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The Summoning.

Sometimes, not even interdimensional entities could enjoy a quiet evening without a human teenager's shrill voice invading their consciousness. Ignoring them was the rule of thumb demons shared with one another, hearty advice delivered with a soft squeeze of encouragement to one of many arms.

"Just let it be," they would say. "It's only background noise. You'll get used to it and they'll get bored eventually."

Milo was *not* someone who could simply get used to the noble tongues of old being butchered by millennials. He found it offensive that the earthly plane was infested with uncouth, uncultured heathens who couldn't get two verses into a summoning ritual without laying waste to the delicate musicality of the words. It wasn't like demons could only be summoned by Latin incantations - in much the same way that humans could greet each other in a variety of ways, it was the meaning that counted, here. A well-enunciated *I summon thee* was far more inviting than a stuttered, messy, *ego te invoco et conurio et constringo* with atrocious and uncalled for diphthongisation.

As ancient beings, demons had respect for the old ways of humans. Some of his colleagues argued the case that Latin was a relatively new invention in comparison to the Chinese that humans carved into bones, the forgotten Hittite and Elamite of clay tablets, or even the Egyptian of papyrus rolls (many of his friends spoke fondly of this last one, as its speakers had been exceedingly generous in their offerings). Milo, however, had taken pride in the rise of what earthlings called the "classic" tongues, and spent several centuries mourning their loss. It was still certainly too soon to hear Latin be defiled by amateur summoners who couldn't put aside the accent of their pesky Anglo-Saxon mother tongue. That he, as a demon, would qualify English as an abomination ought to give humans much to think about, but they rarely summoned him to discuss his linguistic sensibilities.

Oh, but they would hear him now. Yes. They had ruined Milo's game of cards. There was just no getting that irritatingly high voice out of his head. A human female, that was what it was. Milo could see her even while he remained at the table surrounded by his peers – "Do stay," they told him, "Anya's firstborn is in the pot!" – and he didn't like the sight of her in the slightest. She had scribbled his sigil on a piece of paper, for starters, in pen. No blood to nurture him should he attempt to cross into her dimension. She didn't have a virgin for him to take back home to exchange for Anya's firstborn, either, but what was worse than that was that she was reading the summoning from her *phone*.

There were certain slights that even the best of them could just not endure.

With a rush of air like a vacuum that forced many of his companions to hold on tight to their cards, the table and the various winged tokens representing the treasures at stake, Milo answered the call of the earthling. The boundary between their planes was torn open in a jagged, iridescent gash that the demon promptly stalked through. It shut behind him with a loud crash of thunder; he had done this enough times to know not to look behind him now if he didn't want the void to swallow him whole. He kept his eyes ahead of him, placing one hooved foot in front of the other. With every step his body shed the properties that let it thrive in his realm and donned those best-adapted to the one he was set to enter. His matter was rearranged and stuffed into the four-limbed, multi-layered, immutable sack that humans called skin.

Change of container complete, and ignoring the moans of those lost forever in the shuddering darkness of the void, Milo stretched out his new pair of hands and focused on the girl's voice reverberating louder and louder in his head. Her image was clear now: a small, squat girl with an even smaller boy at her side clumsily repeating her words while he held a plastic candle in the air. The flash of indignation that shot through him was almost enough to break Milo's concentration and leave him stranded here, in the realm of shades. It was only because of how familiar the motion of stepping through the temporary doorway was that he was able to carry it out, finally landing upright and unimpressed upon the piece of paper in the middle of the space cleared for the ritual within what appeared to be a bedroom.

Both children – the earthlings could hardly be described as anything more than that – stared at him as he manifested before them with their eyes open very wide. The girl looked delighted where the boy seemed (rightfully) terrified.

"Your dad is going to kill us dead," the boy breathed.

"O Demon," said the girl, her enthusiasm palpable as she stretched both arms in Milo's direction. She was still holding her phone; Milo followed it with his eyes. "I have summoned you to--"

"Wait, does it understand English?" the boy interrupted her.

"Good point. *O Daemonium, ego vocavi te--*"

"For the love of everything that you hold dear," Milo cut in brusquely, "*stop*. Just stop it. Do us all a favour and, next time, find a phonetic transcription before you start."

"It speaks English!" the girl cheered. Milo gave her a sour look.

"My pronouns are he/him."

"My pronouns are she/her," she replied officiously. "I am called Mei-Lin. This is my friend, Toby. His pronouns are he/him."

"Hi," said Toby.

In the good old days before humans learned about infuriating sigils of containment, Milo wouldn't have been trapped within the piece of paper. He would have been free to smite them as he saw fit. He imagined their flesh melting from their bones to make up for the fact that his summoning circle didn't exceed the 30cm².

"We have summoned you here," Mei-Lin continued, oblivious to his dark musings, "as part of an assignment for school. O, Demon, enlighten us with your wisdom so that we will get a good grade in Occult Theory and Toby can come with me on holiday to Italy."

The audacity of human cubs knew no limits in the present age – and neither did that of their instructors, apparently, if they encouraged them to open the veil between dimensions to find someone to bother that wasn't them.

"And what do you offer me in exchange for my services, Mei-Lin?" Milo asked joylessly.

"I'm glad you asked!"

There was a plastic bag behind the children. Mei-Lin turned to it now, crouching next to it and rummaging deeper into it than the dimensions of the bag would suggest as possible. Next to her Toby scuffed the ground with his shoe. Both dressed similarly, so Milo guessed they were in uniform. Black shoes, black trousers and an ugly yellow fleece that might have been golden in design but was canary in practice. The child caught eyes with Milo and didn't really flinch even as Milo consciously made fire burn in his irises. He merely cast a sidelong glance at his friend and cleared his throat.

"Do you need help?"

"Almost got it!"

Only a moment later, the girl let out a noise of triumph and there was a violent scuffle between her and the bag as she tried to pull something out from it. Milo found the struggle intriguing enough that he strained his neck to see. It occurred to him that whatever it was she was fighting with was *alive*. Now *that* would be something. It wouldn't fix the pathetic debacle that was their ritual, but a live offering might allow him to look past their general bad form.

With a final squawk and a battle cry, Mei-Lin yanked her arm back and clutched tight in her grip out came a feathered, winged creature. Milo's spirits lifted for the scarce couple of seconds that he was able to see it, for it pecked Mei-Lin in the hand and the girl was forced to release it. Was it a miniature phoenix? A feathered serpent chick? Would he be allowed to consume it right away or was he supposed to wait until their agreement was terminated?

Toby ran after the creature and ended up chasing it under the nearby bed (it wasn't a very large bedroom, well-lit but crowded and an entire wall was covered in drawings of dubious quality depicting humanoid beings with large eyes in awkward poses). He dove under it and flinched back when the creature attacked him, only to try again immediately after. Mei-Lin joined him as soon as she recovered from the shock of her own bite. Diligent. Resilient, too. Milo could appreciate those qualities in earthlings, sometimes.

"Maybe – spell it?" Toby huffed.

"No way," the girl snorted. "It's *personal* now."

Yes, yes, as it should be. Milo allowed himself to smile, craning and crouching in his tiny space in an attempt to catch sight of the human cubs' progress in re-capturing his offering. The spirited humans were always interesting ones.

"Okay I'm going in," said Mei-Lin through gritted teeth. Toby opened his mouth in what was probably discouragement but his friend dove under the bed before he could get a single word out.

More squawking ensued. Some impressive hissing on the girl's part. Ineffective curses delivered for emphasis that Milo wholly approved of. Then, finally, the girl emerged, wriggling out from under the bed frame with her prey safely ensnared in her arms.

"O Demon," she panted.

"Milo," said Milo, too interested in his offering to help the correction.

"Milo. In exchange for your services, I bestow upon you, griffin." She didn't do any bestowing because Milo was still trapped over his sigil and she couldn't give the creature an inch of leeway should it escape her again, but the gesture pleased him regardless.

Finally, the children had done something right. A griffin was an excellent offering – he could already hear the crunch of its bones in his head as he devoured it, tasting the tough meat and all the magic woven into every fibre. A griffin was better than Anya's firstborn. He wanted it. And what was helping two human pups with their education to a demon such as himself? If anything, it was a noble task. And the reward was oh so irresistible.

"I accept," he purred.

"You vow to help us?" Mei-Lin prompted.

"We *really* need it," Toby added.

"Yes, yes, I vow it," Milo replied, never once taking his eyes off the squirming bird in Mei-Lin's arms. It was small, true, but no matter. The young were always that much more tender. This way he could eat it in just one bite, without need for declawing or any such thing.

"Then I welcome you into my plane!" Mei-Lin declared, and with the words the constraints that the sigil imposed on Milo were broken. The paper burned to ash under his feet and the air warmed to welcome him. He was allowed to take a step toward the children, then another. He stretched a hand out and Mei-Lin opened her arms. The bird took the chance to fly out of her grip but Milo drew it to him and took it in his hands. The purring that had been taking place at the back of his throat stopped abruptly. He stared at the creature in his hold, a frown slowly descending over his features and clouding over his expression.

"What is this?" he rumbled, voice echoing around the room, the few shadows elongating and quivering with them.

Toby shuffled a little closer to Mei-Lin. "I *told* you this was a bad idea!" he whispered loudly. Mei-Lin shushed him with a gesture and stood up as tall as she was, which wasn't very.

"It's griffin."

"No," hissed Milo. The creature he was holding was decidedly *not* a griffin. It had looked like one from afar, but up close there was no denying that this bird was merely a particularly fat, tan-feathered chicken with a bad temperament. Milo turned a glare on the earthlings, his skin cracking as his essence churned inside it with rage. "You *lied*. I'll consume *you* for this--"

"No lies," the girl interrupted him, pointing at the chicken. "It's what I promised."

"You promised a griffin--"

"I didn't promise *a* griffin. I promised Griffin. The chicken is called that."

Toby was white as a sheet but the girl kept her chin raised.

Milo saw himself taking the two steps necessary to reach her and lifting her by the head. He imagined the sounds her bones would make as he shattered them, one by one. Earthlings were too fragile to be this stupid.

"You...intentionally deceived me."

"You vowed you'd help!" Mei-Lin reminded him. Milo's lip curled in disgust, at her misplaced sense of bravery and at his own blunder. He could always break off the deal and go home. Maybe lurk listening and return to snap her neck someday. But if he left now, he would have to tell everyone he broke a pact after being deceived by a child's manipulation of her language's nouns. There would be no living it down for the next age, if that. He returned his gaze to the chicken in his grasp. It cawed softly and pressed its beak to one of his hands.

"She likes you," Toby remarked, as if that would help their situation at all.

Milo sighed with his whole being. The shadows returned to their original positions, his skin sewed itself closed again. "Fine. I'll keep my word, and I accept your chicken."

The children's faces lit up and the sight of it only made him more miserable. They cheered and shook each other in excitement and Milo watched them, displeasure rolling through him. Not all was lost, though. This was an opportunity to correct the ignorance of humans young enough to still possibly grow up to implement changes in their world. It was worth a shot.

"We start right now. Bring out your Latin textbooks," he instructed, forbidding the blank look they both gave him from disheartening him further.

"Uh, I think, maybe, you mean Occult Theory," Mei-Lin said.

Milo made himself at home upon the bed, chicken under his arm. They didn't seem to have Latin textbooks. This was fine: with a wave of his hand two large, shimmering tomes appeared before them, settling on the floor with satisfying thumps.

"You requested my wisdom, so we will start with your pitiful Latin. If I were your Occult Theory instructor, fluency would be the *bare minimum* I'd ask of you. So get to it." He snapped his fingers and the tomes opened to the first lesson, the letters rearranging themselves for their human eyes to read better.

It took his new pupils the better part of a minute to settle down and start tripping over their declensions, but Milo told himself that they would improve. He had until the end of time to force some semblance of culture into them, after all. Griffin laid itself down on his chest and gave another gentle caw. Milo stroked its skinny head and barked corrections at the earthlings, demanding that they start again from the top.

Sometimes, not even interdimensional entities could resist the allure of enlightening the new generations.