

# The Student who Met a She-Demon in the Study Hall

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IN A CORNER OF THE STUDY HALL, BEHIND A SCRIM  
of books, a young man is studying a text.

Once — it reads in an ancient holy language — at the very beginning of the world, there was a woman who was created together with, not from, the first man. Her ribs were her own; and, so she insisted, were her mind, her body, her choices, her right to sexual satisfaction, her shoe closet, and, oh yes, also a room of her own in a quiet corner of the Garden.

The man was not happy with this situation. He would have complained to the animals, but they didn't have names yet and he didn't know how to get their attention. So he called on God instead.

God, too, was rather surprised by this woman, and thought maybe He hadn't put enough advanced planning into this business of creating people, although He wasn't about to admit that to the man. Frankly, God decided after giving the matter some more consideration, the woman was more pleasant to be around, didn't complain or expect things nearly as much as the man, and had noticed some genuinely interesting things about His Garden that hadn't even occurred to Him even though He had created it. He taught her His secret name.

When she uttered it, she was able to fly away from the Garden, and the man, to a cave by the sea.

She found she rather liked it there, the lunar tides speaking to something in her blood and body. She taught herself to fish, to collect edible seaweeds, to make sushi (of course), and to decorate her home with shells and dried starfish and bits of her nets that wore out or tore.

The man demanded that she come back, that she be forcibly returned to him.

God had figured out by now that this would not be a good idea, and so instead cast a deep sleep on the man, amputated a rib, and built up a new first woman around it.

Upon waking, the man was quite pleased and promptly exercised his right to name the woman “Woman.” Eventually, however, this one too began to make demands on him — taste this, wear this, hold the baby, won’t you?

The man went back to God: Are you sure I couldn’t have the *first* first one back, and God said, oh no, you wouldn’t want that, I’ve punished her by making her into a demon, and she would only steal your essence to make demon babies for herself. *Really.*

But the *first* first woman took pity on the man. She came to visit him now and then, spent an afternoon or the early part of the night with him, and then went back to her cave, alone and satisfied.

Having finally drawn what meaning he feels he can from the passage, the student prepares to go home for the evening.

Looking up, he sees he is the last person still in the study hall. But no. A woman is standing by the bookshelves, surveying the titles. He has never before seen a woman in here who was not a wife or a cleaning woman, but this one looks like neither.

Lilith meets his gaze and does not modestly drop her eyes:

—*Is there something you recommend?*

—*Recommend? For whom?*

—*For me.*

—*You can read these?*

She takes a volume off the shelf, lets it fall open, and reads aloud:

—“*A man should not go out alone at night at midweek, for then the Queen of Demons has permission to go forth with her hosts...*”

The student suddenly recalls that it is Wednesday. Also, that he is alone in an enclosed space with an unfamiliar woman, which is forbidden.

—*I was just leaving. Perhaps I could walk you somewhere?* he offers.

Lilith shuts the book in her hand and puts it back in its place. She walks herself to the door.

Out on the street, he cannot complete his question before she is gone:  
 —*Who taught you to read our books?*

Several days later, on a morning when the student thinks he is the first to arrive in the study hall, he finds Lilith already in the room. No cleaning supplies to be seen, and she has already selected a book to read.

Settled in a table, a pencil and notebook at the ready to record insights from the volume before her, Lilith has clearly staked her claim to this spot, made it hers. She merely glances for a moment at the new arrival.

The student knows he should protest. He lifts a finger, waves it around the room and wags it at Lilith.

—*You're not supposed to be here.*

She hardly looks up from her reading, and says nothing. A nothing full of skepticism.

He tries to correct himself, to explain. She isn't forbidden here, not really, it's a public place, women do come here sometimes. No, it's that he, and she, and no one else with them, *that's* the problem, it's the rule for all unrelated men and women, it's nothing personal.

—*You could wait for the others outside,* she suggests.

He notices that she smells of salt water, and fish, and something mustardy, spicy and foreign.

—*You know, they could arrive any time, so maybe it's okay,* he concedes.

As he waits and tries to begin his own work, taking a seat as far from Lilith and as close to the doorway as he can, the student is taken by the realization that he has never before sat quietly in a room with a woman who did not want, more or less overtly, his attention. In his experience, where women are — children are, and groceries, and bills to be paid, and dirty clothes needing washing.

Lilith continues her study as if he were not there. Stealing glances at her, he continues to ponder the situation.

He rises and approaches.

He carefully, politely, clears his throat:

—*May I ask you a question?*

He points down at the table and the book resting on it.

—*What are you reading? If you don't mind telling me?*

She lifts the book, turns it over, checks the printing on the spine:  
—*Your lore of the demons, and how to combat them.*

The student is seized by a tremor, and hurries back to his own seat, where he sits still trembling, and certain the woman is quietly laughing at him.

He will not look. When he does look, she is gone.

He is ready to jump up and search for her, though there is no other exit, or a place for her to have hidden herself, but then he hears the sound of footsteps, other male footsteps, in the hall. Another student has arrived. No woman will penetrate this space now, as it should be.

Every morning for the next week, the student is the first to arrive at the study hall, but it is always empty when he enters. So, too, the following week. And the week after that.

Since that first meeting in the study hall, he is taken by one subject, and one subject only.

Scripture has been set aside, the sacred Law holds no interest.

The study hall is no longer a place of peace and affirmation for the student, where he could feel that every day he was developing a little more understanding of the will of the Holy One. Yes, volumes upon volumes of the very best information that men over several millennia have been able to gather about Him line all the shelves, the ancient script and the gold and silver stamped covers surely attesting to the truth contained therein; but the student, interested now only in the Other Side, the dark, demonic forces, sits at his place and finds the words in front of him dissolving into meaningless scratch marks. Sometimes a visiting scholar comes to give a lecture, but this, too, yields no insights, and there is no one he can ask the questions that weigh upon his soul.

Hiding his eyes under the brim of a baseball cap, surreptitiously purchased from a nondescript shop around the corner, the student slips out in the evening to seek other kinds of libraries, and then book shops, and then establishments with gauzy curtains and crystals hanging in the windows. His teachers, occupied with the many young souls under their tutelage, choose not to notice that he does not go home when the study sessions are over. God finds

him less easy to ignore, for even during his wanderings, he prays and pleads constantly, *please help me*. He tries bargaining, *if you would only let me see her just once*, and then contradicts himself, muttering incantations and mystical names meant to ward off demonic forces:

*I adjure you in the names of Sanoi, Sansanoi, and Samangalof.*

*Igrat, Izlat, Asya, Belusia have been slain with arrows.*

*Beware of Shabrيره: Shabrيره, berيره, rيره, ire re.*

God finds some of this incomprehensible (is He supposed to know these beings the student is calling upon?) and all of it annoyingly familiar (one might say déjà-vu all over again). He drops in at Lilith's sea-side cave, where they drink green tea and speculate on why the old "she-demon" story seems to be having the opposite of its intended effect, and fail to come up with an explanation they find especially plausible.

Lilith, as is her prerogative and her wont, takes pity on him, and Him. The student, peering through a smudged plate glass window and lace hangings, ignoring the rainbows scattered by the sharp planes of crystals catching the sunlight, sees a woman inside.

It is she.

Rushing in, he prostrates himself at her feet, begging to be freed from whatever spell it is she has mercilessly cast on him though he has surely done her no harm. He mutters more spells and calls on more spirits to force her into effecting his release, *Mikhael at my right, Gavriel at my left, Uriel before me and Rafael behind*. He sighs and moans until she agrees that she will not come to him again. Finding himself alone on the floor, he cries himself dry, though he does not know if they are tears of loss or relief.

Once again, the student arrives early and stays late at the study hall. His teachers are relieved, for it is not good for their reputations as promulgators of the Divine Will to have students deviating from their instruction, nor do they like to even admit to themselves that such things can happen. God has no complaints that his prayers have gone from fervent back to rote.

Books pile high on the tables, and around the open room voices rise in discussion and debate. Presence is enough; no one listens too closely to how

loud a particular voice is, or how frequently it participates, or how insightful its contributions.

His obsession gone, but his sense of otherness still with him, the student stays mostly quiet. He begins to look, really look, at his surroundings for the first time.

One night, when it is very late in the study hall, he is present for the arrival of the cleaning lady. Immediately, he sees the stoop of her back, and the weight of the bucket of supplies she carries. He jumps up:

*—Please, let me carry that for you.*

She steps back for a moment and shakes her head, but then appears to reconsider and hands him the bucket. She looks into his face and says, *You're not like the rest of them, you don't belong here.* She indicates where he should place her things, and then gestures towards the door, dismissing him. Perhaps she just wants him to leave her workplace, but he understands that he no longer belongs here, that she may as well be telling him to go far, far away.

Which he does, wandering for a long time, trying unfamiliar things, meeting unfamiliar people, wearing unfamiliar clothes, eating unfamiliar foods. But when he tastes wasabi, something stirs in the man's memory.

So the man makes his way to the sea-shore. Somehow, he is not surprised to see the woman waiting for him on the sand, at the mouth of a cave. She invites him in, where he finds a gentle fire burning in the hearth, two comfortable chairs, and by each a mug of green tea, waiting, still steaming.

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