

Sara Phillips

about 800 words

sara.phillips118@gmail.com

INNOCENT CALLING

by Sara Phillips

Ozrath thought he knew what to expect when people summoned him. He'd had a few hundred years, at least, to establish something of an understanding of how this all worked. It was built into his nature, the purest expression of what he was—a demon, an *incubus*—and something that, as such, he more than knew how to handle.

He did not know how to handle this.

When he'd first gotten yanked into this realm, into this small room with its faded powder blue walls and its shelves lined with little more than dust, he hadn't immediately determined what was wrong with it. No, it wasn't until he started looking around, lidded eyes sweeping his surroundings for who would, he thought, be his next meal-partner-victim, that he recognized that something was a fraction... off.

Namely, there stood no such person to be found.

Then, he looked down.

And there, on the floor, sat a child.

He stared at them.

They stared back. Then blinked, a bit owlishly, seeming almost just as surprised as he was, despite—apparently—having been the one to call him here in the first place.

“What—” Ozrath blinked, too, caught in a rare moment where his mind lagged behind his mouth. “You—you do realize what you’ve just done, yes?”

The child’s eyes dropped from his face, flitting about the room as their fingers tangled together in their lap, fidgeting. It took them a moment to find their voice, but when they did, they said, “I summoned you.” They glanced up at him again, hesitant. “Now you—you have to do what I say, right?”

Incredulity flickered over Ozrath’s expression. “Not—” He pressed his eyes shut, briefly, reeling, and when he opened them again, they were colder. More composed. “Not for free,” he said, gaze impassive as he leveled it down at them. “You’re meant to offer something of value. Then, in exchange, I may agree to fulfill your request.”

He didn’t know what he expected them to do with that information. But they just sort of frowned for a second, thoughtful, and then pushed themselves to their feet, head swiveling to survey the room around them. Without a word, they set about walking from corner to corner, bookshelf to dresser, sifting through clothes and toys—of which, there weren’t many—and later dropping back to their hands and knees to peer under their bed.

Ozrath could only watch, somewhat baffled behind his mask of apathy, as they rummaged through, seemingly, all their belongings, with a distinct and focused determination pinching their face that faded only when they struggled to find anything they deemed worthy of showing him.

After a few minutes, they finally gave it up, turning back to him with a furrowed brow.

“What kind of stuff do you like?”

He was in it now, he supposed. There remained little choice but to humor them. “What I like depends on what you want,” he told them. “Greater demands toll a higher cost. What is it you called me for?”

If they’d seemed just a bit nervous before, they suddenly looked downright timid, eyes dropping once more to the floor and arms wrapping around themselves. Ozrath’s eyes narrowed at them, thoughts leaping at once—did they expect murder? Riches far beyond their means? Some sort of dark power that would test the limitations of his own? Perhaps—

“I—” They stole a look at him, then immediately looked away. “I kind of wanted to play a game.”

Ozrath’s mind fell silent. He blinked at them, again. “A game,” he echoed.

“Nobody else is around,” they added, half-petulantly and half-desperately, as though they needed to offer an explanation of some kind, “but it’s meant for two players, so...”

“A game,” he repeated. “That’s—is that all?”

“Well—” A flush crawled up their neck. “Yeah? I just—wanted a friend.”

“And you thought summoning a *demon* would grant you a *friendly* individual?”

“I thought—” Their face puffed up a little more, some mixture of embarrassment and annoyance. “I read that you’re—you’re supposed to be for companionship. Aren’t you?”

Companionship. He felt a bit lightheaded.

“...Ah,” he said, later than he should’ve. “Right. I see.”

Silence, then. Neither of them spoke again for a while. The child shuffled their feet, face full of doubt, and the slight movement stirred OZRath from the maelstrom of perplexity battering his mind.

“Very well,” he declared, near exasperated with it. “What sort of game?”

Their face brightened, then, not quite smiling but perking right up, with eyes that suddenly shone like stars. And the moment OZRath looked into them, witnessing the vibrant blossoming of unfiltered joy across their expression, something beyond his awareness—beyond either of their awareness—just sort of... shifted.

Which was to say, it wouldn’t be the last game he played with them.