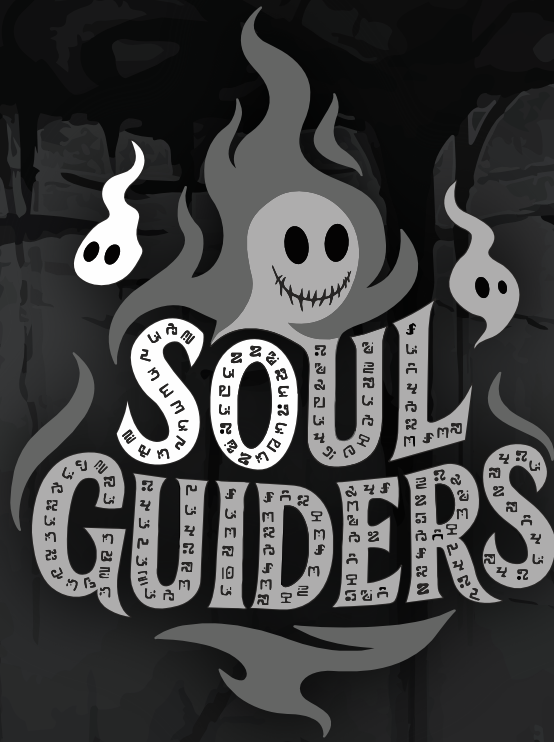
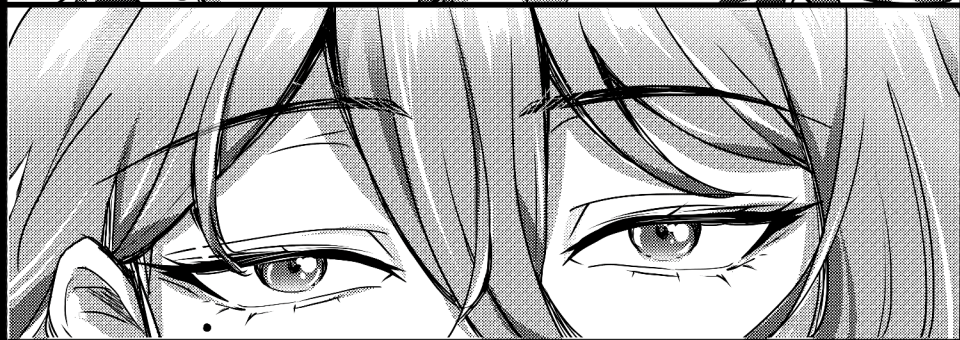
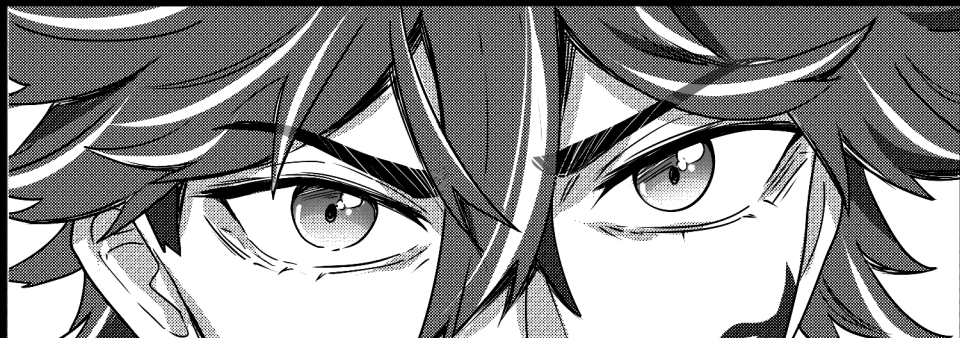
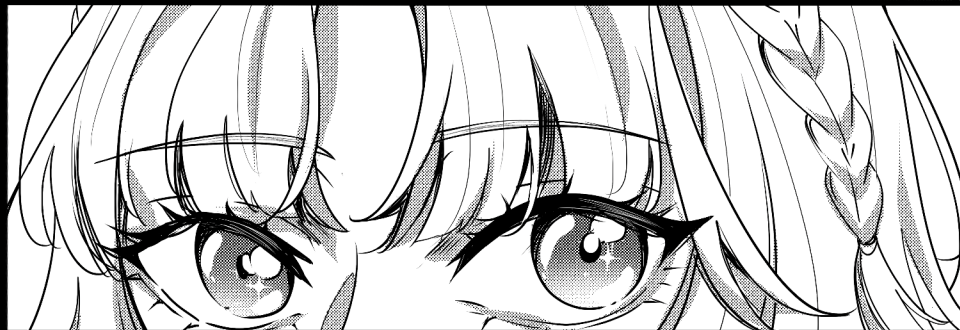






WRITTEN BY
AURORA AUREALIS



THE ONSET

Legends say a fine line separates greatness from madness, a line few can see until it is crossed. It is whispered that the fire deep inside either kindles or consumes, its judgment silent and absolute. When the hour comes, and the choice is yours, will you find the path—or be lost to the flame?

Whispers slithered through the palace corridors as maids drifted from hall to hall, their brooms and rags in hand, yet their steps carefully avoiding one particular chamber. Even in their hushed tones, the words seemed to echo louder than the sweep of bristles on marble.

“The palace is haunted,” one muttered, near the castle gates, her eyes flicking nervously toward the princess’s room.

“Did you see her eyes?” another scoffed, lowering her voice. “She was up all-night thrashing in her sleep. Pale as death—as though she might fade away any second.”

“Who?” asked a guard lazily from the entrance, adjusting his spear.

“Princess Yuzarinne, of course,” the maid replied, and soon the group dissolved into chatter, their voices overlapping in speculative tones.

Albeta, standing near the gates with a basket of fresh fruit in her arms, stiffened at the sound. She tightened her grip on the handle, a flare of irritation coloring her cheeks. The gossip wound around her ears until one of the guards, grinning far too broadly, called out:

“Albeta! How about a date? It’s the harvest festival tonight!”

Her lips curved into a smile—but one edged with annoyance. She marched forward and brought her heel down squarely on his foot.

“No, thank you,” she said crisply. “And as for the princess—she is

perfectly fine. Hardly any of your concern.”

With that, she swept past them, skirts flaring as though parting the corridor itself. Behind her, the maids and guards stared, dumb-founded, sharing glances that silently asked the same thing: *what is wrong with her?*



Albeta slipped into the kitchen, setting the bag of fruit on the counter with a soft thud. The chef's eyes lit up at once, his gaze sparkling with unspoken excitement as if to say: *Could it be...?*

“What you were looking for but couldn't find,” Albeta said with a small, triumphant smile. “I had Steve get them.”

The chef's face broke into a grin, and the two exchanged an exaggerated thumbs-up. The prize in question? The key ingredient for the get-well soup simmering in his mind. Both turned eagerly toward the prep table—only to nearly jump out of their skin when a voice thundered behind them right when they were about done.

“AL—BET—A.”

Each syllable cracked like a whip. The head maid loomed, her brow furrowed, a vein throbbing visibly at her temple.

Albeta flinched, slowly turning with a sheepish wave. “...Good morning?” she offered weakly.

The chef, whistling a tuneless little melody, made himself scarce, vanishing out the door as though nothing had happened.

Moments later, Albeta found herself marched back to the break room, where the head maid pointed accusingly at a chart spread across her desk.

Albeta leaned in, squinting. “What is this?”

“Your attendance,” the head maid declared, slapping the calendar with the authority of a judge. “You have been present every single day—holidays, weekends, storms, festivals—for nearly four

thousand days. The only day you were absent was when you escorted the princess into town.”

Albeta blinked. “Hmm?”

“I’m telling you to get a life!” the head maid barked. “Take a break!”

“But the princess is my family,” Albeta murmured, her voice softening. “Where else would I go, if not by her side?”

“The princess is unwell,” the head maid countered sharply. “This is the first time in years you can take time off as her highness recuperates. Let the doctors do their work. You, meanwhile, rest!”

“That is exactly why I must stay!” Albeta shot back, clutching her skirts. “I am her closest aide, her friend—her family. She needs me now more than ever!”

“No.” The head maid’s eyes narrowed. With a snap of her fingers, the door swung open and a troop of maids bustled in, dragging suitcases already packed and waiting.

Albeta’s jaw dropped. “You packed my bags?!”

“Yes,” the head maid said, her tone brooking no argument. “Because left to you, you would never have done it yourself.”

“Like it or not, Miss Albeta, we are ready to rush you out,” one maid said firmly, her hands planted on her hips.

Another chimed in with a mischievous grin. “And isn’t today the annual harvest festival?”

“A perfect day for a date!” the third added, her eyes twinkling.

“Date?!” Albeta pointed at herself, her face a picture of disbelief. “Who? Me?”

All three maids nodded in unison, far too pleased with themselves.

“With whom?” she demanded, her voice rising an octave as her eyes darted between them.

All of them sighed in unison, a silent chorus of pity. The thought passed between them like a shared prayer: *RIP Steve*. The hapless guard who had trailed loyally at Albeta’s side for the better part of

a decade. They had entered the palace together, two fresh recruits with little more than hope in their eyes. Now, ten years on, he remained the unlucky soul tasked with weathering her obliviousness day after day.



When Albeta first came to the palace, she was little more than a shadow among the other children—her clothes torn, her hair unkempt, her voice all but absent. Like the rest, she was an orphan of the war. The officials gave them a choice: the orphanage, with the promise of bread and education, or enlistment at the palace, where labor would earn them coin and a roof.

Most of the children lit up at the mention of the orphanage. They chattered brightly, dreaming aloud of classrooms, shared meals, and freedom from duty. Together, they vowed to go as one, their eyes gleaming with hope.

But when the official came down the line, asking each child where they would go, Albeta raised her hand. Her face was unreadable, her voice quiet but steady.

“The palace,” she said. “I will serve the princess.”

The room fell still. Then the murmurs began, sharp as nettles.

“She’s just trying to act special.”

“Goody two-shoes.”

“Thinks she’s better than us.”

Albeta turned to face them, her gaze as calm as still water. Her words came plain, yet each syllable struck like a thorn.

“What will you do the next time one of you is possessed? Sit there and wait your turn to die? Or beg for mercy while another falls in your place? I’ve had enough of that life. Enough of being a so-called ‘survivor,’ too weak to fight, too helpless but to watch others be torn apart—or worse, to die cowering at the mercy of someone stronger.”

“When I saw the princess walk straight into a land crawling with the wretched monsters, I knew my choice. I will not waste away as a weakling. I will stand by her side and fight, and if that path is harder than yours, so be it. Better to bleed carving a road forward than to rot waiting for pity.” Albeta continued.

The children stared—some stunned, some bristling, their cheeks flushed with shame or anger. Her words struck like sparks in dry hay, riled them all, but none could dismiss the fire in her voice. One boy shoved through the crowd and seized her by the collar. His face twisted with scorn. “Think you’re the only one with integrity?”

Albeta’s gaze was ice, her silence sharper than a blade. Before the palace officials could intervene, another voice rang out.

“Enough.”

Steve stepped forward, his presence cutting through the chaos like a steady flame in the dark. His tone was calm, yet it carried a weight that stilled the restless crowd.

“She’s right,” he said firmly. “We can’t keep waiting for the world to spare us. Whether orphanage or palace, what matters is that we choose with courage, and that we use that choice to build the future. For those who stand with her—come to the palace. For those who believe they’ll grow stronger at the orphanage—take that path. But know this: we have lost everything already once. To protect ourselves, and the people we care for, no matter what comes ahead, weakness is no excuse. Weakness,” he said, voice low but fierce, “is a sin.”

His words struck deeper than Albeta’s barbs. Slowly, the tension thinned, carried off like smoke. And from that day, their paths were sealed.

Steve swore his oath to the royal guard, while Albeta pledged herself to the princess’s side as a maid. What no one expected was the ripple their defiance left behind—none of the war’s hundred or so survivors chose the orphanage. For the first time, not one child

turned away. They all enlisted, every last one.

Albeta could only stand in silence, her eyes fixed on the boy who had shifted the tide with nothing but words. Steve met her gaze, a quiet smile tugging at his lips—steady, unshaken, as though to say *we chose this together*.

From that day onward—through gossip, hardship, and a decade of trials—they remained inseparable. Two children bound by a choice that had carved their fates, a choice neither of them ever turned back from.

Steve had a way of appearing whenever Albeta was most overburdened, as if fate itself conspired to keep him tethered at her side. When she trudged down the halls with half the laundry piled to her chin or staggered beneath crates of supplies, he would abandon the training yard mid-drill, running to relieve her arms of their load.

“Don’t you have work?” she would huff, glaring at him from beneath strands of hair sticking to her face. “Knights must have an awful lot of free time.”

His only answer was a grin, broad and infuriating, before he darted back toward the yard—just in time for the knight commander to thunder at him. He’d stand there, scolded raw, yet laugh as though discipline were no more than a friendly tap on the shoulder.

At mealtimes, when Albeta entered the canteen only to find every bench occupied, he would not hesitate. With a shove of his elbow, he sent the knight beside him sprawling, then patted the empty seat as though it had always been meant for her. “Here,” he’d say, eyes bright. The fallen soldier groaned, muttering under his breath, “*You owe me one*,” yet made no effort to reclaim the space. Steve only grinned wider, unfazed.

And Albeta—though her pride prickled and her instincts told her to refuse—always ended up lowering herself onto the bench. Against her will, her heart eased, flustered yet strangely comforted by the thought that in all the world’s vastness, one seat would always be

there for her.

When the princess needed an escort, Steve enlisted before anyone else could raise a hand. “What’s another duty?” he said, though the truth was written on his face: he wanted to be near Albeta. The first time he saw her laugh in genuine relief, the sound unguarded and warm, he promptly turned and smacked straight into a wooden post. Blood dripped down his forehead as the carriage driver stared, aghast.

“I’m alright!” Steve insisted, holding up a hand as though that would stop the bleeding. “Perfectly fine!”

From those days of errands and laughter—walking side by side through town with baskets of groceries—to now, ten years had gone. The years had reshaped them both: she, once so distant and formal, now spoke to him with the ease of an old friend, her words casual where once they had been guarded. And through every season, every trial, he had stayed at her side.



“Honestly,” Albeta muttered, arms folded as the other maids fussed with her luggage, “what has Steve got to do with any of this?”

The maids only shook their heads, thrusting the suitcase into her hands before shepherding her toward the door. “No returning for at least a week,” one declared firmly. “We’ll protect the princess in your stead. Trust us for once.”

“Yes,” another added with a sly smirk. “Maybe not as excessively as you, since you are borderline obsessive, but we adore the princess too.”

Albeta’s cheeks flushed scarlet. “Then at least let me take her the secret soup!” she cried, snatching up the tray before they could stop her.

With the steaming bowl balanced carefully in her hands, she

hurried toward the princess's chambers. Just as she rounded the corner, the King and Queen emerged. Albeta froze, curtsied low, her head bowed.

"You may rise, Albeta," the Queen said gently.

"Yes, Your Highness."

The King's voice rumbled with quiet amusement. "You go out of your way to care for Yuzarinne. That child is a handful, is she not?"

"Not at all, Your Majesty," Albeta replied quickly, pride softening her voice. "I am honored to serve the princess."

The Queen studied her for a long moment, then touched her shoulder with a mother's kindness. "You must rest as well, Albeta. You are just as important to us."

Albeta's lips curved into a small smile. "...Perhaps I should."

A servant appeared in haste. "Your Highness, someone has arrived to see you—urgent."

The King and Queen exchanged a glance, then excused themselves, their closeness obvious even in so simple a gesture as his hand brushing hers before they departed down the corridor.



Albeta knocked softly on the chamber door. "Princess, it's me," she called as she stepped inside. Steve stood guard within, Emilie at his side. On the bed, Yuzarinne writhed beneath fever's cruel hand, her eyes dark, her breath ragged.

Albeta approached, setting down the tray. Steve glanced at it and broke into a grin. He mouthed, "The one you asked me for?"

Albeta lifted her chin proudly. "Of course."

Before she could place it in the princess's hands, Emilie swooped in, snatched the tray, and whirled on them both. "Out! Both of you! Go enjoy your leave for once. I'll nurse the princess back to health in no time."

Steve and Albeta found themselves pushed unceremoniously into the corridor, the door shut firmly behind them. They lingered there for a moment, glancing at each other, then at the line of guards pretending not to listen.

At the same time, the words slipped from their lips: “What does one do when they are not working?”

They stared at each other for a heartbeat—two fools who had given a decade to duty without pause—before bursting into laughter, the sound echoing down the hall.

Still chuckling, Steve cleared his throat, rubbing at the back of his neck. “So... Albeta. The harvest festival. I want you to come with me. As my date—”

For a moment, her mind flitted back to the jeering invitations from the morning, but she shook them away. Steve was not like them. He was just Steve.

Her lips curved into a smile, warm and certain. Her answer almost immediate “Sure.”

His heart nearly stopped. He clenched a fist, punching the air in silent celebration, unable to contain the grin spreading across his face. She only shook her head and walked ahead, her smile lingering—while Steve stood rooted behind, feeling as though the world had just turned bright.



The moon hung high above the town, its silvery glow casting a ghostly light upon the cobbled streets below. The air was crisp, with a biting chill that seemed to seep into the bones of those who wandered beneath the stars. Far above it all, a figure walked upon the sky itself, his silhouette barely discernible against the backdrop of a towering clock tower.

Zeo's steps were measured, each one carrying him over the



bustling streets like a shadow among the heavens. His voice, low and deliberate, broke the silence of the night, though none could hear him. “Are you sure this is the town?” he muttered, as though addressing an unseen companion.

Pausing mid-stride, he extended his hand outward, palm upturned, as though inviting the wind to carry his command. “Val. Fros.” The names were spoken with authority, and the air seemed to shiver in response. From the depths of the unseen, two entities materialized, their forms shrouded in a mist that glimmered faintly in the moonlight.

“Find him,” Zeo ordered. “Search every shadow, every corner, and inform me the moment you see his trail.”

With a nod that barely disrupted the stillness, the beings disappeared, leaving only a faint ripple in the air where they had stood. Zeo’s figure, too, began to fade, his presence melting into the fabric of the night. A single rose petal, stark red against the darkness, floated downward, carried by the breeze.

It drifted lazily until it landed amidst the revelry below, unnoticed by the throng of people who danced beneath the festival lights. The streets were alive with celebration—lanterns swinging overhead, laughter spilling across the square, couples twirling around the fountain to the beat of fiddles and drums. Yet beneath the jubilant music ran a quieter thread: unease.



“Chilly tonight,” an older woman muttered, clutching her shawl tighter. “The kind of cold that sinks its claws into your soul. A sign, they say.”

“The death omen,” another whispered, her nervous chuckle failing to disguise the tremor in her voice. “Another awakening, perhaps? They say the end is coming. I only pray the possessed don’t wander

into town.”

“Nonsense!” a man cut in sharply, though his voice wavered at the edges. “They couldn’t possibly. They haven’t done so in over a decade. And this, this is the royal capital! No possessed could ever break the barrier!”

Yet even as he spoke, the words rang hollow, like a prayer uttered more to soothe himself than to convince the others. The laughter and music carried on, but unease threaded the air, cold and unshakable, tugging at the rhythm until even the dancers faltered mid-step.

Into this undercurrent walked Albeta. She moved carefully, awkwardly, the hem of a dress she had never worn before brushing against her ankles. It had been pressed into her arms earlier that day by a shopkeeper who had all but squealed when she learned Albeta was going to the festival *with Steve*. Before she could refuse, the dress was hers, ribbon and all.

Now, as she threaded through the crowd, she smoothed the unfamiliar fabric with restless hands. Did she look ridiculous? It had been months—years, perhaps—since she had worn anything but her uniform. Dressing herself up felt like donning someone else’s skin.

Her doubts only sharpened when she finally spotted Steve. Their gazes locked across the square.

And Steve, instead of offering the grin she had half-expected, blinked once, twice, and tilted his head. His expression was not one of awe, nor even admiration, but of sheer bewilderment.

As though Albeta, in that dress, was the strangest, most inexplicable thing he had seen all day.

How rude! Her lips pressed thin, and she huffed, bristling with quiet anger as he extended his hand. Still, she placed hers in his—awkwardly, stiffly—and together they drifted through the festival stalls.

Steve bought them a snack off a counter, offering it with his usual cheer, but he soon noticed her eyes were elsewhere. Her shoulders

were tight, her thoughts distant. She was not laughing with him, not even scolding him as she often did.

Instead, she was listening—to the murmurs threading through the revelry. *The princess... the possessed... the death omen.*

Her voice broke through at last, quiet but edged with worry. “Do you think we’ll be fine?”

Steve’s smile softened, steady where hers faltered. “What happens will happen,” he said simply. “But isn’t this why we’ve trained all these years?”

“Come what may, Albeta, I’ll protect you.”

Her retort stuck in her throat as a sudden gust of wind tore through the square, snatching the ribboned hat from her head. It tumbled into the shadows at the far edge of the lights. Albeta’s eyes followed, her breath catching. For a heartbeat, she swore she saw movement—shapes shifting just beyond the festival glow. Then, as quickly as they appeared, they were gone. The stillness there gnawed at her, unsettling and unshakable.

Steve, misreading the tension in her face, flushed red. And then, he dropped to one knee.

The crowd hushed at once, eyes snapping to him as he reached into his pocket. A small ring glimmered faintly in the lantern light.

“This may come across sudden,” Steve said, his voice wavering yet resolved, “but I’ve been meaning to ask for months. I want you to take this.”

Albeta’s breath caught, her thoughts a scrambled mess. *Why me? Why now?*

“Think about it, alright?” His tone lifted, almost teasing, as he thrust the ring toward her. Before she could even form words, he turned on his heel and fled into the crowd, vanishing like a boy who had just lit a firework and left it to explode.

The crowd erupted in whispers, eyes darting between her flushed face and his retreating figure.

Albeta's cheeks burned crimson. Muttering furiously under her breath, she spun on her heel and stormed away, her head held high, her stride brisk—yet the shadow of humiliation clung to her like a second dress she could not strip away.



The muffled sounds of the festival dimmed as Albeta shut the door with a sharp slam. She leaned against it, palms flat to the cold wood, her breath quick and uneven.

Did he mean what he said? If so... was she losing her only friend to something as fickle, as uncharted, as love?

What even is love?

Would she lose him if she did not accept? Would it be fair to say yes when she did not even know the shape of her own feelings?

She pressed her lips together. She did not dislike him—no, never that. But romantically? Her heart stumbled at the thought.

Her fingers toyed with the small ring, hesitant, almost guilty, before slipping it onto her hand. The cool metal kissed her skin, and in that moment, the image of the shadow she had seen at the edge of the festival flared back in her mind. Her breath hitched. She must tell Steve. She must tell the guards. She must tell the princess.

Her gaze drifted to the calendar pinned on her wall. Crossing the room, she traced her finger over the days until it halted on the bold letters a week away: *Return to the Palace*.

Her breath caught, the words glaring back at her, colder than steel. A faint chill prickled along her skin.

She could not wait until then. What if the possessed were to return? What if what happened back then were to happen all over again?

And then the memory surged—merciless, searing—crashing over her like fire and grief, dragging her back into a night she had never

truly escaped.

She had been so much younger then, her trembling hands clutching at her skirts as the city burned around her, the bodies of its people piled like broken dolls at her feet. Flames roared into the night sky, devouring homes and lives alike, their searing heat clawing at her skin. Tears streamed down her face, her sobs lost amidst the chaos. She remembered calling out—screaming for someone, anyone—but the only answer she received was the guttural growl of a creature that emerged from the inferno.

Its eyes pierced through the haze, glowing with unholy light. Its form was twisted, monstrous, a grotesque shadow of what might have once been human. A demon, its essence corrupted and its humanity long consumed. Their eyes locked, and for a moment that felt like eternity, Albeta could not move. The weight of its gaze bore down on her, rooting her to the spot as though her very soul had been chained.

Then it lunged.

Her body reacted before her mind could, her legs propelling her forward as sheer instinct took over. She ran, her heart pounding, her bare feet scrambling over cobblestones slick with ash and blood. The demon's snarls echoed behind her, the thudding of its pursuit growing louder with every step. Her breath came in ragged gasps, and as she rounded a corner, her foot caught on a loose stone.

She fell hard, the world spinning as she hit the ground. Rolling onto her back, she stared up at the creature bearing down upon her, its claws raised to strike. This is it, she thought. This is the end.

But before the blow could land, a hand grabbed her arm and yanked her back into the shadows. Her scream was stifled by a firm grip over her mouth, her frantic struggle quelled by a whisper.

"It's me, Lyrikisia Yuzarinne."

The voice, though hushed, carried an unmistakable calmness. Albeta's panicked breathes slowed, her body still trembling in fear as

the stranger—no, her savior—pressed a finger to her lips in a silent command for stillness.

Together, they crouched in the tunnel, the faint light of the fire casting eerie shadows on the stone walls behind them. The demon's footsteps grew nearer, its growls reverberating through the narrow space. Albeta shut her eyes and clutched tightly onto the stranger's sleeve, as if the fabric could shield her. She willed herself not to move, not to breathe. Moments stretched into an eternity, and then, mercifully, the sounds began to fade.

A new sound reached their ears—human voices, calling out into the ruins. "Princess Lyrikisia!" The words echoed, laced with desperation and hope. Soon after, guards with soot-streaked faces appeared at the edge of the tunnel, their torches casting flickering light into the darkened space. One of them leaned closer, his voice gruff but gentle as he spoke.

"Princess?"

Lyrikisia emerged first, her presence regal despite the soot and ash that clung to her. She turned back toward Albeta, extending a hand with quiet reassurance. "Now it's safe," she said, her voice steady, "Where are your parents?"

Albeta hesitated, her eyes darting toward the ruined city behind her. "I... I have no home. The demon took them all." Her hands clutched at her head as words failed her entirely. Lyrikisia knelt, her gaze steady and kind.

"Come with me to the palace," she said, her tone leaving no room for argument. "That will be your home."

For a long moment, Albeta stared at the outstretched hand, uncertainty battling with desperation. Then, with a trembling breath, she reached out and clasped it.

Lyrikisia pulled her from the tunnel, guiding her into the open air. Around them, the city lay in ruins, smoke rising in ghostly tendrils into the night sky. Yet despite the destruction, something new

glimmered in Albeta's heart—a fragile hope, the beginning of a bond she could not yet fully understand.

It was, without question, the best decision she had ever made. The princess had not only saved her life but offered her something far greater: a home, a purpose, and a friendship forged in the fires of despair.

The memory faded as Albeta blinked back tears, her eyes landing on the calendar pinned to her wall. The day marked boldly—Return to the Palace—stared back at her, as though mocking her hesitation.

She grabbed the nearest quill, her grip tightening with resolve. Scratching through the date, she rewrote it boldly: Today.

“The princess always makes it through,” Albeta whispered to herself. Her voice, though soft, carried an edge of determination. “But this time, I’ll be the one to protect her.”



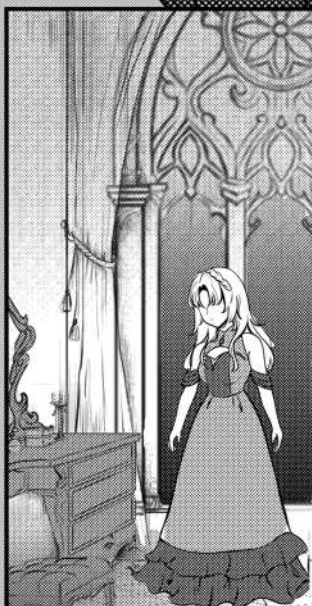
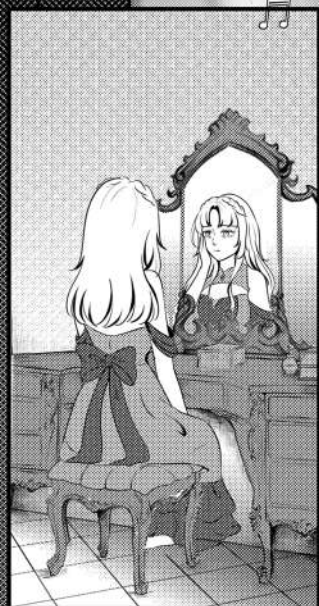
The castle loomed in the moonlight, its spires piercing the night sky like silent sentinels. The faint hum of activity stirred within its walls as guards patrolled the grounds, their armor gleaming faintly beneath the flickering torchlight. Yet amidst the human watchfulness, two ethereal forms moved unseen, their ghostly shapes weaving through the corridors like shadows given life.

One of the hallows, Fros, paused abruptly, his translucent form flickering as he turned to his companion. “I could sense him here a moment ago. Where could he have gone?”

A pair of guards turned abruptly, their boots echoing against the stone floor. Fros froze, his form stiff as though he could be discovered at any moment.

“Fool,” Val muttered, his voice a low rumble. “They cannot see you.”

Fros exhaled sharply, his shoulders sagging in relief. “I already



knew that,” he replied, his tone defensive despite the faint quiver in his voice.

Val’s eyes narrowed, and with a sigh of exasperation, he rolled his eyes. “I will search the right side. You take the left,” he ordered, his voice sharp and commanding. “Do not let him take the orb. If you see it—or, better yet, see him—report to master immediately.”

Without further ado, Val dissolved into the shadows, his form melting into the darkness. Fros lingered for a moment longer, his nervous energy palpable, before he, too, vanished into the void.



Above, in the quiet stillness of her chamber, the princess stood by the window.

The soft hum of the festival reached her ears, faint and distant, as flickering lanterns painted the city below in hues of gold and amber. She watched the revelry with an unreadable expression, her fingers tracing absent patterns on the windowsill.

Turning away, she moved to her vanity, the chair creaking softly beneath her weight. Her reflection stared back at her, its gaze heavy with the weight of unspoken thoughts. She leaned closer, her fingers brushing the edges of her eyes, staring at the reflection of a girl she no longer recognized—eyes sunken, lips pulled taut as if bracing for words she could not yet hear.

It had started days ago, the faintest whisper curling into her dreams, vague and distant like a phantom calling from beyond the veil. But tonight, the whispers were clearer, sharper, their dissonant voices humming in her ears.

“You hear me?”

“This is only your beginning.”

Her heart hammered, the rhythm wild and unsteady as she stood abruptly. Her hands trembled, and the chill air in the room did

nothing to steady them.

And then she saw it.

Through the window, the shadows moved where none should. Dozens of figures loomed against the moonlit haze, their forms amorphous and writhing unnaturally as they drew closer to the castle. A deep, primal terror settled into her bones, and before she knew it, her feet carried her out of the room and into the hall.

“Guards!” She stumbled into the hall, breathless and frantic, her voice rising again. “There! Outside!”

The watchmen on duty turned to her, their faces clouded with concern. Their hands rested on their swords, but they made no move to look where she pointed.

“Princess, please,” one said softly, his tone measured as though soothing a frightened child. “There is no one there.”

She froze, her outstretched hand trembling. “No!” she protested, her voice cracking with urgency. “I saw them— the shadows! They’re coming!”

The guards exchanged uncertain glances, their doubt cutting through her like a blade.

The voices inside her head grew louder, impossibly loud, crashing over her like a relentless tide.

“Useless”

“All of them”

“Kill them all” it said.

Her knees weakened, and she staggered back, clutching at her chest as though it might anchor her. Her breath hitched, panic consuming her as the world seemed to spin. “Mother,” she whispered, her voice barely audible. “Father.”



Val soared high above the castle, his spectral form observing the

chaos sprawled below. Hordes of shadowed spirits and possessed humans surging like a tide of sorrow with death hung thick in the air. It was a disaster far greater than they had ever imagined.

Val's lips curled into a faint sneer, his expression cold and calculating. "The epicenter must be here," he muttered to himself. The realization settled heavily in his mind, a cold certainty tightening his chest. "If the spirits have gathered in such numbers, then he too must be undoubtedly close by".

Where is Fros? The thought pressed against his mind, unbidden yet persistent, as his gaze flickered across the horizon.

Val shook his head sharply, stripping himself of the unease. *Fros can do it. Even someone like him straightens up in a situation like this.* His voice was low but resolute as he murmured, "I must inform master." The urgency of the situation left no room for anything else. With one final glance at the seething chaos below, Val turned sharply, his spectral form streaking through the night like a pale comet cutting through the darkness.

Fros, please meet up with us as soon as you find the orb, he thought, the silent plea unspoken but heavy in his mind as he vanished into the horizon.



The city thrummed with life, lanterns casting a golden glow over crowds lost in laughter and music. Zeo walked among them, a shadow cutting through the revelry, his gaze distant yet sharp. Stopping amidst the dancers, he tilted his head upward, the faint shimmer of crimson in his eyes catching the light.

The dreadful souls had begun to swirl, descending into people,

like restless shadows They moved with an unnatural rhythm, slipping unseen into the bodies of unsuspecting passersby, their



movements turning jerky and strange. Zeo's mouth clicked in irritation. His hand tightened around the hilt of his sword, the warmth of his flames stirring to life beneath his grip. Closing his eyes, he exhaled sharply. With his eyes closed, the world appeared different. The lively crowd was gone, replaced by pale, flickering shapes of souls moving aimlessly in the void. The silence was deafening.

Zeo's voice was low, almost to himself. "So, it begins."

Zeo moved like a flicker of flame in a zigzagged leap of motion, darting from one soul-infested body to the next, his blade slicing through the air with precision and his sword returning to its sheath as quickly as it had been drawn, leaving behind no trace but the faint shimmer of fading embers.

With the last soul cut, the oppressive stillness lifted. The people, now free, blinked in confusion as though waking from a dream. "What happened?" one murmured, clutching their chest.

"I... I felt like my body wasn't mine for a moment," another stammered, looking at their trembling hands. "But now..." Their voice trailed off as they exchanged relieved glances.

Zeo stood at the centre of it all, his eyes still closed as he exhaled a long, weary sigh. When they opened, he tilted his head slightly upward.

Above him, his spirit waited in the silence, watching.

"Master!" the spirit stammered, the words spilling out in a rush. "Hordes of people... they're transforming en masse. The epicenter is... it's most likely here, and that... that means—"

The spirit hesitated, its form flickering erratically as though the weight of its message was too much to bear. Finally, it forced out, "That *he* is here."

Zeo's eyes narrowed, his frown deepening as he turned to look over his shoulder. The souls were still emerging, spilling into the streets like a restless tide, latching onto unsuspecting people.

He raised his hands, and the air seemed to shift, charged with an

invisible force. With a commanding wave, hordes of fiery, glowing spirits erupted around him, their forms flickering with an ethereal brilliance that contrasted the dark, malevolent souls swarming the area.

“Fend them off until I return,” Zeo commanded, his voice cold and unyielding.

The spirits surged forward, clashing with the corrupted souls in a chaotic battle of light and shadow. Without another word, Zeo turned on his heel, his sword glinting faintly at his side as he moved toward the epicenter following the trembling spirit whose whispers were filled with urgency. Behind them, the battlefield of souls raged, the air thick with the clash of their energies.

The night was still young, but then the battle had already begun as cries of helplessness filled the sky. One sound tore through stood out—a guttural, earth-shaking roar that stopped Zeo in his tracks. He turned sharply, his eyes narrowing at a massive, grotesque possessed human lumbered into view. Its form was twisted beyond recognition, muscles bulging unnaturally, its blackened veins pulsing with an ominous glow.

“This seems to be the epicenter,” the spirit at his side whispered, its voice trembling.

Zeo’s gaze drifted to the people scattered across the ground, their bodies trembling as they clawed at their own skin. “Don’t come near me!” one cried, their voice cracking with terror as black veins began crawling up their arms, pushing away air as though it would keep the transformed away. Others whimpered incoherently, their bodies convulsing as the transformation overtook them.

Zeo’s voice was calm, almost detached. “A level 2 possessed.”

“Don’t overdo it, Master,” the spirit warned, its voice tinged with worry.

Zeo said nothing. Instead, he unsheathed his sword, holding it close to his face. His reflection glinted in the blade—a fleeting image



of resolve. His eyes slid shut, the world around him falling silent for a single, weighty moment.

Then, with a sudden snap, his eyes opened, glowing a vivid, otherworldly hue of crimson with spirals forming inside as blood streamed down his cheeks. Flames erupted from his body, curling upward into horns of fire atop his head, their flickering hues reflecting the emotions roiling within. The air around him grew heavy, thick with heat and energy.

He leapt into the air with terrifying speed, flames trailing behind him like a comet, his sword poised for a devastating strike. But just as he neared the beast, his feet hit the ground with a heavy thud, and he turned away from the beast, looking behind.

The grip was weak but desperate, trembling hands clutching at Zeo's leg as he prepared to move. He looked down to see a man, veins bulging, his eyes almost fully transformed into blackened pits.

"Don't... kill her," the man stammered, his voice cracking with pain and desperation. "She was fine... just a moment ago, but... she..." The man's words dissolved as he lost his consciousness.

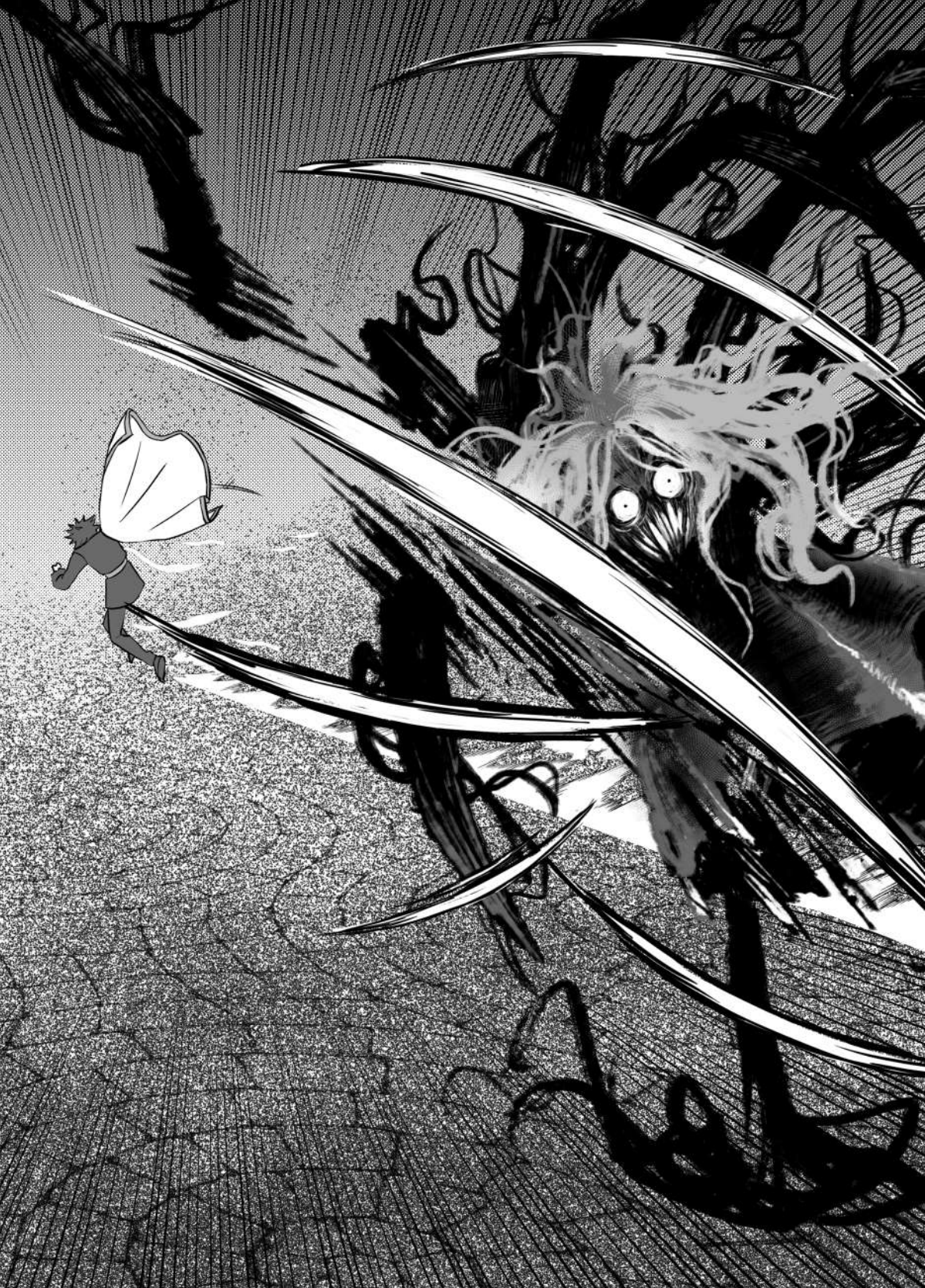
Zeo's jaw tightened. "I don't have time for this," he muttered under his breath, his gaze shifting where the true threat awaited. "I cannot afford to let *him* escape."

He took a step forward, the grip on his leg slackening as the man's body writhed in agony. But as Zeo moved, a memory flared—Rissette's voice, sharp and unwavering. "*Leave no one behind. That is the first rule of our Order of the mirror. And you did what?*"

His eyes flicked to the trembling figures around him, faces contorted with fear and pain. Their lives hung by a thread, and the thought of their end gnawed at him.

Zeo let out a long, exasperated sigh, his hand tightening on his sword hilt. "Even if you don't tell me," he muttered, his voice resigned but firm.

Flames began to ripple from his fingers, flickering with a cold



intensity as he prepared to do what he must. “As if I will leave them behind. You guys take see to those in the midst of transformation—I shall deal with the possessed.”

“Aye!” replied the spirits in unison.

In one swift motion, he lunged toward the ogre-sized possessed human, his sword transforming mid-strike. Its physical structure melted away, replaced by a blade of pure, roaring flame. The fiery weapon crackled with unrestrained energy, illuminating the night with a searing glow.

Leaping into the air with terrifying precision, Zeo brought the flaming blade down in a decisive arc. The strike tore through the possessed creature, flames erupting in all directions. A thick shroud of fire consumed the air, the inferno twisting and writhing like a living entity.

The onlookers, barely regaining their senses, gasped audibly, their mouths agape as the possessed form crumbled beneath the weight of the flames. Whispers of disbelief rippled through the crowd, their fear giving way to awe, before they were whisked away with the smoke.

From the side, the random spirit sighed heavily, its translucent form flickering faintly as it hovered near. “I told you not to overdo it,” it muttered, its voice carrying both exasperation and concern.

Zeo landed amidst the smouldering ruins of the flames, his sword still ablaze in his hand, his breath ragged. Without looking back, he simply replied, “How’s that?”. Behind him, his spirits took over, flitting through the crowd to tend to the trembling, half-transformed people.

“Now, now,” the random spirit muttered as he hovered over a man mid-transformation. Gripping the soul by its translucent ear, the spirit yanked it out with a scolding tone. “What do you think you’re doing, huh? Get out of there and stop causing trouble!” The unruly soul writhed in protest before dissolving into nothingness.



Zeo's sharp voice cut through the air. "Catch!"

The random spirit turned just in time to see a now-normal girl—freed from possession—hurtling through the air. The crowd gasped collectively, their eyes widening in shock as they scrambled to catch her. The random spirit flicked his fingers, softening her fall with an invisible cushion of energy just as the crowd caught her.

The air simmered with heat as Zeo's flames began to die down, his form emerging from the inferno, calm and untransformed. His crimson eyes fixed on the random spirit sprawled on the ground, his form flickering with exhaustion. "Why are you on the floor?" Zeo's tone was sharp, but there was no anger—just an unwavering authority. "Show me to the epicenter."

The random spirit looked up, his form sagging with fatigue from cleaning up his mess but still flickering to life at his master's command. "Coming!" he replied breathlessly, pushing himself upright and gliding forward to lead the way.

A deep, guttural roar echoed from behind Zeo, rattling through the already uneasy air. He sighed, his shoulders rising and falling with quiet exasperation. *Not again.* Slowly, he turned, his crimson gaze landing on the source of the sound. The man who had begged for the girl's life now stood in the centre of the street—not as a man, but as a possessed. Another level 2 possession.

Zeo shot a sharp glance at the spirit beside him, his eyes demanding, "I thought I told you to take care of him?" The spirit tapped both its fingers together, shifting awkwardly. "Ooopss."

Zeo's eyes darkened. His transformation had worn off, the fire in his veins quieted, leaving him momentarily drained. But there was no time to recover.

The demon—once the desperate man—moved fast. In a blur of unnatural motion, it lunged, its jagged claws slicing through the air with deadly precision. Zeo's body tensed, his muscles coiling in preparation. *Too close.*

A swift step to the left, then to the right—each motion a breath ahead of the demon’s frenzied slashes. The wind hissed past his ear as he ducked low, rolling beneath the next strike, his palms hitting the ground. Using the momentum, he flipped upward, balancing momentarily on one hand as his crimson eyes locked onto the possessed man’s face.

Tears.

Even through the grotesque transformation, the demon’s eyes glistened, wet with something deeply human.

Zeo’s voice was steady, unwavering. “You don’t have to cry.” His flames flickered, casting soft embers into the air. “You did well holding it in... until she was safe.”

The demon’s body trembled. The rage flickered, uncertainty creeping into the monstrous form.

Zeo continued, his voice softer, but resolute. “Don’t worry. Let it all out. As long as I’m here, you will be safe.”

The demon hesitated. Its breath hitched.

And for a fleeting moment, its gaze shifted—past Zeo, toward the girl now safe in the arms of the crowd.

Then, as though realization struck, it let out a raw, agonized roar.

Zeo remained still, his flames licking at his skin, not consuming but illuminating. Without lifting a finger, his fire burned *brighter*—its glow swallowing the demon’s form in golden-orange light. The air grew thick with heat, heavy with something beyond power, beyond fire. It was a promise.

And for the first time, the demon *stilled*.

The flames receded, leaving only embers drifting in the heavy air. Where a monstrous demon once stood, a man now lay burned but human once more, his chest rising and falling with shallow breaths.

Zeo’s spirits moved swiftly, placing him beside the woman he had fought so hard to protect.

One spirit, holding a tiny glass bottle, smirked as it watched the



last remnants of the evil soul writhing inside. “Uh oh,” it muttered, just as the bottle slipped from its fingers.

Without looking, the spirit caught it effortlessly mid-air, twirling it once before slipping it back into a small briefcase. As the lid clicked shut, the spirits turned—only to see Zeo standing there, arms crossed, his gaze sharp and unwavering.

They whistled innocently, pretending nothing had happened.

Zeo exhaled, but something inside him lurched—his chest tightening, his vision flickering at the edges. *Not now*, he thought, his heart pounding erratically. His body felt heavy, drained. His flames had taken their toll.

With a grunt of frustration, he slammed a fist against his own chest, forcing his breath to steady. His grip tightened around his sword as he slid it back into place, its hilt clicking softly against his belt.

The dizziness didn’t fade, but his resolve remained unshaken.

He had no time for weakness. Not yet.

The people stared at Zeo with wide eyes, their expressions shifting from disbelief to awe, their breaths collectively held in stunned silence. Then, as if a floodgate had burst, the tension gave way to a thunderous applause. Cheers erupted through the square, voices lifting in exhilaration, some even calling his name.

Zeo’s posture stiffened. A faint tinge of pink dusted his ears as he averted their gaze.

Running a hand through his hair, he muttered, “You guys, just don’t exit your houses anymore, okay?” His crimson eyes flicked over the beaming faces before sighing. “If you need to celebrate a festival this vicariously again, you’ll end up attracting evil spirits again. Just have a warden on the lookout or something.”

Despite his scolding, the energy of the crowd remained bright, their relief palpable.

But Zeo had no time to entertain them further. Turning back, he

commanded, “Epicenter?”

The spirits reacted immediately, conjuring a shimmering map in the air before him. It displayed their current location, the castle in the distance, and a spread of general capital information.

Zeo’s gaze sharpened as he assessed the layout, his mind already calculating their next move.

Then, above the rooftops, a voice split the air.

“Master!”

Val descended rapidly, his form flickering erratically as if the urgency of his message propelled him faster. “Master!” he called again, landing before Zeo in a rush of cold wind. “Loads of spirits have appeared in the castle—far more than we’ve ever seen before! I believe he’s here! This might be our chance to finally capture him.”

Zeo’s eyes narrowed. “Where did you say he is?”

“Castle,” Val confirmed without hesitation.

Zeo’s patience snapped. His body tensed, flames flickering faintly at his fingertips, his temper surging to an all-time high. Slowly, he turned to face the spirit who had just moments ago provided the wrong location.

“Epicenter, you said.” His voice was dangerously low, heat pulsing in the air around him.

The random spirit in question whistled innocently, looking anywhere but at Zeo, as though he hadn’t seen this coming.

“Castle, it is!” adds Val.

Zeo steadied himself, forcing down the wave of dizziness that threatened to pull him under. His body felt heavy, his vision slightly blurred, but there was no time to waste.

“Val,” he muttered, his frustration barely concealed, “Let’s go.”

Without hesitation, Val’s spectral form expanded, wrapping around Zeo before forming into wings of ethereal energy. With a single, powerful motion, they soared into the sky.

As they ascended, the full scale of the disaster below came into

view. The castle grounds were swarming—hordes of possessed, zombie-like humans shuffled aimlessly, their bodies twisted by corruption, their eyes devoid of reason. The city that once stood strong now resembled a graveyard of the living.

The rumor about the orb of salvation... Zeo and Val thought in unison. *It must be true.*

Despite the altitude, Zeo could feel the weight of the sight pressing down on him. His breath came heavy, his head pounding. Too many. His fingers clenched around his temples as he held his head in one hand, frustration seeping through his every movement.

“Oy, oy...” he thought, sweat beading at his temple. This wasn’t just a battle—this was a massacre waiting to happen.



The corridor stretched into shadow, littered with bleeding bodies sprawled across the stone floor. The faint flicker of distant torches cast erratic patterns on the walls, illuminating the lifeless forms of palace maids lying in eerie silence. Fros hovered nearby, his translucent form blending into the dim light.

“Where am I?” he murmured, his voice barely audible as his gaze swept the unsettling scene.

A faint sound broke the stillness—soft, almost imperceptible, but enough to send a jolt of caution through him. Without hesitation, Fros slipped behind a towering pillar, his translucent form barely visible against its shadowed surface. He held his breath, his body rigid, until the noise faded.

Albeta collapsed to her knees at the sight of the corridor filled with bodies scattered across the cold stone floor like discarded dolls. Trembling as her breathe hitched, “No,” she whispered, crawling to the nearest figure, a maid huddled against the wall. “Betty?” Her voice was soft, trembling with hope. But the woman remained

motionless, her chest barely rising.

Panic surged through her as she moved to another, shaking the lifeless form gently. “Anna?” Her voice cracked as she crawled to yet another. “Emma!”

Desperation spilled from her lips in broken pleas. “What’s happening? Please, someone, say something!”

Letting out a shaky sigh of relief, Fros cautiously stepped out from behind the pillar, whispering to himself, “Right. She cannot see me.”

A faint, hoarse whisper cut through her the silence. “Cold... Leave me alone... Go away. I want to live!”

Albeta turned sharply, her eyes landing on a maid slumped against the far wall. The woman’s trembling form shook violently, her hands clawing at the air as if warding off an unseen terror.

“Louis!” Albeta cried, scrambling toward her. She reached out, only for the maid to shriek and shove her away with a surprising burst of strength.

“Louis, it’s me!” Albeta stammered, but the maid’s cries only grew more frantic, her voice rising into incoherent terror.

The sound of heavy, uneven footsteps drew Albeta’s attention. Her blood ran cold as she saw him—the palace guard.

He approached with an unnatural gait, his movements jerky and spasms, as if his body no longer obeyed the laws of humanity. A dark, sickly aura clung to him, rippling like a living shadow.

“By the world tree...” Albeta whispered, her voice trembling, a memory from her past clawing its way into her mind.

The guard turned his head sharply, his glowing eyes locking onto her with feral intensity. With a guttural snarl, he lunged—not at her, but at one of the maids sprawled nearby. Albeta froze in horror as he sank his teeth into the helpless woman, his roars of hunger filling the air.

Trembling, Albeta glanced to her side to save Louis, albeit she

had begun to writhe uncontrollably, her limbs twisting at unnatural angles as her skin darkened, veins bulging like black rivers beneath her flesh. Her eyes glazed over, and a low, guttural growl escaped her throat.

“No...” Albeta whispered, her voice shaking as the truth dawned on her. “No, this can’t be happening.”

Her instincts screamed for her to run. Grabbing her bag, she bolted, her legs carrying her blindly through the halls. Behind her, the sounds of snarls and inhuman cries grew louder, a tide of hoards—the possessed—rising in pursuit. Their monstrous roars echoed through the corridors like the toll of death, sending shivers racing down her spine.

“Princess!” she screamed, her voice cracking with desperation. “Where are you?”



Yuzarinne ran past the guards, her heart pounding as the voices in her head grew louder, a dissonant hum that vibrated through her very bones, her gown rustling behind her as she hurried to the grand chamber.

The hallway was empty. Unnaturally so. “Where is everyone?” she shouted, uneasy.

“They were here a while ago,” one of the guards replied, chasing behind her, confused.

The answer chilled her to the core. Please be safe. Mom. Dad. Albeta. Everyone.

The heavy doors to the King’s chamber loomed before her, and with trembling hands, she pushed them open.

Her parents were at the center of the room, sitting not on their idealic couches but in the air, no longer the king and queen she knew. Their forms were hunched, their heads lolling like puppets



with their strings cut. The moonlight streaming through the tall windows illuminated dark veins crawling up their skin, their movements unnatural, as though something inside them struggled to break free.

“Mother... Father...” Yuzarinne whispered, her voice barely audible over the sound of her pounding heart.

Their eyes met hers, and for a fleeting moment, she saw the faintest glimmers of humanity still flickering within. The knight faints.

Her mother, the queen, with trembling blue lips and a pale demeanor whispered, “Run... Yuza. Run. Before... he comes.”

Her father, the mighty king who had once carried her on his shoulders, trembled beneath the weight of an unseen force. He reached into his sleeve, his hands shaking violently, and dropped a small, glimmering orb.

The orb lands on Yuzarinne’s palms, and the light it emits seems to push back the encroaching darkness, though only faintly.

“Take this,” he said, with a desperation that comes with the lack of time. “Take it and go!” he screamed.

“You must live Yuza. You must live, even if it is by yourself!” as tears stemmed from his eyes.

“Mom! Dad! I cannot leave. Not like this.” Her voice cracked as she fell to her knees, clasping the orb, tears streaming down her face. “You need to come with me—please!”

The king grunted, his trembling hands clawing at his chest as though trying to tear free whatever monstrous force plagued him. “He will... be back. We cannot—”

The rest of his words dissolved into a guttural cry, his body convulsing violently. Beside him, the queen’s movements stilled. Yuzarinne’s breath caught in her throat as her mother’s eyes slowly lost their color, turning a hollow, lifeless black.

Yet, in that moment of transformation, her lips parted, her voice soft but steady. “We love you, Yuzarinne. We always have, always

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will, no matter where we are.”

Her head hung low, lifeless, as silence fell like a shroud.

The voice in Yuzarinne’s head swelled, sharp and overwhelming:
Save them. Kill them.

“No!” she screamed, the sound tearing from her chest as her body was propelled into the air. A surge of raw energy coursed through her, and her vision blurred as brilliant blue tattoos illuminated her skin, spiraling across her body in intricate patterns adorned with glowing butterflies. The air around her shimmered as bubbles of all sizes erupted into existence, glowing like tiny stars. They spun faster and faster, the world around her a cacophony of roaring energy.

And then she exploded.

The sound was deafening, a force that tore through the chamber with a ferocity that left the air heavy with finality. But as the light dimmed and the echoes faded, the voices that had filled her mind fell into a deafening hush.

Peace.

Yuzarinne collapsed to the ground, her body trembling as her eyes regained their color. Her chest heaved with shallow breaths, her vision clearing enough to see the aftermath of the eruption.

Bubbles swirled gently around her parents, cocooning their trembling forms in a luminous shield. Her heart leapt, and with frantic energy, she stumbled forward, her hands reaching to pull them free.

“Please!” she cried, her voice cracking. “Please, no! Don’t leave me!”

But the barrier held firm, unyielding despite her desperate efforts.

For the briefest of moments, the swirling light slowed, and their faces softened. Her father’s strong, weathered features and her mother’s delicate, kind expression emerged, unclouded by torment. Their eyes met hers with a clarity that struck her to the core.

Her mother smiled faintly, tears slipping down her pale cheeks. “You saved us, Yuza,” she whispered, her voice soft as a sigh.

Her father's lips moved, his words fractured but unmistakable:
"Go!"

The bubble shimmered once more before it exploded into a cascade of glowing droplets, leaving behind only silence.

They were gone.

Yuzarinne stared at their bodies, now still and serene, faint smiles etched upon their faces as though freed from their pain at last. The sight unraveled her.

Falling to her knees, she clutched their heads against her chest, her sobs wracking her body as tears poured freely down her face. Tilting her head back, she let out a raw, anguished cry that echoed through the chamber, filling the emptiness with her grief.

"Mom! Dad!" she screamed, her voice breaking as she stared into the endless void of the night sky above.

But no answer came.

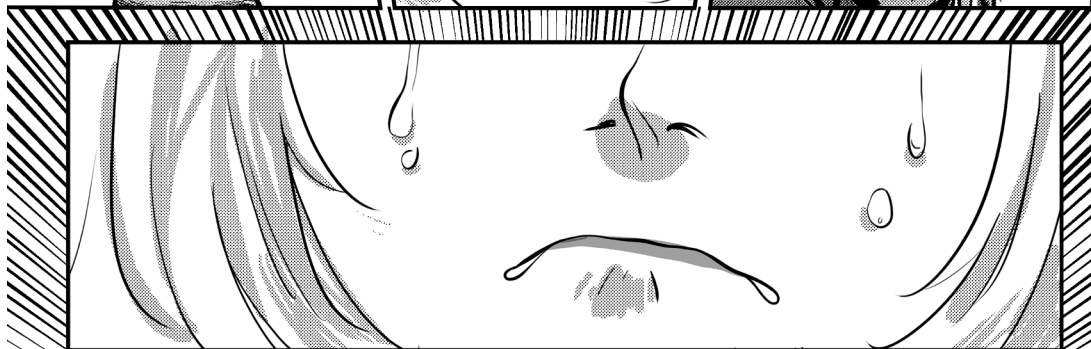
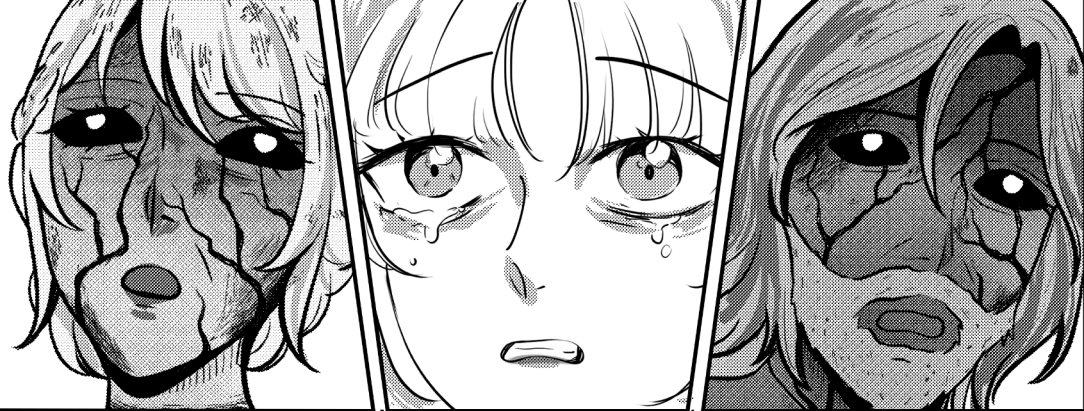


Fros finally saw it. The epicenter.

He breathed a shaky sigh of relief as his gaze landed on a familiar figure—Albeta. She wobbled unsteadily in a man's grasp before collapsing to the ground in a heap. The sight jolted him, and instinctively, he ducked behind a nearby pillar, his mind racing. *Val!*

Curiosity tugged at him, and he risked a glance around the corner. His spectral heart nearly stopped at the grisly scene before him.

A trail of bloodied humans stretched behind the man, their broken bodies littering the ground. Some lay motionless, the life long gone from their forms. Others convulsed violently, mid-transformation, their bodies twisting grotesquely as their veins darkened and eyes turned glassy. Still more had fully transformed, their monstrous figures looming over the fallen, some snarling mindlessly, others seemingly conscious but far removed from their humanity.



Fros swallowed hard, the memory of Van's words echoing in his mind: "*No one can see us.*" He clung to the reassurance and exhaled slowly.

"I see you." The man's voice rang out, low and sharp, cutting through the silence like a blade.

Fros froze, his entire form stiffening as if the words themselves had bound him in place. Slowly, placing himself behind the pillar again, not having caught a sight of his face. His mouth opened and closed uselessly before he stammered out, "Aye."

"This is scary!" he exclaimed. Without a second thought, he turned and fled, his spectral feet carrying him as fast as they could.

Val, Master! he cried inwardly, his mind a whirlwind of panic. *I have found him. I've found the epicenter. Tell me I did a good job!*



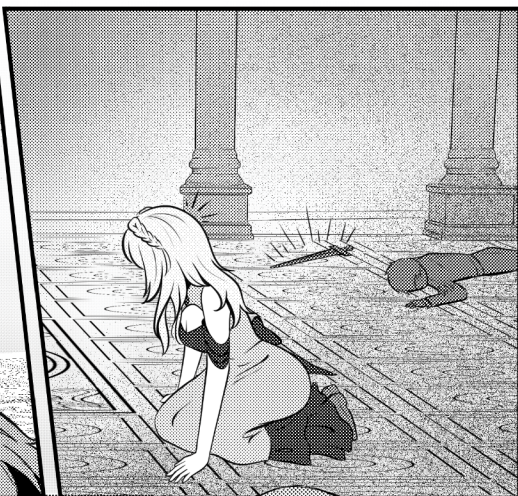
The man's footsteps are seen with his backward view as he walks towards the same door in which Yuzurinne is.

Yuzurinne's breath hitched as the faint sound of footsteps reached her ears—the soft, unhurried cadence of boots striking marble. She froze in place, her entire body tensing as her thoughts spiraled. Is that him?

The voices in her mind surged, sharp and insistent. "Today's the lucky day. Kill him!"

Her grip on the gem tightened, the faint glow of its surface casting a dim light against her trembling fingers. Slowly, she turned, her eyes scanning the dim corridor. At the far end, a silhouette loomed—a figure barely illuminated by the faint moonlight streaming through the high windows.

"There you are," the figure drawled, his voice cold and amused. Yuzurinne's stomach churned as he continued, his tone laced with mockery. "Stubborn old man. He didn't give me the orb until his



last breath. But what do I see there in your hands? The legendary orb of salvation!” He took a step closer, his silhouette growing sharper. “Finally... in my hands.”

Her heart thundered in her chest as a surge of hatred boiled within her. Her gaze flicked toward a knight’s fallen sword lying nearby, the polished steel glinting faintly in the moonlight. She thought of wielding it against him, striking him down before he could come any closer. Or perhaps she could summon the power she had unleashed before. But then, her parents last words returned to her: “Run!”

Her grip tightened around the gem, and she swallowed the searing hatred that threatened to consume her. Without another thought, she turned and ran, her feet carrying her down the long, familiar halls. Her chest heaved, her breath ragged, as the echoes of her footsteps filled the emptiness.

Behind her, his boots followed, their steady rhythm growing louder with each passing second. “Stop where you are!” he barked, his voice cold, reverberating through the corridor like a crack of thunder.

“You cannot escape,” he continued, the sound of his footsteps never increasing in pace, yet somehow always closer.

Tears burned down Yuzurinne’s cheeks as she swung the doorway open, her heart pounding. The once familiar corridors, now eerily silent and barren of life, revealed horrors she could barely comprehend.

The people she loved—guards, maids, nobles—all twisted and malformed, their faces hauntingly familiar yet grotesquely wrong. Their eyes, black pits of insatiable hunger, turned toward her in unison, as though drawn by her presence. Even the unconscious bodies that had once littered the halls began to stir, their movements jerky and monstrous as they took form, grotesque parodies of the people they once were.

“Put me down.” Zeo says, “I’ve got to save those people”.

Val's grip didn't loosen. "*No.*" he refused, firm and unwavering. Zeo's eye twitched. "Val!"

"No, Master. You're in no condition to fight them all."

Zeo's flames flickered in agitation, but Val didn't budge. This time, Zeo wasn't getting his way.

"The master I knew would have saved all these people without blinking an eye." He said, "But the master now? You are but an ember of what you once were."

Zeo's fists clenched, his breathing uneven. The insult stung, but deep down, he knew it wasn't just an insult. It was the truth.

Val's wings beat harder, taking them higher. "As your familiar, I cannot let you throw yourself into danger like this. We must find him—so that you can become yourself again. Then saving these people?" He exhaled sharply. "We can even save the world."

Val's voice remained cold, but his eyes were wet. Yet he held back his tears.

"If you die, there is no one else who can stop him." His words trembled slightly but held firm. "Not just these people—the entire world might cease to exist if things continue like this."

Zeo stilled, his flames dimming. For once, he had nothing to say. The wind howled around them, the air tense with unspoken words.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, Val caught a glimpse of something—or someone—familiar. His gaze flickered toward the distant rooftops, his mind racing. Could it be...?

Above the writhing horde of possessed, a lone entity circled in frantic loops, its voice ringing through the night.

"Master has disappeared!"

It was Fros—his ghostly form spinning wildly in distress, his cries carrying over the chaos.

Val's expression twisted in utter disgust. "You idiot."

Fros, still spiraling mid-air, looked over at them, his translucent eyes brimming with unshed tears. But the moment he spotted them,

his entire face lit up with joy. “Master!” he cried, beaming as he rocketed toward them.

Before he could collide, Val bonked him square on the head, sending him reeling backward. “Spill it.”

Fros clutched the spot where Val had struck him, wincing. “He’s here!” he blurted, gasping. “I saw a lane of dead bodies, possessed humans of all levels—and even the man himself! I... I fear the entire royal family is dead.”

Silence.

Zeo’s grip on his sword tightened. “We were too late.” His voice was eerily calm, but the weight of those words sank deep.

Val exhaled sharply. He grabbed Fros by the back of his head and bowed it forcefully. “Apologize.”

Fros groaned, still rubbing his head. “...I didn’t mean to lose him.”

Fros groaned, still rubbing his head. “If only we were informed sooner, we could have come earlier.”

Val’s expression darkened. “Don’t blame others,” he snapped. “We should have gathered intel faster.” His frustration bled through, but he knew there was no time for regret.

Zeo’s voice cut through the tension. “Search him down.” His flames flickered, restrained but ready. “Do not give him a chance to escape. We strike today.”

“Yes, Master!” Fros straightened, wings of spectral light flaring behind him as he prepared to leave.

But before he could disappear, Zeo grabbed his arm. “Val, go.”

Fros froze, blinking up at him with tear-stained eyes.

“You... You come with me.” Zeo added.

A radiant glow surged from his form as he dissolved into embers, spiralling toward Zeo’s sword. The blade pulsed, now infused with Fros’s presence. As the fusion completed, Fros heard Val’s voice through a telekinetic link— *“Do not let Master use his powers, Fros. I’m counting on you.”*

Fros nodded. “You don’t have to tell me that. I was already thinking about it.”

Zeo lifted his sword, its fiery edge glowing brighter than ever, starting his walk into the castle.

Zeo was prepared to descend, his grip tightening around his sword, Fros’s voice echoed within.

“Master! Stop!”

Zeo halted mid-strike, irritation flashing across his face. “What now?”

“I think I know where he is!” Fros’s voice was urgent, unwavering. “I can lead the way.”

Zeo glanced back, eyes narrowing, then gave a sharp nod. “Fine. Show me.”

Fros gave out a sigh, “I know a way that’s clear of most possessed—since, well, everyone’s already dead.” He hesitated for a beat before continuing. “If we cut through that path, we can buy time until Val returns.”

Without hesitation, Zeo surged forward, blazing through the castle corridors like a storm.

Strike. Slash. Jump. Dodge. Hit.

A grotesque spirit—the same one that had nearly taken down Yuzarinne—lurched from the shadows. It barely had time to react.

One clean slash. Gone.

Zeo moved like a streak of fire, his blade carving through the air, cutting down whatever dared stand in his way. The walls blurred past as they rushed forward, closing in on their true target.

Fros glanced around, his eyes widening as more possessed emerged from the shadows, their twisted forms filling the corridor. “Where did these guys sprout from again?”

Then, realization struck. His gaze flickered toward Zeo, his flames burning hotter, his mana surging unchecked.

“...Are they attracted to Master’s mana?”



As another wave of possessed lurched toward them, Fros sighed in resignation.

“Val... I’m sorry...!”



A massive figure emerged from the chaos, a monstrous being wielding an oversized bat. With an earth-shattering roar, it swung the golem-like weapon at her.

Yuzurinne’s body moved instinctively, her fear propelling her out of harm’s way. She fell to the ground, narrowly dodging the vertical slash as the bat cracked against the stone floor with a deafening crash. Scrambling to her feet, she threw herself to the side, evading the horizontal swing by mere inches as it whistled past her head.

Her back slammed against the cold, unyielding wall, and her breath hitched as the demon advanced on her. Its grotesque golem weapon dragged along the ground, leaving jagged grooves in its wake.

The air thickened with dread as it raised the weapon for another blow—

A hand clamped over her mouth, yanking her into the shadows.



Zeo piled the bodies they had collected at the center, their lifeless forms eerily still. He stood beside them, his breath ragged, hands resting on his knees as he sucked in air. His flames flickered dimly, exhaustion creeping in, but he wasn’t done yet.

His grip tightened on his sword as he straightened. “Fros.”

“Aye, Sir.”

Without hesitation, Fros responded, his energy syncing with Zeo’s as they summoned a towering pillar of fire. The inferno roared to



life, swallowing the bodies whole in a brilliant, searing light—one final, absolute exorcism.

As the flames died down, silence settled over them.

Zeo exhaled, praying, as sweat dripped down his brow. “May your souls rest in peace”.

He looked around, before he said, “I don’t sense him here any longer.”

Fros hovered beside him, his expression troubled. “He was here.”

His voice carried an unsettling certainty. And then, like a shift in the air, they *felt it*.

A deep, pulsing pressure—a presence that sent a shiver through the walls. Zeo’s eyes darkened, his fingers twitching at the hilt of his sword.

“This power...?”

Zeo dashed through the corridor, his footsteps echoing against the cold stone walls. The tension thickened, each step bringing them closer to something unseen—someone waiting.



Bursting into the royal grand chamber, they immediately recognized it. The air was heavy, thick with something unnatural. Books were scattered everywhere.

Near the balcony, a lone silhouette stood, bathed in the pale glow of the moon, holding one book, smiling with with amusement—as if they had been expecting them all along.

“It’s me, Albeta,” came a voice, hushed but unmistakable.

Yuzurinne turned in shock, her eyes wide as they met the familiar face of her savior. Albeta—her sweet and loyal companions—stood before her. But she had changed. Her face was marred by dark veins, her breathing ragged and labored. Yet her blackened eyes held something still recognizable. Something kind.

“Albeta...” Yuzurinne whispered, her voice trembling.

The demon reached for them, but Albeta’s grip was firm as she pulled Yuzurinne along with her, guiding her through the maze of horror. They ran together, Yuzurinne’s breath ragged as the sounds of snarls and inhuman cries echoed behind them.

They reached a small room, its hidden doorway barely visible in the dim light. Without hesitation, Albeta pushed her—hard—into the room, her voice strangled yet urgent.

“Run, Princess,” she whispered, her tone leaving no room for argument.

Tears streamed down Yuzurinne’s face as she reached for her. “Come with me! Please!”

Albeta shook her head, her expression softening for a fleeting moment. Her lips quivered as she smiled faintly, tears sliding down her own cheeks. “We are friends, aren’t we?” she said, her voice breaking. “This time, I shall protect you!”

Before Yuzurinne could protest, Albeta shoved her farther into the room and slammed the door shut.

“Albeta!” Yuzurinne cried, pounding on the door, her voice raw with anguish.

The sound of her own screams was drowned by a louder, blood-curdling one—Albeta’s.

The sickening sound of flesh tearing followed, and blood splattered against the cracks of the doorway, dripping into the tunnel like a gruesome waterfall.

Yuzurinne froze, paralyzed by fear and grief.

Then, piercing through the silence, a voice echoed with chilling certainty, each word sharp yet cruel:

“You cannot run forever.”

Ted stood there, his usual grin in place as he leaned lazily against the balcony railing. The moonlight framed him, casting sharp contrasts across his face—amused, relaxed, yet unreadable.

Zeo eyed him, his brow furrowing slightly, a silent question mark hanging in the air. “Why are you here?”

With a dull thud, he dropped his sword to the ground, letting it stand as he leaned on it.

Ted chuckled, pressing his palms against the guard rail. “Don’t be so mean. I was right on the dot, wasn’t I? He did come here.” He gestured broadly to the devastation below. “Look at all the disaster he left in his wake.”

Zeo’s expression remained unreadable. “Risette?”

Ted clicked his tongue. “I couldn’t possibly bring her to a place where *he* might be. But she’s nearby. Can’t leave her too far away either.”

Zeo exhaled sharply. “I’m going after him.” His grip on the hilt of his sword tightened. “This is our first lead in years—we cannot afford to let it pass by.”

He turned, already moving toward the exit. “I’ll meet you at the usual place.”

In a blink, Ted flashed past Fros, reappearing beside Zeo, his hand clamping onto his shoulder.

His usual smile never wavering.

“You think I don’t know its importance?” Ted’s grip tightened on Zeo’s shoulder, his usual easy-going demeanour turning dangerously close to frustration.

“It’s not that I don’t want to chase after him,” he continued, his gaze sweeping over the ruined chamber, the bloodstained floors, the bodies left in the wake of devastation, perhaps the royals? “But just *look* around us. We are not strong enough to be his opponents—not now. Not when he has the *Book of Awakening* on his side.”

Zeo clenched his jaw, trying to refute it, but the words never came. Ted was right.

Seeing the flicker of realization in Zeo’s silence, Ted exhaled sharply and pressed on.

"The only weapon that can stand against it is the *Orb of Salvation*." His voice was quieter now, but no less firm. "The Order of the Mirror has hunted it down, scouring town after town—and they've finally found it, right here, in *Lyrikisian soil*."

He paused, letting the weight of it settle.

"It might not seem like much," Ted admitted, his grip finally loosening, "but it puts us on the same pedestal as him. And it brings us one step closer to ending this."

'My hunch was right.' Zeo thought, recalling his conversation with Val. The pieces were aligning, but that didn't mean they weren't already too late.

"And?" His voice was steady, sharp. "How do we know it hasn't already fallen into his hands?"

Ted smirked. With a snap of his fingers, a soft thud followed—a figure appearing on the cold stone floor.

Princess Yuzarinne Lyrikisia lay unconscious, her form barely stirring.

"I found her unconscious near the outskirts of the castle," Ted said, folding his arms. "If I hadn't reached her in time..." His gaze darkened. "Both *the girl* and *the orb* would have been his."

Zeo's eyes trailed down to her hands—there, clutched tightly in her grasp, was the orb.

Ted tilted his head, a knowing smile playing at his lips. "It's about time you got a partner."

"Not again." Zeo's voice was sharp, his flames flickering with agitation. "We are done discussing this. I need no partner. They only get in the way. They're weak."

His gaze hardened as he turned away from Yuzarinne, his fists clenched. "And our revenge? It's something we demons must claim through our own power—not with the help of these lousy weaklings." His voice was colder now, unwavering. "We take the orb, and we're out of here."

Ted exhaled, shaking his head with a knowing smirk. “Orb, sure—it’s a direct way to make us demons stronger. But tell me, Zeo...” He tilted his head. “Can you *wield* it?”

Zeo shot him a glare, his expression unreadable but tense. “What do you mean?”

Ignoring him, Zeo crouched down, reaching out to take the orb into his custody.

“I wouldn’t touch it if I were you,” Ted remarked casually.

The moment Zeo’s fingers brushed the orb, a violent force repelled him. His body jerked backward, his palm searing in pain. He landed in a stagger, his breath catching as blood dripped from his fingers.

His stunned gaze snapped to Ted.

Ted leaned against the railing, watching Zeo with that same unreadable smirk. “Told you. The orb can only be wielded by those of pure heart—whole in body, mind, and soul.” His voice still calm. “And you, Zeo? You are far from whole.”

Zeo gritted his teeth, his injured hand still dripping blood.

“You carry more karma in your hands than anyone else can fathom,” Ted continued, his tone turning sharper. “If you are to use it, you need a partner—demon or human. And who better than a *Lyrikisian*? It’s about time you accept what happened... the night the *War of Prognosis* began.”

Zeo’s heart clenched, his body betraying him as a familiar pulse of exhaustion surged through his veins. His vision blurred, and before he could steady himself, his knees buckled.

He collapsed.

Ted barely flinched, watching with mild amusement. “See?”

Before another word could be exchanged, a voice cut through the tension.

“Master!”

Val’s wings flared as he descended, landing in a near sprint as he rushed toward Zeo, his expression tight with worry.

“Ted’s smirk didn’t waver as he glanced toward Val. “You’re here at the right time.”

Val’s gaze flickered between Ted, then to Fros, who was still sniffing beside him. He followed Fros’s downcast stare and froze.

Both Zeo and Yuzarinne lay unconscious—side by side.

A moment of silence passed before Ted spoke again, his tone lighter yet firm. “Return to the Order. He needs rest. With the orb... perhaps we can even undo his curse. Take it with you.”

Fros wiped his face, straightening with a sharp nod before carefully lifting Yuzarinne into his grasp.

Val hesitated, his wings shifting uneasily. “Would the orb make Master return to normal?”

“Maybe?” Ted replied.

Val nodded as he took a step towards Zeo, his familiar instinct guiding him, then turned back to Ted.

“What about you, Sire?”

“I’ll clear things up here and return,” Ted said, pressing a finger to his lips, his usual smirk deepening into something unreadable. His eyes glowed—a piercing, unnatural blue that seemed to shimmer with amusement yet held something far darker beneath. The light of the moon framed his silhouette, casting long, eerie shadows behind him.

For a moment, he looked almost too composed, too calm in the face of ruin. The soft lilt in his voice, the way his posture remained relaxed despite the carnage around them—it was unsettling, like someone who *enjoyed the chaos just a little too much*.

With his back against the silver glow of the night sky, he smiled. Too sweet. Too sharp. Too dangerous.

