

"Where's Mercutio?" Professor Markel asked, barging through the front door.

"My room. Talking to her caretaker through facetime," I answered as a matter of factly.

"Alone? You should be up there supervising her!" The professor and his two task force operatives pushed past me to rush upstairs.

I followed them and one was already twisting the doorknob. It was locked. The second escort planted one leg firmly on the ground while his other was poised to deliver a kick.

"Wait, let me unlock—!"

He kicked open the door, drawing a wince from me at the harsh wooden crack on the lock and frame.

They stormed inside, where Mercutio sat at my computer, face glued to the screen, and both hands clenched atop her lap. It wasn't her caretaker from Shanghai she was speaking to, but the Captain of the Royal Black Guards, Clarissa Raynard.

Clarissa smiled. "Why, hello again. I did not expect to see you so soon again, Caretaker Akira. Unfortunately, I cannot stay long. I have a flight to catch. Bye-bye for now."

"Clarissa, don't do anything rash— Damn it!" The professor cursed under his breath as the video cut, then snapped to his escorts. "Get back to the car and connect me with the Secretary of Defense. Now!"

They rushed out without so much as an affirmation.

"Secretary of Defense? Just how serious is this?" I asked.

"Mercutio would know, wouldn't she?" He cast a chiding gaze to the elven girl, who shamefully twiddled her thumbs.

"I thought I could convince Captain Clarissa to stop... She wouldn't even listen to me, her own adopted daughter." Mercutio clutched the side of her arm, digging her nails into the skin.

It looked like Saralash wasn't the only threat left. Clarissa was coming after us, too.

"What do we do? If the last two come after us at the same time, I'm not sure Irapesha and Cresta could take them. Even if they could, there's no way this dorm is going to stay standing," I said to the professor.

"Angeline is who they are after." He marched to the other end of the room and pulled back the blinds. "We can shelter her away from the dormitory in one of our facilities. If they can't find her—"

"Then they may go after the others and use them as hostages until I reveal myself," Ange said from the broken doorway.

A guard came no further than a few feet away behind Ange.

"The Secretary of Defense is setting up a meeting with the Malaysia Defense Minister. They're waiting on you," he said.

"A decision needs to be made soon. We're still on the look out for Saralash and hope our friends across the Pacific can intercept Clarissa before she leaves the country." Professor Markel sighed and left in a hurry.

Once we were alone and the front door closed as shut as possible in its state, Ange folded her arms across her chest.

"I'm famished. May we go for some sushi? Just the three of us," Ange suggested suddenly.

"You're joking. At a time like this?" I asked.

We ended up leaving the other tenants at the dorm, while I, Mercutia, and Ange drove into the city for sushi. Naturally, our adventure was followed by a group of guards. I wasn't sure what came over Ange to make such a request, but as we sat at a table with a conveyor running through and she picked every dish imaginable, it almost felt like a last meal.

Our armed escort stayed outside while we ate, but they drew a lot of attention and made the patrons tense.

"The seas in Weyera have since become boiling hot, scalding like a cauldron over a fire. You cannot find a river or creek anymore. They are all dried up. Suffice to say, there are likely few fish alive. Yet here it is so plentiful." Ange gazed over her shoulder to a fish tank that ran along the length of the sushi place.

Koi and other similar-sized fish swam through the artificial coral bed and decorations placed into the water. They were meant to add to the atmosphere of the sushi restaurant, but...

"Yeah... I'm sure the fish are enjoying the view, too," I joked.

"You two must be angry at me," Mercutia said, staring at her plate of untouched tuna rolls. "Seeing Cresta and Commander Irapesha fight so passionately, I can't help but feel guilty that we've ruined your peace here. So, why are you treating me to sushi instead of getting yourselves to safety?"

"Every step of the way during the war, we have let anger and fear dictate our lives. It doesn't have to be that way here. Could you ever have imagined to one day break bread with a demon such as myself?" Ange asked.

That brave front was betrayed by shaky hands. I saw what was going on here now. Ange was trying to stay strong for all our sakes. Even for Mercutia, who was after her life once.

When Ange placed her chopsticks down, I put my hand on top of hers.

"Mercutia, like you, Ange came here for another chance and to make things right. Not just for herself, but for others like Tamara. We're treating you to sushi to show that we've already forgiven you," I said.

The elven girl finally picked up her chopsticks. She hesitated at first, staring at the glistening raw slice of glistening fish. Then, after another second of pondering, she stuffed a piece into her mouth.

"It's good. I wish I could have eaten with the other Royal Black Guards... with my mother— Captain Clarissa," Mercutia muttered.

After having sushi for lunch, we emerged from the restaurant to our escorts a little on edge.

"Are we returning to the dormitory?" one man asked.

"Not yet. We're going clothes shopping," I said.

The other frowned. "You guys know there are angry netherfolks after you, right?"

"Mercutia made a one-way trip here from Shanghai without bringing any clothes. You're not going to deny a lady something to wear?" The embarrassed netherfolk in question shifted awkwardly when I thumbed over to Mercutia.

Our escorts sighed. The leader of them, a man of dark complexion and thick mustache, twirled a finger in the air to signal to a harpy perched on the roof of a building above.

We went to a clothing outlet next, where Ange led Mercutia along to find her something nice to wear. The summer season was fast approaching, so much of the outerwear were sundresses, crop tops, and anything that wasn't suffocating. As we passed through the swimwear section, I couldn't help but fantasize about what Ange would wear.

Bikini was at the top of the list, but one piece swimsuits somehow had a better effect of accentuating curves than bare skin.

Then there was me.

I spun around to the men's section of swimsuits. All the banners of hunky male models taunted my not-up-to-snuff body. Despite joining Irapesha and Cresta in some of their gym sessions, I guess I just wasn't built to gain muscle.

"Akira, come here!" Ange hollered to me.

When I caught up, Mercutio was just emerging from the changing booth in a white and yellow flower-pattern sundress. The hair buns felt out of place.

"I-I'm not very big on dresses..." Mercutio stammered with fingers pinching the seams.

"It looks good. Why not?" I asked.

"Ma Ying's family are tailors specializing in traditional Chinese dresses. They recently started using me to model their outfits for other netherfolks. It's where the money will be in the future, they say, but wearing them all the time is a little embarrassing," she groaned with displeasure.

That also explained the buns, and judging by Ange's stare, she was thinking the same.

"How about we bring down your hair?" Ange suggested. "I'm sure you would—"

"Don't touch me!" Mercutio cried, raising a barrier and startling Ange who tried to reach for her.

"I'm sorry, dear. I shouldn't have," she apologized.

The barrier vanished, but the tension didn't.

"N-No... I'm sorry..." Mercutio lowered her head.

It got awkward between the two until I offered to help Mercutio let down her hair. After learning a thing or two brushing and grooming Tamara's forest of wool, I'd become confident in taking care of a woman's precious hair. They draped down as elbow-length curly locks, which suited her more than the buns, especially in a sundress.

"I'll go find something more suitable to your tastes," Ange said, leaving us behind.

Mercutio breathed easier when Ange was gone.

"Still not used to demons, right? It was the same for my tenants, too. Well, one in particular. Cresta and Ange used to be one thin strand away from snapping each other's necks."

"What about that girl, Tamara?" Mercutio asked.

"Tamara surprised us the most. She came to live here wanting to forgive Ange. They got close, and like you and Clarissa, are pretty much like mother and daughter at this point," I explained.

Mercutio faced into the changing room mirror since the curtain was drawn open.

"She picked this out for me. I-I actually kind of like it..." Mercutio said quietly.

"I've returned," Ange announced, holding an armful of outfits.

"Ange... That's a little too much to try out, isn't it?" I asked.

"Nonsense. Mercutio is here on *vacation*, remember? We should be as hospitable as possible," she said.

We tried an ungodly amount of clothing. Ange didn't spare me either, picking outfits she thought I would look nice in, since all I had to wear were what my parents bought me for the past 18 years. I reached into the pile of clothes and pulled something out that looked like underwear.

"Wait, this is a speedo. I'm not wearing this!" I complained.

"Why not?" Ange pouted. "The other option is swimming trunks. What's the difference between showing a little thighs?"

"It feels like underwear!"

Ange put both hands on her hips. "What does that make bikinis? You had us try on swimsuits, now it's your turn. Try it!" she urged, backing me into the changing room.

"Hold on now... There's no telling who else had their wiener in that!" I had my back up against the wall, craning my neck away from the speedo being lifted up to my face.

Our antics earned a giggle from Mercutio. She stifled it as soon as we turned her way, but it still showed on her face. Slowly, she began to crack. Her stiff frown became just malleable enough to flip.

By the end of the clothes shopping spree, we left behind two piles for a poor employee to find. Mercutio held a few outfits that Ange picked out, but she wore the first sundress to the checkout line.

"Are you sure you want to keep that, dear?" Ange asked Mercutio as we got to the register.

"It's a lot comfier and less tight than the qipaos I'm used to. Th-Thank you for choosing this for me," Mercutio said.

Stunned by Mercutio's words of gratitude, Ange had forgotten to move when a register opened and the employee called to us. We paid for our stuff and came away with large plastic bags of clothing in each hand. On our way out, however, Mercutio paused right before the exit.

"What's the matter? We better get going before the guards get antsy again." I gazed up at one of the harpies flying circles around the store.

"Clarissa hasn't always been so cold. She was kind once. I don't want her or Saralash to be sent back to Weyera like Thane and Jeriah. They were all like family to me when I lost mine. I'm not sure if any of them deserve the same kindness you've shown me, but... I have to try. Will you please help them?" Mercutio asked, almost pleadingly.

"My answer is obvious. What about you, Ange?" I asked, bumping her by the hips like she always did to me.

Ange stumbled forward and shot me a glare, then cleared her throat.

"They may come for my life, but I don't appreciate that they have put Tamara in danger. So I ask you this: do you love them?" Ange asked.

"I love Clarissa as a mother, and Saralash as a sister. Jeriah and Thane... they were like goofy uncles to me, turning into odd creatures and levitating toys around me. Distant sometimes, but I loved them all the same. I can't help those two anymore, but the rest I want to," Mercutio said.

Ange smiled. "Then—"

The harsh chime of a breaking news segment appeared on the television behind the employee registers. We raced back into the store to get a closer look. The camera was from a helicopter, a bird's eye view of a familiar black vehicle turned over on the side of the road with the engine smoking. Police cars and several ambulances were on the scene, pulling people out of the wreckage.

*"This is the footage we received half an hour ago," the reporter began in a grim tone, "that appears to have been an attack perpetrated by a lone netherfolk. The three inside the vehicle were taken to a hospital and listed in critical condition. We're just now learning the names of the victim—"*

"Is that?" Ange gasped.

"Professor Markel..." I repeated the first name to be read.