

THE GIRL AND THE TITAN

Being possessed by Ifrit saved my life. That, I could never hope to deny. If I’d been left there alone, the burns from the air raid would’ve killed me. No matter what Leon the demon lord intended for me, I had to accept the fact that I owed my life to him.

As a high-ranked flame elemental, Ifrit had powers that were far beyond anything I could have imagined. He miraculously tamed the magic teeming inside me, ready to explode, as he took over my body. Thanks to my being stabilized beforehand—if you want to phrase it that way—I managed to gain an ability. The unique skill “Deviant.”

Normally, being absorbed by Ifrit would have erased my consciousness from existence. It was Deviant that protected me. Ifrit may have held the right to rule my body, but I still managed to retain my sense of self despite the assimilation.

The demon lord always kept me near him.

Though Ifrit and I had become one, my body was still young and immature. The one who had summoned me towered over me, even seated in a chair. Ifrit held ownership over my body, so there was precious little to occupy my time. All I could do was stare at the things that came into view through my eyes. I never tired, but the long periods of boredom were a little painful to endure. I accepted it, though. It was all part of being assimilated.

Then, one day—

“Lord Leon! We have intruders!”

—one of the knights in the demon’s service burst into his office.

I was standing next to him, as always. I had nothing else to do, and I couldn’t do anything anyway.

A knight in black armor, standing at the demon’s right side, took his sword in his hand.

Suddenly, a mysterious figure—a sort of mix between bird and man—shot into the room, cackling in his rasping voice.

“Kehhhh-keh-keh-keh! Greetings from König the Magic-Born! When I defeat you, Leon, I will be a demon lord for all time. An ex-human like you, declaring himself to be a demon lord? Know your place, fiend! I’ll be happy to take yours once your body is firmly buried in the ground!”

Nothing the man blurted out did anything to change Leon’s facial expression. “Hmph,” the knight in black calmly said to him, “I see leaving me, at least, to guard you was a wise choice. It looks like one of the rank and filers sniffed this place out.”

“Bah,” the demon replied just as the knight was about to unsheathe his sword. “Another would-be meddler from the gallery. Very well.” He looked at me. “It is time, Ifrit.”

What did he mean? I was confused.

“Hmm? What is it, Ifrit?” he asked, an inscrutable look on his face. My bewilderment must have shown in my body’s eyes.

“Ignore me, will you,” the one known as König—a high-level magic-born, as it turned out—said as he spread his winglike arms out and crossed them in front of his face. For a moment, I could see his hands glow.

Confirmed. Extra skill “Magic Sense”…successfully acquired.

Ignoring the unfamiliar voice booming in my head, I unconsciously began to walk. One step. Two steps. Then, before I knew it, I was standing in front of the demon lord Leon—face-to-face with König.

“Are you in such a hurry to die, brat?” he rasped out. Something about that voice rankled me to the core. “You will perish by my hand sooner or later. But once I kill that demon lord pretender—”

I could see that the wings extended in front of him held a decent amount of magical force.

“Die, bastard!!”

Before he finished speaking, he fired a volley of feathers. I could tell he had aimed them straight at me. Each one had an ample amount of force behind it—touching one would make it explode, which looked a tad painful.

The moment that occurred to me, I was suddenly taken by a violent rage, my head heating up until I thought it was going to boil. I think it was the wrath of Ifrit inside me.

What happened next took place in the blink of an eye. In a single moment, all the feathers turned to ash, and flames were dancing around König’s body. Looking closely, I could see a plume of fire, like a whip, extending from the palm of my outstretched right hand.

“Ah, ahhhh! S-stop! Burning, stop, stop it—”

Whatever König was attempting to shout, he never quite managed to piece together a full sentence. My flames consumed him.

My heart filled with fear. I knew that right here, by my own hand, I had killed a magic-born person. Yet I could feel my whole body lightening with a sense of strangely deep satisfaction. It was hard to explain—as if I had just completed something I was meant to do. It felt as though my mind belonged to someone else. The terror was unbearable.

But… In another moment, it all fixed itself. Ifrit’s consciousness filled my soul anew, bottling up my anxieties and my fear.

It did, in the end, keep me from going mad inside. It helped shelter me from the guilt I should have felt at killing. Not that I was incapable of that emotion—Ifrit just exercised his complete control over me to ensure I never felt it. To ensure that I, his host, never lost my mind and died on him.

So began my strange symbiotic relationship with Ifrit, something I neither wanted nor hoped for. The same thing happened again, numerous times—and again, I killed the intruders for Leon, never feeling a thing.

I had no regrets. I was young; I still didn’t know right from wrong, and I left everything to Ifrit. I simply acted, unfeelingly, dragged along by the creature’s will to dispatch those in his way.

One day, the demon lord spoke to me. “Heh-heh. Ha-ha-ha-ha! I love it,” he said. “You’ve shown your will to me, haven’t you? You’ve shown you can survive. I’m impressed.”

For some reason, this observation didn’t discomfort me at all. In fact, I almost felt proud.

“What’s your name?”

“Shizu…e.”

“Shizu-eh? All right. Your name is Shizu. You will call yourself Shizu from now on!”

I meekly accepted it. I am Shizu. Not Shizue Izawa. The name I live with is Shizu.

That was how I came to stay at the demon lord’s castle, serving as his flame titan—an upper-level magic-born. His close assistant.

Several years passed after I gained the name Shizu. After a while, I was able to move around somewhat under my own volition. I was perfectly at ease with my symbiosis with Ifrit.

The demon lord Leon’s castle included a training facility.

There, the black knight served as an instructor, providing guidance for the titan and nonhuman children there—although there were some adults as well. It was a grueling process, and those who failed to keep up would often find themselves with nothing to eat. We all struggled to keep up, with everything we had.

It was there that I learned how to fight with a sword, without borrowing Ifrit’s power. I didn’t want to lose out to any of my fellow students, and I hated being treated like someone special. That was what drove me to improve.

One day, I befriended a young girl named Pirino, a gentle, quiet girl just a tad older than I was. We were in the forest, on a hunt as part of our practical battle training, and we struck up a conversation. Pirino would always go off on her own, which struck me as odd, so I decided to follow her.

“Fwee!”

There, I spotted her playing with a baby wind fox. She had been giving it food, taking care of it on the sly. It was a monster, a magical beast, but also cute and still too small to go hunting by itself. It was alone, separated from its parents, but it was alive and thriving.

“Ah…!” Pirino hid the wind fox behind her as she whirled around, shocked by my presence. “I—I was caring for this,” she stammered, realizing I had seen it. “It’d just be mean to leave it to die… Don’t tell anyone, okay?!”

Her eyes wavered with anxiety. I could tell her aims were noble. This was a small life in her hands; she wanted to protect it. Maybe I was jealous of that wind fox. It wasn’t alone anymore, I felt, but I was.

“All right,” I bashfully said, “but…can I take care of it with you?”

Pirino stared blankly for a moment, then flashed a serene smile. “Of course! In fact, I hope you can. My name is Pirino!”

I gave her my name, and we exchanged a few pleasantries. She was the first friend I ever had in my life.

“What did you name it?” I asked her.

Pirino gave me another look. “Name it? Monsters don’t have names. They can communicate with each other through their minds.”

“But I’d feel bad if this guy didn’t have a name, though. Hey, is it okay if I come up with one?”

“Really? But they said we aren’t allowed to name monsters…”

“Please? Come on, just once?”

I didn’t quite understand what Pirino meant. No matter what it took, I believed the wind fox deserved a name. After a few more moments, she grudgingly nodded at me—and in another moment, we were both having fun coming up with names.

Ultimately, we settled on “Pizu,” a mixture of Pirino and Shizu. It seemed to symbolize our newfound friendship, in a way. I was happy with it.

“Fweee!!”

It would always cry with glee like that whenever Pirino or I used its name. It must have liked what we chose, and I enjoyed the reaction. Pirino would smile, too.

This is so much fun!

I had been so alone, but Pirino and Pizu were there to soothe my heart.

We came to visit Pizu on regular occasions.

A few days after we named it, the wind fox grew from something we could keep on our palms to a creature about the size of our heads. It surprised us, but considering how attached it was to us, we didn’t mind. If anything, we were glad it was large enough to hunt for itself. Sometimes, it’d even have a bird or wild hare for us when we visited.

“Do you think we could take it to the castle, Shizu? It’s really smart, and maybe it could help out around the place…”

“Huh?”

Frankly, I wanted it to remain our little secret. But faced with Pirino’s pleading eyes, I couldn’t bear to say it. I didn’t want my selfishness to sadden her.

There were other assorted magical creatures being kept in the castle. A wind fox this intelligent and this friendly to people—Pirino insisted—could easily be recognized as a servant beast.

That was the start of the tragedy.

“Fweeeeee!!”

I suppose you could say it was just bad luck that we passed by the demon lord Leon in a castle hallway. But it wasn’t. It was our fault for assuming we had the strength to watch over anything in life.

“Run… Run, Pizu…!!”

Coming across Leon spooked Pizu beyond all consoling. It leaped right out of Pirino’s clasped hands, hackles raised at Leon in a show of intimidation.

The act made my titan awaken. The moment it did, I lost all autonomy. Pirino was so close, but she sounded so far away. Ifrit didn’t care how I felt and lashed out at the snarling Pizu. There was no stopping my body, no matter how hard I struggled, as it grabbed Pizu and incinerated it. With my very own hand.

That wasn’t the end of it. The flames from my hand formed a white, swirling vortex, attacking the girl that had brought Pizu to Leon. Without so much as a sound, it rendered her into a pile of ash that disappeared in moments. As if there were never anyone there at all.

The flame elemental, finally satisfied at a job well done, gave a loving salute to his demon master before quieting down.

…What was that? I stood there blankly, unable to parse my new reality. My hand… My…my body… It moved by…itself? Why did…did the flame… Did I…?

It took several more hours to realize that Ifrit had determined not only Pizu but also its keeper Pirino to be enemies of the state. By my own hand, I had slain my friend.

It made me sick. For hours on end, until nothing came out any longer. He should have just killed me, too, while he was at it. My entire body surged with maddening regret and sadness—and then, like nothing had happened, I was serene. No tears spilled from my eyes, even though I wanted to cry. No madness overtook me, even though I wanted to lose myself in it. No voice escaped my throat, even though I wanted to scream.

Did the magic-born titan take over my mind, too? My heart was buried in a swell of terror, and then instantly, the calmness came back. I was no longer even a person. No matter how much I wanted it, I would never attain the kind of happiness others were entitled to.

From that day forward, I stopped crying. I had already cried all my tears out anyway. There was nothing left to shed. I had lost something far too important to myself on that day.

And Leon, my demon lord, simply looked on coldly. Quietly. Never punishing me.

