



vol. 3

I REINCARNATED AS
EVIL ALICE.
SO THE ONLY THING I'M
COURTING IS DEATH

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I Reincarnated As Evil Alice, So the Only Thing I’m Courting Is Death! Volume 3

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Chapter 1: Engagement Party and Boarding School

“AS the current head of the Knightley family, I, Earl Dark Arland Knightley, formally announce my engagement to Miss Alice Liddell of the Liddell barony.”

Dark touched my shoulder when he finished speaking. I clutched the skirt of my black, lacey dress and curtsied politely.



A symphony of cheers and applause erupted in the hall.

We were at Sharondale Gardens, where the early autumn wind was just beginning to stir.

Dark and I had rented the castle-shaped event hall to hold our engagement party.

We invited anyone with connections to our families or those still residing in London at this point in the year to attend. This meant there were few guests—the party itself was a casual affair.

Nobility generally came to London in February for the meeting of the House of Peers. The May opening of the Royal Academy of Arts for private viewings was considered the start of the social season until the summer when they returned to their territories. Once the nobles finished enjoying the seasons of fox hunting and Christmas celebrations, they returned to London again.

In other words, our engagement party was being held well after the social season.

The theme was “an early afternoon tea party.” The venue featured booths of bite-sized cakes and other light snacks, colorful bouquets, benches decorated with balloons, and a floor and orchestra for anyone who wanted to dance.

However, Dark’s guests were more interested in his choice of fiancée—me—than dining or dancing.

Once our greetings were completed, we were swarmed by guests like a rugby scrum.

“Congratulations on your engagement, Miss Alice Liddell. I never expected you to end up with Lord Knightley, but you make a lovely couple.” A woman I’d seen in salons before had approached me.

I smiled politely, imagining the ways she would gossip about me later. “Thank you very much. I happened to be invited to one of Lord Knightley’s parties. We discovered we were surprisingly similar there, and before I knew it, we were engaged in no time.”

“‘Happened to be invited,’ ‘before you knew it,’ ‘no time at all’... It sounds like

it was one coincidence after another.”

Yes, I couldn't agree more! I swallowed the urge to shout that at her. *Don't you dare. You have to act like a prim young lady, Alice!*

Missteps in social settings always lead to consequences. I braced my legs against the solid floor like a flower growing from the ground—it was harder to let the wrong thing slip this way.

The woman noticed and seemed to think it was just my nerves getting to me.

She set her obvious curiosity aside so that we could make normal small talk.

“Lord Knightley owns such lovely territory. It's full of nature, and the people there seem merry. The snow creates a lake when it melts, and by the time summer comes around, you can swim in it like the sea. Have you ever been swimming, Miss Alice?”

“I've seen bathing machines before, but I've never gone swimming, no.”

Seaside resorts recently became a popular venue for Londoners to spend their days off. Work hours became standardized thanks to the Industrial Revolution. The prevalence of long work hours meant those in the cities worked themselves to the bone in exchange for long vacations to indulge in entertainment or travel—a custom that had taken off at some point in time.

I've never been to the ocean in this world, but I did swim in pools and the ocean before I reincarnated... As I was thinking about the subject, a young lady in a zebra print dress began to interrogate me.

“I'm much more interested in how you got His Lordship to fall for you.”

“As I mentioned earlier, I attended a party at his mansion—”

“I'm not talking about the location. Why would the gentle Lord Knightley choose someone like *you* of all people? The head of her family, just a girl who gets targeted by criminals in the East End. You're not fit to be a countess!”

The people around me turned pale when they heard her mention the dark history of the Liddell family. Even the gossip-loving woman who first spoke to me scolded the zebra girl, telling her, “This is a celebration. It's no place for such talk.”

I glanced to the side. The other young ladies standing along the wall glared viciously at me.

Of course. This is simple jealousy. I'm marrying the Lord Knightley you all love and adore, after all.

Just like Cinderella, their beloved Earl noticed the girl they treated like dirt. Of course, they would seethe about it at a time like this. But I wasn't so faint of heart to be scared by this level of harassment.

"You seem to have the wrong idea. I wasn't chosen by Lord Knightly. I chose him myself." I made sure my smile was calm but full of venom.

The zebra print girl snorted like she'd come straight from the savanna. "What do you mean by that?"

"Perhaps most young ladies can expect to be selected by men like they're slices of cake sitting on plates. But not me. I accepted Lord Knightley's proposal because I believed he was a suitable man to join the Liddell family, nothing more," I said, my head held high.

"I don't believe that for a minute," she hissed. "You mean to say an earl would choose to marry into a *lower*-ranking baron family?!"

"That's correct. However, I hope you don't have the wrong idea. We have yet to decide whose title will remain once we're married."

The Liddell family's title of "baron" would end if I married into another family.

With no one else to take over my family's line of work, it was my duty to raise children to take over for me someday. If possible, I needed to have a son who could inherit the title of baron as well.

But Dark was the only direct heir in line to his family's title too.

He had relatives, but every last one was greedy when it came to power and wealth. They would enact heavy, grueling taxes on the people living in the Knightley domain. Those residents were probably eager for Dark to marry and have an heir as soon as he possibly could.

In other words, Dark and I could announce our engagement, but we weren't ready to be married yet. We were bound by rules more limiting and stranger

than a game of chess.

“You have some nerve. How little do you think of Lord Knightley?!” The zebra girl slammed her hand on the table next to her in a fit of rage. But that hand landed on a plate, sending the knife resting on top soaring into the air.

The sharp blade was flying straight toward me.

No way! Is this a death flag?!

As the head of a family charged with exterminating evil from Great Britain, my life was full of dangers. It wasn't just the wrongdoers who wished to snuff out my life. Carriages came racing toward me during walks down the street. I was thrown into ponds just by attending tea parties—all of it was part of who my *character* was.

Despite being nothing more than an ordinary office worker in my past life, I was hit by a truck and reincarnated into the world of the *Evil Alice's Lover* otome game series. The game's heroine, Alice, was so prone to death that the title won the “Deadliest Game of the Year” award. Thus, death lurked around every corner of my life after being reincarnated.

But there was no need to worry. After sixteen years of this, I knew to never let my guard down.

“Now!”

I struck the knife away with the folding fan in my hand, sending it clattering onto the marble floor. The zebra girl and other guests gasped.

Hehe! I didn't even flinch.

I'd had the fan made with steel ribbing just for this sort of occasion.

On the opposite end of “Bull in a China shop” was “Villainess with a steel fan.” It was as powerful a combination as it sounded.

As I basked in my success, a voice called out to me from behind.

“What's going on over here, Alice?” Dark, the other guest of honor, stood behind me with a worried look.

He was wearing a dark blue three-piece suit with French lace, despite this

being nothing more than an engagement party. On his head, Dark sported a top hat embroidered with sapphires, diamonds, and a large bow tied around it. Great Britain was a large country, but I doubted any other gentleman in the land had outfits as gaudy.

“I dropped a knife, that’s all,” I smiled.

“I’m glad you’re not hurt. I wouldn’t want the scene of our proposal to be sullied with blood. My apologies if my fiancée here scared you.”

When Dark smiled at her, the zebra girl stormed off in a huff. I watched the large bustle of her dress, like a horse’s behind, shimmy away. Then I thought back to that day when Dark and I danced here.

We’d come to this venue for an inspection. Then, when Dark proposed to me again, I suddenly realized how deeply I’d fallen for him. My feelings were always of secondary importance until that point. Ever since I realized I’d been reincarnated into this world, I’d never had a spare moment to worry about love.

I’d been planning to marry some irrelevant background character if it meant staying out of danger...but my feelings for Dark and Dark alone broke down my stubborn heart.

It’s like I’m transformed into an entirely different person when I’m around him.

It was my first time experiencing love like a normal girl would. Being around Dark put me in a warm, happy place like a sunbeam. Blood and despair were nowhere to be found with him.

I was watching Dark engage in pleasant conversation when I spotted a young man at the snack table behind him. He wore a silk jacket with his signature light pink scarf wrapped around his neck. The man had taken a slice of a pretty raspberry cake.

“Hmm? Have a meat pie too? No, thank you. I’m on a diet.” The tall, slender man who winked at the chef was Leeds, a member of my family. With a head full of vast knowledge, he was the one I could always go to for advice, be it about work or life.

Leeds was a man, but he spoke and acted elegantly like a woman. His beauty attracted everyone, both men and women. He blew a kiss my way when he

spotted me looking at him.

But then a black shadow passed beside me just as a smile crept onto my face.

“Don’t let your guard down, my lady.”

The warning came from a young butler with fine black hair.

The man was Jack, the only servant in the Liddell home. He never wore his butler’s uniform properly, which made him look like a troublemaker, but he was dressed formally today, patrolling the venue for irregularities.

But I never let my guard down at all.

With my steel fan in hand, I touched my dress, confirming the pistol underneath. I couldn’t wear my pouch like usual, since it would stick out on one of the party’s hosts, so I kept my pistol strapped to my garter belt.

Dark paused his conversation to praise Jack’s vigilance. “He never stops working, does he? We couldn’t have thrown this party in the first place without his *assertive* opinions.”

While Dark had wanted a party that pulled out all the stops, Jack objected, demanding that I not be made a spectacle for an audience. Thankfully, Leeds intervened, and the result was a lavish, but elegant party fitting for nobility.

I heard his change in tone and looked to Dark. He had a sad expression like he was out of energy. Perhaps he was exhausted from all the conversation. Most of the invitees were Dark’s guests, after all.

“I’d like to take a short break,” I said.

“Then let’s go to the back room,” Dark said. “We’ll be taking a break to change outfits, everyone. I do hope you’ll enjoy the rest of the party.”

Dark and I linked arms and waded through the sea of applause. The noises rubbed against my skin like falling leaves. Noise, after noise, after noise. It became hard to tell if we were being congratulated or intimidated.

Silence fell once we stepped into the back room. I could finally breathe again.

“I never knew engagement parties could take such a toll. I’m just glad this isn’t the social season,” I said.

“I would have liked to show you off to more people, personally. I want everyone to know that you’re mine now. Hmm, it feels a bit warm in here.” Dark opened the window. A brisk wind blew in, knocking the top hat off his head.

I watched his shadow on the ground as he quickly picked it back up. Two horns, absent from all-natural human bodies, stuck out of his head. But once I brought my eyes back up, there was no sign of the horns against his smooth, silver hair.

He was good at hiding them. He couldn’t let his true form be discovered.

The true Dark was a demon. Rather than taking a human form, he was born human, but his roots came from Hell. He was able to make his horns invisible, but not when it came to his shadow. That was why he wore extravagantly decorated hats to camouflage his shape, with matching outfits to avoid drawing attention to the strange hats.

Contrasting the showy Dark was me, wearing a black tiered dress with red piping and gloves that went up to my elbows. A red ribbon adorned my waist like a giant bow, but I still paled in comparison to Dark.

“Alice” wasn’t written as a character who wears gaudy clothes. If I dressed up, Dark would probably dress even more outrageously to contrast me...

I had to worry about these things as someone reincarnated into this world. Earl Knightley wasn’t a character whose route I played in my past life, but my knowledge of otome games was still useful.

I’d learned how to spot a death flag, all right.

Dark tugged his hat back down on his head. Then he looked at my hair.

“You’re wearing it upswept today. Who styled it?”

“Leeds did it. He’s good with his hands.”

Leeds suggested an extravagant hairstyle when I asked him what would suit my dress. He’d wrapped it around the back of my head and adorned it with a red rose, making sure I looked worthy of standing next to Dark as one of this party’s hosts. Leeds always had a keen eye for style. I was lucky to have a family

member like him.

Despite my pride, Dark suddenly sulked.

“Leeds again, hmm? He always knows how to style you. Is there anything he *can't* do?”

“I rely on him because I have no maids. Dressing as a young lady isn't easy. Don't you know we have to cinch our waists with corsets to get into some of our dresses?”

“So he helps you get your clothes on too?” Dark pulled me close to him, his look one of anger. The unexpected hug startled me.

“Dark?”

“I want to be the only man who gets to touch you.”

His possessive words made me blush.

The only man who gets to touch me...?

He spoke like we were engaged in a passionate love affair.

Our relationship wasn't at that stage yet, but the strength in his arms as he embraced me told me how he felt.

Dark's love for me was genuine.

My heart skipped a beat. I buried my head in his chest.

I was happy, like I'd been chosen by a god. But these kinds of moments filled me with complex emotions. On the other side of that happiness, I wanted to flee. Or maybe burst into tears.

I wasn't honest, and I wasn't charming.

Dark was a strange man to want a woman like me all to himself.

“Don't worry about that. Leeds and I are family. He's like an elder brother to me.” I tried to pacify him, but Dark didn't fully accept that.

“I only hope he feels the same way. It's hard *not* to worry after what happened with your guard dog. Why, I wish I could take you back to my manor and keep you locked away in there,” he said in that silky voice of his.

“I would have Queen Victoria write you a sternly worded letter if you did,” I tutted. “It’s too bad she couldn’t join us today.”

Her Majesty was a supporter (or rather, a gleeful onlooker) of my romance with Dark. I sent her an invitation to our engagement party, but her response came that morning, saying she couldn’t attend. The servant who brought the letter informed us that she was in bed with a cold.

“The messenger told us that Her Majesty had wept with disappointment over not getting to see my hour of glory.”

“It’s only an engagement party... We’ll have to visit her once she’s feeling a bit better.”

Dark and I were planning a date and time for that visit when two golden masses appeared in the corner of my vision.

The two boys had their chins perched on the back of the sofa, staring at us with their light blue eyes.

“Dum, Dee. I was wondering where you two were,” I said.

These children were tasked with protecting me.

Dum Tweedle was the firstborn of the twins, making Dee Tweedle his younger brother. Their curly blonde hair was their signature feature. Today, they were wearing brand-new overalls that reminded me of what elementary school boys wore during their entrance ceremonies.

The twins were as cute as ever, but they’d been sulking for the past few days. Even now, their soft cheeks were puffed up like squirrels.

But Dark, who adored Dum and Dee, just grinned at the sight. “How do you like the party, my dearest twins?”

“.....”

“.....”

They silently trotted over from the sofa to me, burying their faces in my dress. I worried the lacy fabric might tear in their tiny hands.

“Did something happen?” I asked.

“Don’t do this.”

“Don’t do this.”

“Huh?”

When they lifted their faces, their big eyes were full of tears.

“Don’t get engaged, Alice.”

“Don’t get engaged, Alice.”

“Eek!”

Dum grabbed my left hand, Dee grabbed my right hand, and they pulled me as hard as they could. They had stronger arms than I, despite being small children. I couldn’t stop them from dragging me forward.

“Dum? Dee? Where are we going?!”

We stepped out onto the terrace. A white-haired old man dressed in a butler’s uniform stopped us from proceeding.

“Good evening, Miss Alice. I’m glad you two look well, Mr. Dum and Mr. Dee.”

“Gramps!”

This man was the steward of the Knightley home. He was someone Dark trusted fully, with a reputation for his skilled conduct. Leeds and I also acknowledged the man for the wisdom that came with his age.

The twins buried their faces in my dress again before speaking.

“We’re going home.”

“The party’s over now.”

“You can’t go making trouble for Miss Alice now. As servants employed to protect her, you must prioritize your mistress’ intentions over your own.”

“...No.”

“...No.”

Their voices sounded like they were about to break. The way they squeezed my hands even harder left me lost for words.

Don't get engaged? They've never asked that of me before...

As I tried to think of a response, Dark joined us on the terrace.

"Don't be mean to my dearest twins, Gramps," he said.

"But I must, my lord. Children need to be scolded to understand what they've done wrong. Forgive me for asking, but you haven't given them a proper education, have you, Miss Alice?"

"I've taught them linguistics and arithmetic," I replied. "But as members of the Liddell family, I make sure they put more work into taking out their targets."

It was the best education to give them if they wanted to survive in the criminal underworld.

But the steward shook his head sadly. "And I'm sure that's why they're excellent fighters. However, if they cannot learn to control their emotions, they will grow into adults who use violence to get their way. If you wish to prevent this, why not send them to a proper school? A boarding school would allow them to learn basic knowledge as well."

A boarding school was a place where students both lived and studied. There were nine particularly prestigious boarding schools, including Eton College and Harrow School, where nobles and the wealthy sent their children.

I'd never considered placing the twins in a dormitory before. The proposal left me flustered.

"School is important, but I don't know if Dum and Dee can live outside the Liddell home..." I hesitated.

"Most parents struggle with those same concerns when they send their children off to school. It's no different from birds who force their young out of their nests once they're old enough. Schools are like microcosms of society, containing the strong and the weak, the wise and the foolish. Their boyhood memories will support these twins for the rest of their lives. The fact that their lives will be spent in the Liddell home is all the more reason they must expand their horizons now while they still can."

The weight of his words caused my spine to tense.

I was born into the Liddell family. I obeyed my father's every word throughout my life, spending my days studying with a governess, memorizing the traps within the manor, and learning how to handle weapons.

My whole world consisted of the manor, the garden with its fountain, my parents, and the servants. I was happy in that miniature garden with all its roses and ignorant of the ways of the outside world because the adults in my life protected me.

After my miniature garden was destroyed...I always wished I knew more about the world.

"Would it really help them?"

My question came out hesitantly. The steward nodded.

"It won't all be easy, but it's an act of love."

"Hang on, Gramps." Dark interrupted us. He couldn't bear to hear anymore. "You'd have to be mad to send the twins to boarding school. Why not get them a tutor instead? These two are Alice's family and her guards. She'd be lost without them."

"Lord Dark, do you mean to tell me you can't protect Miss Alice without Mr. Dum and Mr. Dee around? How disheartening. I'd never expect the head of the Knightley family to be so powerless..."

"No, I can protect Alice on my own, but..."

The steward pressed a white handkerchief to his eyes, pretending to cry. Dark was at a loss for words.

I looked down at Dum and Dee, who were still clinging to my dress. "Dum, Dee, would you like to go to school?"

"You'll be fine without us, Alice?"

"You're sending us away, Alice?"

Black marks formed on Dum and Dee's cheeks.

These rose-shaped patterns were called stigmas. Humans received them when a demon brought them back to life—all members of the Liddell family had

the same symbol appear on their bodies when their emotions ran rampant.

It was proof of just how angry the twins were.

But all I asked was if they wanted to go to boarding school...

"Maybe this is their rebellious phase," Dark muttered under his breath.

That reminded me of how some children could have rebellious periods. "Alice" didn't have the kind of personality where her emotions ever overwhelmed her, so the idea of a rebellious phase never crossed my mind.

"I'm not saying that I want you to go away," I asserted. "I'm suggesting it because it's an important decision. What do *you* want to do, Dum, Dee?"

When I asked them to tell me their true desires, the twins untensed their grips on my dress. Their tiny shoulders sagged.

"We don't know what to do for you."

"We don't know what to say to you."

They lacked the words to express the murky feelings in their hearts.

Humans lose their temper when they can't verbalize their emotions. The only way to avoid this was for Dum and Dee to learn things about themselves by studying and learning to communicate better.

Our lives being what they were, I'd never given them the education they needed. They were good at roundabout expressions but had no passion for studying.

"Gramps is right," I said. "They can't answer properly because they don't know the words to express their feelings and intentions. You should go to school for your studies, and if it isn't a good fit, you can always come back. How does that sound?"

Dum and Dee looked at each other and nodded.

"We'll go."

"We'll go."

I was scared to let them go, but I would find a way to make do for a few years. As the head of the Liddell family, it was my job to make sure they led happy

lives.

“Dark, are there any suitable boarding schools for Dum and Dee?”

“There are nine prestigious schools with good reputations, but they cater to children of upper-class families, so the twins might not make it through the admission process,” Dark answered.

“I know the perfect place.” It was the butler who spoke up—his handkerchief now neatly folded up again. “How about Ark School? Lord Dark just received a petition from them asking that he become a new executive of the institution. They specifically requested he visit the campus personally.”

“Hmm. I suppose being an executive means I might be able to get the twins accepted into the school,” Dark said.

The opportunity couldn’t have come at a better time.

Dark pressed his hand to his chin in thought. I had something to ask of him as well.

“If you visit the school for an observation, I want you to take me with you. I can’t leave Dum and Dee at a school if it isn’t the right place for them. Wouldn’t it be awful if they ended up in a bad environment?”

Sensing my drive to protect my boys, Dark smiled awkwardly. “Let’s go together then. It’ll be a good chance for you to let go of your children, just like a parent would.”

“Huh?”

What does he mean by that?

But there was no time to think about it. Dark clapped his hands cheerfully.

“It’s time to prepare for a trip, in that case. Let’s get ready as soon as the party is over.”

“Are you *ever* coming back to the party, my lady?” Jack appeared on the terrace. He was tired of waiting for the two hosts to return.

He looked at Dark, the host most excited to turn the party into a spectacular event, the steward, who wasn’t expected to be here in the first place, and then

at the two pouting twins.

“Tell me who you need me to kill.”



“**LOOK** at all the sheep out there!”

I watched a herd of animals from the window of the steam locomotive.

We left London two hours ago and had been traveling through the countryside for a while. The animals grazed on bright green grass—a sight that relaxed me.

“That’s a sheepdog running circles around them,” I observed. “I’ve heard they corral the herd based on human commands. I wonder how much they really understand?”

Dark sat across from me, legs crossed and eyes fixed on me lovingly in my excitement. “You sound like a young child, Alice. Look at my adorable twins and note how properly they’re sitting.”

Dum, sitting next to Dark, and Dee, sitting at my side, were busy sipping the lemonade we bought at the train station. The train fascinated them when we arrived at the platform, but the novelty waned after we departed. They showed no interest in the scenes outside the window now.

I felt embarrassed when I realized I’d been the only one rejoicing over this train ride.

“I-I’m sitting properly too,” I retorted.

“Then for you, my exemplary lady, I offer this sugary-sweet black tea.” Dark handed me a canteen full of tea.

A small table was in the middle of our box seats with tea, lemonade, chocolates, scones, and biscuits to snack on.

In my past life, I usually bought a bento box at the train station before taking a train ride, but lunchboxes weren’t common in this world. You could either bring bread to dine on or stop at one of the stations along the way to eat at a restaurant. We’d brought our snacks to fend off hunger until our planned stop at a restaurant.

I drank the sweet tea, and my excitement over the trip subsided.

“I got carried away. I’ve only been on a train a few times in my life,” I said.

At the very least, the other passengers never saw me acting excited since we’d reserved a box in first class. We were in the passenger cabin while Leeds and the steward rode in the servants’ quarters ahead. Jack remained in the luggage car in case of an ambush.

Dark, in a cheery mood of his own, removed the rolled-up map he wore on his hat as a decoration and spread it out on the table. Names were written on the land of the fig-shaped continent. Those were train lines leading out of London and into the various countryside regions.

His long fingers traced the line heading for the sea.

“We’re headed for a coastal resort. It’s right beside the sea and is famous for its beautiful ballrooms. Did you pack your swimsuit?”

“Unfortunately not,” I said. “I brought the bare minimum since this isn’t a vacation. I would never think of packing five trunks like a certain someone!”

My eyes nearly fell out of their sockets when I saw Dark waiting for us on the platform. His frock coat and hat were styled to make him look like an explorer. That was attention-grabbing enough, but I was much more shocked by the mountain of trunks the attendants were carrying. He told me they were mostly carrying his outfits.

Some people just can’t resist fine clothes...!

“You’re the reason the luggage storage is full,” I sighed. “Your hats and outfits might take up space, but don’t you think you overpacked? Even a little bit?”

“But I have outfits for the rest of you too. I had them made to fit in at the boarding school since I figured you would be underdressed.”

“You made outfits for five people? In so little time?”

Sewing machines for home use had been popularized by this point, but it still took hours to complete a single piece of clothing—sometimes even a few days.

Actually, how did he know our sizes in the first place?

I was suspicious. Dum and Dee were blinking at Dark, too.

“Clothes for me?”

“And me too?”

“Of course, my lovely twins. I paid extra attention to your outfits’ designs. First, there’s the jackets...”

The boys listened to Dark’s explanation, their expressions serious as they sipped their lemonade. They were getting along with Dark well despite how rarely they displayed their emotions. It almost made that night at the party feel like a dream.

They’ll get through this long trip just fine at this rate.

I breathed a sigh of relief and grabbed another piece of sweet chocolate.



SINCE we didn’t book a sleeping car, we spent the night at a hotel along the way and then set out for our second day of the trip.

Wearing a Garbo hat, I stepped off the train once we reached the last stop and looked out at the town.

“Wow...! What a lovely place.”

Unlike the foggy city of London, the town we reached was clear from the sea breeze. Even the scent of the ocean was refreshing, probably from less pollution in the air.

The area was well-developed as a popular resort spot for tourists. The buildings were large and modern, with rows of signs directing us toward ballrooms, swimming areas, and a botanical garden with a glass ceiling.

Sightseers visiting from London like us were aglow in anticipation of all the attractions.

Dark followed behind the twins and me, showing us around the area.

“This road leads straight to the ocean. You should be allowed to play in the sea as much as you like on your days off from Ark School. I know you’ll make friends right away, too.” Dark glanced at an old signboard and suddenly called

for his steward.

The steward had been taking care of our luggage with Jack and Leeds, but once Dark whispered something in his ear, he headed back inside the train station.

“Where is Gramps headed?” I asked.

“I asked him to run an errand for me. Now, what say we head to the boarding school?” Dark called out to the waiting carriage.

The middle-aged coachman grimaced when he told him we were heading to Ark School.

“I wouldn’t go there if I were you. Nothing good will come of it.”

“Why is that?”

“Legends say that a monster lives in that school. The lord who ruled this land many years ago summoned the monster to build him a castle, and they say it still walks its halls, even now that it’s been turned into a school. The rich folk aren’t privy to these sorts of stories, but the locals know better than to get anywhere near that place.”

A ghost in an English building only increased its value, but “monsters” weren’t something you heard of very often.

Suspicion clouded Dark’s face. “...What do you say to that, Alice?”

“A monster in a school? That sounds like fun!” I exclaimed.

“What?!”

Dark was shocked, but I couldn’t contain my excitement.

“A monster that lives in a school sounds like the plot of a children’s movie! I always loved those in my past life.”

“Past life?”

I gasped. Dark had a strange look on his face.

My reincarnation is supposed to be a secret!

“N-Nothing! I’m eager to see what sort of school it is. Could you please show

us to the school? We won't make any trouble."

Once I offered twice the market rate, the coachman reluctantly agreed to take us.

We arranged for three carriages to carry our group to the school. Jack and Leeds took the second carriage, while the last in line was for our luggage. Dark's luggage probably took up the majority of the space.

A boarding school with a monster in it... I never heard of something like that in the game.

The cases of the Sleeping Beauties and Jack the Ripper were events that happened in Jack, Leeds, and the Tweedles' story routes. I played them all in my past life. However, this "Ark School" we were heading to was never even mentioned in the game.

Perhaps it was a unique story arc in the Lord Knightley route added as bonus content.

I can only speculate, but it will be all right. We're all going together.

I felt resilient as the carriage rattled forward.

I had yet to learn just how much terror this unknown route would bring us.



WE saw fewer people around the further we got out of the city.

The tourists and sightseers were replaced with women carrying baskets to the marketplace and men taking lunch breaks from their jobs. Children on the side of the road were enjoying a game of tag.

It seemed like a peaceful, quiet, blissful place.

"This is your stop."

The carriage slowed to a halt at a small harbor outside of town. Across the calm seas, we could make out a solitary island enveloped in greenery. It was hard to see from that distance, but I saw some sort of stone building sitting in its center.

"That building's where you'll find Ark School," the coachman said. "They call it

Noah's Ark in these parts."

"So the school is on an island..." I hadn't expected it to require a boat to reach, so I was a bit startled.

"Surprising, no? They use it as a school now, but it used to be a castle. The noble kids can't run away this way." The coachman gave us one last "Stay safe" before he left.

The luggage carriage sped off after tossing our trunks to the ground, kicking up a big cloud of dust with its wheels.

Leeds raised his fist in anger as he choked on the dust. "Hang on a second! That is no way to treat a lady!"

"You're no lady. Twins, close your eyes, or you'll get dust in them. My lady, you..." Jack covered the noses and mouths of the boys, then squinted at me. His eyebrows sagged.

Dark had pulled me close to him. He pressed my face into his chest so the dust wouldn't get to me.

"Are you all right, Alice?" he asked.

"I'm fine, thank you. Oh, hello."

A boy with a shaved head ran up to us from where the boats were lined up on the harbor. "You'll miss the last boat if you don't hurry! You won't make it in time for the entrance ceremony if you don't arrive today. I won't stop you if you want to leave, though. Two students already went home today!"

"Why would the students leave at the last minute if they were set to attend the entrance ceremony?" I asked.

"They said they didn't want to be stuck on the island!"

Perhaps attending school on an island with nowhere to flee was like a jail sentence to young boys at the age where all they wanted to do was play.

But how do Dum and Dee feel?

The twins were holding hands and staring out at the ocean. The silhouette of the distant island was reflected in their blue eyes. They seemed nervous, but

they knew they needed to be strong to face this challenge.

Nerves were inevitable when taking the plunge into a new environment. This would give them life experience, too.

I bent down to speak to the boy, waiting for our decision. “Can you get the six of us on a boat?”

“This way!”

He led us onto a wooden ship, where we sat on its old benches.

The hull was oiled to prevent it from rotting, but the exposure to sunlight had turned it a strange gray color.

As the only passengers, the rest of the ship was empty. The wooden seats were splintering, and the neglect in repairing them made me feel that this ship must not have many customers.

Perhaps it only operated during times when students needed to come and go.

The ship set sail on a westward wind. It gradually picked up more and more speed. The waves roared against us, rocking the hull with each impact.

I grabbed the railing before it could knock me off my feet.

The sea looked so calm from the harbor!

Suddenly, a shadow enveloped the ship. A giant bird was flying directly overhead.

“Does anyone know what that bird is?”

No one answered me.

I looked back at the ship and saw Dark and Jack clasping their hands over their mouths. They were both deathly pale. Dum and Dee had slumped into each other, too—only Leeds seemed unaffected.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“I feel...”

“So sick...”

“Sounds like they’re seasick.” Leeds, paying no mind to the ship’s rocking,

stroked the twins' backs. "Sailing can ruin your sense of balance unless you're used to it. How are you doing, my lady?"

"I'm fine. I wish we would have brought some medicine for nausea."

Their symptoms only worsened the longer we were on the boat. They would have to recover once they disembarked.

We finally arrived at the island. The ship pulled up alongside a wharf.

As soon as I stepped onto the land, I gave the others orders.

"Let's take a short break before we head to Ark School."

The ship's crew took care of our luggage while we strolled along the white beach.

The winding road stretched from the harbor into the forest. A giant castle gate protruded from the center of the lush greenery. That was definitely Ark School. The building certainly looked like the setting where a legendary monster would dwell.

There was also a rest area alongside the start of the road. The small log cabin was probably for visitors who needed to recover from seasickness.

"Come on, everyone," I urged them along. "We just have to make it that far."

We slowly made our way to the cabin. The interior consisted of misshapen chairs and a table made from halved logs. The countertops were covered in pamphlets.

"I guess it's just us here."

With relief on their faces, the seasick members collapsed into chairs.

I left Leeds in charge of our luggage cart and looked around the room.

I'd assumed this was nothing more than a place to sit and rest, but the glass cupboards on the walls had signs telling us to take whatever we wanted from inside. The cupboards contained a map of the island, bite-sized pieces of cake on plates, and three blue juice bottles.

"These must be free drinks for visitors," I said.

"That's perfect. The sea breeze left me parched." Dark stood up from his

stool. He collected two bottles and a bottle opener from the cupboard.

I carried the plates of cake to the table. Jack raised his sagging head while the twins, who'd quickly recovered from their seasickness, gathered around me.

"Get me a drink too."

"We want cake!"

"We want cake!"

I popped the corks of the juice bottles.

White steam formed at the top of the bottles as the liquid began to bubble. As the drops of condensation dripped off the bottle, for some reason, I felt goosebumps form on my skin.

They're cold?

It was as if someone had just taken them off ice. The cakes were warm to the touch too, like they were fresh out of the oven. But no one else was around—there wasn't any kitchen equipment in the cabin either.

So, who prepared these?

"Hang on, everyone," I said. "I need to be sure it's safe—"

But I was too late.

Dark and Jack sipped juice from the bottles.

The twins swallowed bites of cake.

"Yummy!"

"Yummy!"

"What a mysterious flavor. I've never tasted anything like it before. It's like a mix between a cherry tart, custard, pineapple, roast turkey, and toast with caramel and butter. Why, I— *Urk!*" Dark went pale in the middle of his description. The bottle slipped from his hand and hit the ground with a thud.

Jack dropped his bottle next. He had one eye closed as he clutched at his throat.

"I-I can't breathe..."

“Mph!”

“Mph!”

Even the twins jolted and fell to the floor.

It has to be poison!

“Hurry and vomit it back out!” I shouted. “If you can’t get your fingers down your throats, then I’ll—”

“No, my lady!” Leeds intercepted my hands before they could reach the twins. “You’ll be hurt if the poison is absorbed by your skin. You can’t touch them.”

“So you want me to stand here and watch them die?!” I cried.

“You’re the head of the Liddell family. It has to be done.”

His words were so cold. A wave of despair consumed me.

The family motto my father always said to me echoed in my brain.

“Don’t forget that death lurks around every corner.”

My death meant the end of the Liddell family bloodline. It was only natural my life would be prioritized during an emergency. Jack and the twins were family to me, but their actual purpose was to protect my true family and nothing more.

The pawns died so that the king could live on.

“B-But...”

As I hesitated, an orange glint of light flashed in front of me. Like a firefly, it soared through the air, drawing lines as it rotated counterclockwise.

Leeds wrapped his arms around me and scowled upward at it.

“Now what?!”

The light wrote the numbers one through twelve as it completed one revolution. A giant clock had formed in the air. The surface glittered before peeling apart and falling onto the four people below.

“Look out!” I shouted in warning. It was all I could do.

The pieces of the clock flashed when they touched the boys. Their bodies were enveloped in light, spinning around them like chrysalis until they finally popped and split apart.

White smoke billowed to the ceiling. The table collapsed, sending cake scattering and bottles rolling across the floor.

Amidst the chaos, I heard fabric hitting the ground through the smoke.

It started to disperse. Under the chair where Jack had just been sitting was a young boy wearing an oversized shirt.

“Huh? What the hell’s going on?”

His sharp, bright green eyes went wide as he stared at his hands coming out of the sleeves.

That curly black hair and the necktie hanging off his neck... They feel so familiar...

“Um... I can’t see anything. Alice, where are you?”

Another high-pitched voice called out. It was a beautiful, icy voice, but muffled—like someone had covered his mouth with a cloth.

I found the source of the voice—a young boy with his head buried inside a top hat. He probably couldn’t see with the hat in the way. The boy flailed his arms like he was fumbling around in the dark, with his too-long sleeves flapping limply.

The extreme decorations on his outfit looked exactly like the ones Dark had been wearing.

“Leeds, I suddenly have a bad feeling about this...” I said in a whisper.

“How funny! I was thinking the same thing. If the two adults look like *that*, what on earth happened to the children?” Leeds whirled around. I followed his eyes...and froze.

“...Huh?”

Two young men were standing where the twins had just been.

They both had handsome, chiseled features. Their glossy blonde hair was eye-

length, and their bright blue eyes were somber. Nearby on the ground were a dagger and crossbow, but they felt like miniatures next to the two well-built men. Leeds let out a whistle at their beauty. Except he hadn't whistled because these men were his type.

It was because they were completely naked.

"Eeeeeeeek!"

I covered my eyes. My heart leaped violently in my chest. My pulse was racing.

Wh-Wh-Why are they naked?! Who are those people?! What happened to Dum and Dee?!

As I staggered around, my toes collided with one of the bottles. A tag was attached to the neck labeled: "Drink me."

Drink me?

On the cake plates, the raisins were arranged to spell out: "Eat me."

The four consumed these. Then, a light appeared and drew a clock in the air before the four were replaced by strange young men and boys.

"Phew! That was scary. I couldn't see a thing!"

A handsome young boy emerged from underneath the top hat. His wavy, silver hair looked like it was spun from moonlight. The boy's long eyelashes were accentuated by sapphire eyes, and he had a dainty little nose and lips like a doll.

But it wasn't his looks that had me so startled.

It's Rabbit!

The boy looked exactly like my memories of my childhood friend. He was the very same Dark I knew from years ago. Only the two visible horns on the top of his head were different.

"It's you, isn't it, Dark?" I ventured. "So that boy is Jack, and these men..."

Leeds had draped a blanket over the two men. The one with the mole under his left eye spoke first.

“I’m Dum.”

Then, the one with the mole under his right eye followed up.

“I’m Dee.”

“I knew it!”

I felt like I was about to faint. My angelic little twins had turned into broad-chested men with defined abs! The children’s clothes scattered around only made it all the more tragic.

Aaaah... Now, how am I supposed to get my fix of cuteness...?

I cried into my sleeves, unable to accept this reality.

Little Dark brought his hand to his chin. “We were caught in a trap. Your guard dog and I were transformed into ten-year-olds, while the twins look to be about seventeen now. Perhaps drinking the juice sends you backward in time, and the cakes advance you.”

With that suggestion, Dum and Dee tried drinking the juice while Dark and Jack bit into the cakes.

But nothing changed.

“I guess it doesn’t work. I doubt a demon child could take things this far on their own, so this must be the work of a named demon,” Dark theorized.

“So, a demon is somewhere around here too...? I’m just glad you’re all alive. My power should work if a demon did this to you.”

I put my arms at my sides, cleared my mind, and concentrated. Then, I folded my hands at my chest and focused on my prayer.

Please release them from the demon’s spell.

My stigma instantly turned hot on my chest. A white band of light slipped from my chest and out of my clothes, engulfing the other four members.

I possessed the ability to undo abnormalities caused by demons.

My powers felt like they were responding, but then...

“Huh?”

The light dispersed, leaving the four unchanged.

Dark flapped the dangling sleeves of his shirt sadly. "It looks like the caster is more powerful than you, so we'll have to find the demon who laid this trap to undo it. I'm sure they've already sensed that their trap was activated, too."

"Does that mean they might come here?" I asked.

The blood drained from my face. Dark's response came without any hint of humor.

"If I caught someone in a trap, I'd want to finish the job as soon as possible. We should change into clothes that are easier to move in. Fortunately, I happen to have just the thing in my luggage. Can you bring me the green trunks, Leeds? There's three of them."

"I won't be able to carry them all by myself," Leeds said.

"I'll come too," I volunteered.

Leeds and I went outside to find the green trunks from the stack on the wagon. We finally spotted them at the bottom of the pile but couldn't pull them out.

As we worked hard to yank the trunks out, Leeds suddenly stiffened.

"Bad news... Someone's coming from the forest. I see a lantern light swaying."

"You what?!"

We would be backed into a corner if this were the demon. It would be foolish to fight without weapons and difficult to resist. Tragically, they could burn the log cabin down with us inside it to reach a guaranteed bad end.

That meant the demise of not just me but of everyone.

"Hurry!"

We finally dislodged the luggage trunks, threw them into the rest area, and closed the door again.

I whipped my head toward the figure emerging from the forest. They were headed our way. My pulse was pounding in my ears.

"Don't step out from behind me, my lady."

Leeds pressed me against the door with his back protectively, his hand instinctively moving down to the chain around his hips. I stuck my hand in my pouch, too, and gulped.

The sky above the old castle turned orange as the sun set.

With the warm glow at his back, as if the forest itself were on fire, the person emerged wearing a black robe.

I squinted my eyes to get a better look at him. He was a tall, skinny man who looked to be roughly eighteen years old. He was holding a lantern but no weapons. I couldn't tell if he was a demon from this distance.

"Hello! Isn't this a lovely island? Are you here alone?" Leeds called out to the man first.

Speaking to a suspicious person directly was a way of preventing violence in itself. Most people were startled into giving up if they'd approached with the intent to attack.

The man froze, and his face turned angry. Perhaps Leeds' move had worked.

"Don't I look like I'm alone? This island is home to a boarding school. Did you think it was a resort?" The man stroked his maple-brown hair. His words prickled with irritation. His short robe, tailcoat, trousers, and shoes were all black. Only his necktie and vest were bright gold, like flowers blooming in a fertile field.

It was most likely the school uniform. But we couldn't let our guard down—a demon could disguise itself as a student, after all.

I called out to him next. I wasn't going to back down in the face of someone mysterious like this. "No, we knew what it was. We're a group of first-year students and their attendants."

"But that can't be. This is a boys' school. Go back to the mainland... No, I guess the boat's already left, now that I think of it."

The ship that brought us there was already a distant speck on the horizon.

In other words, the six of us were trapped on an island with a demon.

On the other side of my back, drenched in cold sweat, I heard the cabin door

creak open.

“The young lady comes from a baron’s family. On the trip here, I heard her mention that she plans to attend finishing school.”

The person who emerged was Dark—clutching the brim of a hat too large for his head. As soon as I laid eyes on him, I could swear I saw flower petals dancing in the wind around him.

He’s...so stinking cute...!

The cheeks of his baby face were tinted pink, and the green tailcoat and white lacy blouse he wore were perfect for him. His plaid trousers went down to the knee, and jeweled belts held up his socks. It was an incredibly intricate design all around.

What an amazing piece of art! It must be a new illustration they were adding to the game, right?! The kind you go back and look at in the gallery again later!

As I was letting my fangirl heart get the best of me, Jack rushed out of the cabin next.

“He’s right. Don’t try and pick fights for no damn reason.”

Jack was wearing the same clothes as Dark, only with much limper bows. I knew he didn’t care about how he presented himself, which only made the beret on his head stand out all the more. It was so cute that I thought my heart might explode.

If the developers made merch out of these character versions, it would sell out instantly.

I can picture it now... In my past life, I would have bought as many items as they let me...!

While my favorite character may have changed now, I still couldn’t resist the urge to fangirl over Jack. Dark shot me a glance.

“I think she came to Ark School by mistake. Isn’t that right, miss?”

“Y-Yes, exactly! How utterly careless of me! Oh ho ho ho!” I tried to play it off with laughter. The student sighed with resignation.

“That’s not good. There isn’t even a place for you to stay out here. What now...?” The man had just met me, but he seemed to be giving real thought to my conundrum. He didn’t seem affected when he saw Dark or Jack, either.

I guess that means he isn’t the demon who laid the traps.

Leeds and I exchanged nods before I spoke next.

“In that case, may I stay at Ark School until the next boat arrives? I don’t need to be treated as a student. I’d be happy to clean or do kitchen work as needed.”

“You can’t!”

“You can’t!”

I heard deep voices, followed by hands being placed on my shoulders from behind.

“You’re nobility, Alice. You can’t mop floors.”

“You’re a young lady, Alice. You can’t bake cakes.”

Wrapping their arms around me from both sides were the Tweedles, now in their new clothes.



They were both wearing black tailcoats with bright green accents.

Dum had his buttons undone to reveal a checkered waistcoat underneath. His untucked shirt and loose necktie made him look like a playboy.

Dee, on the other hand, wore his shirt and necktie properly, like a model student.

The designs of their outfits resembled those of Dark and Jack. That was when I realized something. Dum's outfit must have been made for Jack, while Dee's was made for Dark originally. The width was the right size, but their trousers fell short of their ankles.

I wondered if Jack and Dark were sad to see that the twins had grown taller than them.

"Your uniforms look alike. Did you transfer here from another boarding school? This place takes on students that other schools couldn't handle, but it's rare to see four of you come from the same school."

Dark smiled back beautifully at the student's suspicious gaze. "We fell for the same noblewoman and started a big fight at school."

"I see. That's an English gentleman's solution to problems, all right. We can't treat a baron's daughter like a maid, so I'll ask the headmaster if we can make a special exception and admit you as a female student. Follow me, and I'll show you to the dorms for now."

The student's robe fluttered as he turned on his heel. I introduced myself to him properly.

"Thank you for your hospitality. My name is Alice Liddell. And yours?"

"I'm Charles Dodgson. You sure have a lot of luggage there."

"We'll carry it ourselves, so don't you worry about it." Leeds followed by calling Dum and Dee to push the wagon with him.

I walked ahead with Dark and Jack behind me.

As Charles led our group, he looked up at the distant, towering castle. "That old castle is the schoolhouse. There aren't even two hundred students here,

including the new first years. The school was founded to raise fine gentlemen through studies and communal living.”

The island was slanted upwards toward the ground where the castle sat. A long, winding slope carried visitors through the forest to the castle. It circled the ripening chestnut and maple trees over and over, making you wonder if you would ever reach your destination.

Few people must make that trip, judging by the way the undergrowth jutted out into the path. It *was* just an island with a school and nothing else.

We exited the forest after about three times as long as I thought it would take. The first thing I saw was the sky starting to turn inky black.

The next thing was the thick castle gates. Lit torches were fixed to its sides. Holes were in the rough stack of boulders to fire at oncoming enemies.

“Doesn’t look like much of a school, does it? But even the navy used it as a stronghold once. It’s a place with lots of history,” Charles explained. “A few times every year, the students still make a big fuss about seeing some strange shadow around the place.”

“How frightening,” I remarked.

The coachman had feared the monster at this school, but Charles made it sound like nothing more than a ghost story shared between students. In my past life, stories about ghosts haunting the toilet stalls and pianos playing on their own were common in Japanese schools, too.

The castle drawbridge opened up for Charles to pass through.

Dark, Jack, and I followed him. The bridge pulled back up once Leeds and the twins were inside, its rusted chains creaking under its weight.

The old castle sat directly behind the wall. The center portion was small, but the building sprawled out to the left and right. Both outer walls seemed to have animals carved into them, but I couldn’t tell what kind—the rain and wind had whittled them down over time.

A grassy plaza was in front of the castle with a lion statue on the left and a unicorn statue on the right. Behind each were two-story western-style houses.

The one on the lion's side was made of bricks, while the one on the unicorn's side was white stucco.

"Those houses are the dormitories. Students at Ark School are separated into two dorms as a matter of tradition. We'll have to see the headmaster tomorrow since it's late now. Why don't you and some of your attendants stay in Lion Dorm tonight, Miss Alice? I'm the prefect there. The others can stay in Unicorn Dorm."

"I want to go with Alice."

"I don't want to leave Alice."

The twins were the first to volunteer. Charles nodded.

"All right. You two can come to Lion Dorm. The rest of you, head to Unicorn Dorm."

Dark and Jack looked like they'd been given prison sentences.

"Not the guard dog..."

"Not this bastard..."

It wasn't going to be an easy dorm assignment for them, either. As I stood there worrying about them...

"Charles!"

A small boy was running our way from the plaza. He wore the same uniform as Charles, but his necktie and vest were blue.

Charles furrowed his brow when he saw the boy holding a cricket bat. "Up this late playing sports, Robins? Us prefects are supposed to be the ones greeting the new students."

"My bad, I got really caught up in our match. Hey, why's there a girl here?"

Robins got close to me and looked my face over.

That allowed me to get a good look at him.

His skin was tan from sun exposure, and freckles dotted his nose and cheeks. The boy's dark brown hair was messy, like a ball of yarn clawed up by a kitten. He radiated a cheerful attitude.

Perhaps the choker he wore on his neck was why he reminded me so much of a puppy. But his age stuck out to me as strange. Boarding school students usually only became prefects in their final year of school, yet Robins looked like a first-year.

“I don’t mean to be rude, but are you really a prefect?” I asked.

“Pffft!” Charles burst into laughter. Robins puffed his cheeks up angrily.

“Don’t laugh, Charles!”

“Sorry. Robins is in his final year, just like I am, Miss Alice,” Charles said. “Only prefects are allowed to wear waistcoats in the color of their dormitory.”

Robins’ waistcoat was bright blue. He laughed off what I now realized was a rude question.

“Gosh, I wish I didn’t look so young. I’m Robins Duckworth, the prefect of Unicorn Dorm. Welcome to Ark School, everyone! Did you decide where you’re staying? Yes? Come with me, those of you in Unicorn Dorm.”

Robins tucked the bat under his arm and took off running like a referee had blown the whistle to signal the start of a match.

Leeds whistled in praise at his speed. “Ah, isn’t it so nice to be young? I wonder if I’ll be able to find any promising students who suit my requirements.”

“Don’t you dare flirt at a time like this.” Jack shoved the corner of the trunk he was carrying into Leeds’ behind. “Be careful, my lady. I’ll try my best not to kill the earl.”

“Please do. I’d like to survive this adventure,” I said.

Dark would probably go up in flames if he stuck to his usual routine of teasing Jack. Finding our demon would be the least of my problems at that point.

“Dark, be sure not to fight with Jack, okay? No killing each other! Just repeat the mantra, ‘Life is precious.’ Be good boys, okay?” I bent down and lectured him. Dark had been smiling the whole time, but now he was still.

“...Very well. Sweet dreams, Alice, and twins.” With that quiet farewell, Dark turned and headed toward Unicorn Dorm.

I wondered what had gotten into him all of a sudden. I wanted to stop him, but he was already too far away. He didn't take anything with him either. Jack angrily carried two trunks off in the same direction.

"Let's go, Alice."

"Let's go, Alice."

"Right..."

Dum and Dee pulled the wagon while Leeds and I followed. We walked toward Lion Dorm.

The flames of the torches in the plaza suddenly roared higher when I walked by, which startled me. I didn't see any shadows of lesser demons around.

However, the creature that laid the trap was definitely nearby.

I have to give it everything I've got if I want to turn the others back to normal.
I squeezed the strings of my pouch, determined to set things right.

Chapter 2: Quiet in the Dorms

I awoke the next morning on the second story of Lion Dorm.

I was lying on a wooden bed in a private room usually used by upperclassmen. The room was empty, the mattress was hard, and the curtains were thin. I'd changed into one of my negligees the night before, but it was so cold that I had to curl up in a ball until I finally fell asleep.

Hmm, I'm still tired...

I could tell it was light outside through my closed eyelids, but I couldn't seem to wake up. That was when I felt my bed sink slightly, followed by hot breath against my ears.

"Alice...wake up."

"Alice...wake up."

"EEEEEEK!"

This real-life ASMR sent me flying up. The Tweedle brothers (adult versions) were lying in bed to my left and right. They leaned their elbows into the bed and rested their heads in their hands like models from a fashion magazine. I could see their muscular bodies peeking out from underneath their shirt collars. They had defined Adam's apples and lengthy limbs.

The way their long hair fell around the moles under their eyes created an undeniable sensuality.

They were supposed to sleep in Charles' room last night!

"Wh-Wh-What are you doing here?!" I croaked.

"The usual."

"Lying next to you."

When they cocked their heads, their beautiful features so close to me, I felt

like my face was going to erupt with heat.

I completely forgot that they're extremely handsome as adults!

They were much younger than me, but right now, they looked like the ultimate love interest characters.

The Tweedle brothers' route in the game was a wholesome, child-friendly story. In the true ending of their route, you see a special illustration of the two in the future, exchanging vows to be together with Alice forever. I loved how they were kissing each of her cheeks. Alice was wearing a wedding dress and clutching a bouquet of red roses.

It was why players looked forward to the fan disc of the twins' route most of all.

Calm down. They're my family! No more fantasizing!

I was taking deep breaths when the twins sat up.

"Leeds went out on a morning patrol." Dum reached out and smoothed down my messy hair.

"Charles is still asleep." Dee, with gentler motions than Dum, straightened the collar of my negligee.

"Now's the time to form a plan."

"Now is the time to form a plan."

"R-Right! We have to find the demon who altered your ages and get us out of this strange situation. The longer we stay, the higher the threat to our lives."

We didn't know if the demon had targeted us specifically or was merely aiming to transform a lot of people. All we knew for sure was that the trap was laid for visitors to the island. If they knew we'd fallen victim to the trap, we were like butterflies caught in a spider's web.

If the Liddell family met its end here...

This country would devolve into chaos.

Other figures besides the Liddells held power and influence in the underworld.

The Charons controlled the opium dens operating in Limehouse's Chinatown.

Madame Catherine was the one behind the information brokers throughout the kingdom. Even the police acknowledged her superiority.

Goemon was a thief who stole from those who amassed their fortunes from wrongdoing, but he was caught and executed in London. However, his innumerable followers remained.

London was a diverse assortment of different classes and races, with many being unable to get by without getting their hands dirty. The dead thief's followers now managed those low-level criminals.

One had to admit it was a necessary evil, which was why the Liddell family didn't punish them. But if the Liddells were out of the picture, they would likely set themselves up to take over control of the criminal underworld.

Many had even tried to reach Queen Victoria when I was living in the East End after my family's tragedy. I was eventually taken in by Bear and managed to rebuild my family, but if the various criminals out there began to fight for power, London would become even further stained with blood.

The Liddell family's role was to maintain the delicate balance that kept the underworld in order. Eliminating evildoers served as a warning to others—they would meet the same fate if they did anything too rash.

It wasn't hard to guess what would happen to London without our system in place.

"We might be killed if we don't find the demon soon," I said.

"We won't be killed so quickly."

"We won't be killed so quickly."

"What makes you say that?"

Dum was sitting cross-legged on the bed while Dee sat with his knees bent. They both shared their theory with me.

"They would have poisoned the food if they wanted to kill us."

"They wanted us to live, which is why they used a spell instead of poison."

“I suppose that’s true, now that you mention it.”

It would have been easy to kill us by lacing the food and drinks with poison. But I still didn’t understand the point of changing their ages.

“I wonder what the demon wanted to do to us...?” I mused.

Ding, ding, ding. A bell was ringing through the hallway. It was the alarm to wake up the students. Charles, who lived in the room across from mine, would be among them.

Our morning meeting would have to end there.

“You have to act like transfer students here, you two,” I said. “Keep in contact with Dark and Jack, too. The demon will probably try to get close to us, even if they aren’t after our lives. Come find me right away if you see anyone suspicious.”

“But who will protect you, Alice?”

“You’re in the most danger, Alice.”

Their light blue eyes were brimming with concern for me.

I placed my hands on their cheeks to reassure them.

“I’ll be fine. If anyone tries to hurt me, I’ll have a bullet with their name on it.”

I smiled and let them get a peek at the handgun hidden under my pillow.



I shoed Dum and Dee out of the room to get changed.

I opened up the black trunk in front of me and pulled out the black apron dress I always wore, but the fabric was so wrinkled from the deep creases that the skirt wouldn’t stay down at the bottom.

“I can’t wear this unless I hang it up for a while...”

I took it off, hung the dress on a hanger, and looked around in the red trunk Dark had prepared for me. Inside was a jumper skirt with green accents and an exquisite short jacket with puff sleeves. The outfit was made partially with plaid fabric and a tasteful amount of lace at the bottom of the skirt.

I tied the bow to my chest, took a look in the mirror, and let out a delighted cry.

“Wow... How adorable!”

It matched the outfits the others had put on yesterday. It even looked a bit like a school uniform. I tied my hair up and knocked on Charles’ door.

He emerged dressed in his uniform and suggested I go to the headmaster’s office.

“Ask him to let you study here as a student until the next ship comes. I have to supervise breakfast in the dining hall, so I can’t come with you, but he should listen to you once you tell him the prefects of both dorms are helping you.”

Charles gave me directions to the headmaster’s office before leaving the dorm in a hurry.

Once I got out to the plaza, an old man was trimming the dewy lawn. It appeared this island was home to maintenance workers and caretakers, not just students and teachers.

“Good morning, my lady.” Leeds appeared before me on the path. He was wrinkling his brow.

“Good morning, Leeds. What’s that look for? Don’t tell me you found our demon.”

“I’m in total despair. What’s going on with the age range at this school?!” Leeds was fuming. He tugged on his ponytail. “Everywhere I look, it’s old men, grandpas, and geezers! The teachers and caretakers are totally covered in wrinkles! And here I was looking forward to spending time with gentle, beautiful teachers who turn into total stallions once class is dismissed!”

“I think you’re expecting too much of this place... It’s an island in the middle of the ocean, after all.”

Institutions were being established throughout the country due to the newfound popularity of boarding schools. Some schools valued education, like the famous nine academies, while others were only after money—gathering students and putting them in classes that weren’t up to standards. Teachers

with no honor would move to those locations to guarantee an easy job.

Anyone who wasn't serious about teaching wouldn't come all the way out to an island school. Guardians were surely happy that those kinds of teachers didn't work at Ark School, but Leeds was disappointed that he couldn't land a casual fling. His grief then changed to strength with a clench of his fists.

"We'll find that demon in no time, my lady. Then, once we're back in London, I'll go on a classy date with one of these gloomy old men!" Leeds handed me a piece of paper.

"What's this?"

"This is a blueprint for Ark School. They give these to all the new students, and I swiped one." He winked. "The center building has a chapel and hallways to the left and right towers, which have classrooms, research rooms, and the headmaster's office. In between the towers is a courtyard. There's the sports grounds and a small forest to the east, and a pond to the west for boating. You can't come in or out through the back of the castle because it's just a big cliffside. The dorms are on each side of the grassy plaza, and the little workshop-looking building at the side of the castle is the dining hall. Where are you headed, my lady?"

"To the headmaster's office to get permission to stay here. Charles said he makes all the decisions regarding the school, so the teachers and students will do whatever he says."

"Sounds like a dictatorship, if you ask me. Actually, I bet it's easy as pie to rule over a populace when they're children."

We entered the castle and used the map to navigate.

The hallways were lined with works of art, elaborate lighting fixtures, and fancy furnishings. It had a lavish interior that suited a former castle built by a nobleman. However, everything looked so old. The cobblestone walls were cracked and almost looked like they might collapse if there was a strong enough earthquake.

The headmaster's office was at the very end of the fourth-floor hallway.

"I beg your pardon, Headmaster." Leeds opened the heavy door, but this

allowed smoke to escape from the crack. I nearly choked.

Is he burning something?

I mustered up the strength to step inside.

The office was about as large as the Liddell manor conservatory, and the floor was raised at the back of the room. Someone was sitting at the amber-colored desk in the center, but a white haze filled the room, so I couldn't see them well. All that was evident was their mushroom-shaped silhouette.

With only the sound of bubbling water followed by an exhaled breath to go by, I spoke in the direction of the person. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Are you Headmaster Caterpillar?"

"I am. And you two are...?"

The bubbling sound returned, followed by even more smoke.

"My name is Alice, and I—" I started to cough.

"How're we supposed to talk with all this smoke?" Leeds fumbled around the wall until he found a window to open. Once the ocean breeze had dispersed the smoke, I met the eyes of a man smoking a hookah pipe at his desk.

"Phew... Classes haven't started yet...so you should go to the chapel and pray first."

Headmaster Caterpillar was an old man, somewhere around sixty years old. He wore an oversized robe like a sorcerer, and his long hair and beard were completely white. The headmaster was seated in a chair with arms, but his spine appeared bent as his body sank into the chair.

He cocked his head—the skin around his neck was loose from inhaling from the hookah pipe, but it contracted again as he exhaled. It reminded me of a cabbageworm crawling around on a leaf.

I curtsied to seem polite.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Alice Liddell. I was trying to visit a girl's boarding school but ended up at Ark School by mistake. Would I be able to live here since I hear another boat won't come to the island for some time?"

The headmaster responded instantly to my humble request.

“Did you go down the wrong path somewhere?”

“Huh? Oh, I believe I got on the wrong train in London...”

“Not that. How did you get to the point where you could make such a mistake?”

I froze at the unexpected philosophical question. “Doesn’t everyone make mistakes? No one is perfect, after all.”

“You answer questions with questions because you don’t understand.” The headmaster blew into the pipe, sending white smoke coiling in the giant flask. “It’s merely a question about yourself, yet you don’t understand. Many have sought that answer and become lost in the labyrinth of education, unable to return. You won’t be able to answer the question by studying here.”

He blew smoke in our direction.

“You should leave this island immediately, even if you have to swim.”

“But I can’t swim.” I let my head slump dramatically for show. I couldn’t leave the island until the others were back to normal. “I have no way of crossing the ocean. Can’t you please show me mercy?”

This time, I folded my hands and tensed my eyes to make tears form in them. Most men would instinctively want to rescue me in this state.

I was reborn as an extremely beautiful girl, so I better make the most of it! I was crying on the outside while smiling inside, but the headmaster only had one thing to say to me.

“Mercy... I can’t show you that, no. This is a boys’ school, so you need to leave at once.”

“How cruel!”

As I recoiled in shock, Headmaster Caterpillar turned his attention to Leeds.

“And who are you?”

“My name’s Leeds, Mr. Headmaster. I’m a school nurse who came here on the last ship.” He lied to the older man with a smile on his face. Naturally, the

headmaster was perplexed.

“School nurse? That can’t be. We don’t have any space for a new teacher here.”

“Is that right? But I thought I sent you a letter.”

“A letter... A letter...”

He rifled through the drawers of his desk, searching for a nonexistent letter.

Leeds unwrapped the scarf around his neck, placed his hands on the desk, and whispered a command.

“You shall fall under my control.”

As soon as he received the order, the headmaster’s eyes turned into empty voids. His arms slumped. The hookah fell from his hands and crashed to the ground.

“You shall control me...”

The command had worked. Leeds stuck his tongue out at me triumphantly. A black rose symbol was floating on its surface.

Leeds knows how to get the job done. His Liar’s Tongue comes in handy when there’s trouble.

Leeds was able to control people by whispering orders into their ear. The side effects made it dangerous, so I wondered if using it on someone as old as the headmaster would be safe.

“Let us join Ark School.”

“Yes...”

The headmaster’s throat drew in with a groan—perhaps he’d been harmed after all. But then he finally exhaled a plume of smoke and returned to his senses.

“...Right. This boarding school exists to raise English gentlemen. Sending a young lady in crisis away would violate those standards. You should stay here until next season’s ship arrives and take classes with the other students. I’ll let you work here as a school nurse, too...”

“I’d expect nothing less, Mr. Headmaster!”

It was *Leeds*, who I’d expect nothing less from. Though it was a matter of force, he got us permission to stay at the school after my tears failed to produce results.

“Okay, we’ll be on our merry way then. Thanks a bunch!” Leeds pushed me out of the headmaster’s office. Our next destination was the chapel.

“I’m glad we don’t have to swim across the ocean. Thank you, Leeds,” I said.

“You’re so very welcome. We got permission to stay here, but I’m not sure how we’re going to protect you properly. I don’t want to ask more from the others than they’re capable of.”

We didn’t know how the transformations of the other four might continue to affect them. A demon was lurking somewhere nearby as well. At this point, I wanted them to prioritize their safety rather than mine.

“I can protect myself. Dum and Dee said the demon would have poisoned the food if they wanted to kill us,” I said.

“We don’t know that for sure. A sadist would come up with a reason to trap us on the island for a while before slowly killing us to get his thrills. You’re too forgiving when it comes to demons.” With a worried look, Leeds grabbed my shoulders. “You can’t be alone here, my lady, and you can’t rely on the earl’s help this time either. We’ll have Jack stay with the earl to protect him, and Dum and Dee will guard you. As for the demon, I’ll search for them however you demand. How’s that sound?”

“Perfect. I hope everything goes as planned.”

Leeds placed a reassuring kiss on the top of my head. “No need to worry. Us girls are invincible when everything’s in order. There’s supposed to be an opening ceremony in the chapel before classes start, so why don’t we head there next?”

We walked down the stairs and went into the chapel. Light poured in through the dome skylight, illuminating the students who filled the wide room.

The school uniform was a black tailcoat with different colored neckties

depending on the dorm they belonged to. Lion Dorm members wore golden yellow ties, while Unicorn Dorm members wore bright blue ones. The two dorm members sat on different sides of the chapel. Students wearing gold ties were on the left. I walked over to join them.

Being the only girl at a boys' boarding school made me really stand out. Each time one of the boys pointed at me or jeered, Leeds blew them a kiss to shut them up.

I wonder where Dum and Dee are? I scanned the black-robed masses until I spotted the twins at the very front of the chapel. They were dressed in the same clothes as yesterday, sitting comfortably next to Charles as he read his Bible.

"Hello, Charles. The Headmaster offered to let us take classes here as students until the next boat comes," I said.

"That's good news. I can't give you special treatment for being a female student, but I'll still help you and your attendants if you need it since you're members of Lion Dorm."

"Please take good care of my lady," Leeds said. "I get to be a teacher here during our stay, so make sure she's in good hands while I'm working."

"That makes me a little nervous..." Charles paled but shook his head and offered a suggestion. "Oh well. I guess I'll have to make Miss Alice my 'dorm brother.'"

"What's a dorm brother?"

"Someone who takes care of the upperclassmen. They clean and do odd jobs for them in exchange for protection. Even if you're on the verge of being bullied, no one can touch a powerful upperclassman's dorm brother."

The insulated society of a boarding school sometimes resulted in students acting out violently. Underclassmen needed the dorm brother system to guarantee their safety while they were still low on the food chain.

"I'm the prefect of Lion Dorm. Anyone would have to be a total dunce to lay a hand on you once you're my dorm brother. I can't stay with you at all times, so it's smart to use whatever methods are available to you."

“That sounds logical. I’d love to be your dorm brother, Charles.”

“Let me see your hand.” Charles removed the lion-shaped lapel pin from his tailcoat and placed it in my palm. “This is proof that you’re an upperclassman’s dorm brother.”

When I pinned his badge to my jacket, the twins stared at me, looking irritated.

“Do you have to?”

“Do you have to?”

“Of course. She needs to be protected.” Leeds patted them on the shoulder. “I’m going to look for cute boys in Unicorn Dorm.” With that, he was gone—he had to inform Dark and Jack of the new developments.

“We’re in our final year of school, Alice.”

“Will we be able to stay with you, Alice?”

“I don’t know... I hope we can at least take classes together,” I said.

The twins looked at Charles—any light in their eyes was extinguished.

“We want to take classes with Alice.”

“We want to take classes with Alice.”

“In that case, you can get a teacher’s permission to sit in on any class in this school. But be warned that slots in popular classes are decided by a lottery. Latin, orthography, arithmetic, geometry, sports, astronomy, and demon studies are required for all students.”

One of those subjects caught my attention.

“I’ve never heard of demon studies before. What kind of things are taught?” I furrowed my brow. Charles responded bluntly.

“It’s exactly what the name says. You learn about demons.”

“I-Is that so...?”

Perhaps English gentlemen had to be well-versed in demons. It didn’t seem like Charles was joking, but that left me with even more questions.

The bell in the church rang, and the headmaster and teachers appeared in the chapel. They stepped up onto the altar, their robes dragging along with them. At the end of their line was Leeds in a white coat.

How did he end up there?

Charles closed his Bible, and the other students instantly finished their conversations.

“Alice.”

“Alice.”

Dum and Dee were patting the space they’d left between them on the pew. I decided to take a seat and think about the rest later.

The chapel fell into a hush. The headmaster’s hoarse voice echoed through the hall.

“To all of you who have been gathered here at Ark School, I guarantee your experiences here will teach you valuable lessons. Study hard, pray dutifully, and work together to become men who can serve your country. I’ll introduce your teachers now.”

Just as Leeds had described, every last teacher sitting on the altar was elderly. Their faces were covered in deep wrinkles, their eyes were sunken, and their lips were rigid and stern. Many walked with canes, making them look like sorcerers in their age-worn robes.

Each teacher introduced themselves with their name and subject. Leeds was the last one to go. He stood up, the bottom of his white jacket twirling around like a dress.

“My name’s Leeds and I’ll be your new school nurse. I’ll be sure you’re all nice and healthy, so let me know if you’re hurt or you’ve caught a cold. I don’t mind if you just want to talk, either. I’d love to hear all your secrets about the school or your fellow students. Glad to be part of the team!”

He waved at us charmingly. The other teachers had mixed responses. Some were smiling, but others looked at him with suspicion.

“I’ve never seen a young teacher come to this school before.” Charles was

murmuring to himself.

Most students seemed excited, but only Robins, sitting in the front of Unicorn Dorm's section, looked at Leeds like a bone was caught in his throat.

"With that, classes are now in session, future English gentlemen."

The headmaster had finished speaking.

Once the teachers left the room, the students stood and began to head to their respective classrooms. While Charles was listing off recommended classes for me, a top hat bobbing in the sea of students stole my attention.

Multiple ribbons and a crucifix adorned the glossy, silk hat. But no head was underneath it—the hat was covering it completely.

Jack was leading him around since he couldn't see what was in front of him.

It may be a last resort to hide his horns, but it really makes him stand out.

Only the sight of Jack offered me any hope.

He looked exactly like the other students despite the bag with his saber strapped to his back. I could only pray that nothing at this school would incur his wrath and activate his stigma's flames.

"Let's go, Alice."

"It's astronomy class first."

"Right. Where will you be off to now, Charles?" I asked.

"I still have prefect work to do."

"All right then. Until next time."

With Dum and Dee at each of my sides, we headed to our first class.

Despite the dangerous situation, I was actually looking forward to it.

It's my first time attending school, after all.



ONCE all the boys with bright futures exited the chapel, it was easy to see its state of decline. The old school building was home to many outdated traditions that would soon steal those same boys' lighthearted vitality.

Robins, illuminated by the sunlight, turned to look at Charles, squinting from the sun's glare. They were the only two left in the massive room.

"I wish a girl didn't have to get wrapped up in this."

"No, it doesn't get in the way of our plan."

Charles looked up and pressed his Bible to his chest.

"The monster that lives here will definitely take our side."

Charles expressed his determination with what appeared to be blind faith. Robins merely looked at him with a feeling of bitterness in his heart.



WE arrived at the dining hall after our first astronomy and arithmetic classes.

The menu was very plain, but that wasn't surprising—an elderly married couple were in charge of cooking. Most meals were standard things like fish, chips, and haggis. Fish, eggs, and processed meats like bacon were common components of meals on an isolated island.

I stood in line with my large tray and placed a baked potato and bread on my plate. I'd had some tea and biscuits between classes, but I was still hungry.

A school day was a brand-new experience for me, and I was already exhausted.

It's hard not to be distracted when boys keep glancing at me. Maybe this is why schools separate the sexes.

Noblewomen generally didn't attend school. They employed governesses and studied at home. Subjects covered typically included things like English, French, German, piano, and dance for them to grow into fine young ladies. Their teachers and studies were rarely very strict.

Students at girls' boarding schools were usually upper-or upper-middle-class girls with the ambition to attend college and become things like doctors and lawyers. I thought it was wonderful how they defied the society that told them women had no need for an education and were willing to forge their own path in life.

What profession might I have ended up in if I wasn't bound by my family name?

Maybe I would have become a governess since I didn't hate studying. I liked playing the piano too. While I wasn't skilled at cooking, I could make scones at the very least—perhaps I could become a kitchen maid. Of course, there was no guarantee my food would taste any good.

Even if I got a job like that, I would definitely still get married one day.

I was so lucky to have met a man I wanted to marry. However, his strange nature and the fact that we were both nobles made things difficult...

I took a plate of roasted lamb with apricot sauce and looked for an empty table. But there wasn't a single seat available. As I tried to come up with a solution, Charles stuck his head out from behind a partitioning screen in the room.

"Sit on this side, Miss Alice."

"Are you sure?"

"We're done eating anyway. Besides, everyone else would stop eating and run away if a girl sat at the table with them!" Robins grinned at me. Charles hurled a dish towel at him.

"Stop playing around and wipe your table. Be sure to wipe your table before you leave too, Miss Alice."

I said goodbye to Charles and Robins, and the twins and I took our seats. I'd chosen a main dish with vegetables on the side, but Dum and Dee were eating nothing but fruit and cake.

"You two have to eat balanced meals if you want to grow up big and strong," I chided.

"But we're already big and strong!"

"But we're already big and strong!"

They cocked their heads. ...Yes, they were certainly big. They were as tall as the normal Dark now and blessed with fit bodies that would probably make them stars on the football field.

“I know you are. But that’s not what I mean...” As I struggled to emphasize nutrition to them, a plate full of salad suddenly appeared on the table.

“No talking back, you two. Here, eat up.” Leeds had arrived, still in his white coat. He was holding a cup of coffee. He looked out at the students, enjoying their lunch, with a disheartened face. “Just watching these growing children eat so much makes me feel full. I think I’ll stick to coffee for a while.”

“Be sure to eat properly, too, Leeds. You don’t want these two imitating you.”

All this did was make Leeds take the bread off my plate. He showed me the bundle of keys on his belt as he chewed.

“Take a look at this. Doesn’t it look like a work of art?”

Many keys were attached to a single metal ring. They came in many different sizes and materials. One was a big, discolored bronze key; another was a thin black key like a needle, and two were beautiful gold and silver.

“They gave me these and told me to pick whatever room I liked when I said I wanted to set up an infirmary. I found a place with a great view that’s perfect for naps, so visit me sometime, my lady. I’m also a housemaster for Lion Dorm and Unicorn Dorm now.”

A housemaster was the teacher who became the representative of a dorm. This person monitored the impressionable young students by establishing prefects and living amongst them in the dorm to help them however they needed.

“I wouldn’t expect a brand-new teacher to be selected,” I said.

“I used this little ol’ stigma of mine. Now, two of the old teachers think I’ve been a housemaster for years.” He nonchalantly revealed his trick to me.

I asked Leeds if the teachers were okay, considering their old age. He laughed.

“They were perfectly energetic. But now, no one will get mad at me if I’m in the castle or the dorms. What do we do from here, my lady?”

Leeds chuckled with a scheming look on his face. Dum and Dee stopped eating their cookies and waited for my answer. After all, these people were my chess pieces to move.

“Alice” was the one who gave the Liddell family orders.

I took a deep breath, transforming from a mere female student at a boys’ boarding school to the Liddell family boss.

“Dum and Dee, you two will take afternoon classes with me. Leeds, you check in with Dark and Jack to see if anything is amiss. Come to my room after light’s out if something changes, and if not, take turns staying up to guard me.”

“Understood. It’s too bad we can’t do the full huddle here.”

Leeds held up his cup. The twins and I held up our teacups, then the three of them cheered: “Anything for Alice!”

The noise in the dining hall drowned out the small chorus, but the four of us were in perfect harmony at that moment.



THE twins and I headed straight back to Lion Dorm after our classes.

Young students were playing cricket on the grassy field while a few older boys gathered to discuss the book they were reading for class. An old man who worked for the school was chopping wood to prepare torches for nighttime.

Young and old, innocence and sophistication. Lion and unicorn.

Ark School seemed a lot like an intentional gathering of polar opposites.

We walked around the lawn until the brick dorm building came into view.

The lion statue out front scowled at the passing students with a realistic expression carved into its face. The front door was a rich brown, and the keyhole was gold. I imagined the gold key on Leeds’ keychain was for this dormitory.

Inside was an entrance hall, a living room on the right side, and a washroom and laundry room to the left. That was where I got the water to wash my face in the morning.

We climbed the staircase in the hall to reach the second floor with the students’ rooms. Upperclassmen had their own rooms, but others had to share larger rooms. They faced the wrath of the prefect if they made too much noise

chatting after lights out.

There's lots of passageways someone could sneak through.

There were lots of blind spots, even when keeping guard from the roof of the rectangular building. It seemed like a good idea to have the others guard my room directly, not the area around the dorm.

I sat in my room and worked out this plan. Before I knew it, night had fallen.

I ate dinner, met with Leeds, and said goodbye to the twins as they left for Charles' room.

Then I changed into my negligee, hung my uniform on a hanger, and yawned.

"Phew... I'm tired."

"Sleep well, my lady. I'll be right over here." Leeds had taken up the spot by the window like a cat. I said goodnight to him and returned to bed.

I must have been exhausted as I drifted into a deep sleep almost instantly.



IT was late at night. The twins had taken over for Leeds' shift and were staring quietly at Alice while she slept. The sight of her red, soft-looking hair spread out on the sheets made their hearts ache.

Dum instinctively reached out to her, but Dee stopped him right away.

"Don't."

The younger twin, his equal in body and soul, took his eyes off Alice and shook his head.

"Alice is engaged to Dark."

"That's only because we used to be young."

Alice's pale hand was sitting on top of the blanket, so Dum placed his own on top. Instead of disappearing into hers, Dum's hand was big enough to wrap around Alice's hand now.

"We're adults now. There's no need to hold back anymore."

"Do you think so?"

“I do.”

With light glittering in their eyes, the twins smiled and kissed each of Alice’s cheeks.

“I love you, Alice.”

“I love you, Alice.”



WHEN I felt the bed sink, I went flying up.

“What’s going on?!”

I grabbed the handgun under my pillow and looked around.

Nothing at the door. Nothing at the window.

I didn’t see any intruders but *knew* I felt my bed move. I glanced down and realized Dum and Dee were sleeping on each of my sides. It was a small bed that quickly became cramped with the three of us sharing it.

The movement I felt must have been one of them rolling over. Maybe they were tired after a night of changing shifts guarding me. They’d worked so hard. My heart grew warm as I looked at them sleeping.

“Thank you, Dum, Dee.”

Their eyelids stirred. After a moment, I saw myself reflected in their bright blue eyes. They smiled happily.

“Good morning, Alice.”

“Good morning, Alice.”

“Good morning. It’s not time to wake up yet, but you should go back to your room.”

They sat up sluggishly, exchanged glances with each other, and nodded.

“It’s too hard to go back to Charles’ room every day.”

“What?” I asked.

“We’ll feel better if we move into your room, Alice.”

“I beg your pardon?”

They hopped down to the floor and dashed to the door, throwing it open.

“Charles, we’re moving to Alice’s room!”

“Charles, we’re moving to Alice’s room!”

“You can’t! I was wondering where you were! So you went to Miss Alice’s room?!”

I closed the door softly when I heard Charles shouting back angrily.

I need Dum and Dee to understand that they’re adults right now.

If they clung to me as closely as they always did, they would be treated like perverts.

Racking my brain for how to interact with them now, it was soon time for me to prepare for the rest of the day.



WE ate a traditional English breakfast before heading into the school hallway, referencing the map as we walked. Sounds echoed off the tall ceilings, making it feel like a massive crowd of students filled the halls.

“This is the demon studies classroom.”

It was easy to spot the place as the students in front of us were all filing into it. But as soon as we stepped inside, the atmosphere changed dramatically.

“Is this the right place?”

A tapestry of a giant, half-naked man with sheep’s horns hung over the blackboard. Instead of a typical solar system model, the tall podium displayed a model of Hell. The shelves along the wall held books with torn bindings and jars of unidentifiable objects floating in formaldehyde.

I couldn’t describe it as anything other than gaudy. The rest of the students were surveying the room nervously, too.

Demon studies classes at Ark School were separated into beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels as part of the required curriculum for students. Dum and Dee were given special permission to join the beginner class

as transfer students, but we stood out among the rest.

Upperclassmen were also allowed to sit in if they pleased, so I was glad we weren't the only ones there.

"Let's sit here, Alice."

Dum took me to the very back of the classroom. With the twins at each of my sides, all eyes in the classroom convened on us, though Dum and Dee seemed unbothered.

"It looks like you're all here."

It was Headmaster Caterpillar who appeared at the sound of the school bell.

So the headmaster is the one who teaches demon studies.

He walked up to the desk with his robe dragging behind him. His tone was just as relaxed as when he was smoking the hookah pipe.

"Phew... This class will be a place for you to deepen your knowledge of demons. As a demon scholar, Ark School is the only place I can teach such a class. Study hard so you'll never be charmed by a demon and tricked into giving away your humanity. Now come and get a textbook, everyone."

The books we received had been used for many generations, evident by the warped leather bindings and the discoloration of the page edges.

"These textbooks contain thorough information regarding demons who influence life here on earth. You'll be memorizing it entirely before you graduate. Keep in mind, you'll be submitting a report and taking an exam at the end of the semester, too..."

Some of the students sighed when they heard the word "exam." Tests were the mortal enemy of students, no matter the era.

"Let's have one of you read the foreword right away... Any volunteers?"

The room fell silent.

That's understandable.

The foreword was written in Latin. First-years made up the majority of the beginner class, and they hadn't even started to study classical languages yet.

I stayed silent, too. That was when a student with a lumpy face like a pinecone raised his hand.

“Can we have the female student read it, Headmaster?”

“Tell me your name when you speak in class for the first time.”

“I’m Fry. I’ve never heard of a girl ever coming to this school in its whole history. But a woman’s voice would make the information about demons’ traits more interesting. You all agree, right, everyone? What about you, Batta?”

“He’s right, Headmaster! She’s a girl who sits with us like equals but gets special treatment from the prefects. Can she even read it at all?”

Batta was eager to provoke me.

Now that Fry had a supporter, he sneered and egged me on.

“What? Can’t you read it? I guess it’s too hard for a *girl*. What a waste to have such a useless dorm brother. I wish the prefect had a better, smarter student hanging around him.”

Ah, I see what’s going on.

These two were students in Lion Dorm. They were jealous that I’d become Charles’ dorm brother and wanted to embarrass me in front of the headmaster to get me removed from the position.

It was so ridiculous. But I wasn’t the kind of person to ignore them, either. I stood up, holding the textbook open, and traced my finger over the age-worn letters.

“First, the demons who appear in the Bible and scripture do indeed exist in reality and have integrated into human society. At times, they violate the sanctity of human life, branding them with marks that will ensure an eternity of suffering...”

The students stirred the longer I read the passage fluently.

The two boys who’d provoked me were crying, “How can she read it?!”

“But she’s a girl!”



You fools. I would never let something like Latin get the best of me.

Most ancient books were written in Latin. Father made sure I was even more educated than boys so I could read the many valuable books kept at the Liddell manor.

Reading something as simple as the book's introduction wouldn't make me break a sweat.

"Demons can move freely both in our realm and in parallel universes. They hide their ugly, repulsive forms with their powers to transform into human or animal bodies. As humans, we must acknowledge the existence of demons, as the power to resist them all stems from recognition."

"Marvelous..." The headmaster praised me once I finished. The twins clapped for me, too. "That was a perfect reading. Let me reward you with a chant to exorcize a demon. It goes 'deus ordo seclorum.' It means 'to change the era of demons' prevalence.'"

"I'll be sure to remember that."

Fry and Batta bitterly turned back around to face the front of the class. I only hoped they would give up on replacing me as dorm brothers now...

The rest of the class consisted of reading about the nature of demons. Then, we were dismissed.

When we stepped into the hall, someone stopped us from behind.

"Wait up."

It was Fry and Batta. They glared at me arrogantly.

"You've got a real ego, huh? How dare a girl like you show off like that."

"You shouldn't have volunteered me if you didn't want me to show off," I replied. "Or do you mean to tell me that a *boy* like you couldn't read such simple Latin?"

"Don't talk back to me!"

The second Batta raised his fist, Dum and Dee jumped into the air. They'd slipped past me faster than I could even see, kicking the boys in the stomach

and slamming them into the ground.

“Can we cut them up, Alice?”

“Can we shoot them, Alice?”

Their icy, cold voices made the boys tremble.

Fry burst into tears and begged them not to kill him.

I know you're scared, but don't worry. These two are experts at going for the vital points of the body. They wouldn't slice you in half without a good reason, like Jack, or rip your nails off one by one, like Leeds.

But saying any of that out loud would surely make them scream, so I simply smiled at them.

“No cutting and no shooting. Let them go. I happen to be good at Latin, and that's all it was. If we're going to be students at the same school, why don't we try to help each other if there's something we don't understand? We all belong to the same dorm, right?”

They'd been released but were still in a state of disturbance.

“You know about us?”

“Of course. You seemed lovely, so I've been watching you from a distance.”

Well, I'd really only spotted them in the cafeteria and just happened to remember them.

As soon as they realized I liked them, the boys instantly turned shy.

“Is that right? Sorry, we started a fight with you.”

“I don't know why I thought a girl could never be a dorm brother!”

I'd succeeded in winning them over.

As I waved goodbye to the bullies, I felt two pairs of eyes drilling into the back of my head.

“Hmph...”

“Hmph...”

I turned around and saw their blue eyes looking down at me.

“Wh-What’s the matter, you two?”

“Infidelity.”

“Seduction.”

“It’s neither of those things,” I said. “I was only chatting with them normally. Come, let’s go to our next class.”

As I walked from sociology to orthography to geometry class, the other students in the halls all expressed their envy, too, saying I wasn’t fit to be a dorm brother. I was used to being harassed by young noblewomen, so I wasn’t sensitive enough to be hurt by their words. But I was still exhausted by the end of the day.

I dragged my heavy body out onto the grass field. The students were enjoying their after-school activities while the sun was still out.

Dum and Dee followed me on the way to Lion Dorm, hands shoved into their pockets.

“I’m going to bed once I get to my room,” I said. “Your guard shifts will change at night, so can you wake me up at ten tonight?”

But I received no response. I turned to look at them, and both twins had terrifying expressions. They were glaring at any student who glanced my way.

“Dum? Dee?”

Their faces instantly returned to normal.

“What is it, Alice?”

“What is it, Alice?”

The looks they gave me were so sweet that I almost felt like I’d imagined what I just saw. I pinched my cheek to see if I was dreaming. That was when I heard a shout come from Unicorn Dorm.

“Listen to what I’m telling you!” Robins was scolding a group of short boys on the grassy plaza. Even passing students were recoiling slightly from the sound of his voice. “You can never go into the Nameless Woods, or awful things will happen to you!”

“What’s going on, Robins?”

Robins looked at me with teary eyes when I approached him.

“These boys were daring whoever lost their game of cricket to go into the forbidden forest as punishment, even though I told them that it’s a dangerous place where people have gone missing!”

Missing. The word piqued my curiosity, so I asked for more information.

“Is it easy to get lost in the forest?”

“It sure is. The older boys used to tell me that a monster lived in that forest and ate all the missing people.”

I felt like the curious boys might only want to go exploring more after hearing such an incredible supernatural tale.

Sure enough, the boys were fidgeting restlessly now.

Robins pleaded with them. “Don’t ever set foot in that forest, and don’t go near anything scary. You’ll end up trapped and wishing you’d listened to me, but it will be too late.”

It was best to let sleeping dogs lie. Recklessness was no different from looking down at a landmine and then stepping on it. Thinking you were the exception to harm would lead you down a path of pain.

“I’ll stop lecturing you now,” he said. “Go back to the dorm and think about what you’ve done! I’m sorry you had to see all that.”

“That’s all right,” I said. “I can tell the Unicorn Dorm members enjoy activity. The Lion Dorm members seem quieter if I had to describe them.”

“The dorms each have their own characteristics. Lion Dorm’s students are well-behaved, probably because Charles guides them well.”

Dum and Dee gave big nods of their heads.

“Gentlemen aren’t made in a single day.”

“Gentlemen can take any road to get to Rome.”

“You two know some unusual expressions, huh? What’s it supposed to mean?”

Robins was just as strange a character as the twins.

I was charmed by the exchange, but then I spotted a top hat with tall ears attached passing right by us. I gasped and turned my eyes, only to see Dark heading straight for the dorm without glancing at us.

W-Wait, what's that about?

He should have noticed us, considering how close we came...

I was in shock. Jack, fiddling with his beret, came running up to us.

"My lady and the twins! And the prefect...um..."

"Just call me Robins, Jack. Unlike other boarding schools, it's normal to call each other by our first names at Ark School. No need for any formalities. Be sure to let me know if anything's troubling you."

Robins' eyes were full of affection. He seemed to see Jack as a child who needed to be looked after rather than an underclassman.

However, Jack sulked at this patronizing treatment.

"I'm just small right now, that's all. My lady, do you think Knightley's okay?"

"Did something happen?" I asked.

"He's acting cold, like a different person. He used to be a sheltered brat, so maybe having to go to school all of a sudden has him feeling drained."

Jack had merely turned into a child, but Dark had horns on his head. Having to spend every waking minute keeping his true nature a secret was probably a source of unimaginable stress.

So, is that why he ignored me?

The Dark I knew would never do such a thing.

"I'll try to keep up with him, but you should talk to him too, my lady."

Jack returned to the dorm in a state of frustration. He was small, but still, like an older brother, I knew I could rely on him.

I smiled at the twins to lighten my mood. "Let's head back to the dorm too."

I waved goodbye to Robins and left Unicorn Dorm.

The twins didn't fail to spot the shadow of the person staring down at us from a second-story window.



I took off my hat when I returned to my room in Unicorn Dorm. I opened the curtains and watched Alice in front of the building until Jack arrived and threw the door open.

"She left," he said.

"I know. I was watching."

Alice was a beautiful student, dressed in the two-piece outfit I'd prepared for her. Her red hair, skirt, and ribbons swaying in the wind stirred a commotion in my heart.

I could almost certainly whisper "You look beautiful" in her ear to make her blush and tell me to stop. She was so strong, yet her delicate side came out whenever I wooed her. It was truly adorable.

Not that I can say that to her right now.

I'd fallen for a demon's trap and turned back into a child. It was the age when I didn't yet know how to hide my horns. My back had shrunk, my face was rounder, and my voice was higher.

A pair of sharp horns reflected on the window.

I couldn't flirt with her like usual—not when I looked like this.

"Why'd you ignore her? It's not like you." Jack sat on the bed, irritated by my slight against his mistress.

Alice was his entire world. Leeds and the Tweedles were also devoted to protecting their happy family, which centered around Alice. It was a way of preserving that familial love she offered them as its head.

Their feelings were strong, just as they were righteous.

They weren't constantly afraid that they would lose Alice to someone else unless they kept her attention at all times.

All I could think to do was ignore her so that she couldn't get a good look at

me in this pathetic state.

“Someone as pompous as you wouldn’t let a change in size bother him, I suppose,” I quipped.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Jack was annoyed, but his attitude was no different now that he was a child. That was because he had confidence in who he was as a person. His heart was untouchable, no matter what happened to his body.

“I’m saying that I’m not as strong as you.”

I left the window, casting my shadow on the bed in the light of the sunset.

Looking at my horns’ shadow reminded me of when I first met Alice. She came to the room that I’d locked myself away in, gave me the name “Rabbit,” and became my friend. She was an innocent, brave girl who’d grown up receiving lots of love.

Unlike me...

“If I change again, can I ask you not to tell Alice?” I requested of Jack.

“Change? Like get even smaller?”

“If only that was all.”

I smiled so as not to give a true answer.

I didn’t want my dear Alice and the Liddell boys to know the truth.

As someone clad in human skin, my true nature was something more horrific and wretched than anything they’d ever experienced.

Chapter 3: The Lambs of the Nameless Woods

THE twins and I had grown accustomed to school life a month after classes began.

We got along well with the other students, as was evident during 11 o'clock tea.

As soon as we showed our faces in the dining hall, the students from Lion Dorm swarmed us.

"You can sit here, Alice."

"Thank you, Fry."

"You drink Darjeeling tea, right? Here!"

"Thank you, Batta."

Fry and Batta, the two boys who'd bullied me at first, went out of their way to prepare tea for me now. The other students also brought me pies and biscuits, though I had no idea where they came from. My long table always filled up with sweets.

"They all look delicious," I said.

I grabbed the nearest cookie and felt its light, crumbling texture between my fingers. The scent of butter hit my nose. Eating sweet things was bliss. I could forget all my worries and pain so long as I was eating a dessert.

As I sipped my tea with a grin on my face, Dum and Dee plopped down in the two seats at both of my sides, glaring at the other students silently. Their intensity made them look like the guardian statues placed outside temple gates.

Students scattered away from the table, intimidated by the twins.

"Dum, Dee, you won't make any friends with such scary looks on your faces," I cautioned them.

"I don't want friends."

“I don’t want friends.”

“Don’t say something so sad. It’s a wonderful thing to have friends in your life.”

I wanted them to find someone they could open up to, just like how I had Rabbit.

Memories created with friends were what got people through hard times in life. Even if someday the twins couldn’t stay together anymore, having other people to support them should lift that mental burden if only a little.

The twins placed their elbows on the table and looked at me with unreadable emotions.

“I don’t need anyone but you, Alice.”

“I don’t want anyone else, Alice.”

I could tell just how much “Alice” meant to them.

So what are you two going to do once I belong to someone else?

Nothing lasted forever. Humans tended to believe that their present lives would never change, but the opposite was true. Things always shifted in one way or another. Keeping things the same was something that took work. Only the luckiest people could defeat the external pressures that brought along change.

“Be sure to get along with others, not just me, okay?” I told them.

“We get along with Charles.”

“We play with Robins too.”

“So you *did* make friends already. Well done!” I exaggerated my praise for them, and their masculine features grew slightly pink.

Making friends was an act of chance. If you naturally got along with someone, you would end up in a relationship that could only be called a “friendship” as time passed. It didn’t matter if the prefects had to be the ones to show them that.

Dum and Dee were like first-years when it came to their social circle. I would

have to watch out for them. Their bodies had grown, but their hearts were still those of children. They were blind, like someone who'd fallen in love with a god despite their physical strength. As normal, innocent children, they were sure to find new things that amused them by the time tomorrow came.



THE twins sat on either side of me and dozed off during our afternoon demon studies class. I wasn't worried about them being scolded as the headmaster who taught this class believed in ignoring unmotivated students. About half of the class was slumped over their desks or nodding off, too.

I was a bit tired but forced my eyes to stay open, as I was interested in the lesson. There were very few opportunities to learn about demons.

Demons had been involved in some of the most brutal crimes in Great Britain.

We had to learn about them if we wanted to find new methods of opposing them. Demon studies turned out to be an absolutely vital class for a member of the Liddell family.

"Phew... In other words, demons have existed since the creation of the earth, and they choose to blend into human society when they feel like menacing those of us living happy lives..." The headmaster spoke as nonchalantly as ever.

Once the discussion concluded, a student from Lion Dorm raised his hand.

"Demons look as frightening as they do on that tapestry, right? So, how do they make it into human society without causing a fuss?"

"Excellent question. How are demons able to blend in among humans? Well, they do it by taking on human forms. Each demon is unique, but they're able to appear completely human to our eyes, like so..."

He rolled up the tapestry hung over the blackboard. Underneath was a chalk drawing of a muscular man who looked like a rugby player. His features looked nothing like the depiction of the demon from before—he was completely human.

"Demons are demons, even in human form. Their true appearances are hideous, and they will show you no mercy."

I thought back to the “Rose Demon.” This demon, who infiltrated the Liddell manor and killed my parents and servants, hid his unsightly form and took the name Bernard Liddell. He even gained social status by being my uncle.

The next demon I met, the “Mirror Demon,” was even more clever. She hid the fact that she was a demon and married Duke Sharondale. He was the only one to eventually figure out her true nature.

Dark was born when his father summoned a demon for his wife to give birth to, so he was still a demon in the broad sense of the word.

So many demons lurked in human society, yet I never had a clue until I was resurrected by one. Unfortunately, Father was more interested in teaching me Latin than anything regarding demons.

I was the only daughter of the Liddell family, but I was raised with a blindfold on when it came to demons and demons alone. I didn’t understand why since I had my parents, servants, and governesses to teach me things.

No matter how often I thought back to that, it was a strange omission.

“Phew... Okay, I guess we can move on to the next topic.”

The headmaster brought the tapestry back down and picked up the sheep’s skull sitting on his desk. The large curling horns reminded me of an ammonite.

“You can look at a person’s shadow to see if they’re a demon in disguise. They’re very skilled at hiding their appearances, but they can never hide the shadow of their horns. ...If you meet anyone who raises your suspicions, get a good look at their shadow. If they have horns, they’re a demon, and that means you have to handle them immediately. Those creatures don’t have hearts. They can hide amongst humans, but they can never love us.”

“That’s not true.”

The words slipped out involuntarily. The students in front of me turned around to look my way. The sharp-eared headmaster raised his bushy eyebrows at me.

“It sounds like you object...” he said.

“I do. It’s fascinating that demons can transform into humans, but I don’t

believe that they have no hearts. They probably meet lots of different people by living amongst them, so wouldn't it be natural for them to develop love for one of them at some point?"

I'd already had two demons grow attached to me at that point in my life.

One loved me but destroyed my family. The other one tried to become my family as proof of his love for me. If demons didn't have hearts, they would never show such strong attachment. They would never pursue the love of a single person like this.

"Oh, how frightening. What a dangerous idea..." The headmaster shook his head, bringing his hand to his mouth like when he smoked the hookah pipe. "Demons manipulate people who want to believe in love. Their goal is to blend into society so that they can someday summon Jabberwock, the ruler of Hell, and make this world their own. Turn to page 366 in your textbook..."

I flipped to the page.

"What...is this?"

I was staring at something I'd never seen before.

The creature had two long horns, like dead trees, sprouting from his head. His sharp, saber fangs dripped with blood, and headless corpses dangled from his bat-like wings.

The Jabberwock's razor-sharp nails dug into cows and horses, but his body was the worst of all. He was long like a snake and covered in thick scales.

I didn't fear reptiles, but even I couldn't help but shudder at the sight. Young ladies who hated bugs or frogs would surely faint if they saw this page.

Every other student who flipped to that page grew pale, too.

Only the headmaster was unaffected.

"Remember this demon. Our world will turn to hell as soon as Jabberwock is summoned here. Everyone will perish, with no escape like a Noah's Ark to rely on. You English gentlemen must learn to distinguish demons so they can't achieve this goal. You must protect your fellow humans. Are there any other questions?"

“Me!”

“Me!”

Dum and Dee had woken up from their nap at some point. They were both raising their hands.

“Are there demons that can make human bodies get bigger?”

“Are there demons that can make human bodies get smaller?”

Their questions were to the point. Fortunately, I didn’t have to warn them to speak to teachers respectfully.

But thanks for asking, you two!

It would be a big step forward if the headmaster knew anything about the demon who laid the trap. I stared at the headmaster, my eyes full of hope.

He slowly cocked his head and looked up at the ceiling.

“Phew... Well...”

“Well?!”

He thought it over for some time. Finally, he cocked his head in the other direction.

“Goodness, I’m just so forgetful lately.”

I sunk my head onto my desk. He didn’t have a clue.

I’d half expected an answer like that but didn’t think it would come as such a cliched line.

We were still only at the beginning of the boarding school story, so there wasn’t much we could do. This arc would be resolved far too quickly if we overcame this obstacle without more work. Otome games were much more interesting when they made you grasp for a single hint.

B-But I was really, really hoping to find some new information!

As I fought to hold back tears, the headmaster continued.

“I can’t remember, but who knows what you’ll find if you look into it? Try doing some research in the library. There are lots of books about demons from

around the world in there...”

The library!

Dum, Dee, and I exchanged looks. We hadn’t thought to search there.

Just as we’d learned new information by visiting London’s public archives, perhaps we could find a key to our puzzle in the Ark School library.



“THE headmaster actually gave us a great lead!”

After school, I opened the door to the second-story library with a grin on my face. I’d imagined a few bookshelves would make up their collection, but the actual library had a wall that stretched two stories high, lined with shelves full of books.

Books were valuable items. It was hard to imagine a boarding school owning so many of them, so they probably belonged to the original castle founder.

“Guard the entrance for me, you two,” I said. “Be sure to run to me if I call for you.”

“Okay!”

“Okay!”

I left the twins by the door, looked up at the wall, and searched for books about demons.

The rich amber shelves had leaf veins carved into them, and the pillars, ladders, and even the curtains were finely crafted like works of art. Simply walking by them was a thrill.

I was supposed to be searching, yet different bookshelves kept drawing my eyes. While I stared at the bookshelf covering local history, I heard a warning from behind me.

“That one has lots of spiders.”

Wearing glasses today, Charles was sitting at one of the old tables in the reading section. He startled me since I’d thought I was alone. My response came out somewhat shrill.

“Good day, Charles! This is such a beautiful library.”

“I like how quiet it is here, seeing as how not many people visit. I always come here when something’s bothering me. It feels like all the books will lead me down the right path.”

“So even someone like you has his troubles?”

“That’s *all* I have. Especially since I became a prefect...” Charles trailed off with sadness in his voice.

It was hard to imagine what could trouble such a perfect student. He probably only pretended to be aloof so other people wouldn’t worry about him. I’d thought he was frightening at first, but I was beginning to understand the strange form of compassion he possessed.

“Would you mind helping me look for something, Charles? The headmaster told me to come here if I wanted to research demons.”

“What do you want to know about them?”

“I’m looking for a demon who can turn human bodies larger or smaller.”

Charles furrowed his brow. “Was there ever such a demon...?”

He flipped through the pages of his notebook. Next to it on the table was a thick encyclopedia of demons, a pen, and an open bottle of ink. Each page of his notebook was packed full of writing. It looked like a report about demons he was working on.

“You’re diligent about your studies, aren’t you?” I commented.

“Students here have to write and submit a thesis before they graduate. I’m the fifth son of a nobleman, so I have to end up in a good line of work, like a banker or an attorney. Anyone would study like I do if it was the only way to overcome their situation.”

Noble families with an entail in place welcomed the birth of sons, but being the fifth son was nothing short of a guarantee that you wouldn’t inherit anything. The younger boys had to study, form connections, find work, and receive a salary to make a living.

“Ark School used to be the place for young noblemen who weren’t heirs.

Those deemed the best students and made prefects were given a chance to have an audience with His Majesty,” he explained. “If he took a liking to you, you’d be employed. They say that the top prefects, the ones chosen by the king himself, have their portraits hanging on the top floor of this castle in a closed-off room.”

The king’s employment guaranteed a lifetime of security. I wondered if Queen Victoria had Ark School graduates working for her now that it was her reign.

“So you and Robins are going to have an audience with the queen this year?” I asked.

“Unfortunately not. Her Majesty has been refusing audiences with students for the past few years. She says she’s too old for it now.”

“But she seems so energetic...”

I recalled the queen heading out for a hunting trip, rifle in hand. She was old but still very active. Her Majesty and her maids were always looking for something cute to entertain them. It was hard to imagine her turning down the opportunity to meet boarding school students, what with all the excitement they could bring her.

Charles looked puzzled. “Do you mean to say you’ve met Her Majesty before?”

“Huh?! Oh, um, she spoke to me when I was a debutante!”

I quickly tried to smooth things over with a lie. A baron’s daughter should never be privately corresponding with a queen under normal circumstances.

It’s proof of how powerful Alice really is.

“You’re looking for information on demons, right? I don’t know if you’ll find the right one, but I can show you the best reference books.” Charles stood up and walked to the back of the library. He picked books that classified demons and heavy-looking reference books from the various shelves. “These books cover the rarest demons, but they’re really heavy, so I’ll take them to the dorm for you. In exchange, could I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

Once I gave permission, Charles' face turned serious.

"Miss Alice, you came here on the last boat to Ark School. Did you run into any other nobles who spoke of coming here for a visit?"

I instantly knew he was talking about Dark. He'd mailed a letter to Ark School informing them of his planned visit before we left London. The staff must have been waiting for Earl Knightley's arrival.

Charles was probably concerned about the matter as a prefect. After all, it was their job to guide visitors around the island.

Since I couldn't reveal the truth, I answered him with a feigned smile.

"I didn't see anyone like that."

"I see..."

Looking disappointed, Charles began to walk. He was staggering a bit, perhaps from carrying such hefty books. While I was considering lending a hand, a clanking noise reached my ears.

I looked out the window and saw the students from Unicorn Dorm gathering for a game of cricket. Some were playing while others were there to cheer them on. I gazed at their smiling faces until I spotted Robins, sitting on the chain fence in a corner of the playing field.

I wondered why, as a leader of Unicorn Dorm, he hadn't been invited to play with them.

The game came to an end as I pondered this question. The losing team complained about the outcome, resulting in a near-brawl on the playing field. But that was when Robins used the commotion to slip over the fence.

What?!

The Nameless Woods were on the other side of that fence. Students were forbidden from entry.

"Oh no, Charles! Robins just went into the forest!"

Charles stood next to me and watched Robins disappear into the greenery.

"There's no need to stop him. Us prefects are taught the ins and outs of the

island's geography."

"But what about the monster? Getting lost isn't the only danger. I'm going to go bring him back."

"No, don't!" Charles' shout came out involuntarily. Panting like he'd just run laps around the sports grounds, he gave me a stern warning. "Don't you dare go there. If a demon caught sight of you..."

"A *demon*? I thought it was a monster!"

Could that be the demon who laid the "Drink me" trap?

I changed my expression and made a plea to Charles.

"That's just all the more reason why he needs to be brought back. It would be dreadful if something happened to Robins."

I was ready to charge into that forest like a bull. But Charles stopped me again.

"Ordinary students aren't allowed in the Nameless Woods. No exceptions. Sorry, but you'll have to carry these books yourself."

There was no use arguing. We regrouped with Dum and Dee, and I made them take the books for me. I said goodbye to Charles and headed to the upper floor—not Lion Dorm.

I wanted to chase Robins into the forest, but I knew Charles would keep an eye out for me.

Even then, I couldn't stay silent.

A forest with a demon in it. I might be able to find the person behind those traps in the woods.

The best heroines acted on new information as soon as they obtained it.

I climbed the stairs and opened the door at the end of the third floor. It was the school infirmary, with simple beds, chairs, and white sheets hung up as partitions.

Leeds, the head of this room, was sitting with his legs crossed, listening to Fry and Batta speak.

“So he went missing in the Nameless Woods, hm? And he still hasn’t been found?”

“No, and they say more students went missing ten years ago.”

“He thought he would be okay when he heard about how students used to go into the forest as a test of courage, but he hasn’t returned since yesterday... Do you think he was eaten by the monster, Nurse Leeds?”

“Hmm, well... Oh, looky here. We have visitors.”

Leeds spotted us. Fry and Batta instantly blushed and stood up.

“Thank you for listening to our troubles.”

“We’ll be going now!”

“Of course. No more silly things like tests of courage, okay?”

The twins grimaced, watching the two run out of the infirmary.

“What...”

“...Was that?”

“I’d diagnose them with ‘puberty.’ They came to ask if the girl they liked would be impressed if they went into the forbidden forest as a test of courage. What’s with all the books?”

“You see...”

I sat on the bed with Dum and Dee at my sides. When I told Leeds I’d heard about a demon living in the Nameless Woods, he squinted at me.

“So how come prefects can enter the forest if it’s so darn dangerous? If I were in charge, I’d never let anyone set foot in that place. Sure, this isn’t one of the nine famous schools, but noblemen still send their sons here. Wouldn’t it be just dreadful if something happened to one of them?”

“Would it really?”

“Who knows?”

“Who can say?”

I cocked my head—Dum and Dee did the same.



“Boarding schools can be used for families to send rebelling or misbehaving children if they can’t handle them at home. I think Ark School has a lot of those students,” Leeds said.

Even the stellar Charles wasn’t needed by his family.

Bullies like Fry and Batta probably didn’t fit in in their families either.

If Ark School existed as a place to receive these kinds of boys, there was little reason to confront threats to their safety.

“I see what you mean. So, the families don’t even care when their problem child goes missing.”

Reforming them was a benefit for the family, but their death did the family no damage. These boys were gathered on an island full of mysteries. I would have never thought to send Dum and Dee there if I knew the truth.

I looked at the two of them to see their expressions, but our eyes met immediately. It was as if they’d been watching me from the very start.

They smiled at me, their blue eyes softening.

“What is it, Alice?”

“What is it, Alice?”

“I-I was just wondering if I should have ever brought you here at all.”

They looked so much like young princes from a romance novel now. My heart sped up a bit.

When they were little, I could look them in the eyes and be unable to read their emotions. But now, deep in those light blue eyes, I saw an azure stillness, a peach sweetness, and golden glimmers of light.

These young men, brimming with potential, were a rainbow of colors.

Perhaps the eyes change color as the body matures.

While I tried to recall the pages of biology textbooks in my head, Leeds gave me a command.

“Let’s save the pity party for later. Our job is to find the demon that laid the

traps, get everyone's real bodies back, and head home to London. If we can do that, we can pretend this whole thing never happened."

"You're right. Let's sneak into the Nameless Woods tonight."

"Feel free to take a nap here so you're all ready to go when it's time."

We decided to take Leeds up on the offer and sleep before our nighttime mission.

The infirmary beds were softer than those in the dorms. For the first time in a while, I fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.



INNUMERABLE stars dotted the night sky.

I walked quietly through the sports grounds wearing a black dress.

Lights-out in the dorms was two hours ago. I waited for the sounds of the other students' snoring, slipped out of the room, and began my trip to the Nameless Woods.

The night breeze carried the fragrant scent of dry grass. Having spent so much time on the island now, I was used to the smell of the salt in the air and could no longer sense it.

My eyes adjusted to the dark, and I no longer needed a lantern to see my surroundings—especially since it was such a clear night. The light of the stars helpfully illuminated my path.

The thought of Dark flashed in my mind. But I didn't tell him about tonight's plan.

When I informed Jack, he volunteered to stay behind on standby. His legs were too small to keep up with those of us marching into the forest now.

All Dark and Jack need to do is keep themselves safe.

I returned my attention to the present moment.

Leeds, with his chain wrapped around his striped sweater, led the way. The twins wore black shirts and walked at each of my sides. I was protected from attacks in every direction.

I squinted at the tall grass' shadows cast at our feet, but they didn't seem to move.

Greater demons, who could disguise themselves as humans, and their servants, lesser demons, were the most prevalent in London. I was a main target of theirs, so I often encountered demons just by walking the streets of the city.

But I'd never spotted a demon's shadow since I came to this island. If they weren't checking up on us directly, the demon had to dwell somewhere outside of Ark School.

I wonder what this demon has been doing all this time?

Once the chain fence came into view, Leeds turned and looked at me with concern.

"We're about to enter the Nameless Woods. It's about three times as big as the castle. Are you sure you want to go in without me?"

"I have Dum and Dee with me, so I'll be all right. Your job is more important, Leeds. If we don't return to the sports grounds by morning..."

"I call Jack, have him burn down the forest with his stigma, and come save you. The nature on this island is nothing in value compared to my lady."

It was hard to find a missing person in all the trees. There was one solution—burn them all down.

Jack's power, Flames of Fury, only burned objects of his hatred, so it was impossible for them to hurt us.

"Be careful, my lady. We don't know if it's a monster, demon, human, or something else lurking in this forest."

"That's exactly why the Tweedles are coming with me."

I took their hands. The three of us formed a circle.

"Let's go, Alice."

"Let's go, Alice."

The moles underneath their eyes began to roll down their cheeks like black

ink. The trails formed lines on their skin, drawing out the picture of a rose.

Warm air wafted up from our joined hands, sending our bangs floating in the draft. The air around my body tightened and grew denser and denser until finally...

Crack!

A sensation like being struck with a rubber band ran through me. At that moment, my body turned transparent like frosted glass. It wasn't just my hair and skin, but my clothes, shoes, and even my pouch were now see-through.

This was Hide-and-Seek, the power the Tweedle brothers possessed. It made not just the twins themselves, but anyone holding their hands invisible.

"I can't see you at all now!" Leeds said. "You're still there, right, my lady?"

"Yes. We'll be going now."

We crossed the fence, making sure not to let go of each other's hands, and began our mission.

I couldn't use the stars to calculate our direction since the trees shrouded the sky. Instead, I drew a mental map of our location based on the turns in the path and what I'd seen on the real map before.

I feared we would struggle to get anywhere, but the path was clearer than expected. Overgrown grass spilled onto the path, but the dirt underneath was solid, and someone seemed to have removed any fallen sticks.

My ears picked up an owl's hoot somewhere in the distance. Birds of prey were cautious creatures, so they rarely approached roads that humans traveled.

So this path is used a lot, even though it's supposed to be off-limits?

I'd been told that only prefects could come this way. But it looked like it had been used more than that.

"There's houses, Alice." Dum had been walking in front of me, but he stopped.

A few old one-story houses sat ahead of the road. I counted five in total.

“It’s like a ghost town.”

The houses were stone just like the castle, but their walls were falling apart. I could tell no one lived there from how ivy shrouded the houses up to the roofs.

No humans, at least.

As I heightened my awareness of the area, Dee stood close behind me.

“Do you want to keep going, or do you want to leave, Alice?”

“Let’s go. We need to find this demon and get them to undo the spell as soon as possible. I’ll be sure to get the small, adorable Dum and Dee back.”

I took a determined step forward. But Dum didn’t move.

“What’s the matter?”

“.....”

Dee called out sadly to the still, silent Dum.

“We can’t do this, can we, Dum?”

“No, we can’t, Dee.”

“Eeeek!”

Then they let go of my hands and wrapped their arms around me, both from in front and behind.

Tender but heartbreaking words grazed my ears like a light snowfall.

“We don’t want to go back...”

“We don’t want to go back...”

“Huh?!”

“We don’t want to be small again.”

“We don’t want to be small again.”

My eyes went wide at the unexpected revelation.

It felt like the first time I ever heard their hearts’ true voices.

I never once thought that Dum and Dee wouldn’t want to undo the spell cast by the trap-laying demon. But that appeared to be how they felt.

When they tightened their arms around me, I realized they meant exactly what they said.

“B-But we don’t know what will happen if you aren’t changed back to normal! The most natural, human way of growing is to do it little by little over time. There’s lots of things you need to experience before you can truly grow.”

“We don’t care if we’re not like normal humans.”

“All we want is to be able to hold you like this, Alice.”

They pressed their cheeks to my head and purred like kittens.

“We love you, Alice.”

“We love you so much.”

“We love you.” I’d heard those words of affection from their mouths many times. I’d grown used to that form of play from them. And yet...

Why is my heart racing so fast this time?

My pulse was pounding in my chest. I knew it could only mean that I saw the situation differently now.

They were my family. They were my dear comrades in arms.

So why was there such a strange ache in my chest, almost like I’d fallen in love?

As the unexpected change left me dumbfounded, suddenly, the shrubs next to the houses shook.

“Who’s there?!”

I shoved my hand into my pouch. Dum and Dee let go of me to grab the weapons under their clothes. As we stared at the shrubs, they started to rustle again.

A figure brushed aside the branches and stuck his head out.

“What are you three doing out here?”

It was Robins. He had leaves stuck to his brow. He was holding a lantern but wearing his uniform, so it didn’t seem like he spotted us and followed us here

coincidentally.

“Good evening, Robins. What are *you* doing all the way out here?”

“I came to search for the student who went missing in the woods, but I found him earlier and sent him back to the dorms. Since that’s all done, I was just about to head back too.”

The student lost in the woods had been back at Lion Dorm earlier that evening. He mentioned how Robins went out and rescued him, so it didn’t seem like the prefect was lying.

But that didn’t explain why Robins was still in the Nameless Woods in the middle of the night.

I looked at the twins, silently signaling them to keep their weapons holstered. Then I stepped forward.

“Charles and I saw you go into the Nameless Woods and were wondering why. Is there something out here?”

“Maybe it would be quicker to show you. Come with me.” Robins turned around, his robe fluttering around him, and led us down the path. “A lot of people lived on this island before the castle became a school. This was their village.”

We passed through the trees and walked along partially destroyed homes. A stone well sat on the side of the road, but the bucket and pulley had rotted away.

I kept my eyes moving constantly to make sure nothing dangerous was lurking nearby.

We’ll have to protect Robins if the trap-laying demon appears.

“This is it.”

Robins came to a stop at an overgrown cemetery. There were dozens of graves made up of stacked stones, and the weather had turned the names carved into the graves unreadable over time.

One larger boulder was sitting in the very center of the cemetery with red flowers in front of it.

“Someone’s visited this grave.”

“I’m the one who put the flowers there,” he said. “Prefects have to greet visitors on the island and take care of the cemetery, too. These graves belong to the nobles who owned the castle, the island residents, and those who worked at Ark School over the years.”

The last true “residents” of this island were the Ark School chefs and gardeners now. Their population had dwindled over time, with the remaining staff now elderly.

“You have a lot on your hands as a prefect, don’t you? However, I don’t see the need to visit graves in the middle of the night. It’s dangerous to walk around with only a lantern when it’s so dark out,” I said.

“...That’s true. I guess I should stop coming here at night. Thanks for looking out for me.”

The smile on Robins’ face was blatantly fake.

I won’t ask him what he’s still hiding.

If a boy was sneaking out of his dorm in the middle of the night, he was either drinking, smoking, or gambling. There was no point in digging up his secret if it was unrelated to the demon.

“We should head back now,” I said. “Will you return to the dorms with us, Robins?”

“I’m going to walk through the woods a little more first.”

“Then please be safe. Dum, Dee, let’s go.”

I led the twins away from the cemetery.

I could feel Robins’ eyes digging into my back as I left. His wariness was natural—if whatever mischief he was up to out there came out, his life as a prefect was over.

Schools were tiny societies of their own. Anyone who lost their power would be received coldly, and it was an impossible world to escape, being a school located on an island.

Behind me, the twins had let go of their weapons and were whispering to each other.

“He wasn’t using his lantern all night, was he?”

“He lit the flame just before he ran into us.”

When they mentioned it, I realized the wick of the candle in his lantern hadn’t burned much, as if it had only just been lit. It shouldn’t last long if he’d used it ever since the sun went down.

That meant that he lit the candle just before he found us.

Just what was he up to in such a pitch-black forest?

I whirled around for another look, but the cemetery was out of sight now.

The decaying houses seemed to bend and warp like I was looking through a stereoscope.



“**AH**, that was too close.”

After sending Alice and the twins off, Robins crumpled to the ground.

He’d warned the students of Unicorn Dorm that the Nameless Woods was a dangerous place, but Alice and the twins were from Lion Dorm. Their prefect, Charles, was kinder than his stern demeanor made people think. Perhaps he hadn’t scared his students enough to keep them out.

This island was home to a terrifying monster—a demon. If they didn’t want the students to end up in its clutches, they had to be sure the rules were strictly followed.

“Come back already.”

A stomach-churning voice was carried to Robins’ ears by the night breeze. He looked up at the church next to the cemetery. A few silhouettes were beckoning him through the window.

“I’m coming.”

As soon as Robins approached the door, more hands than he could count reached out and pulled him into the church.

“Now, give your youth to us.”

The hands slithered over his body. Robins gritted his teeth to suppress his feelings of nausea.

He had to feed them his life force, or they would go after the other students.

Charles, his fellow prefect, would be their first target.

Charles was his dear friend, with whom he’d vowed to protect the boys who came to Ark School—an institution without a future, unlike its students. He couldn’t bear to let that friend become a victim, too.

I can handle whatever they do to me as long as it protects you, Charles.

With that one thought in his mind, he closed his eyes.

Robins knew he had to continue this daily routine until Charles graduated.

Even if Charles forgot about Robins as soon as he left the island.

Chapter 4: The Darkness Calls

BEEP... Beep... Beep...

The sound of something electronic was playing on a loop. My body and mind were asleep, but that sound never stopped.

“...lease wake up.”

It was my mother’s voice. Perhaps I was in my parents’ home. I spent most of my life either alone in my apartment or at work, but I always visited my parents at the end of the year and for Obon.

I didn’t feel particularly hot or cold. *Wait, is it winter right now? Or summer? What year is it?*

Through my hazy thoughts, I felt something squeeze my left hand. It was soft and warm—the hand of my mother.

“Do you know what day it is? Everyone’s waiting for you.”

Everyone?

“Your coworkers have been calling you. They say they’re waiting to see you again once you recover.”

Recover? Recover from what?

“I know it’s a miracle that you’re alive at all, but your mom and dad want to hear your voice again, ●●. So please come back to us...”

When I heard her tearful voice, that memory flooded back.

The night my whole life changed.

I was going home late after working unpaid overtime at my company. When I saw a kitten jump out into the street, I tried to save it and, a truck hit me. The impact was so intense that I still remember the feeling of being flung through the air.

I'd never comprehended just how dangerous moving cars could be until that moment.

After all, that was the accident that killed me.

But why was my mom crying at my side like that?

It was like something out of a medical drama.

A character would get into an accident and spend the entire episode unconscious in their hospital bed.

Was I dreaming?

Or was I—

“Ah!”

I opened my eyes and sat up slowly.

Morning light was pouring in from the curtains, illuminating the bed where I slept. The smell of disinfectant and the sound of the heart monitor were gone now—they never could have existed here in the first place.

This was the world from a game, after all.

I'd reincarnated into the otome game *Evil Alice's Lover*.

My new name was Alice Liddell. I was a baron's daughter with blood-red hair and eyes—the beautiful heroine of a fictional version of Victorian England. The dream I just had could be nothing more than an illusion constructed from my past life memories.

Still, it felt so real to me...

“I hope Mom is doing well.”

My current mental confusion was probably the cause of that strange dream.

I can't believe Dum and Dee don't want to go back to normal.

I'd been eager to undo the spell, but the twins wanted to remain as adults. After hearing their earnest plea in the Nameless Woods, I never got a chance to respond to them.

I want to respect their feelings. But we don't know what might go wrong if

they stay in that state for a long time. It's a difficult problem.

Leeds was sleeping with his arms crossed in a chair by the window.

I slipped out of my room and went to the first floor to wash my face, where Charles found me.

"Good morning, Charles."

"Good morning. You're up early today."

Charles washed his face with the clear water and dried himself with his sleeve. But his eyes were bloodshot.

"Did you stay up all night?"

"...Robins was out until morning again..." He gasped and put his hand to his mouth. "I just got engrossed in the book I was reading. I'm in a hurry, so if you'll excuse me."

Charles left before I could ask anything else of him.

He must have stayed up because he was worried about Robins.

They should only need to visit the cemetery a few times a year for upkeep. What was the old trail in the Nameless Woods really used for? As I pondered that, someone poked me in the back of the head.

"There you are, my lady." It was Leeds. He scolded me for leaving the room without telling him. "You need to stay safe since we can't rely on the Tweedles right now."

The twins had started to act slightly differently ever since the three of us entered the Nameless Woods. Dum and Dee had grown incredibly overprotective of me.

More specifically, they prepared everything I would need to use during classes, lifted and carried me over puddles in the road, and had one go to the dining hall first to secure a table and a plate full of whatever food I wanted.

Then, they followed with the same line.

"As long as you're smiling, Alice, that's all I need."

"As long as you're smiling, Alice, that's all we need."

They were dreamboats. Absolute dreamboats.

Leeds finally had to ban them from sleepovers when they tried to get in bed with me.

Dum and Dee only guarded me in the afternoons, while Leeds took the night shift. The two quickly turned cold toward Leeds before persuading an upperclassman to give them his room. They went to bed and woke up in the room next door to Charles now.

I wonder what has them acting like this?

I didn't have a clue what was going on in their hearts. Perhaps this was how it felt to have a child move out before they seemed ready. Before all this, they would have simply told me how they felt. I hated how that wasn't the case anymore.

I returned to my room, changed clothes, and stepped into the hallway with my textbooks. The twins were waiting for me with their backs against the wall. They pulled me close like they were stealing me away from Leeds.

"Goodbye."

"See you tonight."

"Bye-bye, you three! No napping in class, okay?"

Leeds bid us farewell like a doting mother. Even I forgot my worries and smiled.



"HERE, Alice."

I was heading from lunch to arithmetic class when a student showed me a red ribbon. The boy was from Unicorn Dorm. I remembered him being a fourth year and someone who always glanced at me whenever we passed each other in the hallway.

"What a lovely ribbon. What's this for?"

"It came in a package from my family. You can have it if you like..."

"You're giving it to me?"

I thanked him, and the student shrieked briefly before fleeing. He turned the corner when I heard a loud crash. The helmet of a suit of armor rolled around on the floor, making me worry about the pain the student must have felt.

But I knew he was alive, at least, so I entered my classroom. Brett, a chubby boy, came up to me and asked if I liked sweets before opening a bundle wrapped in blue.

Inside was a white, chocolate bar-shaped object.

“This is called a Kendal Mint Cake. It’s really popular in towns near lakes. I bet young ladies from London don’t see them often, right? Here, it’s yours.”

“Thank you, Brett. I’ll have it in my room later.” I took the cake with a polite smile.

The boy and our other classmates watching us instantly erupted with excitement.

“Dum, Dee, I got sweets.”

“Hmph.”

“Hmph.”

The twins, who’d been following me, had an intense anger gleaming in their eyes. The expression on their faces would surely make a child cry if they saw it. They looked like they were willing to kill everything they encountered for the next fifty years. Even I felt like shedding a tear at those looks.

Dum, who had one hand in his pocket, pulled me by the arm when he saw I’d frozen in place.

“Let’s take our seats.”

“Class is about to start.”

Seated on either side of me, the twins remained grumpy throughout class. I received more presents from other students every time I walked somewhere else after that.

Dum and Dee’s faces were growing even scarier. It was like they were silently casting curses on every person they laid eyes on. Finally, the school day came to

an end.

“I’ll have to bring an empty basket with me tomorrow.” I was clutching my gifts in my arms on the way back to Lion Dorm when I spotted a pretty boy holding his top hat down with both hands.

“Dark!”

My voice was full of emotion when I called out to him. I’d had so few opportunities to see him.

Dark jumped and turned to face me. “Alice...”

“Have you been feeling all right?” I asked. “I’m still looking for the trap-laying demon, so please just bear with it a little longer.”

Dark’s face clouded at my explanation. The blood drained from his face, his red lips trembled slightly, and his sapphire eyes blurred with tears.

“Stay away from me.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. I froze.

“Did something happen?” I asked.

“I don’t want to see your face. ...I’m sorry.”

That was all Dark said before he walked away.

I stood there, alone and dumbfounded.

“He...doesn’t want...to see my face...”

Being abandoned by my fiancé was like a bolt of lightning straight to the head. It didn’t hurt. Instead, my heart felt numb, like time had stopped entirely.

Jack came up in front of me, seeing that I’d turned into an empty shell.

“Are you all right, my lady?”

“Jack... What happened with Dark? He told me he didn’t want to see my face.”

“So he’s like that with you too?” It seemed that Jack was struggling to deal with Dark as well. He scratched his head over his beret. “He’s messing up our pace like that. Bloody annoying...”

Perhaps the unexpected school enrollment and his fear of hiding his horns were influencing Dark's mind.

"I'll ask Dark what's going on. We don't have classes tomorrow, right? I'll bring sweets to Unicorn Dorm, so please prepare some tea for us."

I laid out that schedule before turning to look at the twins, who'd stopped behind me. They were glaring at the second story of Unicorn Dorm with eyes as cold as ice.

"Dum? Dee?"

I watched their expressions untense.

"Let's return to the dorm."

"Leeds is waiting for us."

They held their hands out toward me like a pair of dashing princes. I couldn't help but think of how Dark acted before his transformation.

"Yes, let's head back."

I gave my left hand to Dum and my right hand to Dee. They gently closed their fingers around mine and smiled sweetly at me.

"Just the three of us."

"Just the three of us."

Their kindness filled the hole Dark's cold words had left in my heart.

I knew it was wrong, but I couldn't help but accept the gesture. The three of us walked back to the dorm hand-in-hand that day.



THE students of Ark School still went to church on days without classes. It was the Sunday service where they prayed and discussed the Bible. Some students participated intently, while others nodded off or quietly studied.

They didn't skip the service because of the tea party held afterward.

Unlike the modest Elevenses, this gathering consisted of mountains of fancy cakes and sandwiches. Many students spent the week waiting for this event.

Once we saw that the chapel doors had been closed and the students inside quieted down, Leeds and I went out onto the grass plaza. Dum and Dee's job was to attend the service and capture the trap-laying demon if they showed their face.

I had to send them there if I didn't want them interfering while I talked to Dark.

Thick clouds covered the sky that day, leaving the sun only faintly visible.

Leeds walked in front of me to shroud me from the strong autumn wind. I was carrying my basket full of gifts from the other students. There were all kinds of food items inside, so we'd have things to eat if our conversation lasted a long time.

Jack was standing in front of the door when we approached Unicorn Dorm. His hair was still messy from the night's sleep. He stretched his arms in the air and yawned.

"Good morning, Jack," I greeted. "I see you're still in your pajamas."

"It's that damn Knightley's fault. He locked me out when I said you were coming to visit. So bloody annoying!" Jack kicked a planter of pansies to channel his irritation. But it only wobbled and remained standing. "Damn. Everything about this body is awful. I want to go back to normal already."

Jack clicked his tongue. His sentiment was the opposite of the twins'.

"You want to undo the demon's spell, Jack?"

"Of course I do. Why do I have to relive the most powerless years of my life? I'm not some loser who thinks of his childhood as his happiest times."

"That's true. There's so much you can't do as a child..." I agreed.

Jack constantly felt helpless now that he was a child again. Perhaps Dum and Dee felt the same before the spell grew their bodies. They didn't want to go back to normal because they were painfully aware of childhood's inherent hardships.

I'd relied on the two of them for years, but there were still things I could never put children in charge of. I usually left Leeds and Jack to take on jobs that

took them to busy streets or kept them up all night.

Sometimes, I even ordered the twins to stay home when it was time to punish our target in the dead of night. I told them it was their job to protect the manor, but maybe they'd hated that role all this time.

But adults have their burdens to bear, too. It's important to be nostalgic for your childhood so that you never forget just how short human life is.

I wanted to search for a way to convey that to the twins together with Dark.

"I'm going to try talking to Dark. Where is his room?" I asked.

"The one in the northern corner of the second floor. Knightley and I are using it, but all the other students are at Sunday service, so they shouldn't bother you. Do you need tea?"

"I'd like some, but you need to change first, don't you? Jack, come with me. Leeds, stay here and guard the bottom floor."

"Got it."

Jack and I headed to their room.

The hallway smelled of laundry soap. We walked until we reached the locked door at the end of the building. I knocked.

"It's me, Dark. I want to talk. Can you open the door?" I spoke loudly, but the room remained silent inside.

"My lady wants to see you, and you just ignore her?!" Jack roared. "I can't even get dressed because you locked yourself in there!"

The door flew open. Dark was wearing white bedsheets over his horns. He balled up Jack's uniform and flung it at him.

"Your clothes."

"Bff!"

The impact on his face made Jack stumble backward. I quickly put my hands on his back to support him.

"Dark, what was that for?" I asked.

“.....”

Dark closed the door again, his expression as apathetic as ever. Jack peeled the clothes off his face, snapped his teeth like a turtle, and kicked the door.

“Damn you, Knightley!!”

“Calm down, Jack,” I soothed. He might end up starting a fire if he got too angry. Fortunately, he was small enough that I could wrap my arms around him to stop him. “Leave Dark to me. Can you prepare tea for us?”

“Tsk! Don’t you dare throw anything at her, Knightley.”

Jack took his uniform and went downstairs.

Now that I was alone in the hallway, I knocked on the door again.

“Can you let me in, Dark? I brought sweets that I got from the other boys. Some are quite rare, too, so I thought we could eat them together.”

“.....”

He didn’t respond. The twins would always race to me if they heard I had sweets, even if we were playing hide-and-seek. I would have to talk to him like this since I didn’t have another choice.

“I feel like you’ve been avoiding me lately,” I said. “I’ve always known you to be a confident, cheerful person to the point of arrogance. You succeed in everything you do, and you never abandon me. Did becoming a child make you lose that self-confidence?”

I didn’t hear a peep on the other side of the door. Dark still wasn’t responding.

“No matter what you look like, you’re still Earl Knightley, the star of high society. I understand that you’re at a loss now, and I know being unable to hide your horns is a burden, but please don’t lose sight of who you are. When you’re feeling hopeless, you can rely on me.”

I believed a person’s true essence existed in their soul, not their body. That was why I could never let my surroundings or situations control my heart. When a person was in emotional pain, crying an ocean of tears would serve no purpose but to drown them.

“It feels better to discuss your worries with other people,” I continued. “It’s a way to untangle all the complex feelings in your mind. I want to know how you feel right now. Do you want to go back to normal? Or do you want to stay like this? Can you tell me that, at least?”

“...Alice.”

He finally replied.

When I thought about how Rabbit—the boy wearing the sheets to cover his head—was right on the other side of this door, a warm feeling grew in my chest.

“What is it, Dark?”

“Can you just leave? If I see you right now, I might say terrible things to you...”

“Say them. Unlike you, I can’t read human minds with a kiss.”

After a long period of silence, Dark finally spoke out.

“...We have to go back to normal. I can’t face you like this.”

“But I think you look lovely.”

“*This* is lovely?”

The door opened slowly. Dark was smiling with his sheets wrapped around his head. When I saw the light burning in those sapphire eyes, nearly covered by fabric, I felt the blood drain from my face.

Dark’s lips weren’t curled up because he was happy. He was angry. My simple words had made him furious.

Dark grabbed my arm and pulled me close. “What’s so lovely about this disgusting body?” His slender fingers touched my cheek before trailing downward until he tugged on the ribbon on my neck. He wanted me to bend down.

I knew he wanted to kiss me to see how I truly felt. If it would bring Dark some relief, I was happy to oblige. I bent forward and closed my eyes.

His face drew closer. I held my breath.

I’d kissed Dark many times before, so I knew what came next.

His touch was going to make me so unbearably happy.

But...our lips never connected. I felt him pull away instead.

“...I can’t.”

What?

Startled, I opened my eyes and saw Dark looking at me like he was about to cry.



“You don’t understand how demons feel.”

He pushed me away.

As I stumbled, Dark slammed the door right in front of my eyes. I heard him lock it from the inside.

“Why...?”

He wasn’t going to kiss me after all. But all he would find if he looked into my heart was how much I loved him.

The basket slipped off my limp arms, spilling sweets all over the floor.

The Kendal Mint Cake I received the day before cracked and turned to white sand.

Dark is struggling because he can’t rely on me.

Of course, he didn’t want to see my face. It was why he’d ignored me when we passed each other outside. I understood what state he was in, yet I was selfish and ended up rubbing salt in the wound.

“...I’m sorry I can’t support you.”

As soon as I got the apology out, I started to cry. I was only glad that Dark had closed the door. If he saw me like this, he might laugh, say he was only kidding, and pull me into his embrace like always.

That was just how kind of a person he was.

Dark was someone who sensed what people wanted and gave it to them. I didn’t want him to feel like he had to be strong for me when he was already in so much pain.

“...I’m going now.”

I staggered down the hallway.

When I entered the common room, Jack had changed and was working on our tea. Leeds helped him by measuring the tea leaves. But as soon as he saw me, his face fell.

“Your eyes are red, my lady. Were you crying?”

The two abandoned their work and helped me sit down on the sofa. They looked closely at my face and nervously asked what Dark had said to me.

“What did he say...?”

My lover told me that I couldn’t help him, and that was it. All he did was say I didn’t understand him before sending me away. But just remembering it was more than I could take. I let out another sob.

“I can’t bear to watch this!” Leeds spread his arms and pulled me into a tight hug. “Hugs are so mysterious. Having someone hug you melts away your pain and fear like it’s nothing. I don’t think humans were meant to live all alone.”

Leeds sounded feminine when he spoke, but the large body wrapped around mine was that of an adult man. The strength in his arms made me feel more safe and secure. It was a relief not just for my body, but it stabilized my spiraling emotions too.

I would have to grow if I wanted to support someone else how Leeds was supporting me.

I’m too childish for Dark to trust me with his troubles.

I felt mature for someone who was only sixteen, but it seemed I still had a lot of growing to do.

I sniffled, and Leeds nuzzled his cheek against mine.

“Poor thing. Men are always like this, I’ll have you know. They only act tough when they’re in control but go and get frightened when they’re powerless again. There’s nothing you can do when they start crying and lashing out like this.”

“Don’t rock her like that, or she’ll get sick.” Jack placed a cup in front of me. White steam was billowing up from the fresh tea.

Leeds let go of me, and I took the teacup.

Instead of light and smooth bone china, the dorm used shared dishes made of plain, thick ceramic. The cup wasn’t very hot, so I slowly carried it to my lips and took a sip.

My body grew warm from the inside once I swallowed the black tea.

“Thank you. I feel better now,” I said.

“So, what did Knightley say?” Jack had a serious expression. I bit my tongue.

I didn’t feel like I could explain it very well. I was still in shock but didn’t fully understand what Dark wanted to say to me either. Dark was still lovely even with horns. My love for him hadn’t changed now that his body was transformed.

Not a single part of him is ugly.

But Dark didn’t understand me.

I could tell him whatever I wanted—it wouldn’t matter unless I got him to listen to me. But there was one thing I was sure of.

“...I wish I could have gotten bigger like Dum and Dee.”

When those words quietly escaped my lips, Jack looked shocked.

“You what?”

“Bigger, huh? What’s this about?” Leeds asked.

“I could protect all of you if I was bigger, right? You would know you can rely on me. Dark doesn’t trust me right now, and that makes me incredibly upset...” I confessed.

Relationships in real life weren’t simple like in otome games. Male pride was difficult to grasp, and besides, I was too foolish to ensure we were always on the same page.

“I don’t know what I should do at a time like this,” I mumbled.

“Well, that’s only natural. There’s not always a single answer when it comes to love.” Leeds, an expert at romance, shared his knowledge with me. “If he says he wants to be apart, then why not keep your distance for a while? Sometimes, you just need a little cooling off. Why, I’ll jump for joy if he loses interest in you, my lady. It’s maddening to have the earl keep you all to himself. I’ve been deprived of my dose of Alice day after day!”

When Leeds stuck his lips out in a pout, Jack smacked him in the head with a tray. “Why do *you* need her every single day?” he asked the teary-eyed Leeds.

“That hurt! You’re going to knock my head off if you hit it that hard!”

“Your neck’s not that weak.”

“Who knows, after it was severed all those years ago.”

Leeds grinned. The sight of his toothy smile was identical to that of the Cheshire Cat.

A reluctant Jack began to fix the bent tray. “Not that rubbish again. I don’t care if the twins like it. No one else wants to hear your creepy stories.”

“But it’s true! Mother Goose is no different. You might knock my head off, but it won’t go rolling under the bed. Try looking up in a tree instead. Once you find me...”

“...Your head will still be grinning.”

When I finished his thought, Leeds gave me his biggest smile and wrapped his arms around me.

“You’re exactly right, my lady! Why don’t you forget about that silly old earl and have a tea party with me instead?”

“How many times are you going to keep hugging her? Don’t look so pleased with him either, my lady. He’ll just keep doing it!”

The merciless Jack swung the tray again. The sound of the metal colliding with Leeds’ hard head rang through Unicorn Dorm like a gong.



CLANG, clang, clang.

Some sort of gong was ringing in the dorm. But all I could do was sit on the ground with my back against the door.

Through a gap in the sheet over my head, the scene of my bleak room was like a weight on my chest. Dust sparkled in the morning light pouring through the window, but even that felt strangely unfriendly.

What can I say? I’m the one who locked myself in here.

Alice came to see me, and I pushed her away. They say that women anguish over how to act while men jump to action and come to regret it later—it

seemed that was exactly right. My self-hatred was crushing me.

I was terrified that I would fail to hide my horns and my true, horrifying nature would be exposed. But Alice optimistically came to bring me sweets. She even told me they were from the other boys.

The cruel girl had no idea just how charming her smile could be.

On this island without any young women, Alice was like a solitary flower blooming in a wasteland. Some of those boys would do whatever was necessary to win her affection.

The Tweedles had grown and were still guarding her, but it was no weight off my mind.

I watched Dum and Dee cuddling up to Alice and learned they were still my rivals.

The twins had become beautiful but untamed adult men.

They had defined muscles, a subtle ferocity like that of carnivores, and they intimidated anything and anyone who tried to get close to Alice. If they directed that intensity at Alice, someone easily pressured like her would surely give them her heart.

That was if she hadn't given it to them already.

Am I still the one who has your love?

Or does your heart belong to someone else now?

Had she moved on to another man?

Since I wasn't brave enough to ask her out loud, I thought I'd kiss her to look into her mind.

But I couldn't do it.

Fear overcame me the moment our lips were about to meet.

If I peered into her heart and didn't see myself there...

If another man was there instead...

"...!"

Just the thought of it was bone-chilling.

Being abandoned by Alice would be the same to me as death.

“If only you were never born.”

The curse that was burned into my brain replayed in my mind.

It was a memory from years ago.

I was so happy when I learned how to hide my horns at the Liddell manor. I returned to the Knightley territory, feeling like I’d become a human at last. But that night, my mother said those last words to me right before she passed away—a death that was my own fault.

It was a mark seared into my soul.

That weakness—that trigger—lurked in the depths of my heart.

If I didn’t want to cause another string of tragedies, the least I could do was not allow the girl I loved to see me in this state.

I don’t want you to end up like my mother.

I wanted her to know, but I also didn’t.

Trapped in this state of indecision, I sat in front of the door until the commotion down the hall subsided.



I was walking down the hall alone after literature class. Dum and Dee weren’t with me. The teacher had scolded them for talking to me during class, so they had to stay behind for detention and a lecture.

I can walk alone for a short distance. It’s still the middle of the day, and I have my handgun for self-defense.

It felt refreshing to be alone for the first time in so long.

I’d memorized the entire layout of the school, so I could tell where I was by referencing the number of weapons mounted to the walls.

A single spear was hung on the first floor of the western tower where arithmetic and Latin were taught. The second floor had two spears and was

home to the orthography classroom. The eastern tower had one, two, or three swords hung on the wall for each respective floor.

Only the first three floors were used for classrooms.

The fourth floor contained the teachers' residential area and the headmaster's office.

I'll try going up there today.

I made my way up step after step. The stone stairs were in more disrepair the higher I got—no one had bothered maintaining them.

Out of breath, I looked up at the fourth-floor landing and saw four swords affixed to the wall. I quietly pressed forward down the hall.

There was a great room with rows of beds inside left open. That was where the teachers slept. It was incredibly sparse and nothing like the dorms the students lived in.

I felt a chill and noticed the window was open. When I stuck my head out, it was nothing but cliffs underneath.

I remember Leeds saying that the back of the castle was the cliffside.

I left the great room and went in search of the staircase to the fifth floor.

Stuffed and mounted bats decorated the hallway. I examined a dance room with a broken piano and emerged in front of a familiar sight—the headmaster's office in the western tower.

"Wait, did I miss it?"

I was sure I'd memorized every corner of the castle...

I retraced my steps but could only find the staircase down to the third floor. There was nothing that took me higher.

"Maybe it's inside one of the rooms. ...Hm?"

My eyes were drawn to a familiar marking. A modest wooden door stood in the back of the dance room. The image of a lion and unicorn facing each other was carved into its face.

It was locked. I couldn't open it. But the door had two keyholes—one gold

and one silver.

Leeds had one gold and one silver key in that keychain of his.

They were keys to the dorm, but perhaps they could open this door, too.

As much as I wanted to test it out, I couldn't do any more exploring today.

If this was a movie about exploring ancient ruins, a locked door like this would be hiding potentially deadly traps on the other side. Wandering down strange paths without telling anyone was far too risky.

Dum and Dee were probably getting out of detention, so I used the nearest staircase to head back down. It was a cramped, dark passage originally built for servants to use.

I didn't expect any other students to use these stairs since it was harder to get to the classrooms from them, but then...

"There you are, Alice!"

Brett, the chubby boy who gave me the Kendal Mint Cake, was coming up to the second-story landing.

"Do you need something?" I asked.

"I wanted to know if you liked the cake. Did you try it yet?"

His question instantly took me back to earlier. I'd dropped the dessert and turned it into crumbs.

"I'm sorry. I dropped it while carrying it somewhere, so I never got the chance to try the cake."

"Oh..." Brett slumped over sadly, but then he quickly raised his sweaty face again. "I have lots more in my room, so let's go get them!"

"Wha?!"

I let out a strange cry when he grabbed my arm.

Brett seemed extremely excited by my reaction. He was breathing heavily now.

I shuddered. I tried to remove his hands, but he stopped me.

“Please let go of me. I’m not going there,” I said.

“Don’t worry, I have my friends with me too. They all want to get to know you, Alice.”

A group of students emerged behind Brett. One of them was the boy who gave me the red ribbon. The others were upperclassmen from Unicorn Dorm who’d been watching me from afar.

“You never play with us, Alice. It’s so boring here without any girls around.”

“We won’t tell anyone if you want to let loose a little.”

“Our prefect this year is a nice guy. He won’t do anything, even if he finds out there’s been funny business.”

On the receiving end of all their creepy smiles, I actually found my mind getting clearer. I was up against four boys. Other than Brett, they looked like strong sportsmen.

I’m not sure if I can escape with self-defense moves alone.

I didn’t want to use my gun on ordinary people. If anyone knew I carried it, I’d be seen as dangerous and exiled from the island, much less the school. That left me with only one solution.

It’s time to do what I practiced in my past life!

I filled my lungs with air and shouted as loud as I could.

“Pervert! There’s a pervert here!”

“What?!”

The scream caused the students to flinch. I used that moment to kick Brett between the legs.

“Oof!”

“Forgive me for this!”

Without a second of hesitation, I pushed him backwards with both hands. He tumbled down the staircase, taking two of the students with him.

I broke out into a mad dash and raced down the stairs. Even if I tripped and

fell, it would be better than getting harassed by the male students.

I made it down to the first floor, only to have my hair grabbed and yanked by someone to my side.

“Eek!”

“Hahaha! Caught you!”

Fry and Batta were waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs. Fry tore my hair out with a loud rip, and I knew I was probably going to have a bald patch.

“What are you doing?!” I shouted. “Let go of me! Mmmph!”

Batta covered my mouth with a cloth so I couldn’t scream. That was when Brett and the rest of the students, clutching the aching parts of their bodies, caught up to us.

“This girl really put up a fight.”

“Grab her under the arms and drag her away.”

“But get her to keep quiet before we leave. Give her a good punch in the stomach.”

Just as Batta raised his fist to strike me...

An arrow shot by right in front of his eyes.

“Whoa!”

I looked in the direction the arrow had come from. There stood Dee holding his crossbow and Dum spinning his dagger.

“What are you doing to Alice?”

Dum’s question was icy cold, and his eyes were halfway closed. He wasn’t falling asleep—he was focusing his entire vision on his target like a camera shutter.

The students were lost for words now that they realized they were his prey.

“W-We were just playing around. Why do you guys have those weapons?!”

“I’m the one asking questions. If you don’t let her go, I’m going to kill you.” Dum pointed the tip of his dagger at Fry, his eyes glinting with light.

Fry let go of my hair, startled. I fell back and landed on my bottom, but the twins' eyes never strayed from the students.

"What were your plans with Alice?" Dee spoke next.

This time, Batta responded with hostility. "Stay out of it! Leave us alone!"

"Answer us."

"Answer us."

Dum disappeared, leaving only those blood-chilling words in the air.

More accurately, he'd sprinted to action faster than he could be perceived. Dum leapt toward Fry, grabbed him by the collar, and pointed his blade at the boy's left eye.

"You have three seconds. If you don't answer, I'll gouge your eyes out, one by one."

"G-Gouge?!"

"One."

He started to count before Fry could respond. The boy knew he had no choice but to speak.

"W-We were just..."

"Two."

"We just wanted to be friends with her."

"Three. Ready to say goodbye to this eye?"

Dum cocked his head, and Fry sent spittle flying from his mouth.

Batta stepped in right away to answer.

"I-It's not fair for you two to hog the girl all to yourselves! Can't you let us have some fun with her too?"

"Ah... I've heard enough."

Dum let go of Fry and leaned his body weight to one side. His long bangs shrouded his face, but his blue eyes were still peering through. They were brimming with an undeniable, murderous rage.

“Can I kill them all, Dee?”

Dee, who’d lifted me off the ground, nodded deeply.

“Tear them apart, Dum.”

“Stop this!” I shouted.

I couldn’t allow them to execute students over giving me a bald spot. Although, it was also true that I was on the verge of something very bad happening to me if they hadn’t shown up.

What sins were deserving of which punishments? The twins had spent their lives working in the underworld, so they struggled deeply to weigh such factors.

I’ll have to teach them that some people shouldn’t be killed, no matter how much you hate them.

It was my job, as the head of the Liddell family, to educate the twins—they were family, too.

“They didn’t succeed in their crimes. It’s not worth getting your hands dirty,” I said.

“...I can’t even cut them up?”

“No, you can’t,” I said firmly. “Not even when you cock your head at me so sweetly.”

Dum was displeased, so he and Dee started to discuss secretly killing them at night or during classes.

“Come on, we can make a run for it.”

The boys quietly started to move. Dee shot his crossbow in their direction without even glancing at them. The arrow landed ahead of them in the hallway, causing them to let out shrieks and topple to the ground.

“I’ll kill you if you run. What should we do, Alice?”

“Let’s consult a prefect and have them decide on their punishment,” I decided.

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

The twins hid their weapons underneath their clothes.

“Follow us.”

“I’ll shoot your feet if you run.”

They made the boys stand in a line, hold hands, and walk in that state. The sheer bloodthirst they’d witnessed had turned their legs to jelly.

When we got out to the grass plaza, Robins was playing cricket while Charles sat on a bench reading a thick book. He came our way when we spotted us.

“Alice and the twins. What are you up to?”

“I was nearly attacked by these students,” I said, gesturing to the boys. “They grabbed my hair and tried to drag me back to the dorms. I shudder to think what would have happened if Dum and Dee hadn’t rescued me.”

“You guys did this?” Charles asked.

The cornered students’ faces twitched, pressuring each other with pleas of “You say it!” and “You’re the one who planned it!”

Charles seemed to give up on getting the truth out of them. He turned his eyes to me in my obviously battered state. “You went through something awful. As prefect, I’ll make sure this never happens again by teaching them—”

“Phew. Disturbances are such a nuisance...” Headmaster Caterpillar emerged from the castle. He came out onto the plaza, his robe dragging on the ground, and glared at the trembling boys. “Why have you done such a thing?”

“Allow me to explain, Headmaster.” When Charles stepped forward, his body went flying back.

My eyes went wide with shock. The headmaster had struck him with a whip.

“Why did you do that, Headmaster?!” I jumped in between them, and the headmaster sighed.

“We’re allowed to discipline students with whips at this school. Children get too unruly unless they experience a bit of pain. The whip is an effective tool for education.”

“Even so, why hit Charles? He didn’t do anything wrong!” I argued.

The man’s long eyebrows rose, revealing the eyes underneath. His eyes were so cloudy, I questioned if he could see his surroundings at all. “Bad students are born when prefects don’t keep a close enough watch. It’s perfectly justified to whip the representatives of the rest of the student body.”

“That’s no different from tyranny. There’s no need to punish someone who hasn’t done anything wrong!” I stood firm in my declaration. But still kneeling on the ground, Charles took the side of the headmaster.

“...It’s fine. This is what I...what Robins and I agreed to as an Ark School rule.”

“A rule?” I wrinkled my brow, confused.

Robins stood at my side and spoke to the headmaster firmly. “Us prefects will give these students strict guidance. I promise to offer the victim appropriate aid as well.”

“Good. I’ll leave the rest to you...” He wrapped up his whip, looking satisfied, and returned to the castle with his robe dragging behind him.

The twins, Brett’s group of boys, the students playing cricket, and I were totally still. Only Robins could speak—he had orders for some of us.

“Sorry, but I’m going to have to bail on our cricket game. I’ll be giving you boys who hurt Alice a talking-to later, so wait for me in the Lion Dorm common room. Could you twins take them there and be sure they don’t run away? I’ll join you there shortly.”

“Please do, Dum, Dee,” I said.

“What about you, Alice?”

“What about you, Alice?”

“I won’t be long. I’ll have Robins and Charles with me, so there’s no need to worry.”

“Be sure to join us soon.”

“Be sure to join us soon.”

Dum and Dee led the students back to Lion Dorm.

Once normalcy had returned to the grassy plaza, Robins crouched down next to Charles.

“Can you stand, Charles?”

“Yeah.”

He had a pained expression, but Charles got back on his feet by leaning on Robins’ shoulder.

I looked him over to make sure he wasn’t hurt.

Wait, what’s that?

Charles’ hands were covered in scars—not just the one he’d earned a moment ago.

“Does the headmaster whip you often, Charles?” I asked.

“Not just me.” He looked at Robins. Robins’ hands were covered in the same scars. “Most of the teachers here believe in corporal punishment. They whip the bad students until they lose consciousness. I wanted to get rid of that practice, so once we became prefects, Robins and I proposed the new rule directly to the headmaster.”

It was a sad, dreadful system.

The prefects were punished for every wrongdoing committed by the students. Seeing their prefects whipped forced the students to reflect on their actions and refrain from straying from the right path again.

My heart was broken by the prefects who sacrificed themselves to protect the other students.

“How can such an unfair rule exist? Why are you two the only ones who have to suffer?!” I asked.

“There’s no getting around it, Alice. Didn’t you see the graves in the Nameless Woods?” Robins was referring to the cemetery in the ghost town. “That’s where the students who died from corporal punishment rest. Some boys’ whip wounds never healed, and they died from fevers, and some fled to the forest to escape punishment and were eaten by wild dogs.”

Robins explained why they could never neglect to upkeep the graves.

Charles' face was overcome with frustration.

"I want to get rid of corporal punishment, but I don't have the power to do that. The headmaster and teachers are the real demons to the rest of us, more evil than any of the ones in our reference books."

The teachers whipped their students, sometimes to the point of death, and called it an education. Trapped on this island with no place to run, the educators were the ultimate demons to the boys at this school.

"I've seen many students suffer, both younger and older than me. That's why I swore I'd be the one to protect the student body and drive the teachers out of Ark School."

I was touched by his determination to stand up in the face of oppression.

Students in their final year of school were the ones to become prefects.

Charles and Robins only had one year to carry out their plan. However, it was hard to imagine that they could change the boarding school in such a fundamental way in that short of a time.

They chose to stand up and defy the unfair system in part *because* they were still children.

"I want to help the two of you," I said. "How do we get rid of the teachers?"

"Headmaster Caterpillar is the current owner of Ark School. No new teachers can be admitted without his approval, which is why we're looking for a new owner to take over. We've spent years looking for good candidates and sending letters to suitable nobles."

"So that's why you asked me if I'd seen any noblemen when we met by the dock."

Ark School had sent a letter addressed to Earl Knightley.

But it turned out that Charles was the original sender after all. He was so eager to see noblemen come to the island because he was trying to find someone powerful who could take over control of the school.

However, one person never wanted those candidates to arrive.

It was Headmaster Caterpillar.

These candidates were nothing more than rivals to him. Dark had sent Ark School a letter informing them of the time and date he planned to come to observe the school so it would have been easy to prepare traps for him.

Is Headmaster Caterpillar the trap-laying demon?

I glared up at the part of the castle that housed the headmaster's office. He abused his position to do something as cowardly as inflicting violence, and he was bold enough to teach his students about demons, too. All of it was consistent with the other demons I'd encountered in life.

Now that I think about it, it all makes sense. Of course, a demon would know so much about demons.

The headmaster, a demon, had laid the trap for Earl Knightley's visit. His goal was to stop him from taking over the school by changing his body. He wanted to keep reigning over the island by subjugating his students.

"You could have just killed him..." I muttered.

That's what I would have done if I was the headmaster. After all, changing everyone's body size meant he would no longer be able to tell who was who. It would be difficult to take out his intended target.

"Did you just say 'kill him?'"

Charles went pale. He'd overheard my muttering. It sounded like he thought I was telling him to kill the headmaster.

I smiled knowingly, secretly feeling like that wasn't a bad idea either.

"We have to hurry to Lion Dorm. Dum and Dee might tear the boys apart if we leave them to wait too long."

"That's not good. Let's get going then."

Robins and Charles began to head toward Lion Dorm. I followed them from behind.

As the two walked side-by-side, their gold and silver keys were close enough

to collide, as if the sound they made was their way of consoling each other. Even if they got rid of the headmaster, the two boys were graduating next year. It wouldn't be of any direct benefit to them.

They could have ignored the situation at their school and left the island like nothing was wrong.

But they didn't—Robins and Charles loved this place.

They didn't want the remaining students and the ones still to come to experience the same suffering they did. They didn't care if their names were forgotten by the school or if no one thanked them for what they did.

All that mattered was the happiness of the people they loved.

Everyone is free to love who they want, even if that love isn't returned to them.

I thought back to Dark and the sheet over his head. The memory brought a bit of relief to my weary heart.



THE old castle sat in the darkness of a moonless night. From the highest floor, a demon peered down at the world outside.

It was the only place he could exist in his true form.

The demon was careful not to let his disguise slip anywhere near the crowded classrooms and dorms.

Boarding school life consisted of nothing but repetition. Boys graduated only for replacements to enroll soon after. They wore the same uniforms, spent a few years sticking to the same schedule, matured a bit, and then they graduated.

Since they would never return to the school after that, the demon only had to deceive them for a few years to get by.

However, there were a number of problem students that year.

Alice Liddell, the only female student in Ark School's history, stood out to him in particular. She emerged from the brush like a snake and caught the eyes of

the boys, which led to an act of violence against her.

Girls were so much like snakes. They ate lots of eggs and instilled a fear in how unreadable their true intentions were.

Alice's followers were strange, too.

Dum and Dee, the twin transfer students, were openly hostile to everyone other than Alice. Dark and Jack, new first years who came here on the same boat as her, never let go of their top hat and beret.

Then, there was Leeds, the mysterious man who became the school nurse. He gave the demon the creeps.

"Which of the four caught in my trap is the real Earl Knightley...?"

There were three wrong answers and one correct.

That was what the demon thought at first, but a new idea formed after he watched how boldly Alice conducted herself.

"Could it be the girl herself?"

He needed to find out for sure—before it was too late.

The demon spread his large wings and took off through the window, flying into the night.

Chapter 5: The Kiss of Betrayal is a Trap

“I heard some students tried to attack a girl.”

“Those twin transfer students managed to save her.”

“I wonder if the prefects beat the life out of those boys?”

Rumors were swirling through school the day after Brett attacked me. They caught fire because the culprits weren't in class that day. The student body had also learned how eager Dum and Dee were to jump into a physical confrontation.

Now, no one will be foolish enough to come after me anymore.

My peaceful school life was back to normal—at least, that was what I thought until later in the day.

“...Hey, Dum.” I stopped writing on the blackboard and whispered to him.

The mood in the afternoon orthography classroom was extremely distracted. Few students were actually listening to the lecture. Even Dum was twirling my hair around his fingers.

“What is it, Alice?”

“I know you want to protect me, but don't you think this is a little over the line?”

For some reason, I was sitting on Dum's lap in the back of the classroom. The teacher was pretending not to notice, taking it for an extreme public display of affection.

Dum instantly answered my confusion with a “No.”

“Charles told me that girls in Ark School sit on boys' laps during class.”

“There's no way that's a real rule. Don't you think it's strange, Dee?”

“No. Be sure to sit on my lap in the next class, okay?”

“Urk...”

Dee smiled kindly at me, and I didn’t know how to respond.

Dum was forceful, while Dee knew how to be sweet.

They looked the same but knew how to make a girl swoon in opposite ways. I’d always thought of them as little brothers, so being on the receiving end of their infatuation wasn’t easy to process.

I mean, how am I supposed to stop my heart from racing when they do this stuff?

I would have only had eyes for Dark if he serenaded me with words of love like before—even with Dum and Dee having turned into such beauties. As I sadly pondered how, at this point, Dark might not even try to win me back if I fell in love with the twins, class finished in a flash.

“Let’s go, Alice.”

“Let’s go, Alice.”

Dum and Dee put their arms around me and led me to the linguistics classroom. Along the way, Leeds came down the staircase and called out to us.

“Can you three come to the library and help me with something?”

“Of course.”

“Help me with something” was a code our family used. It signaled that one of us had obtained new information.

Leeds took us to the library, closed the door behind us, and locked it. He had the key to the library along with all the others in his bundle.

The bell signaling the start of class was ringing.

People rarely came to this small library in the first place, so locking the door wouldn’t raise suspicions.

Leeds hooked the keys back to his belt and looked at us with a dumbfounded expression—one you didn’t usually see on teachers’ faces.

“I’m hearing all sorts of rumors about you, my lady. It hasn’t even been a full day, and they keep turning crazier and crazier.”

“We know. They say Alice is actually a princess from Hungary who snuck into Great Britain.”

“We’ve heard. They say Alice gave her twin knights orders to correct any students who act improperly.”

Dum and Dee seemed to be enjoying the rumors, even though they were nothing but an annoyance from my point of view.

“A princess and her knights? They’ve all read one too many fairy tales,” I sighed.

“I don’t hate their enthusiasm, but I wish they could make it a little more realistic. For example, that immortal beings are walking around Ark School or something.” With that blatantly less realistic suggestion, Leeds started walking to the back of the library.

A sea of books covered the walls. The quiet but violent waves were like a world no one would ever imagine existed in such a small room.

“The same student who told me about the rumors also told me about rumors of undead existing at this school. I laughed and called it silly gossip, but that sounds like something of interest to us, no?” Leeds said.

“But demons don’t die in the first place.”

Leeds nodded at my instant reply. “I looked into it right away. It doesn’t seem like this school changes teachers very often, but I thought the headmasters would be written somewhere, at least. So here’s what I found out about the school’s history.”

He pulled a large, old book off the shelf at the back of the room. The binding was wrinkled with age, and a light layer of dust flew into the air as Leeds turned the pages. It was obvious no one had opened it in many years.

A drawing of a lion and an eagle facing each other was printed on the cover.

“It’s not a lion and unicorn?” I observed.

“Apparently, it was an eagle first and was changed to a unicorn at some point. This book was written about three hundred years ago when the school first opened. It has the name of the headmaster the castle’s owner transferred the

rights to.”

Leeds carefully turned the pages until his bony finger landed on a certain name.

“Headmaster: Caterpillar.”

“That’s the same name as the current headmaster, but it’s a leap to call him immortal because of this. He could be his descendent, after all.”

“Do you still think so after seeing this?”

Leeds flipped to the next page containing the names of the teachers in charge of each class. Astronomy, arithmetic, Latin...they were all the same names as the current teachers. One or two could have been a coincidence, but there was no explaining every name being the same.

“I guess I have to believe it after seeing this.”

It was possible the teachers were all being kept alive with a demon’s magic. Few people ever came to an isolated island like this. Once the students graduated, they never wanted to come back to Ark School again. The boys would be none the wiser to the fact that the teachers had been in the same positions for hundreds of years.

Dum and Dee peered into the books curiously.

“Is the headmaster really the demon?”

“Or is it one of the teachers?”

“They’re both possible. I won’t be able to tell until the demon gives themselves away somehow.”

“It would be best to sit and wait for that, but it will take too long. What should we do?”

When he saw me cradling my head in my hands, Leeds lit up.

“I think I know what to do. Remind me of your power again, my lady?”

“My stigma allows me to erase other powers... Ah, that’s it!”

If the demon was using their magic to turn the teachers immortal, my power should be able to make them normal again.

Even if I failed, I would at least be able to know if they were branded with a demon's stigma or not. However, this power wouldn't work on the demon himself.

A stigmata could try as hard as they like, but they would never be able to defeat an actual demon.

"I can lure the trap-laying demon out with my power. But if I undo the spell, the teachers will instantly die..."

Some weren't as passionate as others, but none of the teachers were bad at their job. I couldn't forgive the headmaster for using corporal punishment, though I did enjoy his enthralling demon studies class.

It was Charles, Robins, and the students who would suffer if the teachers suddenly perished. It may have been a school ruled by a demon, but it was still an important place for the boys to learn and spend their youth.

Was it really okay for me to destroy this place for our sake? As someone who had lived there as a student, too, I was reluctant to throw it all away for good.

But Leeds leaned his lips close to my ear and whispered to me. "Don't hesitate, my lady. You can't save everyone. I don't have to tell you that having sympathy will only get you killed."

"That's right."

Our priority was to turn Dark, Jack, Dum, and Dee back to normal. I would have to eliminate the immortals if I wanted to find the trap-laying demon.

I couldn't allow those who violated the laws of nature to exist. Even as a noble who watched over the criminal underworld and a stigmata with an otherworldly power, I would have no choice but to let death take me too someday.

Death was a part of life—the cycle made our world function.

"I'll use my stigma to expose the trap-laying demon," I said. "Once we find them, it's just a matter of how to undo the spell."

We'd previously weakened demons enough for Dark to use his powers and send them to Hell. His help would be indispensable in getting them back to

normal.

“I’ll try asking Dark for help, although I don’t know if he’ll listen...”

“No!”

“No!”

The twins puffed up their cheeks.

“I want to stay like this.”

“I want to stay like this, too.”

Leeds put his hands on his hips. He couldn’t believe the twins needed persuading. “Don’t make trouble for my lady. Who knows what mess you might end up in if you stay like that? Be good boys, now, and do as she says.”

“No!”

“No!”

The twins grabbed my arms and stuck their tongues out at Leeds.

“We won’t let Alice go look for the demon.”

“We’re staying with Alice just like this.”

“Wait, you two! Sorry, Leeds, but we’ll talk again soon!”

They then dragged me out of the library.

Not even the head of the Liddell family could resist her family members’ intense determination.



LEEDS, alone in the library, silently applauded the twins for stealing Alice away.

“You can tell how much they love being that size.”

They’d been desperately courting Alice ever since their bodies grew. They treated Alice like Dark did, protected her like Jack, and doted on her like Leeds, all to awaken feelings of love within her.

But their methods were infantile. Maybe it would work if they were all ten

years old. If it were Leeds, he would bind Alice with chains of love and keep her tied up so that she could never touch another man again.

There were plenty of ways to make a girl obsessed with you. If none of them worked, you could always trap her on a physical level. Cutting off her legs was a last resort.

“But I sure would hate that if it was me.”

Laughing at his own cruelty, Leeds returned to the bookshelf at the back of the room. He put the school history book back on the shelf and looked up at the ceiling.

It displayed a painting of a lion and an eagle battling a serpent-shaped demon with wings—the Jabberwock. The image had been passed down throughout Ark School for years.

A girl was cowering at the feet of the Jabberwock.

The girl, her hair red like Alice’s, had been charmed by a demon and became the one to call forth the Jabberwock to earth. She was known as the “Summoner Maiden.”

“If a demon has to take her, then shouldn’t it be me?” With that declaration to no one in particular, Leeds exited the library, the smirk still on his lips.



IF you wanted to befriend someone, you talked to them in the afternoon. If you wanted to actually get to know them, you talked at night.

Night was a quieter time—easier to hear things as the temperature cooled.

Mary, the maid, didn’t know the specifics of how sounds traveled differently, but she did have this to say about the night’s effectiveness.

“The silence of night makes whoever you’re speaking to let their guard down, my lady. It’s hard to lie when you’re worried someone might be able to hear your heart racing.”

Leeds had been in Alice’s room, guarding her while the twins went to eat dinner.

“I’m going to eat next. She’s out cold in there, so let her sleep until she wakes up naturally,” he said.

“Okay!”

“Okay!”

They sat back to back in chairs, with Dum facing the door and Dee facing the window. They wanted to get into bed with her like they did as children, but they couldn’t risk waking her up.

“I want to see Alice sleeping, Dee.”

“So do I, Dum. But we can’t.”

They were feeling selfish, though they didn’t dare do anything that would upset Alice.

Dum and Dee thought growing bigger would come with more freedom.

They’d expected to be able to leave food they didn’t like on their plates without being scolded or stay up as late as they wanted without any complaints. But the demon had made them older, and while it did come with a bit more freedom, there were also new restrictions that they never experienced as children.

“Endurance” was the greatest of them all.

The boys had always found it strange to see Jack or Dark reach out for Alice instinctively, only to let their hands fall before they could touch her.

They were bigger than Alice, so why didn’t they use that power to touch her?

But now they understood—they didn’t want to hurt someone they cared about.

Using force was no way to obtain the person you loved.

If you didn’t treat someone delicately and kindly, like a flower plucked from the stem, they would spread their wings and fly to someone else.

“What do we do to get Alice to acknowledge us?”

They’d been treating Alice like a princess for a while now, but Alice still treated them like nothing more than large children.

Dum had truly believed that Alice would see him as a man once he was taller and his voice was deeper. He was heartbroken that it hadn't turned out that way.

"How do we make Alice see that we don't want to go back to normal?"

Dee was in just as much pain.

He couldn't count how many times the fact that his youth alone meant he would never be Alice's lover had crushed him. If they went back to normal, it would be another five or ten years before he could hold Alice in his arms again.

He could spend those years chasing after her, but by the time he was grown again, she would belong to someone else—she would be his bride.

"I don't want to sit back and watch anymore."

Dum stood up and walked over to the sleeping Alice.

She was hidden under the blanket, but her long, curled eyelashes, adorable nose, apple-red lips, and smooth, pale skin all made Alice devastatingly beautiful.

Alice was pure of heart, had an important place in society, and was someone the twins would never come close to if they lived a normal life. They would never get to be together if she hadn't taken them into her family—that was how sacred she was.

But the love Dum felt for Alice wasn't familial. He wanted more than goodnight kisses from her. He wanted her heart to skip a beat when he embraced her.

Dum placed his hands on the bed, but Dee scolded him from the bedside.

"Don't. You don't want Alice to hate you."

"I don't care if she does. It's better than doing nothing..."

Dum grabbed the blanket and yanked it off her.

When he did, he was staring at a pair of bright red eyes.

"...Alice?"



“GOOD morning, Dum.”

No, I hadn’t been asleep at all.

I’d been dreaming a few minutes ago but awoke to the sound of Leeds leaving the room. I thought back to Mary’s words as I listened to the twins’ conversation shortly after.

If you wanted to know someone well, it was best to talk at night. The night made people honest. It was the perfect time to make people reveal their true feelings.

“What were you going to do?” I asked.

“...I’m sorry.”

The twins sat on the bed silently.

If he was apologizing, then maybe he wanted to play a prank on me. Children often tested limits with adults to see how much they meant to them.

I sat up, took the gun from underneath my pillow, and gave it to Dum.

“This is proof of my honesty. If I can’t reach my gun, then I have no way of resisting you, no matter what you do to me. That’s how much I trust you. You’re my precious family.”

Dee squinted at me.

“We’re not your children, Alice.”

“I didn’t give birth to you, but you’re children growing up in the Liddell family. I want you to go back to normal because I love you.”

“It’s not that kind of love that we want.”

Dum set the gun down on the sheets. With an expression like he was about to burst into tears, he leaned his forehead against my shoulder. His blonde hair grazed my cheek. It was soft and gentle—like a feather tickling me.

“How do we get you to fall in love with us, Alice?”

“How do we get your heart to race for us like it does for Dark, Jack, and Leeds?” Dee, who’d put his forehead on my opposite shoulder, spoke in a weak, trembling voice.

I was the one who'd driven them to this state of agony. I'd always thought of them as a pair of little angels. I'd been looking down on them by thinking that I had to be the one to keep them safe.

I was trying to protect them, but I'd wounded them instead.

They'd had to hold hands and desperately shield themselves from my cruelty together.

"...You're hurting so much, but you still love me?"

When I finally asked that question, Dum and Dee raised their heads. Fixed on me, their blue eyes were full of tears.

"Yes. We love you, Alice."

"We love you so much."

Their familiar words were blatantly romantic. They'd been telling me all this time, but I never understood.

They loved me. They loved me so much.

They'd been standing on their tiptoes and screaming in silence for so long.

"Look at us. We love you."

I'd always thought they were playing around, so every time they said it to me, I replied, "Me too." I was as cruel as a demon.

"What should I do? How do I make the two of you happy?"

My desire to keep seeing them as the adorable little Tweedles had turned out to be nothing more than a dagger to their hearts. So, I asked them that question with blind honesty.

I half expected to be shouted at. But instead, the pair embraced me gently.

"We want you to love us."

"We want you to love us."

Their voices sounded like a plea for forgiveness.

It was as if they couldn't bear to live a second longer if I rejected them.

Suddenly, I understood.

I was like a god to them. I created a world for them to live in, protected their days of nonchalant bliss, and was in their hearts at all times—be it waking or sleeping.

I was someone they were never supposed to fall in love with. But now it was too late, and they were suffering for it.

“Thank you for falling in love with me.”

I hugged them back to show my gratitude. It was a trivial thing to say compared to the days they’d spent in grief. But I was still the adult here, and I knew that first loves were fleeting, empty things like glassware.

It was common to mistake admiration for love. Childhood invited such misunderstandings, like when female high school students fell for their teachers. Once they were grown, Dum and Dee’s feelings for me would be a distant memory.

That was the natural outcome. It was why I had to refuse them now.

“I’m happy that you love me. But I can’t be your partner. I’m sorry.”

“Because of Dark?”

“Even though things aren’t going well with him?”

“Well, that’s part of it...”

Thinking back to Dark’s rejection made me depressed again.

I didn’t need to be told again—I understood our situation. It was difficult to press forward toward the future with a partner when your hearts had grown distant.

Dark and I had ended up on different tracks. No matter what directions those routes took, someday, the red thread binding us would snap.

Or maybe it already has.

If it hadn’t, Dark would wrap his arms around me and comfort me with a gentle, *“Just keep looking at me, not anyone else.”*

“Don’t run from us, Alice.”

“It doesn’t have to be Dark you’re with, does it?”

Their voices were sugary sweet. It was making my determination waver. I hated myself for feeling that way.

Help me, Dark. Don't let me betray you.

But my heart had already started to lean toward the twins. That was probably what it felt like to go through a rut in a relationship.

Why wasn't he stopping me? Why wouldn't he look at me? If he'd only been kind to me, I would never be so reckless. I searched for a reason to betray him, putting all the responsibility in his hands.

"We love you, Alice."

"We love you so much."

Those magic words made my brain short-circuit.

I watched them tilt their heads, and I slowly closed my eyes.

In a corner of my hazy mind, I remembered the days I played with Rabbit without any ulterior motives.

Was he the one I loved? Or was it—





I can't sleep.

I opened my eyes, untangled the sheets from my body, and rolled over.

The empty room was cold, both in temperature and mood.

Jack and I were sharing the room, but he'd started sleeping in Robins' room ever since that day Alice came to visit. He was angry about how cruelly I sent her away.

The old Jack would have surely burnt the dorm to a crisp, but he'd been learning to control his rage ever since the Jack the Ripper case. Unlike his stunning growth, all I could do was run away, lock myself in a room, and lash out at my lover.

I ran my fingers over my head until they collided with the stiff bone.

"It's all their fault."

I always checked if my horns were still there when I awoke from a dream. It was a habit from my youth, but it came back when my body transformed. It was pathetic. I could never let Alice see me like that.

Suddenly, the curtains shook. It seemed the chill in the air had been from an open window. I stood up, grabbed the curtains, and something suddenly overpowered me.

"Whoa!"

I fell on my rear end and peered up through half-open eyes.

Underneath the fluttering curtains, illuminated faintly by starlight, was a girl with blood-red hair that shook in the night breeze.

She wasn't supposed to be in my room. I was speechless for a while.

"...Alice."

"Good evening, Dark. I see you're not wearing your sheets today."

I'd forgotten to hide my horns as soon as I stood up. I quickly grabbed my bedsheets and wrapped them around my head, turning to face the opposite

direction, but she never took her eyes off me.

“How did you get up... No, I have nothing to talk to you about, so get out.”

“But I do. Dark, I just kissed Dum and Dee.”

She said it so simply that I took a long time to react.

“The Tweedles...?”

The twins were always giving Alice affectionate kisses. They were for good mornings, good nights, and other things in between. But even as all my rationality was on the verge of screeching to a halt, I could still tell that Alice wasn't talking about those kinds of adorable little kisses.

The betrayal sent me into a rage. Before I realized what I was doing, I'd slammed my lips into hers.

“Mmph!”

She tried to turn her head and escape, but I grabbed the back of her head and pulled her toward me roughly.

I swallowed all the sounds escaping her, caught hold of her frightened tongue, and consumed her completely with the kiss. Alice finally went limp and slumped into my body.

Did you let the twins see you like this, too?

Thinking of her snuggling up against their muscular bodies made my eyes spin. The feelings I'd kept hidden from Alice were fiery and bubbling like a fake turtle soup that'd been cooked for too long.

Why did you betray me? Why with my dear twins of all people?

Don't you know how much I love you?!

My brain was boiling, and I'd lost myself in the kiss—but that was when my demon power slipped into Alice's heart.

I was able to read the mind of anyone I kissed.

I could open the tiny locked room deep in their hearts that held their emotions and memories, even when I didn't have their permission to set foot inside.

Hearts were fragile things once they'd been unlocked.

I'd peered into Alice's mind many times before, but now I found it wide open and waiting for me. It was enough to make me concerned about her.

At the very bottom of her scarlet heart, playing on the screen in that internal room even she'd never explored was...

"?!"

I drew back from Alice in shock.

I couldn't believe what I just saw. I stared at the blushing, dizzy Alice looking up at me as closely as I could.

"You didn't kiss them?"

The three of them were close in her memory.

Alice thought her romance with me was over.

Dum and Dee had used that opportunity to pursue her.

Alice had closed her eyes out of spite toward me...and then the twins kissed her cheeks, not her lips.

"If you really can't fix things with Dark..."

"Then be our lover instead."

Then Alice started to cry, her emotions overwhelming her.

The twins comforted her as she wept. They convinced her to talk to me, set a ladder up against the outside of Unicorn Dorm, and helped her get into my room on the second floor.

I couldn't believe it. I'd thought she betrayed me.

"Why did you lie?" I asked, my throat tight.

"...I had to. I thought you would send me away again if I didn't."

Alice had lied to stop me from rejecting her. I'd fallen for her trick hook, line, and sinker.

"Besides, it's easier for me to show you my feelings this way."

Then she pulled me forward and pressed our lips together again.

“Ah!”

The soft sensation made my mind go blank.

It was her first time initiating a kiss.

I gazed at her when she separated from me again, making her pout her lips in embarrassment.

“Now, do you see how much I love you?” she asked.

“...I do. I’ve always known.” I smiled bitterly, unable to say anything but the opposite of what my actions had been indicating all this time. “But I can’t be at your side so long as I have these.”

I touched the horns on my head. The rugged, bony sensation made my mood plummet.

“I’m only at peace when I sleep at night. As soon as I look in the mirror every morning, I’m sent into despair because it’s another day that I can’t see you...”

Alice looked at my horns. She said they weren’t so bad. But I could only see them as proof of my identity as a demon. I wanted them gone. It was all I thought about when I was a child.

Alice probably didn’t know how many times I’d tried to cut them off and failed, leaving shallow wounds on my scalp to this day. I couldn’t believe that she saw them as anything other than disgusting.

Wasn’t it possible that she was hiding her true feelings so as not to hurt me? My inferiority complex and suspicious nature filled every nook and cranny of my body. It threatened to spill over in front of her now that my body was so small.

“I can put on a human skin, but I’m still a demon. Someday, I might show you my wicked nature and end up hurting you. That’s the feeling that came back to me once I couldn’t hide my horns anymore.” My voice trembled.

Seeing me like this was probably ruining Alice’s impression of me.

The “Earl Knightley” everyone loved was a character I’d worked hard to create. The true me was a cowardly, shy, weakling who had to lock himself in

his room with a sheet over his head to breathe.

I hated myself for it. But Alice chuckled at me.

“What has you so scared after all this time? Aren’t you still Dark, even if you shrink and can’t hide your horns anymore? Do you really think of me as some little lady who flees when she sees a demon?”

She pointed at her pouch, now with a serious expression.

I remembered now. If someone did something bad to her, even me, she wouldn’t hesitate to fire.

She was more than just a kind-natured noblewoman. Alice was brave, noble, and a merciless executioner who protected the order of the criminal underworld.

If my body and heart transformed into those of a wicked demon, maybe she would be the one to deal out the punishment I deserved.

Maybe I could tell her the truth after all.

I’d been hiding these dark secrets all along.

“Alice, would you listen to me talk about my past?”

“Of course. You’ve never told me about it before.”

Alice seemed pleased.

That only hurt me more. What I wanted to tell her was something dreadful, after all.

The two of us sat on the bed with the same sheet wrapped around us.

That was all it took to bring relief from the frigid room. My throat felt less tense than before.

“...The previous Earl Knightley couldn’t conceive children. It was a terrible problem.” Alice winced at the already heavy subject, but I continued. “He used sorcery to summon a demon into his wife’s body. Ten months and ten days later, she gave birth to a demon boy with a pair of horns. The countess went mad when she saw it.”

She never knew her husband summoned a demon. She’d believed her

pregnancy was natural all along, so she refused to accept the demon as her child.

“My mother always called me a ‘monster’ when I was young.”

“That’s terrible...”

Alice’s face fell. She’d been loved by her parents and servants, so it was hard for her to imagine. She could never comprehend a life of abuse at the hands of her mother.

“Mother wailed whenever she saw me, so I only ever met her a few times. When I still couldn’t hide my horns at the Tweedles’ age, Father finally had to send me to the Liddell manor when he heard you were experts in demons. That was where we first met, and I finally learned to hide them. I was so happy, I went straight to my mother as soon as I was home.”

I thought she would be happy when she saw the source of her disgust was gone.

I believed she would accept me as her beloved son.

Mother lived at our London home, not in the Knightley domain. When I took my hat off and rushed up to her, she went pale.

“Why have you come here, you monster?!”

“Even though you were hiding your horns?” Alice asked.

“The horns weren’t the problem for her. She only ever saw me as the demon who’d invaded her womb, not an actual son. There I was, desperately trying to hide my horns so she would love me, but it didn’t mean a thing to her in the end.”

After that, she erupted with enough verbal abuse to last me a lifetime.

“Are you trying to trick humans by hiding your horns? I never wanted to give birth to you. It’s all your fault that I’m miserable. Die, die, die!”

I hesitated to recite such things to Alice, so I kept the details to myself. She peered out from under the sheets, looking at me with concern.

“What happened to your mother after that?”

“She died. She shouted at me until she had a heart attack.”

Mother suddenly went completely silent like a machine that broke down. Then she collapsed. I lifted her and called out to her.

“Are you all right, Mother?! It’s me, Dark!”

I don’t know what was going through her mind, but her face twisted with pain. Mother used the last of her strength to look up at my face and say...

“If only you’d never been born.”

And then she was gone.

Everything went pitch black. I would never be loved by my mother, no matter what else I tried. Even though there was never an answer in the first place.

Horns or not, I wasn’t any son in her eyes.

“Father and Gramps both told me it was a fluke, but I’ve always felt that I killed my mother.”

“That’s not true!” I pictured Alice saying that and suddenly felt lonely. I didn’t need sympathy. I only wanted her to know about me.

Regardless of who was responsible, nothing would change the fact that my mother died screaming at me. I intended to carry that sin for the rest of my life. I needed no comfort to lessen that burden.

Alice had listened silently to my heavy life story. I waited for her to respond until finally...

“That must have been so painful.”

That was all she said.

I was shocked. It was such a simple response.

“That’s it?” I asked.

“That’s it. I’m sure you’ve decided to punish yourself for life over this. If anyone wants to tell you you’re wrong, that’s a matter of their own ego. If someone’s lived for years trying to atone for a sin, convincing them of their innocence will only cause them more grief, not free them from guilt.”

“...I see. That’s right. That’s the kind of girl you are.”

I started to laugh—Alice’s indifference was just so amusing. She watched me tremble and tear up with laughter, obviously displeased.

“You’re laughing at me again, aren’t you?” she pouted.

“I’m sorry. I’m just so happy.”

Alice always found words that surpassed my wildest expectations. She had the nerve to withstand the most extraordinary things and the wisdom to understand that sympathy could do more harm than good.

I may be a demon who killed my mother, but Alice never changed.

The more I learned of her, the harder I fell for her.

My love for Alice washed away the anguish filling my body all this time.

“Alice, don’t hesitate to kill me the next time I hurt you.”

Before I destroy you like I did my mother.

“I have every intention.” Alice took the gun out of her pouch, pressed it to my forehead, and laughed wildly. “If you ever betray me, I’ll put a hole in your head that’s a lot more eye-catching than those horns. Got it?”

Seeing her cackle with a weapon in her hands made her look like a witch.

No, considering her age, “villainess” is a better fit.

“Ah... Alice, may I finally share the feelings I’ve kept inside while we were apart? I love that side of you, too.”

“Can you not speak before I’ve given you permission?”

“My apologies. No one likes a gentleman who only talks about himself.”

Once I cracked a joke, she put the gun down.

“I see you’re back to your normal self, so let me ask you something while you’re in a good mood. I think we’re about to find our demon. I’ve ruled it down to either the headmaster or one of the teachers.”

Alice explained her suspicions that a demon’s spell had made the teachers immortal. The source of these rumors was the student body itself. She’d also

found that the headmaster and teachers' names hadn't changed since the founding of the school, according to a record book.

"The problem is what to do after we find the demon," she said. "We're going to need some sort of advantage to undo the spell, but stigmata can't use their powers on demons. Can you still help us in your current state?"

"Not a problem. My demon powers don't depend on my body size."

Demons existed in a hierarchy of strength. Bernard, the Rose Demon, and Susie, the Mirror Demon, were nobility in Hell as well. I would have probably become a demon who slaughtered humans like them if I'd been born in Hell.

"I'll come with you when it's time to lure out the demon," I said.

"Thank you. That's a big relief!"

The gleeful look on her face was adorable, too. I touched my nearby cane.

If the trap-laying demon *was* amongst the teachers, I couldn't help but wonder what the strange, constant presence I'd felt in Unicorn Dorm was.

I kept that question to myself and listened intently to Alice's plans.

Chapter 6: A Name of Deceit

THUNDER cracked through the night sky like the roar of a dragon as I climbed the staircase in the old castle, careful not to make a peep. I didn't have a lantern, but I had no difficulty walking in darkness after all this time.

The dark had always been on my side, ever since I was young.

Besides, I had a whole group of people I could count on now.

Leeds was in front of me, the twins took both of my sides and Dark and Jack followed right behind me. We were all wearing our school uniforms, so we probably looked like a cluster of shadows walking around.

"All right, my cute little kittens. It's time for us to split up now." Leeds stopped on the landing with three swords on the wall and handed me his keychain. "The teachers have gone night-night in the big room with all the beds. You know the one, right?"

"Of course. Dark and I will handle the target ourselves. Jack, secure this staircase as our escape route. Leeds, you stick with Headmaster Caterpillar."

The headmaster alone slept in a room next to his office.

"If he turns out to be the demon, he might show up once he senses the teachers have been freed from their spell. If something happens, everyone needs to flee to the escape route and go straight to the chapel."

"I drew my seal in the chapel this afternoon. Make sure to entice him into chasing after you so he doesn't spot it, all right?"

Dark, carrying his cane under his arm, had his horns on full display. He'd left his hat in his bedroom, as it would obstruct his vision to wear. He felt conflicted about showing himself as a demon like that at first, but the twins managed to get through to him.

"You can hide your horns, but not your life itself."

“There’s no need to be sad about having horns.”

It seemed like they wanted to tell Dark not to be preoccupied with hiding his horns—that being a demon with horns only made him more reliable for this job.

Their blunt attempt at encouragement worked. Dark had left his hat behind. He had his own unique sense of dignity, not wanting to show a weak side of himself to his beloved twins.

The twins had saved a demon but feigned ignorance as they joined us in tonight’s plan.

“What about us?”

“What about us?”

Their blonde hair swayed around their faces. I held my hands out to them.

“You’ll be guarding me. Don’t let anyone get close to me while I’m using my stigma, be it human, demon, or anything else that shows up.”

It was an indirect order to kill them. They nodded, their faces remaining completely unaffected. They grabbed my thumb and pinky.

Leeds put his hand on top of ours, followed by Jack’s tiny hand covering his.

“Anything for Alice!”

We felt strangely united as one after that vow to complete the mission.

The Liddell family possessed a bond that would always keep us marching forward, even to a place that meant certain death. Dark looked on at us with a smile. He didn’t ask to join the cheer, and I loved him for it all the more. He understood how sacred this rite was to us.

“All right. We’ll be on our merry way then.”

“Be careful, my lady, twins. You too, Knightley.”

Leeds and Jack bid us farewell before disappearing into the darkness.

We climbed to the fourth story and went straight to the room where the teachers slept.

“This is it. I’ll start by using my stigma on the closest bed,” I whispered to

them and unlocked the door with the key.

Rain that had started to pour drowned out the sound of the lock. I asked Dum and Dee to watch over our escape route. Then Dark and I approached a bed.

The man fast asleep, a snot bubble growing out of his nose, was the orthography teacher. He was a popular, jovial instructor.

My heart ached when I thought back to his class. His name was one of the ones from the school history book. If he was under a spell of immortality, he would die as soon as I freed him from it.

I'm sorry. You can complain to me when we meet again in Hell...

I glanced at Dark to show him I was ready, closed my eyes, and focused my mind. I drew the crescent moon symbol in my head and felt the stigma on my chest start to burn.

Please release the captives in Ark School from their immortality.

The band of light escaped my chest and slipped through my clothes.

It turned again and again, wrapping the bed and teacher together in a cocoon of light.

“?!”

A chill suddenly shot down my spine. A red emergency light was flashing in my head. I sensed danger. My whole body and spirit informed me that a powerful enemy was near.

I whipped around, but the color of straw filled my vision.

What's this?

I looked closer and saw it was the leg of a beast.

Just inches from my face, a carnivorous animal's leg was floating there.

With my heart pounding in my ears, I slowly looked up at the ceiling.

An unbelievable sight had appeared over our heads.

The monster had the body of a lion, the head of an eagle, and a pair of wings. Its glaring eyes were gold. It looked down at us like we were prey.

“Don’t move.”

Dark raised his cane. The creature’s eyes stopped on Dark’s horns. It let out a cry of surprise.

“So you were a demon all along...?”

Though it looked like a monster, it appeared to understand human language.

Maybe we can negotiate with it?

Despite this first thought, a dark shadow flew past me before I could do anything.

“He who acts first wins the war.”

It was Dum who’d sprung to action.

Dark jumped on me, sending us tumbling to the floor just as the monster flapped its wings and rose to the ceiling.

Dee followed up by firing his crossbow.

“Support your men first and think later. What’s next, Alice?”

“We’re getting everyone out of here, of course!”

There was no other choice. The teachers had woken up, too.

I took Dark’s hand and raced into the hallway.

Dee rolled out behind him. All of us sprinted toward the staircase where Jack was waiting for us. I heard the flapping of wings just behind. The monster was chasing us.

It was a game of tag for our lives.

The feathers on the monster’s right wing were damaged, and the narrow hallway made it difficult for it to pursue us.

We can escape if we make it to the staircase!

“Whoa!”

Dark had stumbled. He couldn’t keep the same pace as usual at his current size, and staying shut in his room for so long meant he’d lost muscle mass, too.

Sweat dripped down my brow.

My safety was the priority of the Liddell family. Leeds, Jack, and the twins would do whatever it took to save me, even if it put their lives in danger.

But to me, there was no one more important than Dark. I wanted to protect him just as the others did with me.

That was why running from the beast wasn't enough. We would have to make a bold move, or it would catch up to us before we reached the staircase.

I felt a breeze overhead and watched the monster land in front of me.

"What?!"

Our path to the staircase was blocked. I skidded to a stop and blocked Dark from going forward.

Dum and Dee were in front of us, holding their weapons protectively.

"Take another staircase, Alice."

"Take another staircase, Alice."

"You too, twins. I'll put a stop to this thing." Dark waved his cane, which shot a grain of light out of the tip and formed a crest-shaped wall between us.

The monster rammed at the wall of light. With each heavy thud, fissures formed in the crest itself.

"It doesn't look like it will last for long."

"This way!"

We spun around and went back the way we came.

Dashing through the hallways lined with stuffed bats, we finally reached the dance room with the old piano. I realized the door had been left open this entire time.

We can stop the monster here.

The door could only be locked from this side.

"Dum, pick up Dark and run! Dee, get Jack and Leeds and head to the chapel!"

"Got it."

“Got it.”

Once Dum scooped up Dark, the three of them ran out of the room. I closed the massive door. I rushed to lock it—but that was when the twins returned. They’d noticed something shocking.

“Alice?”

“Alice?”

“Just leave me behind! I can take care of things myself!”

My shouting was met with a bewildered retort.

“Alice, this is...”

“A death flag.”

“Ah!”

The blood drained from my face. I’d accidentally turned myself into the character who sacrifices herself to stop the oncoming danger in a disaster movie.

“I-It’s all right! Let’s meet at the chapel!”

I said goodbye, stepped back from the door, and looked around.

I need to find a place to hide.

The broken piano wouldn’t help, nor would the bench with its cracked legs.

“That’s it!”

I remembered the door with the lion and unicorn engraved in its face and ran toward it. I found the gold and silver keys on the keychain and stuck them in the locks.

The keys turned without resistance, and the door swung open with a sharp creak.

I quickly went inside and closed the door behind me. The monster just made it into the dance room but didn’t know where I was.

I hope Dark and the twins went straight to the chapel...

I kept walking forward so I wouldn’t be near the door in case the monster

broke through. A small wooden staircase was nearby—likely a way to reach the fifth floor.

I crept toward it, careful not to make noise.

“It’s...a hallway?”

The hallway connected the western and eastern towers. I happened to be right in the very center. To my right was a stack of furniture blocking the way. I could head left, but old suits of armor and spears covered the torn rug.

It seemed this place was a forgotten storage room from long ago. It was the perfect place to hide. Although, there was a frigid wind blowing in from the broken windows, so I knew I wouldn’t last long. I needed to find something to wear.

Curtains were hanging on the walls all over the hallway that would do the trick. They were nothing more than tattered rags to protect portraits from sunlight, but it was better than nothing.

I walked down the hallway, looking for one that was clean.

All of the figures peeking out from the fabric were wearing the same black tailcoats. I couldn’t see their faces well, but I knew they were portraits of past Ark School students. The curtains were cleaner the further down I walked, as the portraits were becoming more recent.

The one closest to the corner was practically new.

That would be the one. I yanked the cloth. The clasp dislodged, knocking me to the ground with the curtain. A layer of dust flew up and then rained down on me.

“Urk... They definitely don’t clean here.”

With teary eyes, I looked up at the portraits. It was too dark to see the student in the portrait clearly. He seemed to be sitting in a chair, looking in my direction...

But as soon as I was about to look away, a bolt of lightning lit up the sky.

“Huh?”

My eyes nearly fell out of my head when I laid eyes on the illuminated portrait.

He had sleepy eyes and a slender nose. The way his lips curved into a smile made him look more feminine, in a way.

The young man's face was one I knew very well.

"Leeds?"

I stood up. Another lightning bolt allowed me to get a good look at the portrait. Their features were exactly the same. But there was one striking difference.

The boy in the painting had bright strawberry-blonde hair. Leeds had gray hair tinged with green.

I was so confused. Who *was* this person?

I squinted at the rusted nameplate underneath the portrait.

It was too dark to see. That was until another bolt of lightning came to my rescue.

Prefect Ulysses Cheshire.

They were different names. Maybe it was someone else, after all. When I cocked my head, I heard a voice call out to me.

"I've been looking for you, my lady."

"Leeds..."

Leeds found me. He came straight toward me, paying no mind to the pitch-black hallway.

"It looks like the monster is gone, so come on, let's get a move on."

"Tell me something before that. How did you get in here?"

I'd locked the door behind me, and I had his keys. He'd even come from the opposite direction that I did. Maybe he found another passageway.

But instead of answering, Leeds stared at the portrait on the wall.

"It looks just like me. What a great painting."

“Answer me, Leeds.”

Lightning cracked again. That was when I realized the boy in the painting had a scarf draped over his lap. It was light pink, just like the one Leeds was wearing around his neck.



“That scarf is the same one you have,” I said. “You told me your mother knitted it before you two were separated...”

No two knitted items were exactly the same. It looked slightly different in the picture, but I was confident that such a unique scarf had no other duplicate.

“Leeds, is ‘Ulysses Cheshire’ your real name?”

“And if I said that it wasn’t? Would you believe me?”

I wouldn’t.

Maybe he had some sort of explanation, but my intuition was telling me otherwise.

I was silent. Leeds threw one end of his scarf over his shoulder.

“It’s a strange last name, no? Everyone called me ‘Cheshire Cat’ because of it. That really takes me back. I spent so many days here finding blackmail on the students to climb my way up to the role of prefect.”

The person in front of me, lost in memories of his past, looked like a stranger now.

“Why do you use a fake name?” I asked.

“When a new owner takes in a stray cat, they always change its name.”

“I’m not your owner. I’m family!”

“If only all my owners said things like that to me.” Leeds took his eyes off the painting and smiled at me fondly. “My lady, there’s a lot of kittens who have to do bad things to get by in this world. Some are lucky and get taken into the Liddell family like the twins, while others have to come up with fake names, cheat, and fight just to get a day’s worth of milk. That’s the kind of kitten I was...”

His sad-sounding words made me realize my thoughtlessness.

Leeds had factors in his life that made him have to lie to get by. It was arrogant of someone who’d lived a privileged life to call him cowardly or unbelievable for that.

I hung my head. I was one of the people blessed with a good life. “I didn’t

know. I'm sorry for saying something so cruel."

"It's no worse than what I've done. I'm glad you're such a good girl, my lady." He laughed it off with a gleeful smile.

Leeds was still a precious family member to me, even if that wasn't his real name. His past didn't matter now. All I needed to know was the Leeds who'd become my family member.

I was coming to an understanding. But his next words made me go stiff.

"I'm glad you're such a fool too."

"Huh...?"

I was doubting my ears when Leeds leaned close and whispered into them.

"You will forget everything about Ulysses Cheshire."

"!!"

My earlobe started to burn.

His voice vibrated my eardrums, and electric currents surged to my brain through my nerves.

Leeds had used his "Liar's Tongue."

My mind was starting to get hazy. I couldn't move a single muscle by my own will.

"L-Leeds..."

I looked up at Leeds through the fog in my head. The way his eyelids were half-closed, I could only really see the smirk on his face.

"Don't you worry. I'll be your 'Leeds' again when you wake up."

Will you really? Can we really be family like we always have once I forget the truth?

"So goodnight, my lady."

When he touched my forehead, I was overwhelmed with lethargy.

He took me in his arms before I could collapse. My senses slipped away from me until I finally lost consciousness.



“LET me go, twins! I want to find Alice!”

“You can’t.”

“It’s not safe.”

The twins were restraining Dark in the chapel.

Despite the total darkness outside, the glowing, crescent moon seal on its floor faintly illuminated the room. The bluish-white light was getting stronger and weaker at random intervals due to its caster’s state of agitation.

Jack scolded the stubborn Dark from his pew.

“We’ll get in the way if we go after her. We have to wait here for Leeds to bring her back. Stop making more work for us, damn it...”

“The future is unpredictable, Dark.”

“You must never give up, Dark.”

“Stop finding nicer ways to call me powerless. ...I’m just scared.”

Alice had sent the others away and locked herself in the dance room alone.

Dum carried Dark toward the chapel as Dee went to inform the others. Then, they met up with Jack and Leeds.

Dark begged them to let him rescue Alice. Fortunately, he always knew where she was thanks to the stigma he’d marked her with. But Leeds ordered them to wait in the chapel.

“Think about why she stayed behind and let me go get her instead. Jack and I are the only ones the monster hasn’t seen yet, and I can make up an excuse for why I’m lurking around the castle at night since I’m a teacher. The earl needs to stay and wait with the rest of you.”

Leeds left the chapel after that without letting anyone else get another word in. The twins still had to restrain Dark from chasing after him, which was why he was making such a fuss now.

“Behave yourself, Dark.”

“We’re acting more like adults than you.”

“How can you stay so calm?! The woman you love is in danger!”

When he shouted at the twins, they instantly released him and sat down on the ground, cradling their knees.

“Because you said Alice is alive...”

“Because Leeds said he’d bring Alice back...”

Dum and Dee would have left Dark and Jack in the chapel and run back to that room to fight the monster if they didn’t know Alice was alive. They could only sit there and wait because their comrade said she was safe.

“Alice said something to us on the day we were taken into the Liddell family.”

“She said that family is someone you trust, rely on, and communicate openly with.”

That was why their hearts had almost split when they found out Alice lied to them.

Dum and Dee had trusted her completely.

They were hurt, separated from her, made a promise to never lie to each other again, and returned to the Liddell family once more.

Their faith in their family only grew stronger.

“We love Alice.”

“We love the rest of you almost as much.”

“That’s why we trust you.”

“That’s why we trust you.”

Dark went limp when he heard their encouragement.

They managed to swallow their fears and have faith in the others instead of jumping into harm’s way without thinking of the consequences like himself. Their hearts had grown along with their bodies. They were wonderful rivals to have.

“...I can’t treat you two like kids anymore.”

“We don’t get candy once we’re adults?”

“We have to be kids to get toys?”

Dark laughed when they slumped their shoulders. “Adults and children can all like whatever they like. If we make it out of this safely, I’ll buy you something nice, okay?”

“Yay!”

“Yay!”

The twins high-fived.

Now that he’d cooled his head, Dark stood on the border of the shining blue seal. The symbol was acting as a barrier in the chapel. He didn’t sense any demons nearby.

When he closed his eyes and searched for Alice, she was closer than he thought. She was right outside the door. Dark rushed over and opened it to see Leeds carrying Alice in his arms.

“Thanks, Earl. I was wondering how I was going to open this without waking her up.” Leeds stepped inside and laid her down on the closest pew.

Jack and the twins gathered around her.

“Is she hurt?”

“Just take a look. She’s only sleeping.”

Alice’s cheeks were rosy, and she was breathing quietly. Dust and cobwebs covered her uniform, but she didn’t look injured.

“She was hiding in the storage room at the back of that dance room. I didn’t find the monster anywhere, but the door looked like it had been clawed up by a bear.”

“If Alice hadn’t been quick on her feet enough to close that door, I might have been ripped to pieces by those claws...”

Alice had reasoned that the trap-laying demon was after Dark.

The twins shook their heads, their hair bobbing around them.

"It's not a bear, Leeds."

"It's more like a dog."

"Yuck, I hate dogs. I'm a cat person, myself."

"They're not talking about that, obviously."

The chatter of the Liddell family seemed to rouse Alice from her sleep. She let out a groan and stirred.

Dark took her hand and called out to her.

"Alice."

Her curled eyelashes fluttered until she finally opened her eyes.

"...Dark."

She smiled with Dark reflected in her crimson eyes.

Dark's heart filled with love. Her first concern upon waking was his well-being.

"Good morning, my lady. How do you feel?"

Leeds was sitting next to her head. Alice looked up at him with a cherubic expression.

The darkness had shrunk her pupils, but they expanded as soon as she laid eyes on his smirk.

When Dark saw it up close, it struck him as strange.

Her eyes are dark?

But by the time she sat up, Alice's eyes were the exact color of rubies again.

"Good morning, *Leeds*. We're in the chapel, aren't we? How did I get here?"

Leeds smiled and gently stroked her head. "You played tag with a monster, my lady. Then you hid in a storage room and fell asleep, so I found you and brought you back."

"I remember hiding, but that's all. I guess I really did fall asleep..."

Dark cupped his hand around Alice's cheek and felt a chill. Her hiding spot must have been cold. "I'm sorry I left you there, Alice."

“It’s okay. I’m just glad everyone’s all right.”

Her tender smile was a breath of fresh air. Everyone sighed with relief.

Not one of them noticed the monster peering down at them from the skylight.

Chapter 7: Poison Apples for the Outsiders

“TAKE care of the table and the bookshelves today.”

At Charles’ orders, I wiped down the table with a wet cloth.

Unlike my upperclassman’s room, the prefects’ rooms consisted of a bedroom and two parlors each. They needed a quieter atmosphere to handle visits from housemasters or sit down and give advice to their students.

Dorm brothers were in charge of cleaning these rooms. The twins complained that I shouldn’t be doing something like that, but a little cleaning wasn’t more than I could handle. Besides, Charles only asked me to do simple tasks like dusting the bookshelves and wiping down furniture.

The other dorm brothers have it rough since they get worked to the bone. At least Charles does most of his own cleaning.

I wished the twins would learn from him.

Dum and Dee had always left their toys on the floor, pretended to be witches whenever someone handed them brooms, and left their clothes unfolded after being cleaned.

But they’d undergone slight changes since coming to Ark School.

Their room was rarely messy when I visited them (though they were usually sprawled out in bed and eating candy). They’d also started rounding up their own laundry for the cleaners.

It was a loose definition of “cleaning,” but felt acceptable for boys like them. It seemed like sending them to boarding school was the right choice, after all—ignoring the demon and their traps, of course.

Lost in thought, I got my skirt caught on the splintered table.

Charles saw this and bent down to free me.

“I feel like a father when I watch you, Miss Alice. I thought Robins would be

the only person at this school to make me feel that way.”

“You two are close, aren’t you? How long have you been friends?”

“Since we first enrolled in school. I used to get beat up by upperclassmen back then.”

“What?!”

I could hardly believe the shocking past Charles revealed to me next.



WHEN Charles first came to this school, it was an unwritten rule that the younger kids who didn’t become dorm brothers were allowed to be treated like slaves.

Charles wasn’t a dorm brother that year. The upperclassmen would call him over to them and beat him up for the made-up reason that his oversized tailcoat “pissed them off.” They were the sons of noblemen, so even the prefects pretended not to know about it. Teachers told him that students were always getting into fights with each other. They didn’t take him seriously.

The violence only worsened with each passing day. He cried out for help but was told it was his fault for being weak. Charles grew into a student who neither smiled nor cried over time. He shoved his bruised body into his uniform and focused only on his survival.

One day, Charles was punched so hard that he fell onto his back on the grassy plaza. He opened his eyes when he felt something cool against his cheek. Overhead, dark clouds were starting to roll in.

That was when he remembered the prefect telling him a storm would come later that day. Thunderstorms were common so close to the sea. It was dangerous to be outside the dormitory once he started to hear the roar of thunder.

He figured that was why the plaza was so empty.

But Charles still didn’t move.

He’d been abandoned by his teachers, the other students, and his own family. Everyone would be happier without him around.

Charles stood up, enduring the pain of his aching body, and pleaded up at the sky. *“Strike me. Just end it all, already!”*

The sky rumbled. The next moment, a spear of light brighter than anything he’d ever seen shot down. The lightning bolt splintered down from the sky toward Charles.

It would be the end of his cruel fate.

Amid his hope and anguish, a massive wing suddenly shielded him. He’d never seen a creature like that before. It was an incredible being with the body of a lion and the head of an eagle.

He realized that it might be the monster said to live at Ark School.

The lightning struck the monster instead of Charles.

Charles lost consciousness there and then with its silhouette burned into his retinas. When he awoke, he was in a bed in Unicorn Dorm for some reason.

“Are you all right?”

It was a fellow student looking down at him with concern—a student named Robins.



“ROBINS said he found me unconscious and carried me to Unicorn Dorm in the rain. I asked him about the monster with wings, but he never saw it. No one knows what it was. I decided to look into it myself.” Charles retrieved a notebook from his bookshelf. Inside were all his findings relating to the monster. “I learned something surprising from my research. Other students had been rescued by the same creature, too.”

“So the monster saves students?”

Suddenly, I didn’t know what to believe. Monsters were supposed to attack humans.

“I was surprised, too. Some students slipped on the staircase only to be yanked up by the collar, while others saw the monster fling falling rocks from the castle away from them. Everyone described it as a beast that was half lion on the bottom, half eagle on the top. I took my memory and the testimony I got

from everyone, compared it to books, and arrived at the demon known as 'Gryphon.'"

He flipped to a new page, revealing a drawing of the exact monster I'd seen. The only difference was that one of its wings wasn't injured.

"Is this monster the demon?" I asked.

"That's what they say. Gryphon was the one the island's original owner formed a contract with to build the castle in a single night. It must have been living here on the island even after the lord of the castle died."

The legend of the monster and the demon lurking on the island had merged into one. I wondered how Gryphon felt all this time, lurking in the castle after the lord it was in a contract with passed away. If it was lonely, perhaps the castle's transformation into a boarding school, bringing so many boys to the once empty land, made it happy.

That would be why it secretly rescued the students in peril.

Then why did it attack us?

We were students of Ark School, too. But Gryphon still attacked us that night. If we provoked it by harming the teachers, then the demon must have had some sort of deep relation to the immortals.

Was it friend or foe?

I didn't know enough to reach that answer just yet.

"Do you think Gryphon is a good demon, Charles?"

"I think so if such a thing exists. I've been studying demons to find Gryphon before I graduate and thank it. That's just my own project, though, and I haven't found any leads yet."

"Maybe you could lure it out if you knew what it liked to eat," I suggested.

I wondered if luring it out with meat still on the bone would work. We could even place it on the magic circle we learned about in demon studies.

"They say it likes to have fun. Lots of people see it every year on Halloween."

Halloween was a holiday based on the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain. It

was a ceremony to celebrate the autumn harvest and banish evil spirits, but it had mostly become obsolete thanks to a different holiday being established at the start of November in Great Britain.

“It’s still celebrated on this island. The students make their own costumes to protect themselves from spirits. There’s even a snap apple contest between dorms.” Charles invited me to participate, calling it a rare opportunity. “I was thinking of asking the Tweedles to compete for Lion Dorm. Would you join them, Miss Alice?”

“But I’m not as fast on my feet as men...”

“It’s fine if you don’t win. You just need to get everyone fired up. Gryphon might appear if it hears a lot of cheering.”

It would be worth it if we lured out Gryphon. It was the complete opposite strategy of a sneak attack in the middle of the night. However, this sort of plan gave us a shot at victory, too.

I don’t know if Gryphon is the trap-laying demon yet, but I can’t let this opportunity go to waste.

“I’d be glad to participate in that case. I’ll talk to Dum and Dee, too.”

“Please do. Have whatever costume you want ready for next week’s party.”

After that, I visited the twins’ room and asked them if they wanted to join the snap apple contest. I explained that the monster who chased us was a demon called Gryphon, that it rescued students of Ark School, and was said to appear for fun events.

“Charles said the dorms compete against each other on Halloween night and wants the three of us to represent Lion Dorm. If the competition gets the crowd going, we might be able to catch Gryphon, get it to tell us if it’s the demon who laid the traps, and make it undo the spell.”

The twins, lying on their bed, stopped eating candy to ask me questions.

“How many apples?”

“Probably one for each person.”

“What shape are they?”

“Probably exactly like how they grow on trees.”

They looked at each other, engaged in a quick emergency conference, and then told me they’d participate if they could make an apple pie afterward. The apples would taste better to them when baked with sugar.

“So it’s decided. I wonder who will compete for Unicorn Dorm.”

The twins perked their heads up.

“What about Jack and Dark?”

“What about Jack and Dark?”

“I doubt it. Robins will decide who competes for their dorm, and lots of his students seem better at sports than those two.”

Dum and Dee got down from the bed and opened a nearby trunk. They rummaged through it, removing a massive heap of colorfully wrapped chocolates.

“Where did all those sweets come from?” I asked.

“From students being bullied by upperclassmen.”

“We fought off the bullies and got these as rewards.”

Candy wrappers were always on the floor whenever I came into their room. I’d assumed the sweets had been stashed away in one of the trunks from home, but it seemed they were from rescuing their fellow students.

They handed me as much candy as their hands could carry.

“Give these to Robins.”

“Tell him to let Jack and Dark play.”

“You want to bribe him?” I asked.

They nodded, actually looking serious about it...!

“You really want to compete against them, don’t you? Very well. I don’t mind resorting to wickedness for the two of you!”

I stuffed the candy in my pouch and headed to Unicorn Dorm.

Robins was walking across the plaza with a folded cloth and pieces of lumber.

He had a metal toolbox hanging from his arm. It looked like too much for him to carry on his own.

“Let me help you, Robins,” I offered.

“Thanks! Headmaster asked me to help with some repairs.”

He handed me the toolbox and told me to come with him to the fourth floor once we were inside the castle. I tensed myself when I realized we were headed to the same floor where we encountered Gryphon.

“What’s that scary look for?” he asked.

“I was just wondering what we were going to repair...”

“It’s the door to the dance room. Headmaster said he’s too sick to get out of bed right now. I wonder if there’s going to be another death.” Robins’ words echoed off the walls of the staircase.

“Do a lot of people here pass away?” I asked.

“The people who work here are all elderly, after all. The young people all want to leave an island like this, and it’s not like anyone comes back after they’ve graduated. The population can’t really do anything other than decline.”

“I suppose there’s no work here that isn’t part of the school.”

It was only natural that the students would never return to a place closed off from the rest of the world, with nothing amusing around.

Perhaps that’s why the teachers have been made immortal.

I still wasn’t sure if our trap-laying demon was Gryphon or something else altogether. It was possible that the headmaster himself was the demon controlling Gryphon, but it didn’t make sense that they would ignore me now that they’d seen my face.

The toolbox was surprisingly heavy. I felt my arms being weighed down with each floor we reached. It seemed like Robins should be struggling with all that lumber, but he hadn’t broken a sweat.

Of course, Dum and Dee had shown me that boys seemed to have unlimited stamina, but still...

He must have superhuman strength.

Once we reached the fourth floor, I followed Robins down the hall and into the dance room. The door, still wide open, had holes clawed right through it.

“These are...”

The claw marks had come from Gryphon. That door could have been me that night if I never found a place to hide.

As I shivered, Robins set the lumber down on the ground.

“We won’t be able to get it back to normal. We’ll have to cover the broken parts with cloth and nail wood around them. There’s a stepladder over there.” He brought it over, hopped up, and began to cover the claw marks with fabric. “Lion claws sure do leave big marks. I’ll have to warn Charles about this, so he stops trying to find Gryphon.”

Robins seemed to know that Gryphon had saved Charles, and Charles was trying to find and thank him.

“...Speaking of lions, the Tweedles and I are going to be Lion Dorm’s representatives in the snap apple contest,” I said. “If you haven’t picked competitors from your dorm yet, would you mind picking Jack and Dark as candidates?”

“Sure, I’ll ask them.”

He smiled.

It seemed I wouldn’t need to utilize my pouch full of chocolates.

I stayed with Robins until the repairs were finished and reported all this to Dum and Dee when I returned to the dorm.

The boys were extremely pleased. They instantly wanted to start strategizing. The competition was a week away. We also needed to work on our costumes before the Halloween party.

I sighed, the difficulties of student life weighing heavily on me.



THE snap apple competitors had been finalized.

Dum, Dee, and I were representing Lion Dorm. Jack, Dark, and another fast student were competing for Unicorn Dorm. Dark hesitated to participate until the end but folded when the twins invited him directly.

Finally, Halloween was upon us.

The students left their dorms dressed in their costumes. They headed to the dining hall for treats, enjoyed cricket on the field, and went to spectate the snap apple contest.

“Everyone’s so excited.”

Standing on the grassy plaza, I wore a red cape and had my hair in braids that night.

I’d had one of the dresses I brought modified for tonight. Then, I put on my cape to complete my Little Red Riding Hood costume.

At my side was Jack, dressed as a werewolf. His large wolf ears and tail hardly looked made of yarn. Jack wore one of his usual shirts, a brown vest, and gloves that had felt glued to them to look like claws.

“I was wondering what a snap apple contest was. We’re really supposed to bite those things with our teeth?” He was looking at the handmade wooden stand with apples suspended from strings. They were at different lengths to accommodate the heights of the players. The apples were slightly yellow, as if underripe.

“Huh? These bastards are staring at you again, my lady!” Jack gave a wolf-like scowl to scare off the other students.

A tent was set up for us to wait in. Leeds emerged when we approached. He was dressed as a mummy with bandages wrapped loosely around his head and neck. But he was still wearing his white coat, too, so the costume was a bit mismatched.

“Did you two get a look at the playing field?”

“We did. I’ve been practicing in my imagination, too.”

Charles explained a surefire way to win was to make sure our first bite was nice and firm. The apple would sway unless you got a good grip on it, so it was

hard to get your teeth around it again.

“It’s Little Red Riding Hood.”

“It’s a werewolf.”

The twins emerged from the tent dressed in Chinese-style outfits.

They were dressed as *jiangshi*. They’d made dark circles under their eyes with makeup and had long, dragging sleeves that caught the eye. They wore bowl-shaped Chinese hats on their heads, and best of all, the loincloths around their waists had their weapons fastened to them like costume props.

“Dum, Dee, you’re so adorable...!” I couldn’t help but fangirl. Leeds applauded them, too.

“Handsome men are just on a different level. It’s hard to believe these costumes were made with tapestries and cushion covers from the dorms.”

“Damn right. I worked hard on those.” Jack scratched his chin proudly. He’d been the one to tailor most of our costumes.

The Liddell family butler had to be skilled with his hands, of course.

Looking pleased, the twins came and clung to me.

“You look cute too, Alice.”

“You look cute too, Alice.”

“Thanks, you two. Dum, your cord is about to come undone. Let me tie it for you.”

The twins stared closely at my hands as I tied the knot. I couldn’t help but chuckle at their intense gaze.

“You always like to watch my fingers, don’t you?”

Their bodies had changed, but their persistent habits remained ingrained in them. The proof of the lives they lived until now would never disappear. While I smiled, the twins pouted at my attitude.

“Don’t treat us like kids.”

“We’ll show you who’s boss.”

“Kyah!”

They tickled me, and I burst into laughter. A voice from behind called out to them, unable to sit back and watch anymore.

“My dear twins, could I ask you to stop teasing Alice?” Dark, dressed in his costume, appeared with the sound of his bell-like voice. He was using my clothes to dress up as a vampire.

Dark wore my black Spencer jacket, a white frilly blouse, and an eye-catching red scarf tie. His trousers were tucked into a pair of long boots for optimal mobility. He’d cinched the adult-sized jacket in the back to turn it into the perfect fit. Although the sleeves were still too long, he had to tie bands around his upper arms to create makeshift mutton sleeves.

But the costume was perfected by the pair of horns sticking out of Dark’s head. The milky-white horns, like bones, were intimidating in a way that a fake pair could never compare to.

“Are you sure you’re fine to be out here like that, Dark?” I asked. “It’s not too much for you?”

No one suspected a true demon to be blending in with the crowd of costumed students. Still, it took a lot of courage to reveal his real horns in front of everyone like that.

Dark’s impossibly large sapphire eyes sparkled at me.

“There’s no need to worry. Gryphon should find a way to interact with me if I expose my horns like this. If it always swoops in to save students in peril, that must mean it has the school under surveillance. I’m willing to call it out and even hurt it if I have to. After all...” Dark smiled provocatively at the twins. “I have to go all out if I want to keep you to myself.”

His bold declaration startled me. Dum and Dee pulled me closer.

“We won’t lose to you!”

“We won’t lose to you!”

Sparks were flying between the three of them.

After that, we left Leeds and headed to the starting line.

Robins was standing next to the white line. He hadn't had time to prepare a costume, so he was wearing a white sheet over his body, making the other students laugh with his cries of "I can't see!"

He finally received a pair of scissors and began to cut holes in the sheet.

"Whoa! I cut too much out!"

Everyone burst into laughter at the ridiculously large mouth of the ghost.

"Oh well, that'll have to do the trick. I know it's sudden, but I'm gonna be subbing in for a Unicorn Dorm student who twisted his ankle. Let's have a good match, everyone!"

Robins stuck his head out of the hole in the sheet and explained the rules to us.

"The six of us will stand in a line and start at the signal. You have to get to the apple in your lane, hold it in your mouth, then run through the golden tape at the end of the lane with it. Whoever gets there first is the winner. Be careful. You'll be disqualified if you touch the apple with your hands or drop it."

The finish line was a hundred feet away. It would take speed and jaw strength to get there with the apple in your mouth.

From right to left, the lanes went in order of Dum, Robins, Dee, Dark, me, and then Jack. Dark and Jack's apples were hanging down lower than the rest.

Mine was higher. I would probably need to jump to reach it. But we had the tall Dum and Dee on our team, so I was glad we still had a chance to win even if I struggled.

"All right, we're about to begin."

Charles looked up at the darkened sky and gave the order.

Students crowded around the field to cheer on their dorms.

I calmed my heart and prayed that their cheers would reach Gryphon.

Then, I put one foot forward and waited for the signal.

Charles, our referee, raised his arm.

"On your marks, get set..."

The air was full of tension until Charles finally swung his hand down. As soon as he gave the signal, I was pulled backward.

“Huh?!” I whirled around. Jack was grabbing hold of my skirt.



“Sorry, my lady. This is Unicorn Dorm’s strategy. It’s not against the rules to get in the other team’s way.”

“It’s not?!”

That was the first I heard about such a rule. I looked ahead and saw Dark blocking Dee’s path. Only Dum and Robins were running at full speed. It seemed like Dum’s longer legs would give him the advantage in speed, but Robins pulled ahead, his white sheet fluttering in the breeze.

So fast!

He was quick and nimble from all the cricket he played, reaching the stand faster than any of us. He hopped up, bit into the apple, then landed firmly on two feet.

Unicorn Dorm is going to win!

The crowd cheered, but Robins didn’t move. Instead, he spit the apple out on the ground and jumped at Dum before he could bite into his own apple.

Dum looked at Robins, irritated by the unexpected tackle.

“What is it?”

“Don’t bite into them. These are poison apples!”

“What are you talking about?”

Jack led me by the hand toward Robins. The prefect was pleading with us desperately.

“They look like apples, but these are fruits from something called manchineel trees. They contain a terrible poison that burns your mouth and makes it too painful to drink water. Some even die from it. Although, they’re supposed to be green...”

“It looks like they’re painted red.” Dark crouched down and studied the fruit that had fallen.

Robins’ bite had torn away the outer layer, revealing green skin underneath.

“Who would do such a thing...?”

Leeds and Charles rushed over to us.

“What’s wrong?!”

“These are manchineel fruits, Charles. Who prepared these?” Robins asked.

“Headmaster prepares the apples for the competition. He harvests them from the land around Ark School every year.”

“Did he take them from manchineel trees by mistake, thinking they were apples?” I asked.

Charles answered my question with a grim look on his face. “Those trees don’t grow in cold places. Someone had to have shipped them in from outside the island, and the Headmaster manages all the cargo shipments...”

“So the headmaster tried to kill us.”

There could be only one reason for that. He knew that we’d tried to free the immortals from their spell.

Charles stood up and addressed the noisy crowd. “It looks like the apples are too bitter to bite into. We’ll have to call this year’s match a draw.”

The audience started to boo.

“You can all leave. We’ll clean this up tomorrow. This year, both dorms will get to eat the victory sweets.”

The students started excitedly heading for the dining hall when they heard they would all be treated to the reward.

Charles turned away from them and let his expression become serious again. “...I’m going to take Robins to Unicorn Dorm and make sure he rests. The rest of you should go back to Lion Dorm and make sure you’re never alone, even for a minute. Can you look after them, Nurse Leeds?”

“Of course. You be careful too now, okay?” Leeds said.

Charles nodded and left with Robins.

Robins was able to walk and speak without any difficulty. It was hard to believe he’d just bitten into something containing a deadly poison.

Was the apple really poisoned? I reached out for the fruit on the ground, but

Dark grabbed it before I could.

“You shouldn’t touch this thing.” Dark’s fingertips instantly turned red when they touched the fruit’s juices.

“How are you just holding it like that?!” Jack smacked it out of his hand. But the poison had already formed blisters on his skin.

Dark spread his fingers out. He looked like he didn’t feel any pain at all.

“My magic is keeping the poison in check, but it’s still causing this much damage. A human shouldn’t be unaffected by biting into a poison this strong.”

“So a *human* would definitely be harmed by it?”

The puzzle pieces of information I’d gathered were starting to fit together in my mind.

The trap-laying demon had manipulated the growth of Dark and the others.

Legends said that a monster lived on this island.

The headmaster and teachers shouldn’t still be alive.

A being called Gryphon protected the students from misfortune.

Then there was the prefect unaffected by poison.

“I understand now...”

The more difficult the riddle, the more of an anticlimactic conclusion the solution was. I’d only struggled to find the true identity of Ark School’s demon because of the contradicting concepts of “good” and “evil” overlapping each other.

I should have known from the start that, just like humans, the culprit might fall somewhere between them.

“Let’s go see Gryphon now before we send our evildoer into the flames of Hell.”

I glared up at the top floor of the castle. It was going to feel so delightful to banish this good-for-nothing demon to Hell.



ROBINS was heading for the grassy plaza late at night, long after the torches had been extinguished.

The students were dreaming in their beds now after a night of Halloween festivities. He knew he wouldn't be spotted unless he made loud noises, but it was better safe than sorry.

Robins pulled his black robe around his body to disguise himself in the darkness.

Once he arrived at the snap apple stand, he saw the other five fruits were still hanging where he'd left them. Robins sighed in relief that none of the other students had touched them. He would have to find a safe way to dispose of them before morning.

Manchineel poison would dissolve into rainwater and even spread through the smoke if he burned the fruits. He could either throw them in the ocean or feed them to someone who could survive the poison.

Robins stood beneath the fruit, took one into his hands, and just as he was about to bite into it...

"Don't you know it's poor manners to eat while standing?"

His heart skipped a beat when he heard the female voice behind him.

Only boys were permitted to enter Ark School. On an island full of nothing but elderly school staff, there could be only one person behind that young, lovely soprano voice that bloomed in the air like a rose.

Robins let go of the fruit and slowly turned toward her.

The girl observing him from the bench with the wavy red hair that fluttered in the night wind was Alice Liddell.

I held the bitten manchineel fruit in my gloved hands. I probably looked repulsive and creepy to him. But Robins smiled innocently at me, just as he did during the day.

"I wasn't going to eat it. I was just smelling it to see if it was a real apple or not. Anyway, it's lights out. You should head back to Lion Dorm before Charles scolds you," he said.

“There’s no need to worry. I’d be the biggest fool in the history of Ark School to let go of my target as soon as I found him.”

“Target? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t play dumb. You’re a demon, aren’t you?”

Robins’ body went stiff. Even in the darkness, I could see how pale he looked and the beads of sweat forming on his temples.

“...I’m no demon. Take a good look. Don’t you see? I’m obviously a human!”

“So you won’t admit it? Very well.”

I stood up and curtsied, pulling on the uniform I was wearing. My skirt had enough fabric to pull it out very far to my left and right.

“I won’t call this ‘an eye for an eye,’ but poor hospitality deserves fitting retaliation, as I see it.”

Suddenly, a black mass shot out from behind the left side of my skirt.

With his curly blonde hair swaying, Dum, who was supposed to be asleep in Lion Dorm, attacked Robins with his two daggers.

Robins blocked the attack with his bare hands. The blade sliced into his palm, sending blood dripping down his wrist.

“Ngh!”

He grimaced and was met with another blow to his body. When he looked down, an arrow was sticking out of the right side of his chest.

“Where...did this...?”

He looked and saw Dee behind the right side of my skirt, kneeling and pointing his crossbow at the prefect. Dee swiftly readied another arrow, squeezed one eye shut, and fired at him over and over again.

The arrows struck Robins in the right upper arm, left shin, right thigh, and left hand. He stumbled backward with each impact.

“S-Stop!”

“Why did you trick us?”

“Why did you trick us?”

Dum, with the free hand Robins hadn't blocked, shoved his blade through Robins' neck.

“Aaaaaaah!”

Robins' body started to transform into a shadow. It swelled up like bread in an oven, sending the arrows stuck in him falling to the ground. His blood evaporated and disappeared.

His body twisted and wrenched until, finally, his lower half was that of a strong lion. Feathers sprouted on his top half, a large beak formed, and wings seemed to split his back as they forced their way out.

I couldn't stop the corners of my mouth from curving up.

“I've finally caught you, Gryphon the demon.”

I was looking at the monster that attacked us that night.

His injured wing was probably the result of the lightning bolt he protected Charles from. I hadn't noticed before, but the collar around his neck looked just like the choker Robins wore.

Now that his transformation was complete, Robins spoke from his beak in a deeper voice than before.

“I'm surprised you figured it out.”

“Swallowing a manchineel fruit gave it away.”

I'd searched all over the sports grounds while the students were sleeping just to be sure, but I never found the piece of the apple Robins bit off.

“You should have been on the verge of death like Snow White if you swallowed any of that fruit. But you were perfectly healthy, enough to walk back to the dorm. That was when I knew you couldn't be human. You were the legendary monster that's said to live on this island.”

Charles' research into the monster led me to the demon known as Gryphon.

Robins slumped to the ground. His curved beak hit the dirt.

“I didn't even think to spit it out... I was just focused on protecting you all since

I knew it would be really bad if you ate any of the fruit."

"Thank you for saving us. I hear you've been saving students in that form for a while now. Allow us to introduce ourselves now, with our understanding that not all demons are evil."

I looked at the twins standing at each of my sides.

"I'm Dum, Alice's left hand."

"I'm Dee, Alice's right hand."

"These two protect me, the head of the Liddell barony. My family works outside the law to maintain the country's order from the shadows. I came here to have Dum and Dee enrolled in school, but then they had their bodies transformed. We're at a real loss for what to do. Are you the one who cast that spell on the food in the rest area?"

"...I'm sorry. I had to do that to protect everyone." Robins folded his wings and pointed his beak at me.

I couldn't read his expression but could tell he was upset.

"I was given an order to kill the next candidate for school executive who came here. I saw you sailing in on the boat from the harbor, but you're all so young, I didn't know which of you was the noble. He was going to do it himself if you showed up at the school without me doing anything to you, so all I could do was force a situation where you kept your identities hidden. He would have killed you otherwise."

Robins said he raced back to the island and prepared food with the spell that would change our ages.

So that giant bird I saw on the ship was Robins.

Both the drinks and the cakes would activate the spell when consumed.

Adults would be transformed into the age that they could disguise themselves as Ark School students, while children were changed into an age that they could protect themselves. It seemed there was real thought put into the exact ages Dark, Jack, Dum, and Dee ended up as.

"Was Headmaster Caterpillar the one who gave the order to kill the

nobleman?" I asked.

"Yes. I can never defy his orders. It's in our contract."

He'd entered into the contract with the original lord of the castle, worked for his sake, and stayed in the castle even after the lord's death. His descendants, who inherited the contract, treated Gryphon as an important guardian.

Gryphon loved humans, and all residents of the island adored him. He could fly freely through the sky on the island full of nature. Robins said it was like discovering Heaven for the first time.

But then famine and a plague came to the island, wiping out the lord's family and many islanders.

The man who inherited the castle was a distant relative—a pauper Robins had never even heard mentioned by the family before. He didn't so much as set foot on the island, instead selling it to a man named Caterpillar when he heard the rumors of a monster dwelling there.

Caterpillar arrived at the castle with his subordinates. When he saw Gryphon in such pain over the death of the humans, he offered to enter into a continued contract with him.

Robins' golden eyes wavered at the memory of it all.

"My luck had run out by the time I agreed to that offer. He turned out to be a demon researcher and made me tell him everything I knew about demons and Hell. The textbooks and models we use in demon studies classes all came from the information I gave him. They made a school to continue their research, beat students with whips like they were disposable, and kept aging with each passing year."

Caterpillar finally began to fear death when he ended up sick and bedridden. So, he used the contract to give Gryphon an order: *"Stop our bodies from aging and make us live forever."*

Death spared no living being.

That was just a law of nature. I bit my lip, thinking how foolish humans were to want more still.

"I knew it was bad, but I couldn't defy an order from my master. I stopped time for the teachers and their bodies, granted them my life force to make them healthy, and started to help them get by however I could. I'd already told them everything I knew about demons by then."

Gryphon transformed into a human and pretended to be a student or island native. He didn't remember who first used the name "Robins," but it became known as his name when he was in human form.

Robins' self-sacrifice was what allowed the immortals to maintain their life.

"Are contracts really so binding to demons?" I asked.

"They usually end when the human party dies, but my contract with the castle's lord was arranged to be inherited by his heirs. I'm like a slave until the contract itself goes away."

Robins' voice came out sounding grief-stricken. His island had turned from Heaven to Hell since he entered the contract with such a villain.

"Then it sounds like we just need to terminate the contract."

Dark stepped out of the tent, clutching his cane and holding up his large top hat decorated with deer antlers. Leeds, with his chain wrapped around his waist over a sweater, and Jack, with his saber in hand, stood beside him.

"Let us introduce ourselves, too. It's nice to meet you properly, Gryphon. My name is Earl Dark Arland Knightley."

Dark fired light out of his cane and drew a crescent moon and star seal in the air.

When Robins saw the light blue seal in front of him, his beak fell open in shock.

"The star and moon crest is supposed to belong to a very high-ranking demon... So you're Lord Knightley, Dark? And a demon, too?"

"Correct. I'd probably be dead right now if it weren't for your spell. I'm going to help you get out of your contract with Headmaster Caterpillar, as is everyone else here."

"I'm glad to have you on my side. But these others are just humans. It's too

dangerous to fight him.”

Robins shook his head. That got Dum and Dee to argue back.

“We’re not just humans.”

“We’re not just humans.”

“Don’t look down on the Liddells, damn it,” Jack huffed.

“Despite our looks, we can get the job done when we need to,” Leeds added.

Dum and Dee’s black moles began to run down their cheeks and form the rose seal. Jack raised his hand, and Leeds stuck his tongue out to show Robins the same one.

“You’re all stigmata?”

I understood his surprise. It was probably unusual, even for a demon, to be around so many humans brought back from the dead.

“Yes, we’ve all been branded with a stigma. We can definitely handle a few immortals with these powers.”

Gryphon possessed incredible physical strength, but Dark’s destructive forces were the real deal, too. If it was necessary to carry out our mission, he should be able to fight off the headmaster without any trouble.

But Robins shuddered—not from the cold night wind this time.

“It’s not the immortals you should be scared of. It’s me! If Headmaster ordered me to kill you, I’d...”

“You should be able to resist that order. Didn’t you defy him when he told you to kill the noble who might become the next executive here?”

Robins’ eyes went wide when I said that.

“I’ve been so desperate, I never even thought of that. How did I manage that?”

Dark replied to that after adjusting his hat. “This is just my theory, but I think the effects of the contract might have gotten weaker over time. It was originally supposed to be passed down through the family of the lord who built the castle, but once it reached distant relatives and a stranger like Caterpillar, the contract

itself lost its consistency.”

“Does that mean I might be freed?”

A faint but definite hope lit up Robins’ eyes.

I placed my hand on his beak and made a vow to him.

“Gryphon the demon, we’re going to fight alongside you.”

“I understand. I’ll be there to protect you.”

He bowed his head deeply and accepted my offer. I’d been successful in joining hands with a demon.



THE students filed into the dining hall after getting dressed in the morning.

Charles had slipped away from the rest of them and was walking along the school hallway with a dreary expression. The headmaster had prepared the apples for the game of snap apple, only for them to be manchineel fruits instead. He never should have sent away for something so dangerous in the first place.

The headmaster had made the arrangement to kill his students.

From his merciless use of the whip to the way he rarely spoke to students outside of class, Charles had known for a while that the headmaster thought little of the student body.

As a prefect, he would have to confront that man if he tried to hurt his students.

He didn’t try saying anything to Robins because his friend was already in a state of shock. He’d been muttering incoherently about having to get rid of the fruit immediately when Charles walked him back to Unicorn Dorm.

The plaza had been cleaned by the time Charles got there early the next morning. Robins had definitely done it on his own.

Robins was small but had no lack of bravery. He was Charles’ kind-hearted partner who agreed to shoulder the burden of corporal punishment alongside him.

Robins had already protected the students. That was why it was Charles' turn now.

"I'd like to speak to you, Headmaster."

He knocked on the fourth-floor office and entered the room.

The teachers were all gathered in the room, hazy from the smoke of the hookah pipe. At the desk in the back of the room, the headmaster raised a bushy eyebrow and asked what he wanted.

"It's about last night's snap apple competition. The fruits were the poisonous manchineel fruit, not apples. Robins stopped it before anyone could be hurt, but things could have easily taken a turn for the worse. Why did you prepare something like that for our game?"

Then teachers started to let out mutters of "Why didn't they die?" and "We were so close."

What's going on?

The headmaster took his lips away from the pipe to answer the confused prefect. "Phew... Why, you ask? That's a strange question. Weren't you the one who told me that female student and her followers would participate in the match?"

"What...? Did you really mean to kill them with those fruits?"

The headmaster rose out of his seat slowly and walked around the desk, his robe dragging behind him. "I didn't expect everyone to make it out alive. Robins must be going through a rebellious phase to defy the owner of his contract like that..."

When he suddenly heard his friend's name mentioned, Charles erupted angrily. "What contract?! What are you people doing to Robins?!"

"What's with that tone, hm?"

The headmaster cracked his whip, its tip striking Charles in the shoulder and bringing him to his knees. It came down on him again and again. He curled up to resist, but each strike felt like it would split his skin open.

Robins, what do these people have on you?

The image that came into his mind as he gritted his teeth was Robins' innocent smile. He was always in a bright mood and encouraging the other students. That was when Charles realized something. He'd never seen Robins expressing pain before.

"You won't be able to endure this."

Crack! His head was struck with the whip, and he finally collapsed.

Charles' hot blood spilled out onto the floor and made his body wet.

Those demons were discussing something that he could barely make out as he drifted out of consciousness.

"We should discipline the extra students who came here this year, no?"

"The other students need a way to blow off steam from time to time."

"Public executions used to be put on for amusement in the Middle Ages, after all."

I'm sorry, Robins... Charles silently asked for forgiveness. *If I'm killed, be sure you make it out of here without me.*

Chapter 8: Alice, the Immortals, and the Monster

THE night we pledged to fight alongside Robins, we changed into our uniforms and slept in the castle infirmary instead of our dorm rooms. It was risky to stay in one place now that we knew the headmaster was out for our lives.

Robins stayed in the form of Gryphon just to be safe. He curled his body up as if he was cradling us against him. His wings were smoother than they looked and so warm when wrapped around us like a blanket.

I leaned my body into his soft feathers and instantly felt ready to fall asleep.

I wonder if Dark's mother wouldn't have gone through so much despair if she knew there were kind demons like Robins in the world...

It was a difficult question.

Dark's mother wanted a child with the husband she loved, but the being in her stomach turned out to be a demon with no blood relation to either of them. Giving birth to Dark only solidified her status as a new mother.

Those feelings of love must have tortured her when she had no outlet for them. She wanted to love him, but she couldn't.

"God, how do I send that boy...send Dark..."

"How do I send him back to Hell?"



WHEN I opened my eyes, Leeds and Dark were by the window. Robins' fur was standing on end. Dum, Dee, and Jack rubbed their eyes—they'd just woken up too.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

Dark turned back toward me with a grim expression. "Headmaster Caterpillar and the teachers are out on the plaza. They're making everyone gather around

the Lion Dorm prefect.”

I went over to the window, looked down, and saw Charles tied up in the plaza center. Students surrounded him.

The headmaster ordered everyone to pick up rocks. “This prefect abuses his position to seem more powerful,” he said. “You aren’t happy about that, are you? Today, let’s chastise him by throwing stones instead of using my whip!”

“How did this happen...?” I asked.

Charles never abused his power or acted cocky just because he was a prefect. He was a kind-hearted person willing to take corporal punishment if it meant protecting the other boys at school.

The students were conflicted, as they felt like they owed Charles for everything he’d done for them. None of them picked up rocks—some of the braver boys even tried to convince the headmaster that this must be a mistake.

But the old man had words for the student body.

“If you don’t throw your stones, I’ll strike you with my whip.”

That finally got their expressions to change. Some started to pick up stones, not wanting to be hurt over this.

Leeds looked at the headmaster in total shock at the man’s true character. “Only an adult who’s rotten to the core would think to make children dirty their hands to avoid punishment. Although, it’s a great method to instigate the boys, who haven’t fully developed their morals yet.”

“This is no time to sit around and chat. We have to go save Charles!” I shouted.

“*Wait.*” Robins spread his wings and stopped me from heading toward the staircase. “*I’ll take you. Get on my back.*”

“But the others will see you like this.”

“*That’s all right. It’ll be a whole lot worse if I can’t save my friend.*”

Robins was prepared for such an outcome, so there was nothing else to be said. I accepted his offer and hopped onto his back.

“Let’s go!”

Robins kicked off the ground with his lion’s feet. He rammed his body against the wall near the window and broke through it instantly.

Clinging to his feathers, I felt my stomach rise into my chest. But the fall never came. Robins spread his wings and caught the fierce sea breeze.

I sat up and stared at the distant sun and the glittering surface of the ocean.

I’m flying!



The students snapped their heads up to look at us. They cried out at the sight of the half-lion, half-eagle monster—and at me riding him.

The headmaster, teachers, and Charles were at a loss for words.

“Hold on tight!”

Robins swung his wings down and backward to push through the waves in the air. All he had to do was incline his head to send us instantly soaring upside down and straight to the ground at tremendous speeds.

“...!” I desperately clung to him and swallowed my scream before it could escape.

Robins spun us around before finally righting his body just before we hit the ground. We touched down behind Charles.

He flapped his wings and sent the students flying backward with that gust. Amidst the chaos, Charles looked at Robins like he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. But his face was full of strong emotions at the same time.

“Gryphon the demon...and Miss Alice?”

“We came to save you! My friends are here too!” I said.

The other five were jumping down from the building at that moment.

Dum and Dee had their weapons out like they were ready for war. Jack unsheathed his saber while Leeds landed with Dark—who was clutching his hat—on his knee like a cushion.

The teachers couldn’t believe they could jump from such a height without being injured.

I hopped down from Robins’ back, stood in front of our group, and came face to face with Headmaster Caterpillar.

“Stop this attack on Charles,” I ordered. “We’re the ones you’re really after, right?”

“Phew. What guts you have to defy me. Gryphon, tear these people to bits.”

“No...” Robins shook his head. *“I don’t want to kill anyone. Alice, Dark, Jack, the Tweedles, and Nurse Leeds are people I care about. I want to protect*

everyone just like Charles does!"

Robins' emphatic voice was trembling. I knew the demon was experiencing a similar pain and fear to that of a rebellious child opposing their father.

"That voice..." When he heard the unexpected sound of his friend's voice, Charles blinked heavily. "Are you Robins?"

Robins flinched. He turned his face away awkwardly before giving a small nod.

That only made Charles furrow his brow. "Why didn't you tell me you were the one who saved me?!"

"I didn't know how to say it to you. Besides, humans despise demons..."

But Charles denied that part. He wiggled his bound body to face Robins better. "I was searching for you this whole time. I would've died without you. You're the one who gave me a future." He stood up on unsteady legs and buried his face in Robins' chest. "Thank you for saving me, Robins."

"...Right. Of course..." Robins gritted his teeth as he took in Charles' deepest gratitude. Then he looked at the headmaster with an intensity in his eyes that wasn't there before. *"I'll never follow your orders. I'll protect Charles, the students, and Ark School itself!"*

"Don't be so careless. Deus ordo seclorum."

I gasped when I heard that spell.

It's the one we learned in demon studies!

As soon as the words were out, Robins' eye color went from golden to a deep, bottomless black. Those words exorcized demons. While they didn't work on Dark, Robins couldn't put up a fight against his contract's master.

His eyes rolled backward, and he opened his massive beak to let out a roar.

"Aaaaaaah!"

"What is it, Robins?!" Charles cried.

"Something's wrong. Get away from him!" I dragged Charles away from Robins by the hand. "Robins can't deny the headmaster since he's the one who owns his contract. We have to find that contract and free him. Dum, Dee, I'm

counting on you!”

“Got it!”

“Got it!”

The twins began to battle with Robins, who’d gone into a blind rage.

Dum went in for a direct slice of his dagger while Dee fired an arrow at his blind spot while he was distracted. They were perfect when it came to teamwork. However, Robins instantly plucked the knives and arrows out with his beak and claws.

“Are you hurt, my lady? You did well getting through all that, too, Prefect.” Jack rushed up to us and cut away Charles’ ropes with his saber.

Charles was startled by how easy it was for him. “Who are you people...? No, that’s not important right now. This ‘contract’ is the one Gryphon entered with the castle’s original builder, right? I’ve heard that man hid it inside his cape so it would never be stolen. A memo of his left in the library mentioned it.”

“But then where would the headmaster have hidden it?” I wondered.

Robins had told us he never found it, no matter how hard he searched throughout the school. There had to be a secret hiding place somewhere.

Now that I think of it, the headmaster is wearing the same robe he always does.

Headmaster Caterpillar walked around with his long robe dragging behind him. But he never had a new one made, even though this one had snagged and ripped.

If the original lord of the castle had worn it on his own body, then the headmaster was probably doing the same.

I left Charles with Leeds and called Dark over.

“I think the contract is sewn inside the headmaster’s robe,” I said. “We’ll handle him, so you take care of Robins. Can you stop him without getting hurt?”

“That’s my specialty.” He kept one hand on his hat and used the other to hold his cane out horizontally. Dark’s blue eyes peered out from under the brim.

They sparkled as if lit with fire. “Hello, Gryphon, the demon. Care to test your strength against mine?”

A light blue beam shot out from the tip of his cane. It hurdled toward Robins like a cannonball, struck his wings, and expanded into an orb. It was big enough to wrap around him and embed deeply into the ground.

The light had formed a birdcage. Robins snarled and thrashed inside of it, unable to escape.

The headmaster staggered—he never expected his Gryphon to be locked away.

“Will that do the trick?”

“That’s plenty.”

I threw my hands up toward the sky and prayed: *“May these immortals be freed from their spell.”*

The center of my chest prickled with heat. White bands shot out rapidly and branched off in every direction. Just as the teachers tried to run, some even dislocating their backs to escape, the light struck them.

Headmaster Caterpillar’s body was constricted by it too. His eyebrows went high enough to reveal his wide eyes underneath.

“What’s going on...?” he strained.

“This is my power.”

His face warped with fright when I answered honestly.

“You possess such a power...? Are you people stigmata?” he asked.

“You only just realized? Well, it’s too late to do you any good now.”

Flames of rage were burning inside me despite the cold answer I gave him. Passion was a means of fueling my power. My anger strengthened the beams of light pouring into the teachers and hit the spell that had frozen their bodies in time.

An orange clock formed under their feet—Robins’ crest. My power had been stopped short by Robins’ spell. But I was too weak to break through. I was

trying to force myself past the spell when Dark tapped his cane on the ground.

“Time for my power to come to the rescue.”

Dark’s magic traveled through the ground and ate into the clock seals. My bands of light glowed brighter and brighter until finally...the clocks shattered.

That was when the teachers’ bodies started to crumble like clay dolls.

“Gyaaaaaah!”

Their final screeches pierced our ears from every direction.

Their time had come. Once the spell was broken, nothing but death awaited them. There was no human dignity in the way they perished—as was to be expected from those who’d strayed from the course of nature.

Their skin melted, their eyes and teeth dislodged, and their bones crumbled apart. The smell of their hair burning was earthy yet sweet. When it was all over, they’d left behind nothing more than what looked like puddles of mud.

Every last teacher vanished, their lives on this earth meeting a terrible end. However, the root of the evil itself, Headmaster Caterpillar, remained unaffected by the light around him.

“Ahahaha! You can’t kill me so long as I have my contract with Gryphon!” The bands of light bounced away from him. He sneered down at us. “It’s deplorable that stigmata managed to sneak into Ark School. Bad students must be disciplined!”

He brought his whip down as hard as he could. It cut through the air toward me but was knocked away by a chain before the blow could land.

Leeds had come to my rescue.

“How dare you call my lady a bad student? Teachers these days can’t even see the good in their pupils.”

“He must be losing his sight.”

“He must be going senile.”

Dum and Dee had appeared behind the headmaster with harsh criticism. They each took a dagger and plunged them mercilessly into his feet. The sharp blades

pierced his leather shoes and came out the other sides of his feet.

“Aaaaargh!”

The headmaster desperately tried to flee, but he’d been pinned to the ground by his feet.

“This’ll be good target practice. It’s our turn now, right, my lady?”

“Do as you please.”

A shadow fell over their faces when they received my permission. Dum and Dee stared down the headmaster like that—attacking him intensely enough that it was hard to watch.

“It hurts, doesn’t it, Headmaster?”

“But Charles was in a lot more pain.”

“P-Please forgive me. *Eeeengh!*” His screeches sounded like metal scraping against metal.

“Now, do you know how these boys felt when they couldn’t resist your beatings? Students need to be treated delicately, even when you’re an old man.”

“Y-You’re...too cocky...” Blood sprayed from his mouth. The panting man looked toward Robins. “Gryphon! Kill these—”

Before he could finish the order, the headmaster’s robes went up in flames. He spun around with a gasp and found Jack grabbing his clothes. But Jack held no flint or coals. His hands were the things doing the burning.

The rose stigma branded on the back of his hands shot out more and more flames until even I started to feel the heat on my cheeks from a distance.

“You’ve made Robins suffer...!” Jack roared.

Robins had looked after Jack in Unicorn Dorm, so his feelings for the man who hurt him were close to hatred.

The headmaster had been protecting his contract with the demon, but he couldn’t keep his clothes safe now.

Jack was unleashing all his emotions to turn the robe red with his burning

flames. The fire intensified until it reached the paper sewn into the back of his robe.

“I’ll burn this thing to ash!”

The tower of flames roared and billowed until the contract and robe were no more. That was when the collar around Robins’ neck fell off.

He returned to his senses and called out gleefully as if his rage from a moment ago had merely been a dream.

“My contract is over. Thank you, everyone!”

“I guess you don’t need this anymore.” Dark unleashed him from the cage.

The headmaster spat out blood and trembled. “How could you do this?! You’re all expelled! You hear me? Expelled!”

“Very well. But before we leave, I’d like to give you something.” I smiled, reached into my heart-shaped pouch, and retrieved his black-framed obituary.

It was addressed “Dear Headmaster Caterpillar.” He ripped off the red sealing wax and found his name listed as the name of the dead.

“Why do you...have that...?”

“That’s a gift for you, for all you’ve done for us at school, Headmaster. ...Now repent!”

I pressed the obituary into his hands. A new beam of light emerged from my chest. It coiled around the headmaster and glowed brightly.

“Let me go! I’m going to live forever and e— Gyah!”

A pair of wings flapped loudly. A lion’s foot stomped down on his head.

The headmaster toppled over to the ground. Robins, having regained his sanity, stood on top of him.

“It’s all over for you.”

“This can’t be happening...”

With those final, bitter words, the headmaster crumbled to pieces. Robins took his foot away, leaving a sticky, smoldering pile of remains on the ground.

I picked up the fallen obituary and placed it with them.

“May we meet again in the flames of Hell. Although, I don’t know if you’ll be welcomed there either.”

I’d finished his judgment. Jack, Leeds, Dum, Dee, and Dark gathered around me with relieved looks. None of them appeared injured.

Next to our calm reunion, Robins and Charles confirmed the other was unharmed.

“You’ve been through so much all these years, haven’t you, Robins? I’m sorry, I never even noticed it.” Charles reached out and touched his broken feathers. He stroked them affectionately. “You’re the guardian deity of the students at this school. You might be a demon, but you’re still my friend. I’m proud of you.”

“I’m glad I met you too, Charles...”

Despite their difference in species, not a single crack had formed in their friendship.

Demon studies classes only taught the frightening sides of demons. But just like humans, demons spend their lives in this world worrying, suffering, making friends, and even falling in love.

I wish Dark’s mother had known that, too.

Someone grabbed my hand. Dark was clutching his hat and looking at Robins with teary eyes. Maybe he’d been thinking the same thing I was.

The students who’d fled the plaza slowly gathered around us again.

“Prefect, what’s that creature...?”

Charles proudly introduced Robins to them. “This is the ‘monster’ who lives at Ark School. He’s a guardian who’s been rescuing students all this time. Come here if you’d like to thank him. Everyone else, join me in thinking about what we’re going to do with this school from here out.”

At his suggestion, the students Robins had saved started to thank him. The others stared at us from a distance, now that we’d finished our battle, while others pleaded with Charles that they would have nowhere to go without Ark School.

This place was like a second home to boys who didn't belong in their own families. The survival of the school was in question now that the headmaster and teachers were all wiped out. The students might have to search for another place to live.

Charles addressed each concern earnestly and gave them constructive advice.

"The school caretakers are still alive, fortunately, and we have the money to get by. Let's try to find a nobleman who will become the new owner. Once we do that, we can figure out what to do about teachers and credits."

"I'd like to volunteer." Dark raised his hand. But Charles scowled, unsure what he was talking about.

"Is your father someone important?" he asked.

"No, that would be me. Thank you for the enthusiastic letter, Charles. I am none other than Earl Knightley."

Charles watched the underclassman reach his hand out to him. His mouth hung open wider than when he found out Robins was the demon known as Gryphon.

Dark looked up at him with a cheery smile. "But the students need a new headmaster who will work in earnest so that they can feel safe at school, not an executive. What do you think? Would you be up to the task?"

"Me...?" Charles looked toward Robins, who was nodding eagerly.

All the students around us were supporting him, too, telling him he was the only person they trusted with the title of headmaster.

Charles made up his mind. He reached out and took Dark's hand. "Very well. I'll spend my life getting this school back to its full strength. Will you join me, everyone?"

The students answered with cheers.

Their voices were full of vigor as if time had finally unfrozen for them.



THE ship that arrived at the island's harbor was unloading a massive delivery

of crates.

Inside were food supplies, clothes, and materials for protection against the cold. They handed them out to the students lined up at the dock. Each boy passed them down the line until they were stacked up on wagons. Then, others pushed those wagons up the winding road to the castle.

“Take all the cargo to the chapel. Once you’ve verified what’s inside, divide the contents for each dorm.” Charles was giving orders to the students. Then he called out to the young man dressed in a flashy outfit, checking over the shipment at the end of the dock. “Thank you for all the supplies, Lord Knightley. We’re going to have a comfortable Christmas with your help.”

“You can’t leave your precious students to struggle, after all.” The earl answered fluently. With his sapphire eyes and shiny silver hair, he was the very picture of an English gentleman. If you ignored his top hat with tiny lion and eagle decorations and the excessively frilly clothes, it was hard to imagine anyone in Great Britain looked more like nobility.

It was impossible to believe he’d been a bright-eyed young boy only a few days ago.

Jack and Earl Knightley had been turned into children by Robins’ spell. But once they eliminated the immortals in Ark School, the spell was undone, and they returned to their true ages.

Charles felt guilty about the disrespect he’d shown the man. “I’m sorry for treating you like a child when I didn’t know you were an earl...”

“You had no way of knowing, so you don’t need to apologize. I’d work on that habit of always jumping to apologies if I were you. You have to conduct yourself with dignity now that you’re to become the temporary headmaster.”

“I’ll be more careful.”

New teachers were scheduled to arrive at Ark School in the new year. Until then, Charles and Robins would manage the school together.

Earl Knightley had become the castle’s owner and a manager of the boarding school. However, he didn’t enter into a contract with Robins. He told him he wanted Robins to keep protecting the school on a system of trust—not because

of the contract.

Robins had returned to human form and was still serving as Unicorn Dorm's prefect.

Charles was set to attend college under Earl Knightley's guardianship after graduating from Ark School. Once he was ready, he would return as a teacher until he someday became the headmaster.

Robins would spend that time at Ark School, making sure everything was operating as it was supposed to.

The earl placed his hand on the brim of his hat. He turned his attention from the unloading of cargo to the ship itself. "I have to board now, too. Feel free to write me at any time, Charles."

"Um, excuse me, Lord Knightley."

The earl had placed his hand on the rope bridge to board the ship, but Charles needed to ask him the one question sticking in his chest.

"Why did you set Robins free in the end? He's a demon. We were always taught that demons are horrifying creatures in demon studies class."

The earl turned, stared closely at Charles, and smiled. "I'm not prejudiced against demons. Here's why."

He lifted his hat just slightly. Underneath, a pair of horns emerging from his head came into view.

They were the same ones Charles had seen on Halloween night as part of Lord Knightley's costume. Time had passed since that festival, but he was shocked to learn that the horns weren't fake.

All demons possessed horns. That meant that Earl Knightley was...

Charles couldn't speak. The earl lowered his hat and pressed his finger to his lips.

"This is our little secret, okay?"

That vibrant smile captivated Charles. He never knew that demons were capable of enticing humans with such sweetness.

“...I’ll never tell a soul. Not until I reach the gates of Heaven.”

With that promise, the earl nodded, satisfied, and stepped onto the ship.

His cape fluttered in the ocean breeze much like Gryphon’s wings.



I stood on the deck of the ship dressed in a thick coat. I was watching the students haul cargo back to the castle.

All around me, the faces of the Liddell family were back to what I recognized.

Jack was angry that the jacket tied around his waist had snagged on a cannon. Dum and Dee, dressed in hooded capes, were playing with small crabs on a glass float.

Everyone was in perfect form.

Only Leeds, in a pair of sunglasses, was slumped over the railing sadly. “What a god-awful school life that was. So many boys and I couldn’t even get a single date! Can you believe that?”

“But it was fun, wasn’t it?” I responded.

The days I spent living communally in the dorm and the time I spent studying with the others in class were all brilliant memories for me.

I knew Dum and Dee must have felt the same. I looked over at the two of them. They were catching crabs that slipped from the glass float and returning them to the ocean.

They waved at Charles when they spotted him on the dock. Charles waved back. The three were still friends, even with the twins back to their normal size.

Dum and Dee’s lives used to consist of nothing but each other. But their world expanded as soon as they came to Ark School.

“There are so many possibilities in life when you have lots of people around. I’m glad I was able to show you two that,” I said.

“...Although, some things are better left unknown...” Leeds muttered under his breath, but the roar of the waves drowned out his words.

“What’s that?”

The sea was as stormy as ever. Thankfully, the massive ship didn't rock as much as the last one. Only the noise of the ocean was disproportionately loud.

Leeds lowered his sunglasses and smirked. "It's nothing. Anyway, I'm surprised the earl was able to prepare such a nice ship for us."

The ship was painted blue, white, and red and had three sails. Black smoke was billowing up from the stern—a state-of-the-art steamboat. The railings and cabin doors were decorated in a nouveau art style, and the entire ship was far more luxurious than any other cargo vessel on the sea.

"He probably made the most of his connections, no?"

"I'm talking about the timing. Isn't it too perfect that our ride home showed up the day after Gryphon undid the spells? As far as I'm aware, the earl can't contact people outside of physical means. So who's this 'Menou' guy who arranged for the ship?"

"Did someone summon me?"

My eyes went wide. The Knightley steward had emerged from the wheelhouse.

"The steward?! Now I remember, you left us at the train station. Where have you been all this time?"

"When I heard Ark School was on an island, I waited on the shore in case there was any trouble. I'm sorry to introduce myself so late, but my name is Menou."

It was an astonishing revelation. I made a note of his name on my mental character sheet to be sure I didn't forget it.

Instead of looking shocked, Leeds seemed more wary that this steward was going to be an annoyance. "Three months is a long time to wait. How did you know when the spell was broken?"

"I used my power."

The steward widened his usually squinted eyes. The star and crescent moon seal was floating over his pupils.

"You're a stigmata too?!" I felt like I was going to fall over. The steward, on

the other hand, didn't seem even slightly bothered.

"I was the first human Lord Dark ever resurrected. He blessed me with the power of 'Second Sight' to see things as they happen, even from far away."

He'd always been able to get ahead of things because of the power of his stigma. I felt like I'd finally solved a mystery. But Leeds was squeezing his fists.

Is he nervous now?

"That's incredible. Does your power work for anyone?"

"Only upon those I know very well. I can use it on Lord Dark, Hisui, and a few other servants of the Knightley family. I may be able to use my power on you in the near future, Miss Alice, but I would never dare spy on a lady's private life."

"I see..."

I let out a sigh of relief, and Leeds placed his hand on my back.

"I'm glad your private life gets to stay under wraps, my lady."

"We're about to depart."

Dark had joined us on the deck. He was dressed in an outfit much more intricate than what was suitable for sea travel. He took his place at my side and waved goodbye to Charles on the dock.

"It's only temporary at this point, but I can tell he's going to be a wonderful headmaster," he said. "The supplies Gramps brought them will make their lives better for some time, and I intend to do everything I can to the same end."

"It's the start of a new era in Ark School's history."

I heard the metal clanking of the anchor being raised. Smoke billowed from the smokestack, and a tugboat pulled the ship out of the harbor.

I placed my hands on the railing and gazed at the castle in the distance.

"We're saying goodbye for real this time."

Life at Ark School was full of hardships, but I was still sad to leave.

I looked to my side and saw Dum and Dee holding hands, staring off at the island. Jack had his hands on their shoulders. It seemed that everyone was

struggling to leave it behind, too.

Amid our moment of reflection, we heard a cheerful cry of *“Up here!”* from above.

I gasped and looked up. My eyes landed on none other than Gryphon, sailing through the air with a flock of seagulls.

“Robins!”

“Robins!”

Dum and Dee waved at him with pink cheeks.

“Take care, everyone!”

Robins flew three laps around our ship before heading back for the island.

It was like seeing a living illustration straight out of a fantasy novel.

I burned the images of the island and all its nature, the ancient historic castle, and the kind-hearted demon into my eyes. Then, I vowed to never forget them for as long as I lived.

Epilogue

THERE was no time of the year more dazzling than Christmas.

The homes of nobles were no exception. They put up large trees in front of the fireplace, decorated them with snowmen and candy cane ornaments, and piled presents underneath.

The Christmas tree was a custom popularized by Queen Victoria. Nobles began to display them to imitate the royal family. While Christmas trees were seen as places for the family to gather around, the Liddell manor had never been home to one in its history.

The massive tree before my eyes belonged to none other than Dark.

We were at his palace in the Knightley domain. It was a white, sacred-looking structure just like his manor in London. Dark had been born and raised here. He also looked after his mother and father. Everything in the house revolved around the color blue, from the fabric on the chairs to the lampshades to the paintings on the walls.

I was standing by the window adorned with holly, feeling overwhelmed by reminders of Dark everywhere I looked.

I never expected to spend my Christmas break with Dark.

We'd left the island and taken a large ship to the nearest trade port. It would be difficult to return to London directly, so we took a carriage north to the Knightley domain instead.

His region abounded with natural beauty, with many rivers made from melting snow and sheep pastures. Now I understood why textiles were the main industry in this place.

Dark's extravagant outfits he wore in high society were, in part, to advertise the manufacturers in his territory.

We returned from a few days of exploring the area to Dark's palace, where we ate a traditional Christmas dinner before moving to the warm room with the Christmas tree.

Dum and Dee immediately opened presents, their eyes lighting up at all their new books and toys. I was shocked by the amount of presents under the tree and would soon find out that most of them were accessories.

They received cardigans, gloves, woolen caps, and socks. Though they were small enough that the twins would outgrow them someday, each piece had lots of adorable details.

Dum put on the gloves, and Dee put on a hat. Then they went over to show Dark, who was sitting in a chair by the fireplace.

"Do they look good?"

"Do they look good?"

"They're perfect. Just looking at you soothes my heart."

It almost sounded like he was trying to seduce a woman. Dark kissed both of their foreheads. He wasn't wearing a hat today since he felt safe in his family home. His horns weren't visible on his head anymore since his body was back to its normal size.

"Can you call for Jack and Leeds, my dear twins? I have presents for them, too."

The space under the tree was still full of boxes.

Dark's steward was showing Jack and Leeds how to navigate the side passageways of the manor. They would serve as escape routes in case of an emergency and as helpful patrol routes.

Dark wrapped red scarves with white pompoms around their necks before the twins left for the hallway, hand in hand. They had keen senses, so they would probably find the other two right away.

Dark and I were left alone in the room.

"Thank you for getting the rest of us presents too."

I approached the fireplace. Dark spoke to me softly.

“No, I should be thanking you for spending this time with me. Without all of you, I would fall asleep lonely each night, surrounded by nothing but these presents.”

“You say that...but I’m sure you would have just shipped them to London, right?”

It was amusing to imagine all the presents being carried into the completely undecorated Liddell manor. Jack would probably check them all thoroughly for traps, even with Dark listed as the sender.

I chuckled. It got Dark to smile, too.



“I’m glad I could give you your presents, but I’m just as happy that you came out here to my domain.” Dark cast his eyes toward the fireplace emotionally. “I always wanted to show you the Knightley territory. It’s full of beautiful nature, kind people, and good work. What did you think of it?”

“It’s a wonderful place. I’ve fallen in love with it.” I smiled shyly. For whatever reason, that made Dark wrap his arms around me and pull me close. His head was leaning against my stomach.

“I want you to hear this without seeing my face. This is my home, and my London manor is merely a temporary residence. So long as I’m Earl Knightley, I have to live for my domain and its population. I can’t abandon this place for London...”

Dark loved his territory and had a duty to protect it as nobility. He would never choose to let his family line die. I’d understood this in the back of my mind, but to hear him finally say it out loud surprised me.

“So your wish is to bring me out here,” I said.

A normal marriage with Dark would mean leaving the Liddell family, becoming a Knightley, and living happily ever after. This castle would naturally become my home where I raised the successor to Dark’s title.

My family’s barony would die at that point.

That choice is available to me. I understand that.

But the Liddell family’s role was an absolute necessity to the kingdom of Great Britain. I wasn’t a foolish little girl willing to sacrifice her family line for a single generation of romance. This was, in a way, a weakness of mine.

Dark was still staring down at the ground, waiting for my answer.

“...I’m sure you don’t expect me to nod and go along with that?” I responded softly, and Dark separated from me with a lonely look.

“I know. I’m looking for a way to be together where you can still be yourself. Searching brings me the slightest hope, but I just wanted you to know in case I never actually find it. That’s all...”

I wished he wouldn’t give me such depressing updates.

He's always so confident, yet he backs down at the worst times!

"I know you'll find it!" I cradled Dark's head in my arms. He cried out in surprise, but I squeezed him even tighter. "You're the one I want. I can't imagine becoming someone else's bride. I would never think of kissing a walking death flag like you if I could, but that's impossible now!"

Dark's eyes were wide with confusion, but he smiled warmly when he heard that.

"I feel the same... I promise I'll never give up on you."

We exchanged our vow in the form of a kiss. Then we heard footsteps running toward us.

The twins brought my family into the room a second later.

I wanted to stop time in this moment if it meant such happiness would last forever.

But that wouldn't solve anything. I couldn't run away from reality.

The new year would come soon after Christmas.

Time was going to keep carrying our lives forward just as it always had.

Afterword

IT'S nice to meet you, or perhaps we've already met before in the prior two volumes. My name is Chii Kurusu.

Thank you very much for purchasing volume 3 of *I Reincarnated As Evil Alice So the Only Thing I'm Courting is Death!*

The Evil Alice series finally has a third book.

With each volume, the story revolves around a different love interest. The first book was about Earl Knightley, the second covered Jack, and this volume is about the Tweedle brothers.

However, the twins are very much still children. Alice thought of them as family she needed to protect, not as potential lovers, though that relationship underwent a big transformation in this book.

This story was set at a boarding school even though such institutions aren't well understood here in Japan. Most people only know a little bit about them from manga or anime, as did I. I did a lot of research to write this story, but there may be some parts that aren't accurate to real life. I hope you'll appreciate that this is a depiction of an otome game world as much as it is of Victorian England.

Now, I'd like to thank a few people.

Thank you to Yaguchi Minato for your lovely cover design and illustrations throughout the book. The different ways you depict the characters, both handsome and adorable, always strikes my heart. I had trouble writing this volume for various reasons, but my desire to see you draw Alice and the boys again kept me going.

Thank you to Emma Schumacker for translating this series into English in a way that accurately captures my intentions. Your wonderful translation is why this series has reached readers around the world.

I also want to thank all the designers and editors involved in the publication of this translated version.

If you've read this far, you have my sincerest gratitude. I hope you enjoy this world together with Alice.

May we meet again in the next volume.



Too Strong to Belong! Banished to Another World!

By Kazuki Karasawa Illustration Akane Rica

Still Too Strong in Another World!

Sakurako longs to fall in love. Unfortunately, her super-strength scares everybody off! If only she were normal... But then she would have died long ago.



The Do-Over Damsel Conquers the Dragon Emperor

By Sarasa Nagase Illustration Mitsuya Fuji

A young woman with overpowered magic gets sent back 6 years after being killed. She takes this second chance at life to get with her greatest enemy, the dragon emperor!



Reincarnated as the Last of My Kind

By Kiri Komori Illustration Yamigo

An endearing slice of life fantasy light novel series about a nonhuman girl's journey to become an alchemist to repay the family who took her in!



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