 0.1.

"I told you before. Not sure when, but I definitely said it.

She can never be saved. As if someone decided it.

A life so meaningless, it barely seems worth living."

A strange life where death just sent me back again.

If I could save Alicia and die, maybe I could at least have a gravestone:

‘Ellen, the kind sister, died here.’

What a shame, huh?

Or maybe,

‘A useless failure who couldn’t save anyone rests here.’

"Then why not just die? For good."

"It’s not that easy. You want to kill me?"

"I’m exhausted too."

Being stripped of death was a crueler fate than it seemed.

Maybe I had killed myself in a past life.

And this was hell.

Though, it wasn’t quite hellish enough.

Maybe I was being forced to create my own hell, slaughtering demons endlessly.

If that was the case, wasn't I more devout than those church bastards worshiping money?

Ah, a guest.

What do you do when a guest arrives?

It was morning—should I offer him breakfast and send him off?

"Must have been a long trip here. Want something to eat?"

"Why do you act like nothing's wrong…?"

"Should I sob and scream her name instead?"

I wanted to conserve my emotions.

If Alicia's death became tedious rather than tragic…

What kind of person would that make me?

Losing a loved one should be heartbreaking, not boring.

Otherwise, I'd be nothing more than a psychopath.

I hated that idea.

I wanted to stay human—someone capable of love, even if I was a madwoman.

Because a person who can't love isn't a person at all.

"You're getting tired, aren't you?

Just because I lash out a little, you make such a big deal out of it."

"If that was all you did, maybe I could ignore it. But you…

Yeah. I'm tired. Fucking tired. Because of everything you've done."

Maybe I had grown numb, but Theo hadn't.

He still remembered every single thing I had done.

Strange. He never seemed to get tired of this.

"Heh. What if I said I don't remember?"

What had I even done?

At least, I had never acted against my heart.

Whenever I wanted something, I tried to achieve it.

I failed many times, but I had poured everything into saving Alicia.

Even if my efforts had always been in vain.

I smirked and mocked Theo.

He didn’t slap me—just weakly patted my cheek.

"...Miss? Who is that man?"

I laughed for a long time while Theo grabbed me by the collar and shook me.

From afar, we must have looked absolutely ridiculous.

A pair of lunatics playing their sick little games—it wasn’t a pleasant sight.

And as expected, Marco, having finished scouting the perimeter, appeared with his gun aimed at Theo.

"Boyfriend, did you come looking for me out of worry?"

Marco blinked in slight confusion.

It wasn’t wrong. He was my friend, after all.

"How romantic."

"Right? Ha, if only you’d arrived a little earlier."

At my words, Theo’s pupils trembled violently before he collapsed onto his back, arms sprawled wide.

"Why the hell did I end up in this nightmare? And why am I stuck with this lunatic?!"

"Probably because you did something to deserve it."

"...I lived a normal life. And I would’ve continued living normally if not for you."

Yeah, if not for me.

I wondered, if the original me—the Ellen born and raised in this mansion, without these strange memories—what would she have done?

Would she even have been close to Alicia?

Of course. There’s no one in this world cruel enough to hate Alicia.

Beautiful, kind, and lovely. Never even got the chance to grow up.

Maybe if she had lived, she’d have become ugly over time.

But I’d have loved her just the same.

"Unlike you, I don’t have crystal-clear memories of everything I’ve done."

That wasn’t a lie.

If my memories were as sharp as his, I would’ve stopped Alicia from ever stepping into that carriage bound for the city.

Who cared if our parents burned to death in the theater?

Julian? He was a little pitiful, but sometimes he made it back alive.

"You went on a killing spree, slaughtering demons, then suddenly opened fire at the academy.

Last time, you killed your own brother, gathered your subordinates, and stormed the imperial palace—only to burn alive."

Did I?

Maybe.

I remembered how I died. Just not why.

Which meant I was probably saner than Theo.

Not remembering meant I didn’t have to think about it.

"Hmm, I don’t recall."

"Ethel tried stopping you from killing the demons in Rosenberg’s house, so you killed her. And you executed Isabel just because she was a church official."

"She was already being tortured and dismembered. If she was fine with it, why shouldn’t I have killed her?

And the church? Throw some money at them even in death, and all is forgiven. I don’t remember, but I’m sure that’s how it went."

"...Yeah, probably."

See? The church was like that.

Rather than pointing my good left hand at Theo, I raised my tattered, broomstick-like right arm and jabbed a finger at him mockingly.

"But in the end, none of it mattered.

Everything we did was erased.

So what's the point of even talking about it?"

"...Didn't you say you were tired? Didn't you say you didn't even want to lift a finger?

Didn't you say killing demons wasn't even fun anymore?"

"Did I say that out loud?"

"How many times do you think we've had this conversation?

You always say that once all the demons are dead, you'll finally be relieved—only to shoot yourself in the head.

And then I wake up.

Again.

In front of that fucking mad count."

Probably.

What else was there to do after killing all the demons?

Keep breathing and wasting oxygen?

Throw tantrums at innocent people?

One thing was certain—I wouldn't be doing anything productive.

"Ah, yeah, that happened."

"Please, just…"

Theo was crying.

A grown man sobbing wasn't a pretty sight.

"If you want this to stop, then tie me up somewhere. Lock me in a basement. Drown me in drugs."

"...You’d just come back. Again. Ha, ha."

"Shut up."

I turned away from Theo, ignoring his hysterics.

How many times did he need to go through this before he learned to accept it?

Crying about it wouldn’t change anything.

"...Where are you going?"

He looked at me with a pitiful expression, voice barely above a whisper.

"Don’t ask things you already know. This isn’t your first time."

"...You crazy bitch."

The plan was simple.

Do what I always did.

And Theo, like always, would stand in my way, exhausted but still wearing that familiar, irritating smirk.

A reflection of my own twisted grin.

It was disgusting.

"You think you’re some tragic protagonist, don’t you?

I’ll drag you out of this loop. I’ll prove you were just a miserable failure."

"Fuck off. Ha ha."

I wasn’t a failure.

Just someone who had a few more chances than most.

Chapter 69

The way he stood in my path almost made me want to applaud.

If nothing else, he had persistence.

Or maybe it was just inertia, not persistence.

"Who’s deliberately trying to die? I just happened to mess up and die a few times."

A little—no, that was just an excuse.

It felt strange, hearing someone so openly declare they would keep me alive.

Not out of rage, but exhaustion.

"Accidentally blowing your head off more than ten times is quite a feat."

"Already double digits? What were you doing while my head was flying off?"

"Nothing. Just watching."

"How cold."

"Trying to stop you wouldn’t have meant anything."

"Then doesn’t blocking my way now mean nothing too?"

"Probably."

"Then move."

"No."

I pulled out a dagger and swung it carelessly.

I didn’t put much effort into it, assuming he’d dodge—but it left a long cut across Theo’s face.

A clean, handsome face could look rather pitiful with a big enough wound.

"Not dodging?"

Theo simply touched the wound, then let out a small laugh.

Yeah, something was definitely broken in his head.

Or maybe he was just pretending it didn’t hurt at all, like those people with inflated egos who acted tough even with broken bones.

"How long are you going to keep this up?"

"Until my anger fades so much that I feel nothing at all."

"Then go ahead. But listen to one thing."

"Oh? When I tried to say something like that ages ago, you ignored me completely and even slapped me."

Calling it a slap was putting it lightly.

I still remembered getting slammed into a wall.

But I wasn’t feeling particularly emotional about it now.

It just felt like another event from the past.

Bargains could only happen when both parties were equal.

And I was definitely not in a position to bargain with Theo.

I had spent years knowing he could blow my head off at any moment.

Then why was he reacting like this?

Maybe he had realized that killing me wouldn’t change anything.

I’d just come back.

I had never once managed to save Alicia, but maybe I could.

Time solved everything, after all.

Whether the solution was good or bad was irrelevant—at least it erased the problem.

Or let it fester until it exploded.

"...What’s your point?"

How miserable must he have been to fall so far from the composed, righteous Theo I once knew?

But I thought this suited him better.

This wasn’t the perfect protagonist he was designed to be.

This was just Theo.

People show their true nature in difficult situations—that sort of cliché.

"I like your shamelessness. Fine, let’s hear it."

"Leave people alone. No matter what. Even if they sheltered demons, loved demons, or protected demons."

I was a little surprised.

So it was fine to kill every demon as long as humans were left untouched?

I wasn’t particularly interested in harming humans anyway.

I already knew plenty of places packed with demons.

"What about the demons?"

"Not my problem."

"It was your problem not long ago."

"Not anymore."

"What changed—no, wait."

I needed to use sharper words.

Right now, Theo felt like some dull, mechanical thing that just followed a programmed response.

"Did you fall that far?"

"More happened than you realize.

But you wouldn’t remember properly."

That wistful gaze made me sick.

Theo pulled a small vial from his pocket and splashed it on his face.

It didn’t seem like a potion.

He probably wasn’t overflowing with money.

He must have just been lucky enough to get his hands on some medicine somewhere.

Watching the wound sizzle and heal, I didn’t feel like mocking him for using such a drug.

Maybe—just maybe—Theo was also trying to save Alicia in his own way.

Mocking someone trying to save my family would make me a lunatic.

At the very least, I wasn’t that kind of person.

"What do you think the others would say if they saw us like this?"

Theo murmured, staring blankly into space.

By "others," he probably meant Ethel, Isabel, or people like them.

"They’d probably just assume we’ve lost our minds because of the demons and try to be considerate. They’re needlessly kind like that."

Theo let out a hollow laugh at the word "kind."

"Don’t you ever feel like crying when you say things like that?

Or does guilt creep up on you?"

Had my ego inflated after turning back time so many times?

Maybe I had become like a middle schooler who, after finally forming an identity of their own, started losing their sense of judgment.

Not that it mattered. Turning back time wasn’t exactly a common ability.

The problem was that nothing ever changed.

But at least I knew what was coming.

An ego, huh? Maybe it would be better if I didn’t have one at all.

"Not at all."

"I want to cry."

Or maybe he had developed bipolar disorder.

This was all because of a weak mind.

If life got too hard, the right thing to do was to numb it with alcohol and cigarettes—not fall apart.

And if that didn’t work, there were always drugs.

Eventually, the craving would be too strong to resist.

That strange discomfort would make it easier to forget unpleasant memories.

Still, I wouldn’t recommend drugs.

Even in a world with magic, the best they had were opium and the occasional cannabis.

Nothing too useful.

When you’re in pain, sure, but if you’re healthy, it barely does anything.

Just smells terrible.

Potions were expensive.

I didn’t know why I used them so recklessly in the past, but I didn’t see the point anymore.

Everything I needed was neatly stored in my head.

"Then just sit here and lament your unchanging future.

I won’t comfort you, though. Ahaha."

"I was going to do that anyway."

His reaction was so predictable that it was boring.

"How dull."

I meant it.

That youthful energy he once had was completely gone.

Just as he said, Theo sat against the wall, burying his face in his knees and clutching his head.

Watching him, I felt nothing but complicated emotions.

Was I the strange one, or was he?

Or had we both been strange from the start?

"Hey, senior."

"What."

"You’re really not going to stop me?"

"...Yeah."

I had a feeling this man had lost his purpose.

Before, he had a goal—saving someone, stopping me from slaughtering demons.

That goal had kept him moving.

Just like how I kept going because I had a purpose—to wipe out every last demon.

A man who had lost his purpose was simply pitiful.

***

If left alone, Ellen would kill demons by the dozens.

She had once accidentally shot Ethel, then spent an entire day hugging the corpse and crying, only to forget about it and continue her massacre.

She remembered where the demons hid, but not the people she killed.

And I would stand by, watching.

Isabel, Diana, and even Ethel would come to me, begging me to stop Ellen.

But stopping her meant killing her.

Her deaths varied.

She was the only person I knew who could die in such creative ways.

Although, technically, you can only die once.

It was as if she had contracted some disease where she had to kill demons or die herself.

I still remembered something she had once told me.

"You don’t need to understand the other person—just force your own view on them."

In a repeating timeline, forcing things was useless.

If it didn’t work, you just tried again.

I recalled a distant past when I had run with all my might to reach the capital in time.

I had made it when the moon was at its peak.

Now, I wondered if I had made a mistake.

For the first time, I had started to understand Ellen.

Until then, I had only seen the aftermath—the ruins, the bloodstains, the empty husks of people left behind.

But when I finally arrived in time, I saw it with my own eyes.

Demons were impossible to see as equals.

What I had heard and imagined paled in comparison to reality.

There were too many of them. I couldn't stop them alone.

And they didn't care how many of their own I killed—they just kept burning the city down.

Like it was their fate, just as Ellen saw killing demons as hers.

That was probably when I gave up trying to protect them.

Exhausting.

This world moved according to a set path.

The only variables were Ellen and me.

Maybe we were ghosts of a past that shouldn't exist.

And yet, Ellen moved as if she had a clear purpose.

Like a puppet possessed by something.

And the funniest part?

She truly believed she was moving by her own will.

Chapter 70

The demons were being dealt with faster than expected.

Honestly, after repeating the same thing dozens of times, the idea of failure was just laughable.

The villages near the water had been sealed off and burned. Now, all that was left was to drag out the demons hiding in the slums or those being sheltered by the nobility.

Like the ones hiding in Ethel’s family estate.

Or, more specifically, the fox-eared demon trembling behind Ethel’s legs.

"…Ethel, stop being stubborn and move aside."

"Y-You barge into my home, start shooting people, and now you’re telling me to move?! Get away from me!"

Ethel’s pupils were shaking wildly.

Of course, if people stormed in and started killing the creatures you considered friends, anyone would be shocked.

I wondered if she was going to choke on her food.

I felt a little bad about it.

But she could rest easy.

Only demons had been shot.

Even though Julius had resisted, I had only handled him roughly—I hadn’t shot him.

I was always so kind to humans, so why was she trembling so much?

"If you’re so scared, then just run.

No one will blame you. Your family will understand."

My subordinates had their guns aimed at the count and his wife, as well as Julius.

If I gave the order, they’d pull the trigger.

That ridiculous-looking mage standing behind them, with two floating fireballs over his shoulders, would probably start casting spells.

Not that I had any intention of letting it come to that.

But my subordinates? I couldn’t be so sure about them.

"…Who would understand abandoning their child!?"

"What child?"

The estate reeked of blood.

We hadn’t even gone down to the underground tunnels yet, but the place was already packed with demons trying to flee.

It had been a perfect opportunity—just the right time and just the right people to take care of them.

Better a quick death from a bullet than slowly suffocating underground.

Yes, this was the humane choice.

I aimed carefully at a demon’s head and pulled the trigger.

Unfortunately, the bullet struck Ethel’s thigh instead.

"Are you really doing this?"

Ethel sobbed from the pain but refused to move aside.

Instead, she began chanting a spell, levitating sharp stones in the air, pointing them at me.

"Why are you doing this?!"

Before, I would have said it was for revenge or some childish game of payback.

Now, I wasn’t sure.

Whatever emotions I once held toward demons had faded long ago. I was just moving forward out of sheer inertia.

"I don’t know."

"Please, stop. Just days ago, we—"

Ethel desperately tried to remind me of something.

But to me, those few days felt like an eternity ago.

Time was funny like that.

Struggling, floundering, running in circles—it was all ridiculous.

"I don’t even remember what happened days ago, so move aside."

She didn’t.

Neither did the disgusting demon cowering behind her.

Of course, they didn’t want to die.

Life must be precious when you only get one.

I supposed my life didn’t feel as valuable.

Not when I had repeated it so many times.

Ah. I wanted to see Alicia.

Maybe I should just shoot Ethel and get it over with.

Then at least I’d get to see her wandering through the marketplace, looking for her favorite books, giggling to herself.

For a moment, the image of a terrified Ethel overlapped with the image of her with a hole in her head.

Pupils dilating, body slumping, eyes wide open even in death…

Was I really like this?

No, I hadn’t even pulled the trigger yet.

And she was still alive, trembling in front of me.

Just a hallucination.

Or maybe a memory bleeding through.

No problem.

This time, it wouldn’t happen.

Not this time.

I aimed at her stomach and squeezed the trigger repeatedly.

I didn’t look away.

She wouldn’t die from this anyway, and turning my eyes from my own actions wasn’t something I did.

"Like I always say, I’m just doing what needs to be done.

Ah, but I guess this is your first time hearing that. Not that it matters."

The spell Ethel had been casting crumbled, and the sharpened stones fell to the ground.

Had she torn pieces from the mansion walls to use as weapons?

"Marco, pull the bullet out and douse her in a potion."

Marco nodded, then smacked Julius in the gut with the butt of his rifle before kicking him in the face.

A little excessive, maybe, but Julius had thrown a knife at him earlier.

A petty grudge, no doubt.

People could be so pathetic.

Still, Marco was too useful to discard.

I picked up one of the fallen sharp stones and approached the trembling demon.

"P-Please, spare me…!"

"No."

"Why?!"

Did they never learn how to speak respectfully?

Well, in a backwater village like this, it was no surprise that the demons were uneducated brutes.

I was practically a saint for fixing such issues.

Taking care of them before they made this wretched world even worse.

"Because of you, Ethel got hurt."

I even told them why they had to die.

This thing—once a child, now becoming something else—would understand.

Ethel was important.

She would grow into a great mage, perhaps even fall in love with Theo and marry him. She was smart, pretty, and talented.

"Why not just use a gun? Why dirty your hands?"

"Sometimes, you need to feel it."

If I didn't get my hands dirty every now and then, I'd start feeling relieved, like I wasn't really the one killing.

Whether human or demon.

Over time, I found myself disgusted by old butler Noa and even Marco.

Even though I was the one giving the orders.

"…Even if you say it's about feeling something, it's just the servants who suffer doing the laundry."

"Well, they're paid, so they should work hard."

It was a lesson I had learned after experiencing that strange, unpleasant feeling a few times.

A ritual of sorts—to feel connected.

Some blood had splattered onto Ethel's clothes, but she wasn't injured anymore.

Leaving behind the dazed members of the Rosenberg family, I turned to continue dealing with the demons.

The sun was still high in the sky.

I still had a long day ahead.

Though, this would all end soon enough.

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A month passed quickly.

I was back at the academy.

If asked what had changed in the past month, I would say this:

There were no more demons wandering the streets.

It was about time for me to leave.

Leave?

Go where?

Home? The academy?

I had nowhere to go.

No one would welcome me anywhere.

When the demons fled into the church, I burned it down—Isabel included.

A few days ago, I got into a fight with Ethel and accidentally put a hole in her stomach.

As for home…

Julian’s eyes had started to lose focus. He’d probably die soon.

I wasn’t interested in cleaning up my brother’s corpse.

Maybe I’d let him clean up mine instead.

They say people become what they dream of.

But what was my dream?

What did I want?

To save Alicia.

Then… was all this killing necessary?

I had fought, slaughtered, and committed atrocities far beyond mere "fighting."

If I met a horrific end, I could at least call it deserved punishment and accept it.

But even that had been taken from me.

Now I was just lashing out at everything around me.

Like a child throwing a tantrum because nothing was going their way.

A red haze rose before my eyes.

Or maybe somewhere else. I couldn’t tell.

In the end, I was the problem.

If I hadn’t existed—if Ellen hadn’t existed—none of this would have happened.

"…Get a grip. Are you trying to die again?"

A voice echoed from the bathroom.

Blood dripped from my wrist, dyeing the bathwater a deep red, swirling like an elegant mirage.

"…People are surprisingly sturdy. This much won’t kill me."

"People can be weak, too. Sometimes they die in the stupidest ways."

"How long are you going to stare at my naked body? It’s getting embarrassing."

"Stop talking nonsense."

"That hurts my feelings."

He didn’t leave.

Not that a shallow cut like this could kill me.

Theo stared at my arm for a long time before speaking in a low voice.

"Why do you do this?"

"Because I hate myself. It’s just a small punishment.

Before, my parents punished me. Now, I will do it myself."

I reached for the dagger submerged at the bottom of the bathtub and threw it at Theo.

With an exasperated grunt, he dodged it effortlessly.

"I hate you, too."

"Why."

"Are you going to stick around forever?"

"…I don’t know what you’ll do the moment I look away."

Theo approached, poured potion over my wound, and carefully wrapped me in a towel before dressing me.

As if he had done it countless times before.

That annoyed me.

I threw a punch at him, but of course, it didn’t hurt him.

…Yeah. What I really hated was that pitying look in his eyes.

Chapter 71

Everyone relies on something—someone, an object, or even something meaningless—to keep going.

I'm not saying anything profound. Even now, I'm living off the burning tip of this cigarette.

When the nicotine wears off, my brain flickers like a dying lightbulb.

Sometimes, I hate the way the thick smoke sticks in my mouth, but in the end, there's nothing quite like it.

Alcohol makes me dizzy, shows me illusions, and fills my head with phantom voices.

Drugs? They just make my body sluggish before throwing me into some ridiculous hallucination.

Yeah. In the end, all I have is this cigarette.

Is that pathetic?

Locked in my room, brooding, with nothing but a cigar to comfort me?

No family, no friends, no one to rely on.

Just a world full of lunatics who think demons are people—or dying souls with nothing left.

Physically or mentally.

No, it's just because I'm weak.

A person with nothing to rely on must be strong.

Take Theo, for example. Does he have anything?

Looking back, I've seen plenty of pathetic sides of him. But over time, what should I say?

He's improved compared to the reckless fool he used to be.

Of course, others probably preferred his old self, when he was full of human emotion.

But I find his current numbness far more convenient.

Less exhausting.

Yes. If you call this growth, then he's grown.

If witnessing countless deaths is what it takes to grow, maybe it’s better not to.

Anyway, why am I even thinking about this?

Just passing time, I guess.

It’s a luxury to sit around and get lost in thought.

What a joke.

Just meaningless rambling to distract myself from this awkward silence.

Theo keeps staring at me.

He never stops me, never interferes—except when I try to go back.

The demons are dead, my relationships are in shambles, and Julian, once again, has killed himself after failing to save his fiancée.

That woman was probably to Julian what Alicia is to me.

No matter how many times he tried, no matter what he did, she was someone he could never save.

"I want to go back. It’s been over a month since I last saw Alicia."

"You’re the only person who talks about dying so casually."

"Hmm, I can think of one other."

"Who?"

"Julian."

Theo’s eyebrow twitched.

Did I say something uncomfortable?

"He made quite a spectacle of it the first time, didn’t he?

I don’t remember the details, but I do remember how annoying it was to clean up."

"…Shut up."

"Skipping classes and spending a whole week with me like this, won’t rumors start flying?

A talented, handsome commoner comforting a noble lady who lost her family, plotting to take over her house."

Ethel and Isabel wouldn’t be visiting.

Theo had ordered me not to touch humans, so I hadn’t killed them—but I had done plenty else.

They were probably terrified, afraid that if I snapped, I’d kill their families too.

How could they visit me casually?

Unless they came as heroes to slay the villain, like before.

Theo didn’t respond.

You’re supposed to take a slow drag, savor the scent before exhaling—but with no conversation, I couldn’t even enjoy my cigarette properly.

I was talking to myself.

Might as well set up a stage, grab a mic, and start a comedy show.

Even if my stories weren’t funny, my face alone would make people laugh.

Everyone loves beautiful things.

Still, Alicia was much more beautiful than me.

"Let me rephrase my question.

What’s the longest I’ve ever stayed alive?"

"A year. I drugged you and locked you in a room.

I handled the authorities with your family’s money."

A year? Even drugged and imprisoned, I only lasted a year?

"Then how did I die?

You kept me alive, didn’t you?"

"When you were lucid enough, you bit your tongue and swallowed it on purpose. Choked yourself."

Well, yeah. Just losing a tongue doesn’t kill you.

Unless it rolls back and blocks your throat.

The first time I pulled that off, my father nearly beat me to death.

Then, in the end, he just tore my tongue out.

Of course, he had it reattached later.

"Ugh. Then you must have tried again.

You could have pulled out my teeth, gagged me—anything."

I didn’t understand.

Keeping someone alive wasn’t hard.

Especially someone as young as me.

"Tried that. Then you just smashed your head against a wall.

Or, when memories came back, you blew your brains out before I could stop you."

"Hmm. Funny, I don’t really remember that now."

Theo let out a dry chuckle.

Then he said, quite casually, that he hated me.

Conversation requires mutual effort—listening, responding, exchanging words.

This was a solid start.

Never mind the topic.

"That’s why I hate you.

You only remember what’s convenient.

I could lock you up again, drug you forever. Keep you alive until you die of old age.

But you have to live."

I smirked and crossed my legs.

Throwing away a cigar after just ten minutes felt like a waste.

I had stolen it from Julian’s drawer—it was hard to find good ones now.

Last time, it was soaked in blood, so I couldn’t even smoke it.

But this one? This was a good one.

I cut the end with a knife, tucked it into my cigar pouch, then pulled out my gun and walked toward Theo.

"Enough excuses. Just end it cleanly."

I pointed the barrel between his brows, but he didn’t even blink.

How could someone be so fearless?

Shooting an unresisting man felt wrong.

So, I turned the gun on myself, pressing the muzzle to my temple and pulling the trigger.

Unfortunately, the barrel bent before the bullet could fire.

"…How long do you think this can last?"

"And yet, you never just tied me down."

"Yeah. Might as well try everything I can. This time, it feels easier."

"What’s the point? What good comes from keeping me alive?"

"Like you said—it’s just childish revenge. Not even real revenge, just some petty way to lash out."

"Does keeping me alive feel like some kind of punishment to you?"

"Isn’t it? You’re still breathing even though you couldn’t save your sister."

"Hah. If you’d told me that a few dozen times ago, I would’ve snapped and attacked you."

"You say that, and yet, here you are—attacking me."

He was right.

I pulled out a dagger and drove it toward Theo’s heart, but he blocked it effortlessly.

Though, I did manage to pierce his palm.

"Lying with a smile, pretending nothing’s wrong—don’t you ever get tired of it?"

"Have I ever killed you?"

"No."

His answer was short, but there was emotion in it.

A hint of hatred, or maybe just exhaustion from repetition.

Boredom. Yeah, boredom seemed like the right word.

"Even when you were gasping for air, you always came back before you could die."

And with that, he grabbed my throat and lifted me into the air.

I started suffocating.

My body trembled violently—if I didn't die from asphyxiation, my neck would snap first.

Why do I always have to live like this?

I know I have talents. I know I excel at many things, and I want to prove it.

I'm vile enough that I should be compared to Julian when it comes to sheer cruelty.

Even among family, Alicia is the most beautiful one.

I'm not stupid, but my mind only works in cunning ways—Julian is far smarter than me in every other sense.

Am I more ruthless than others?

No. Compared to my wretched parents, I'm practically fragile.

Am I stronger than others?

Maybe, more than most. But I can't win against Theo in a fight.

And without a weapon, without a gun, I'm useless.

I can't use magic, I can't sense mana well, I can't command spirits, and I certainly don't have faith.

If there was a god who dropped me into this world, I wouldn't worship them—I'd curse them, mock them, defy them.

Even before the demons ruined everything, my life had no value.

Why didn't I just die back then?

Well, there was no reason.

None at all.

And even now, as I'm on the verge of death, I still want to live.

I’ll forget this feeling soon enough.

I’ll sink back into despair.

I’ll try to die again.

Not before pulling the trigger, but right after.

That’s why I laugh—or maybe cry.

Tears spill down my face.

And then—air floods my lungs.

"Ghaaah—! Hahh, haah, hehh—!"

"…And in the end, you always want to live. You liar."

Chapter 72

If I can’t die in a world where no one understands me, then the only answer is to get rid of those who refuse to listen.

I’m tired of lying, pretending everything’s fine while trembling inside.

In the end, I just want to run away—to where Alicia is, where my existence is accepted without question.

Dying is terrifying, but I know I’ll return. And yet, a part of me is scared—what if this time is truly the last?

"Ellen, how many times have we done this?

Isn’t it about time to stop?"

"…Polite threats mixed with violence can be effective—just not on me."

My throat still aches.

If I look in the mirror, his handprint will still be there.

"There’s no meaning to this. Even if you go back, nothing will change.

You’ll never save your sister. It’s already decided."

"Of course. If you can’t save her, who can?

You’re the all-powerful protagonist, aren’t you?

The one who cuts down enemies and demons with a single swing. Why do you keep emphasizing this?"

As always, he avoids answering difficult questions.

He always has.

"…Why the hell is it only Alicia who can’t be saved!?"

Why am I the one who always survives?

Why is it only me and Theo who return?

Theo looks at me, his voice laced with scorn.

His words are drenched in contempt, making it nearly impossible to hold back my emotions.

"Hah. Maybe it’s because the people you’ve killed are clinging to you, cursing you.

You accept your own death in the end, but you can’t handle it when others die."

Ethel. Even when Isabel died.

He adds that as an afterthought.

I don’t remember.

I can’t remember.

Because I never did that.

No.

No, I didn’t.

Shut up.

If I say it didn’t happen, then it didn’t. Stop talking.

I don’t remember anything.

Even if I did kill Ethel, it was an accident.

I thought she was a demon.

She lunged at me—I thought she was a demon.

If I had hit her anywhere but the head, I would have poured a potion on her immediately.

So, it doesn’t count.

No, that never happened.

"You always pretend you’re fine, like you’re in control, but you’re rotting from the inside out.

That fake smile of yours—it’s disgusting. Just give up, like you keep telling everyone else to.

Stop lying. You always say you want to die, but you fight harder to live than anyone."

"…Shut up."

"Even that stiff, formal speech—you only talk like that because your parents forced you to."

"Don’t act like you know everything."

I throw a punch, but he blocks it effortlessly.

"You told me yourself. What am I supposed to believe?"

I would never have told him that.

I want to sew his mouth shut, but I don’t have the strength.

Thinking back, it’s always been Theo’s fault.

Every time I tried to wipe out the demons, I did it carefully, making sure he wouldn’t notice.

But he always found out, always got in the way, and I ended up dead.

Even when he claimed to help, he stopped me from killing the young demons.

He was the problem.

I did nothing wrong.

I’m not the problem.

Yes. It’s the world that’s broken.

Even my trash parents said it.

Lunatics who can’t be understood should be eliminated or sent for counseling.

"Ellen, you’ve never once told the truth.

When you approached Ethel to befriend her, when we met at the café for the first time, when you helped Isabel feed the slums—everything you said was a lie.

Maybe I’m no different, but at least I don’t lie all the time like you do."

Maybe my first words were lies, but my time at the academy felt like a sanctuary.

The only places where I could truly relax were in front of Alicia and at the academy.

Was that all a lie?

Even if it was, I refuse to accept it.

I want to shut Theo up.

Even if I have to kill him.

But my gun is already warped beyond use.

How the hell does a human bend steel with their bare hands?

I swing my dagger, but he dodges effortlessly, grabbing my wrist.

Or he twists my arm, making it impossible to attack properly.

Like he’s watching a child’s tantrum.

"You said this before.

I’m asking seriously—don’t you feel guilt?"

"Guilt? What for? You helped me kill demons too."

"Yeah, I did. But no matter how many times we repeat this, I can’t slaughter people like livestock the way you do.

I’m not criticizing you—I just don’t understand."

I look into his eyes.

His voice no longer carried the sharp edge of mockery or condemnation. It was the same expression he always wore.

As if he was genuinely trying to understand.

Why couldn't he understand?

"If your family suffered at the hands of demons, then surely you—"

"They did. I rushed to your estate, and when I returned, they were already dead.

Some were laughing while violating my already-dead sister, and my father—he was being eaten alive."

His voice, unlike before, dripped with hatred.

Then he should understand me.

If his family was butchered like that, how could he still see demons as people?

How could he see the things that stole his life’s meaning as equals?

"Then…!"

"So I helped you. I killed them. But even as I did it, I didn’t understand.

I still can’t see it the way you do. Just because a person kills another person doesn’t mean they stop being human."

He asked if I ever felt guilt, if this was all some form of punishment.

As if I could feel guilt.

I don’t.

I won’t.

I was simply using my abilities—just on a larger scale.

I was doing something positive, cleaning up the filth of society.

Better than some useless bastard leeching off their parents, screaming about the unfairness of life in their room.

Better than some coward who, after one setback, decides everything is meaningless and kills themselves.

Or was I supposed to have died?

No. That wasn’t it. Living to exterminate demons was the right answer.

Those creatures—murderers, criminals, rapists—killing them wasn’t a crime.

And yet, despite everything I’ve done, the so-called protagonist just stands there.

"At least do your job as the protagonist. Save someone, damn it.

I was born a worthless piece of trash, but you? You were born strong. Why the hell can’t you save anyone!?"

"Answer me. Stop dodging with bullshit."

Have I repeated these words to him before?

The thought alone was unbearable.

If no matter how many times I tried, nothing changed, then this was truly hell.

Why did this keep repeating?

Just end it already.

If someone asked me whether I wanted to live or die, of course, I’d say live.

But only if it meant living as a person, not this.

I guess I wasn’t the kind of person who could find happiness in warm meals and a soft bed.

"Why is it always me?

Why am I the only one suffering?

Demons, you, that damned church, my parents—all of you.

I was born into this miserable world, forced to live like this, and now I’m wrong for killing a few demons?!"

"When your sister was killed by humans, you still blamed demons and only killed demons."

"Poor demons, huh? Getting caught up with some crazy bitch."

"Shut up! They were demons!"

I screamed, and he slapped me.

"Too loud."

I swung my knife, but as expected, he twisted my wrist in the opposite direction.

It hurt like hell, but I refused to cry out.

"So what if someone is born strong?"

Was he angry that I had swung the knife?

Or was he just sick of my whining?

Theo kicked me hard in the gut.

I gasped, unable to breathe.

Bile dripped from my mouth, my eyes felt like they were about to burst.

I lay there, wheezing, until I slowly came back to my senses.

Theo spoke quietly.

"I can’t even control the person in front of me."

He pressed my head into the ground.

If he added just a bit more pressure, my skull would crack.

"I’ve tried everything—coaxing, persuading, helping, beating you down, pushing you to the brink.

And none of it has worked."

He lifted his foot and kicked me in the face.

The knife I had been gripping finally slipped from my grasp.

"So let’s just stop. Like you said, I’m tired."

He picked me up and laid me back on the bed before muttering a simple healing spell.

It was clumsy. I had no idea when he had learned it.

"I won’t even ask what you want.

Because saving your sister is impossible."

Not yet.

It’s too soon to say that.

I’ve only tried a few dozen times. If I try a few hundred more, maybe I can save her.

I hate dying, but still…

I always come back.

I can live without Alicia.

But if I give up on the person who kept me alive in that hellish mansion, is that really living?

To give up now and surrender?

The fact that it even sounded tempting made it all the more terrifying.

Chapter 73

"...Don’t say it’s impossible."

"If I can’t do it, who can?

You? You can’t even break free from my grip."

Theo released my wrist and shoved me lightly.

"Even without restraints, you can’t do anything."

My body ached slightly.

Ignoring it, I swung my fist at Theo.

He blocked each strike effortlessly. Kicked at him—missed completely.

"I bet you don’t even remember killing my family.

Don’t remember locking me up, laughing while you cut into me."

"So what? You want revenge?"

Theo chuckled.

Not a mocking laugh. Not one of amusement.

A laugh to suppress rage.

"I used to get caught up in old memories. Used to yell, cry, beg you.

But I realized—that’s exactly what you wanted from me."

I tried to retort, but the words caught in my throat.

Because I couldn’t deny it.

I had always drawn out the reactions I wanted from others.

"When someone rebuked you, tore into you, you enjoyed it.

Because you believed you deserved it—for failing to protect Alicia."

Theo gripped my wrists tightly in one hand and pointed a finger at me.

"I won’t play along anymore.

If your plan is to kill all the demons and then throw yourself away, my job is to keep you alive and throw back your bullshit whenever necessary."

Would he break my wrist?

I didn’t want to stick around a guy who had a habit of snapping bones and mending them just to break them again.

"You hate living, so I’ll make sure you keep doing it."

His voice was thick with resentment.

Layer upon layer of old emotions spilling out all at once.

I hated this.

People who cursed and resented me—they all ended up dead, or locked away until they wasted away.

I had never been the one in danger.

But this—this was different.

I hated it.

I wanted everything under my feet, under my control.

Yet here I was, pinned beneath Theo.

"What changes if you keep me alive?

Forget my feelings. What changes for you?"

I struggled, of course.

"The future will still be there.

Maybe I’ll see a new day—one that isn’t swallowed by the same old despair you spew every time you open your mouth.

Even if things don’t get better, I believe they will."

So hopeful.

"If you’re going to keep me alive, take responsibility.

Stop spewing that useless crap."

"You've never taken responsibility for anything.

Maybe now's the time to start."

"Hah. And what am I supposed to do?

The demons are already ashes in the dirt."

Theo seemed to seriously consider that.

I shook my arm, called his name—he ignored me, lost in thought.

But when I reached for the fallen dagger, he pressed a foot onto my hand.

Was he thinking or just messing with me?

Annoyed, I pulled out a cigar.

There was a faint stain of blood on it.

Lighting up, I took a long drag. The heat in my head cooled slightly.

I thought I was in control, but maybe I never was.

I couldn't do anything.

Maybe Theo was right—maybe letting go wasn't so bad.

Responsibility?

I'd already taken it.

I'd wiped out nearly every last demon.

I'd atoned for Alicia, for existing, for wasting air every goddamn day.

Responsibility isn't some grand, universal thing.

It's different for everyone.

So what do I have left?

My parents burned alive in a theater, Alicia was torn apart by demons, Julian strangled himself until he dangled lifeless in the air.

His will had asked to be buried next to his sister—what was left of her after the demons had their way.

I shot Ethel, never saw her again. Same with Isabel.

Diana—I pushed her away with cruel words.

Marco? I paid him off and let him go.

The estate was stripped to its bare minimum.

All I had left was a mountain of money, weapons, and a name.

To the world, that meant power. To me, it was nothing.

If someone wanted it, I'd give it to them.

But only if they endured the same upbringing I had.

No one would.

I had nothing left.

That was me.

Nothing. Owning nothing. Just a fool grasping at old memories.

Alicia was gone, and I had truly, completely, absolutely nothing left.

So I asked Theo.

"Come up with anything?"

"…Nothing."

Why did he have to be right?

Did he want to tear me down completely?

Make me feel even more meaningless?

The idea of living felt even more unbearable.

But Theo's voice, thick with anger moments ago, had settled.

Earlier, he had been on the verge of snapping my neck.

Maybe time really did dull everything.

But this emptiness inside me—

The gaping void left by Alicia—

I knew time would never fix that.

"If you meet Ethel and Isabel and apologize, they'll forgive you."

"Did you just say forgive?

You want me to crawl to Ethel and Isabel and beg?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"Everything. You, Ethel, the demons, everything around me!"

Call it pride.

I wasn't about to admit I had been wrong.

Even if I was.

Even if there had been a demon among them—a heroine, maybe.

She was dead now.

Or rather—I had killed her.

The name was faint in my memory, but I had recognized her before burning her alive.

I think it was beside Theo.

That must be why he's being so damn spiteful now.

Just because I torched some mutts, he's throwing a tantrum.

Like they weren't everywhere, overrunning the place.

"...I don't like you, but you'll need at least some decent human connections if you want to keep living.

I could stick around forever, but honestly, I hate the idea."

Was he trying to act nonchalant?

It was just annoying.

Not like he'd ever say something with my feelings in mind.

And I didn’t have to consider his either.

"So?"

"Instead of thinking about hanging yourself, go see Ethel.

You always said people need something to do to keep going.

...Even if, for you, that meant killing demons."

Apologizing to Ethel.

What would I even say?

Sorry for killing your pet? Sorry for putting holes in your stomach?

If it were me, I wouldn’t forgive me.

I’d rip my throat out.

This wasn’t the kind of thing an apology could fix.

I had stormed into her home mid-meal, beaten her family bloody, and slaughtered the demons she’d been trying to smuggle away.

From her perspective, I was her mortal enemy.

I turned to Theo, exasperation in my voice.

"...Ha. With what face do I even go to Ethel?"

Theo scoffed.

"Ha. Face? You never had shame to begin with.

Always waving a gun or a knife at me the second things don’t go your way."

"At least commend my perseverance in challenging you despite knowing you’ll just dodge or block."

"You already know Ethel’s got an unhealthy attachment to you.

I don’t know what it is exactly...

But no matter what you did, as long as you didn’t kill her family, she forgave you."

His phrasing was sloppy.

What he meant was, Ethel held me dear.

"...Did she?"

"And she will again.

You even let her scary-looking brother live."

"After wrecking everything else, what exactly do I gain from slapping on a smile and apologizing now?"

Theo shrugged.

"Nothing. Maybe a flimsy sense of peace."

For dozens of cycles, I had hurt Ethel again and again.

Then avoided her like the plague.

The thought of ‘now’ dug into my brain and wouldn’t leave.

Still, I needed to do something.

For Theo, for me—

Because sitting still was unbearable.

A flimsy sense of peace.

Too grand a reward for the shameless act I was about to commit.

Chapter 74

Apologizing for mistakes, seeking forgiveness, and making amends.

Those are probably things children learn as they grow up—except, of course, in this wretched family I was born into.

It must be common sense for living among people.

Instead of learning how to admit my mistakes, I was taught how to make everyone turn a blind eye to them.

Rather than sincere apologies, my tongue was more accustomed to saying, "Regrettably," in a tone laced with mockery.

And reconciliation? I've never done that before.

Most of the people I should apologize to are no longer in this world, anyway.

After all, if I had to admit I was wrong, wouldn't it just be simpler to erase the other person altogether?

No matter how much I mess up, the moment I point a gun at them, they smile and forgive me—sometimes, they even beg me for forgiveness.

There are always a few stubborn ones who refuse, but that's a simple matter to resolve—just bring in their family and put a hole in each of their heads.

There was a time, long ago, before I was called Ellen, when I think I could say the words "I was wrong."

But it was so long ago that I must have forgotten.

Speaking of which, what was my name back then?

Not that it matters anymore.

I've long since become something so different, so distant from who I was that I can't even recall it.

I don't think I can even be called a person anymore.

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"Theo."

"What?"

"How do you apologize?"

“…Huh?"

"If you keep making that dumb face, even I’ll get hurt, you know."

"You’ve managed just fine before.

'Sorry for stabbing you.'

'Excuse me, but could you take a bullet to the head for me?'

Was that supposed to be an impression of me? Because if it was, I should be legally allowed to split his skull open with an axe right now.

"You just say what you did wrong and ask for forgiveness.

If they don’t accept it, that’s the end of it. Take a slap to the face and move on."

"Easier said than done."

"…Why are you asking?"

"Just to be difficult."

I didn’t want to go to the academy, so should I head straight to Ethel’s house instead?

If I go to the academy, I’ll be bombarded with stares. There’s no hiding what I’ve done, and rumors must be spreading like wildfire.

I mean, before that happened, I was just a girl who sat in the corner with a silly grin, reading books.

And then, suddenly, I became a crazed mass murderer.

Who wouldn’t struggle to process that?

Besides, there are demons and half-demons at the academy. If I go, there’s a chance I’ll end up with a hole in my head or a knife in my chest.

I wouldn’t die, but like I always say—I hate pain.

No matter how I phrase it, all I’m doing is running away again.

When someone gets cornered and runs for long enough, their final stop is death.

And yet, because of Theo, I can’t even run properly. Ha.

Ugh. I hate everything.

Not in some dramatic way, "I hate myself for failing to save Alicia!" way.

Just a pure, simple hatred for everything.

I don’t have the energy for complicated emotions anymore.

If I started listing everything I hate, it’d never end.

I hate Theo.

I hate how my throat sometimes gets dry when I breathe.

I hate the way water catches in my throat when I drink it.

I hate how my dagger and pistol clink together uncomfortably when I walk.

I hate the way my clothes rustle against my skin.

I hate the warmth of sunlight.

I hate the coolness of the wind.

I hate that I can’t listen to music.

I hate that I’ll never watch my favorite movies again.

I hate that when I look at people passing by, the first thing I think is whether I can kill them or not.

***

"What are you mumbling about?"

Without thinking, I instinctively drove my dagger into his throat.

Theo yanked it out immediately and poured a potion over the wound.

"…Not even close."

"I don’t want to go apologize."

"Then don’t. Live like this forever."

"And you? How long are you planning to stay by my side like this?"

"As long as I need to.

I'll drag you along when I go out with family, when I meet with friends, even when I travel sometimes."

Just imagining it made my stomach churn.

Me, wordless and tucked into a corner, watching happy people go about their peaceful lives.

I wouldn't even consider being happy myself.

I'd just seethe with jealousy.

Or maybe I'd try to drag them down to my level—like I did with Ethel.

"If you don't like sticking close like a person, I could always put a collar on you. How about that?"

"I don't have those kinds of kinks, so don't worry…."

I wiped the blood off my neck with a handkerchief and stood up.

"Come on. If Ethel rejects me, I'll just die on the spot."

Not that he'd let that happen.

Theo gave me a strange look, then nodded.

Not that I wanted him to follow me.

But if he was just going to secretly trail behind me to keep me alive, I might as well let him stay by my side.

It had been almost ten days.

Ten days since I last stepped outside and felt the sunlight.

…The sun stung my skin.

I went back inside and grabbed a hat.

Wait. My sleeves are short too.

I turned around and changed into long-sleeved clothes.

Then, just as I reached the front door, I hesitated again.

Wouldn't a long skirt be better than pants?

I changed again.

The fabric brushing against my ankles felt strange.

…Right, my hair’s a mess, and my face looks like a corpse.

I took out the cosmetics Alicia once gave me and applied a little, then ran a comb through my hair.

Then, as I stepped outside, I had another thought—what if there was some blemish on my face?

I hurried back inside again.

…What the hell am I doing?

"…Haa, haa."

I looked in the mirror.

My red eyes were shaking like crazy.

There was nothing to be afraid of. Nothing to be anxious about.

There were no living demons left. No humans outside waiting to attack me.

What would Ethel say when he saw me?

"Ugh… ugh, ah…"

The thought made me sick.

I didn’t want to see my reflection anymore.

So I pulled out my gun and shattered the mirror with the handle.

Then I threw the gun aside and clenched my fists, slamming them against the broken shards.

Not that it did anything but wound my hands.

Theo must have had enough, because he grabbed my wrist.

I trembled all over.

"…What are you doing?"

"It’s my first time going outside in ten days. Let me have this much."

"Are you really that scared to go out?"

"Anyone who hears us would think I’m some pathetic shut-in… Oh, wait. I am."

"When you’re like this, just ask for help.

If I feel like it, I might help you."

So he’s stopped saying "Whenever, however."

He used to say that all the time.

Guess he’s sick of all my failures.

He’s already done so much just to keep me alive.

Theo looked at me for a moment, then held out his hand.

"Take it. If you do, I’ll take you to Ethel myself."

"……."

"You told me to follow you, didn’t you?

You already asked how to do it, so now go meet Ethel.

And whether you get cursed at or make amends—just don’t think about it."

If I took that hand, I wouldn’t have a chance to go back inside. I’d have to walk straight to Ethel’s mansion.

"Why are you doing this?"

"What’s with the random question all of a sudden?"

"If I knew I was only going back because of you, I would’ve tied you up for life.

I’d feed you through a hose and have someone clean up your waste.

As for your arms and legs, I could just have people move you around.

I’m a cheap human being, after all.

So why are you going this far?"

"…I can’t lock someone up and live indifferently like you."

Didn’t he say I’d been drugged for a year?

Why would he feel guilty about that?

All he did was manage the trash properly, like sorting waste for disposal.

"I don’t get it."

Theo responded indifferently, as if he never expected me to in the first place.

"Of course you don’t. So just do as I say.

At the very least, I’ll make sure you live something that looks like a normal life.

And just like you, I won’t ask for your opinion—I’ll do whatever I want."

Then he grabbed my hand and started dragging me forward.

I let myself be pulled along, half-heartedly. But was this really the right thing to do?

Even as we walked through the streets, Theo never let go of my hand.

He held onto it tightly all the way to Ethel’s mansion.

And to make sure I couldn’t run, he even knocked on the door for me.

Then, the bastard had the audacity to step back and leave me to deal with it.

***

"…Why are you here?"

The one who opened the door wasn’t Ethel.

Which was fortunate—though I wasn’t sure if Julius was any less physically intimidating.

"…I came to apologize."

At those words, Julius’ face flickered with surprise before twisting into a look of sheer contempt.

"Oh, so now that everything’s over, you want to ease your guilty conscience?"

A guilty conscience.

As if I had something like that.

"If my brother sees you, he might faint from fear. Get the hell out of here."

When I didn’t move, Julius stared at me for a long moment—then punched me.

Theo, caught off guard, managed to catch me mid-air, but my head still spun from the impact.

…For a moment, I reflexively pulled out my gun.

But I shoved it back into my inner pocket and stepped toward the front door again.

"…Was one hit not enough?"

Julius frowned, then let out a sigh before opening the door.

"Wait in the guest room.

…No matter who you are, a guest is still a guest."

The moment I stepped into the mansion, hallucinations began replaying the things I'd done here before.

75

Chapter 75

A mirage rose in the air, slowly taking on the shape of a person.

And then, before me, Ethel and the entire Rosenberg family knelt on the ground.

—No matter what, how could you hide demons?

Then, right before their eyes, I shot the captured demons tied up before them.

When the Count, unable to bear it any longer, lunged at me, I shot him in the knee, making him collapse.

Julius, eyes burning with rage, charged at me.

I didn't flinch.

I took his punch head-on, then drove my dagger straight into his throat.

As I pulled the blade out, I drew my pistol and pulled the trigger, putting a hole in his head.

It felt less like killing a close friend's older brother and more like processing livestock at a factory.

Like a machine operating out of sheer inertia, my body moved as if it was used to this.

The dizziness returned.

I raised my gun toward Ethel, who had tried to rush toward Julius as he clutched his bleeding neck on the floor.

—Ethel, if you move, I'll kill you. I told you to stay still from the beginning, didn't I?

Ethel was trembling all over, desperately saying something to me.

I could hear my own voice, but I couldn't hear Ethel's.

That only made me want to block it out more.

Julius, standing here alive and well, overlapped with the Julius I had just killed.

A wave of nausea surged up my throat.

"Ugh… ugh—huek…"

"…Was that because I hit you just now…?"

Julius, startled, crouched down and grabbed my shoulder, checking my face.

He should be one of the people who wished I would just die, yet here he was, looking at me with concern. I couldn't understand it.

I turned my head away, unwilling to see his face—only for Ethel and myself to appear before my eyes again.

"Fucking hell… why now, of all times…?"

I muttered under my breath, low enough that neither Julius nor Theo could hear.

I had avoided opium, avoided alcohol, because I didn't want to see this.

The way to keep an addict from using is simple.

If being high becomes more painful than being sober, of course, they'll quit.

And that's what I did.

"Theo. Light."

Even through the dizziness, I fumbled with shaking hands, pulling out a cigar.

Theo held out a flame for me, and I lit it, inhaling deeply before looking ahead.

The hallucinations didn't disappear.

Ethel was still there, a hole in his forehead, his body twitching and convulsing as he died.

—N-no, this… this isn't what I meant to do. But humans… humans aren't supposed to side with demons, right?

The terrified young demon collapsed against the wall, shaking uncontrollably.

Ethel trembled as well before his body finally went limp.

His pupils, which had held the faintest glimmer of light, darkened into something like the depths of the ocean.

I cradled his body and, gripping my gun, shot every demon in sight before reloading again.

—Ethel, don't joke around. No, you're… you're the heroine, aren't you? You're not supposed to die. A bullet shouldn't be able to kill you.

Even as I slapped his lifeless cheeks, telling him to wake up.

Of course, he wouldn't wake up, you stupid bitch.

—No, he’s not dead. He’s not dead. I didn’t kill him. He’s still alive.

Even if you handed me a machine built solely for killing, I still wouldn’t be able to pull the trigger so easily.

But I did.

And you did.

After doing something like this, I dared to come here and apologize to Ethel?

Me?

I mumbled nonsense for a long time, utterly dazed.

Then, unable to hold it in anymore, I smashed my fist against the wall, stomped my feet, and kicked at the already-dead body over and over again.

I eventually collapsed, holding Ethel’s corpse, sobbing for hours.

Then, like some kind of punishment, I bit off the finger that had pulled the trigger and swallowed it.

With my left hand, trembling violently, I picked up my gun.

I pressed the muzzle to my temple and pulled the trigger.

Was the gun just that powerful, or was my imagination running wild?

Instead of just a bullet hole, my skull blew open, brain matter splattering across the floor.

"…Should we call a priest?"

"No, just… No. Hoo—huk—!"

Good thing I hadn’t eaten.

At least I wasn’t vomiting out an entire pizza, just disgusting stomach acid.

Someone else could clean this up.

Hopefully.

"Don’t mind me. This happens sometimes. It’s embarrassing, showing you this side of me."

I wiped my mouth with a handkerchief and forced a smile.

Julius flinched.

I met the eyes of a maid watching from a distance.

She looked troubled, probably thinking about how much extra work she'd have to do now.

—You hid some of them outside the dungeon too, didn't you? If you don't tell me where they are, I'll deal with these people first.

I had asked Ethel where the escaped demons had gone.

Ethel hesitated, pressing his lips tightly together as he looked between me and the maid.

—We might be like family, but we're not, are we? In the end, you're not telling me because they're not your family either, right?

Bang.

With the gunshot, the maid became what had been a maid.

There were plenty of maids. Losing one wouldn't matter.

That was how I thought back then.

Then I grabbed the blood-soaked maid by the hair and pointed my gun at her head, using her as leverage to threaten Ethel.

Though I couldn't hear it, Ethel must have said something about the demons.

Even so, I pulled the trigger.

I must have thought he was being insolent.

After wiping the blood off my face with a handkerchief, I struck Ethel in the philtrum with the butt of my gun, sending him reeling.

Then, kicking him away, I gathered my subordinates and left the mansion.

"Haa… ha, ugh, ah…"

Theo pulled me to my feet and sat me down in a chair in the guest room.

If someone saw us, they'd think he was my caretaker, not someone who despised me.

I knew I was a person who deserved to die.

But even so, I couldn't stop the wave of despair.

This vision—it was just scolding me.

Why are you still alive instead of going out there and dying?

It’s not like I didn’t want to die.

…If only a bolt of lightning would just strike me down.

The Count and his wife weren’t home.

Theo, standing beside me, looked somewhat tense.

He didn’t have to worry.

Even if I got smacked across the face, I’d just cry.

I wasn’t about to throw myself at anyone for comfort.

Julius set down a tray with three cups of tea, placing one in front of me and another in front of himself.

"I don’t know whose boyfriend you are, but sit down too. You came to our house before, didn’t you?"

Then, he placed the last cup in front of Theo.

"Ah… yes."

Theo looked like he was going to lose his mind from how awkward this was. His leg trembled slightly.

If he was going to be like this, he shouldn’t have followed me.

Or at least, he should’ve dragged me here with more confidence.

I might have embarrassed myself outside the mansion, but I still would’ve come on my own eventually.

It just would’ve taken a little longer.

I took a sip of tea, but it had no taste, no scent.

"Honestly, I didn’t expect you to show up here acting like you could just apologize after everything you’ve done.

Didn’t you say before that you don’t do things like regret?"

"…I’ve done too much to sit around lamenting the past now."

"Is your death approaching?"

"People do change when they’re about to die, but no, that’s not it."

"Ethel will be here in an hour.

Until then, hand over every weapon you have."

"…I can’t do that."

"Or get the hell out right now."

I couldn’t separate myself from my weapons.

Not when I showered. Not when I ate.

I never knew when or where something might happen.

Weapons were life.

If I had them, I could have protected Alicia.

So I could never, ever let go of them.

Without them, I was nothing.

I couldn’t do anything.

Not even breathe. Not even speak.

"Julius, as long as I’m not a threat to Ethel, it should be fine, right?"

I bit down on my cigar with my molars and pulled out my gun with my left hand.

Julius immediately stood up and marched toward me.

His expression was utterly vicious.

Of course, it was.

"What the hell are you trying to do this time—?!"

But his furious face quickly softened.

…Though I wasn’t sure if softened was the right word.

I didn’t point the gun at him.

Instead, I aimed at my own right hand and pulled the trigger.

My right index and thumb were blown off.

Then, with the remaining fingers, I pulled out my dagger and sliced off my left index and thumb as well.

Cutting off fingers didn’t bleed as much as one might think.

I wiped the blood off the table with a handkerchief, wrapped the stumps in cloth, and pocketed the severed fingers.

Then, taking the cigar—now marked with my teeth—I exhaled a mouthful of thick smoke.

"Haa… Without my index fingers and thumbs, I’m not much of a threat anymore, right?

I can’t use magic, either, so we’re good. Ahaha."

No one answered.

Everyone in the room—including Theo—just stared at me with sheer horror.

For a long while, we sat in awkward silence, exchanging glances but saying nothing.

Then, I heard footsteps approaching the mansion.

Light, hurried steps echoed down the hall, reaching this very room.

"Brother, do we have a guest—Ellen…?"

With a hand now missing a few fingers, I forced a clumsy smile and gave a small wave.

"It’s been a while, Ethel."

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"…What about your hand?"

"It seems like Julius doesn't like me very much."

Ethel looked at the faint bloodstains on the table and the blood marks on my clothes, then let out a shriek.

"Brother!? No matter what Ellen did, cutting off a finger is…."

"…I didn’t do anything. I just told her to hand over the weapon she was hiding."

"Since you're alone now, hurry up and call a priest!"

Alone.

Right, being alone wasn't much of a risk.

There was nothing I could do by myself anyway.

At those words, Julius seemed all too eager to go fetch a nearby priest.

Theo stopped him, though.

He took the finger from my pocket, placed it on the roughly severed stump, and began chanting a spell.

I wasn’t sure if it was because he was stingy or if he was just a crazy sadist who enjoyed my pain, but I couldn’t understand why he insisted on using a spell.

Sure, using a potion for this might seem a bit wasteful.

The finger started to reattach, very slowly and grotesquely.

During this, Ethel threw a question at Theo.

Her tone was resentful.

"…Everyone was worried since you didn’t show your face after the semester started, and you were with Ellen all along."

"Well, it just happened that way."

When Ethel stared at Theo with a probing look, he scratched the back of his head with his left hand, speaking as if he were making excuses.

"…Whenever I'm not around, she keeps trying to die. I couldn't help it."

Trying to die all the time? That was a bit of a severe accusation.

I only tried to die when I felt the right mood, when I was certain it would be peaceful, and when I could disappear without bothering anyone.

Well, honestly, I always felt that way.

"So, you're saying that for almost ten days, an unmarried man and woman lived together under one roof?"

"Oh, even when I was bathing naked, he stayed right next to me."

Ethel's face turned bright red.

"…That's…"

"You can't really argue with that, can you?"

"Not really…."

I tried to lighten the mood with a simple joke, but I wasn't sure if it worked.

It seemed my sense of humor was a bit off for others.

When I pointed a gun and told them to laugh, everyone laughed. After all, a gun seemed to be the most effective tool for communication.

"I was just joking. I guess it wasn't funny. Sorry."

"…Yeah."

Theo's expression was awkward.

After everything I'd been through, I thought I'd become indifferent to most situations, but this—this uneasy peacefulness—felt somewhat new.

In a negative way.

"Ethel, you haven't asked why I came here."

"…It's obvious. You probably came to demand I hand over any hidden demons again.

Since you already killed all of them, I couldn't think of any other reason for you to be here."

I remembered that when apologizing, you shouldn't justify yourself.

Excuses were even more forbidden.

You had to offer a sincere apology with a clean and satisfying compensation.

Since my finger was reattached perfectly, what should I say to Ethel?

"I came to apologize. I wanted to say I’m sorry."

I removed the cigar from my mouth.

I had been holding it out of habit, and without it, my mouth felt a bit empty.

Ethel’s face showed a mixture of confusion, surprise, and a touch of disbelief.

I was good at reading emotions and understanding how others felt, but I only knew one way to respond, so I had no idea what to do in a situation like this.

"…Now?"

After keeping her mouth shut with a complicated expression, Ethel finally spoke.

Her tone carried a dampened sigh.

I checked my watch. It took her eight minutes to say something, but it felt like eight hours had passed.

"Yeah."

Now?

What was I supposed to say?

Should I drop to the ground, bury my head, and keep repeating "I’m sorry" as if I truly meant it?

But Theo had said that an apology should be sincere.

And I didn’t regret killing those demons.

If I told Ethel that, I’d become a liar.

People might say it was absurd for someone who always lied and wore a mask in front of others to talk about sincerity, but if I kept lying to myself, I’d start to lose track of what was real.

I couldn't afford to regret it.

I shouldn't regret it.

It was something I'd already done, and denying it was meaningless. Even if I went back in time, I'd still kill those demons.

Alicia would still be killed by them in the end.

Alicia probably wouldn't have wanted me to exterminate the demons, and Julian seemed a bit uneasy about it too. If it had been my parents, they'd have clapped their hands, telling me I did well.

The irony of being the person who resembled the parents I loathed the most.

"Do you remember the names of Mr. Hanton and his wife, the people who farmed wheat in front of our house, the children in the village, and the ones who grew fruits?"

"No."

At that, Ethel's expression crumpled.

"And you call that an apology?

You shot and killed every single one of them right before my eyes—kids, adults, all of them!

Why not say you don't remember that either?"

Right.

I came to apologize for shooting you that day and for when Julius got beaten up by Marco.

But I didn't realize I had to go as far as to admit that killing the demons was a mistake.

If I said I didn't remember, would I get slapped?

I had killed them almost automatically, repeating the same motions dozens of times over.

"…I."

I no longer remembered what I said to those demons as they died, or what kind of expressions they had as they looked at me.

If I remembered all of that, I would have fallen apart.

I shouldn't regret it, but should I?

Wasn't I supposed to regret such a horrible thing?

It wouldn't change the fact that the demons wouldn't come back to life, but if I did, would Ethel at least be satisfied?

I had no idea.

It was too complicated to understand.

But maybe it wouldn’t be impossible.

There was no need to hold onto my flimsy pride or my sense of self when I couldn’t go back and see Alicia again.

Honestly, even if I couldn’t save Alicia, I just wanted to stop.

Like Theo said, maybe it was time to let go.

If I could, I’d want to just die, but if I said that out loud, I’d become an even more disgusting human being.

What would a normal Ellen say in this situation? The ordinary girl who went to the academy, loved books, and enjoyed chatting with Ethel.

I had no idea.

But I was certain of one thing: I deserved to die.

Until now, I had only died by suicide or at Theo’s hands.

I’d never died by Ethel’s hand.

Maybe this time it could really end.

Not just coming back, but truly, an end.

"I’m sorry. I’m sorry for breaking into your house, for hurting Julius, for pointing a gun at you, and for threatening your parents.

I thought demons shouldn’t be allowed to live."

I still thought that.

I hadn’t even considered why. It was just an unconditional belief.

"I’m sorry for killing all the demons.

I’m sorry for not remembering their names. I’m sorry for saying this to you now."

Ethel’s face, which had been holding a forced, angry expression, crumbled.

I didn’t understand.

Why was she crying?

If it were me, I'd have told me to shut up and blown my head off.

Yeah, I would've done that.

I pulled out my gun.

Then, I walked up to Ethel and calmly knelt before her.

I reloaded the empty chamber from when my finger had been blown off and pulled back the hammer.

Then, I took Ethel's hand, placed the gun in it, and offered a clumsy smile.

When she hesitated to put her finger on the trigger, I gently pulled her index finger forward with my left hand, setting it against the trigger.

But I didn't pull it.

Ethel had to pull it herself.

A trigger pulled by someone else always felt strangely empty.

"I know words won't really convey much and won't feel genuine.

No matter what I say, it'll sound disgusting, and the only way to feel better would be to kill me. This is the only way I know. I'm sorry for that too."

Would it look a bit pathetic if I died with my eyes open?

I squeezed my eyes shut.

But instead of a bullet, what came was Ethel's hand gripping the gun's handle and smacking me in the head.

"You think I would—! You think I'd kill you?!"

Ethel started kicking me as I lay on the ground.

She didn't put much strength into it, so it didn't hurt.

"You think dying and running away will make everything better?

You hid away in your room, refusing to show your face, and then suddenly come out and think saying sorry makes it all okay?

And then you want me to kill you with my own hands!? Are you out of your mind?"

She straddled my stomach, grabbing my collar.

Her face was as red as a beet, tears streaming down her cheeks—a truly strange sight.

What could I even call this emotion?

It wasn’t quite hatred or love. It was something else.

"From now on, remember the names of the people you killed, and what their lives were like.

And you’re going to come with me every time I go to the cemetery to change the flowers!

You’ll come along, apologize to them, and take care of the weeds.

And when it’s hard, sometimes you’ll take me to a café and buy me a drink.

You’ll apologize to my parents, and every time you run into my brother, you’ll keep saying sorry.

I’m going to ask him if you’ve done it, so don’t even think about skipping it!"

"That’s…"

I couldn’t finish saying, "That’s not a punishment."

Before I could, she slapped me.

It didn’t hurt this time either.

Was she always this weak?

"And don’t even dream about dying.

If you die, I’ll bring you back and curse you out all over again."

I opened my mouth as if to say something, then closed it again.

I had no idea what to say.

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Chapter 77

It seemed the story had been longer than I thought.

Ethel had been hugging me for a long time, and when we finally separated and looked outside, the sky had already turned dark.

We hadn't run into the Count and his wife, but Ethel told me to stay with Theo.

"Um, I guess we should sleep in separate rooms, right, Theo?"

"…I'll stay by Ellen's side, as always."

His enthusiasm was almost burdensome.

Ethel glanced at Theo with half-lidded eyes, sighed, and then nodded.

"I hope nothing I'm imagining actually happens."

"Even when I was changing or bathing, he just watched without doing anything, so you don't need to worry."

You have no idea how fucking annoying it was, haha.

Once again, an awkward silence fell.

A slight sense of satisfaction crept up within me, knowing that, for once, I wasn't the cause of it.

"……."

Theo didn't respond. After a while, he grabbed my wrist, guiding me to the room Ethel had mentioned.

"Why do you keep saying unnecessary things like that?"

"Well, I think it's because I'm annoyed."

I couldn't give a definitive answer.

I didn't really understand my own feelings or emotions.

For a moment, I saw a vision of myself chasing after a young demon on the stairs. I shook my head to dismiss it, relying on Theo's hand to lead me forward.

I only hoped he couldn't see my trembling fingertips.

Thankfully, the room had two beds, not just one. Two teacups, a teapot, and tea leaves were prepared on the table.

"Can you make some hot water?"

I opened the teapot lid, placed the tea leaves inside, and asked Theo.

At my request, Theo conjured hot water from thin air and poured it into the teapot.

The tea leaves didn't have a particularly fragrant smell, but it was still better than plain water.

I sipped the tea to moisten my lips, then pulled out the bloodstained cigar with bite marks on it. I lit it up.

Taking a drag, I spoke to Theo.

Ethel had cried, told me not to die, and said she accepted my apology.

But I didn't understand either Theo or Ethel at all.

Honestly, seeing how I couldn't understand others made me wonder if I was the abnormal one and everyone else was normal.

If a normal person were dropped among cannibals, they'd seem abnormal, right?

"I don't think this really counts as an apology.

She should've pulled the trigger back there. If she didn't want to use my hand, she could've just burned me to death with magic."

"…Ethel said it was okay."

"I'm not okay. Honestly, if it were me, I wouldn't have pulled the trigger. I'd have slowly sliced you up before killing you."

When you think about it, they dragged in those men to beat Alicia and threaten Julian.

They probably shot Marco or that old butler right in front of me, after putting multiple holes in my stomach.

As for the parents, well, they deserved to be beaten to death anyway.

Theo sipped the tea I had brewed, glanced at me, and spoke.

He looked unbelievably irritating.

"You seem like you're not from here but from some medieval place."

"You don’t have to be so roundabout to say I’m barbaric.

A few weeks ago, I literally came back from skinning demons alive."

"…How am I supposed to respond when you say that with a smile?"

I shrugged.

It was the truth.

That demon probably killed two of my subordinates.

It had chopped them up alive, hung them on hooks in its house, and tried to kill me when I showed up.

Unfortunately for it, it wasn’t of a species sturdy enough to survive a bullet.

Rather than anger, I had just felt tired, wondering how long I’d have to keep dealing with monsters like that.

Even when I repeated time over and over, I couldn’t figure out why their hiding places kept changing.

With the other demons, it was enough to target villages or hideouts, but the ones who had always lived as bandits, like that one, were always the same.

As I mentioned before, once I started skinning them, they weren’t exactly loyal to each other, so they talked pretty quickly.

But there was no need to share this.

Hearing it would only make someone uncomfortable, not entertained.

"Shall I tell you an old story before bed?"

"What kind of story?"

"Just about how we grew up.

I’ve never really told you before, have I?"

"I did hear a bit when you were screaming at me."

"Yeah, but those were just angry words filled with hatred. I’m talking about just having a normal chat."

"…So you want me to start?"

"If you don’t want to, I’ll go first."

The cigar had almost burned down.

It was so close to my fingers that I could feel the heat.

"Do you have another cigar?"

Theo sighed, pulled a box from his coat, and handed it to me.

It was the same box I’d kept in my drawer before. How did it end up here?

When I looked at him suspiciously, he explained.

"I brought it because I thought this might happen. You could at least say thank you."

"Hmm, thank you."

I accepted the box, took a cigar, bit down on it, and, after lighting it, inhaled the slightly damp smoke. Then, almost muttering, I began to speak.

"Anyway, you must’ve grown up loved.

I grew up exchanging love with Alicia.

With Julian, it was different. We lived with knives in each other’s sides, so things were a bit awkward between us."

"I’ve heard that before."

Isn’t it better to listen again in times like this?

I hadn’t said it. It was the old me who had.

I hid my thoughts and just smiled.

"You said I’d spat out all sorts of hateful things before.

You’ve heard about my parents, so I won’t bother explaining again."

I’d probably been so full of inferiority that I blurted out anything and everything, whether appropriate or not.

If it were me, I’d definitely do that.

Because I was a filthy, disgusting person.

"Maybe that’s why the only genuine feelings I have seem to be tied to Alicia. Yeah, it’s an excuse.

As you said earlier, the only thoughts in my head are things like 'let’s slowly skin them alive,' nothing but crazy ideas.

Yeah, I grew up like that."

"…What about Ethel?"

Sincerity. To Ethel, I must not have been sincere enough—enough for her to point at me and say I had deceived her.

In the end, I had worn a mask just to get through the academy without trouble.

"She was just someone I could talk to. But now, she means a bit more than that."

A bit more? No, that wasn’t true.

When she said she’d bring me back to life even if I died, a shiver ran down my spine.

Her eyes weren’t clouded by emotion—she meant it.

I once read a report.

Marco had brought it to me, laughing at how absurd it was.

A few nobles who had lost their children had gathered and sacrificed their own serfs to unknown beings, hoping to bring their children back to life.

Maybe if it were in the distant past, when magic was incredibly advanced, but not now.

The thought that Ethel might do something like that gave me a chill.

"Anyway, living in that shithole of a life, spending time with Alicia, and being like sisters in a normal family—it made me realize how blessed I was."

That’s why she was precious to me.

Because she made me realize that the place I was born into wasn’t normal—it was a sick, horrible place.

Sure, sometimes it made me feel miserable, but it also allowed me to experience what normalcy was like.

Alicia had given me so much.

All I could give in return were a few words of affection and some trivial gifts or books.

"What did you think of me when you first met me at the academy?"

Theo’s expression turned as if he was trying to recall a distant memory.

With a slightly dampened voice, he spoke softly, almost lamenting.

"…You were just a quiet, pretty girl."

"Even if I’m showing you this side of me now, until I died to the demons, the only person who truly knew me was Alicia.

I always wanted to kill my parents, but I’d smile and do as I was told, groveling as hard as I could. With Julian… Well, I already mentioned that, didn’t I?"

Not that this was my true self, either. It was just a pathetic, worn-out version of me.

"I thought things would change if I made up with Ethel.

But I’m still the same. Nothing has changed."

I did something, thinking it would help, and there was a result, but if I couldn’t accept it...

Maybe I was just living too wearily.

Living was all about this, and that’s why I kept wanting to die.

It was simpler that way.

I just couldn’t die, and that was the painful part.

I trailed off mid-sentence and just flopped onto the bed.

"Am I trapped by Alicia?"

"…I’d rather not say anything, or you might pull a knife on me."

"How did you know?"

"It’s not like this is the first time."

"Then, will you tell me?

I think that without Alicia, I’m nothing. But you and Ethel don’t seem to think that.

It’s not some deep philosophical question, just... What am I, really?

If only I had been born into the Speyer family without any memory of a normal world, maybe it would’ve been easier."

Of course, it wasn’t as if I did all these things because of those people.

Just look at Julian—he went through the same horrors, but he didn’t kill demons the way I did.

I was the weird one.

I couldn’t live without having a specific target to hate.

I thought that by killing all the demons, there would be no one left to hate.

But in the end, the object of my hatred just shifted—from the demons to myself.

I liked Ethel.

I probably liked Isabel too, and Theo as well.

Though he was a bit annoying.

If that were the case, wouldn’t it be okay to start liking myself, too?

As soon as that thought crossed my mind, a horned girl with a hole in her head grinned and mocked me.

As if to say, "You? Now? After all this?"

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Chapter 78

I wasn’t sure if I was letting out a hollow laugh because it was absurd or if I was just struggling to breathe, but either way, my breath was ragged.

"Ah, uh, ha, haha…."

So, if I wanted to accept myself—

If I wanted to dismiss Alicia’s death as a curse binding me, did that mean I had to start seeing the demons I killed as people?

It wasn’t as if I had no guilt or emotions.

I was just better at hiding them, better at making them seem shallow.

That was my only real strength. Though, sometimes, I failed at that too, resulting in bizarre outbursts.

Anyway, there was a simple reason why I couldn’t remember the faces of the grown demons or the ones who had attacked me.

I still didn’t think of them as people.

Or maybe I still believed they deserved to die.

When I rubbed my eyes, the horned girl who had been mocking me disappeared. She was probably the demon Ethel had tried so hard to protect.

And just like Ethel said, I couldn’t remember her name.

I vaguely recalled chatting with her at the farm once, but that must have been ages ago.

"Theo."

No response.

Was he asleep?

If I pulled out a weapon, he'd probably sense it and wake up in an instant.

He wasn’t some animal—what kind of person even did that?

I drew my gun, cocked it, and called his name again.

"Theo."

This time, a groggy voice responded.

"…What?"

"Imagine you were an exterminator, a professional pest control worker, and you'd spent your life killing cockroaches."

"…Okay, and?"

"And then, one day, you realize—

You weren't a cleaner but a delusional recluse. And what you'd actually been killing… were people.

How would that feel?"

"…How would I know?"

Wouldn't he understand, at least a little?

No, Theo was always clear-headed.

When he stopped me. When he protected the children.

When he went after so-called villains.

Even when he saw the atrocities they had committed.

Sometimes he seemed a bit too enthusiastic, even to the point of acting foolishly, but he was still sane.

Even when he helped me capture and punish demons.

He wasn't like me.

I was a coward. I turned away from what I was doing, claiming it was for someone else or justifying it with some imaginary righteousness.

I did it all while half out of my mind.

"It feels strange.

It's shocking, but since I'd been turning a blind eye to it the whole time, it's not like I can't handle it.

The only certain thing is that it doesn't feel good."

I had been a bum before, but never a mentally ill one. It just left me confused.

I wasn’t a complete bum, though. I’d passed the civil service exam but hadn’t gotten an assignment for two years, so I’d just been lazing around the house.

I tried to cover my mind with old memories, with thoughts that felt good.

Even if they were useless.

Maybe then these demons laughing at me would go away.

They weren’t ghosts.

If ghosts were real, the dragon ghosts would have eaten all the human ghosts.

So, this had to be just a hallucination.

An uncomfortably realistic hallucination.

I looked at Theo, who was rubbing his eyes, still drowsy, and spoke.

"Theo, do you know what I see in front of me right now?"

"What do you see?"

"One annoying human who keeps following me around, and seven demons I burned or shot to death."

One of them was a succubus holding a child.

She was even wearing a nun’s habit.

"…It’s a hallucination."

"I know. That’s why I’m just sitting here.

But how long will I be able to believe it’s just a hallucination?"

"What do you mean?"

"I’ve accepted that Alicia is really dead, and that what I did—killing the demons—was pure madness, a completely useless, abhorrent act.

Some might say I’ve come to terms with reality and moved forward, but that only means I was wrong all along."

"…Even if you say that now."

"Yeah, saying it now doesn’t change anything.

But you’re the one who told me to move on.

Can’t you do something about this…?"

I wasn’t going to say anything like, "You’re the hero."

How could I possibly know if the game stuck in my head was real or not?

I knew he couldn’t actually help.

I knew that wanting something from him was nothing but a sad, pathetic wish.

But still, I threw it out there. Just hoping for something to lean on.

If I were the protagonist of my own life, the genre would be a comedy.

A dark comedy, like the kind with a creepy, black-haired Englishman who looked like he ate eel jelly for breakfast.

Otherwise, life couldn’t be this twisted.

"I don’t want to see it. I don’t want to hear it.

It must be a mental illness. I know.

But if I try to blow my brains out, you’ll stop me. So what am I supposed to do?"

"…I can’t do anything for you."

"I know. I’m just venting, so just shut up and listen."

"You’re seeing dead people in front of you, aren’t you?"

"Just... just listen to me."

I really didn't want to hear any lectures.

What if I lashed out at Theo and made a scene, and Ethel woke up?

"I see you too—the you I killed.

Sometimes you just sit there, saying nothing. Other times, you're cursing me out, telling me to die.

I close my eyes, and when I open them, you're either sleeping or just reading a book."

"……I don't really know how to respond to that."

"Exactly. Sometimes, it’s just your floating head talking to me. Honestly, it’s kind of unsettling."

Theo chuckled, pulling a cigar from his coat.

So that’s where my missing cigar boxes had gone. What a sneaky bastard.

I had hidden them where only I would know, but he still found them…

"Still, I'll just brush it off with a bit of annoyance.

Even if it turns into hatred or disgust, it won’t mean anything."

With a light tone, Theo conjured a flame at his fingertip.

He couldn’t let go of his emotions, but it was as if he planned to at least bury them under a layer of dirt.

"Just let it hurt. It’s fine. Think of it as a punishment.

If you caused all that and felt nothing, that would be a punishment in itself."

How arrogant.

If it was a punishment, who was the one handing it out?

It certainly wasn’t God.

"Even if it’s not, I’m just going to think of it that way.

I’m too tired to deal with all these complicated thoughts."

If God had existed, Alicia would still be alive.

If some idiot who couldn’t even do that dared call themselves God, I’d call them a moron.

"Screw punishment. Tell them all to fuck off unless they want a bullet to the head in hell."

I almost pulled the trigger, but I set the gun down gently, wondering if Ethel might still be asleep.

Maybe the ghosts of those shot to death were too scared to stick around.

"That wouldn’t be too bad."

All the demons who had been mocking me just moments ago were gone.

If it was a hallucination, then all I needed to do was accept that I wasn’t in my right mind.

If they were ghosts, I’d just burn them to ash even in death—that wouldn’t be so bad.

"Yeah. If only it were that easy."

Theo muttered quietly.

I didn’t want to hear it, so I closed my eyes, pulled the blanket over me, and tried to sleep.

Of course, I spent another night wide awake.

Morning came, and someone knocked on the door.

When I opened it, it was Julius.

"I’m sorry, Julius."

"……?"

"Ethel told me to apologize every time we met."

Julius scratched the back of his head, looking a bit dumbfounded, then told me why he had come.

"Ethel said it’s almost morning. She wants everyone to wash up and have breakfast."

"Is Count Rosenberg there too?"

He nodded.

Ugh, how burdensome.

"I’ll wash up quickly and come down."

Julius handed me a basket with a towel, clothes, and underwear that Ethel must have prepared.

And, of course, Theo followed me to the bathroom, as if he’d heard everything.

I’d much rather bathe with Ethel than with him.

The large bathtub in the bathroom was filled with warm water.

There wasn’t an enchantment for a hot water supply, but there was something like a lukewarm showerhead.

Theo, feeling grimy, undressed and quickly washed up.

"Aren’t you going to use the bathtub?"

"I’m not really in the mood for a bath this early."

"Suit yourself."

After washing, we put on the clothes from the basket and stepped back into the hallway.

Aside from the fact that the top was a bit loose around my chest, it was a surprisingly refreshing start to the morning.

"Uh, uh, did you both just come out at the same time..?"

"Yeah."

"Then… you bathed together!?"

"I told you yesterday. He stays by my side even when I’m washing up."

"I thought he waited outside or something!"

"If you were so worried, you could’ve joined us."

"…I just woke up a bit early."

Anyway, Ethel led us down to the first floor.

At the dining table, Count Rosenberg and his wife sat side by side.

Instead of a greeting, I immediately started with an apology, but they had no reaction.

"Whatever you did, if you apologize, I should be the one feeling honored to accept it.

Even if you go to the same school as my daughter, you’re still a much higher status than I am."

Ah, right.

At least I hadn’t held hands with Julian to tear their family apart.

I’d spent a bit of money, but I only used it where necessary thanks to the experience I had gained.

"If it seemed like I was pressuring you, I’m sorry for that too."

"I believe meals should be filled with pleasant and cheerful conversation.

So let’s eat first and think about the rest later. Please, take a seat."

Breakfast was simple.

The problem was, I couldn’t taste any of it.

Chapter 79

After the meal, the Count led me to the guest room.

Instead of asking a servant, he instructed Ethel to bring the tea herself.

Ethel sat in an armchair next to the Count, and as he sipped the tea she had prepared, he spoke quietly.

"So, I'm not quite sure what made you decide to offer this so-called apology."

The Count took a small sip of his tea, a faintly bitter smile on his lips.

"Or perhaps you're simply uncomfortable that a lowly country bumpkin like me dares not to use honorifics?"

"It's not that. I was just thinking of how to respond."

"Back then, you stormed in during a meal with a mage and armed men. What was it you said?"

"…I told you to bring out all the demons you were hiding."

"I still don't know how you figured out that we were gathering to prepare for hiding. Because of you, they were all dragged out or killed."

"I'm sorry."

"And back then, you spoke casually, almost cheerfully, with a sense of arrogance."

"I'm sorry."

"Is 'sorry' all you have?"

The Count's hand trembled, and he threw the teacup at me, hot tea splashing over me.

It was still quite hot, enough to sting. Glass shards scattered across the room.

At most, it left a few scratches. The tea had cooled enough that the burns were only mild.

"Right, I suppose it doesn't matter how much I get hurt.

Julius is a man, so as long as he didn't die, there's nothing to worry about."

I picked out the shards from my skin. They hadn't pierced deeply—just stuck to the surface.

Ethel, sitting next to us, started to panic, but now wasn't the time for her to step in.

I had come to Ethel fully prepared to die. A small stab wound wouldn’t be a big deal.

"…That day, you called everyone working the fields demons and tried to kill them all.

If the king had ordered us to kill all demons, I would have tried to save who I could.

For my daughter’s sake, I might have let some go."

"Tell me, why did you do that to my daughter?

You didn’t need to shoot her. The men you brought could have just restrained her!"

Because she stood in my way.

I needed to kill the horned girl behind her, but Ethel was blocking me.

To kill an innocent, ordinary girl, I had to create a narrative in my mind.

Maybe, one day, she could give birth to a demon like the one that killed Alicia—an absurd justification, but one that allowed me to act.

Without that flimsy excuse, my actions would have faltered and crumbled.

But I couldn’t say that out loud.

If I were here to intimidate them into agreeing with me, I’d have simply pointed my gun and had a quick conversation. But that wasn’t what I was here for.

In the end, there was only one thing I could say.

"…I’m sorry."

When I used to fake tears to seem pitiful or get out of a situation, I was good at it. But not now.

I cleared my mind of unnecessary thoughts, faced my own emotions honestly, and all that showed on my face was a blank, expressionless look.

There was no sadness, no anger.

Maybe not even remorse.

"And yet, my daughter still clings to you, Duke Speyer."

That was Julian, though...

He was dead. I didn’t need to see a hallucination of Julian, his eyes wide open and his tongue hanging out as he dangled from a rope, to know that.

My brain was far too helpful.

If I ever forgot something, it would quickly throw a vivid hallucination at me.

Right. I was the Duke.

No wonder they were being careful.

Throwing a cup of hot tea was probably the safest option.

If my mood soured, they couldn’t know what kind of retaliation might come later.

"I’d love to just tell you to stay away, but there’s only one thing I can really ask.

Please, never do anything like that again. And especially not to Ethel."

What was I supposed to say?

I won’t do it again?

I’m sorry for doing it, and I promise it won’t happen again?

Countless responses flashed through my mind, but in the end, I just nodded.

The Count left the room, his face full of anger.

"…Ellen, are you okay?"

Ethel approached me and began wiping the blood from my arm.

It seemed Theo had decided to let things play out as long as I didn’t get hurt too badly.

Hadn’t he said he didn’t hate me, just found me annoying?

I let out a small laugh.

"Why do you treat me so well?"

"B-because we’re friends…."

"Friends don’t usually go this far.

We’re not even that close.

Honestly, if anyone here could be called my friend, it’d probably be Theo."

The word "friend" was deceptively simple yet incredibly complex.

Ethel and I were friends. Theo and I were friends too.

But before I engaged in a special and intense conversation with demons, if they looked around my age, I'd often call them friends.

There weren't many other words to describe them.

There were so many kinds of friends in this world.

So, what kind of friendship did I have with Ethel?

The Count had just asked me not to do anything cruel to Ethel.

But this wasn't cruel.

It couldn't be. It was just a little bit of clarity—an action to help us have a conversation.

I sat down, held Ethel's arm, and hugged her.

She crouched down in front of me in an awkward position, but she hugged me back.

I deliberately ignored the faint scent of skin rising from her neck, bringing my lips close to the hair behind her ear.

And I whispered, softly, with a chill-inducing tone.

"Maybe if I grow up like this, I'll end up marrying Theo.

I mean, he bathes with me without a care, whether I'm naked or not.

Since we're friends, Ethel, you don't mind, do you?"

"I know you like Theo and me, but I thought I should say it anyway."

As I spoke, my breath brushed Ethel's ear, and she shivered.

Maybe it was because of what I said. Maybe she felt something.

I slowly pulled away from our hug, a small smile lingering on my lips.

"About everything that's happened until now—I'm sorry. I'll be going now.

I won't come back. I know your parents and your brother wouldn't like it.

But you're always welcome to visit me."

I stood up.

And I calmly walked out of Ethel’s mansion.

I bid farewell to Julius again before I left, then crossed the gate and found myself on a quiet street. Only then did my steps start to falter.

I staggered, and just as I thought I might collapse, Theo steadied me.

"You didn’t do anything when I had glass shards in me earlier, so why help me now?"

"You deserved that."

He wasn’t wrong.

And it was hard to argue against it.

"Stop saying the right things."

Theo held my wrist and guided me to a nearby bench.

There were apple trees all around. They weren’t bearing fruit, though.

Still, why was there a bench here...? Oh, right.

This was Mr. Hanton’s farm.

I didn’t want to remember, but I suddenly saw a vision of the little demon charging at me with a fork, shouting that they’d kill me.

"Why did you tell Ethel we’d get married?"

"Don’t you want that?"

"Want what?"

"A decent name and power to throw around at anyone, and I’ve saved up quite a bit while killing demons.

You’d have more money than you could spend, even living lavishly for a lifetime.

Even if you hated me, you could still surround yourself with ten pretty prostitutes every day."

"…I don’t want that."

"Anyway, let’s say I don’t die and manage to live somewhat normally.

Have you thought about what you’ll do then?"

I didn’t really care, as long as I had a cigar, some good coffee, and plenty of books. But who knew what Theo wanted?

Life always needed a bit of joy, whether it was good or bad.

Maybe gambling would be fun too.

If I could waste away the wealth and status my parents worked so hard to build through petty games, wouldn’t that be a fantastic comedy?

Life was so bleak; it made me crave something enjoyable.

"It’s a bit weird for a grown man and woman to be stuck together all day, isn’t it?"

Theo ignored my smirk and stated his goal.

"I’m going to graduate from the academy."

"Is that it?"

So he was planning to drag me along no matter what.

Theo shrugged.

"Why not? In novels, comics, and games, people always seem to get derailed halfway through.

Graduating properly and living somewhere quiet, not in a bustling city, doesn’t sound so bad."

"I’d prefer not to be there.

I like the city. Where people are everywhere, where I can feel life, and where all sorts of emotions fill the air."

Because they were things I didn’t have.

"Then I guess we’ll keep living here."

"You know Ethel, Isabel, and Diana all like you, right?"

"I know."

"Don’t I seem pretty normal by now?

I don’t think I’m going to die, so maybe it’s time for you to hang out with those friends instead.

Staying with me must be boring and awful."

Theo shook his head.

"I’m not ready to like or love someone—not right now, at least.

…And it’s not that I hate you. I just find you annoying."

I didn’t feel like answering, so I stayed quiet. After a while, I changed the subject.

"Let’s go see Isabel next."

"Okay."

80

Chapter 80

"Are you really going to keep smoking that while walking into the church?"

When Theo spoke up while we were walking, I wondered what he meant. It turned out to be something duller than expected.

"Why? It’s not like God ever said tobacco is a sin."

"No, I just think if you walk in there like that, Isabel might hit you with a spell."

"Ah."

"Walking in with a bunch of weapons hidden on you and smoking a cigar doesn’t exactly scream ‘I’m here to apologize.’

She might think you came to drag out more demons."

I cut off the end of the cigar with a knife, pressed the still-burning tip against the back of my hand to extinguish it, and slipped it into my pocket.

"What do you expect me to do when I can barely breathe without a blade at my side?"

I walked into the church naturally, without even knocking.

The class would end soon, and if we were waiting for Isabel, it might be about 30 minutes.

The only people inside were a few young girls halfheartedly sweeping the floor.

I looked around, then sat wherever.

"I’ve never liked the atmosphere in places like this."

"Why? It’s calm. Even if you’re not devout, it feels kind of reverent."

"I once ate my own severed finger here.

When the priest made it regrow, I ate it again.

Sometimes we even had little intestine parties."

"……."

"But it did keep me alive until now.

For both me and you, this place should be one we hate."

If they’d killed me back then, none of this would have happened.

Of course, the demons would still have killed people, but at least not all of them would have died.

"That was just that one priest…."

"I know. They’re not all like that.

I can admit it now."

Just as not all demons were wicked, cannibalistic monsters, not all priests or church folks were the same.

That much was obvious.

Not everyone could be evil.

I knew that, but I hadn’t wanted to accept it.

Even if it meant being tortured to death.

After dying dozens of times, though, some of that stubbornness had worn away.

The best solution was definitely to put a hole in the head.

Though there were a lot of problems with doing that now.

While I was thinking about all this and chatting with Theo, a girl in a nun’s habit approached us, having finished cleaning.

At first, she stared at Theo, practically drooling over his face, but then she asked what we needed.

"What brings you here?"

"I’m just waiting for a friend—well, a person. Isabel."

I wasn’t sure if she was really a friend.

For all I knew, I was more like an enemy to Isabel.

"Oh, Sister Isabel should be back soon!

But, um, I don’t think anyone said they’d be visiting. Can I get your name?"

I turned to the girl and told her my name.

"You… you're…."

The girl dropped her broom.

I stood, bent down, and picked it up for her.

She stared at my face for a long time, let out a small scream, and then ran off somewhere.

She didn't even take the broom.

"Maybe I should have worn a mask."

"Then they'd have kicked you out."

"And here I thought I'd put out my cigar for nothing since Isabel isn't even here."

"…She'll be here soon."

"Alright."

After a while, people did show up.

I was a bit disappointed it wasn't Isabel.

And it wasn't just one person—there were several.

They held brooms and tools, even a scythe that looked like it was meant for tending the garden next to the church.

A girl who seemed a couple of years younger than Isabel, but still the oldest among them, stepped forward to speak to me.

Her hand pointed accusingly at me, but it trembled violently. Her expression was filled with fear.

"W-what are you planning to do this time?! Get out!"

This was a bit of a problem.

Theo looked at me with a tired expression, rubbed his face, and muttered quietly enough for only me to hear.

"What the hell did you do here for them to act like this?"

"I dragged out the demons hiding inside and probably roughed up a half-demon nun a bit."

"A bit?"

"…Relatively speaking, a bit."

"Yeah, you should've been kicked out."

I almost said, "At least I didn't kill her," but I shut my mouth.

That wasn't something a truly remorseful person would say.

It might be too much to ask for real repentance from me.

All I felt was mild regret, not the deep, lingering guilt that one might expect.

I'd never share these inner thoughts with anyone.

Going forward, I had to atone, to live a bit more decently, as a somewhat better person.

Why? Because Theo said so…?

The thought that maybe I had just shifted my dependency onto Theo crossed my mind, but I intentionally pushed it aside.

I spoke gently to the trembling young nun.

"I told you, I'm here to see Isabel."

"Y-you're here to kill my sister, aren't you? Just like when you took away those patients and children!"

"I just want to talk. See? I'm not holding anything."

If she swung that cute little blade she was holding, it might make my skin a bit ragged, but it probably wouldn't hurt too much.

She seemed so delicate. If I ended up covered in blood, the feeling of slicing through skin might shock her into running away.

The girl, driven by emotion, seemed to decide to believe me when I said I was only here to talk rather than attack me.

At least, she hadn't swung the weapon at me, so that must have been the case.

"…If Frau or Seria see you, they might have a fit and pass out.

I'll tell Sister Isabel, so please, just leave."

Those must be the nuns who got beaten up by my subordinates.

I glanced at Theo, and he nodded.

If not here at the church, where else could I talk to her?

Wherever it was, it wasn’t likely to be a pleasant conversation.

I agreed and stood up.

Feeling slightly stuffy, I took out the cigar I had cut earlier and bit down on it. I wanted to light it, but I realized I’d used up all my scrolls.

Under a tree next to the church, I asked Theo to light it for me. He produced a small flame at his fingertip.

"They’re pretty brave."

"What is?"

"They must have been scared, but they still stood up to an evil villain."

"…I guess."

"If I were to make a small excuse, I treated them relatively gently.

Even when they charged at me, I just kicked them away—I didn’t kill them."

I couldn’t help but find it a bit absurd even as I said it, but it was the truth.

"…You should cut down on that kind of bullshit. It’d make your life better."

"I agree."

"By the way, where did all your subordinates go?"

"I don’t know. I gave them enough money to live comfortably forever, as long as they didn’t get too extravagant, and let them go."

I knew, but I kept my mouth shut so I wouldn’t end up hunting them down.

Marco was probably still gambling in the back alleys, throwing away any money he could get his hands on.

The old butler was likely living a peaceful retirement with his wife, occasionally grabbing his rifle and going on a little hunting trip if some punk kids showed up.

That old man had too fiery a personality.

The cigar smoke had a sweet note to it today.

When I brought it closer to smell, I caught a mix of fruity and chocolatey scents.

"Is this really your taste? You’re not a kid, you know."

"…I spent my own money on it, so just shut up and smoke it."

Right, last time I'd been smoking his.

But fruit-flavored?

I could tolerate chocolate, but fruit was a bit much.

It smelled too much like dried fruit, especially raisins.

"Next time, something with a hint of oak—hmm?"

As I thought that, I took another drag of the cigar, and suddenly, my wrist went flying into the air.

I quickly drew my gun with my right hand, checked where the spell had come from, and then put it back in its holster.

"…What the hell are you thinking, coming back here?

And with Theo, who hasn't been seen in ages!

Did you think I'd just let it happen like last time?"

"Don't worry about me."

"How can I not worry? You disappear for ages and then show up with this crazy woman out of nowhere?!"

"Ellen's the one who said she wanted to talk."

I didn't want to dirty the clothes Ethel had given me, so I let the blood just drip to the ground.

The rate it was flowing didn't look good, but if it got too bad, Theo would do something about it.

"Look, I get that you're angry, but I'm feeling a bit dizzy.

Can I pick up my wrist and reattach it?"

Maybe I shouldn't have said that.

Isabel's face twisted in anger, and she shot another spell at me.

Thankfully, it didn't cut anything off this time. It just felt like getting hit by a passing carriage.

I crashed into a tree, but I wouldn't die.

Isabel approached me, but instead of kicking me, she set her foot against the tree.

I could see her underwear, but it didn’t seem like the right time to mention it.

"Talk?"

"…Yes."

"When I asked to talk last time, what did you say?"

I couldn’t remember.

By the time I had gone to see Isabel, I wasn’t really acting on my own will—just moving forward by sheer inertia.

Whatever I said, it would just sound like an excuse.

So I kept my mouth shut.

Like Theo said, whenever I opened my mouth, it was only bullshit anyway.

"Talking is only possible when you’re able to kill the other person with a flick of your finger, you said."

For a moment, I thought this might be the end, so I looked at Theo.

He had just been sitting there earlier, but now he was gripping his sword handle with a tense expression, smoke curling from his cigar.

"Alright, what did you want to say?"

"…I came to apologize."

"……?"

I was being sincere.

Chapter 81

"I don't know what the hell is going on."

Isabel stood there thinking for a moment, and then, as if something clicked in her, she kicked me in the head.

Getting kicked wasn’t the worst part—but the stomping that followed made it feel like my skull was about to split open.

Wouldn’t be too bad to just turn into a tomato like this.

This was how it was supposed to be from the start.

Ethel was the weird one.

"What the hell are you suddenly babbling about?"

Isabel asked as she eased up a little on the pressure she was applying with her foot.

Only then was I able to speak.

"Exactly what I said. I just got back from apologizing to Ethel."

"So, did she accept it?"

Judging by the mocking tone, she was probably assuming Ethel didn't.

Yeah, that’d be accurate.

"As if she would, after everything you’ve done—"

"She did."

At those words, Isabel scrunched her face and floated one of those hovering lights closer to me.

I wasn’t exactly sure what it was, but it felt kind of like she was pointing a gun at my temple.

"You're still lying? Even now?"

"Right? Honestly, it might all just be my lie.

Maybe everything that happened this morning was just me grinning like an idiot, hallucinating."

Isabel bit down hard on her lip.

She looked like she was really in pain, with blood starting to drip.

Didn’t expect her to kick me in the gut next.

"Don't give me that bullshit. I still can't forget you laughing your ass off while saying you poked five holes in Ethel’s stomach after gouging my eyes out."

Then she kicked me in the face again.

"Yeah, fuck, fine. Let’s say I let that slide.

You're dangerous enough that with just a chant you could kill me.”

Isabel was definitely strong.

Not quite at Theo’s level, but still—without a surprise attack, I wouldn’t stand a chance.

If I hadn’t attacked first, she would’ve probably sliced through five or six of her subordinates.

Burned right through by that hovering light in front of me.

“What was it you said back then? That all the church bastards are garbage, so they shouldn’t complain about being treated like it?

Well, you don’t get to complain either. I’m just returning the favor.”

No complaints here.

I honestly deserved it—this was all fair punishment.

Like I said before, I expected Ethel to treat me this way too.

It’s just… that was probably because Ethel was weird.

Did I ever say I liked her that much?

Why, though?

I never thought we were close enough for that to actually mean something.

"Then what the hell were you thinking, having two powerless kids beat someone up?"

I wasn’t thinking about anything.

They were just in the way, so I did what I did.

That’s the kind of person I am.

Anything related to the church still fills me with that old fear and hatred, so maybe I was a little excessive.

No matter what I said, it’d all be an excuse.

Even an apology would just come off as disgusting.

And yet, that was all I had left to say.

"I'm sor… gahk."

My mouth got stomped.

One second I was tasting fruity chocolate from a cigar, and the next I was chewing on dirt. It was oddly depressing.

My lips split open. It hurt.

Maybe because I was losing blood, I couldn’t even find the strength to move.

"Right. You dragged off all the kids we were protecting and killed them, then wrapped up all your ‘duties,’ and now you wanna say sorry?

Don’t make me laugh. You should just die."

Even her kicking and cursing didn’t feel all that bad.

Still.

"…Ughk, Isabel."

Isabel’s kicking came to a stop.

If she really hated me that much, she could’ve just killed me and been done with it.

That’s how I used to handle things. So even if it was being done to me now, I didn’t resent it.

Theo had asked me at the end—did I really not want to live?

I’d said I did, but…

"…Then just kill me.

No apology from me will ever matter. Just do it.

All it takes is a flick of your finger and my head’s gone. So just do it."

As I said that, I reached out and touched the light floating in front of me.

The moment I pressed it with a finger, the tip burst into flames.

Fire always hurts like hell, but this felt like my skin was being ripped off.

Isabel's eyes went wide as she quickly canceled the spell.

"…Ha. So that’s what you came here for?

Too scared to kill yourself, so you wanted someone else to do it?"

She grabbed me by the collar.

She was much stronger than I was. I squirmed, but couldn’t move at all.

And I was starting to choke.

"You think killing you would make me feel better?

Fuck, I actually thought we were friends! Probably just me, huh?

This is all an act! That apology is bullshit too, isn’t it?"

It was an honor to hear her say she thought we were friends.

It meant more than I could express, thinking she actually felt close to me.

I really thought she didn’t care at all.

Which meant… the betrayal must have hurt even worse.

"Keh, haah! I-I mean… when I get all heated, sometimes I just, hahh, pull the trigger without thinking.

The complicated stuff… I'll think about it later."

Isabel, looking completely dazed, suddenly dropped to the ground like she lost all strength.

She muttered something under her breath, staggered up again, and picked up my severed hand.

Then she started reattaching it with a healing spell.

Was this her plan all along?

"Not a drop of blood on your clothes, huh…"

They weren’t even mine—Ethel gave them to me. I couldn’t get them too dirty.

There were a few bloodstains, but that couldn’t be helped.

"…Follow me."

Behind us, Theo looked relieved, his face awkward.

It was kind of funny, but I didn’t laugh. Not in front of Isabel.

"The kids are terrified of you, so I’m not taking you into the church."

Isabel pulled me up, brushed the dirt off my face and shoulders.

Her face looked like she might cry at any moment.

She took me and Theo to a nearby café.

Of course, none of us had any money, so Isabel paid for everyone.

"So? Why'd you come?"

"I came to apologize for everything that’s happened until now."

"…Really?"

"…Yeah."

"I don't know what's real or fake anymore with you.

You barged into the church, hugged me—like you’d never done before—and then stabbed me in the stomach. So don’t expect me to think you're the victim."

I was the one who went too far from the start.

"Honestly, even if I said I forgive you, I’m not sure I’d mean it.

You scare me. Even if you look weak now, I don’t know when you’ll turn again."

"If I do, Theo’ll split my head open."

"So why’d you disappear for so long, and then suddenly show up with Ellen?"

Hard to explain.

If I died, time would rewind.

Just for the two of us.

How do I even begin to say that?

Even not getting thrown in a psych ward would be a miracle.

…Then again, maybe there aren’t any psych wards here.

"…It’s complicated to explain."

"Figures. But if you can someday, tell me."

She really trusted me.

"Alright."

Isabel downed a sweet drink filled with lemon in one go and set the glass down.

She frowned, rubbing her temples, deep in thought for a while.

"Ellen."

Felt like an hour had passed.

Probably wasn’t even five minutes.

Isabel called my name.

"Yeah?"

"I… I don’t really care anymore. If you’re sorry, I’ll accept that and be done.

But later, come back. Go to the kids in the church and kneel. Tell them you were wrong."

She didn’t say when.

Probably when those kids she mentioned—who got beaten—were doing a little better.

Kneeling to apologize, huh.

Would that really be enough?

At least she didn’t tell me to stab myself in the gut and die, so I guess it was okay.

"I’ll do that."

"…And pay for all the furniture your subordinates smashed."

"I’ll replace everything in the church with new ones."

"…You don’t have to go that far."

"It’s hard just sitting here face to face with you.

I’m scared of you. I hate you.

It’s just… complicated. I can’t even explain it.

Later. When I’ve sorted it out, let’s talk again.

I’m leaving now, don’t follow me."

With that, Isabel stood up and walked out.

I turned to Theo.

"Doesn’t feel like anything’s been resolved."

"How could it be?

She just wants you to own up and apologize.

No one can fix this. It’s not like the demons you killed are coming back to life."

"There is one way to bring them back."

I said, pulling out a pistol.

Theo grabbed my hand and twisted it, taking the gun away.

Seems like everyone’s obsessed with wrecking my hands these days.

"Don’t."

"…Okay. Give me back the gun."

Theo emptied the bullets and handed the gun back.

Then, after a while, he muttered under his breath.

"Like hell you haven’t tried already, you lunatic."

"Sorry."

The words just slipped out.

What was I even apologizing for?

"Yeah."

For putting him through this?

For making him keep me alive?

Or maybe, for dragging him into a miserable, endless cycle when he didn't need to be?

I didn't know.

It just came out of me.

My eyes felt a little damp. I buried my face in the table and whispered "I'm sorry" so no one could hear.

I didn't know who I was apologizing to.

Alicia, Julian, Theo, Ethel, Isabel… maybe even the demons.

Or maybe I was just apologizing to the world for the fact that I was still alive.

Nothing had been resolved.

I'd just been forced to feel things I didn't want to feel.

Because doing all that and expecting forgiveness—was never going to make any sense.

Chapter 82

After meeting Isabel, I started attending the academy again.

I just wanted to lock myself up in my room, but what could I do when Theo said he wanted to graduate?

Theo still stuck close to me, but at least during class hours, he left me in Ethel's care.

Since I kept trying to die at random moments, he even told her that if things got dicey, she should just knock me out with a spell.

Even so, it's not like I try to do it constantly.

It's just—when I get a little down, or when that thing I called an apology starts gnawing at me, and the fact that they accepted it makes everything feel… off.

I was already twisted beyond repair—there's no way back from this.

Even if I blew my head off now, went back, and lived a peaceful life without killing any more demons, the memories would stay lodged in my head, slowly eating me from the inside.

Eventually, I'd snap again—like now—and start spinning up the slaughter factory all over again.

So in the end, I'd need something to rely on.

Like setting a goal… or clinging to someone.

Right now, I was clinging to Ethel.

No—that's not right. I was being clung to by her.

"…Ethel, how long are you going to stick to me like glue?"

"Theo-sunbae told me never to leave you alone no matter what."

"I'm not some lonely bunny, you know…"

"Anyway!"

The classes were just about magic theory or history. Nothing higher than what I'd already learned back at the mansion, so it's not like I needed to listen.

Ethel probably should've, though. She wasn't exactly the brightest.

She laughed and chatted like everything was normal, but it felt like she was tiptoeing on a high wire.

Ethel, me, and even Theo—we all avoided any talk that might make things heavy.

No one brought up the past or our families.

Like we were trying to erase it all.

At the same time, I felt like Alicia's presence inside me was fading away.

What I felt was probably guilt, and maybe the tiniest bit of relief.

The shame that followed was horrific, but still—why had I felt relieved?

Maybe I was just tired. Pathetically so, after repeating the same thing dozens of times.

I'd muttered over and over that I'd keep moving, even if my body melted into sludge, for Alicia's sake. But maybe that was all a lie.

Once that thought filled my head, I stared blankly at the empty air.

"Ellen, Ellen!"

Until Ethel started calling me after all the classes had ended.

"Ah, yeah. What?"

"…Are you really okay?"

"What do you mean."

Filthy, clinging, disgusting feelings bubbled up inside, but I couldn't take it out on Ethel.

I stood up, stared at my hand for a long time, and answered quietly.

And if I wasn't okay? Then what? I'd just freak out again like always and that would be the end of it.

"…I'm fine."

As we left the classroom, Theo was waiting up ahead.

Was this normal?

It felt like nothing had happened.

If I pretended to be my old self, everything would seem like it went back to normal.

No—seem like it. At least on the surface.

That feeling of disconnect started to wrap around my body again.

I wanted to blow my head off.

After class, I went home with Theo.

Whether it was my quiet, mostly empty mansion save for a few servants, or Theo's home with its warm, happy family—it didn't matter.

"Theo, you said you hated me, right?"

"…Why are you bringing this up now when we were just getting along?"

"It's nothing big. Just—could you strangle me for a bit?"

"…That is big."

"Anyway, strangle me hard enough that it feels like my neck's about to snap.

I kinda feel like dangling like Julian."

Whenever I got the urge to self-harm or die, wouldn't it be enough to just get beaten up or bullied by someone else?

Theo wouldn't actually kill me anyway.

"How long are you going to keep doing this?

You knew Isabel would act like that."

"Why are you suddenly bringing up Isabel?"

"…She wasn't ever normal, but now she's going around kneeling to those kids and apologizing to everyone, and you do this every day."

"That's not the reason."

Theo stared at me for a long time.

The back of my neck itched, so I scratched it hard.

The skin had peeled, and a bit of blood came out, but this kind of thing healed fast with some medicine I kept in the basement.

"I'm just trying to reduce the sense of disconnect however I can."

Ethel forgave me way too easily.

So did Isabel.

Even the kids around us, though they seemed hesitant, were kind to me after I brought them new furniture.

Even those half-demons my subordinates beat up.

The world felt a little off.

Was the game world always this full of peace and warmth?

Was it just my family that was broken?

Fine, let's say that's true.

Whether it's guilt or the sin of abandoning Alicia, I didn't know—but something kept tightening around my neck.

But in reality, I couldn't breathe for real, and that made my head feel like it was spinning.

If the body and mind are supposed to be one, then the pain should also happen in both.

I wasn't some Frenchman who draws coordinate planes and eats frogs with a grin.

I didn't believe I existed just because I thought, or that my body and mind were separate.

If my heart hurt, then my body should hurt too. That way I could be sure this wasn't just some shitty game world.

Otherwise, every time I had to scoop up my own guts, it'd be too fucking pathetic.

Now, the only one left to slice open my stomach was Theo.

Don't take it too seriously.

As always, it's just bullshit.

Everything I say is a lie, garbage, nonsense, madness, words worth getting stoned to death over.

I should get my tongue ripped out and nailed to a post to die drying out.

That's how I killed those who weren't even human.

Even if they were demons who ate people and burned things, there were some I killed who didn't do a thing. Even that succubus who protected kids at the orphanage.

When I strangle my own neck, I never really feel like I’m suffocating. All I do is keep tearing at my skin for no reason.

“Disconnect, huh?”

“See? Ethel just accepted my apology like it was nothing, and even Julius said okay, though he clearly didn’t like it.

Thankfully, the Count and his wife made it clear they wouldn’t forgive me.”

"Why the hell is that a good thing…?"

"Some things deserve forgiveness, and some don’t."

Theo gave me a look that said, who the hell are you to say that?

I am the one to say it.

I shouldn’t have been forgiven so easily—but I was.

Ethel should’ve blown my head off. Isabel should’ve torn my limbs apart and dumped what was left into a pen of starving pigs.

Pigs make it seem even more disgusting and meaningless than dogs or wolves.

That’s what punishment is.

Regret shouldn’t erase it.

“So what—you’re trying to say you’re someone who doesn’t deserve forgiveness?

It’s over. Nothing’s going to happen anymore.

Sure, some psychos might show up now and then, but none of them will be as awful as you!”

Hearing him say I was awful hurt my delicate heart.

What if, overcome with grief, I pointed a gun to my temple and pulled the trigger when it was just me and Ethel in the classroom?

"See? I’m still awful.

It’s not over.

We just hope it is."

"…Yeah, you’re fucking awful. Drove me nuts.

I thought over and over that I wanted you dead, and a few times, I did kill you.

But you just kept coming back to life, and sometimes you went after my family, wrecking everything around me with your own hands.

It's fucking unbearable. No matter how many times I stop you, it never ends."

Then what do you want me to do.

My neck itched like mad.

I scratched it.

My nails were trimmed so short the skin barely stayed on.

It was all a mess.

"…And I'm the worst of all.

In the end, I was the one telling you demons were people too and to stop doing this crazy shit, but I gave up.

My family, and the people I met at the academy… they meant more to me than demons ever could."

If I said that just now, it'd be an excuse.

If Theo said it, it was the truth.

I understood that. But I hated it so much I pulled out my gun and unloaded on him.

Gunshots inside the house weren't new, so the servants just sighed. No one came running.

I thought he'd dodge them all—but one bullet landed in his shoulder.

Theo scowled, pulled a tiny iron rod from the air to dig the bullet out, and poured potion on the wound.

"…What the hell are you doing, you lunatic."

"Ahaha, fuck. I asked you to strangle me, and you're here preaching.

Cut the crap, or I'll kill your damn parents nex—kghk!! Ackkk!!"

Bringing up family always worked fastest.

He had some moral line, so unless I said something like that, he wouldn't move.

A long time ago, I brought my subordinates to Theo’s house and opened fire.

Didn’t kill the whole family—but I think his mom and little sister died?

I was glad he didn’t kill them.

Kind of funny that I could think that after being the one who killed them.

The pressure on my neck that felt like it’d snap any second slowly loosened.

Air rushed into my lungs.

"You’ve lost all strength, haah… and why are you crying?"

"I hate you."

"Do you now."

I couldn’t meet his eyes.

"You get on top of me, strangle me, and then say that?

All I can say is—fuck you."

I couldn’t even say sorry.

Just—don’t come near me like you mean it.

83

Chapter 83

A lot happened between me and Theo, but honestly, whether it did or not doesn't matter.

How many times had I already watched my family die right before my eyes?

Something like this—I could just shrug it off like it was nothing.

Theo had probably blown off my head plenty of times too, so he'd be fine.

That's just the kind of person he was.

Strong, needlessly kind, with a ridiculous sense of responsibility.

Yeah.

Even now, we were keeping this slightly awkward distance like nothing had happened.

I didn't lie down in bed—just leaned against the wall and started reading a book.

The words didn't even sink in. I was only doing it to kill time.

At some point, I dozed off, and when I opened my eyes again, it was already dawn.

Theo was slumped on the couch, nodding off half-asleep.

If I really wanted to, I could take out my gun and blow my head off right now.

I'd have to stick the barrel in my mouth and pull the trigger to obliterate my brainstem.

Thinking that, I pulled out the gun—but then I looked at Theo's face.

Why couldn't I look at him earlier?

And why couldn't I bring myself to say I was sorry?

Maybe—just maybe—it was because I didn't want this fragile connection to break.

If that was it… then what should I do?

"Hey, Theo."

He didn't wake. Must've been in a deep sleep.

Lately, he sometimes slept like this—deeply, as if he really believed I wouldn't kill myself.

Or maybe he was confident he'd wake up in time and save me if I tried anything.

I doubted even Theo could bring back someone with a blown-out brainstem—so maybe he just trusted me.

Why was I hearing his voice even though he was asleep?

All the curses Theo had thrown at me so far echoed in my ears.

What was more grotesque than all that rage-filled yelling was probably the sight of me bringing up Alicia while Theo clung to his dead little sister, sobbing.

Did he say something like, "Someone like you should just die"?

What did I reply again?

Something like, “Sure, whatever,” and then I think I blew my own head off.

I wasn’t expecting anything noble out of it, but still—I didn’t want to hear that.

Even though I always ended up killing myself after hearing those words, I guess deep down I’d still hoped he might try to save me.

It was pathetic how ugly that hope looked now.

I wanted to apologize, and just like I did with Ethel, I wanted to make up with Theo too.

I didn’t want to hear that I’d been lying all along.

Sure, at first, I approached him because he was the protagonist—but after a while, it just felt comfortable, like being with Ethel.

I liked how he didn’t brag, even when he was out there hunting down grotesque, wicked villains and slicing off their heads.

Usually, people who did that kind of thing would start spouting bullshit like “Marry me someday,” while hitting on me.

But if they ever found out the truth about the Speyer family, they’d all run screaming with their tails between their legs.

You didn’t run—you stood your ground. I could give you extra credit for that.

"Theo."

"What?"

"I can’t say this sober. Let me go grab the booze I hid a while back."

"…Wait, let me put on my shoes."

Of course he didn’t want to leave me alone.

I went deep into the room where I used to keep my things and dug out a box stuffed with liquor.

It hadn’t been touched in a while—dust was everywhere.

Not the kind of stuff you drink straight from the bottle, but I couldn’t be bothered to get glasses.

I just tossed one of the bottles to Theo and popped open another one.

I didn’t have a corkscrew, so I pulled the dagger from my thigh and carefully twisted the cork out.

Theo looked at the bottle, unsure what to do, so I just threw the dagger at him too.

I thought about clinking bottles, but we weren’t really the type to toast.

So I just downed the alcohol.

I hadn’t had any in a while, and the strong stuff hit me fast—the world started spinning.

This dizzy feeling wasn’t entirely unpleasant.

That is, if the people I’d killed weren’t standing in front of me.

Theo’s rotting, zombie-like corpses were glaring at me.

Ethel was beside them, a hole in her forehead, staring at me with hollow eyes. Isabel and Diana were leaning next to her.

All standing on a pile of Alicia’s corpses.

Maybe it was time these hallucinations and nightmares got a little more creative.

I’d seen them not just a few, but dozens of times—at this point they weren’t scary, just cliché.

Waking up from a nightmare always felt awful for a simple reason.

Even if the contents were horrifying, all I remembered was that something had shown up. Nothing more.

It’s like rereading a novel you loved, after enough time has passed to forget everything—you enjoy it all over again.

But I replayed those scenes in my head constantly, even without the hallucinations or nightmares.

All it did was make me feel worse.

I wanted to cling to someone, but I always felt that way—so it didn’t help anymore.

"Not drinking?"

"…You wake me up and then feed me booze. What kind of mood swing is this?"

"When the alcohol kicks in, your face flushes and your head spins.

It messes with your judgment. That way, you can say the stuff you’d never say sober."

If you added a bit of weed to a cigarette, it’d be perfect.

But I hated the stink of weed.

Cigarettes you could mask with flavors, but weed had this awful stench.

I pulled out a cigar like always, took a long time lighting it, and finally clamped it between my lips as the smoke began to rise.

"I'm sorry, Theo.

Sorry for being alive, and sorry for everything I’ve done up till now.

Actually, maybe you’re the one I should’ve apologized to first."

There were plenty of things I didn’t like about him, sure, but I’d still gone too far.

I still remembered when I cried and came at him screaming, asking why his family got to live when Alicia didn’t.

I’d shown him countless brutal deaths—people dying miserably.

Hoping it’d break him.

At some point, when he tried to save me, I’d blow my head off again without warning, or pretend to go along before killing him instead.

I knew what it felt like to lose someone you tried to save.

And I still threw it back at him.

Saying sorry now doesn’t mean shit.

"But whether it’s my pride or just because you piss me off so much, I couldn’t bring myself to apologize."

I covered my face with both hands and collapsed onto the bed.

After a long while, Theo spoke.

"Sorry for killing you over and over without listening."

"I’m still alive, so it’s fine."

"…How did it end up like this?"

"Beats me."

"Sorry I couldn’t save my sister."

"In this kind of atmosphere, I can’t exactly nag you about it. So it’s oka—"

"Sorry I told you to give up."

I couldn’t say anything.

It wasn’t that I got choked up.

It was like the words just… got stuck.

"You know this doesn’t mean we’re making up, right?"

"Yeah, I know."

Theo lit a cigar too.

We’d been stuck together so long that even though we hated each other, we’d started to resemble one another.

Sometimes when I caught myself picking up his habits, it creeped me out.

"I nodded… but I wonder if I really meant it.

Or if I was just so soaked in depression that I nodded without thinking."

"I dunno. If you don’t know, then nobody does."

My head spun.

"You took all the twisted emotions, all my obsession with Alicia, my grief, my life… You took everything."

I walked over and snatched the cigarette out of Theo’s mouth.

Then I just tossed it behind me.

If it caused a fire, so what? Theo would put it out.

Or we'd both burn to death together.

"That's why—don't you think I should get something in return?"

Wasn't this the kind of story where the great protagonist goes through all sorts of adventures, grows stronger, and falls in love with the heroines?

If it's just love, I figured I could steal that much.

I brought my lips to his, and let our breaths mix.

The bitter metallic tang of alcohol lingered in my mouth, layered with the distinct taste of his cigar.

And then—I bit down on Theo's tongue.

Didn't sever it. Just enough to shred it.

The kiss tasted like blood and iron.

"Don't go near Isabel.

Ah, not that it matters. You'll be my husband soon anyway.

Since you're a church guy and all."

"……You're insane."

"Now, now. That's nothing new. I'm just a little different from everyone else.

But then again—aren't you the same?"

I wiped the blood off my lips with my sleeve.

Then I glanced at the mirror and saw myself grinning.

A half-dead thing, smiling like it was still alive.

"Ethel's disqualified. Mm. Two girls can't get married anyway, so let's say she's your mistress."

My relationship with Theo wasn't love.

It's just that, after taking too much from each other—good and bad—we ended up a tangled mess.

Once love, hate, and anger get mixed beyond separation, other people just see it as broken.

"With all your epic tales, the academy head, high-ranking nobles coveting your powers, all those beautiful girls around you, and close friends—

Sounds like a successful life, right? But now the only thing you get to have… is me."

Giving up everything you had, only to end up with a madwoman like me?

I guess it was still a bit short for the price of giving up Alicia.

84

Chapter 84

I listened as Theo heard my whisper and suddenly started crying.

No.

It wasn't that he cried after hearing my words; it was something different.

He was crying while staring at something, as if he saw a hallucination in the empty air.

He kept looking at something in the air, sobbing and laughing repeatedly for a long time.

Had alcohol driven him mad?

I thought I should give up on pouring alcohol into this guy for a while.

"Ahaha, does being with me feel that unfair to you?

Even I'd feel hurt if you started crying."

"…It's, it's, it's over. Finally."

His voice sounded horribly hollow.

It was the kind of empty voice that seemed to resent the heavens, as if asking why such a thing came to him now.

It felt oddly similar to the emotion I had when I mumbled to myself after being forgiven by Ethel, wondering if this was right.

"What's over? You won't even let me die."

"Yeah, I was stopping you from dying. That's over now too."

Theo pushed me away as I clung to him.

Before I knew it, he'd taken the pistol from my waist and all the daggers strapped to the belt around my thigh.

"G-give them back."

His eyes scared me.

Was he angry?

Because I'd treated him too harshly until now?

I felt a bit confused that this guy, who'd never reacted before, was suddenly angry now.

"You give me back what you took from me."

Instead of drawing the sword at his waist, he approached me holding the one he'd taken from me.

Was he going to kill me?

Maybe it was all an act—maybe even his demand for an apology was just a ploy to restore things with Ethel and Isabel.

When someone who'd already crumbled once rebuilt something only for it to collapse again, it was hard to get back up.

Yeah, honestly, it was overwhelming.

If Theo betrayed me here…

"Even if you tell me to give it back, I don't even know what to return, so how can I?

Everything I took from you was ruined long ago. I can't give it back."

My words dragged on.

It wasn't like me.

I didn’t know why I was acting like this.

Was it because I’d been betrayed?

No, there was no need to use the word “betrayal.”

I’d always been the one making a fuss on my own, never asking for the other person’s opinion, so thinking of us as allies or friends was strange…

Fuck, he did call me a friend, didn’t he?

He said he didn’t hate me, even if he found me annoying.

Had he lied so calmly with that composed face?

“Yeah, you always just took from me.

You didn’t kill them yourself, but…

No, fuck, it was basically the same as you killing them.

Do you remember what you said to me when I was crying after Mom and Irma died!?”

Even if I remembered, I wouldn’t say I did.

I hadn’t thought he’d forgive me just because I said sorry, but I never imagined that after struggling so hard to keep myself alive and finally seeing a path forward, he’d try to kill me.

Maybe it was divine punishment for trying to push Alicia to the back of my mind.

If someone like me could live happily after doing such things, there’d be no god in this world.

Though they say there’s some holy power floating around up there, bestowed by a god.

“You asked if I finally understood, didn’t you?

They died, so I couldn’t answer, but back then, I didn’t understand a fucking thing, you bitch.”

Even when I kicked him wildly with my feet, he didn’t seem fazed.

Probably because he really wasn’t. They say bullets don’t even pierce when you cloak your body in mana.

“S-stop talking.”

“What kind of crazy bastard would think of taking kids and killing them with their own hands, even if their family died?”

I gathered spit in my mouth and spat it at Theo’s face.

Maybe because I’d just bitten my tongue, it wasn’t spit so much as pure red blood.

Even without a weapon, my hands could still move.

I punched Theo’s face repeatedly until a dagger stabbed into my arm.

It hurt like hell.

I always felt it, but I really hated pain.

“…Now?”

I hated seeing someone in pain, and I hated being in pain myself.

But even if I hated it, I had to do whatever it took to get what I wanted.

“Well, live? What’s there to live for?

Forgive? What’s there to forgive? Just die.”

I’d gotten used to it, but the sensation of blood flowing from my body, the dizziness, and the pain from the wound were utterly unbearable.

Who’d like pain?

That’s why people inflict it on others.

Hateful, filthy, unbelievable, yeah.

I’d wanted to give up and die, but he forced me back to life and even made me resolve to keep living, and now?

I told him from the start.

Tie up my arms and legs, strap me to a bed, and shove food through a hose.

Let me live like that until I die of old age.

If he wanted to keep me alive, that’s how he should’ve done it.

Why, why now?

Just when I saw a bit of hope.

Just when I thought I could see a path forward.

He smashed it all.

“Now, fuck. You fucking bastard, fuck off.

If I die and come back, I’ll kill you, Ethel, and Isabel.

My specialty was skinning people your parents’ age alive—right in front of you, I’d skin…”

Suddenly, he started choking my neck.

I thrashed, kicked him in the groin with my still-moving legs, and flailed my whole body.

Not that it mattered much.

“You asked me to choke you, didn’t you?”

“Gah! Eh, hrrgh! Agh! Ehh, ugh!!”

I was dying again.

Would I forget this too?

Theo would remember it all.

He’d recall it someday.

Hopefully soon.

The sensation of my mind blacking out came as my vision darkened.

I was surely staring wide-eyed at the ceiling.

Then, for a moment, it felt like my consciousness expanded again…

“Ha, fuck. I can’t do it.”

“Aheeeeek!! Guheeeeek!!”

I clutched my just-choked neck and desperately gasped for air.

My lungs filled so much it was hard to believe this was a body that’d been dying for lack of air, and I kept inhaling and exhaling.

“Didn’t I say you’re the only thing I have?”

“Now, hey, huff. It hurts. Did you, realize? Hic.”

Bile leaked from my mouth, my breathing still unsteady.

Tears streamed down my face, but I forced a smile, not wanting to show weakness.

“Since you’re mine anyway, it doesn’t matter how I treat you, right?”

Theo came closer and started stripping my clothes.

I wasn’t in a school uniform—just light white underwear and a housecoat—so when his rough hands yanked them down, my bare body was exposed.

“W-wait, you were trying to kill me a second ago, what the fuck are you—mmph…”

“Shut up.”

If he was going to cover my mouth, he could’ve at least used his hand—this bastard shoved my panties into it instead.

I hadn’t planned on having a kid.

Even if I did, I wouldn’t have the confidence to love it.

And just like I’d always done, Theo was treating me the same way.

Not caring about the other person’s opinion, just forcing it with strength.

It didn’t feel great.

“Ugh, uhh, mmph, ahh…”

The dagger was still in my arm, and after not breathing for so long, the guy who’d just tried to kill me was now on top of me, moving his hips. It’d be weird if that felt good.

My sense of smell only brought awful odors.

The faint stench of urine from when I’d wet myself while being choked.

The smell of cigars on his breath, mixed with the hot, alcoholic stink.

The unique scent of skin and the smell that came with our bodies mingling.

I managed to push the panties out of my mouth with my tongue, and what came out wasn’t curses.

For some reason, it was a plea.

Maybe because I saw Theo's crying face.

This time, I didn't look away or run from his emotions, so why did it turn out like this?

"Guh, ugh, st-stop…"

They say it's so painful for small-framed people their first time, but thankfully, it wasn't that bad for me.

Physically, the pain in my lower body was less than the dagger in my arm or my choked neck.

But my heart hurt more.

Because I felt everything I touched got ruined.

Alicia died.

My parents died.

Julian died.

Ethel and Isabel, once fine and beautiful, became twisted messes.

And Theo, the one most deeply tied to me, was in this state.

People usually call sex an act of love.

There was none of that here.

Just two people who suddenly cried, exploded with violence, and now lay here venting their urges while drowning in self-loathing.

"I want, to cry, too, ha, ha…"

After a while, I felt a hot sensation filling me up inside.

There was no love.

No excitement, no happiness.

Not even sexual satisfaction.

Just two idiots lying on a bed, disappointed in themselves after mixing their bodies in a mire of emotions.

A long time passed.

Maybe because he was a decent guy, he wasn't the type to open a path forward and then push me off a cliff.

Not trash like me.

Well, he'd always been kind.

If you looked at it narrowly, you could even call him righteous.

"…I'm the one who got attacked, so why are you crying?"

"I hate you, enough to want to kill you.

But why do I like you? Enough that I can't kill you."

"Yeah, why is that?"

How could we know how people feel?

You or me.

"Light a cigar and put it in my mouth.

I can't do anything."

My body had no strength.

I could barely wiggle my fingers, and that was it.

“Sorry.”

“Yeah.”

“Sorry.”

Theo kept repeating that he was sorry, and I kept answering, “Yeah.”

Because it wasn’t okay.

And I answered again when he said sorry once more.

“Theo, I’m sorry too.”

I didn’t hear that it was okay.

Because it wouldn’t be.

“Yeah.”

Chapter 85

I said, “In countless heroic tales, your abilities—coveted by the academy president and various high-ranking nobles—along with the pretty women surrounding you and your close friends.

At a glance, it sounds like a successful life, but now, the only thing you can have is me.”

It didn’t matter.

Because everything around me, you took it all.

I was lucky to have even one thing left in my hands.

Yeah, you.

I figured I’d just live with you like this.

I didn’t know if there’d be happiness or something grand in it, but I thought if I kept living, a positive future might come someday.

I managed to keep you alive somehow, even though you were always trying to die.

You, who thought reconciliation or forgiveness was impossible, were forgiven by Isabel.

While attending the academy, I started seeing you smile sometimes, like the girl you used to be…

Yeah, the ordinary girl who liked books, didn’t talk much but still wanted to chat sometimes, and got shy every now and then—I began to see that side of you again.

Our first kiss tasted of blood, a nauseating alcohol stench, and the bitter scent of cigars.

The sensation in my mouth felt like it represented our relationship, and it made me feel oddly amused.

It wasn’t love—too many horrific things had happened between us for it to be pure emotion.

Ellen lost everything, but I still had precious things left alive, which made it even worse.

I knew Ellen was jealous of me.

And that she felt self-loathing, inferiority, and wanted to die.

[NORMAL END NO.8: Wrapped Up Plainly!]

[Tips: Small things might still happen going forward, but finally, it’s all over.

Still, if you want a happy ending, kill the heroine in front of you and start over!

If you do it now, maybe you can set everything back to how it was?]

The end?

The demons were all slaughtered, and people’s hearts were left tattered and scarred.

Innocent people unrelated to the evil died, and so many lost their purpose in life.

And this was really the end?

Was this ordinary?

It was utterly horrific.

If it was over, then it was over.

That useless tip always mocked me and turned back time.

At least it wasn’t rewinding now.

“…It’s, it’s, over. Finally.”

Did that mean I didn’t have to repeat it anymore?

Could I just give up and live like this?

But I wasn't sure if this was right.

I remembered a girl named Petra I used to be close to.

What she did, what kind of person she was—those memories were fading now.

But I clearly remembered that Ellen killed her this time too.

The memory of her grinning after killing my family in front of me and then committing suicide flashed through my mind.

Even now, the Ellens I killed were staring at me, sneering, and spouting nonsense.

A friend I got along with at the academy was murdered by Ellen too.

Was he the one good at magic?

I didn't know—lately, I'd seen Ellen storm into his house right after a reset, claiming she was dangerous, and burn him alive so many times.

He had an older brother, didn't he?

Graduated from the academy too, some crazy guy advocating for demon rights.

As if people would accept that.

Ethel lost everyone she lived with like family, they said.

Isabel forgave Ellen even after having her eyes gouged out and her stomach and chest riddled with bullets.

Though it was obvious she was trembling.

Diana wandered around with the kids with hollow eyes but always went home first and locked herself in her room.

I couldn’t care for her. I always had to stick by Ellen to keep her from dying.

“What’s over? You won’t even let me die.”

“Yeah, I was stopping you from dying. That’s over now too.”

That damn status window never lied.

It said if I wanted a happy future, I should kill the heroine in front of me.

That I might be able to go back.

Which meant I might not be able to.

So if Ellen was gone now, maybe—just maybe—everyone could live happily?

Could I miraculously save Ellen’s little sister and not have to worry about the demons disappearing?

Would Ellen finally stop her insane rampages?

If things went wrong, she’d kill my family too, but maybe I wouldn’t have to see that anymore…

I pushed Ellen off me and took all the weapons she had.

She asked me to give them back.

Give what back?

After everything you took from me.

You even took my happy future and said the only thing I could have now was you.

Ellen looked at me with confused eyes, her usual carefree expression crumbling as she pleaded.

“Even if you tell me to give it back, I don’t even know what to return, so how can I?

Everything I took from you was ruined long ago. I can’t give it back.”

Was Ellen panicking?

Normally, she’d scowl and get furious at this point.

Did she suddenly want to live now… fuck.

I was the one who made her want to live.

Did I pretend to give hope to a dying person just to ruin her again?

Telling her she might be happy in the future?

I didn’t know what this feeling was.

My heart was boiling, but my head screamed that I shouldn’t act like this.

My eyes felt like they were burning.

Ellen deserved this, didn’t she?

She was literal human garbage.

It was fine to kill her, right?

I’d killed her so many times already.

It was just another repeat.

Always cycling with no hope, no progress—but now, I saw a glimmer of something better.

With that thought, I berated Ellen with words.

I told her it was a sin for trash like her to even think of living.

Ellen’s expressions were varied.

Normally, no matter what insults she heard, she'd laugh or stay blank, but now she got angry.

Her face twisted, she burst into tears and pleaded, then stared into space with an empty look.

She seemed human.

She yelled that she'd kill my family.

I didn't want to hear it, so I stabbed the dagger I'd taken into Ellen's arm as she thrashed on the bed and hit me.

Ellen—who'd giggle through bursting guts, severed fingers, or being burned alive—started crying that it hurt.

Ellen, who never made a sound of pain even when her wrist was cut off or her body was covered in wounds!

I didn't want to hear it.

Especially not her blaming me.

So I started choking her.

Her face went beyond pale to blue, her mouth open and tongue sticking out, but no air could get in.

Ellen was dying.

If I kept squeezing, her neck would snap, and she'd die.

She said she lost everything and that I could only have her.

In other words, I lost everything, but I could still have Ellen.

Why did this lunatic, who always smiled even while dying, care about me so much?

Things were finally getting better, and Ellen was starting to seem human.

And now I had to destroy it with my own hands?

What did everything I'd done until now even mean?

If I kept living like this, I'd eventually achieve something, then toss it aside when it didn't suit me.

But that couldn't be right.

I should only feel hatred, loathing, disgust.

Had I grown attached just because we'd been together a little?

If I called this love, even a prostitute selling her body would laugh.

"Ha, fuck, I can't do it."

Even so, I couldn't kill Ellen.

What should I call this sticky emotion?

I couldn't whisper to Ellen that I loved her or liked her.

Neither could she.

We'd been through too much together to say such things.

I was just pissed off.

I went crazy on my own—yeah, I'd just drunk.

It must've been the alcohol making me feel this way.

To bury the fact that I'd tried to kill Ellen, I started forcing myself on her.

It was too messy and violent to call it an act between a man and woman.

But it was too full of emotions beyond instinct to dismiss it as mere animal mating.

“I want, to cry, too, ha, ha…”

Ellen, being pinned down, mumbled as she looked at my face.

I touched my eyes.

Why were tears falling now, when they wouldn’t come when I wanted to cry?

I didn’t cry even when Mom was murdered in front of me.

I couldn’t cry when I held Irma’s limp body.

“…I’m the one who got attacked, so why are you crying?”

After a while, Ellen, too weak to turn her head, stared at the ceiling and murmured.

“I hate you, enough to want to kill you.

But why do I like you? Enough that I can’t kill you.”

It was the truth.

“Yeah, why is that?”

Why, with a person like this?

“Light a cigar and put it in my mouth.

I can’t do anything.”

I knew she hated fruit-scented cigars, so I deliberately picked one and put it in her mouth.

“Sorry.”

What was I sorry to Ellen for?

For not saving your little sister.

For killing your brother in front of you over and over.

For trampling you all this time and spewing every kind of hatred at you.

For saving you on a whim, then trying to kill you again on a whim when things started looking up.

Each time I spoke, Ellen didn’t say it was okay—she just said, “Yeah.”

Then, she murmured softly.

“Theo, I’m sorry too.”

I answered the same way.

Because I wasn’t okay either.

That was just the kind of relationship we had.

Chapter 86

As I smoked the cigar, I realized the taste lingering in my mouth had a fruity scent.

If he was going to bring me one, it would’ve been enough to bring something soaked in oakwood scent.

I shifted slightly to get some sleep—then realized there was still a dagger stuck in my arm.

"…Could you take this out?"

"Ah."

With a dazed expression, Theo pulled the dagger out of my arm and used a healing spell on me.

Though my arm was back to normal, my hand trembled slightly—maybe the shock of what had just happened hadn't worn off yet.

Anyway, we fell asleep holding each other.

When I woke up and sighed at the mess the room was in, Theo flinched slightly beside me.

"We really thought sleeping on this bed like this was a good idea, huh?"

"…Yeah."

"I'm going to blame you. It's not wrong, after all."

"……."

Theo fell silent for a long while and looked around the room.

There were empty bottles strewn about, and the scent of strong alcohol filled the air—stronger than most bars—probably from liquor spilled on the floor.

Mixed in with that was the scent of sex and the stench left behind from last night’s accidental strangling.

"I’ll go make breakfast.

I’ll tell the servants to clean the room, so come to the dining room."

Saying that, Theo quickly got dressed and bolted out of the room.

Normally, he’d never leave me alone. Maybe now he trusted me a little.

I stared at the bloodied dagger and pistol on the bed for a long time.

Then I shook my head and dragged my heavy feet toward the bathroom.

My clothes were so torn and stretched that it was laughable. I stripped them off and tore open a scroll that summoned warm water.

After washing up lightly and drying off with a towel, I put on my uniform and headed to the dining room. On the table were buttered toast, eggs, and smoked meat.

I wasn't a fan of greasy food in the morning, but since he made it for me, I couldn’t complain.

Even while eating breakfast, Theo kept glancing at me nervously, his words hesitant.

"…Yesterday, nothing happened."

"Is that… enough?"

Enough? What was that supposed to mean?

"Enough for what?"

"…I, sort of, well…

Yeah, I treated you badly."

"You said you didn’t care how you treated your belongings.

I don’t mind either. As long as I don’t die."

As I’d thought before—being strangled by someone else was far better than doing it to myself.

That feeling of losing control, the tension of not knowing when I might die, and the certainty that since it was Theo, I wouldn’t—it all helped clear my otherwise tormented mind.

"We just had a long, deep talk.

So long that we stayed up all night.

Sure, there was some conflict in the middle, but let’s just say we made up."

Theo looked at me with a slightly dazed expression, then nodded.

"Well, at least I can go to class now without worry.

Although thanks to someone convincing Ethel I’ve lost my mind, I’ll probably have to stick by her side all day."

"You don’t exactly hate being with Ethel."

"You don’t hate it either."

She didn’t keep talking endlessly like Ethel, so when I wanted peace, I preferred having Theo nearby.

Ethel was pretty, and it was pleasant to have her by my side—but she talked too much.

And I felt too guilty to tell her to stop.

"By the way, what did you mean by what you said yesterday?"

"What did we talk about yesterday?

If we did talk, it wasn’t just one or two things."

"You know, that part where you said you’d make Ethel your mistress or whatever…."

Ah, that.

Yeah, I’d just blurted it out while drunk without giving any context.

"Ethel likes me, and I like her too."

Maybe it was overly confident, but it was probably true.

After I apologized to the Count and Ethel came to me, worried—her reaction when I told her that as an adult, I’d marry Theo, and that even being naked with him didn’t bother me—her mix of embarrassment, jealousy, and trembling… it could only mean one thing.

"This world has magic and feels kind of like our old one, but with even more outdated parts."

Not that it mattered much.

It didn’t seem like whoever made this world had spent much effort on the worldbuilding.

People didn’t seem to care either.

"Some parts are extremely open, and others are extremely closed.

Like, it’s acceptable for a man to have many women, but marrying multiple women is taboo.

Most of those other women are high-end prostitutes or mistresses anyway."

"…So?"

"In that kind of world, do you think two women can have something real?"

Maybe. I didn’t really know either.

And I had no plans to find out.

I wasn’t going to leave Theo anyway.

"Two flowers in one hand. You don’t mind, do you?

It’s not like we can get married openly as women anyway."

If Ethel was okay with it, I’d gladly give Theo up.

Well, it’s not really giving up, is it?

Ethel would be mine too, and Theo already was.

Maybe it was the other way around.

Theo seemed fixated on the phrase “two flowers in one hand.”

I’d probably fall for it too if someone said it to me.

"So you think Ethel would go along with that?

Honestly, from the way you two interact, all I see is a victim and a perpetrator who just barely reconciled."

"If she didn’t like me, there’s no way she would’ve forgiven me."

"……Is that so?"

After finishing breakfast, I walked over to Theo.

Since there were servants around, I just lightly touched my lips to his cheek and pulled back, smiling.

"Anyway, if Ethel accepts."

As always, we began walking to the Academy.

The distance that used to be between us had shrunk to something like acquaintances walking side by side.

Which was kind of funny, considering we’d already slept together.

Theo still acted awkward.

I'd told him during breakfast—yesterday was nothing. Even if it was something, we resolved it through conversation.

"What's bothering you so much?"

"It's lame, I know—but I can't just act normal around someone I fought with the day before like you do…."

It's not lame.

Just being able to say that out loud was impressive.

Me? I was just pretending like always.

In a way, it felt like lying.

I should probably fix that one day.

"Theo."

"What."

"Do you still not understand what it means to have had me?"

"…How would I?"

"That big mansion is just a shallow exterior.

All the villas, parlors, the money to buy people at will, the power and prestige—that's all me."

The reason no one dared to tear apart this worn-out family—left tattered after my parents and Julian died—was simple.

If some petty noble tried to devour and digest it, no one knew when or where they'd be dragged off.

Just because the ones who did devour it were nobles didn't mean they wouldn't do something insane.

If I hadn't been from the Speyer family but some ordinary noble girl, I'd probably be trembling in fear, wondering who I'd be sold off to.

And praying to the heavens that it wouldn't be some bald, fat middle-aged man or an old man on the verge of losing his dentures.

Maybe.

If only Alicia had been left behind, that could've happened.

She was untrained, after all.

In that sense, I was lucky.

I'd been showing off since I was a child, but at least I had the ability to put a hole in someone's head if they tried anything with me.

What happened after that? I didn't know.

"And someone who has all that should probably start acting a little differently."

"I might've actually been touched if you hadn't spent this morning talking about turning that sweet girl into your mistress."

"You should've resisted when I said 'two flowers in one hand,' then."

"…That was…"

"So? Do you hate it?"

"I don't really mind."

Theo grinned and whispered into my ear.

Getting the same treatment I gave him last night and this morning felt strangely odd.

"And you really think that sweet Ethel would only like you?"

I think I pouted a little after hearing that.

But I was the one who had teasingly said it first.

So I just smiled like a fool, hiding my feelings.

How pathetic.

Getting caught up in my own words like this was just idiotic.

Back when Ethel and I were getting close, she used to talk about Theo all the time—like he was a god.

Back then, I never imagined it would come to this.

Back then, I never imagined I could be this ugly.

I used to think Theo was just a lucky idiot coasting through life thanks to his gifted abilities.

Inferiority, jealousy, or maybe a longing for something I couldn’t have.

I didn’t know.

"You're right."

I whispered by his ear, like a child throwing a tantrum.

"But I told you, in the end—it’s just me."

Then I darted off toward the classroom.

Anyway, leaving behind all those gloomy thoughts, after hearing Theo’s words, I kind of wanted to try that thing.

It was said to be bad for kids emotionally, but Ethel wasn’t a kid.

After living together in the mansion for a while, maybe I’d ask her like those childish games—“Do you like Mommy more, or Daddy?”

Would be fun to ask: “Do you like Theo? Or me?”

"Ellen, what are you thinking so hard about?

I’ve been calling you and you’re not answering."

"Ah, sorry. Just… felt relaxed, that’s all."

Because the things I was worrying about started to feel trivial.

Chapter 87

Sometimes, there are moments like that.

My vision would suddenly black out, and my body wouldn’t move as if bound by sleep paralysis.

Then slowly, I would sink—so deeply that it felt like I might suffocate in emptiness—and I would see myself.

That is, all the versions of myself so far.

They came in many forms.

Some were half-devoured by demons, others skewered on sharp stakes, or burned and tattered, dragging their feet as they walked over and sat down in the chair in front of me.

"…I really hate this."

I murmured with my face buried in my desk, low enough that Ethel wouldn’t hear.

I couldn’t see her, but she was probably listening to the lecture diligently.

Probably.

If the “you” from a few days ago saw you now, she’d laugh.

I mean, it’s ridiculous.

Just a little while ago, you were a pathetic wreck who couldn’t breathe unless you were being strangled, and now you’re here giggling and flirting.

Talking nonsense like Ethel is mine.

You should be begging with your head bowed and a gun in your hand, pleading for someone to blow your brains out.

Do you really think you’ve been forgiven?

She only accepted you because she’s scared of what’s behind you.

Because she’s afraid of the money, and the scary men with guns and swords you might send.

It wasn’t because she cared about a worthless thing like you.

"Fuck off."

What is there to fuck off about?

There’s nothing there.

Well, even if there were, it probably wouldn’t matter.

You would’ve been born as Julian.

That would’ve been something, huh?

At least Julian had a conscience.

He took responsibility.

Still, considering he was just as pathetic as you, maybe that’s a point off.

He couldn’t protect the one he loved, couldn’t protect his family, and all he had was his intellect—and he couldn’t even use that properly.

Even so, if Julian hadn’t been there, someone like you—an idiot with a bunch of wants and zero capability—would’ve rotted away in some room muttering nonsense in the dark until you blew your head off.

"Julian…"

Think about all the things you’ve done.

Seriously, I want to know—are you sane?

You killed people over and over, people who were like family to you, and now you think they’ll forgive you just because you love them?

Well… maybe.

But you shouldn’t be the one to say that.

Someone like you, with that disgusting mouth that spews filth every time it opens, should never say something like that so carelessly.

If you were even half a human being, you wouldn’t have.

It’s one thing to have a mouth—but you’ve taken that too far, haven’t you?

Do you really think all demons are beasts?

The ones who attacked that night were either cultists, hired thugs, or criminals with no sense of morality.

And I think humans have a higher percentage of that kind of filth.

People who boil their own villagers to save their children, who believe drinking the blood or eating the flesh of executed corpses brings good luck—and they think they're different from demons?

If you think having horns makes them different, then… right. You didn't think Black people were human either.

You really are insane.

"Why are you doing this again, after being quiet for so long…?"

You're seriously asking that?

You always know why. You just say it out loud because you're feeling like shit.

Among the demons you've killed, there were so many noble people.

People who tried to protect children—not even their own—while their bodies were full of holes and dying.

Prostitutes and street punks who begged you to spare just the children, even if they died themselves.

If they'd been human, they probably would've just taken the money and handed the kids over.

There were demons who had been to the Academy or were noble mistresses—people who might've had the power to protect themselves, who stood up and tried to stop you anyway.

Didn't you burn them all alive?

Said it was only proper to burn crazy beasts pretending to be human.

You even killed a regular person standing next to you, claiming they were enchanted by a demon.

How can a person do that?

How could you not feel anything while doing all of that?

And now you talk about love, and hate, sorrow and longing, happiness and joy?

That's bullshit.

You're just pretending to feel things.

Because someone who can commit those atrocities without blinking an eye could never truly feel.

You were a liar from the very start.

Even before you were Ellen, you were like that.

Pretending to get along with people, but always silently judging them—making mental lists of who to keep close and who to keep away.

Even your family.

Even if you bashed your head against a wall, it wouldn't change a thing.

Well, maybe you'd just become dumber.

But that'd just make you even more emotional, so maybe don't.

"Ellen, Ellen, what's wrong!?"

Well, try doing better with Ethel.

I'll be right here whispering this shit in your ear for the rest of your life.

It's weird, though. When Theo's around, I can't bring myself to talk.

Not sure why.

But hey, you won't be with him all the time, ha ha.

Whether you make friends, find someone to save you, realize love, reconcile with someone, or forget everything you've done—I'll always be right here by your side.

Because at the very least, you mustn't forget what you've done.

I'll drag you back from fantasy, so you can't escape reality.

If you ever have a kid, I'll ask if you think someone like you even deserves one. And if you try to love that child, I'll yell that a filthy, disgusting beast like you doesn't even know what love is.

Why are you even alive?

The truth is, you didn't die because you missed Alicia—you just wanted to run away.

You're a selfish, pathetic, useless piece of shit who only cares about herself.

If it were me, I'd be dead already.

Oh wait, I am dead?

And look at you wagging your tail, barking happily because the protagonist swooped in to save your sorry ass.

What can someone like you even do? You can't feel love, or emotions, or a future—even when you're in someone's arms.

You think, I could die like this and it wouldn't matter—and yet you're still trying to live.

It chuckled as it shoved its dangling eyeball back into the empty socket.

I'll keep showing up, again and again, cursing you to die.

I'll always remind you: You don't deserve to live like a human.

It's really just me talking to myself.

Because I'm you.

"…Do whatever."

Every time that happened, I'd stick a cigarette with a harsh scent between my lips, inhale deeply, and mutter how shitty the world was.

The me in front of me grinned and then scattered into the air.

At the same time, I saw Ethel shaking me, clearly panicked.

So what. Whatever I've done, I'd rather try living like Theo said, than rot away locked in a room drowning in misery.

For now, I'll cling to life shamelessly and keep brushing against others.

"…Ethel."

"Y-you had your eyes rolled back and were mumbling to yourself. It was terrifying…."

I'd only ever shown this kind of side in front of Theo, so I didn't even know my eyes had rolled back.

Theo must've been considerate—he never told me what happened during those times.

"What about class…?"

"It ended a long time ago."

"…That's good. At least I didn't interrupt."

Ethel looked at me with a slightly tearful face, her eyes brimming.

"Ethel, are you worried about me?"

"…Yeah."

"You know I'm not the kind of person worth worrying about, right?"

"I already told you, whatever you did in the past, it's okay…."

"Ah, I think you misunderstood. That's not what I meant."

"If I suddenly got bored of you, I could easily do whatever I want with a lot of people.

I could pay them off, send them out of the country to capture demons who aren't even inside the Empire anymore—things like that."

No students around. No teachers either.

Still, talking like this out loud felt a little risky.

Maybe my headache made me say it regardless.

I wanted Ethel to hear it.

"And I'm the kind of person who says cruel, reckless things just because I'm in a bad mood."

Yeah. Who am I to talk about Ethel being mine or whatever.

It's all up to her. If she wants to be with me, then fine. If she doesn't, then I'll back off.

"Even so, you're worried about me?"

Maybe I was feeling a little down.

Maybe Theo was, too.

Thinking about that made me want to keep chatting with a grin on my face.

Anyway, if Ethel didn't come closer, I'd keep my distance too.

Sometimes I wondered if just being near someone brought them misfortune.

Theo didn't matter.

I liked being near him, but that didn't mean I wished for his happiness.

This tangled mess of emotions crashing inside me always made me want to throw up.

And I just couldn’t understand Ethel.

I could understand Theo, even if I didn’t empathize with him. But with Ethel—I couldn’t even get to that first step.

"Yeah. I’ve always told you, haven’t I?"

I wondered what kind of face I made when I heard that.

Judging by the slight curve at the corner of my mouth when I touched it, I must’ve made a crooked smile.

At least my eyes didn’t move at all.

With a face wearing such a pathetic expression, I leaned toward Ethel.

We stared into each other’s eyes for a long time.

She looked like she’d frozen in surprise.

I brought my breath to her lips.

No mingling of tongues, no whispering. Just a light brush of skin—and then we pulled away.

Hoping that someday, I might understand.

88

Chapter 88

I graduated from the Academy without much trouble.

Well, calling it "without much trouble" might be a stretch—since I spent all my time during class clinging to Ethel, and afterward, Theo would show up and cause a scene.

Still, since Theo and I were living together in my house, even though we went home together, Ethel returned to her own estate, so things quieted down a little.

After Ethel and I shared our first kiss, kissing daily became the norm.

At first, it was just lip-to-lip, but before I knew it, we started exchanging breaths, and then eventually our tongues.

It wasn't about that typical erotic feeling. More than anything, it was the emotional weight of being able to do that with someone I liked.

But Ethel started to crave my body more and more.

I knew we were at that age, but I hadn't expected her sexual curiosity to be this intense.

Just having Ethel by my side had always felt like enough—but I guess that wasn't the case for her.

Her hand, which once gently stroked my back, slowly slipped under my clothes, then over my underwear, then onto bare skin.

Her chest was much bigger than mine, yet she kept fondling mine—I still don't know why.

One day, Ethel asked me:

"You have Theo-senpai… is it really okay to be doing this with me?"

And, "We're both girls… is this really okay?"

What did I say again?

I can't remember exactly.

I think I just felt like, why bother worrying about that kind of thing?

So one day, I brought Ethel to my estate.

With Theo, of course.

I went to the bath, cleaned myself thoroughly, then walked into the bedroom—still wet, completely nude—and started rolling around in bed with Theo.

Whispering into his ear about all the things I'd done with Ethel.

And casually throwing out spiteful little remarks.

Stuff like, You're no better than trash, since you're sleeping with trash like me.

At first, Theo pretended not to hear.

But, just like always, he muttered no, you're wrong, and then choked me while we kept going.

Thanks to that, the handprint-shaped bruises around my neck still haven't faded.

That moment—when it felt like I might stop breathing, like I was about to lose consciousness—the sudden gulp of air afterward was intoxicating. I couldn't even complain.

If not for that, I'd probably still be cutting my wrists every day.

Though, from Ethel's perspective, it must've looked like a horrifying scene.

Eventually, Ethel started trying to stop the two of us.

Honestly, I think it's a bit dumb to try interfering when we're both all worked up and tangled together.

When I was dazed from lack of oxygen, and Theo was mentally gone because of me… we both lunged at Ethel.

So now our relationship has become one of those things that's hard to explain to others.

But as long as we're okay with it, that's all that matters.

Anyway, my relationship with Isabel had become distant—just exchanging greetings when we ran into each other. And Diana eventually stopped showing up at the Academy and dropped out altogether.

Maybe Diana was the protagonist all along.

She never graduated—just disappeared.

She didn't accomplish anything, but protagonists like that are surprisingly common.

For all we know, she's doing something protagonist-like behind our backs right now.

She didn't stand out much, but she was undeniably competent.

And like I’d said before, I ended up marrying Theo.

It wasn’t some grand event with crowds of well-wishers.

We had Isabel officiate the ceremony and simply exchanged a few vows.

It felt more like performing in a short, silly play.

I wore a plain white dress, added a few accessories—it wasn’t flashy at all.

You could walk down the street in it, and it wouldn’t seem out of place.

Just a touch of “dressed up.”

If some fancy noble family saw it, they’d probably laugh.

Of course, they’d have a hole in their forehead right after.

Calling them "guests" would be a stretch, but the only ones present were Ethel and Theo’s family.

"…So that’s really it?"

Isabel gave a low hum, massaging the back of her neck as she spoke.

"What is?"

"You know, usually when someone says ‘wedding,’ it’s full of people offering congratulations, something a bit more grand…"

"But aside from Ethel, there’s no one to congratulate me. What do you want me to do?"

Even Theo’s family found me intimidating.

His mother and younger siblings acted politely—maybe because of my status or appearance—but it was like how a servant might treat someone of a much higher rank.

Not wrong exactly, but it made me feel awkward.

Back in the slums, even the thugs I ran with were people I could grumble and joke with.

I’d gotten help before, but I’d never been served.

And Theo’s father was outright scared of me.

From what Theo’s said, his family has all sorts of ties. So he probably knew what I’d done—and what happened to my family.

Even though he looked calm on the surface, I could feel it—that subtle tremor in his emotions when we shook hands or made eye contact.

Reading that sort of thing was my job, after all.

"Then what about you, Theo? You must have plenty of people you could've invited…"

At that, Theo hesitated, then said something ridiculous.

"…Ellen said it'd be too much."

I did say that, but I also told him it was fine to bring them.

Those people who trained in magic or swordsmanship—I told him it was okay.

But he said if they saw me, they'd probably try to cut me in half.

That the mage was a half-demon and would burn me alive.

It's a good thing they live outside the country.

"…Okay, yeah. That would be a bit much," Isabel muttered, clearly unsure what else to say.

I remember how excited she looked when I asked her to officiate.

Normally, you'd ask an older priest. Not a young girl—no matter how talented.

I did feel a little bad, like I'd tricked her somehow, but oh well.

Anyway, the "ceremony" was over quickly.

Afterward, we had a simple meal prepared by the estate, and Theo's family left early.

The rest of us crashed in my room, lounging on the couch and eating snacks.

Well—Isabel, mostly.

"I think this is the first wedding like this I've ever seen.

And I do mean that negatively."

"You dress up a couple at the right age and say they got married. What more do you need?"

"You didn't even bother to dress up!"

"I don't need to. I'm naturally radiant. No one here is prettier than me."

My chest might be on the smaller side, but my face is the best.

I’m trying to like myself more these days—so a little positive thinking won’t hurt.

"…Can I punch you?"

"As much as you wa—ow, gack!"

Isabel got up and actually punched me in the face.

She didn’t hit that hard, so it didn’t hurt, but still—it felt unfair.

"Theo, it’s our first day as a married couple and your bride just got hit. Aren’t you going to help me?"

"Well, um, yeah…"

"Just don’t cheat, okay? Ha-ha."

I thought things would change after graduation, but nothing has.

Sometimes Theo goes out and wipes out a local crime ring. Or buys new furniture. Or feeds orphans.

That’s about it.

Watching the half-demons I once hurt now smile and thank me makes things feel… complicated.

It’s not like I’m doing it for thanks or forgiveness. I’m just doing what Isabel told me to do.

And money? I’ve got more than enough.

Enough to wipe out every last demon in the Empire—so feeding a few kids is nothing.

Sure, there are still starving children in the slums. But Isabel never asked about them, so it’s not my concern.

"Oh, I meant to say—with permission, don’t cheat."

"…You’re saying it’s not cheating if it’s approved?" Isabel stared at Theo like he was some lunatic.

Theo scratched his head and tried to explain.

"I mean, technically Ellen did it first…"

Terrible defense. Not effective at all.

In situations like this, all you need to do is keep your mouth shut and bow your head.

"My kisses were full of platonic affection, thank you very much. I don’t even have a dick."

"……."

Ethel blushed deeply and buried her face in her hands.

Isabel stared at us like we were lunatics.

"Maybe… the God up there will look the other way as long as the parties involved are fine with it?"

"…So if it’s consensual, it’s not adultery?"

That question felt like cheating.

It was a little embarrassing, but hey—I’m the one she married.

"Well… I guess not…"

"Why am I hearing this nonsense on your wedding day, of all days?" Isabel groaned, clutching her head.

"And you, Ethel… what the hell…" she added, like someone betrayed by a trusted friend.

"You guys are okay with this?"

"More than okay—this is happiness."

Yeah, to most people, our relationship would look insane.

But I liked this moment.

"What’s wrong with liking both? I like them both, that’s all."

"…Do whatever you want."

After chatting for a while longer, Isabel returned to the church.

"Oh, right—when are you going to talk to Ethel’s parents?"

"…Huh?"

"You can’t just live like this forever without saying anything."

"If I go… won’t they kill me?"

I mean, it’s not like I was the one who orchestrated all this—Theo’s the one who looks like the rogue here.

89

Chapter 89

"Ah, uh, wh-what, all of a sudden…?"

Maybe she hadn’t processed what just happened.

Ethel stared at me blankly for a long time, then her face turned red—like a tomato ripening under the sun.

"I-It was my first kiss!?"

"Which means it'll be all the more special, right?

The sunlight’s red, the classroom’s empty except for us… A kiss in that kind of setting is romantic."

It probably made her even more flustered that the person was a girl—and me, at that.

And considering she’d just been trying to comfort me, getting her first kiss stolen out of nowhere probably felt disorienting.

"Did you… have someone you were dating?

You were always hanging out with me, so I figured not."

"I didn’t! But still! Kissing another girl is a little weird—mmph!"

Ethel let out a flustered yelp, so I covered her mouth with mine.

Then I pulled back, hugged her gently as she trembled slightly, and whispered into her ear.

I made sure my breath tickled her skin just a little as I spoke.

"Ethel, I get startled when you scream like that."

"O-okay, okay, just stop it already…"

"And it’s not weird at all.

It’s just something that can happen, like anything else."

"…Still."

"Did you hate it?"

Ethel didn’t answer.

I leaned in a little closer.

Those tear-brimmed eyes, her heavier breaths—whether from anger or fluster—and the flushed skin around her ear where I’d whispered… all of it made Ethel look more beautiful than usual.

"If you hated me getting close like this, I won’t do it anymore.

But you know we’re too close to just call each other friends.

And even calling us best friends wouldn’t feel right, would it?"

If I stared into her eyes and pronounced everything clearly, it’d convey the message more directly, but it wouldn’t carry the right emotion.

Words should always be used in the best possible moment.

When facing a prisoner with their fingernails and toenails all pulled out, I would casually toss around torture tools like it was an ordinary day, speaking lightly and playfully.

When speaking with Alicia, I always stayed serious—and truthful when I could.

With my parents, I bowed and served with all the respect of a loyal retainer before a king.

And right now, following my instincts, I felt it was more important to convey emotion than meaning.

"Maybe… I misunderstood."

Like leaning in close, speaking with a voice that trembled just enough to barely be heard.

This way, even as I absorbed her trembles and emotions, I could hide my own expression.

Though the downside was that I couldn’t see what expression Ethel was making, either.

"…I didn’t hate it."

"So you didn’t like it either, huh."

Ethel didn’t deny that.

A slight pang of negativity rose up in me, but this wasn’t normal for Ethel. If I took my time, I could convince her.

Theo taught me that persuasion doesn’t mean holding a gun to someone’s head or cutting their skin with a knife—it means talking.

"But it was just… too sudden.

You know how people imagine their first kiss—like after a sweet date, right at sunset, with just the right mood…"

That's a bit much.

My first time involved nausea, the smell of blood, torn flesh, and alcohol-soaked cigars.

The next was probably while being strangled.

I'd nearly died then.

"And you… you're with Theo-senpai…"

"You don't have to worry about that. I already got his permission."

"……?"

"Exactly what it sounds like."

Maybe we moved on from that a little too quickly to really call it permission, but Theo seemed to be okay with it.

"Anyway, remember when I asked you if you liked me?

You said yes, didn't you?"

"…Yeah."

Ethel still looked lost, turning her head from side to side, unable to focus on anything.

It kind of reminded me of a kid who'd been waiting all day for a sweet treat, only to finally taste it and realize it wasn't what they expected.

"If you really don't want this, just push me away right now.

And tomorrow morning, we'll pretend nothing ever happened."

As I gently stroked the back of Ethel's head, I kept talking.

"But one day, you'll grow up.

You'll get married to someone, and the time we spend together will start to shrink.

We'll grow apart.

More and more things will take priority over each other."

"And someday, I'll just be that friend you used to have. Are you really okay with that?"

Not that I'm exactly the "friend" type.

I'm the monster who put five holes in your stomach, the enemy your family loathes, and the one who didn't hesitate to kill the neighbor you used to play with.

Looking at us now, you'd think we were friendly classmates or something. Ridiculous.

Ethel didn't say no. In fact, she pulled me in tighter.

Then she buried her face into me, nuzzling gently.

She was probably shaking her head.

We held each other for a long time before awkwardly pulling apart.

Ethel wiped her face with the handkerchief she'd had in her arms—maybe she'd teared up a little.

"Ethel, do you like me?"

"…Yeah."

"Though I don't think anything will change between us right away."

"Whenever I'm with you, everything feels like it changes.

For better or worse."

I gently ran my hand over her slightly puffy eyes, then caressed her face softly.

She didn't seem to do any kind of skincare, but her skin was naturally good.

Ethel blinked wide-eyed, so I closed her eyes with my hand and leaned in even closer.

I could feel her heartbeat through her skin—she could probably feel mine, too.

This time it wasn't a clumsy or playful kiss.

It was sticky, slow—consensual.

Though I didn't use my tongue. That would've been too much.

After a long exchange of breath, I pulled away, and Ethel's eyes seemed to spin in circles.

Maybe from lack of air, or maybe from rising heat—her short, gasping breaths made her look all the more beautiful.

Contrasting those thoughts, I gently wiped her damp lips with my sleeve and muttered softly:

"Hmph… as long as I feel good, that's all that matters."

That's how I've always lived.

Repeating time dozens of times, trying to save Alicia no matter how much it hurt me—or how much it hurt Theo.

Killing demon after demon, killing everyone around me, refusing to stop, no matter how much blood was spilled.

I could've let some of them live. But I didn't. Not a single exception.

And now I've let go of Alicia.

Now I'm selfishly tossing the reason for my survival onto Ethel and Theo.

Yes. Everything I've done—it's all to make things easier for me. To feel good.

I discarded myself, dressed up the trash as something precious, and forced it into someone else's hands.

Now Ethel, draped in feelings of love or affection, would do her best to protect me, treasure me, love me.

Without even checking if any of it was actually reaching me.

I just hope it's not like pouring water into a bottomless jar.

I hope I can give back at least a fraction of what I receive.

After a while, Theo walked into the classroom.

Ethel turned beet red, then said she was leaving now that Theo had arrived, and bolted out of the room.

She even left behind her handkerchief and book.

"I don't mind peeking, but watching's not really my thing, you know."

"…You always came to get me after class. This is no different."

"That's true."

"And just like you said… it really seems like Ethel likes you."

"See? Why don't you ever believe me?

I’ve been talking to people and reading their feelings for years!"

"Except all your conversation partners were tied up and about to die.

Or you made them that way."

"If you nitpick like that, even I lose a bit of motivation."

Theo stepped in closer.

"Was it something like this?"

Then he hugged me.

Not tightly, just lightly lifting his arms and wrapping them around me.

Then, he kissed me.

Even though I bit his tongue, he didn’t flinch—just kept smiling, like it didn’t hurt.

It reminded me of myself.

"Uh… ah… I, I left it behind…"

Just then, I sensed movement behind me, and instinctively pulled out my pistol and pointed it.

And standing there… was Ethel.

Normally, I’d have picked up on that sooner. Was I getting dull?

Or maybe I found some sense of peace after biting someone’s tongue.

Not like I’m a vampire or anything.

In any case, the mood was thoroughly ruined.

"Ahaha, I tried to copy you out of jealousy, and now I’ve been caught."

"…Shut up."

"Still, things went way better than I expected."

"Better than expected?"

"In my head, you two were going to ignore each other for a few days, just sitting next to one another until Ethel broke the silence."

"You know, your personality isn't just bad—it’s actively malicious."

"What can I say?"

All my best ideas always end up like this.

Whether it’s instinct or nature, I don’t know.

Even if I know this isn’t the right way to live, once I set my mind to something, I can’t stop myself.

I’ve always lived a life where stopping meant dying.

And I mean that literally.

Back when I was under my parents, or slaughtering demons, or clashing with Theo day after day.

Every time I stopped, I died.

Probably still true now.

But at least I can choose the direction I move in.

If I take a wrong step, Theo will cut me down. Ethel will worry as I suffer.

That’s enough.

For now… I’m happy.

Even if some voice in my head is screaming that someone like me doesn’t deserve happiness.

Like I care.

A single puff of smoke, and it'll all be gone.

90

Chapter 90

After spending a casual night together, I pushed Theo a bit further toward the edge of the bed, where he was still sleeping, and snuggled closer to Ethel.

Since we were naked under the blanket, her body looked even more pronounced, and I couldn't help but feel a little aroused.

Just a little, mind you.

Theo and Ethel had both come at me like they were out to destroy my waist, leaving barely anything of me intact.

I gently stroked Ethel's hair as she lay there, and she scrunched her face before letting out a yawn and sitting up.

"…Did you sleep well, Ellen?"

"Yeah."

"It's already morning—yawn!"

"My back's killing me, so could you tell the staff to bring up breakfast?"

"Okay."

Theo, looking like death with his dark circles, was curled up and sleeping at the foot of the bed.

He clearly had no energy left—so why had he gone so wild last night?

It's not like he even put that much emotional weight into the whole marriage thing.

Feeling slightly annoyed, I rolled across the bed and kicked him, but—predictably—he didn't budge.

He just breathed softly, like nothing happened.

"I think I left my cigars around here…"

I pulled out the cigar box I'd stashed under the bed and took one out.

Sticking it between my lips, I lit it up.

Ethel didn't mind alcohol, but she absolutely refused to touch tobacco.

Once, out of curiosity, she tried inhaling when she saw me smoke and ended up coughing for a long time. Ever since then, she won't even look at the stuff.

After a while, Ethel, now freshly washed, started tidying up the room.

Teacups, empty bottles, half-burned cigar butts, that sort of thing.

She said it was more efficient to just cast a spell and gather everything in one spot than have the maids bend over and clean by hand.

If that's the case, you'd think there's no point in having staff, but I guess Ethel was trying to find her own way of being helpful, so I didn't stop her.

Eventually, the servants brought a light breakfast into the room.

I stuffed some bread and bacon into my mouth and downed a glass of milk.

Then I shoved some jam-covered bread into Theo's mouth too. That finally got him up—he started chewing with a bleary expression.

Swallowing it all, he muttered:

"…If you were gonna wake me, why not just say something?"

"Would you have believed me if I said I kicked you and you didn't even flinch?"

"…Maybe not. Sorry."

Stretching with a crack, Theo twisted his waist.

We ignored the cracking sound with practiced indifference.

"So, how was your first night as a married man?"

"…I thought I was going to die. Way tougher than expected."

Same here.

If Ethel hadn't been involved, I could've mocked Theo, maybe pinned him down and called him useless.

But with Ethel stuck to me the whole time, there was no winning.

"Today, we're going to visit Ethel's family."

Pfffft! Cough!

Theo spat out the milk he was drinking and started choking.

If he had just come from the bathroom like Ethel had, I might've actually gotten annoyed.

"I told you yesterday, didn't I?"

"…Shouldn't I get some time to mentally prepare?

You want me to say I married you and I'm dating Ethel?"

"Who's going to believe it if I say I'm dating both of you? They'll just say I'm talking nonsense."

They'd probably assume I was mocking them.

Julius, the Count and Countess—even Isabel still thinks Ethel is just Theo's lover, not mine too.

That's how people see things.

Which is why I have to stay with Theo—not that I mind.

"I'm so tired I think I might die. How about tomorrow instead…?" Theo suggested with an awkward smile.

Why did he have to smile so sadly—it almost made me feel bad.

But we had to get this over with.

Rather than say anything, I just kept smiling at him.

Eventually, he lowered his head and sighed.

"…Fine."

"I'll go wash up first.

Ethel, are you eating lunch here, or at your place?"

"Let's eat at my house! It's been a while!"

Ethel seemed genuinely happy that we'd be visiting her home.

I, on the other hand, felt like dying every time I set foot there.

Not figuratively—literally.

"Alright, I'll go wash up. Theo, you coming?"

"…Let me wallow in despair for a bit."

"Hey, that's my specialty. Don't steal my thing."

"…They say married couples start to resemble each other."

How was I even supposed to respond to that?

He really was starting to mimic my worst habits.

It was hard to answer, so I just brushed it off.

"Ha-ha, it's only been one day, you know."

I cleaned up in the bathroom, picked out some decent clothes, and also tucked a small hammer into the belt on my thigh.

You never know—if the Count or Julius try to kill Theo, I'll need a non-lethal option.

Guns and knives kill. A hammer just hurts—unless you mash someone to pulp.

Not that I think Theo's in any real danger.

They let me live, after all—they're not going to kill him.

Ethel took both our hands and happily hummed as she led the way.

"Why are you in such a good mood?"

"My parents have been pressuring me to get married lately! They keep bringing around these weird guys they call 'husband candidates.'"

Well, I suppose it is that age.

She did graduate a bit late, thanks to the Academy.

Ethel's mine.

No matter how good-looking or well-off those suitors might be, I can confidently say Ethel belongs to me.

Same as Theo.

"And my brother just got married, yet he's the one nagging me about settling down first!"

"…Probably because they think once you get married, you won't be involved with me anymore."

And honestly, if she built a new family with someone she barely knew, someone like me wouldn't even register anymore.

Mothers—except for the psychos in the Speyer family—tend to prioritize their children over everything else.

If Ethel had a child, I’m sure it’d be adorable.

Someone to love.

"…Well."

"But still, you’re going to stay with me, right?

Even if Theo’s hanging around too."

Back then, we would’ve blushed over a line like that.

Now, we kiss as naturally as breathing.

She must’ve had fruit for breakfast—her lips tasted sweet.

It was the same kind of fruitiness Theo liked. Their tastes really were surprisingly similar.

"I wanted to keep running away, never facing anything… but I guess that’s not so easy."

Maybe my guilt had faded over time.

Even Ethel and Isabel—who suffered a lot because of me—kept saying it was okay, treating me warmly.

Even when I tried to hold on to guilt and remorse, objectively, I was living too happy a life.

Not exactly fitting for someone like me.

Where had I heard that before?

"…Yeah, that’s why you came to apologize, wasn’t it?"

Was it?

Ethel’s face wasn’t the bright, cheerful one she usually wore.

It was cold and unreadable—like the expression I sometimes saw when looking at myself in the mirror.

A mask that looked solid but would shatter completely if nudged in just the right spot.

"Guess so."

We got dressed and left the estate.

There was a carriage, but I’d already paid off and fired everyone who could take care of the horses, so there were none.

Walking around in fancy clothes without a carriage was tough.

But was it tougher than what Theo had to do?

He was the one who'd have to speak, after all.

As we neared Ethel's estate, Theo's face began to sag—like an old man at death's door.

When the house came into view, he let out a soul-crushing sigh.

"…I really don't want to go in."

The servants standing by the door stepped aside immediately when they saw Ethel.

Of course, as I passed, they gave me their usual how dare she look.

I couldn't claim to be kind, but I was merciful enough not to react.

Some of them probably had holes in their bodies because of me. It's a bit much to ask them not to resent me.

Once inside, Julius was waiting, arms crossed.

I heard he got married. Probably inherited the estate too…

I hadn't seen his wife's face. In fact, the only people I'd really seen recently were Ethel, Theo, Isabel, and the orphans at the church.

Anyway, Ethel had made me promise.

That whenever I ran into this guy, I'd start by apologizing.

"I'm sor—"

Julius cut me off with a short laugh, like he couldn't believe it.

"How long are you going to keep doing that?

I don't know why you're here, but come in for now."

He wouldn't be laughing for long.

Julius led us to the guest room.

Theo said he had something to discuss with the Count and Countess, and Julius said he'd go fetch them.

I turned to look at Theo's face.

It was expressionless—but his eyes were trembling.

I couldn’t help but smile for the first time in a while.

As if to mock me, hallucinations of the demons who died here started appearing.

But I was used to it.

I touched the dagger strapped to my waist and made a shallow cut on my skin.

Then I closed my eyes, took a breath, and opened them again.

They were gone.

I couldn’t stay shackled by ghosts forever.

91

Chapter 91

Time passed, and the Count and Countess came to visit the guest room.

Our eyes met.

I didn’t avoid their gaze.

There was no reason to.

I was probably still the kind of person who made them uncomfortable just by showing up.

But that didn’t mean I could refuse to come along, which made things troublesome.

When I opened and closed my eyes, a half-burst corpse moved as if it were alive.

I rubbed my eyes, closed them again, and reopened them—everything was back to normal.

Maybe I should be thankful at least that it didn’t reek of blood.

At least it didn’t ruin my appetite.

Even the most diligent counselors working in the counseling room, despite getting paid well enough, usually just ate simple biscuits for meals.

Those tasteless, rock-hard biscuits didn’t make you gag even when you caught the stench that rose after showing off your guts, so to speak.

Still, I forced myself to chew on proper bread for a while, but eventually, I just started guzzling sugar water instead.

It felt like my head had gone a little bit broken.

Seeing hallucinations and hearing strange things all the time—no wonder I ended up like this.

That was why I hadn’t been sleeping properly lately, instead constantly mixing bodies with Ethel or Theo.

When we wore ourselves out confirming each other’s emotions and finally fell asleep, the nightmares came less often.

Even so, Ethel always worried, saying I groaned every time I slept.

And every time, I told her not to worry—that I wasn’t someone worth worrying over, so she could just leave me alone.

If it was really that uncomfortable, I said I'd sleep in another room, but I guess she didn't like that either.

"You again. What brings you here this time?"

"It's not me who came this time."

"…Then?"

I pointed to Theo beside me with my finger.

Theo clutched his head like he didn't know how to begin, then gave a small nod.

I hated visiting this mansion.

Even though the corpses on the floor didn't get stepped on, blood still oozed out with every step.

First, I quickly stood up and left the room.

Everyone looked at me like I was strange, but that was just because the drugs had worn off.

I lit a cigar and took a hasty drag.

"…Hoo."

Without extinguishing the cigar, I plastered on an awkward smile and walked back into the room.

"…I don't know what brought this on."

"Ah, I have a small illness.

It's nothing. This little friend in my hand takes care of everything."

The Count and Countess nodded, looking a little bewildered.

Julius still looked at me like I was something bizarre.

"So, Theo, was it? What brings you here?"

"A few days ago, I married Ellen."

The Count and Julius both seemed a little taken aback, as if they hadn't expected Theo to bring that up.

Then, after a pause, they asked, as if wondering why he was telling them this in the first place.

"Well… congratulations, I suppose. But that can't be all you came to say, right? So what is it?"

"And, and Ethel and I…."

Theo looked at me with a slightly tearful expression.

His face said half of this was my doing, and he resented it.

Sure, it was half my doing—but if Ethel got pregnant, that was on him.

All I did was engage in some skin-on-skin contact out of friendly affection.

It was just flesh brushing against flesh.

Still, he'd gone through a lot of trouble because of me, so I figured helping this much was only fair.

"Why are you suddenly stopping mid-sentence…?"

Julius trailed off, startled by Theo's teary eyes.

"I got caught having an affair with Ethel."

Silence fell.

The room that had been noisy just a moment ago turned ice cold.

"I didn't come to say anything, really. Just thought you should know.

After all, she's of marriageable age, and I figured you should be aware…."

I said that with a somewhat sorrowful expression and bit down on the cigar.

When I looked at Ethel, her face had gone bright red, and she looked like she was about to cry.

"Ah, no, wait—Ellen, I mean, it's not wrong, but…"

I crossed my legs, bit down on the cigar again, and smiled at Theo.

Julius and the Count and Countess stared at me like they were in shock.

"Theo, was it?"

"Yes…."

"I don't ask for much. Just come closer and let me hit you a few times."

At those words, Theo stood up and walked toward the Count.

As expected of such refined people—they seemed content just to hit him.

I puffed away on the cigar, watching Theo get beaten.

It was more entertaining than I thought. He punched Theo’s gut and solar plexus but didn’t kick him in the balls.

"E-Ellen, shouldn’t we stop this…?"

Unable to keep watching Theo get pummeled, Ethel came up beside me and whispered.

"Shotgun… no, he’s lucky he didn’t get a bullet in his head.

Theo doesn’t get seriously hurt from something like this. He’ll be fine."

Sometimes bullets didn’t even work on that man—what harm could a few punches to the gut do?

After a while, the Count finally sat back down, whether from exhaustion or because his anger had subsided.

"…Ellen Speyer. Is this enough for you?"

"If you ask like that, I’m not sure what you mean."

"…My daughter, ahem. Are you really okay with her sleeping with your husband?"

"I don’t care. In fact, this way I get to live with Ethel, so I quite like it.

Honestly, someone like me doesn’t deserve to be this happy anyway."

At those words, Julius got up and walked over to Theo, who was leaning against the wall to catch his breath, and flicked him on the forehead.

He didn’t hit hard—more like he found him irritating.

The Count looked at me like he’d given up.

It was the look of a doctor staring at a mental ward patient.

"Ethel. What about you?

Since you came here, it seems like there’s something you want to say."

He asked his daughter with a gentle tone.

So he really did treat Ethel with this much warmth.

I hadn’t quite understood before, but now it made sense that he genuinely loved his family.

I guess this was what a normal family looked like.

Live long enough in a dysfunctional one, and you start to think that's what normal is.

"I know you love me, Father, but… I want to live with T-Theo and Ellen instead of the person you chose for me…."

The Count said he understood, though his expression said otherwise.

I'd probably feel the same, but what could he do?

His daughter said she was happy, and the wife who got cheated on didn't mind, so what was there to say?

They'd already rolled around in bed together.

I looked over at Theo.

Not a bruise on his face, and his breathing was steady—he didn't seem injured.

I'd said all that expecting this outcome, but he'd probably have a hard time sleeping for a while.

What would we tell the kid when it was born?

He'd come out and see he had two moms.

Well, we'd just have to explain it in a way that made sense.

That was Ethel's job.

I wasn't good with words.

Yeah, it was Theo's fault for asking someone like me to handle this.

A bundle of contradictions who only knew how to do awful things.

Whatever I did always turned to ruin. I'd never accomplished anything properly.

And yet he asked me….

When I opened my eyes, I always saw dead things.

They weren't ghosts.

I could still see plenty of things that were alive right now.

I dusted off Theo's clothes, which had gotten messy from the beating, and helped him up.

Theo said he’d visit again, then left the mansion with me and Ethel.

We walked for a long time, returning to the mansion.

We chatted a bit as we walked.

"That went smoother than expected, don’t you think?"

"…Not something you say to the guy who got beaten."

I saw his fingers twitching as he secretly cast a spell.

No way that hurt.

The fact that he reacted a full second after getting hit in the gut and faked the pain—he was lucky they didn’t notice.

"But now I get to live with Ethel.

No worries about money, no worries about power, and we have more than enough strength."

I’d told Theo from the start this would happen if he pounced on Ethel.

And yet, he couldn’t control his lust and did it anyway.

Of course, I wasn’t without fault either.

But I couldn’t keep making excuses forever.

Still, a little bit of petty spite was allowed.

He’d taken Ethel half away from me, after all.

"But Ethel, are you really okay with this?"

At my question, Ethel shrugged and answered.

"Yeah. I mean, this is way better than marrying a stranger."

"…So, are you happy?"

At that, Ethel smiled brightly and replied without a hint of doubt.

"Yeah!"

"Then that’s enough."

I didn’t ask Theo.

He’d given up far too much because of me.

Neither of us brought it up.

Even when we realized what feelings we had.

Even when we couldn’t take our eyes off each other anymore, even when our emotions bloomed with the happiness of touching bodies.

We didn’t have the right to say we loved each other.

We’d hurt each other too much, stolen too much.

So we just vaguely sensed each other, keeping our mouths shut.

And even if it was just my own delusion, that wouldn’t be so bad.

It’d just mean Theo didn’t feel what I felt.

A little bit miserable, like something was slowly strangling my throat—not the most pleasant feeling.

Anyway, as long as Ethel and the children born into this house were happy, that was enough.

We returned to the mansion, bathed, changed clothes, and talked about this and that.

Then we sat at the same table, ate the same food, and lay on the same bed.

I reached a hand toward the sky I couldn’t see, hidden behind the ceiling.

I stared at that hand for a long time, sighed, then curled up next to Ethel and closed my eyes.

It had been a ridiculous day. Just like me.

Chapter 92

"…Ha, fuck. Wow. Ha."

Once again, Alicia was dead.

Again.

A perfect word to capture my utter incompetence.

I had never once succeeded before.

At this rate, I didn't even know if I could ever save her. The fact that I was still alive was starting to fill me with deep doubt.

I knew there wouldn't be a priest waiting when I got back.

I knew all too well that even if I came back with potions, she'd already be dead.

And yet, why was I still…

I had tried taking Alicia to a medical facility, and when her body was still intact, I'd tried walking straight out of the bustling city.

All of it failed—as if the path to this mansion was the only one that ever existed.

"…My lady."

Marco looked at me with concern from the side.

He probably knew Alicia was the only person I ever opened my heart to. No wonder he looked worried.

Then, fuck, you should've come and saved her sooner, you useless—

Bullshit.

You only think of these things once someone's already dead.

Someone like me has no right to say anything to Marco or the old butler.

They've pledged loyalty to me and even their lives, every time this loop resets. I shouldn't even be entertaining these thoughts.

How many times has it been?

It seriously feels like I've gone through this dozens of times.

Soon, Theo would come to stop me.

Killing the demons was the obvious thing to do.

But that lunatic who insisted we spare those monsters would come to kill me instead.

Fuck, at least save Alicia.

Why was he never in town on this particular day?

He always showed up after Alicia was already dead.

And then he would do everything he could to stop me from what I was about to do.

Of course, by “stop,” I meant physically.

And then I’d be back in front of Alicia again.

Watching her die right before my eyes. Only then realizing, again and again, just how fucked up all of this was.

Ah.

Even if I die, I will come back.

Not even hell is this cruel.

At least hell only torments unworthy souls who couldn’t pass through heaven.

Those idiots called Satans who torment sinners in burning sulfur are probably more useless than the counselors in the mansion’s basement.

How many times do I have to repeat this?

Eventually, it has to end.

Either I, or this whole cycle.

What if I burn out first?

Once I’ve taken care of the demons who killed Alicia, there’s nothing left for me to do.

I thought once I died after that, everything would be over.

But it wasn’t!

It wasn’t. Even if I killed all the demons, nothing ever changed.

Why the hell—why am I—

Like I'd fucking know.

"Marco."

"Yes, my lady."

"Your daughter—she's alright?"

"Daughter…?"

"That cute girl you claim is your niece.

I know she's your daughter, Marco. Is she safe?"

"…Yes, she is."

"Good. Then go to the armory and prepare weapons.

Bring about ten people along with the old butler. Two daggers and a handgun."

I couldn't kill Theo directly, but maybe if I threatened the people around him, I could find a way.

Or maybe not. If I ambushed him, even a top-tier mage or swordsman would just drop dead like that…

As I trailed off into those thoughts, Julian—with only one arm—started walking over from a distance.

If he hadn't picked up his severed arm, he'd have to live as a one-armed man.

But he still had his right arm, so it shouldn't affect his work too much.

He glanced at the slightly scorched mansion, then, recalling that this all happened while we were out at night, he asked:

"…Ellen, what about the rest of the family?"

"They're all dead."

"…Then why do you look so calm?"

Because I've been through this over and over.

The words rose up to my throat but sank back down again.

I'd said it once before, but nothing really changed.

Just pitiful looks and eyes that asked why I couldn’t stop it despite all these repetitions.

It wasn’t something I said hoping to be understood.

It just slipped out while I was answering a question about how I found the hiding place of those immortal bastards.

"There’s still something I need to do. What happened to your fiancée?"

"T-Tried to protect her. Lost my arm along with her… Ah, fuck, I thought maybe things were finally wrapping up.

The training was done, and now I thought I could finally meet people and do something…"

"I wanted to try something," he murmured.

Julian scratched his head with his remaining arm.

He bit down on a cigar but couldn’t light it, so I tore off a scroll and lit it for him.

"…Thanks."

He probably just wanted to marry the one he fell in love with at first sight and live happily.

My longing had been filled by Alicia, but Julian wanted someone he could love and be loved by.

He always wanted to escape his wretched parents.

He’d grown up in horror, but never really resented them.

He just wanted to build his own family and live a happy life.

Maybe he didn’t fall for that woman at first sight so much as fall for the future she represented—his own life.

If he could just live peacefully with her, like other parents and families did, maybe he believed he could finally claim a life of his own.

Maybe the reason I hated my parents was because I had experienced a different kind of family.

At least I knew it wasn’t normal to raise children by gutting them open from the day they were born.

"So, what’s this thing you need to do?"

"I’m going to wipe out every last demon living in the Empire."

"…You do know that’s impossible, right?"

Julian looked at me like I was talking nonsense.

He probably thought I didn’t mean it—that I just said it to comfort him.

But I wasn’t joking.

"It’s doable. We just have to stab and shoot the lower ones until they shut up, and fatten the Chancellor behind the puppet Emperor with a few coins—then there’s nothing we can’t do in this country.

We round up all the succubi, rip out their tongues and limbs, and deliver them as offerings. They’ll love it."

Not just the Emperor—all the nobles would cheer.

Immortals had decent looks, so if we processed them well, they could be used as breeding tools passed down family lines. Problem solved.

Add a decorative collar that chokes them to death if they bite, and that’s that.

As for those noble families using demons as farming tools—well, I want to kill them all anyway. What can they do?

They’ll crawl when told to crawl.

The worthless dirt-diggers will get stomped, and the better-born ones will be satisfied with a few succubi.

Nobles in the countryside don’t even see commoners as people, so what do you think they think of demons whose ancestors were literal slaves?

When I talk to them at social gatherings, I sometimes wonder if these people are still living a few centuries in the past.

"It can’t just be us who died.

There were so many people."

If it were just commoners, it wouldn’t matter. But some nobles must’ve gotten caught up in it too.

Commoners don’t matter whether they have money or ties to power.

They exist to pay taxes, go to war, and shut the fuck up.

And Theo is a commoner.

That bastard who struts around acting all high and mighty just because he has a bit of skill and still couldn’t save my sister—he’s fair game.

If the academy head makes a fuss, maybe I won't kill him, but I can make sure everyone around him meets a suspicious end.

How do you kill that man anyway?

If he's in a bad mood, he casually tosses out fireballs that could burn down entire villages—he's a senile lunatic.

But if the people around him start getting run over by carriages, stabbed by madmen, or choke to death on poisoned wine, maybe even a lunatic like him will start to reconsider.

"There's nothing left to protect. I have too much money and too many people."

"…If I'm not hearing things, did you just say you're going to kill every last demon?"

"Yep. Just being alive is a crime for them.

You saw last night, didn't you? How they really see us."

Last time I said this, I was in one piece, so they dismissed it as nonsense.

Now that Julian's lost an arm, he seemed a bit more receptive.

"Shouldn't we just get rid of the dangerous ones, and make the rest into laborers or slaves…?"

"That costs too much."

Julian looked at me.

As if to ask, Are you serious?

He'd lost an arm, and he was still clinging to sanity.

Or maybe he thought he had to hold on to at least a sliver of it after everything.

He was the only family I had left.

If he wanted it, I should respect it.

"Do as you please. I won't get in your way."

Come to think of it, if Theo were gone, I could probably pull it off.

Kill him, and everything gets resolved.

Theo's the protagonist of this world, so something has to change.

When you die to the boss, it's Game Over, and the game ends.

So if I become the final boss who blocks Theo’s path, that should do it.

Sure, my body was slow as hell, and one swing could take my head clean off. All I could do was shoot from a distance.

When Theo returned to town, he always dropped by his house first, then came to the mansion.

Just in time, Marco and the old butler approached, fully armed with their subordinates.

Sitting on the floor, I reached out my hand to Marco.

He took it and helped me to my feet.

"Where to, my lady?"

"Let’s go give a little surprise gift to a friend."

I think he had a younger sister.

Hopefully, she’d be useful.

Marco handed me a pouch of bullets and a handgun.

It was heavy—probably already loaded.

Theo, who always stood in my way, had had things far too easy for far too long.

Just a little—

Yeah, just a little—

He needed to understand me.

93

Chapter 93

Theo’s house was a modest-sized home in a residential neighborhood.

Thinking about all the items and money he’d accumulated, he could’ve been living in a mansion like mine. It was honestly baffling that he was still living in a place like this.

Aside from a few corpses lying in the street, the neighborhood looked more or less the same—no signs that the demons had stormed through.

The sun was starting to rise. Theo would be arriving soon.

"Marco, station the others around the house and tell them to be ready to fire on my signal."

It might’ve seemed strange to act like this out of nowhere, but Marco didn’t question me and simply obeyed.

"Butler."

"Yes, my lady."

"Sit inside, and if anyone tries anything, deal with it.

If you hear anything, hit the ground."

"As you command!"

There probably wasn’t another old man who’d smile so cheerfully after receiving an order like that.

Even Marco and I felt a bit hesitant when it came to killing kids.

Still, this was why I liked Marco and the old butler.

They followed orders without question.

If I told them to kill themselves, they’d do it without even asking why.

Once the subordinates had surrounded the house, I stepped up to the door and knocked.

After a moment, Theo’s father came out.

Was he here tonight?

I didn’t think he’d been here the last time.

Theo must’ve contacted him, since he was repeating the loop too.

"…Who are you?"

As he spoke, his eyes flicked around, quickly scanning his surroundings.

He'd already noticed the men surrounding the house.

"I'm a friend of your son's."

"…Doesn't look like someone pointing guns at my house is much of a friend."

Polite speech. I liked that.

People should be courteous.

There were too many who got cocky when threatened with a gun—like they had no fear. Exhausting.

That's why I preferred people with something to protect.

"Just… a lot going on. Butler."

The old butler nodded and walked inside the house.

Of course, he was carrying his beloved rifle.

Theo's father saw that and shut his mouth.

Wise of him.

There was nothing to gain from resisting.

"…Did Theo do something to you?"

"Senior Theo wouldn't be dumb enough to do something like that.

When he handles things, he makes sure there are no consequences. You raised a fine son."

I pressed the gun muzzle to his solar plexus.

"I'd still like to stay a guest for now, so would you kindly bring me a cup of tea?"

"…Understood."

Bang.

The gunshot sounded weaker than I'd expected.

Then again, pistols usually did.

I didn’t like how long he was dragging the conversation, so I made a hole in his back.

A scream came from inside.

As Theo’s father staggered from the bullet wound, his wife rushed over to help and glared at me.

Just as she was about to hurl some barbed words my way, the man who’d been shot cut her off frantically.

"D-Don’t say anything! Just stay quiet!"

He gently pushed his wife aside and, using the wall for support, struggled his way back into the house.

If Theo’s mother actually brought out tea, what would I do?

Would’ve been a waste to shoot her right now.

I heard voices conversing inside.

After a little while, Theo’s father reappeared, shaking all over, holding a tray with teacups.

I hadn’t shot him somewhere fatal, but he sure was dramatic.

"Butler, really? You’re letting an injured man bring the tea?"

"I’m too old for that kind of task, my lady."

"When I say bring it, you bring it."

"Yes, my lady!"

That lighthearted, playful tone of his never matched his image.

If he’d just shut up, he’d seem like a dignified, classy old man. But inside, he was still a moody teen.

The tea might’ve been poisoned, but I accepted a cup anyway, leaned against the fence, and took a sip.

Didn’t smell great, but it wasn’t bad for wetting my throat.

There wasn’t really anywhere to sit, so I just leaned against the fence, cigar between my lips, and lit it.

I remembered how I used to avoid smoking, telling myself I had to honor Alicia’s last words.

When was that again?

Still, Alicia—you didn’t honor my wish to not die, did you?

So now we’re even.

Maybe I’d just grown numb to death.

Maybe life just didn’t excite me anymore.

Everything was boring.

Even horror was getting old. Maybe it was because there wasn’t anything fun left.

Ah—now that had been funny.

Those bastards who’d kidnapped a noble girl and kept her as a sex slave underground.

Once I shoved them into the counseling room and told them they’d be burned alive unless they helped each other “relieve” themselves, they panicked like mad.

I burned them in the end, anyway.

Someone came running from the distance.

"Ellen..? Why are you here?"

"Don’t come any closer."

"…Why the hell are you here!?"

Theo yelled, drawing the sword from his hip.

"If you don’t put that down, you’re going to regret it."

Only then did he seem to notice the armed men surrounding the house.

If I were him, I’d have dropped my weapon immediately.

Last time, the moment Alicia was taken hostage, he dropped his blade and let the demon kill him.

He died before she did, which didn’t feel great, honestly.

I wondered if he survived that time.

No, probably not.

She must’ve been defiled for a long time and eventually devoured, physically too—fuck.

I gagged.

I bit down hard on the right side of my tongue, grinding it between my molars, and my mind cleared again.

"Aren’t you going to put it down?"

At my words, Theo dropped the sword.

"The ring, too. Haha."

He clenched his teeth and removed the ring.

"Toss it over."

It just looked like a regular gem-studded ring, but somehow that was what he used to fire those fireballs.

Anyway, it looked pretty, so I slipped it onto my index finger.

"Senior Theo, how about we make a deal?"

"I told you before—stop talking shit."

"This isn’t nonsense.

If you say the wrong thing, your parents, and your siblings still inside, they’ll all die. How’s that nonsense?"

First time being on the receiving end?

You’ve been slicing off Julian’s head like it was nothing, and now you can’t imagine your own family getting hurt?

Then again, people always go stupid when it becomes their problem.

Guess I’m no different.

Look at how I can’t save Alicia.

But Theo wouldn’t be able to save his family either.

He always showed up in this city just a little after Alicia died.

If she died earlier, he arrived earlier. If later, then he arrived later.

Strange, like someone was mocking me.

If, by some miracle, God decided I'd done well disposing of the demons and let me into heaven, I'd arm myself and throw out every bastard living upstairs.

Alicia would be in heaven, obviously. Then we could live a sweet, cozy life together.

"You're usually good about keeping your promises.

Why didn't I think of this before?

If you can't save Alicia, that means you won't be here for a while."

No, it's not that he didn't think of it. He must've thought of it and then erased it from his mind.

I'd already crossed the line, but this went a step further—and he knew it.

But I'd crossed it anyway, so what difference did one more step make?

"Answer me."

"…Go to hell."

Hmm. That expression—like he couldn't believe I'd actually go through with it.

I guess that was fair. He'd never experienced it before.

But what can you expect from someone willing to toss humans into incinerators just to protect flesh-eating demons?

"Marco, fire."

At my command, Marco pulled the trigger.

The subordinates did the same.

The roar of gunfire and shattering glass was, as always, an unpleasant noise.

"He's probably still alive, but don't move ju—"

Theo screamed, kicking his sword up from the ground and taking off at a full sprint.

He moved so fast, no one could land a shot.

He blew off the arm holding my pistol, then cut down Marco and the others right before my eyes and stormed into the house.

"Again, huh… same old story."

With my remaining left hand, I pulled out a cigar and lit it.

Lately, I felt like I was losing limbs and dying a lot more than usual.

Two gunshots rang out.

The sound of blades cutting through bone followed, along with a spray of blood from inside the house.

The old butler must've been killed by Theo.

Cigar still between my teeth, I bent down and picked up my handgun from the severed arm.

"See? If you'd just listened, you could've lived.

This is basically your fault, Senior Theo."

"…Shut up."

"You'd throw away your parents and your sister just to protect some man-eating demons?

I could never do that. I'm more human than you are, haha.

How do you give up your family for some demon you don't even know the name of? Isn't that too cold?"

Theo was crying.

He clutched his little sister's limp body tightly in his arms.

"Haha, I'm kidding. Kidding. It happens.

So stop looking at me like that—you're scaring me."

Anyway, even if he used a potion, it would've been too late.

Her head had been pierced. She probably didn't last long.

His mother seemed to be in the same state. One of his sisters was still alive, though.

Father, too—he was shielding Theo's sister and still mostly intact.

In the corner of the living room, the old butler's head was rolling across the floor.

He was smiling.

A bit of a tired look on his face.

"So, how does it feel to lose your whole family?"

"It’s the worst. Even if you die—"

I go through this every single day.

I cut him off and gave a bright smile.

"Well, that’s a relief."

Then I gently pulled the trigger.

94

Chapter 94

I'd been captured.

I probably didn't even need to say who had done it.

There was only one person in the world who could capture me—Theo.

And he'd done it in the most despicable way, waiting until after Julian had committed suicide to abduct me.

Marco and the old butler were probably out there frantically searching for me… or maybe Theo had already killed them.

I could always ask him. Not like I could find out on my own.

There's no way they'd be able to.

Those two couldn't even use the family's money freely—what could a pair of individuals possibly do?

Who ended up swallowing the funds?

Probably Theo. I'm sure he handled it all neatly.

He might seem like an idiot, but he'd adapted to life in this world far better than I had.

While I clung to my past self, Theo seemed perfectly content with life here, like he'd erased his time on Earth from his memory.

Did he not have a family? Fucking bastard thinks like an orphan.

His parents probably abandoned him once they saw what a lost cause he was. Fucking bastard.

Some of us were born into a godforsaken place, became worse than trash, while others were born normal and grew up to be people like him.

I looked pathetic.

Especially when I stood in front of Theo.

I even thought that if Theo had been in my shoes, he wouldn't have ended up twisted like me.

You only see someone's true nature when they're stripped to the core—and I'd already revealed everything there was to show.

And Theo… even after I'd killed his family like they were worse than dogs, all he did was throw words of resentment my way. He never once did what I did.

So that just made me the only monster.

We went through the exact same thing, but why—

Why was he the only one who came out of it intact?

I couldn't understand it. That's why I sent my subordinates to Theo's mansion, killed Isabel, casually disposed of Diana, and left Ethel with injuries too severe to ignore—though I couldn't bring myself to kill her.

Even so. He didn't do anything like me…

Yeah.

He didn't even slaughter all the members of House Speyer. He only went after Julian and me.

It felt like some higher being was mocking me.

As if to say you're the only one who's garbage enough to do something like this, everyone else isn't this evil.

Honestly, if you're going to lock someone up, you shouldn't do it in a room like this.

It was too livable for something called a prison.

A bookshelf crammed with books, a desk and chair, a hard wall just right for smashing my skull into—sunlight even streamed in through the barred window.

Letting prisoners look outside wasn't a great idea.

It gave them hope—hope that they could someday leave—and that kind of hope had to be crushed.

I couldn't be left like some dying chicken.

There wasn't a bed, but there was a soft mattress on the floor and even a warm blanket.

Still, I guess it was a prison. The door was a barred gate.

There was even a disgusting little toilet stuck in the corner, as a bonus.

Where the hell was I supposed to shower?

"…What the."

There were no photographs in this world, but there were things that looked like them.

If you could use magic, you could create all kinds of conveniences—like printing a landscape exactly as it was onto paper with magic.

On the desk, there was a drawing of me with Ethel and the children, all of us awkwardly smiling.

What, was I supposed to feel guilty now?

Feeling something like that would just make me too weak to get anything done.

I wondered if there was any way to get out.

I pounded on the bars with my fists.

Even tried swinging one of the books from the shelf at it, but it felt like solid iron.

The walls were probably just as thick.

“You really think you can break out like that?”

“Can I get a spoon? Or maybe a tiny hammer?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Haven’t you seen The Shawshank Redemption?”

Theo shut his mouth at that.

“…I just know it’s an old movie.”

And now I knew he was not just dumb, but uncultured.

Even if he’d seen it, I probably would’ve mocked him for not remembering it.

I just hated the fact that he was alive.

If we’d shared a common interest, I might’ve hated that even more.

“Still, now that I’m locked up, you’re treating me real gentle.

If this was the plan, maybe I should’ve just gotten caught earlier, haha.”

“I’m here to put a dog collar on you.”

Theo, standing near the bars, kicked me and literally strapped a dog collar around my neck.

“Ughkh…”

It was hideously designed, studded with gemstones.

“…Is this crap your kink or something?”

“Talk to Diana about that.

From now on, whether you get hurt or can’t breathe, it’ll alert the guards watching over you.

Whatever you try, you won’t be able to die.”

“…Ha.”

Theo stared at me for a long time, wearing a complicated expression, then turned to leave.

I didn’t even know where this place was.

If I tried to escape, could I really avoid getting caught again?

I looked out the window. As expected, I didn’t recognize the area.

Maybe I’d passed through once, but probably not.

I was the type to bark orders and have my subordinates do everything.

If I die, I return.

I’d come back so many times.

Always watched Alicia die—was I not going to see that anymore?

Even without memory, emotions didn’t dull.

And the memories always came back slowly, after Alicia had died.

Sure, I could say I felt sad and miserable, but at this point, maybe it’d be better to just kill me.

You die this many times and normally you’d just delete the character and make a new one.

At least I’d never have these thoughts again. Maybe that was a relief…

“Shuuut the fuck uuuup!!! Aghhh!!!”

To erase my thoughts, I grabbed the bars with both hands and tried to shove myself through.

I heard my ribs crack.

You could get used to pain, but it always hurt just the same.

Could I make it out?

Half my body had slipped through, but my head still wouldn't fit.

Then I heard Theo's footsteps running up in the distance.

"…Fucking hell. You crazy bitch."

He kicked my half-hanging body back through the bars, opened the door, and came in.

"…You know, haah, is it really okay to barge into a lady's room like this?"

Every time I spoke, it felt like my right breast was being slashed open—but I was used to it.

I just thought of it like a punishment from my parents after a long while.

Theo stood over me and poured what was probably a potion—definitely from my mansion—and then pulled out a syringe.

Seriously? This is supposed to be fantasy. What the hell's a syringe doing here?

Ah, right. I had some at my mansion too.

Well, yeah. This world was one big game.

Whoever threw me in here must be laughing their ass off right now.

This can't be real.

Not when Alicia isn't here.

"…Hhhgh, hh…?"

Whatever Theo injected into my arm didn't really matter anymore.

I slept for a long time.

Maybe I was just tired.

After all, I had saved Alicia.

After countless trials and failures, I'd finally rescued her, and now I was stuck hiding here because the outside was overrun with demons.

Technically, it was Theo who came charging in and rescued me.

"Right, Alicia?"

She even responded with a proper “yeah,” smiling just like she used to.

She couldn’t speak when she was dead… no, wait. That was a long time ago.

Anyway, I was happy.

That was the reason I was here.

And Theo—he probably only left the house because the Empire had already collapsed, and the demons had taken over everything outside.

I had no skills, no power, nothing but my gun.

So I’d stay hidden here with the others.

“Alicia, I was exhausted.”

She comforted me.

Her moving lips looked eerily like my right hand, but that was probably just the fatigue talking.

“Like, over and over… I kept doing it all over again.

Guess there’s no need to kill demons anymore, huh? Right?”

Alicia shook her head.

Yeah… we couldn’t leave or return to the mansion because of those bastards.

At least the ones around here had to be cleared out.

“But I probably don’t need to kill the demons who don’t fight back. Especially not the kids.

I acted like I was fine, but…

It really felt like something inside me was slowly being carved away. It was awful.”

“Ellen.”

Someone called my name.

“It felt like I was falling apart.

But Theo saved us all.

Oh, did I not introduce him?

I told you there was a handsome, talented commoner at the academy.

That’s him. The one who saved us. Don’t you think he’d be a good fiancé for you?”

Alicia and Theo would go well together.

He’d take care of her, stay close behind her, and he was the protagonist—nothing bad would happen.

Alicia would live a happy life.

“Ellen.”

Maybe it was the demons outside, demanding they hand me over for killing so many of them.

I’d just ignore them.

“Come to think of it, we’ll go to the academy together next year!

You said you wanted to go there, remember? When you were hurt and curled up in my arms.

You don’t remember? Come on, don’t be embarrassed—just admit it, hehe.”

Suddenly, my vision blurred.

My body stretched, then compressed.

It was… a floating feeling.

Like being flung into space in just your clothes, after falling off a spaceship.

Not that a spaceship would exist in a backwater world like this.

But from now on, I’d only have a happy life left.

A few demons may have died, but Julian and Alicia were alive by my side.

“…Ellen.”

My arm itched slightly.

Guess the mosquitoes were out now that summer had started.

I was tired, so I excused myself to Julian and Alicia and lay down on the bed.

95

Chapter 95

I was slowly dying.

Maybe not physically—but mentally, definitely.

At first, it was a potent drug laced with spells, inducing hallucinations. That part was fine.

But people… maybe not with magic, but with drugs—they build tolerance.

That's why junkies always chase stronger, more potent substances until they end up dead…

These clueless idiots who'd never touched drugs probably didn't even know something that simple.

That creeping dissonance between what I knew and what I could perceive, that unraveling of my senses—it was worse than I thought.

So much so that I'd rather have my flesh slowly flayed and be burned alive than go through this.

It wasn't so much the world falling apart as it was being dismantled.

Along with my mind.

And thanks to that, I was very, very sane right now—accompanied, of course, by a horrendous mood.

Sure, I desperately wanted to die, which wasn't exactly sane, but that had always been the case, so I could let that slide.

I didn't know how much time had passed.

The first dose was in the summer. Now, with summer gone and early autumn just beginning, it must've been at least a year.

Over time, the surveillance had gotten laxer.

Not enough to escape, of course.

The collar around my neck was still there, and I was sure Diana had embedded a tracking spell in it.

But ultimately, I couldn't get out of here.

I couldn't dig through the wall, and I couldn't shatter my body trying to squeeze through the bars.

If I couldn’t even get my head out, how the hell could I escape?

“…Ah.”

My lips were parched, and my stomach felt hollow.

I looked at my arm for the first time in a while. It was skeletal.

Maybe the absence of a mirror wasn’t just to prevent self-harm. Maybe it was a sliver of mercy—so I wouldn’t have to watch myself slowly rot away.

That once-glossy, snow-white hair of mine had gone dry and brittle.

What about my eyes?

That signature light must’ve vanished, leaving only sunken, lifeless sockets.

Theo or Ethel had been the ones taking care of me.

I wasn’t sure how they fed me, but judging by the state I was in, they probably just poured sugar water into my mouth.

Even with the drugs now, I couldn’t see Alicia or Julian anymore.

Only this empty, suffocating little room.

I opened and closed my fists over and over.

There wasn’t a single drop of strength left in me.

Even killing Ethel, if she came into this room, seemed impossible.

Not that I wanted to kill her, but I figured if I just slammed my head into the floor and followed after her, that might work somehow.

I wasn’t always this lucid, but I’d woken up a few times.

Usually when the drugs wore off, around the time Theo would visit.

I’d cursed him, blamed him, pleaded with him, and then cursed him again.

Each time, I felt like I was crumbling—like I was being undone from the inside, barely holding on with spite alone.

I’d once thought maybe I could bear it if I just didn’t have to see Alicia die.

But now, even that didn’t matter.

Time had worn me down.

Time always dulls people. Their feelings, their pain, all of it.

Did they really think this would fix me?

That I'd just grow old and die in here?

Unluckily—or maybe luckily—when I died, I always came back.

The feelings would come back too.

The memories, at least, would fade again.

And how long could I even live in this state?

If they shoved food in my mouth, I could just vomit it back up.

Pour sugar water through my nose? There's only so much my body could take.

Ethel appeared from down the hall.

Same as always.

Pupils unfocused like a junkie, mouth hanging open, drooling.

"…Ellen."

The voice that called my name—it was Ethel's.

When I was high, it usually sounded like static, or Alicia's voice.

Ethel visited every other day—maybe not daily, but without fail.

I didn't know why.

But as I looked at her, that ever-present smile still on her lips, tears rolled from her eyes.

Probably just the drugs messing with her tear ducts.

If she were really sad, she'd be crying from both eyes.

She'd be gasping for breath.

She wouldn't be pretending to be a drugged-out wreck like me.

No—that wasn't an act.

She was a wreck. A proper junkie, thanks to the drugs cooked up by Diana and Theo working together.

“Today, Theo-senpai—or I guess not senpai anymore.

Theo-oppa… ugh, that sounds so cheesy.”

Even though she knew I wouldn’t hear properly, Ethel continued talking, voice soft and sorrowful.

“Anyway, he said they’re going to move you to a bigger place.”

Her sniffling—why was that?

Maybe it was because she hadn’t lost any family this time.

No, wait. I think they were killed. Or maybe not? It had happened so many times, it was all a blur.

I didn’t even know what “now” meant anymore.

I felt uneasy. Soon, Alicia would come to kill me.

No—Theo would.

Or maybe Julian. Maybe Ethel.

Was Isabel alive? Yeah, I think she was—I saw her the last time.

I really needed to shut the fuck up.

Then again, it’s all in my head anyway, so maybe it didn’t matter.

It’d been more than just days. Felt like years had passed.

“…I’ve told them so many times.

If they want to keep you alive longer, they should put you in his house or mine—not this animal cage.

You’re already locked up with all these spells around your neck—what are they so afraid of?”

Ethel spoke bitterly, like she resented Theo.

The way her eyes failed to focus made me wonder if she’d been shooting up the same cocktail I had.

“And he just kept saying this is what you deserved…”

Ethel unlocked the barred door and stepped into the room.

She started tidying up the mess I'd made.

One by one, she put the books back on the shelf.

When she bent over, I stood up and lunged at her from behind.

"Ellen..?"

I tried to choke her, but I had no strength. She just stood up, and I dangled there.

"…Ha, fuck."

It was over. The next round of sedation would come soon.

I didn't care. Even in a world full of fantasy, there had to be a lethal dose.

Eventually, my tolerance would grow, and I'd die from an overdose anyway.

Thinking that, I forced my trembling legs to carry me toward the open door and dragged myself out.

"Ellen, do you… do you remember me?"

"Shut up, Ethel. My head's ringing…"

At those words, Ethel threw her arms around me and began to sob.

Her sobs soon turned into wails.

My skull felt like it was splitting open.

Theo had said he was coming.

I had to crawl to that window and throw myself out before he got here.

I used all my strength to shove Ethel aside and dragged myself, limb by limb, toward the window.

But all I found was despair.

The scene beyond the bars—it was a magical illusion.

I was on the ground floor.

"…Ha."

My body went limp, and I collapsed where I was.

Felt like my tailbone shattered.

Didn't matter. I was shivering uncontrollably now.

This would hurt more. Probably.

Ethel rushed to me in shock.

"Sorry, I just… my head's really messed up."

I apologized for my harsh words from earlier.

Ethel held me tightly and wept again.

I wondered if I'd ever been sane.

Probably not. Not once.

In any case, this was probably the first time in a while she'd seen me able to speak.

And of course, the moment didn't last long.

Theo stood in front of me, looking older—weathered, like he'd aged years.

He was saying something to Ethel, but I didn't want to hear it, so I shut my eyes.

When I finally peeled my shaking eyelids open, he was still there.

"Hey, before you stick another needle in me, can I get a cigar?"

"…There's none."

"Damn. That's fucked up."

"Go back inside."

"No thanks. Just carry me in and chuck me like usual.

Then pour some potion and sedate me again."

"If… if I let you go now—would you live properly?"

"What do you mean, properly?"

"…Would you live? I mean, without trying to kill yourself."

“I’m already dead. I don’t even remember Alicia’s face.”

“…Answer me.”

“Go fuck yourself, asshole, ahaha.”

Theo wiped his face with a devastated expression.

Fucking bastard—if he’d just kept me locked up, maybe I wouldn’t have said what I just did.

“Shit—I spent a whole fucking year talking to corpses and laughing like an idiot all day!

You should’ve just chained me up and shoved a tube up my nose—force-fed me slop like some kind of experiment! That would've been less fucked than this!

Say hi to Diana for me. Tell that bitch to go die with her mother. No wonder her dad ditched her.”

“…You…”

“So how have you been?

Getting your dick wet, I assume?

Poor Ethel here probably spread her legs, and Diana too—hell, you already made a hole in Isabel’s gut, so I guess that means you went in direct, huh?”

Why won’t you say anything?

At least get angry.

“You slap this fucked-up collar on me, and—hah, aah, cough! Ghh… hkkk… cough! Hah. Fuck, I’d rather burn to death.

At least that just hurts your body. Never imagined I’d see a dead arm flopping around in front of me.

When I go back, I’m shooting your whole family. Diana, that dog-bitch, I’m feeding her to the demons.”

Theo just looked at me.

Like he regretted something.

I couldn’t understand it.

Maybe he felt something seeing me all dried up like this.

He’d been outside all this time, after all.

“…I don’t even know what to say. But I really hate you.

I can’t even put it into words. I hate you like hell.

Next time, come earlier and use something else instead of drugs.”

I smashed my head into the floor.

But I didn’t die from the impact.

This just felt like dying of natural causes.

My whole body had withered to nothing.

I was so, so tired.

Chapter 96

Ellen was dying.

All I had to do was hold her head in place and pour potion over her—it would've been enough to keep her from dying…

But even if I brought back a girl so dried out she looked like a living mummy, how much longer could she survive?

One thing was clear: I'd failed again.

How many more failures would it take before I reached the end?

"…Theo-senpai. I told you, didn't I? That instead of drugging her up and locking her in some hole, you had to keep her close, even if it hurt, while she was still sane."

Was there ever a time when Ellen was sane?

I knew what would've made it possible: saving her little sister.

That girl named Alicia—whom she'd never once seen alive—if I saved her, everything would fall into place.

But I couldn't.

It was as if some divine figure had hammered a nail into fate, declaring Alicia could never be saved.

"Have you ever even tried to save Alicia?

Have you ever actually tried anything?"

Ellen used to say that all the time.

Back in the beginning.

Now, she didn't say anything to me at all.

Only muttered that it was "a shame."

It was a shame for me too.

My family—well, they always survived when time reset, so long as Ellen didn't touch them. But Ellen… she always died. Without fail.

Even the ones who lived, eventually died.

Julian always ended it himself.

And Ellen never even tried to save him.

She once said it'd be more painful for him to live.

Was she thinking the same about herself now?

Back when she'd lived on Earth, Ellen must've had a long academic career.

She would quote authors I'd never heard of to mock and lecture me.

"……"

Back then, I said nothing in return.

I could've shouted, argued, pinned her down with force, but I knew that wasn't the answer.

I couldn't become like Ellen.

I couldn't be like her—draping herself in fancy words while committing horrific acts underneath.

It wasn't that I didn't do it—it was that I couldn't.

Ellen and I were fundamentally different.

That hadn't changed.

Even now, in front of Ethel, I couldn't bring myself to say anything.

"You said it was bullshit, didn't you?

But Ellen's dead now."

To be precise, she wasn't dead yet.

If she had died, one of those annoying system windows would've popped up, mocking me again.

Why did it always end with that useless screen?

It was unfair.

Ellen used to call it absurd.

When I asked what that meant, she mocked me, saying I didn't need to know—just pick up a sword and start slicing people.

Maybe that transparent screen was mocking her—mocking Ellen for thinking she knew so much.

No matter how hard you fight and scream, it whispered, you can't change fate.

And the cruelest part was: she couldn't even see the content of the window herself.

Was the great being up above really allowed to treat people this lightly?

If Ellen had broken down alone, I might've been able to ignore it.

But this all started when she slaughtered demons and anyone even remotely tied to them.

Now, it was no longer easy to point a finger and say it was only Ellen's fault.

I used to tell myself I was blameless, that Ellen was the only monster.

But now—I couldn't even say that.

So how was I supposed to look at Ellen?

She once joked—maybe seriously—that if I was going to lock her up, I should do it right: gag her, chain her to a bed in a pitch-black room, and shove food down her throat through a tube.

This was as far as I could go.

I couldn't do more.

A deranged mass murderer, a killer of my family—sure, but in the end, she was still a person.

Just because she thought differently or looked differently didn't mean she wasn't human.

If this kept repeating, maybe I would snap and act exactly as she once described.

But that would be a problem for future me.

Everything Ethel said was right.

All I could do was bow my head and shut my mouth.

Ellen was dead—so now, was it time to start fighting again?

"Even if you don't see it, anyone who wasn't deeply connected to demons doesn't think Ellen's a criminal.

Go outside right now, grab any random person, and ask them if what House Speyer did was wrong. About half would say it was justified."

“…And you’re the one saying this?”

“I forgave her.

It doesn’t matter anymore.

As long as Ellen’s okay.

If her thinking’s wrong, we can fix it—bit by bit.”

I used to think the same, but it never worked.

It wasn’t just that she refused to listen. Even after dying dozens of times, she still wouldn’t listen.

Didn’t matter if you hit her, coaxed her, threatened her, tortured her, even killed her.

Every day she’d say she hated pain—but no one cared less about pain than Ellen herself.

“Then what was I supposed to do?”

I didn’t want to lash out at Ethel.

But the feelings kept rising. Maybe they’d been festering all along.

“I kept trying to stop Ellen. Over and over, without rest.

But what good did it do? Nothing ever changed—everything just reset.”

What had you been doing all that time? That question sat in my throat, then slid back down.

To say something like that, I’d have to be truly at the end of my rope.

When would this all end?

“Ethel, if you could go back… what would you have done?”

“I would’ve run to save Ellen’s little sister.

You heard her too, didn’t you? How she called out that girl’s name every single day.”

“What if you couldn’t save her?”

“…Then I’d wait until she calmed down.”

I had waited, a few times.

Would’ve been nice if it all ended with just the demons gone. But I saw it so many times—her mumbling Alicia’s name before blowing her own head off.

“You think she would’ve lived if I just left her alone?

She would've killed herself the moment the demons were gone!”

“You could have stopped her!

You’re the one who stayed by her side day and night—you’d hear her clothes rustling and be able to get up in time!”

As she said that, Ethel’s body started trembling.

“You shoved her in here because you didn’t want to see her!

And now you're talking about going back in time!?”

“…Don’t you even hate Ellen?”

“I did. But I guess I loved her more.

I used to think I liked you—but I guess that was a mistake.

Now that Ellen’s dead, I feel… empty inside.

I don’t think I’d feel this way if you died.”

I couldn’t say anything to that.

Could I have stopped her?

Could I stop Ellen next time?

I didn’t know.

I had to keep trying.

Just like Ethel said.

Even if I didn’t want to. Even if no one wanted me to.

I’d grown used to forcing things onto others—

All thanks to this withered girl, dying with her face pressed to the floor.

I gathered spell energy into my fist and struck Ellen’s head.

Other people’s skulls would usually shatter with a heavy crack, but hers—

Hers collapsed like cardboard.

“…Ah? Kyaaaaaaaa!!”

In old movies back on Earth, people used to knock each other out with a karate chop.

Those actors must’ve known some kind of magic spell that ensured instant unconsciousness.

Because in reality, the neck’s a fragile place—you mess it up, they die. No second chances.

I took a pouch of sleeping powder from my coat and sprinkled it over Ethel, who was now screaming and sobbing.

Then, above Ellen’s crumpled head, a translucent screen appeared.

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[BAD ENDING no.73: Fate of a Junkie]

[tip: Didn’t we say never to touch drugs, no matter what?
Help the heroine avoid making the wrong choices!
A death brought by drugs has no meaning.]

Even if she hadn’t died from drugs, I doubt it would’ve been any more meaningful.

***

I came back.

Left the mad count in the hands of my companions and started walking.

The two of them could handle it just fine on their own.

No need to rush.

If I walked slow and steady, it would all be over by the time I arrived.

I met Ellen.

And left her alone.

Let her do as she pleased.

After killing every demon, Ellen walked into the office with a bottle of wine, saying we should toast together.

Before I could stop them, the two pointed guns at each other and pulled the trigger.

As if it had been decided from the start.

***

This time, I stayed with her—so she wouldn't die.

Had my subordinates stab my limbs with blades and then died right in front of me.

Literally.

***

How many times has it been? She died again.

Even after I took away her blades and guns!

Finished her off in her room, and she leapt out the window.

It was only the third floor, but her neck snapped and she died.

***

Keeping her alive didn't mean much.

It wasn't much different from locking her in that drugged-up room.

Ellen needed a reason to live after killing all the demons.

I had my family. Ellen had no one.

I suddenly remembered something Ethel had once said to me, full of contempt—

That she loved Ellen.

Ellen seemed to like Ethel too.

She even killed herself once, after accidentally killing her.

I remember being confused at the time—she hadn't even wiped out all the demons yet, so why?

Holding onto some foolish hope, I returned once again to the burning capital.

Just like always.

97

Chapter 97

It had been quite a while.

Six years? No, maybe seven.

My sense of time had gotten so twisted I wasn't sure anymore.

I'd stopped counting the days ever since that day Theo came to me and told me to give up on everything.

Someone was approaching from afar.

I stubbed out the cigar I'd been smoking and quickly opened the window.

Not that the thick smoke hanging in the air would just disappear because of that.

"Mother, what are you doing just sitting here?"

Mother.

What a ridiculous word.

It wasn't meant to mock me or anything, but still.

The one speaking was Ethel's child.

She must've been around five.

Like some kind of rabbit, Ethel kept having children every year.

She'd finally started using birth control after the fourth.

Mages could handle contraception so easily. Just a hand on the belly and a chant, and it was done.

Anyway, now this large mansion had four little beings crawling around, barely born, making noise and chaos.

In a way, maybe it was healthier than how it used to be, when it was just the three of us entwined at night, making all sorts of lewd sounds.

Still, it was a bit uncomfortable.

I had to smoke my cigarettes or weed in secret.

Technically, ever since I found out Ethel was pregnant, I'd limited it to two designated rooms in the house.

Even though it was my mansion... well, I had said I was giving it to Theo, so I couldn't exactly complain.

If Theo had called me "mother," I'd have punched him right in the face, but this child didn't know any better.

Ethel had taught her to call me that.

It wouldn't be right to get angry or ignore her.

She was just a child, after all.

Not a demon or anything.

"…I was just thinking.

It's not good to stay in here. How about we go out for a bit?"

"Mom said you might be bored, so I should come keep you company!"

I figured if I didn't leave the room, the kid wouldn't either, so I got up.

She followed me closely.

Her surname was Speyer.

We weren't related by blood, but since Theo used my surname, naturally, it was passed down to the child too.

"…Aren't I boring to be with?"

"Boring?!"

With that, she cupped her little hands over her mouth as if to share a secret.

I bent down and brought my ear close.

"This is a secret, but… to be honest, you're way prettier than Mom."

If Ethel's son had said that, I might've been a little concerned about what kind of person he'd grow up to be. But she was a daughter, so whatever.

"How can I be pretty like you? I have to stay by your side to find out the secret!"

"Eat everything the chef makes, without being picky. That should help."

“…That might be a problem.”

“Well, both your mom and dad are smart, so you’ll grow up to be pretty.

Way more beautiful than someone like me.

But if you stay short, you’ll just be cute and unimpressive—so don’t be picky, okay?”

“Is being cute a bad thing?”

“Who knows.”

I really didn’t.

I’d seen plenty of short and cute people, but not many beautiful ones.

I figured she’d get tired walking down the hall for so long, but Ella showed no signs of fatigue.

“Ethel.”

“Ellen? I thought you’d be playing with Ella—did you come back already?”

Ethel was breastfeeding, her chest exposed as the baby suckled.

At first, she used to get embarrassed, but over time she stopped caring. Now she did it openly, naturally.

The thought in my head was that I’d had a taste before that baby did.

It had a bland taste, a clean finish with a slightly fishy sweetness.

I remember thinking, “This is why adults drink milk instead of breast milk.”

“…Yeah.”

“Why’d you send Ella off?”

“I didn’t! Ella said she wanted to play with you, so I let her go.”

“She said you sent her to cheer me up.”

“Well, you were alone, so you’d be bored, right?”

I sat next to Ethel.

Ella plopped down on my lap like it was the most natural thing in the world.

I ran my hand through her hair for a long while.

“Where’s Theo?”

“He said he was going to see Isabel.

Think he’s having an affair?”

“If it’s with Isabel, then who cares?

There’ll be no gossip, no awkwardness between us. As long as we agree on the story, it’s fine.”

If a child came out of it, we’d just say it was mine.

Though we’d have to tell the child from early on that their real mother was Isabel—otherwise, it’d feel like I was stealing someone’s child.

“…Don’t you have any possessiveness at all?”

“I do. That’s why you’re here. Theo too.”

“……”

Ethel blushed.

She lifted the baby and stood up.

“I’ve got something I was in the middle of smoking.

Don’t send the kids in. It’s bad for them.

Just come get me instead.”

“…Alright.”

She looked a little disappointed, so I offered some gentle words to soothe her.

“We see each other at every meal anyway. If I’m around too much, it’ll just feel like you’ve got another child to look after.”

“I like having more kids around, though.”

“…Well, then.”

She looked at me like that and called out—it was surprisingly hard to just walk away.

I sat back down, and Ella sat on my lap again.

I hadn’t really said anything special or done anything particularly fun—so why did she cling to me like this?

Calling me “mother” so naturally.

Well, Ethel had taught her that, so I let that part slide.

Still, it felt heavy.

She acted like a little sister.

Alicia. That’s right.

I told myself not to think about her, but how could I not?

She looked nothing like Alicia, not even a little—but the way she genuinely cared about me, it was almost terrifying.

Because sometimes, pieces of that day’s memory would start to float back.

Ethel had changed a lot since having kids.

Not in the sense that she got uglier or gained weight.

Those kinds of things could be fixed with magic or medicine.

I always thought of her as kind and gentle, but now… it was like she embodied every positive image I’d ever had of a mother.

Theo hadn’t changed.

But then again, he never needed to.

He was someone anyone could see was upright and righteous.

It was only after meeting me that he started to bend a little.

Even then, the only ones he’d ever treated cruelly were me and Julian—who was already dead.

That was at least some small comfort.

He didn’t go out much, and the only people he saw were old academy acquaintances—nothing to worry about.

Even his family had been fairly kind.

He’d once pointed a gun at me… wait, was that this time? Maybe not.

Anyway.

He probably would’ve been better off if he’d never met me.

“Ethel.”

“What?”

“…Nothing.”

I was going to ask what it felt like to have a child.

Because she looked so happy.

Even happier than she did when she was with Theo and me.

It wasn’t jealousy.

If it were, I’d be overwhelmed with that sickly, dark feeling, screaming at her to send all the kids away.

But I didn’t feel any of that. Her children were just… lovely.

Ella, sitting on my lap right now, included.

Still… why did she name her Ella?

Why pick a name so close to mine?

What if she turned out like me?

I was just curious, that’s all.

Just how much love did it take to become someone like Ethel?

I knew I’d never be like that.

Maybe it was a blessing that I couldn’t have children.

Why couldn’t I, anyway?

Did my parents pull out my uterus along with my guts when I was little?

Or maybe they just stabbed it so thoroughly it turned into a useless organ.

Maybe the demons rendered it infertile.

That rusted hunk of metal had pierced right through me, after all.

Or maybe I was just born this way.

Whatever the reason, it was a blessing in disguise.

No more children born with the blood of the cursed Speyer family—hell must be having a festival.

I felt nausea rise up.

"…I'm going to the bathroom."

"Ella, get up. Mother needs to go."

"Okay!"

I must've been sitting for a while.

She must've been bored—so why had she just sat on my lap, playing with my hair?

I stretched out my numb legs and started to undo my tightly tied hair, but then I met Ella's gaze and left it alone.

Her face, which had looked gloomy just a moment ago, lit up instantly.

After that… Well, I vomited my guts out in the bathroom.

Lately, food had no taste. I was depressed. I kept wondering if I should just die—but the fear that I might reset again held me back.

After all this, what if I went back again?

What if I had to watch Alicia die again in that wretched place?

I wouldn't break or go mad… but I'd be even less whole than I already was.

I'd already proven with my own body that people don't fall apart so easily—so I had to be right.

I figured my next targets might shift from demons to… unsuitable humans.

Not that it mattered much.

Theo had said it, hadn't he?

That I wouldn't be going back again. That when I died, it would be the end.

Or something like that, according to whatever system-like message he saw.

The last time I took Ella shopping downtown, a few thugs showed up and caused a scene.

Ella got scared and cried.

I sent her back home with a servant and cleaned them up—but it still left a bad taste in my mouth.

Maybe it was time to work again.

I couldn’t sit around the house forever, doing nothing.

98

Chapter 98

Marco and the old butler—though I still saw them from time to time—no longer worked at the estate.

They looked like they wanted to return to work, but it was hard to leave them around where Ethel was.

Even more so now that there were children.

Because of that, it had become harder for me to do what I was best at.

It was a bit much to handle alone.

If the city guards wanted all the demons cleared out, they could at least do their damn jobs properly.

They must be turning a blind eye because of some bribe money, letting punks wreak havoc on shops and streets.

Sure, I could go through official channels and raise a complaint, and nothing would happen for a while. But that wasn't my style.

Eventually, the problem would come back anyway, so what was the point? It was inefficient.

If getting rid of those thugs was the most effective solution, why take the long way around?

There was a big difference between the people on top and the ones below.

Even if both broke the law, it didn't matter for those at the top.

It felt weird to say it myself, but socially speaking, I was one of the people at the top.

I revisited the shop from last time and asked the owner where the thugs usually hung out. Then I headed there.

Apparently, they were squatting in a house where a whole family had once been killed by demon bandits.

Well, I doubted anyone who'd graduated from an academy or trained as a mage would be out here mugging people on the streets.

I knocked on the door, and it creaked open.

Chains were fastened at the top and bottom—either for security or to prevent kidnap victims from escaping.

“Who is it?”

It was just a wooden door.

I didn’t bother answering. I pressed the barrel of my pistol to the door and pulled the trigger.

That familiar jolt in my wrist—been a while.

A hole burst through the door, and the man collapsed clutching his gut.

Then I used a knife to slice through the chains and kicked the door open.

This sort of thing, I liked.

Reminded me of those old cowboy movies I’d seen.

Too bad the person who came in wasn’t some cool, cigar-smoking cowboy, but a worn-down, mentally fried mess.

“You, you fucker, do you even know who we are!?”

I shot the guy yelling in the shoulder.

All their weapons were just short knives and planks with nails in them…

There was no way I’d have left losers like this alone. They must’ve been bribing the local patrols.

“Names. And tell me who you’re bribing.”

One of the thugs gave a signal with his chin.

At the same time, the ceiling above me collapsed, and someone holding chains tried to ambush me.

But I’d already fired upward, and all that landed was a bleeding hunk of meat.

“Mm, idiots, huh.”

They didn’t look useful, so I just kept shooting them one by one.

Even during the reloads, no one rushed me—clearly none of them had ever killed anyone.

Or maybe they were just cowards who’d never fought anyone stronger than themselves.

Probably the latter.

Even if I got caught here, Theo would come save me eventually.

Looked like a bunch of brothers or cousins had formed some kind of gang.

As they dropped one by one, the others screamed their names or shouted “brother!”—pathetic to watch.

Yeah, this was what I used to do.

Not some half-dead husk rotting in a room, but someone who cleaned up society’s filth.

That’s why I’d exterminated the demons and dragged every half-blood hiding in back alleys into the light.

Let’s just say it wasn’t because I was venting over my sister’s death.

I was doing society a favor, not throwing a tantrum.

“The, they could’ve just been arrested… why kill them all…?”

“I’ve just been feeling down lately.”

I was busy justifying myself when I accidentally let the truth slip.

The man started sobbing uncontrollably.

He said he’d gathered his whole family for this pitiful excuse of a business just to make money—and now they were all dead.

Then what about all the merchants and passersby they’d mugged?

“P-please, have mercy! We just took money on orders from above, we never killed anyone—!”

I didn’t think it was worth hearing. Just another piece of trash whining.

I pulled the trigger at the back of his neck.

It’d be too kind if he died instantly from a headshot.

From his neck came no voice, only the gurgling sound of blood and air escaping.

He’d die soon enough.

I squatted on his body, crossed my legs, and lit a cigar.

The slightly damp smell of blood and smoke filled the tiny house.

After some time, guards in blue uniforms bearing their family crest arrived at the door.

“You’re late.”

“...Drop the weapon and put your hands up.”

“What, do the rookies these days not recognize faces? Don’t you think so, Mr. Aslan?”

A familiar face. He’d helped me move all the demons from the prison to my estate grounds.

Had it been nearly seven years since I saw him?

Back then, there wasn’t a single dumb guard who didn’t know my face—at least until I killed all the ones trying to help demons escape.

“Drop it, you idiot…”

He whacked the rookie over the head with the pistol butt and walked over to greet me.

“My apologies, Your Grace. What brings you here…?”

That title should be Theo’s, really.

But I guess to others, it made no difference.

Or maybe it was me now.

Whatever—just because I said that didn’t mean Theo’s parents magically became my awful parents.

“I came shopping with my daughter. We got mugged.

I was furious. Don’t you agree they deserved to die?”

“…Yes, indeed. They deserved to die.”

“Right? Also, times must be tough lately.

Hiring trash like this?”

“…Apologies. We’ll make sure this doesn’t happen again.”

“Well, I should hope so.”

They were corpses, so what did it matter?

I fired a few more rounds into their skulls, chunks splattering onto the guard’s face.

“What’s the name of the rookie who pointed a gun at me?”

“Anthony. His name’s Anthony. He’s new—doesn’t know any better, so please…”

The man dropped to his knees.

Looked like he’d start begging any second.

I hadn’t planned to kill him.

The rookie, Anthony, looked like he was about to faint.

“Then have someone fetch a carriage. I’m tired after working again for the first time in a while.”

Relieved, they hurried off to get one.

Back at home, I headed straight for the bath.

“Urgh…”

I didn’t know why, but for days now I’d felt weirdly sore all over.

Was I sick?

My forehead felt a bit warm…

How long had it been since my last period?

Maybe it was cancer.

Would a potion cure that?

No way a baby just happened after all these years.

If I was going to die in agony, I’d rather just blow my head off.

I was rinsing blood off my body when I felt dizzy and fell asleep right there in the tub.

***

When I opened my eyes, I was in a room wearing pajamas.

That familiar smell of children.

Ella was next to me, holding my hand while she slept.

“…Ella, sweetheart, sitting up like that is bad for your back.”

She rubbed her eyes, sat up, and then looked shocked. Without replying, she ran off.

Soon after, Ethel stormed into the room looking furious, with Theo trailing behind, looking troubled.

“The maid told me everything! You came back covered in blood!?”

“My head’s pounding… can you keep it down…”

“Ah, okay.”

Ethel deflated and quietly went to brew tea in the corner.

Theo sat beside me and asked softly,

“What were you doing?”

“Just… cleaning.”

He understood what I meant right away.

“I thought you were done with that.”

“I went shopping with Ella, and some thugs tried to mug us.”

At that, Theo flicked my forehead.

Still as strong as ever—my skull rang from it.

“…It was dangerous.”

“I’ve just been kind of down lately…

It’s not like I want to die, but… yeah.”

He lit a cigar and held it to my lips.

Then, glancing at Ella’s direction, he sliced it in half with a finger enchantment.

I was annoyed—it felt like he gave it and took it back—but I couldn’t complain, not with a kid around.

“I thought maybe seeing some blood would help. Guess I overdid it.”

“Well… now that you’re pregnant…”

“Wait, what the fuck!?”

Theo laughed at my reaction.

“What, you thought you were infertile?

Isabel told you your body was fine, remember?”

“I thought she was just being nice…”

I guess this explained the weird feelings I’d been having.

But mostly, a deeper fear washed over me.

If I had this baby and then died—would I get to meet the child again?

Even if another baby was born, would it be this child?

Even putting those worries aside, I realized something:

I couldn’t even think about suicide anymore.

I just quietly sipped the tea Ethel brought me.

All in all, it was a surprisingly ordinary day.

Chapter 99

They say conflicts are more often born from misunderstanding or apathy than malice or schemes.

Bullshit.

That was something said by some pathetic man in a frock coat, yellow vest, and boots—couldn't even win his own love.

A fool who whimpered about married women and ended up blowing his own head off. No wonder his words were useless.

Sure, the start of a conflict might sometimes come from misunderstanding. But most of the time, it comes from pure malice.

My family didn’t die because of some misunderstanding.

It was blatant, deliberate malice.

And once someone refuses to fix their apathy, it’s no different than a premeditated scheme.

That’s why I killed all the demons.

This isn’t about rationalizing anything.

Someday, I want to tell my child about it—proudly.

Not to be remembered as a criminal, but to remain a proud and honorable parent.

So instead of being asked, “Mom, why did you do something like that?” I want to hear, “How were you able to do something so incredible?”

I’ll explain it all kindly—how those monsters casually eat people alive for fun.

And I’ll be sure to add that there’s no need for them to hunt demons like I did. That was my role.

It’s a feeling everyone has—this desire to be the most radiant person in the world, at least in front of your child.

My parents weren’t people, they were beasts that spoke like humans, so even if I said something like this to them, they’d just shrug.

Not that I care—they’re dead anyway.

No need to visit their graves.

The two who claimed to love each other so dearly died hand-in-hand. I'm sure that was a good ending for them.

Though they screamed a lot when they burned.

In any case, I must've been right.

Because after kicking all the malicious and scheming demons and thugs out of society, I've ended up with a happy life like this.

Though calling it happy might be a stretch, considering how many worries I've got.

"Ella! I told you to let Ethel rest!"

"It's okay. I was just watching Marie next to her."

Ethel looked at the child in my arms and gave a slight nod.

I still didn't know how to raise a child with love.

All I could do was hold them like this.

I didn't want to pass on the name Speyer, but if she wanted to stay in this comfortable home, it was a small price to pay.

What if she starts whining later, saying she doesn't like her last name?

Should I nag Theo to change the family name or something?

Would this alone be enough for the child to feel loved?

Just holding them and saying "I love you"?

One day, when adolescence hits, maybe they'll say "You don't really love me."

I wonder how I'll feel if that ever happens.

Just imagining it gave me a twinge between the eyes and a wave of nausea in my gut.

"Marie's cute."

Ethel tickled Marie's cheek with her finger, making her giggle.

"Yeah. She's probably the cutest in the world."

"Oh, right. The people you mentioned—your guests—they're waiting in the drawing room now."

"Yeah? I should go down, then.

Ethel, is it okay if I leave the baby with you for a bit?”

“I want to go too!”

As I handed Marie to Ethel, Ella started bouncing beside me, saying she wanted to come too.

I was about to tell her no, but Ethel beat me to it.

“You can go, but be quiet and mind your manners. Listen to your mother, okay?”

“…Hey, Ethel, this isn’t exactly something a kid should hear. Where’s Theo?”

“Some huge monster appeared outside the capital, and he went to deal with it.

They said it’s half the size of a castle. But he’ll be back soon.”

It’s Theo—of course he’ll come back soon.

Hand him a sword and he can slice through steel; if he can’t take down a monster, he should quit being a dad.

Likewise, if I can’t do my job, then I should quit being a mom.

“Doesn’t even sound real.”

“Right? Anyway, Ella said she wants to be like you.

Specifically, like you when you defeat bad people.”

Bad people, huh.

I’ve never killed a person, though.

Everything I’ve killed deserved to die, so it wasn’t really a person, was it?

From that angle… hmm.

Maybe I really was a righteous person.

Still not used to this.

Theo once told me to stop the self-loathing and try praising myself mentally—but it just didn’t work.

That’s the kind of thing he always does.

Anyway, in front of my child, I’ll always show only my proud, respectable side.

Self-loathing can wait until I'm alone.

"Like me?"

"Yeah. She thinks you're cool.

Well, I do too. You're cool and beautiful."

For a moment, I almost stole Ethel's lips—but I held back, since she was holding the baby.

"Alright, I'll be back soon."

"Okay. Take care."

With Ella's hand in mine, I headed down the stairs to the drawing room.

Inside, two familiar faces were enjoying tea and snacks from the maid.

"My lady, it's been too long!"

"It's an honor to see you again, miss!"

"Why do neither of you look any different?"

"Well, I've been living the high life thanks to your generosity, and this old man here is just as lively as ever."

Marco and the old butler hadn't changed at all.

Not even a single new wrinkle.

Maybe that line about "still alive" annoyed the old man—he casually elbowed Marco in the ribs like nothing happened.

Ella probably didn't notice.

"My lady—or perhaps I should say madam now?"

Marco gritted his teeth but kept smiling.

"Call me whatever. I don't care."

"And the young lady beside you…?"

"She's Ethel's daughter."

Ella looked a bit bewildered at how casually I was chatting with these two.

“Um, mother…?”

“Ah, Ella. Say hello. This is Marco and the old butler—they worked at the estate for a long time.

As for the butler’s name, ask him yourself. If he likes you, he’ll tell you.”

Marco gave a polite bow, and the butler removed his cap with a formal gesture.

“Lisbill, miss. This humble old man is honored to meet you.”

“Ah—no! I’m happy to meet you both too!”

Ella took a seat and started nibbling on some cookies.

Marco and Lisbill watched her with fond smiles.

“Anyway, I called you here because there are some folks in the area who aren’t quite fit to be here. I need them dealt with.”

“If I may ask, what’s your criteria for being unfit?”

“Y’know, the ones loitering around, mugging people, robbing shops.

I’ve got a kid now, and I figured it’s about time I handled those types a bit more carefully.”

I sipped my tea to wet my throat.

“If it’s too much trouble, don’t kill them.

If they’re not too malicious, just toss them into a job somewhere—teach them the value of labor.

Everyone knows how valuable minerals are these days. Or put them on a boat and let them roam the seas.”

Basically, kidnap them and toss them into the mines or sell them to the navy.

Ella was looking up at me with sparkling eyes.

It was a hassle to speak in code, but with a kid present, I didn’t have a choice.

“Understood. Can we still use the old facilities?”

“Oh, those? They’re probably rusted to hell by now.

I’ll cover the costs—build new ones or renovate as you like.”

“Thank you, my lady—er, madam!”

“Yup. Good luck.”

Marco and Lisbill left the room, bickering like always.

At this rate, they’d be like that till death.

Ella bounced out after them, excited for some reason I couldn’t quite place.

Back in the day, I’d always smoke a cigar after a conversation like this.

It’s been a while since I quit.

Guess I’ll only start again once the kids start going outside on their own.

Until then, I just hope all the degenerates in this city vanish.

I even spared their lives—so they better hurry up and disappear.

As I sat sipping my tea, Theo suddenly walked into the drawing room.

He looked surprisingly clean, despite saying he’d just fought a monster.

“Did someone visit?”

“Yeah. Marco and the old butler.”

“Weren’t they retired?”

“I called them back in for a job.”

“What kind of job?”

“Cleaning up the city our child’s going to grow up in.”

“…Well, that’s fair.”

Theo came over and pressed up against me.

“Hey, Theo.”

“Yeah?”

“Do you think I love our child?”

“Yeah.”

“How can you say that so confidently?”

“If you didn’t, you wouldn’t have summoned madmen who slaughtered demons just to clean the streets for your child’s sake.”

“…Maybe. Still, I’m trying not to kill this time.”

“See? You’re softening.

Just tell the kid you love them. A lot.

Ella clearly grew up surrounded by love.”

“That’s because she had Ethel.”

“You can do it too.

You’ve got Ethel right beside you—and me too.”

“…That was a bit cringy, y’know.”

“Was trying to sound cool.”

Theo stuck his fingers in my cheeks and forced a smile on my face.

“Blarrgh…”

“Anyway, just smile. That’s all it takes.”

Yeah. That’s all it takes.

We’ve been through a lot, but somehow, things have always worked out.

With no real reason for optimism, I leaned against Theo and let myself believe.

“I think I’ll go hold Marie again.”

Theo said he wanted to see her face too.

The three of us—me, Ethel, and Theo—spent a long, quiet time in the room with the children.