

In My Head

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I never intended to summon a demon.

It didn't happen through a mysterious book rented out from the dark corridors of a library. It didn't happen through a midnight meeting at the crossroads, and it certainly didn't happen through a sketched pentagram on a creaky attic floor.

It happened in a classroom. I wasn't focusing on anything particular, certainly not the professor at the front of the classroom, who was rambling on about Latin roots and writing on a dry-erase board. My eyes trailed the livid blue lines her marker made, but my mind made sure I processed none of it. Instead, I was occupied by thoughts of what I would do with my first night off in weeks.

Perhaps I'd call Naomi and see what she was up to. I'd blown her off so many times now—thanks to my chaotic work schedule—that I'm sure she'd be thrilled to hear that I'm finally free for a night. What I *didn't* want was for her to drag me off to some frat party. It wouldn't be the first time she'd spontaneously chosen to haul me with her to some random greek house in the middle of the night, where nearly every guy looked like he'd slip me a roofie if given the chance. No, after weeks of slaving away in that cursed restaurant, just trying to scrape together

enough money to pay my rent, I wanted to relax. No creepy men, no blaring music, no stale beer. But I didn't want to spend the night alone either. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd truly had a conversation with anyone—my life had grown so hectic that I'd almost forgotten what it was like to just sit down and talk with a friend.

I'll suggest a movie night, I decided.

"Jane, could you give us a word that corresponds with this meaning here?"

Professor Anderson's voice jolted me out of my reverie, and I scrambled to read what she'd written on the board. I hadn't studied the material for weeks; there hadn't been any time.

"Ummm," I stalled. I had expected to stay anonymous in this lecture hall filled with over a hundred other students, but I should have known better. Anderson seemed to have a sixth sense for spotting students who weren't paying attention.

"Ab...gen...terr," I finally sputtered. I felt my cheeks flush at the word that I'd just made up. My brain could have, at the very least, supplied me with a Latin word that *existed*.

I was never going to show my face in this class again. I didn't care if I failed it—I mean, shit, I might as well just drop out at this point. In that moment, I swore that I felt the air constrict around me, almost as if it paused its natural flow just to press in on me.

"Not quite," Professor Anderson said after the few agonizing seconds of silence. "Anyone else?"

I slumped in my chair, hoping to melt into a puddle so I could slip away through a nearby grate. But before I could achieve that, I heard a voice.

You called?

I jumped in my seat and snapped to attention, whipping my head back and forth to see who was speaking. But everyone around me was focused on the white board ahead of them. A few gave me a questioning look, but it was apparent that they weren't waiting for an answer of any kind.

In here, you imbecile.

I startled yet again, but still couldn't figure out who had spoken up for the life of me. Eyes wide, I thought, *Am I going insane?*

And, as if I wasn't already scared enough, the voice *replied*.

No. Though I do tend to have that effect on people—just give it some time.

I glanced at everyone around me once more, just to see if they were hearing this shit. Judging by their apathetic expressions, they weren't. And if they were, they must have become accustomed to random voices popping up out of nowhere, seeming to belong to no one.

Let's just cut to the chase here, shall we? I want to know how you summoned me.

I managed not to jump at the voice this time, though a new sort of panic began to

seize me when I realized that it had to be coming from *inside my head*.

What? The thought was more instinctive than it was an answer to the question, but whatever inhabited my mind seemed to take it as the latter.

How did you know that word? No one has said in centuries... millennia even. I was under the impression that humans had forgotten the spirit language.

Spirit language?

You don't even know what you've done, do you?

What exactly is it that I've done?
Playing along seemed like the only option at this point.

I forgot what a hopeless mess humanity is. Then the thing seemed to let loose a sigh inside my head, something that felt like a slight breeze brushing over the surface of my mind. I shivered at the sensation.

I'm in class, I said, though the fact was completely arbitrary under the current circumstances. And I obviously hadn't been paying attention in the first place.

Hold on, I thought suddenly. *Are you... here because of what I said?*

Yes, you braindead ninny.

I bristled at the insult, but plowed on. *Ab...gen..terr?*

Now, just string it all together, darling. I wasn't sure how a disembodied thing could take on a patronizing tone

within my head, but it managed to do so. The words dripped with disdain.

Abgenterr? I complied despite my irritation.

Yes, that's it.

And that...summoned you? This has got to be the lowest point in my life. I hadn't meant to 'say' the second part, but it seemed that my mind was no longer a private place.

Now there's no need to be rude, human. Didn't your mother teach you any manners?

I didn't answer. Maybe if I just ignored it, it would go away.

I'm not going anywhere.

Maybe I had a brain tumor.

Do you want one? I can arrange that.

No! I hadn't been able to keep my mind from pouncing on that one. The thing inside my head seemed to find that funny, and I felt something like a chuckle reverberate from it.

What the hell are you??

Hmmmm...that's a tough question, darling. Years ago, when your kind still spoke the spirit language, some called us Travelling Spirits. And others simply called us demons. You may use whichever title you prefer, I suppose.

You're a demon?! I was starting to doubt that this was a figment of my imagination. Am I possessed??

I don't have time for this. Release me. Release you?

Yes, if you know the summoning words, surely you know the banishing ones as well.

I have no idea what you're talking about.

Then, before I knew what was happening, I started to feel a *tugging* in my head. Like something being pulled or extracted from the depths of my mind.

What're you doing?? I sputtered, flustered at the lack of control I felt.

Relax, Jane, I am just getting to know you. I flinched at the sound of my own name uttered by this supposed demon. But now that it mentioned getting to know me, I started to categorize the sensation as a sort of sifting through my mind, as if the thing was leisurely flipping through my memories.

Stop that!! I tried to make my inner voice sound stern, but the demon only laughed again in return.

Fine, fine. No need to get your panties in a twist.

Too late, my panties are very much twisted. Get out of my head.

I don't want to be here either, you know, the demon muttered with a tinge of annoyance.

Then leave?!

Let me make this simple for you, shall I? The demon slipped back into its condescension with ease. *Just as you summoned me with the spirit language, you'll need to release me with the spirit language.*

But I—

The demon cut my protest short. *Yes, I know. Somehow you've managed to be lousy*

enough at Latin to just slip into the spirit language without even realizing it. Your brand of stupidity is a rare one, indeed.

You don't even know me, I snapped, starting to forget that I was arguing with something that likely didn't even exist.

I know enough, Jane. You want to hear what else I know?

I made no answer, fuming.

However, my lack of response did not seem to faze the demon one bit. *As long as you don't know the word to release me, I am here to stay.*

What the fuck is that supposed to mean?!

You shouldn't take that tone with me, Jane. I scoffed at the sheer irony of it all, which drew a few glances from my classmates. I'd nearly forgotten where I was, but now that I was momentarily reinstated in the outside world, I realized the lecture was ending.

"Don't forget about the exam coming next week," Professor Anderson was saying. "Some of you may need to start studying well ahead of time." She made brief eye contact with me before I ducked my head in embarrassment.

That's unfortunate, the demon piped up once more, snickering.

The class dispersed, and I got up to leave with the others.

So how do I find these banishing words you speak of, I asked, trying to keep my focus as I walked down the stairs.

You know, your eagerness to be rid of me

so soon is a bit offensive.

Tell me. I could've sworn I felt the thing smile at that.

For the sake of transparency, I'll tell you the truth: I'm not completely sure.

You're not sure?!? If I hadn't already lost my mind, I was surely about to now.

No one's summoned me in millennia, you'll have to forgive me if I don't remember the exact words they used to do so.

I sighed out loud. Pushing the door of the foreign language building open, I stepped out onto the manicured lawn of the quad. Sometimes I wished that I could actually afford to live here, like all of the other students. Instead, I was stuck in my old, dirty apartment.

Money trouble, eh?

Shut up, I retorted. Unless you can fix it, that is.

Just because I'm not here to ruin your life or steal your soul—like all your spooky little tales say about beings like me—does not mean I'm some benevolent genie, Jane.

Worth a shot.

The demon snorted at this.

I have a plan, Jane.

And what might that be?

Well, all you need to do is suck at Latin some more, something you are already plenty accustomed to.

I reached my car and opened the door, settling in the driver's seat before responding. *First of all, I don't need this*

*abuse from you, I get enough of it as it is.
From myself.*

Woe is you, the demon mocked.

Refusing to acknowledge it, I continued,
*Second of all, how do you propose I do that?
You want me to just make up random words
until I find the right one? That's not a great
plan.*

*No, that's not what I want you to do.
Remember the word from earlier? Abgenterr?
It happens to be a combination of several
common Latin roots that you just combined
incorrectly. I am betting that if you keep
haphazardly slapping roots together, you
might just slip into the spirit language once
more.*

That's the best you've got?

*Oh, I'm sorry, did you have a better
idea?* The demon asked sardonically.

I sighed and turned the key in the
ignition, pondering the idea of driving
with a demon in my head. Couldn't be that
distracting, could it?

Ten minutes later, I'd somehow made it
home without crashing the car. Even after
politely asking it to keep quiet while
I watched the road, the demon had only
continued to ramble on about its brilliant
idea, combining roots for me to try out loud.

It'll be your fault if I crash and die,
I'd said.

Its only reply had been, *Go on ahead,
it'd be a lovely way out for me—no spirit*

language needed if you're dead.

I'd stopped complaining after that.

I entered my lackluster apartment, instantly annoyed by the perpetual dripping of the kitchen faucet. I'd asked the landlord about getting it fixed a week ago, but the email just sat in his inbox, unattended like all the others I'd sent. One for the leaky faucet, one for the window with the faulty latch that let in the frigid cold, one for the electrical socket that had stopped working weeks ago, and so on.

Nice place you got here, the demon drawled.

Shut up.

I threw my bag on the counter, pulled out the thick tome that was my Latin textbook, and slapped it down.

Alright, let's get to the banishing business, shall we?

I'd love nothing more, the demon replied with a sharp smile that seemed to cut through my mind like a butter knife.

Not having to *feel* this thing's expressions was my new top priority as I flipped the book open.

Two hours later, I was still making up nonsensical words.

"Acer...bene...tim."

Still here, the demon said for what felt like the four-hundredth time.

I groaned out loud, rubbing a hand up my spine, which was beginning to hurt after

such a long time spent hunched over a stupid textbook. So much for hanging out with Naomi tonight.

You've got bigger problems here, the demon reminded me, unnecessarily.

"I'm well aware of that, thank you." Now that I was alone, I'd taken to answering the thing out loud. Perhaps I did it to regain some sense of normalcy, but if so, it wasn't working.

"How about...Omni...terr...vid?"

I waited for an answer, but none came. The demon had played this trick before, letting me believe that I'd finally said the right thing before it popped right back up with some snide remark.

"Come on, demon, I haven't got all day here."

Still no answer.

"Hello?"

Nothing.

At first, I was hesitant to hope that I'd gotten it right. But after a few more minutes of sitting there and talking to myself like an idiot, I broke into a smile.

Thank God. Finally alone in my own goddamn head.

Alone.

The word struck me with an unexpected pang of sadness. During the past few weeks, my only source of human interaction had come from brief conversations with my coworkers, which usually only pertained to my next task, and short midnight texts to Naomi, which

usually ended with one of us passing out from exhaustion.

The thought of Naomi reminded me of my plans from earlier today—before I summoned a demon by accident, that is. I picked up my phone and quickly dialed her number.

The phone rang about eight times before going to voicemail. I hung up before the tone, unwilling to leave a message for some inexplicable reason.

So, instead, I made a stupid decision.

“Abgenterr.”

For a moment, silence.

Then: *Goddamn you, Jane.*

I smiled.