

Wheels rattled against stone. Hooves clopped against pavement. Dresses swished through the air. Heels clicked along the ground. A mysterious perfume-like scent wafted in the breeze.

And there was a song echoing in the air, soft yet cheery, almost triumphant.

*“We are polished, sparkling jewels
None may choose what we may do
Those who fail to gain such gems
Will ne’er know joy so pure and true
Someday we will finally be free
To swim like fish through city streets
When cruelty is cast aside
Choose the glittering, gorgeous life
Choose the voice of truth so bright
Choose the One, our light, our guide”*

Two voices, one soprano, one alto, weaved through the fog.

“... Jewels...”

Ritz raised her head at the sound of the song, wiping the tears from her eyes and peering into the fog.

And from within the cloud appeared a carriage rolling its way toward her, the silvery tendrils of mist seemingly flashing and sparkling around it. Deeper in the fog, costumed Demons draped in dresses dark as night sang along. This could only be the very Demon Parade that was causing such a commotion within the public eye.

Yet Ritz did not flee, did not panic. No, she waited patiently where she stood for the procession to reach her side, a dark and stormy expression twisting her features.

The clacking wheels drew closer and closer.

The strange scent wafted by Ritz’s nose, more powerful than before – the scent of fresh lilies. She breathed deeply of the aroma.

“Oh, Ritz, what are you doing here?” one of the silhouettes in the fog called out. “I was wondering why you weren’t at the salon.”

“... I apologize, I had gone to a friend’s....” Her immediate response came tremblingly, but not from fear; the tears she’d been holding back were simply threatening to fall again.

The Demon... no, it was a regular woman *dressed* as a Demon, noticed her distress and gently cooed, “You poor thing, having to go through so much strife. Was it your superior this time? Or a coworker?” Soft silken gloves reached out to cup Ritz’s cheek.

The tears began to fall, tracing familiar, well-worn lines down her cheeks.

“Oh. Oh, dear.” The masked woman glanced around to her companions and called, “Forgive me, everyone, but I’ll be taking Ritz back to the assembly hall for a moment.”

“All right.”

“That’s fine.”

“Feel better!”

The others readily agreed, and the procession moved on, clacking wheels and singing voices fading into the distance.

“You must be so tired,” murmured the woman. She took Ritz by the hand and led her down the street she’d just come.

The two walked through the dense fog for some time before they arrived at a sizable old building bearing traces indicating it had at one point been a hospital. They passed through the gate and opened the door to find a lone woman standing on the other side. Unlike the others, she was without a costume, instead wearing a simple dress with fraying hems. “Is everything all right?” she asked the second she saw Ritz, her eyebrows climbing as she stepped smartly forward.

“Ahh, Maud. You get on well with Ritz, if I remember correctly,” hummed the first woman.

“Could I ask you to stay with her for a bit? She seems a bit down.”

“Huh? Yes, of course.”

“Thank you. I’ll be rejoining the others now.” The woman left quickly, presumably to rejoin the parade, leaving Ritz with Maud.

The woman directed Ritz to a sofa near the entrance. “... Do you want some tea? I brought a good kind with me today, I can make you some,” she suggested.

As Ritz sat down, she swiped at her cheeks. “I apologize, I’m just a little emotional at the moment,” she replied. “I usually have better control of myself, but lately, everything seems to be setting me off. I have to be better.”

“Don’t say that, Ritz, you’re working plenty hard already,” Maud urged, gentle as could be. “Of course things like this’ll happen if you’re running yourself ragged.” Her gaze overflowed with sympathy... but it was tempered with sadness as well.

“But I have been happy, too. Everyone here is so nice, nothing at all like what the rumors say. You’re all good people fighting only for women’s rights, and yet everyone calls you ‘Demons’ and decries you as kidnappers... they’re all liars.”

“Ritz...”

“Even the drunk man whose case I took, to find the woman who vanished in the salon, lied to me. But it’s enough that I know that now.”

Maud was silent. Ritz sniffled, scrubbing at the tear tracks on her face, then tilted her head up to paste a smile on. Maud paused for a moment, then whispered, “... Hey, Ritz, you probably shouldn’t come by here anymore.”

Ritz tilted her head, puzzled.

Maud heard the silent question and elaborated, “You came in here saying you were looking for someone, but you don’t *need* to anymore if it’s not true, right? You’ve been dropping in almost every day lately, it seems like, and it has to be causing some problems in your daily life, plus you’re so busy with your job anyway... so you don’t need to go to all that effort.” There was clear worry in the crease between her brows.

“That is... true, but I do think of this salon as a genuinely lovely place in its own right.” Ritz bent forward, as if physically shaking off the concern emanating from Maud. “I would like to offer whatever help I can to this establishment. I want to help the women suffering from illness or discrimination. Besides, I want to... apologize properly, for coming here suspecting this group of being kidnappers at first....”

This was the building Ritz had arrived at when she’d first gone searching for the man Davies’ missing wife. It was old, standing apart from the rest of the city. Once it had been private property, then it had been a church, then a hospital, and now it was being used by a group who aimed to shelter women suffering from all sorts of troubles with nowhere else to go.

It was also, incidentally, the headquarters for the rumored “Demon Parade.”

It was a fantastical, bizarre procession. The group would emerge from silver fog, and all who laid eyes on it would be sucked into their midst, never to return.

But the rumors were absolutely nothing like what Ritz had seen for herself. These women patrolled the streets at night and called out to others who'd suffered injustices and had lost their places to belong, inviting them into their ring of acceptance and assistance. The rumors swirling around the city made it so that no one taking a pleasant midnight stroll would dare approach them, for fear of disappearing without a trace.

But not the women. They were sick, or homeless, or backed into metaphorical corners - they didn't have the strength to flee from the parade even if they wanted to. The group marched through the streets night after night in search of women just like that.

Ritz herself had been investigating the group alongside her missing persons case, but the more she uncovered, the more she understood just how different they were to the ghost stories spreading across town, and the more she admired them.

"I will provide directions to this facility. I understand there are strange rumors flying about, but I intend to speak with my father to dissuade the police force from acting on any unsavory untruths they may have heard. You will not lose your place, your home, so please rest easy, Miss Maud." Maud sucked in a breath, conflicted. "You don't need to worry about me, Ritz..."

"You have suffered enough," Ritz said firmly. "When I think of your upbringing, it hurts my heart, Miss Maud. Locked away for as long as you can remember, your freedom stolen from you... and losing the man who freed you from that pain, your husband... I can't even fathom what you've gone through. I'm truly glad you found support here."

Maud's eyes flicked around, her jaw jumping like she wanted desperately to say something.

Eventually she visibly steeled herself and grabbed one of Ritz's hands, her eyebrows rising. "... You know," she began, "it might be odd for me to say something like this here, but -"

"Your heart is truly magnificent as it is now."

Another voice cut through their conversation. Standing on the other end of the entrance hall was a young woman... no, maybe they were just a beautiful man? It was difficult to tell, but either way, there was an androgynous-looking person slowly walking up to them, their silhouette almost fragile, even ephemeral. Short platinum blonde locks gently swayed with every step, sometimes shifting to mask their white lily earrings from view. Golden eyelashes framed impossibly clear green eyes.

They were dressed in an impeccable suit with a huge collar, decorated with a gorgeous lily motif, as beautiful as an elf straight out of a fairy tale.

Ritz stood as soon as she saw them approaching. "Hello, Krinos," she greeted them, eyes shining with joy.

"I am eternally grateful for your consideration of others," they said, almost gliding across the floor. Their voice was wonderfully clear and wonderfully sweet, like freshly made lemonade, sinking into Ritz's ears and reverberating in her skull, setting off fireworks in her chest. A wave of sweet dizziness overtook her mind.

"No, not at all. If I can be of any help to you -"

Before she lost consciousness, Ritz pressed her hands to her chest.

To an outside observer, she appeared completely lost in fervent prayer.