

For The Taking

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Summary

"I've summoned a demon for sex," she said, on the second date and the fourth martini. "It's safe as long as you don't let them talk."

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I nodded, the way you nod on a second date when she's pretty and tipsy and giggling. Then I blinked. Then I squinted at her - you can't tell if people've sold their soul by looking closely enough, but it's still tempting to try - "You mean," I said, "like, you summoned a demon for something, paid it with sex -"

"Nah. I summoned him, slept with him, sent him home. Got a circle for it online." She was getting bored of the martini, tilting the glass so it sparkled in the light, not really drinking any.

"Circles you find online aren't always safe."

"Unlike meeting guys in bars," she said, "*that's* always safe. You can design a binding so it has to stop if you say no, that's more than you can say for humans."

My mouth was a little dry. I had another drink; that didn't fix it. "Why'd you do it?"

"You don't see the appeal? Having someone who would kill you if they could - who'd do worse if they could say a single word - and the wings, and the tail - wings're snuggly -"

"Snuggly."

"Oh yeah."

I thought about it. "...s pretty hot," I said after a while. "Was it good sex?"

"It was exactly what I wanted."

"Did it take you a while to find one who was up for it -"

"They're *demons*, Kerry."

"I've never met a demon, maybe some of 'em are gay."

"Some of them are definitely... picky? But it didn't take me very long. And now whenever people are like 'who was your worst ex' I can be like 'well he didn't do anything to me, but...'"

"He might not have done anything to anyone. Most of them don't get the chance. Could look it up."

"Don't want to," she said. "Too - real."

I looked it up for her, once, six months later, no good reason. He hadn't done anything to anyone, not since humanity started keeping track. He'd probably get an opening eventually. Demons live forever.

I told her.

"Can't believe you even still remember that."

"Kinda left an impression."

"I'm actually surprised you've never summoned, you seem like the type. Angels and fairies, if not demons."

"Well, that's the problem, isn't it?"

"Hmm?"

"If I learned how to do it at all I'd summon one ungagged, some day. Just because I was curious."

"- that's insane -"

"You don't wonder? What the words are that could talk you out of your soul? It doesn't drive you nuts, knowing that there *are* some, knowing that no matter how sensible you think you are and no matter how terrifying you find the prospect and no matter how little you want anything a demon could offer you -"

"People don't *always* get talked out of their soul."

"Well, of course not," I said. "Imagine you were a demon and you could always generate the string of sentences that gets you a person's soul, and you wanted as many souls as you could have, would you talk them out of their soul every single time?"

" - uh, yeah?"

"But then *everyone knows* they don't *possibly stand a chance*, and they'll only do it if they're really dumb or really desperate. If you talk people out of their souls thirty, forty percent of the time - then people think they're smart enough, and maybe they take a chance. Right now everyone gags demons, circles in emergency kits have a gag, it's an automatic fail on most licensing exams to mess up the gag, the optimal percentage of souls to take is probably pretty low, they're immortal, why not play the long game - why not build us our arcologies on Luna and on Mars, let the population swell to a hundred billion, take a smaller share of a bigger human race -"

" - sure," she said, "but there're billions of demons."

"And?"

"And they want souls, *personally*. It might maximize the total number of souls stolen by all demons if the average rate of soul-stealing was low enough that people'd be tempted to not

gag their demons, but any given demon deciding whether to make a move or not doesn't move the average much -"

"There could be enforcement in Hell for taking souls more often than the agreed-upon average."

"...I guess there *could* be but why would you hypothesize law enforcement in *Hell* when you could just hypothesize that they're not *perfect*, that sometimes they actually can't talk you out of your soul -"

"I don't want to bet the fate of the human race on it."

"They can make *arbitrary matter*, if they were that much smarter than us there'd be no human race left to place bets on."

"Anna," I said, "are you *trying* to tempt me to summon an ungagged demon -"

"What? No! Observing that Russian roulette usually won't kill you is not an exhortation to play it!"

"But Russian roulette's a game of chance. This is all about who's smarter."

"Well," she says as if it's obvious, "don't bet your soul on being smarter."

"- if they are playing the long game, though, the best thing to do would probably be to never take souls, to stop it entirely for three or four centuries until it's just some old myth, maybe that's the plan and the ones who still take souls are defecting -"

"Kerry."

"I don't understand how everybody doesn't find this terrifying."

"People don't find demons sufficiently terrifying?"

I dropped it.

Three years later Facebook informed me it was her birthday - it'd been a cordial breakup - and I found myself staring at the notification for longer than the relationship really warranted.

And then I opened eighty tabs and spent all night reading.

There are two things everyone knows about demons. The first, of course, is that they can make anything that is made out of atoms. They can't make people - when they try they get something that breathes but does not blink, does not flinch, shows no signs of higher brain activity. Atom-for-atom indistinguishable from a human body - a delight to medical schools and people in need of organ transplants, not that you'd get a whole person made if you wanted a kidney -

- but no one home. The implications are left as an exercise for the reader.

Demons can make black holes. People have messed up bindings - people have in fact messed up bindings badly enough to leave a demon the option to do that - but none of them have ever taken it. They'll rape people, they'll murder people, they'll occasionally venture into other creative and horrifying things, but none of them have ever done that. They will kill people, but they do not act like their goal is for people to be dead.

The other thing everyone knows about demons is that they can talk you out of your soul. They don't always do it, given an opening. They don't even always try, and sometimes when they try they try badly. But there are people and organizations who work with them professionally, and they are uniformly and categorically in agreement that there is no safe way to let a demon talk.

I didn't know if they haven't thought about the implications or if they're just trying to avoid scaring the public.

But if it's true - if, for every person, demons can find the words that will get their soul - then they are a whole lot smarter than we are. If they are instead, every time they get a chance, saying exactly the words that will get them the most souls in expectation - then they're probably even smarter than the previous thing implies. And evil. And routinely summoned to do all our space stations and half our manufacturing, a couple lines on a piece of paper protecting us from a fate we don't even understand.

It would be dumb to summon a demon and try to get to the bottom of this. It would be really dumb. That's why I didn't even know how, because in a moment of weakness I would be tempted.

But no one else seemed to be doing anything.

I read all night and then I slept all day and then -

My apartment had an emergency kit on the wall and then a backup in the closet. I pulled it out. It had about ten thousand words of text, detailed and careful legalese, prohibiting this demon from leaving the circle until we had agreed on a deal, from killing people or hurting people or drugging people or taking any of the following very long list of actions that would cause people to be hurt or killed or influenced. Prohibiting making things unrelated to the task, prohibiting making things that were radioactive or too hot or too cold or dangerous to humans in the vicinity in any of these excruciatingly detailed ways, pages and pages prohibiting exploits with software and hardware they make for you -

It had a gag, of course. Prohibiting talking and writing and all forms of symbolic communication except for agreeing to deals, or refusing them. A gagged demon can't nod or shake their head or stamp their foot when an assistive communication device flashes the letter they're looking for. It's the only way to be safe.

I scribbled out the gag.

I finished the circle.

There are billions of them. You get an answer instantaneously.

She was my height, curly red hair with antelope horns and vaguely southeast Asian features and dusky green bat wings that would be around fourteen feet across if she extended them, I'd just read that tidbit. She glanced down at her circle and then up at me and - "Well, hullo, summoner."

"- hi," I said. "I would like the answer to five questions, in exchange for which I will have sex with you. For up to two hours."

"That was the least enthusiastic proposition I have ever heard," she said, wrapping a finger around a ringlet. "You'll get takers, but, like, they'll be people for whom the lack of enthusiasm is a selling point, you know? What questions are that urgent?"

"Is that a no."

"I'll answer five questions in exchange for, like, a list of your ten favorite blogs in your language, I didn't have it before. Stop looking at me like I'm going to make horrifying parasitic worms in your bloodstream, okay? I'm not going to do that."

That had not even occurred to me as a thing to be worried about. I flinched. I reminded myself that the only information content of anything she said was that these were the thirty or forty words you started with if you wanted to use me as an opening to acquire as many souls as you possibly could. "Binding wouldn't let you," I said.

"That depends if it's recent! Some of those older bindings, they totally neglect to prohibit horrifying parasitic worms! I haven't read through it. Anyway, deal or no deal -"

I wasn't going to get a better one. "I agree to provide you with a list of ten good blogs in my language in exchange for the answers to the questions - you can't make anything extraneous no making anything is in fact relevant to this task at all -"

She laughed. "Deal."

"I want to pay you up front." That meant I could dismiss her any time I wanted.

"Go for it."

I put together a list of ten blogs. It took a while because I was violently shaking. I pointed at the list. "This is the list of blogs you requested, you've been paid -"

"These had better be some fucking fascinating questions."

I took a deep breath. "Did demons plan Revelation?"

"- how the fuck would I know?"

That was not among the answers I expected, even taking into account that answers were only information about how she could get souls. "Um," I said. "This is not an additional question but if you cared to expand on that I would really appreciate it."

She rolled her eyes. "Well," she said. "Every Earth year all five billion demons get together in a really big stadium we made, and we come up with the demon master plan to - I'm kidding, no we don't, someone'd hole the place in five seconds flat just because it would be kind of funny. I assume some demons had something to do with Revelation, they handed the books out, right? And demons couldn't have done all of it, there had to have been a summoner orchestrating it. And I don't read tons of 21st century history so that is all I know."

"Why can't demons make people?"

" - no idea."

I sighed.

"You summoned a random, sweetheart, you don't get to be like 'what? you're not in on all the fundamental secrets of the universe?' Like, that's not even your only problem here because nobody actually knows that but you have especially little room to complain when you summoned a random."

"Not one of my five questions but is there someone in particular I should have summoned."

"- that's totally a question, I am totally not going to answer it unless it counts."

"Okay," I said. "Is there a hierarchy or law enforcement in Hell, and if so who's at the top -"

"Nope."

"Thank you. Do demons get in trouble at home for their conduct around humans - if they don't do things they're supposed to be doing?"

" - what kind of trouble? We're all indestructible and we can all make whatever we want. There are people who, like, wouldn't go to parties with rapists or whatever."

I blinked. "Why, for moral reasons? - oh, that's not what I meant to be my fifth -"

She rolled her eyes again. "Yes for moral reasons. You can ask another question, I could stop answering any time anyway, you're new at this aren't you -"

"I didn't learn how to do it because I didn't want to be tempted, I failed to consider that I'd be tempted anyway and then I'd just be doing it without knowing what I was doing. Anyway my last question was going to be why do you take summons."

"For the adventure."

"For the adventure?"

"Yeah, it's totally unpredictable, like maybe some lady with a terrible haircut wants to treat some basic questions about demons as a high-stakes intrigue game or maybe someone wants a new moon arcology or maybe someone wants to be pregnant with Shakespeare -"

"What about the payments?"

"Humanity is shit at payments, no one really does it for that. I guess there are people who do it for sex."

"Or souls?"

"Or souls."

"What do you do with the souls."

"Uh, address the videos to the archives and strut around feeling clever?"

"*What?*"

" - address. The. Videos. To. The."

"I heard you, I just -"

"Demons can't take souls. I don't even think you people have souls. But some people find it entertaining to talk humans out of their nonexistent souls, so they take summons wearing a little camera in their clothes and then they talk someone out of their soul which again is not actually a thing and then they address the video for the archives so it's searchable and everyone who finds it entertaining to watch humans being talked out of their souls can make themselves a copy and watch."

"I see. Thank you for answering my questions."

"Sure thing, sweetheart."

I concentrated on sending her home. You have to want them gone, for a full minute. Or die which does it instantly. If you summon a demon or an angel or a fairy inadequately bound, and someone notices, they have legal license to shoot you; that minute could be billions of lives.

A minute later she was gone.

I tried to figure out how this could have been the best set of words to advance the cause of getting humans to let demons take their souls. By making us think it wasn't a big deal, maybe? I post about this online, someone decides to sell their soul to demons for a couple million dollars of material goods because why not, if it loses you nothing, someone else skips a gag because why not -

Or she could have been telling the truth. But I couldn't assume that.

I summoned another one.

Male (or male-looking), no horns, thin black wings.

"Hello," I said. "What do you want in exchange for a standard 256 gigabyte USB drive containing as many videos of distinct humans being talked out of their souls as can be fit on the drive without enough compression to render them unwatchable to humans?"

"Oh, I don't know," he said. "What are you doing with that?"

"Just curious."

"If you put it online you might embarrass people. Some of them remember it as a very traumatic experience."

"I was not going to put it online."

"I've gotten people who were curious why demons take souls. But curious how, that's a new one. It's not usually very exciting. 'this space station's breaking down I don't want my children to die take whatever payment you want from me' -"

"I've read through a bunch of incident reports I know there are incidents like that. But there are also incidents where someone just summons a demon and then gets talked into giving up their soul and I want to know how you do it."

"Do you."

"Yes. - secondhand."

"So more curious than altruistic," he said thoughtfully.

"- huh?"

"Well, if you wanted to know because you wanted to minimize the number of souls that were in Hell, you could ask a demon to trade you souls that've been taken."

"That's possible?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"I heard you can't actually take souls at all."

"Starting from the premise we can take souls, though, why wouldn't we be able to give them back?"

" - no one's ever done that."

"Oh," he says. "Well, that's that refuted, then."

"Do you want anything for the videos or not."

"Not, I think."

"I'm going to send you home now."

He didn't answer. A minute later he was gone.

I waited two months before I took the bait again.

This one looked disconcertingly human, wings folded up so neatly they could have just been a strange backpack.

"So," I said. "Can humans buy souls off demons."

" - that's a new one. You want mine?"

"I want *all the souls in Hell*."

"Some of us are using 'em."

" - okay, I want *all the human souls in Hell*."

"Sure," she said. "I want to stay on Earth - this is Earth? -"

"Canberra."

"I want to stay on Earth long-term, at least a year, give me internet access, pay for three calls to Luna -"

"Why?"

"None of your business."

Three calls to Luna. What could you accomplish in three calls to Luna? I'd talked to three demons and still didn't feel especially close to trading away my soul - no, not even for all the souls in Hell. What I cared about was all of the souls that would ever be in Hell and the future was too vast to compromise on behalf of the people who already existed. Three calls to Luna and a year of internet access -

"- no," I said.

" - what do you want for it? Please - *please* -"

"I don't want anything for it I won't give you internet access for anything I'm sorry."

"One call."

I shook my head.

"Please, one call, it's to my daughter."

I shook my head more resolutely; demons don't have children.

" - can you please tell other people who might?"

"No!"

And I sent her home -

Female again, dark-skinned, gold wings, gold cloven hooves.

"What payment would you accept in exchange for all the souls in Hell?" I asked her.

"Demons can't really take souls, it's not a thing."

"I've heard. I'm just - not sure what I believe."

"Why do you care?"

"- because the idea that we're routinely having inadequately secured interactions with agents with superhuman capacity to persuade us of things, who mostly use it to persuade us to give them our souls, and who when questioned insist that this is just a practical joke, is *utterly terrifying*? I can't tell if you are just a bunch of variously charming normal people with wings and horns and hooves or if you are an outrageously dangerous memetic hazard presently entertained by playing nice and eventually planning when there are a trillion humans to infiltrate us with a stunningly well-designed religion in which at fucking bar mitzvah or whatever one offers a demon their soul!"

"Honey, chill."

I glared at her and subsided.

"So, what evidence do you in fact have that demons have superhuman capacity to persuade humans of things?"

"I don't know, no one'll give me the video chip of all of the demons stealing souls ever -"

" - lotsa those videos are pretty messed up."

"Yes that is among the excuses I get when I ask, along with 'it'd ruin the fun' and 'I don't even know what to conjure for and this binding won't let me grab the catalogues -"

"I hadn't even noticed that but yeah if you're not letting us make task-relevant stuff -"

"If I do let you it's much harder to contain you and I will probably die!"

"- if you are just summoning dozens of randoms, yep, even with this binding eventually you'll get someone who wants to exploit a loophole and then you'll die."

"There are loopholes? Which you're not exploiting?"

"There usually are but I haven't looked at this one that closely -"

" - would you be willing to describe a loophole?"

"Sure." She smirks. "If I can find five I get your soul, deal or -"

"You said it was a practical joke."

"It is."

I sent her home.

"Oh," said the next one. "If you sell us your soul you become one of us when you die. Or a fairy or an angel, some people aren't demon-y sorts. Only no one ever fucking believes me about that."

"You are correct, I don't believe you about that."

"I can prove it. Get a list of people who sold their soul, and double-check you have a binding that doesn't let us make something which is not the thing specified by the task, and then ask me for models of those people -"

"I will consider conducting that experiment at a later date," I said stiffly.

"Do you want a hug?" said the one after that.

"I'm not stepping into your circle I'm not an idiot."

"You'd have to be crazy or stupid and you look crazy, not stupid."

"Every single person who has given this any thought should be exactly as terrified as I am and probably even more paranoid than I am. People say you are a memetic hazard but they do not act like they mean it and I do not feel like I'm being shaped to be an instrument of any larger plan and maybe I wouldn't or maybe not all of you are memetic hazards and I just keep getting lucky or maybe you have values opposed to ours but not the insane level of knowledge necessary to actually point any person you come in contact with on the trajectory you please and maybe I should've taken the deal for all the souls in Hell, phrased carefully enough it would at least be a good thing to do - unless then they get loose on Earth and kill everyone? If you are the thing I am trying to figure out no action I could take after talking to this many of you will possibly serve the goals I had before I started and if you're not that thing but are instead any of a mass of related dangerous things I could be passing up on the opportunity to save thousands of people from eternal torment -"

"The souls thing is a practical joke."

"SO I HAVE BEEN TOLD!" I shrieked at him.

"- so check. Sell your soul -"

"Oh my god fuck you fuck all of you -"

"Twice," he says, "sell your soul twice. Sell your soul twenty times. If we can take souls there is absolutely no reason to think that'd work, right?"

"If you can take souls the second one might still play along. You might all play along."

"You've talked to a dozen demons and are still entertaining the hypothesis we're coordinated? But, okay, yeah, maybe souls are real and you sold yours but you also get - however long humans live these days - in which you can get whatever you want from demons by pretending to sell them your soul which they will pretend to accept to keep up the masquerade that the soul thing is a practical joke, a masquerade which we invented just for you because no one lets demons talk -"

I sent him home.

I went to our college reunion. Anna was there. Shot me a concerned look. People had children. The birth rate's back above replacement, since Revelation. Maybe that's what the demons want. Maybe they don't give a damn.

Brendan was always smarter than me. I found him. "I might be a memetic hazard," I said, "want to talk?"

"Is that how people announce they're demon-summoners these days?"

"I guess," I said, "I mean it and I won't blame you if you don't want to talk to me it's probably smart not to."

"Okay," he said. "Take care," and he turned around and left.

"I want to sell my soul."

The demon blinked. "What for?"

"I looked it up. Doesn't seem to affect peoples' values or priorities in life, associated with higher risk of psychotic breaks but I'm starting to think that's from talking to you things not specifically from selling you our souls, and I can have someone look at recordings of me interacting with you with or without a soul, get a guess as to whether random demons can tell that I sold my soul, have a source of information that is not 'you said so' on the whole thing -"

"No, I mean, what do you want to sell it for, like what do you want in exchange."

"256-gigabyte USB drive containing videos archived in Hell of people selling their souls, and the catalogue you apparently need to be able to conjure to make that, and on a separate USB

drive a plaintext file containing the posthumous written works of the following hundred people -" half ones who sold their souls, half ones who didn't.

"The soul thing is a practical joke."

"Yes I know please take the deal."

He shrugged. Two USB drives appeared.

"Do you, uh, need to touch me or anything?"

The demon rolled his eyes. "I have no idea -" And he spread out his wings and said halfheartedly 'bwahaha' and reached out and touched my collarbone, and his hands closed into a fist.

It didn't feel like anything.

"Thank you," I said, and sent him home.

All of the people who sold their souls and five of the ones who didn't had posthumous published works. I watched all the videos. They were - mediocre. They could have been carefully selected for being mediocre, of course.

I summoned another demon, sold my soul for an ice cream cone. Summoned another, sold my soul for the Library of Alexandria. Summoned another, sold my soul for all the Harry Potter fanfiction ever written in Hell.

And then I wrote the government.

It is possible that the attached content may somehow constitute an information hazard, I prefaced it, but I really don't think so and I expect you'd know better than I how to handle it and verify it. I did check with a friend that I had thought it was a good idea before I sold my soul.

"Do we in fact have a procedure for that, Dave?"

"- yeah, we do. It's 'throw it out without reading!'."

"I guess that makes sense."

"Yeah, it does."

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