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HELL'S DUKE

A tale of Ba'al



Listen to your inner demons

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Prologue:

*«It's time for one person to change
everything around them»*

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With an irritated stride, he headed towards his office. New and new state problems began to surface. The unease grew like a snowball, and the sense of chaos intensified. The sound of his steps echoed through the empty corridors. The previously coordinated and well-thought-out system was failing repeatedly. How annoying it all was. It was time to stop playing in the sandbox. Reaching his office, he ran his hand over the keyhole. Something clicked softly inside the mechanism. The heavy iron-clad door opened without a creak.

The interior resembled a huge hall. Rows of stone seats were arranged on a slight elevation and encircled a stone-paved circle. Torches burned along the perimeter of the walls, providing scant illumination. The grand structure was crowned by a dome. Essentially, this used to be the coronation hall and a meeting place of varying importance for ministers. Over time, it became a prayer hall for fifty people; now, it was his private quarters: stone benches piled with books, and in the center of the circle under the dome stood his carved table. Books were scattered everywhere, creating a sense of neglect.

It was a magnificent hall, designed and built by someone who loved their craft. He liked the majestic tone. Such an atmosphere instilled awe in the hearts of visitors. Every detail was thought out to the smallest nuance,

reflecting the taste and style of the creator. Still irritated, he stopped by a symbol painted on the floor.

Surrounded by fools, incapable of thinking in terms of centuries or millennia. Five, ten, twenty years — these are merely imperceptible drops in the ocean of history. The lives of ordinary people are too short, and they see nothing beyond their own noses. All these mayors and high priests of temples just want to fill their insatiable bellies. They don't want to live for an idea, for a higher purpose. And the world — it's right here, in the palms of their hands. So fragile, occupied with its internal matters. Every movement seemed insignificant, but the consequences could be catastrophic.

He sighed deeply. The grimace of irritation changed to sadness. In the modern world, no one seriously believes in wars anymore. The times of glorious battles are gone. These beliefs will cost them dearly. A smile appeared on his lips. Enough waiting. The time for change had come. Approaching the drawing on the floor, covered with dozens of lines and circles, he waved his hands. A flash of bright red light illuminated the hall. The torches on the walls hissed and went out.

Chapter One:

«To receive a consultation with a demonologist regarding a contract with the Devil, you can contact us via email...»

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Ba`al

Among the multitude of worlds and dimensions, seemingly apart from the countless fragments and reflections of realities, there exist Heaven and Hell. They float side by side in the Great Nothingness, above and below respectively, without intersecting with other worlds. While Heaven is quite a dull and dreary place where almost all real, interesting entertainments are forbidden because they fall into "that same top ten" of the most famous commandments, true fun reigns in Hell. Let's turn our gaze there.

Hell is a wonderful place to relax. Of course, if you are a demon. And when you have under your control exactly a devil's dozen of devil's dozens of subordinates, rest from time to time is simply necessary. The vast and truly endless expanse of Hell looks like an ordinary bagel. Yes, exactly — a huge bagel floating in impenetrable darkness. Some mortals, those who are smarter and more arrogant than others, call such a shape — a Torus.

Just imagine: the screaming souls of sinners, unbearable cold, and at the same time unbearable heat. Can you even imagine how difficult it is to maintain a

temperature of -273°C and $+5778\text{K}$?¹ If you still don't understand what the difficulty is, imagine the problems we have with water and its states of matter. Only an immortal soul can comprehend the essence of such torture, and for me, an honorable demon of His Dark Eminence, all this is, on the contrary, a delight.

The various realms of Hell provide immense freedom for the imagination of demons. All these new torture inventions, created by our most malevolent minds, always require a lot of refinements, much to my regret.

For example, there was a case where an endless queue to a demon manager's office was used as a method of torture. The essence of the torture was to convey eternal waiting in disgusting conditions. While souls in line wait for something unclear, the one who enters the office engages in an eternal conversation with the demon.

Human souls constantly want something and are always dissatisfied. They thought the demon could solve their problems. However, the manager had opposite instructions—not to pass anything to anyone, to avoid direct answers, and to promise nothing. For this torture, especially stuffy and narrow corridors with piles of dust and pre-broken chairs were also built.

The sinners were standing quietly when suddenly the line moved by one soul. What a commotion arose! It turned out the demon who came on duty brushed off a speck of dust from his table with his hand, and the sinner caught it. Since an item was passed from hand to hand during a conversation with a mortal soul, a transaction was concluded according to Hell's rules.

As soon as the soul passed the "queue trial," it was immediately sent to Heaven. A slight advancement in the

¹ Of course, I could avoid delving into specific figures and simply say "very cold" and "very hot." But I respect precision.

queue was enough for HOPE to spread across Hell. We had to beat this filth out of our charges for a long time. But there are still suspicions that not all of them lost it.

As a result of an official investigation, the demon was demoted to sinner status for: "Squandering the souls entrusted to him, and making a free transaction in exchange for goods." We are strict with violators. Despite all the troubles, this does not prevent us from working at full capacity and for our own pleasure.

Today I was in a good mood. After all, if someone invented Monday, that guy was definitely one of ours. Melodiously clinking in pitch-black plate armor, I moved along the main road of the city of Apaadi past the souls of sinners straight to the cozy corner near my estate.

The estate was given not just like that, but along with the title of Duke of Hell, one of the thirteen, to be precise. Also, with the title, I received lands with sinners and a pack of imps. A full description of my unassuming dwelling in written form could completely fill a small truck.

There were eight banquet halls alone. My lands were also extremely interesting, as they were located on a small, of course, artificial elevation. From there, the screams of the martyrs could be perfectly heard, which even caressed my ears. Not that I was particularly a cruel sadist. Understand me correctly, this is my job, and I handle it perfectly.

Everyone has a calling in life. Something they truly enjoy doing: some dance, some sing, some paint, and so on. I have the most challenging type of work—working with people. You can never expect praise from them for the services provided. They are constantly dissatisfied with something: either the sharpness of the hooks or the temperature of the fire. It's very difficult, you know, to work in such an ungrateful atmosphere. However, it is always interesting. Every day is unlike the previous one, and you can never predict what the next will be like.

Humming a cheerful tune to myself, I approached my fence. Any self-respecting estate must be surrounded by a huge fence, hand-forged. Carefully opening the heavy gates, I slipped inside my apartments. Since today was a working day, I absolutely did not want to be seen by the neighbors. They could report me.

Absenteeism does not significantly affect my work. I give orders, organize the imps. I ensure that everything is sufficient—pain, screams, firewood, and so on. To make sure no one slacks off and everyone is busy. It seems you have everything organized, so you can rest, but no. There is always someone higher up. He is already watching to make sure you are not slacking off. The cycle of bosses in nature. No one is eternal, and you can always be promoted or demoted. Competition is what creates interest in existence.

Quickly running through the corridor, passing two halls and one of the kitchens, I ran out through the back door and finally reached the cauldron. Raising my trident, I aimed it at the bundle of firewood under the cauldron and recited the inferno spell. I got all this luxury not just like that, not for nice horns. I had to dirty my black robes. Those were fun times.

Back then, I was younger and much more initiative. Once, a deserving priest of a wild tribe summoned me as the sun set behind the pyramid². And asked, in exchange for a rather bloody sacrifice, to destroy the neighboring tribe. At that time, it was quite a mundane request, but I decided to take a different approach. I offered the priest to forgo the sacrifice now and instead pay with his soul after death, so the tribe would remain intact, and the payment deferred. He

² You certainly appear, but where else can you go? The force calling from outside pulls so strongly that it nearly tears you in half, and resisting is impossible. The only way is to fulfill the desire of the one who is calling, and, if possible, take them along with you on the way back.

liked the idea, and I went to the entire population with the same proposal: to destroy the malicious aggressors in exchange for their souls after death. Then I pulled the same trick with the aggressor tribe. Well, in the end, with the help of my favorite trident, I caused an avalanche of rocks to fall on both tribes.

While I was enjoying the sweet haze of undeserved rest, a tiny imp flew up to me and landed. He shyly scratched the cauldron, in which I was steaming, with his tiny pitchfork. The imp stretched like a string, and his rather large belly swayed amusingly. Not paying attention to this and trying with all his might not to meet my gaze, he reported in a soldier-like manner:

"Your Wickedness, Lord Beelzebub is calling for you."³

"What for, may I ask? Be generous and tell me," I didn't want to leave such a cozy spot in the round cauldron. I was stalling as best I could. Every second of delay gave me a chance that the problem would resolve itself without my personal intervention. Even the most ardent workaholic has the right to a short rest.

"Regarding that sabbath organized by the harlots and adulterers last week."

Nothing could be hidden from him. I wished it could.

Well, to start, it wasn't a sabbath, just six new souls who hadn't settled in yet, which happens, and decided to get to know each other better, but how did the boss find out? It seems someone reported it to him again. I'd find this "helper" and tickle his nerves. Okay, there's still time for that.

³ As you can understand, Satanail has retired. In Hell, the spirit of rivalry is very prevalent. In such conditions of infernal capitalism, it is easier to manage a machine that has been rolling for an eternity.

"I am setting off immediately!" I made one last lazy attempt to shake off the imp, pretending to actually get up any moment.

"Lord Beelzebub ordered me to personally escort you, darker Duke Ba'al," the imp replied a bit quieter, with emphasis on the last word, and just as insistently.

Here was another oddity: lately, the Lord of Terror and the fortress Pandemonium the Great, etc., had not appeared to his servants even for transgressions. Where is Hell headed if even the leadership doesn't take breaks with the subordinates? Although, perhaps, it's for the better — with Beelzebub, I have a non-aggression pact "unless necessary." Quite a convenient document that can be broken at any moment. Though it's better relations than I had with the previous throne holder. So, no complaints.

Having only one escort in any case indicates that this will be at most an oral reprimand and will not go as far as an official reprimand in the employment record or, worse, a demotion in rank.

I creaked out of the boiling cauldron. The water bubbled merrily as if bidding farewell to my body. The clothes, black plate armor, along with the Trident of Power, lay on the other side of the cauldron. This is what doomed me. I did not expect the Summons to occur at that moment. Moreover, I could not predict its power. My face twisted in pain. My body began to stretch and pull into a vortex formed above the cauldron. I tried to reach the pile of things to grab at least the trident, but I was already being sucked into the whirlpool into one of Earth's reflections. At the last moment, I still managed to see the displeased face of the imp. He would get into trouble anyway. As a farewell, out of a sense of malice, I stuck my tongue out at him and disappeared.

The vortex closed with a sharp sound. The imp shuffled in place a bit, scratched his bald head near the

horns. He grunted sharply and, having decided something for himself, with a graceful somersault, jumped into the cauldron. There were almost no splashes, the trick was executed ten out of ten.

While I was rushing through the rift between worlds, I had a little time. The constant rotations and twists were a bit distracting, but still, I could devote myself to my favorite thing after tortures — thinking.

This was something special. I had never experienced such a Summons before. Ordinary people simply cannot produce such a flow of power. The thing is, any, even the smallest imp, can be summoned to the human world. For this, we usually use the word "Summons." In the human world, it usually looks like a sacrifice, a secret ritual, or tearful pleas with hand-wringing.

In any case, a strong energy surge capable of reaching us is created. Usually, a Summons is an ordinary portal that you are invited to enter. On the other side, you can clearly hear moans, pleas, and tearful cries.

However, the portal always stood still and waited, did not rush and did not pull you along. You could calmly finish your business. Fry a soul or wait in line for a lava pie. Setting off somewhere unknown without having eaten properly is simply unreasonable. And, of course, before a great task, there must be a great smoke break.

Honestly, I never despised a Summons. In fact, this is how I earned my current position. There are two main reasons.

The first is the journey itself. Even if briefly, you can distract yourself from the work routine. Such portals always dilute the boring and monotonous work.

And of course, the second reason is the people themselves. More precisely, not these bags of bones and blood stretched with skin, but what is valued in Hell. The most valuable currency a person can offer in exchange for

showing them the trick of multiplying gold is their immortal soul.

Screams and hellish cries filled the pentacle in which I found myself. Their echoes bounced off the empty stone walls of the huge hall for some time.

A little informational note about pentacles in general. It's a pile of intersecting lines, circles, and other geometric shapes, connected in a bizarre drawing.

Usually, it is located on the floor, but sometimes on walls, stones, and anything else, as long as you can chalk the right pattern. Such pentacles are often supplemented with protective hieroglyphs or items "warding off spirits": incense, powders, teeth of virgin infants, and newborn girls... or vice versa. And many other artifacts that humans come up with. The essence of the pentacle is to keep the demon inside. A demon really can't cross the outline, but only as long as it is intact.

These special effects were designed to show how powerful a demon I am. It also had to convey that mortals should not disturb my peace. I quickly glanced around. The walls of the room were covered with dark fabrics. Either brown or dark brown. Due to the age of the rags, it was not possible to determine their color more precisely.

Deciding not to limit myself to just sound effects, I took the form of a malevolent Kazakh Obur. At that moment, flaming tongues of fire swirled into a vortex, forming a fiery whirlwind. In the pillar of roaring crimson flames, the outline of a figure with goat legs was clearly visible. Two copper eyes, radiating malice, stared at those present. Connecting my melodic voice to the created image, I roared with all my might:

"WHO DARED TO DISTURB... yikes!" something pricked my hoof painfully. I filled my lungs with air again to continue, but I was unceremoniously interrupted.

"Summoned Ba`al, listen and obey!"

In front of me stood a plump, slightly balding man. I could even guess his approximate age, if I weren't so bewildered. No one, neither demons nor mortals, had ever dared not just to interrupt me but even to peep out of turn. Everyone understands the basic truths that to conclude a beneficial deal, both parties must be in high spirits.

"You, with all your unheard-of satanic powers, are to assist and aid this young man," his voice cut like a knife, so disgusting it was, "you are obliged to protect him and those he deems worthy. You are forbidden to attack him or plot against him. From now on, your souls are bound, and if he dies, you die too!" he continued to monotonously recite the memorized text. His cracked-squeaky voice unnerved and irritated me.

Trying to collect my thoughts, I was again thrown off balance. This self-confident fool who summoned me was pointing at the young man near me. The guy was dressed more modestly than anyone could imagine.⁴ A linen shirt with huge holes through which the skinny body of a teenager was clearly visible. Skin, bones, and soul.

"In the name of Beelzebub's stinking pits, what's going on here?!" The echo of my voice bounced around the room. The plaster on the ceiling cracked, raining down in thin streams on everyone's heads. A couple of extremely emotionally sensitive spiders, clutching their hearts, fainted and fell from their webs.

These two, it seemed, for the first time since this muttering in the ancient language had begun, deigned to give me a crumb of their precious attention.

The young man looked at me in awe, as if not believing his luck. It's the way a child usually looks at a nice toy just given to them. The old man, judging by his

⁴ Believe me, in my long life I've seen much humbler places, but this was the humblest of them all.

appearance, was clearly a devotee of some cult. He looked me straight in the eye with a bored gaze.

"What does it mean to help, what does it mean to be bound? What about the contract? What about the honest deal that will plunge you into debt?"

"You demons always need everything explained," the older one drawled, switching from the ancient language to the common tongue. The young man continued to stare at me. "You signed the contract on our terms the moment you were summoned."

It seemed that in this stunning situation, I was so completely taken aback that I didn't even notice how the parchment had transferred from my pentacle to this scoundrel's hands.

"The contract is sealed with your blood and his," he pointed at the boy again. "Now, Eugene⁵! Why are you standing there with your mouth open? It's time for you to get to work! Take your demon and go clean the abbey's cesspits," the monk squeaked, shaking his countless chins.

"Of course, Master Brogene," the boy responded, suddenly animated, and hurriedly aimed an amulet at me, shouting commanding orders: "Demon, follow me, or I will punish you with the Allfather's palm!"

Thoughts swarmed in my head. The workday in the Department of Reflections had begun. Every thought and idea had its own goals and tasks. They all unanimously set about their duties.

Let's find the positive aspects of this situation. I wasn't mistaken: if this is an abbey, then the plump man in the robe with the extraordinarily disgusting voice is indeed a priest. The next thought that came to me was also positive.

⁵ What an awful name, Eugene! His parents must have really disliked him.

I'm still alive, and I haven't been imprisoned in a bottle or a wretched lamp like some shabby genie.

Focusing on the positive, it is worth noting that at first glance, there were significantly more negatives. I'm without my weapon and armor, and I also signed the cursed contract with my own blood. At the moment, that's all that comes to mind. The flow of thoughts has dried up, but even this was not a bad result.

It would be useful to find out exactly how this happened and definitely task our development department with implementing such an effective method. Additionally, I have no idea what time period⁶ I am in. Without a doubt, one of the positive aspects is that all my limbs are intact, and I have a full reserve of strength.

In the end, I still have my sharp mind, capable of outwitting any human. The life of an ordinary bipedal mortal is short. Even if they are stubborn, smart, strong, and utterly invincible, all I need to do is wait less than a century. Time is the most vicious and relentless enemy of man. Though it might be a bit unfair, it is one hundred percent effective.

So, considering all the circumstances, I was in a rather good position. My mind remained clear and sharp, which was my main weapon in this difficult situation. And although the circumstances were not the best, I still saw paths that could lead me to victory.

Outside my head, in the present reality, the integrity of the pentacle circle in which I was confined was broken. The boy had simply rubbed out part of the drawings with his foot. From the gap thus created, stale dungeon air blew on me.

"Maybe I should just stay here?"

⁶ In Hell, time flows differently. We exist eternally, and here, a moment can feel like a century.

My question hung in the air. If you looked closely, you could see it turning rhetorical. It twisted and trembled. Questions really don't like such treatment. Each of them has the right to be heard and not ignored.

The fat man seemed to have lost all interest in us. He picked up a dustpan, broom, and mop from a shelf by the wall. From somewhere deep within his folds of fat came a snort. He probably considered it music. Under these horrible sounds, all the symbols, so carefully drawn by someone's hand, began to disappear from the floor. Each individual symbol was first swept away and then carefully washed off the floor. The fat man's hand was steady, showing that he had done this many times before.

As for my humble self, there was no immediate danger threatening me. So for now, everything was in order, and the main thing was to figure out what was happening. I was used to controlling the situation. Any attempt to control my person always ended very badly. Of course, not for me! Here I am before you! My thoughts at that moment were somewhat chaotic. I tried to concentrate on what was happening around me.

The boy Eugene, as I could now call him, had left the spacious hall where the Summons took place. Since I had no other choice, I followed him.

"A demon of my stature cannot be simply summoned and chained with some stinking chains!"

The boy ignored me.

"Alright, boy, you're playing with fire. I don't like wasting resources, but I can do without your soul."

I swung and threw a fireball at Eugene. Nothing happened. No flaming ball flew from my hand. I tried again. The result didn't change. Glancing at the wall, abundantly covered in moss, I tried to set it on fire. It worked on the first try!

"Ow!"

I jumped up to half my height. While my attention was focused on the innocent plant, the boy approached and poked me in the leg with something. After that, he turned and continued in the same direction.

"Hurry up, demon."

The echo of his voice stung my pride a few more times. Alright, changing tactics, but not abandoning the original desire.

Dragging myself through the dusty and moss-covered corridors, I tried to get ahead of him and look into his face. A note to young adventurers: when deceiving a victim, it's best to look them straight in the eyes to build trust. And, of course, don't forget the charming smile!

"I can give you five demons instead of myself, just imagine! They can do things that even I can't!" I got to my favorite activity, namely persuading and deceiving.

"Shut your mouth, demon!" the boy fumed.

"Drop your dull aphorisms, let's talk plainly. I'm offering you the wealth and power of five, alright... alright... you're persuasive—six demons!"

The boy ignored me. No problem, I've turned even tougher ones to evil. Look at him, acting like he's some kind of Adam!

"Then maybe, lovely ladies, in lingerie and all that? They'll circle around you, feed you juicy fruits, twist in passionate dance, gradually undressing... By the way, how old are you?" I decided to clarify just in case, glancing at the boy.

"Fourteen," Eugene automatically replied, clearly immersed in the scenes I described.

I figured that for a demon, that's a short lifespan, but for a human with an average lifespan of forty years, it was just right.

"Well... well then, later you can..."

"Shut your mouth! Be quiet! Silence!" his breaking voice soared to a soprano. "Your power is already at my disposal, so stop arguing and weaving your schemes! Here is your task for today—clean the latrines of our revered abbots," Eugene pointed to a dilapidated wooden structure.

The boy quickly regained his composure, though he now resembled a freshly ripened tomato. However, he drew my attention to such a seemingly simple thing—we had indeed left the temple gates and were now in the courtyard, which I hadn't noticed in the heat of our dialogue. Now I could fully appreciate the beauty, or horror, depending on one's perspective, of the scene before me.

And there was indeed much to see. My eyes widened in astonishment as I looked at the goings-on in the courtyard. My jaw dropped to the floor. No, understand me correctly, there's nothing particularly interesting in the human world. I've seen it hundreds of thousands of times, but something was definitely off here.

In the temple courtyard, DEMONS were bustling back and forth, sometimes colliding with each other. Demons, you understand! These weren't just ugly or wretched people, but actual demons.

Some carried bags toward an extension of the temple, and from within the building came the robust sound of demon speech. I even spotted a couple of imps with small wings and a stack of envelopes in their tiny gripping paws. Two figures, even smaller than the imps, fluttered towards them, took the envelopes, and handed over new ones. These were fairies. Here and there, other creatures, which I didn't have time to identify because they were moving so fast, were running around. The number of non-human entities here was something I had seen only in Hell and in the worlds of Navi. Just as my lower jaw was about to touch the tops of my big toes, my left side burned with pain.

"What the...?!" I cried out but had no time for more. Another strike with the gleaming sacred sign followed in the same spot. I felt another spasm mixed with pain.

"Just dare to speak obscenities with your lying mouth!" Eugene seethed. Apparently, he was deeply offended by the conversation about temptresses.

"And now get to work."

He pointed towards the cesspits. I would have found them by smell alone. It was an unparalleled scent. The combination of the monks' and demons' waste created a truly unique aroma.

Dragging myself to my workplace, I felt despair. I had no idea what to do or where to start. It's hard to be prepared for such a thing. However, one thing I knew for sure—I needed to get out of here as quickly as possible. First, I would need time to understand what was happening and develop a brilliant plan to return my body to the bathing procedures in the cauldron. It's shameful to admit, but the next opportunity to take any kind of bath would not come soon.

Chapter Two:

«Among us, there are absentees! But I cannot figure out who is missing.»

© Member of the Secret World Council

The Grand Temple

"Master! Master!" A man dressed as a typical clerk ran into the hall: a three-piece suit, the top button undone, and a tie hanging around his navel.

With these shouts, he approached the figure sitting in a huge office chair behind an equally large carved table made of blue wood. The figure raised its head.

"I hope you have good news," the voice of the man sitting at the desk was as if trained by sermons, sounding resonant and authoritative.

The clerk finally reached the table and stopped.

"Yes, master! By your order, we are beginning the purge. Our demonic response team is already converging on the temple where the original prophecy is located," the messenger reported.

"Good, excellent even. Then we begin the assault. Everyone in the temple must be eliminated, and the prophecy brought to me," his voice was monotonous, but it seemed as if the very space around him conveyed the necessary emotions.

"Yes, my lord. The special units are awaiting nightfall and my signal."

"I hope they won't have to wait long," after saying this, the figure delved back into the papers on the desk.

"And once the group is in position, I want to observe the proceedings personally."

"When everyone is ready, a communication sphere will be delivered to you," the clerk, bowing incessantly, began to retreat. He could not stay in this room alone for long.

"Oh, and one more thing. After the operation, I would like to address the people," the figure said without lifting his head from the papers. "So the sphere will need to be recalibrated for broadcast."

Ba`al

The sun had already set below the horizon, but it was only a few hours later when the signal for retreat sounded, and everyone trudged off to their assigned dungeons. Except for the builders, of course. Demons are quite resilient and can go without sleep for several days, but even supernatural beings need rest from time to time.

As I walked with the others in a long line, I spat and peeled off the remnants of "work" stuck to my body. A free space immediately formed around me. You know, few would like to walk next to a foul-smelling demon, especially one reeking of cesspits.

I was extremely angry. At the boy, at that fat man, at the fact that I had left my trident further than I could reach, at the lack of bags, and having to carry everything by hand, and as a result, at the entire world in general. In short, my mood was the worst it could be.

"Lord Ba`al?" came a hesitant voice from behind.

It turns out I still had some reserve of good mood left; otherwise, how could I explain that after these words, it got even worse? I spun around quickly, shaking off the dirt. The splashes flew onto the surrounding demons, who grumbled in discontent. I paid them no attention.

"Grask?" The cup of my surprise was full, so it just slowly overflowed.

"Yes, Duke, it's me," he lowered his head.

"We thought you had disappeared; there had been no news from you for over a hundred years. We were already considering replacing you."

He moved closer to me, and we began to walk side by side, hoof to hoof.

"So, what does all this mean?" I asked quite specifically.

"I understand, Duke, you mean not specifically this temple?"

"The Duke means what is going on here in general!? Where did all these entities come from?"

"This world gave birth to one person three hundred and seventy-four years ago," Grask began his tale. "He was an unremarkable priest. However, he managed to do what no one else among the living had ever done on this Earth. He summoned a minor imp and made a contract on his own terms. His name was Grandwurd."

"Whom? The imp?"

"No, of course not, the priest. A few decades later, humans started to develop electricity. But because there were countless numbers of creatures of the night at that time, wires and electricity didn't catch their interest. All concepts seemed unjustifiably expensive, and they abandoned them. Why spend resources inventing an engine if a couple of demons can push a car? Why make a lamp if you can trap a few fairies in a jar? I was one of the first hundred demons summoned here by Grandwurd."⁷ This is a monumental figure. His likeness adorns all squares and

⁷ It needs to be clarified: in Hell, the concept of time does not exist, or if delving into metaphysics, time flows non-linearly, in endless and uneven jolts. This explains the difference in the perception of time.

banknotes. In general, I have seen a lot over these long years. Now I am the senior overseer of the newcomers. So please love and do not be lazy," he paused and glanced at me with a strange, pleading look. "Otherwise, I will have problems," and there it was again, that look.

Ba`al walked with a completely absent expression on his face.

"Are you trying to tell me that this whole mess was started by a decrepit old man about three hundred years ago?" I glanced at the chain of demons and other creatures. "And this old man knew a thing or two about organization. Good thing I'm not planning to stay here; by tomorrow, I'll be out of this sty."

Grask looked at me distrustfully.

"See that doubtful look again, and you'll be scattered to the winds," I hissed in a sly voice.

He recoiled in fear. Apologizing as he went, he rushed forward, pushing aside the tired demons with his horns, elbows, and particularly stubborn ones with a pitchfork.

Eugene

Eugene was in high spirits: he finally got his first demon. He would be able to summon future servants by himself. No boy could dream of a better birthday gift. Moreover, tomorrow there would be math classes. Eugene loved these classes and was one of the best students. He passed through the main hall with the temple's main relic—the tablet. This was the fastest way to get to his cell.

A few monks were conducting the evening service. Eugene didn't stay long. The curfew was soon, and he needed to be in bed by then. He swiftly flew down the corridor and stepped onto the first stair of the staircase. Immediately after this sharp maneuver, he was knocked off his feet by a blow of something fiery red to the forehead.

A red-haired boy, about the same age as Eugene, was sitting on the floor, shaking his head in surprise. He was dressed in the same clothes as Eugene. However, the long toga of a novice looked more harmonious on him.

"Who are you?" Eugene was puzzled. He had seen him a few times at sermons along with the temple's chief treasurer. The boy carried prayer books for him and helped as an acolyte but almost never participated in the rest of the temple's life. He never spent his free time in the company of other boys. Therefore, the other novices didn't like him.

"Vikk, and you?" The boy quickly stood up. He held his head with one hand and extended the other to Eugene.

"Eugene. What are you doing here? I've never seen you in this part of the temple before. Your quarters are in the other wing," Eugene accepted the hand. His head was ringing, but it would soon pass. He had hit his head hard many times during overly zealous prayers.

"I... well, nothing, just wanted to chat with the guys," Vikk said uncertainly. His eyes rolled up toward the ceiling and didn't want to look at Eugene.

"You have friends you wanted to talk to? Oh, Redhead?" That was the nickname the boys used for him. "And what are their names?" Eugene smiled.

"Well, they're probably already asleep. I'll come back tomorrow then," Vikk turned and quickly walked away.

He's strange, Eugene thought. Rubbing his forehead with his hand, he stayed in place for a few more moments. Waiting until the sound of footsteps completely died away, he continued climbing the stairs.

Ba'al

I scratched my head thoughtfully. The situation was as follows: at the entrance to the common barracks, there

were three guards. They couldn't provide substantial resistance but could give a timely alarm signal. Also, the "housing" was surrounded by a magical fence, invisible to the ordinary person. So, having gotten inside and settled on the six-story beds, I began to wait for things to calm down and the guards to assume a bored posture.

Everything was much more complicated than it could have been. If I had my trident now, I would just wave it, and the temple walls would crumble into dust under the pressure of cataclysms. A couple more swipes, and all the monks would be ashes, along with the slave demons left after the destruction of their masters... well, them too! After a day spent in exhausting and foul-smelling work, I was ready to burn this world down by myself.

Outside, everything fell silent, and I needed a little more time to calm down. It was time for the most ingenious of all plans. After all, I had thought about it longer than any plan in my long life. A whole three minutes! Approaching the entrance, I ignited a spark on the nearest bed. The flame came out with a greenish-blue hue. Very stylish.

The flash of magical power was supposed to attract the guards' attention. I had to act quickly. While my fellow slaves were extinguishing the fire...⁸, I, with another magical effort, assumed the form of a fairy. Maybe not as elegant as the guards, but in the general commotion, it should suffice. I had to conserve magic. Without my trident, my powers were draining very quickly, and the spells were not as potent. I rushed from the entrance into the maw of the growing fire. Two guard fairies had already flown inside. They weren't in a hurry to use their magic. The dust in their

⁸ WITHOUT USING MAGIC! No, seriously, they didn't even try. They were probably well-informed about the consequences of the punishment. Unlike me.

pouches, you know, was limited, and they couldn't cast spells without it.

"I'm getting reinforcements! Hold them off as long as possible! They're resisting!" I squeaked in a high-pitched voice. Passing by the fairies, I couldn't resist and tossed another spark at the nearest demon's cloak. His outer garment ignited instantly; he must have also been cleaning the cesspits recently. The demon roared and hurled a bolt of lightning at the fairies. They retaliated, unraveling their pouches. The fun had begun.

Since everyone was preoccupied, I slipped through almost unnoticed. At the entrance, shifting from foot to foot, the third guard hovered in the air. It was a demon with a humanoid green body and the head of a strange bird.

"Hurry, our men are being attacked! My magical powers are at their limit. I'll sound the alarm, save our people!" I delivered this crucial phrase, stammering and breathing heavily. When I want to, I can be very dramatic.

As if expecting this, the third guard nodded to me and rushed inside, passing through the building wall and leaving a charred silhouette behind. I darted toward the main building of the temple like a bullet. The appearance of a guard fairy suited me; there were plenty of them here, and the unusual movements of such a beautiful creature wouldn't arouse suspicion.

The next part of the plan went something like this: "Find the novices' dormitory and beat the crap out of Eugene to steal my contract." Moving through the dark labyrinths of the passageways⁹, I didn't encounter any entities. It seemed that all the forces were concentrated in the courtyard. My breathing became heavy and labored; it turns out that flying is hard work. I had forgotten what it

⁹ Was it really so difficult to put a couple of fairies in jars and hang them from the ceiling to provide light?

was like. It had been a long time since I had to move so much through the air.

Taking a pause to catch my breath, I stopped near one of the corridor branches. At the end of it, a door was visible, and standing by it was a minotaur, holding a huge axe in his hands. An enemy, of course, not serious, especially for me, but he could easily raise an alarm with his battle cry, waking everyone in the temple. Maybe I should try to trick the bull-headed creature? He couldn't see through magic but was as strong as... well, a bull, in general.

I recalled what the monk who summoned me looked like. Not that he had left a deep impression. I hadn't looked at him closely, but I could reproduce his approximate features. For the minotaur, all humans looked the same anyway. Emerging from around the corner towards the minotaur, I remembered one small detail: I hadn't seen this fat man from behind. My form resembled a clay figurine with only an outer shell, and even that not entirely complete. There was nowhere to go; he had already noticed me and tensed his muscles. Carelessness will be my undoing. It's strange this trait isn't listed among the mortal sins.

"I need to get to the novices," I said, trying to mimic the thin voice, addressing the creature.

"No," he rumbled, not stopping to look straight ahead.

"What do you mean, no?! Haven't you heard what's happening outside? The slaves have rebelled!" I energetically waved my hands towards the barracks.

"No," the minotaur replied, not coming up with anything better. It seemed he wasn't even trying. He stood like a sullen bull with a huge axe.

The minotaur glanced at me suspiciously. Evidently, my appearance was really bad, as his eyes glittered warily.

"Master Brodgin?" he asked, gripping his two-handed weapon tighter.

"Who else?! Can't you see? Or are your eyes more accustomed to the labyrinths of Crete? Now hurry up and help the guards!" Saying this, I tried to walk around the beast and stand directly in front of him.

"The world needs warriors like you! If you stop the traitors, I'll make sure you are granted freedom!"

Some changes appeared on the guard's face. First, his eyes widened, though they were already somewhat bulging, and focused somewhere beyond me. Second, his nostrils flared and trembled, releasing a cloud of thick warm steam. With all his might, he charged down the corridor to fend off the slave rebellion.

Just a moment ago, this giant was blocking my way to the room, and now, as if his shift had ended exactly a second ago, he was gone. Only the loud clattering of hooves echoed in the corridor. I swiftly slipped through the ajar door.

On six double-decker beds, the boys were sleeping. The room, in general, was not distinguished by rich decoration. I would even say it reeked of unhealthy asceticism. Though the beds were similar to those of their servants, the room was much more spacious. But the smell was exactly the same as in my fellow sufferers' quarters. It seems six boys can stink as much as thirty demons.

In the moonlight streaming through the large window, I noticed the tousled head of my "master." Stepping silently on the time-smoothed stone floor, I approached the bedside table. If the scroll wasn't there, I was done for.

Outside, frightened and irritated cries were already heard, though not loud enough to wake the resting leadership. I needed to hurry.

An immediate desire to strangle the boy seized me. He slept so defenselessly. But the contract held me tighter

than friends who don't let your drunken body show the hooligans who's the main karate master in hell.

I plunged both hands into the bedside table by the boy's bed. I no longer had time for silence as the cries slowly crept into the temple. Among the various papers, I found the parchment, endowed with power and sealed. I also felt my name on it. There was no time to read it. Since the contract had considerable magical power, it couldn't simply be torn. It needed concentrated inferno. But it's not recommended to cast it in an enclosed space.

Running from the table, I jumped out the window. The shards scattered in all directions, beautifully shimmering in the moonlight. The sound of breaking glass attracts attention in any case. But either everyone was engrossed in searching for me inside the temple or in its surroundings. There was no one by the novices' windows except the minotaur. From his offended expression, I recognized my old acquaintance.

"You're not the one!" the creature accurately noted.

He jumped out of the window and landed not far from me. His posture promised nothing good for me.

"And you are just...!" I said maliciously, running towards the minotaur and casting an inferno spell directly at the scroll.

Nothing happened. Well, not exactly. I was, for instance, repelled by the released energy of my own explosion. But not to Hell, as I had hoped, but simply through the outer wall of the perimeter. After the impact, I reverted to my usual form. It's like wearing your favorite worn shoes—comfortable and free. The explosion, with the help of my sturdy body, created a hole in the outer wall of the temple. Quite a large one, about three meters in radius. The bull-headed one was also affected. He flew not as gracefully as I did, just thudding against the opposite side, where he was pinned by debris.

I don't understand anything. After destroying the contract, both parties gain freedom; that's the golden standard. But it didn't work for some reason now. By a happy coincidence, my hooves still left the sacred ground. I needed to stay away from it as much as possible.

I stood up, shook my head, but the ringing in my ears wouldn't stop. Ignoring the ringing of hundreds of crazy bells, I trudged away. After a few steps, I banged my head against the temple wall. Well, I should run in the opposite direction from the enemies, not towards them. Quickly turning one hundred and eighty degrees and staggering even more like a drunken penguin, I walked away.

Even though I had already moved a decent distance, my legs still weren't working well. Through the now quite annoying ringing, I heard someone calling me by name.

"Ba`al, stop!" someone repeated behind me.

I recognized that voice; it was the tireless Eugene. A fairy perched on his shoulder, glowing blue and red alternately. I leaned wearily against a tree and turned around.

"I literally stepped out for five minutes to get some fresh night air," I muttered, holding onto the tree trunk. Judging by the prickly sensations, it was an aspen.

"I can see that. After all, you're my servant and can rest from time to time. But tell me, why did you decide to destroy the list of summoned demons? You could have destroyed your contract and regained your freedom?" In the complete darkness, I couldn't make out his facial features; I couldn't tell if he was mocking or genuinely concerned about the topic.

"Altruistic demons," I rasped, "ever heard of them? They're the most powerful," I smiled. Well, I couldn't admit my own stupidity.

The boy ignored this remark. He turned his head to the fairy.

"Inform Master Brodgin that I have found the demon. Also, report the destruction of the temple's protective wall. Maybe one of the demons guilty of the rebellion can help Ba'al repair it."

The tiny creature, still shimmering red and blue, nodded. Taking off in a long arc, the fairy flew towards the temple. The noise inside the perimeter began to subside, and individual commands were heard. But the main riot had been suppressed.

"What were you saying, dem..." he didn't have time to finish.

As if obeying a silent command, monsters started rushing towards the temple, jumping out of bushes and leaping from larger stones. There were about a hundred of them, maybe even several hundred large representatives of spirits. And this entire considerable crowd rushed into the breach I had made in the wall. I managed to spot a couple of hydras, three centaurs, six succubi, and even a phoenix. It seemed he was being held under a fireproof cover. There were countless other lower-ranking creatures. The temple was once again filled with screams, but now they were the screams of the dying. We froze.

The Grand Temple

"And that was the signal? As far as I remember, signal fairies were supposed to fly strictly upwards." The voice belonged to a figure bent over the sphere.

"Uhhhh, yees, that was the signal, my lord," sweat was dripping from the first secretary's forehead, but he couldn't reveal his complete lack of involvement in initiating the attack.

"There seems to be too little confidence in your words," the speaker turned around, and the light from the

spell flashes in the sphere briefly illuminated the figure. It was an elderly man with a neatly trimmed beard¹⁰.

"This... this is our new tactic: the signal fairy leads the attack, illuminating the spearhead with light," the clerk swallowed and tried to smile.

The figure slowly shook his head, pondering.

"We'll see how effective this turns out to be."

He extended his hands toward the sphere, guiding it to follow the attackers.

Ba`al

From behind the temple courtyard, the screams of the dying could be heard. The walls of the buildings within the temple perimeter were crumbling and collapsing. It seemed like a perfect chance to escape, especially since the boy was watching the events unfold with his mouth open.

All that remained was to snatch the scroll with the contract from him, wherever it might be. Taking everything necessary from a corpse, of course, was easier, but killing the master was forbidden, unlike theft. It was easy to check: I tried to aim a spell at the boy, but nothing happened. He was still protected by the contract. However, rummaging through pockets had not been tried yet.

I quietly approached the boy and just as silently extended my hand to his breast pocket. His clothes were quite loose, and this took a bit longer than necessary.

While I was rummaging there, Eugene gathered himself and noticed what was happening to him. Meanwhile, I was in the process of the most trivial theft. Scrolls of potions and small protection amulets had already slipped into my hands, showing imps and other even less

¹⁰ A true villain. You never notice them, but they always crave attention.

useful creatures.¹¹ He slapped my hand as it reached for another batch of junk from his pockets.

"What the devil?!" he cried, swatting my hand away. "Oh, right..."

I jumped back and shyly started scraping the ground with my hoof.

"We must help the brothers!" the boy said unreasonably loudly.

"I don't think we have the necessary resources for help. Something like troops, magical support from the air, or at the very least a demon capable of stopping an entire army," I said, trying to discreetly drop the stolen items into the bushes.

"Then we need to wait out the assault," Eugene suddenly said.

"Maybe I misheard, and you said we should wait for something?"

A particularly loud explosion sounded, the temple's spire swayed. The noises from beyond the wall completely fell silent. It seemed the resistance had been crushed in a matter of seconds.

The boy frowned. It was unclear from his face whether he was trying not to shake from fear or preparing to rush into battle.

"Let's go," he said in a trembling voice.

"There?" I clarified, just to be sure, pointing a clawed finger at the burning ruins of the temple.

"Yes, there," he declared with the same resolve. "We need to save at least the tablet, which the monks dedicated their lives to protecting and are ready to defend to the end." Well, that phrase was clearly rehearsed and carried no real

¹¹ Why carry so many useless things in your pockets at once? I've only seen such junk on failed thieves. Actually, maybe that's why they carry all of it.

meaning. "There lies the tome of past, present, and future times."

"I don't know about you, but I'm not going into a fierce battle against overwhelming enemy forces just because your guys had a squabble with someone! That's madness! Especially to steal some book!" I crossed my arms over my chest and looked defiantly at the boy. He responded with a suspiciously gloomy look and a nervous smile on his lips. I didn't like it.

Chapter Three:

«We control demons even at the molecular level! This is the greatest breakthrough in science!»

James Clerk Maxwell

Ba`al

No, just imagine this. I was climbing up the wall like a cat on curtains, heading for the same window I had jumped out of less than an hour ago, trying to escape. Fate is a funny thing, and this strange new world with its no less strange laws was completely unfamiliar to me. Up until this moment, I had never even heard of mortals so brazenly controlling the lives of magical creatures, as if they were the pinnacle of creation.

From the height of a bird's flight, I had a perfect view of how the battle inside the temple walls was gradually dying down. Flames were raging everywhere. The last defenders of the temple were still trying to resist, but it was hardly organized. Bodies of people were scattered across the inner courtyard, with magical battles continuing around them. The slaves were defending themselves as best they could. From the depths of the main tower, sounds of battle echoed. It seemed the last survivors were being finished off there.

It was strange how quickly such a seemingly well-protected structure was taken. No alarm sirens, no sentinels. With these thoughts, I climbed into the open aperture.

In the novices' rest room, there were already two lifeless bodies. They were young boys, no older than my

acquaintance. Who, by the way, preferred to stay outside, not risking himself. Quite a fearless lad, I must say.

The boys lay on the opposite side of the door, their backs against the wall. Their hair and novices' robes were singed, perhaps they blew themselves up or simply didn't have time to run. It didn't matter now.

What mattered was that their bodies were petrified. No, they were dead, of course, that's not the point. They were literally turned to stone, up to their chests. This was interesting. It meant either a basilisk was among the attackers, or my mind was playing tricks on me, and they decided to try two different schools of magic, fire and earth, simultaneously.

"Ah, something to remember!" I hissed, transforming into a basilisk.

I had only seen this beast once, not often do creatures from hell get to torment mythical beings from the world of Navi. Honestly, back then, no one tortured anyone either. The meat of this lovely creature is quite interesting in taste and somewhat reminiscent of chicken, and we were celebrating my promotion, and well, I haven't drunk that much since.

I straightened my wings, extended my claws, ruffled my scales, and boldly walked towards the door. Such transformations from something larger to something smaller are easier: excess energy is released, causing a small flash of light and heat. It's just physics, pure physics.

The temple building shook from an explosion. Within seconds, the choking smell filled the room. It smelled like something burning. Carefully peeking from behind the doorway, I surveyed the corridor. Immediately, I spotted a crest. Either basilisks don't shake their heads that quickly, or they accept that half of the space in front of them is out of view.

Stepping cautiously, I moved towards the stairs. According to Eugene's instructions, I needed to go down and turn left towards the main hall. On the first floor, I heard the clanging of metal against metal, and the echoes of footsteps reached me. Someone was coming up. Without changing pace, but altering direction, I stubbornly moved to the opposite end of the corridor. I needed to reach the main hall another way. Judging by Eugene's hurried and fragmented stories, that's where the artifact was located.

Reaching the end of the corridor, I turned left and ran into the door of one of the rooms. I wanted to be as inconspicuous as possible. Any of the warring parties could mistake me for an enemy. And my magic reserves, without my beloved trident, were replenishable but limited.

The door was unlocked. Carefully holding it with my paws, I quietly opened it. It was a storage room or a dressing room. The visible space was filled with items and clothes, some neatly stacked, others just piled up. There were other objects, but there was no time to investigate; the footsteps were already on my floor.

In desperation, I began to turn my head. What to do? What to do now?! From what I saw outside the temple, I needed to go straight through the storage room wall. My brain worked, trying to recreate the building's layout in my mind. By my calculations, the main hall should be behind this room's wall. I cast a spell with the elegant name "tongues of hellfire." For silently cutting through stone masonry, it was the perfect method. My palm flared with a soft pop, and a directed red flame shot from it. I traced a circle with my paw, and clouds of acrid dust and smoke obscured my hand. When I finished, the entire room was filled with dust and the smell of burning stone. If you don't know what burning stone smells like, smell the rocks in a sauna when water is poured over them, then imagine this

scent magnified tenfold. I waved my hands, trying to disperse the dust and see the results of my work.

Eugene

Eugene stood, staring at the walls of the Temple. It had been about half an hour since his servant left. He watched the burning roof of the abbey. The beams, unable to bear the weight of the roof, collapsed inside with a crash. To his left, behind the wall, there was a wild howl. It ceased as suddenly as it had begun. Eugene was so scared that he stood frozen, unable to take even a step under the cover of the tree crowns. He couldn't believe this was really happening. He couldn't believe his eyes. Everyone, absolutely everyone he knew and loved, was now on the other side of the wall. And he was here, all alone.

His former life was burning along with the Temple of the Allfather. This couldn't, shouldn't have happened. He was supposed to start studying demonology. From tomorrow, he could touch the tablet of the great clergymen for the first time. In the first year, he would learn how to summon the simplest servants. Then six months of practice, and after that, studying the summoning of more powerful servants based on the principle of the contract.

His life was planned and understandable. Every day was written in the schedule, just like for everyone else before him. Eugene knew perfectly well what would happen on any given day. It had happened to his older friends and even to his mentor. Now it had all turned to ashes. Dozens of huge demons had run out from the bushes and trees surrounding the abbey and simply destroyed his, Eugene's, future.

Every minute without his servant filled Eugene with despair. Demon Ba'al was the only thing that now connected him to home. He couldn't help his brothers in any way. He was just an ordinary boy. He didn't know a single

spell. He never took physical training seriously, relying on his intellectual abilities. However, the vow made at the age of six by all the novices still echoed in his head: "I pledge to protect the tablet at the cost of my life. The holiest relic of the Allfather."

Back then, those words meant nothing to Eugene, but they had been etched into his memory forever. Now it was the only thing he could do. He could fulfill the vow and at least try to save the tablet.

The building, which the slaves had been constructing for three weeks, collapsed after a powerful explosion. From the clouds of smoke emerged a creature with a snake's head and webbed wings. It let out a ringing, prolonged cry after being hit by a fireball. Someone was still resisting.

Eugene felt he had to help but couldn't force himself to take a step. A huge hairy beast darted through a breach in the wall. There was a thunderous sound, and the blackened dead weight of a monk's body flew out of sight.

Eugene snapped out of his daze a bit, turned around, and dived into a nearby bush. From there, he wouldn't be visible; the darkness of the forest would hide him. In a moment, another disgusting creature stepped into the clearing. It hissed and twisted its two heads in different directions, looking for something. Eugene held his breath. He felt that even loud thoughts could give away his location.

Ba`al

I gently pushed the stone disk that I had created with my manipulations. It didn't budge. I pushed harder, then leaned my entire body against it. No result. Perhaps the wall was thicker than I had anticipated.

There was noise again outside the door. Judging by the stomping in the corridor, there were either five demons or one huge one with ten legs; there were other combinations as well. But for some reason, I really didn't

want to find out the correct answer. I backed up to the opposite wall. Aimed, whispered the "explosion" spell, and ended up with a bright lump of magma and fire in my palm. I swung, aimed once more for good measure, and threw the spell right at the center of the stone disk.

Smoke rose in a column, and I was already leaping into the hole with a running start. It would have been excruciatingly painful and offensive if the "explosion" hadn't blown the disk outward. I didn't want to think about that, and time was running out, but as usual, I was lucky.

Perhaps I should have shouted something like "Watch out!", but it's not in my nature to warn anyone about anything. So, I wasn't particularly surprised when, jumping from the stone disk, I landed on hooves sticking out from under it. The stone was still smoking and hot to the touch.

"Tough luck, my friend," I chuckled softly, dusting off my paws¹².

As far as I could see through the dust clouds, this was indeed the main hall. The description seemed to match. Near the entrance doors lay the bodies of the temple's servants in their robes. Around them, in equally varied poses, lay about a dozen demons. It was unclear which side the poor souls were fighting on, but I still saluted them.

If they had died, they would have returned to their home world. Otherwise, either they still had some life left in them, or they were killed by some powerful artifact.

Screams echoed from above, amplified by the vast hall. It sounded like dozens of ten-legged demons were shouting. Just what we needed. I began scanning the rest of

¹² Under any circumstances, even in the most critical situations, I always strive to look impeccable. In our profession, appearance is everything. Who knows when you might come across a fool ready to give away their soul for a pittance.

the location with my eyes and spotted a pedestal with a book.

As it should be, the pedestal was located in the center of the room. The glass dome top of the temple focused the moonlight in the middle. It looked impressive and pompous. The surroundings seemed to hint that this was something very important. The dead bodies around the pedestal confirmed my thoughts. Everything was covered in blood, which didn't really fit the overall decor. One of the "dead" unexpectedly lifted his head. His opened eye focused on me.

"Judging by your appearance, you are a servant. What's your master's name?" croaked the monk.

"Eugene. Although I wouldn't use the terms 'servant' and 'master,' they're somewhat offensive," I said. The "dead" man closed his eyes, trying to recall.

"Take the tablet and give it to your master, demon. Guard it." He coughed.

Nothing else was discernible. The cough turned into choking sounds. But the outstretched hand holding the book was firm, as if it didn't belong to this dying body. I took the book and turned my back on the poor fellow. There was nothing I could do to help him, and I didn't want to join this "sleepy" party. I needed to transform into something more suitable for a hasty retreat from the enemy's surroundings.

I transformed into the Aztec goddess of death. My body now consisted of a writhing mass of snakes with two snake heads and four arms. The snakes were constantly in motion, producing a rolling hiss in the silence.

A fairy emerged from the round hole I had entered through. She was hard to miss, leaving a blue trail about an arm's length behind her. After circling the dome, she hovered above the center. For a few seconds, she hung motionless, then slowly descended to the pedestal where the tablet was supposed to be. But, of course, it wasn't there.

After making another loop around the hall, she focused her gaze on me. No matter how hard I tried to pose as a statue, I was noticed.

I started running-slithering, hearing nothing but the rustling of the fairy's wings behind me. This room had definitely become a graveyard. As soon as I reached the wrecked doors of the hall, sounds from above hinted at a pursuit. I proceeded along the corridor, holding one pair of arms straight and clutching the stolen goods tightly to my body with the other pair. After wandering through these lovely labyrinths for a bit, I found myself in the same tunnel I had been led through when I first arrived in this world. Now I knew the way to freedom.

After some time, dry and hot air hit the nostrils of one of my snake heads. The pursuit was far behind. It was very convenient to have a 360-degree view around you.

I inhaled the fresh night air with my snake nostrils. I needed to get beyond the wall as quickly as possible. Judging by the appearance and sounds of the destroyed property, all the invaders were inside. They definitely needed lessons in tactics and strategy. No guards, no blocking squads. I smiled with both heads and launched an inferno charge down the corridor from which I had just emerged. I headed toward the wall surrounding the temple. Quickly finding a breach, one of those made by the invaders, I dove through it.

Running into the clearing where I last saw Eugene, I stopped; there was no one in sight. Of course, it was night and all, but the snake vision should have helped me. And then I noticed one of the bushes shaking vigorously.

"Hey! Brave one, let's-s-s go, we have little time!" I hissed, almost in unison with both mouths.

The boy emerged, drawing some symbols with his hands. I grimaced, and to make him understand that I wasn't an enemy, I threw a fireball at his feet.

"Let's-s-s go! Fool, your favorite s-s-storybook is-s-s with-h me!" I chuckled softly, seeing that my actions had the desired effect. The boy stopped his useless activity and gaped at me.

"Name yourself, demon!" he blurted out in what he thought was a menacing voice.

"Friendly, friendly," I grimaced. "Let's-s-s move in th-h-hat direction."

I pointed north with one clawed hand while shaking the trophy in front of his astonished face with the other. Then I dashed off in the indicated direction, as I had no desire to die. Eugene, not being an idiot, finally realized what was going on and rushed after me like a whirlwind.

"Can you make us invisible?" Eugene tried to keep up with me.

"You know, if I could, I would have long s-s-since rid mys-s-self of your fac-c-ce, making it invis-s-sible."

Chapter Four:

*«Great problems lead to genius solutions.
Genius solutions lead to catastrophic
problems.»*

© *The Deceased*

Ba`al

We had been making our way through the dense thicket for almost three hours, without paying much attention to the path. I had taken on the form of a small imp, similar to those that work as messengers in Hell. Maintaining this form didn't require much energy since it was small in size. Over the past day, I had used up almost all of my energy.

A branch released by Eugene slapped me across the face, slightly bending my snout. I began to mutter innocent curses under my breath.

According to my Great Master's¹³ beliefs, we were heading towards the city. Without a map of the area! Relying on a teenage boy who had only been outside the temple walls until the age of four. The rest of his time, he spent within the confines of his new home. Fantastic! I angrily flashed my bare backside.

Meanwhile, dawn was breaking. We finally emerged onto a fairly wide road where two carts could easily pass each other without touching. The "Prophets' Tablet," as the book I had stolen was called, was being carried by Eugene in an improvised bag made from a piece of his robe.

¹³ Sarcasm..

Before us, the first buildings of the city began to appear. Behind us and a bit to the right, a black smoke plume curled up from the forest line. For now, only the two of us knew where it originated from. Recalling everything I knew about cities and quickly assessing our situation, I suddenly thought, "We urgently need to secure some financial stability."

After spending a long time in Hell as a duke, I had grown accustomed to luxury, although there were tough times too. Judging by everything I had learned about the boy, I couldn't expect plans or decisions from him. So, I had to take matters into my own clawed hands again.

"Are you hungry?" I asked my companion.

He glanced at me from under his brows and nodded. His tousled hair fell over his face, and his stomach growled, rivaling the roar of the minotaur guard. It was clear he was distressed, having just witnessed the destruction of everything dear to him by unknown assailants. But time heals all wounds, and I needed to distract him.

"Listen, don't be so down! So your home burned down. Big deal. You've read books, right? The greatest and most unforgettable adventures begin with stepping out of your comfort zone. Often, this means losing your home and loved ones. You didn't have many acquaintances there, did you?"

During this brief tirade, I got carried away and didn't notice Eugene lagging behind by a few steps. His brows knitted together, and his cheeks turned red. Sneakily, he poked me with a holy symbol right below my back. Pain seared through my buttocks.

"Enough with the offended moon frog act, better tell me what that person is doing," I said, rubbing my aching part and pointing at a neatly dressed young man seemingly engaged in some pointless activity.

He stood on a small level clearing by the roadside, looking through a peculiar telescope-like device with a box in the middle, observing the city. It seemed that in the time I spent in Hell, people in other worlds had forgotten how to make simple glasses. Humans always want to complicate their lives with strange inventions.

"You mean the one holding the camera? Haven't you ever seen movies before?" Eugene grumbled.

"Do me a favor, explain it in detail," I flashed the toothiest of smiles.

"There's not much to tell. He's probably a tourist filming a movie to watch later at home, showing off beautiful places he visited, or something like that."

"Stop! Stop! Stop! Now, that's an idea! It's far from a full plan, but there's a good one hidden here, I can feel it with my own hooves." For added persuasion, I tapped my hooves in the air.

"And tell me, my friend, do they film staged scenes for these movies?"

"With a camera? Sure, but why do you ask?" he raised an eyebrow, pushing some hair off his forehead.

"You're not old enough to ask questions yet; better puff your cheeks and answer mine simply," I interrupted. "And can they film anywhere?"

"That's not important now! What's important is..."

"...that the temple burned down, and we're rushing with a very IMPORTANT artifact to who knows where!" I snapped. "But correct me if I'm wrong, you need food, which is bought with local currency: slaves, paper, or stones with holes in them. Given the level of your society, I think you prefer paper." I glanced at the boy.

He trudged beside me, puffing his cheeks as I suggested. He picks up fast. He'll be useful yet!

"So, I'm right! Listen to Uncle Ba'al, and everything will be fine!"

I smiled enigmatically and wiggled my eyebrows to add intrigue.

"Sometimes I don't understand half of what you say," Eugene muttered.

Engaged in such a pleasant conversation that warmed the soul "for both of us," we passed the city entrance. The roads were empty, with no one entering or leaving. The city didn't even have walls with huge iron-bound oak gates. I was genuinely disappointed. But the streets were quite crowded, with everyone bustling in their own direction. Each had their own small goal and path, which would eventually lead them either to me or to the pale-faced competitors.

We wandered the streets for quite some time. The boy was clearly thrilled by what he saw. To me, the primitive architecture wasn't impressive. The buildings were up to nine stories high, and only in the distance was something taller visible. The facades were mostly brick with small windows. Though, there were some interesting designs with semi-transparent brick walls. I swear, some magical creature must have been embedded in the wall, now destined to rot there forever...

About half an hour later, we passed one of the many jewelry shops. Sandwiched between two tall buildings, it looked quite pathetic. The impression was heightened by the cobwebs on the stained glass windows and the dirt covering the facade, as if it had been doused with pig waste for three hundred years. This nondescript counter and the overly decorated sign "RUBY and KARAT at Tobbie's, only the best" indicated that the owner had little money and desperately needed advertising.

With a few hand gestures, I performed the necessary spells to change my appearance. There was no energy left for instant transformation. "Oh, I need to rest." I also had to sacrifice the special effects I loved. On my arm lay

something resembling a camera, made from available materials. I didn't have the time or energy to experiment with clothing, so I magically copied it from a customer in the grocery store across the street.

My overall appearance turned out to be quite elegant, at least for an ordinary person. I wore a three-piece suit and a small bowler hat. Along with round sunglasses and the equipment in my hands, I looked like a trustworthy aesthete.

Approaching the entrance, I hesitated. The doors were very dirty. I understand I cleaned latrines the other day, but it doesn't mean I have to wallow in filth for the rest of my life. Making a mental effort, I exhaled. With a sharp motion, I pushed the door open and stepped inside.

"May I have a word with you, kind sir?" I turned my head towards the shopkeeper, lowering my glasses. I wiped my other hand on a nearby clothing rack.

"Of course, of course, what does the gentleman desire?"

The owner, who had been giving bored instructions to small creatures resembling gremlins, lit up with a smile. He rushed to me, switching his sad face to a beaming smile with impressive speed.

"My name is Rai Gichi, a director, though, of course, you've heard of me." The shopkeeper nodded enthusiastically.

"Of course, of course!" His smile stretched across his face, almost reaching his earlobes. A quick wave of his hand signaled the troll guard not to interfere. The troll, after taking a step behind the customer, returned to his post by the door.

"As you know, my movies are full of realism! But this requires extra expenses, my ruby friend..."

"Tobbie," the merchant helpfully supplied, "Tobbie Nobbson, if it pleases you."

"Yes, Tobbie. So, I am incredibly impressed with your shop; the goods shine, and the light pours through these wonderful windows so cinematically. My friend Tobbie, I'd like to feature your shop in my 'Epic Myth Film' for good money!"

While my tongue spun this nonsense, the rest of my limbs weren't idle. It was becoming physically difficult to maintain such a detailed and cumbersome appearance. I placed the camera on an extending tripod. As if seeking the best angle, I examined the interior thoroughly. The careful inspection paid off. The cash register was at the far end of the shop, away from the entrance, and the troll guard was two steps from the doorway. This could complicate a quick exit from the shop. He either needed to be distracted or bypassed.

"My eye's sparkle, I understand you agree and want to discuss the price, so to speak. I agree to any terms but want to offer you another gift—you will be the star of this scene!"

If my maneuver succeeded, we'd be in luck. Tobbie swallowed the bait, hook, line, and sinker, or as we say in Hell: "Ate the glowing dung and asked for seconds."

"I'd like to ask you one more favor, my karat of diamonds. Could you ask that unworthy troll to step away from the door? He's ruining the shot."

"Does he really spoil it that much?" There were notes of suspicion in Tobbie's voice.

"Oh yes! Oh yes! You see, he disrupts the composition's balance and draws attention to himself. It will distract viewers from the main star—you."

"The main star?"

"Of course, my heart's amber, you. You just need to give it your all."

"It's an honor, but what exactly do I need to do? I... um... haven't acted in such... um... grand projects before. And times now, well, you know..."

"Oh, my desire's opal, don't worry about that! Just be natural!"

It didn't work out, so be it. It was worth a try. So, we'll have to bypass. I waved to Eugene, who had been waiting outside for a signal.

"You just need to follow my commands, you have no lines in the scene, but you can improvise. I feel in my gut we've found a new star! My actor should have already put on his costume. Where is he?"

The door swung open, and the boy entered, tattered and dirty. He had spent the night wandering through a dense forest in a single robe. And he reeked of smoke. Though for me, that was more of a plus than a minus.

"Wonderful costume! So, dear Mr. Topaz Nobbson, stand behind the counter, now you're being robbed. On my command, you shout 'THIS IS A ROBBERY!' and brandish the knife, and you, Mr. Tobbie Nephrite, do not resist and try to comply with the robber's demands. A-a-and action!"

Eugene pulled out a piece of metal, previously sharpened into a knife, and stomped towards the shopkeeper, who barely managed to slip behind the counter.

"I'm robbing you, good sir! Hand over the money or die!" the boy stammered¹⁴. The shopkeeper obediently let himself be wrapped in a gold chain from his jewelry arsenal, looking now like a Christmas tree.

"Now open the register and pretend to take the money!" I shouted.

"What?!" Tobbie began, but he was interrupted by my confident demeanor and an additional charming smile.

¹⁴ To my taste, it was a bit stiff and lacking in expression, but the guy was clearly out of his element at the moment..

With trembling hands, Eugene reached for the register and opened it. Success! There was a pile of paper money inside. I hadn't figured out their value system yet, but the quantity gave me hope.

"More energy, young man!" I couldn't resist. "More emotion!"

Eugene scooped all the money that could fit into his monk apprentice robe. The shopkeeper, still unsuspecting, made a displeased expression with his eyebrows. Eugene was not a skilled robber, and he tied up our good merchant quite clumsily. Only the belief in future popularity and fame kept the shopkeeper from realizing the reality. Besides, a gold chain is not the strongest material, though it is devilishly beautiful.

"And now run like the devils are after you!" I continued giving instructions.

After Eugene ran out, jingling and rustling with cash, I stepped out from behind the camera and approached the shopkeeper.

"That was splendid! You did a marvelous job with the role! A great future awaits you!" I said, tying the knots more securely and adding new ropes.

"Thank you, good sir, it truly was my debut! Do you think I conveyed all the despair on the first try?" Tobbie asked eagerly. "Maybe we should do it again? I can do better!"

"Absolutely, my gem's setting... my knees' setting, absolutely!" I finished with the knots; now even Satan himself couldn't untie them. "Wait here a moment, I'll get my actor back; it seems he got too caught up in the role." And I quickly rushed outside, circling around the troll. He had just started to move when I was already behind him.

Rushing out of the jewelry shop, I saw Eugene running down the street. Well, he wasn't much of a thief yet, but I'd make a regular client of our cozy little Hell out of

him! I hurried after him, and behind me, the melodious roar of a chimera sounded. Tobbie must have managed to call security. Maybe he reached the alarm button with his foot or something.

We ran, hoof to foot, for quite a while. The sounds of pursuit faded in the distance, replaced by the usual street noise. An exhausted Eugene stopped. I did the same, simultaneously changing my appearance to a more compact form. Now I looked exactly like the brave imp who had come to me on Beelzebub's orders.

If we got caught, let my reputation not suffer. Besides, constantly changing appearances in such a short time had completely worn me out. I needed to catch my breath.

The diversity of the city, which turned out to be "Aston," now amazed me. The city outskirts were very different from its main parts. Don't get me wrong, I've seen a lot during my assignments chasing sinners. This city was unique.

Many people moved along the roads riding centaurs. Winged snakes occasionally flew in the sky. A lady walked by, holding a small sphinx on a leash, with a cute miniature pschent on its head¹⁵. Each city dweller was either accompanied by a spirit or riding a mythical creature. The chaos I witnessed made my head spin. The overall turmoil of the city was accentuated by the stark contrast with the buildings I had seen at the city's entrance.

Here, the buildings were fifteen times the height of an average demon¹⁶. The walls of these giant buildings were semi-transparent, with some shimmering in all the colors of

¹⁵ The pschent was the crown of the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt, resembling a bronze circlet with a long spike at the back of the head.

¹⁶ Approximately 3 to 3.2 meters. Particularly tall specimens can reach up to 3.7 meters, but this doesn't significantly affect the statistics.

the rainbow. From time to time, demons flew up to them. Some walls rotated around their axis, while others simply dissolved, allowing the messenger inside. The space above the metropolis teemed with various types of creatures. Everyone was busy with something. Some carried people on their backs, while others held bags filled with unknown contents in their claws or tentacles. From below, these routes appeared completely chaotic and resembled the behavior of an angry beehive.

You might consider me distracted or single-minded, but during the first half hour after we entered the city, my thoughts were entirely elsewhere.

"Now, demon, thanks to your antics, we're being chased not only by the temple destroyers but also by the honest citizens of this city," Eugene said, catching his breath.

"You call jewelry sellers 'honest'?" I smiled, secretly catching my breath as well. The last thing I needed was for the boy to notice my exhaustion.

"Stop evading, demon! Find us shelter—here's all the money I managed to steal," he said, dumping a mixture of paper notes and coins into my hands.

I glanced down. The face on the bills was of a stern-looking older man with a lush beard. I had no idea how the currency system worked in this world, so I simply rolled the bills into a tube and tucked them under my arm. I gave a heroic salute, flapped my wings, and set off to find the nearest place to stay for the night.

The Grand Temple

"Your Holiness!" the clerk addressed the figure standing by the window.

The figure was tall and broad-shouldered. Despite the gray hair indicating his age, he appeared robust. This was also suggested by the large cane the figure leaned on.

"Some upstart has outmaneuvered our warriors. He snatched the tablet from our hands."

"I saw how everything unfolded," the man said without turning around. "Find and bring me this spirit alive. I believe he might be useful to us. Resourceful servants are always in short supply. Are the others dead?"

"Oh yes, sir! All the people are dead, and the spirits that did not resist have been sent back to their realms as you commanded."

"Then it's just a formality to find the book, and we can proceed with the sanctification of the world. Isn't that delightful, Krombin?" The figure suddenly turned and struck the stone floor with his cane. Small flames sparked from the impact and began dancing around their summoner.

"Of course, Master, of course!" Krombin bowed respectfully. "The sphere for addressing the public is ready."

In the main squares of all cities stood a fountain featuring a statue of Grenwurd holding a sphere from which water flowed. The statues were never realistic; their purpose was to heroize and canonize the depicted figure, not to convey the small imperfections of the human body. The wise figure in a robe gazed down at the people like an almighty, ideal father looking at his disobedient but beloved children.

A loud but pleasant music composed of several notes played. People left their activities and gathered around the statue. The water in the fountain disappeared, and a glowing blue cone of light emanated from the sphere held by the statue. Within this glow, the bust of High Priest Rothschild II became clearly visible.

"Dear fellow citizens! It is with sadness that I inform you that we have been attacked..."

People began to murmur, and the square gradually filled with a steady hum.

"What? Another war?" grumbled an old voice from the crowd.

"Quiet, old man! It can't be another war; we just finished one, and it hasn't even been eight years," a woman holding a child tried to hush the grumbler.

"...an act of aggression by our neighbors, the Bullians. They have long been preparing to attack. However, we humbly believed that their schemes would not go beyond talks and threats. We are a peaceful country..."

"It's a war, I tell you! After 'we are a peaceful country,' wars always start," the old man muttered.

People shushed the old man from all sides. He grunted in dissatisfaction and, as if losing interest, began to make his way out of the square. The eyes of the people turned back to the speaker.

"...despite our goodwill towards them, they have struck, attacking our temple near Aston with a dragon. Our best entities from the Temple Guard are currently at the site. We are compelled to respond, and we will! However, other attacks in different cities of our country are not excluded. Starting today, the capital will operate under a special regime. A curfew is being introduced in cities near the border with Bullia. I hope for your understanding. The Wullirian government will not let this go unpunished. For every death, there will be retribution! Pray for their souls, my brothers!"

Ba`al

Less than thirty minutes had passed, and I had accomplished the task and returned, fully satisfied, to the same spot where Eugene was supposed to wait. I have a very good spatial orientation. I rented a small room in a seven-star hotel to avoid drawing attention. I ordered dinner

for two¹⁷ and decided to go back for the boy. However, he was nowhere to be found.

Without panicking, I looked around. I shouted a bit, and finding no one, I simply sat where I stood. It was unclear where to search for him. There were no signs of a struggle, so maybe he just went to a tavern or pub. After all, not eating for a whole day is a lot for a human, probably.

The form of an imp wasn't very suitable for search operations. Thin legs, weak arms, and utterly useless wings. However, changing form now would be a waste of energy. I needed to rest and not use spells for at least a day.

While spinning around in place, I noticed a pub with the sign "White Moon." The establishment looked respectable; maybe Eugene went there. My hooves clacked on the cobblestones in the rhythm of "Chop Suey!" by System Of A Down. Approaching the door, I peeked inside.

The hall was filled exclusively with magical creatures. Many looked exhausted. Particularly sad and tired seemed a Chinese feathered serpent. It was coiled around a table in the corner of the pub. Its golden scales were almost entirely covered by a row of seats, like saddles on a horse, on its back. It was amiably conversing with a small goblin. They both had mugs of what seemed to be beer, but due to the difference in size, while the small goblin struggled with one mug, the serpent had already gone through about a dozen.

Scanning the other patrons, I didn't see such diversity at the tables. The other visitors mostly interacted with their kind: harpies with harpies, sirens with sirens, and so on. I didn't spot Eugene. There were no humans at any table.

Noticing a large group of imps, I approached them.

¹⁷ I didn't skimp on this...

"Drinks on me!" The imps' surprised and happy faces turned towards me, their small wings fluttering as I plopped down on one of the free barrels they used as stools.

"Work sucks. Bosses are jerks?" I tried to guess the topic of their conversation.

A six-armed creature, clearly of Indian origin judging by the nose ring and bluish skin, approached us. I placed an order for another round for everyone, including myself. Within half an hour, we were best friends. The money was burning a hole in my pocket, and I wanted to spend it. It turned out that Eugene managed to grab quite a sum. Speaking of the boy...

"My friends!" I shouted, rising above the barrels. "Does anyone have any ideas on where I could find a lost soul?"

"A lost soul?" one of the imps asked. "We haven't seen any ghosts in a while."

"No, it's not a spirit, but a boy, a human," I clarified.

"A human? We've never seen humans come in here. Are you sure he might have come in?" another asked.

"Not sure, but thanks for the help anyway," I replied.

The imps told me they worked at a construction site two blocks away. They genuinely loved their job. Here, they didn't have to endure the exhausting climate of Hell, the screams of sinners didn't press on their eardrums. And overall, they were beaten less frequently than at home. I had almost forgotten how unappealing the role of imps was.

In reality, most demons despise imps. I, on the other hand, do not support this trend. While I don't have a particular love for them, I treat them rather like younger brothers or pets. Cute and harmless, sometimes funny, but at any moment, they can mess up your shoes.

The imps' boss was a lazy foreman¹⁸who didn't really keep an eye on the work, so the guys slacked off as much as they could. They did their work without straining themselves or hurrying.

We talked for a long time, and it was a lively and enjoyable conversation. There were happy shouts, hugs, and friendly pats on the back. In such company, I didn't notice how the night had fallen.

¹⁸ Just like all builders. There's nothing strange about that...

Chapter Five:

«I want you to sell me this pen.»

© *Stationery Store Customer*

Eugene

Ba`al flapped his wings and soared upwards, displaying his battle fervor. Eugene stood and watched him until he disappeared behind the rooftops. The sun, having passed its zenith, began to dip towards the horizon. The street gradually darkened. Eugene took a few steps and found himself near a shop shaded by trees. Glancing around, he hurriedly took out the tablet.

People were rushing home after work. Fairies were beginning their night shift, flying into the street lamps.

Eugene took the tablet out of his robe. He had seen the sacred book countless times. Every scuff mark on the cover was etched into his memory. He remembered well the palm-shaped indentation on it, with a red stone in the center, its sharp end pointing upwards. Every novice swore an oath to protect the tablet and touched the stone, leaving a scar as a reminder.

However, they were only allowed to read it after turning fourteen. Upon reaching this age, a novice was considered a full-fledged cleric. A cleric, of course, had the right to their own personal demon protector and began studying the "Prophets" folio.

Eugene opened the tablet. Initially, as expected, there was a list of summoned demons. Each name was crossed out, indicating that the demon had been summoned. Next to each demon's name, the cleric's name was written in ink.

Some clerics' names were also crossed out, with new names written beside them. When a demon's master died, their entire legacy was passed to another brother. The last crossed-out name was "Ba`al," with "Eugene R. Pentil" written next to it.

They had been given identical lists in their lessons. They had to memorize all the demon names to quickly summon a servant when needed. The lists were enchanted to display data in real-time, showing who had summoned which demon. This prevented the simultaneous summoning of the same servant. Over time, new demon names were added to the lists. It was this very list that Eugene's cheeky and relentless demon Ba`al had stolen from him.

"Stupid demon," Eugene smiled.

After flipping through a few pages, he found the section "Summoning and Dismissing a Demon," with an addition at the end of all entries, "Supplemented by Brother Brodgin."

A lump formed in his throat, as if someone was squeezing it tightly. It became hard to breathe. Tears fell onto the pages, smudging the letters. Eugene cried silently. He couldn't allow himself to show weakness in Ba`al's presence. But as soon as the demon left him, the full weight of losing his family and home hit him with immense force. It's like the story of the camel and the straw. A camel can carry a heavy load, but one single straw can break its back.

The longer you hold in sorrow, the stronger it will manifest one day. Eugene closed the tablet, continuing to sob silently, when a heavy clawed paw rested on his shoulder.

"Why are you not in the monastery, novice, when evening prayer is taking place?" The voice, more of a growl, belonged to a lion-like humanoid.

Eugene quickly wrapped the tablet in cloth and slowly tucked it into his robe. Then he looked up at the speaker.

The humanoid aspect was mainly in the creature's body, which was like that of a very physically developed man. The armor highlighted the complexity of the figure. The head and neck, however, were leonine. A thick mane fell over the shoulders. Eugene looked up, hiding the book in an improvised bag, and froze. The tears stopped as quickly as they had started.

The demon standing before him was dressed in finely crafted leather armor. Over it was a heraldic cloak bearing the insignia of the Supreme Church Temple surrounded by a spiked star on a blue background. This was a guard of His Majesty Bishop Father Rothschild II.

"Come with me."

The lion-headed figure lifted the boy from the bench with one effortless motion, as if he were a speck of dust. Eugene tried to relax and adopted the most guilty look he could muster.

"How should I address you, sir guard?" he needed to think of something quickly, but without his demon, he was almost powerless.

"Address me as Captain Maach, novice."

Bright yellow eyes with narrow vertical pupils slowly examined the boy from head to toe.

"What is that you have there?"

A clawed paw pressed against Eugene's chest.

"Brother Instructor ordered me to buy a book and bring it to the monastery. Let me show you."

Eugene made a move as if trying to reach for the book held by the guard. Maach gradually loosened his grip, allowing the boy to take out what was wrapped in the cloth. Eugene took advantage of this, sharply twisted, and ran off without looking back. The lion's face twisted in genuine

surprise. The cat's wet nose and whiskers twitched nervously.

In his memory, few had dared to resist arrest. With a leathery scrape, a pair of huge swan wings spread from Maach's back. One flap lifted him off the ground. Eugene hid behind the nearest building corner. The second flap and the demon was already above the boy. A third flap wasn't needed; the boy was already tightly gripped in strong paws. There was no escape.

The lion-headed demon cast a shackle spell. Dark purple threads woven from smoke burst from his hands and wrapped around the boy. After a few attempts to break free, Eugene realized that the harder he resisted, the tighter the smoke became and the greater the pressure. For the first few minutes, he could barely breathe. The pressure eventually lessened, but there was no doubt that the slightest attempt to escape could result in suffocation.

Without saying a word, Maach flew up again with his securely bound captive. While they were in flight, Eugene frantically thought about what to do next.

Nothing useful came to mind. There were only "buts" and "nots." For example, he couldn't let Ba`al know where he was. He also couldn't summon another demon for help. Eugene simply didn't know how. He was just about to start learning all this craft yesterday. But that would never happen now. "But..., but..., but..., but..." nothing but limitations.

Eugene felt anger beginning to boil inside him. This shouldn't have happened. Everything was supposed to go as he had long planned. Get his helper, learn to summon demons, become a monk, and then a Bishop. Or at least the Bishop's first assistant. But everything went completely differently, and someone had to pay for it. He had to avenge all his now-dead brothers.

"I need to see the Bishop!" he shouted, trying to drown out the whistling wind. The demon didn't turn his head; he kept his eyes fixed on a point only he could see. "Do you hear me, demon? I have the right to meet with the clergyman because only those equal in spirit to me can condemn or pardon all who have sworn allegiance to the Bishop!" – Eugene addressed the demon in the ancient language¹⁹. Maah lowered his head, his eyes promising nothing good.

"Do not dare speak to me in the ancient language. I existed when it was first conceived, and it is not for you to chastise me with it" growled the demon.

As Eugene knew, few summoned creatures spoke the ancient language. Most of them simply obeyed it without understanding what was being said.

The rest of the flight continued in complete silence. After flying over two more blocks, Maah suddenly dove down to the entrance of a large building. Still holding Eugene firmly, the demon walked toward the door.

Inside was a spacious room, with a long table against the wall opposite the entrance. Seated at the table was a demon with a goat's head. Maah, gripping Eugene's shoulder, approached the table. The goat-headed demon looked up from his papers with interest at the newcomers.

"Resisting arrest and minor hooliganism. Put him in the cell for a day," Maah said without waiting for a response, leading Eugene down one of the corridors.

They reached a wall that looked no different from the others. The demon made a gesture with his hand, and the wall became transparent, revealing a small room with a bed

¹⁹Demons have an allergy to the ancient language, to put it mildly. It's like an itch that hasn't subsided for centuries. It's impossible not to react to it.

and a tiny window. Maah shoved Eugene into the room. The wall solidified again. Eugene was left alone.

Focusing his gaze on the bed, he approached it. The bed consisted of a mattress on metal legs. The design was simple, but he had seen worse back home. Remembering his room where he lived with the other boys, Eugene was once again overcome with sadness and incredible fatigue. He lay down and instantly fell asleep.

The Grand Temple

The communication sphere was already recalibrated for reception. It sparkled, flickering with tongues of flame. Light spilled into the dark room, illuminating everything within reach. The man sitting at the enormous table leisurely approached the sphere. He was not accustomed to rushing. Let everyone around him bustle about, executing his will. His life was long, and his plans even longer. He waved his hand over the sphere, accepting the call. Instantly, the figure of a demon appeared in the blue cone of light.

"Master, I've detained a boy dressed as an acolyte. He might be the one who stole the tablet you seek."

"Thank you, Maah. Do you know what to do with him, or do I need to spell it out for you?"

"I know, Master, everything will be done," Maah smiled.²⁰

"What about his servant? Was there a demon with him?" the man inquired.

"No, sir. I have relayed the imprint of his power that you provided to all patrols. They will find him, regardless of the form he takes. Should we destroy him upon capture?" Maah responded.

²⁰ Smiling faces from the feline family have the same effect on everyone. It's impossible not to be charmed by such faces, even if that "kitty" is capable of biting off your head.

"Bring him to me alive. Since we are acquainted, I would like to discuss a potential collaboration," the man smiled, the blue light from the sphere dancing in his eyes like a burning azure ocean.

"Of course, sir," Maah bowed and severed the connection.

The figure standing over the sphere straightened. Everything was proceeding more or less according to plan. There were still two more assaults on opposing temples to carry out. They had refused to accept the shift in power from internal to external control and had to be eliminated. This was only an interim step in establishing hegemony, a process that began yesterday. No one in the world knew yet, but it was evident that within a year, the entire world would be under a strong hand. The doors to the hall opened, and Krombin entered.

"Master, the loss report is ready," he said, placing a stack of papers on the table.

"I will review it thoroughly. For now, tell me our casualties."

"One succubus, two basilisks, five imps irretrievably, and one devil along with two basilisks are currently recovering their strength. They will be fully restored in three to four days."

"Do we have replacements for them?"

"Of course, sir. Maah has already secured replacements for all. However..."

"No 'however.' This was the most critical phase. We started with the hardest part; it will get easier from here."

"Understood, sir."

Eugene

Light hit his closed eyes. Eugene stretched sweetly, still unwilling to wake up. It was rare to sleep longer. Usually, the mentors would wake them up at the crack of

dawn. Eugene opened his eyes. He was not in his room; this was a prison cell. The night had taken away all the bad memories and anxieties, leaving him refreshed.

Eugene sat up on the bed, letting his legs hang down. He was full of energy. He needed to try to get out of here. Only the scripture could help with that. Eugene opened it. The pages were yellowed from millions of touches. Eugene found the chapter on summoning a demon again. The key to this was the Grenward Agreement, which had been used by all humans on Earth for several centuries. The agreement stated:

"This agreement is made in a single copy and is binding on the souls. The blood of the first to touch the agreement shall be called 'the master.' The blood of the second shall be called 'the servant.' The essence of the agreement:

1. The servant cannot harm the master or, through inaction, allow harm to come to the master.
2. The servant must obey all orders given by the master, except when such orders contradict the first clause of the agreement.
3. The servant must ensure their own safety to the extent that it does not conflict with the first or second clauses of the agreement.
4. The term of the agreement is determined by the lifespan of the master, unless otherwise specified or unless the master terminates the agreement earlier.

The text provided advice on properly signing the contract. Among other things, it stated that the servant should never see the contract. There were also rules regarding the actual signing process. For example, one needed to draw a seven-pointed star with an inscribed circle. At the end of each point of the star, there was a specific hieroglyph. This construction was called a "pentacle." Each type of mythical creature required a specific pentacle with

its own hieroglyphs. This complex structure served one purpose: to concentrate the essence of the summoned being at a point so that a needle piercing through the contract could draw a drop of blood. That was it. Nothing complicated.

Drawing the correct pentacles and their varieties, as well as learning mathematics and the ancient language, were taught in the temple from a young age. Summoning complex demons required more intricate preparations. To summon simple creatures like fairies or fire scarab beetles, one only needed to trace a symbol in the air with their hand, give a command in the ancient language, and extract the summoned being from the Great Nothingness.

It seemed simple at first glance, but it was something Eugene still needed to learn. Uttering the wrong words or making an incorrect gesture²¹ could result in either nothing happening or, worse, losing a hand. He was supposed to start his training under the watchful eye of a mentor and after summoning his first servant. This very servant was meant to teach the young student how to handle beings like itself.

Eugene flipped through the pages detailing the summoning of minor entities and sealing them in various containers. Here and there, the pages were annotated with notes left by the mentor brothers. The further Eugene flipped towards the end of the book, the more the text became illegible, and the number of annotations by the brothers increased. Near the end of the book, the text abruptly ended and was followed by another, written in an ancient language, seemingly in a different handwriting.

"The one who will save the world will descend from the heights,

²¹ Or perhaps just botched the pronunciation of the spell.

With a sword that he grips, prepared for the fights.
A disciple of the Temple of the All-Father's hand,
Bringing peace and tranquility to the creator's land.
When he saves countless lives, with courage so clever,
All wars will vanish, gone forever."

To Eugene, the author of this text clearly had no taste, and the rhyme was weak. He turned the page. The following pages were glued in. Some were folded like an accordion to fit the shape of the book. From the notes, it was clear that the terrible literary work in the ancient language was a prophecy.

The pages were filled with guesses as to which event these words could be linked to. There was no single solution. However, everyone agreed that the book should be preserved and the Temple of the All-Father should be defended with all their might until the meaning became clear to everyone.

There were not many mountains in the country. In fact, there were only two mountain ranges. Most of the country lay in a steppe zone. One mountain range was in the west, and the other in the south. The distance to both from the current location was about the same—around two or two and a half weeks' journey.

Moreover, there was a very high hill about three or four days away, rising above a river. It was necessary to find this "one with a sword in his hand." If he indeed belonged to the Temple of the All-Father, he might help find those who burned the Temple and avenge them. Eugene desperately needed any ally he could find right now. But first, he had to get out of here. Eugene approached the wall through which he had entered this room and knocked with his hands, and when he didn't receive a response, he started kicking it.

Through closed eyelids, I could see the blinding sun. However, the light was not uniform but fragmented. Circles flowed into squares, and squares into elephants. Observing these floating shapes and other wonders, I began to feel nauseous. Attempting to stand without opening my eyes was a complete failure from start to finish. The nausea hit me with triple force. I suddenly opened my eyes wide with force. Everything became even worse. The light was too bright, the sounds too loud, the walls too wooden. The smells—don't even ask.

During the time I was unconscious, my imp form had slightly "melted" around the edges. The contours of my body and limbs looked like snot, as if from a flu-stricken elephant. Small horns that used to be on my head had slid down and now lay on the back of my head like two sad strings.

I gathered my strength and restored the proper forms. I had regained some strength over the day. Abstaining from using magic had indeed helped. Looking around, I realized I was in a small room filled with imps. It resembled a chicken egg factory the most. Only instead of roosts, there were mattresses, and instead of docile chickens, there were stinking imps.

I approached one of the sleeping imps. They smelled so bad that it brought tears to my eyes. Turning away, I took a deep breath. I gathered my scattered thoughts, trying to remember the spell for energy transfer. It was convoluted and refused to come to mind. The imp I had randomly chosen was still sound asleep. I leaned on him with my whole body, trying to reduce the effort to keep my balance and increase it on my thinking process. Finally, a small revolution occurred in my head, and the spell was uttered.

From under my palm, tender green tendrils resembling viscous smoke burst forth. The imp's body trembled, surrendering its strength to me, though there

wasn't much of it. However, it was enough to cleanse me of my hangover. Honestly, I hated this spell. Absorbing the strength of a magical creature felt like cannibalism. It was permissible, but it made me sick.

To fully understand the sensation I'm talking about, try tickling the back of your throat with a spoon. Not pleasant, right? That's why I rarely resort to such radical methods. I also deeply despise those who can't live without it, and believe me, they exist.

I approached two more imps, who looked sturdier and less smelly, and performed the same operation. During the energy transfer, too many feelings and emotions of the creature from which the energy was taken were absorbed. And they were always disgusting to taste. Transferring someone else's essence into yourself is always disgusting, just remember that. And may Beelzebub forbid you from doing something similar.

After these manipulations, I felt like a fairly decent creature and was about to approach the next victim of my energetic vampirism when the door to our cozy nest flew open. I quickly withdrew my hand, fearing being recognized as "not an imp." After all, energy transfer, also known as energy vampirism, is a high-order spell. Not all creatures possess it.

The door to the imp den opened. Standing in the doorway was a man. It could even be said he was a burly fellow. He was middle-aged, wearing a worn-out t-shirt, partly dirty and partly torn pants, a helmet, and a high-visibility vest. "Oh, here's the boss of this place," flashed through my mind.²² From him, it smelled just like his subordinates, with one small difference. His scent was fresh.

²² The foreman can be used as a benchmark, a constant across all worlds. Wherever I go, they always look the same. Whether in the

"Wake up! It's almost eight in the morning! Everyone, restore your appearance to an acceptable state and be on time for the roll call. Wake up!" After this, the master of documents and materials belched loudly, turned around, and left.

The open doorway let in the blinding morning light. Until now, the room was illuminated only by timid rays filtering through the curtained and boarded-up windows.

The imps stretched, turned over, and muttered spells. The wake-up call was in full swing. After twenty minutes, all thirty-four imps, including me, were standing in three rows before the foreman. I felt a kinship with him. We had a lot in common. He performed his thankless job just like me. He managed dumb and lazy imps just like me. The only difference was that he created, while I mostly destroyed. In any case, I had the opportunity to look at myself from the side, through the eyes of a subordinate.

The man began his day with his usual ritual. He scratched the scraggly growth on his face, pulled a cigarette from his mouth, pushed his helmet down to his nose, and scratched his crown. In his other hand, he held a scrap of paper with a drawing that he examined as if seeing it for the first time.

After a few very obscene sentences, the workers were quickly divided into teams of eight person-imps. In one of the groups, as you understand, there were ten imps. I ended up in the third brigade. We were responsible for cleaning the area.

Why didn't I leave immediately to avoid hard labor, for which my delicate hands and intelligent head were not designed? Well, there were several significant reasons for that.

Golden Age or in the Cosmic Era. Seriously! Do they cast them from the same mold?

For example, from time to time, I touched one imp or another, drawing strength from them. Not so much that they felt it, but approaching the task wisely. I really needed to restore my strength; without it, I felt literally naked. There were other reasons too. I still understood too little about the world I was in.

The basic principles were preserved here, namely: the vertical of power, a capitalist system, law enforcement, religion, and so on. There was still a bunch of little things to figure out to find Eugene.

Meanwhile, a fairy was flying above us, highlighting the areas that needed cleaning with bright light. Similarly, areas for leveling the land were highlighted. When we reached the required level, the fairy would fly and highlight the next area. Uncleaned areas were red; cleaned and leveled ones were green.

Sometimes, manual labor is very useful. It has a beneficial effect on the psyche. You don't decide anything, you just follow orders, and your grateful nervous system heals the holes as best as it can.

The absence of shackles and guards also had a positive effect on my mood. Compared to that magnificent temple I encountered first in this world, this building was just a paradise for workers.

The imps worked peacefully, and I kept restoring my strength with every accidental touch. Besides imps, golems, and fairies, there were six people here who had summoned all the imps. A special team was assigned to bring them drinks and snacks. Luckily, I didn't end up there; I wouldn't have forgiven myself for that. Besides, you can't draw strength from humans. It just kills them. Taking even a tiny bit of energy from them is like popping a balloon. Bam! And that's it. After that, the balloon can't be restored. Humans—what can you take from them.

I put another tub of garbage onto the golem's arms. Golems are very interesting creatures. They represent any figure molded from clay with a magical being inside. This particular golem was a giant, twenty-five of my current heights tall. I had never seen such huge golems before. They are usually made for guarding areas or attacking defensive structures. They have appropriate characteristics: enormous strength, blind obedience, immunity to a wide range of spells. Here, they performed the functions of machines and lifting mechanisms. What won't people come up with just to avoid doing anything themselves.

The end of the day, as always, was marked by sunset. Together with the imps, I went to the "White Moon" pub. They had chosen this place as their favorite many years ago. Every self-respecting ground stomper has a place where they can drink and relax, whether it's a demon or a human.

We sat at the same table as last time. Without consulting, we ordered two pints each, to start. Snacks are considered unacceptable in polite society and are strongly condemned. After all, they reduce the alcohol level and deprive you of the opportunity to buy another mug.

Conversations and laughter flowed like a river. After the seventh pint or so, when the everyday topics were discussed, the conversation turned to life.

"Those Bullyans have really gone too far," said the imp sitting to my left.

"Tell me about it! They're always eyeing our wealth! They just can't wait to grab everything for themselves," agreed the imp to my right, scratching his asymmetrically large nose.

"And their people are quite shifty."

Today, this imp got hit by a shovel under his left eye. He had grown only one tooth, as he didn't have enough strength for more.

"Yeah, not like ours here," my sarcasm drowned in approving murmurs and the banging of mugs on the table.

"That's exactly what I mean! Our masters are good, the country is huge and beautiful," echoed the first imp.

"You work with pleasure. No overtime. There are breaks for rest. Beer flows like a river!"

"What about Hell?"

"Don't even say it. Hell is a hole! Everyone mocks you except the sinners, and the demons wipe whatever they want on you, and it's good if it's just their feet."

"And here we have a mighty country! With the wisest ruler! All countries fear and respect him! Even those damned Bullyans don't attack us because they know we won't let them get away with it. But they sure do covet our wealth," said the imp to my left again.

I slowly scanned the pub, looking for confirmation of their words. The most ordinary hole. Beaten oak tables. Slanted and rotten stools, and some even sit on barrels. Every time the door opens, dust rises and swirls around the room, settling on drinks and food. The mugs are dirty, the beer is oily, but it has a good portion of alcohol inside. No wealth was observed within sight.

Regarding the relationship between imps and demons, it's true. Of course, demons behave somewhat arrogantly. I believe this is a great stimulus for progress. Whoever wants to can secure themselves. I myself come from an imp tribe; I know what I'm talking about. Despite all of the above, admiring and glorifying some backward world, let alone a separate country, was simply ridiculous.

"But you...we are slaves! We have no rights. We're just things in human hands here! It's against the principles of all beings."

"Speak for yourself. We are not slaves. We are Vullirians. Everyone here is equal. Everyone gets paid for their work."

"We're imps! Imps, you understand? We have no citizenship," I began to boil. "Do fairies in lamps also receive wages? Everyone is equal, after all?"

"Heh! Fairies, you say? Fairies are beings of a lower order. Just like goblins, leprechauns, and other small folk. Don't compare an elite imp to a miserable fairy, or you'll get a punch in the face! Got it?" said the imp with the big nose.

At the same time, he raised his chin so high that his uncontrollable nasal hair became visible.

"But they burn you with spells for offenses. Are you completely idiots?"

"That's only once every two days," waved the imp to my right. With his other hand, he scratched the bald spot on his head. It was perfectly round, which could indicate its artificial origin. For example, multiple punitive strikes to the same place.

"Are you saying you're even ready to die for such an existence?" I didn't relent.

"Of course! I'm telling you, we're patriots! If needed, we'll kill them all! Our great country has never lost a war!"

My left eye involuntarily began to twitch.

During his passionate monologue, the imp constantly waved his mug, as if conducting his own words. The drink generously splashed on the table.

"Listen, friend, aren't you a patriot?" The nasally imp looked at me from under his furrowed brows.

"You'd have to look for a patriot like me! I love our country very much! Long live our great country and its great leader!"

As I spoke this sentence, the twitching of my right eye gradually spread to the left.

Imps are gullible and stupid—everyone knows that. Their unwavering confidence in their rightness can drive anyone to a nervous breakdown. There's nothing to blame them for. That's the essence of an imp. But enduring this any

longer was already impossible. Either I burn their stupid heads right now, or it was time to end the drinking.

"Long live Vulliria!"

The imp jumped on his stool, saluting with his mug. The liquid couldn't stand such abuse and splashed out. The oily beer splashed on my head. Thin streams flowed down, covering my face, and only my twitching eye fought this flood alone.

Enough was enough. I'd had enough. Using my eloquence and kicks, I led everyone outside. It was time for us to return.

Chapter Six:

«I've been working in construction for thirty-three years and I know more than you! When I was a manager...»

©*Laborer*

Three more days of routine work passed. Cleaning transitioned to actual construction. We, the imps and I, built the formwork and poured concrete, occasionally using a bit of magic to save time. You might ask: why don't I constantly use magic since I can? I have a counter-question: you can run, can't you? So why don't you, with all your wisdom, run all the time?

In any case, I had fully replenished the strength I had spent in this world. Or at least the reserve of power I had without my beloved trident. It was now possible to leave this cozy corner. After the workday ended, everyone, following tradition, headed to the "White Moon" pub.

At one of the turns on the way to our destination, I fell behind the group. Ensuring that the imps went on without me, I changed my appearance to the one familiar to me. And on the first post, three steps away, I was surprised to see a familiar face. Not that I had many acquaintances here. There was a portrait of Eugene. Below it was the word "wanted." The word "wanted" was crossed out. Instead, it read: "detained." Next to Eugene was a sheet infused with my energy signature. The only inscription on the sheet stated: "entity wanted."

What kind of nonsense is happening here? How did they get my energy signature? How did they have Eugene's portrait? And finally, who are they?

I took a deep breath and exhaled. I ran both hands through my hair, pushing it back. Calmness is the key to success. If you panic and worry, you make mistakes. Higher-order beings fear nothing and act calmly. I turned and walked away.

The city was conducive to disappearing. The larger it is, the easier it is to get lost. The streets were filled with a vast number of people and other creatures. Relying on my internal compass, I left the construction site and the pub behind, moving perpendicularly from their direction.

The crowd surrounded and engulfed me. Feeling like a raft in a stormy sea, I let myself be carried by the storm. Only occasionally did I adjust my direction to avoid encounters with local law enforcement patrols. They were distinguished by their uniform and heraldic signs. Overall, things were going quite well. My trail was confused and dissolved.

I managed to pass almost an entire block. I even began to believe that I wouldn't be found. My confidence lasted until the moment I heard the flapping of wings behind me and a familiar voice said:

"Ba-al! It's the Duke Ba`al himself. Never expected to meet you here."

"Thank you, the meeting was enlightening," I shouted, sharply turning and casting an explosion spell at the sound of the voice.

Maah lazily deflected it with his fiery sword. Behind him stood a griffin and a centaur in matching armor. Determination was evident on their dumb animal faces. The wave of people and other creatures depicted a retreat. Now, they circled us in a diameter of no less than a hundred meters.

"Listen, as I see it, you're without your weapon. Maybe you should just surrender, and we won't beat you?"

"Duke Maah, is this an official offer?"

I kept the dialogue going while scanning for escape routes. He was in full armor with his weapon and clearly outmatched me in strength. But he was also a complete idiot if he thought I would fall for this deal. They might not beat me, but they could certainly use spells. I raised my hands and walked toward them.

"Alright, tie me up," I said meekly.

Approaching within two steps of the trio, I released a lightning bolt at Maah's hand almost point-blank. He seemed to expect something like this and tried to dodge but didn't succeed. The distance was too short. The lightning bolt knocked the sword out of his hand. That's what I was aiming for.

What happened next took less time than it does to describe.

The centaur crouched, preparing to lunge. The griffin didn't need any preparation—it leapt from the spot. The few people still on the street ran away at impressive speed.

Dangerously sharp claws flashed in the air near my ear. Dodging the griffin's blows, I rushed at Maah, gripping his throat with satisfaction. Simultaneously, as my fingers touched the demon, I changed my form in a cloud of black smoke. As the smoke began to dissipate, the centaur and griffin saw an interesting scene. Now, Maah was choking Maah. As you might guess, one of those fighting was me.

Maah retaliated with a sharp punch to my ribs, knocking the wind out of me. We took flight, exchanging blows and short-range spells.

Physical pain isn't magical, but it can disturb mental balance. The griffin, hovering near us, couldn't tell which of

us was its boss. So, it just floated nearby, tilting its head to get a better view. Ugly oversized pigeon.

I pushed Maah away, launching a focused explosion at him. The fire blast threw him quite a distance. Down on the cobblestone street lay Maah's weapon. In the pause that followed, I had the opportunity to dive for the sword. Which I did. Halfway to the ground, lightning struck me in the back, right between my wings. Falling to the ground, I landed right next to the sword²³. Pulling myself up with one hand, I grabbed the weapon.

"In the name of Rothschild II, seize him!" roared the disheveled Maah.

The foreign concentration of power within the flaming blade increased my chances of survival. Essentially, a weapon is just an auxiliary tool. Imagine you need to dig a hole of a certain depth and width. You can easily do it with your hands. Of course, it will take you a lot of time, but nonetheless, the task will be accomplished. But you can also use a tool designed for digging, such as a shovel. You'd be surprised how much faster the work would go. This is roughly how the weapon of a Duke of Hell works. It's just a way to manage the flow of souls and energy.

Now that I held the flaming blade in my hands, the power balance between the opposing sides was approximately equal. If this weapon were truly mine, these three clowns wouldn't stand a chance. Well, maybe Maah would survive since he's also a duke.

I concentrated and tried to mentally extend the sword. I succeeded. The flame forming the cutting edge extended by the length of two palms. It was more convenient that way. Several fireballs were already flying at

²³ If you're interested, it was quite painful. I think many of you would have ended your journey right there. If you want to know the details of the sensation, just jab a bare wire between your shoulder blades.

me from the sky, along with a diving griffin. From the left, a centaur was charging with a spear extended forward. I jumped aside, avoiding the fiery rain. Mentally extending the sword to its maximum length, I whipped it like a lash at the centaur. The tip of the flame struck the centaur squarely on the forehead, sending him flying into the nearest building. The wall couldn't withstand such an assault and crumbled. A crash came from within the building as the centaur completed his landing.

The griffin, however, managed to claw me. Pain shot through my body. Muttering an incantation for binding interspersed with profanities, I hurled it at the feathered beast. Glowing dark blue nets entangled him, leaving only his beak exposed. This should buy me some time.

Meanwhile, Maah continued sending fireballs. Looking at him from below, he resembled a fiery cloud. From there, he had a perfect view of everything happening below. Deflecting the spells with the sword and dodging, I hid behind the corner of a building. Two minotaurs and two imps ran toward me.

"He's up there in my form. Take him down!" I gestured with the sword toward Maah. The guys nodded and, without breaking stride, set off to carry out the order. Overall, a great team.

I had some time to heal the wounds from the griffin's claws. Were they coated with poison? I leaned against the wall, moving my hand over the wounds that stubbornly refused to heal. Just as I began to make progress, the wall behind me exploded. I was thrown and rolled my beautiful face along the street. Falling to the ground, I created a protective dome around myself. It absorbed part of the impact and burned the small debris from the wall.

In the gaping hole stood Maah. He looked tired and very angry. With a sharp swing, he threw two lightning

bolts. My shield did its job, absorbing both charges before its glow faded.

"Well, that was fun!" Maah smiled. "No one has infuriated me like this in a long time."

"I can offer to put you back together again!"

At these words, I drove the sword into the ground, causing a minor earthquake. If this were my weapon, half the city would have collapsed into an abyss, but as it was, just a small landslide. Maah staggered but regained his balance with a flap of his wings. He was severely exhausted, and I decided to go on the offensive. But my attack was not to be.

Three binding spells flew out from the windows behind me. I managed to deflect one and hurl a fireball in return. The other two ensnared me, leaving me unable to even scratch my nose. I fell to the ground, still clutching the sword, but unable to move it.

"You wretched fiend!"

Maah leaned in close.

"Thought you were the smartest here? You're nothing but an overgrown imp. You'll never be a true duke."

My fingers lost their grip on the fiery blade. Maah reclaimed his weapon. Without the nourishing energy of the sword, the remnants of my strength left my body.

Two humanoid figures emerged from the empty window frames. One had the head of a predatory bird, the other had a human head but only one eye.

"Take him to the station," Maah growled with a smile. "Let the experts lock him up in the filthiest cell, like a common genie."

"I'm a genie too," the bird-headed figure snapped indignantly.

"Don't take it personally; you're an afrit, not just a simple genie. And this wretched being will rot like a genie from silly tales," the lion's head grinned. I aimed and

accurately spat a stream of flame into the cyclops' eye. He screamed and fell to the ground.

"Is this how Dukes of Hell behave? What will our friends think of us?" Maah leaned in close again. Though clearly exhausted, he didn't show it. "Let's leave you temporarily without the ability to communicate."

With these words, Maah waved his hand near my mouth. Following his hand, a gag appeared over my face. An interesting localized use of the binding spell.

"Business can't wait. Perhaps we'll meet again."

His wings flapped, and with one powerful thrust, he took to the sky. Bound hand and foot, I was lifted and dragged away to an unknown destination. As we passed the site of our little skirmish, I noted with satisfaction the centaur struggling out of the collapsed building, limping on two legs. The griffin was nowhere to be seen. The place where I had left him was empty. Maybe I had overdone it with the spell and it had strangled him. Beneath the tight blue ribbons of the spell, a smile spread across my face. I was quite pleased with my work.

The Grand Temple

"Sir, may I report?" Krombin stood rigid and tense, like a newly-strung bowstring.

His master stood in a magical circle, conversing with a summoned creature. It looked nightmarish—a mass of eyes and tentacles that swirled chaotically. The conversation halted at the sound of Krombin's voice.

"Sir, am I interrupting? You requested immediate reports upon the completion of operations."

"Of course, of course! I'm listening. Keep it brief."

"Sir, the operation was executed fully. No survivors. We did not lose a single one of our warriors. They are all now recuperating for further orders. They should be fully restored within a day."

"Excellent! Can it be that you are capable of executing my orders precisely without any caveats or nuances? Well, I didn't expect that," he stroked his well-groomed beard, a faint smile slipping from under his fingers. "Well then, since everything is going so well, prepare the sphere for me. I want to address the people."

With these words, the figure turned his back to Krombin and resumed his conversation with the monster. Krombin, bowing, left the room. Once the door closed, he hurried to carry out the order.

In the squares of all major cities, a melody of three notes sounded. It wasn't loud, but its echo bounced around for a few moments. The citizens began gathering, expecting official news. The fountains and statues of various cities glowed with a pleasant blue hue. Finally, the visage of the ruler appeared. His gaze was firm, his expression bright.

"Dear citizens of Vulliria! My beloved friends! Today, we must again revisit the tragic events of recent days and the crucial issue of our nation's security. It concerns what threatens our safety and leads to direct attacks on our country. Attempts to negotiate with our neighbors have not yielded the desired results, despite their assurances of non-involvement in the attacks on our temples and their professed loyalty to our state. Despite our efforts to reach an agreement. Last night, in the dead of night, two more attacks were carried out. Acting treacherously, knowing our kindness, they once again destroy our temples, attempting to eradicate our faith and intimidate our people. Appeals to our allies have yielded no results," Rothschild II sighed. "This means that the defense of our homes and our children falls solely to us. These godless attackers wish to strip us of our traditional values and impose their barbaric ones upon us. This is a matter of life and death for our people. A question of our historical future as a nation. This is the red line they have crossed. The circumstances demand immediate and

decisive action from us. Therefore, I have made the difficult decision to declare war on Bullia. I count on the unity of our citizens. I count on your patriotic spirit. Our military is already moving towards the enemy. Justice is on our side, and the Almighty is before us."

Eugene

Eugene closed his eyes and focused. He had already managed to summon small creatures. However, there were still problems. These creatures lived very briefly and after a few seconds they returned to their world. Concentration of power was lacking.

Eugene crossed his arms over his chest. He sharply spread them apart and began to move them in a circle. One hand moved clockwise, the other counterclockwise, alternately making shapes with his fingers. Each hand was supposed to depict different symbols. After the hands were at twelve and six o'clock respectively, Eugene clapped his hands together. A pale red glow appeared around his palms. Throwing his right hand forward, he pierced the space and grabbed a small creature in another world. Eugene was trying to summon it for the first time. The creature struggled, trying to push away with its small thin paws.

Fire beetles are not pleasant to the touch, and a fire scarab beetle was exactly from this unpleasant family. With a deft hand maneuver, he pulled the scarab into his world. The creature was the size of a fist and burned with fire, the heat reaching his face. The beetle moved restlessly and began to rub its wings, growing larger with each moment. Eugene threw the beetle at the door. There was an explosion.

Explosions in tight enclosed spaces are not a stroke of genius. In fact, to be completely honest, it was an outcast from the family of genius ideas. A sort of ugly duckling of thought. If you think about it further, it couldn't even be

called a brainchild. Eugene's head was pounding, and he smelled burning. The taste of iron appeared in his mouth. He seemed to be bleeding. He felt very nauseous.

The wall dissolved, and a troll in guard uniform appeared, holding a huge halberd at the ready.

"No more magic here, or else."

"I... I won't do it again," Eugene's words came out with difficulty.

"Too much talking... never any action."

"This is the last time, I swear."

Eugene tried to focus his gaze on the troll.

"You... will be taken to the waiting cell."

"What? Why?"

The troll did not bother to answer. Putting shackles on Eugene's limp body, he grabbed him by the collar and dragged him through the corridors. After twenty steps, exactly the number of times the troll's heel hit Eugene's head, they reached three ordinary metal cages.

One was already occupied. A boy of the same age as Eugene. Even his build was similar. He was dressed as a novice. Only his hair was red. When Eugene was thrown into the cage, the boy looked up.

There was little light. Only one lantern with a fairy hung on the walls. The fairy was already on her last breath, and judging by the greenish tint of the glow, she had taken some intoxicating substances.

"Wick?" Eugene moved closer to the boy.

"What? Eugene?! You're alive? What are you doing here?" Wick raised his head. His face was tear-stained.

"I was caught in the square and thrown in here," Eugene was glad to see someone from the Temple of the Allfather. "Let's escape together?"

"How can we escape? They've locked us up and will take us to the holy court as criminals."

"The holy court? Us?! They attacked us! Killed everyone! And now they will judge us for that?!"

"They said," Wick wiped his tears, "that our Temple was attacked by the Bullyians. And that we are traitors who helped them. And that we will be judged," he started crying again.

"That's even more reason to run! We need to meet Rothschild II and tell him everything. He must believe us."

"Why should he believe us? We are just two teenagers, we have no evidence. And our word means nothing against the holy court."

"I have the tablet. Whoever possesses it has the right to be heard as an equal," Eugene pulled out the book and showed it to Wick.

"You have it?! I thought it was destroyed!" Wick brightened up.

He leaned towards the bars, peering into the dim light. The light from the inebriated fairy flickered, creating strange shadows.

"Let me see," Wick reached out his hand.

"Not now, let's get out of here. I don't want anyone to know I have it."

"That's sensible, but not fair. I also have a right! This is all that's left of my home too, in case you forgot. And between brothers, there should be no secrets. Remember what we were taught?"

Eugene sighed.

"Once we are free, I promise you'll get a good look at it right away, but not now."

Eugene leaned back against the bars and closed his eyes. Before his inner vision still stood the burning temple, the screams of people, and the cries of demons. Despite everything, he fell asleep. Too much energy had been spent on learning and practicing spells.

When he opened his eyes, Eugene saw the ground moving behind the bars. It was receding somewhere behind him. A sharp adrenaline rush was better than a cup of coffee in the morning. Eugene jumped to his feet and immediately fell.

The road they traveled was rough and had many bumps. They were riding in a wagon. It was hard to tell how long they had been on the road. It was clear that the number of prisoners had increased. Now all three cages were filled. In the third cage, a bottle was rolling on the floor. It looked ordinary, made of sturdy glass. The bottle was filled with some liquid and tightly corked.

Inside it, tossed about like a chip in a storm, was a tiny Ba`al. His face was very displeased. The cart jolted on another bump. The bottle jumped, and Ba`al's and Eugene's eyes met. Grimacing, Ba`al waved his hand and said something. No sound reached Eugene through the noise of the road and the thickness of the bottle.

"I can't hear you."

Silent laughter came from the bottle. Over time, the merriment subsided. The next wave covered the miniature demon's head. Ba`al tried to get up. He failed. He flopped back into the liquid and gestured that he couldn't hear Eugene.

"I already figured that out," Eugene nodded gloomily.

"Who is that?" Wick rubbed his eyes, waking up.

"That's my servant," he said proudly and with dignity.

Ba`al in the bottle began to laugh silently again. It seemed that the liquid in the bottle was having a very positive effect on him. Ba`al was having more fun than ever, between bouts of coughing.

Now that his servant was nearby, it wasn't so scary anymore. Inspiration filled Eugene. He got to his feet, barely

maintaining his balance. Eugene spread his arms as wide as the cage allowed. He began to recite a summoning spell. His right hand circled upwards, his left downwards. Eugene clasped his palms together, finishing the summoning spell for the scarab beetle. He threw his hand forward, expecting to feel the influence of another world, but nothing happened.

Eugene repeated all the actions twice more. Either the concentration was insufficient, or he was doing something wrong. After this, he took a break and checked the book. Everything was done correctly. Yet nothing was happening.

"That troll who put me in the cage seemed to say that magic doesn't work inside these cages."

"I figured that out already," Eugene muttered.

"Okay, what if I try this?"

With these words, he stuck his hands through the cage bars. He repeated his actions. After a clap, pale red light appeared around his hands. Eugene stepped back into the cage. As soon as his palms passed the cage bars, the light disappeared. Wick watched with interest, not saying a word. Even Ba`al in his intoxicating prison stopped struggling. Eugene thoughtfully took out the book. He quickly flipped to the right place.

"Aha! Here it is! The method for imbuing creatures into inanimate objects."

Eugene had already read this section in solitary confinement, but he hadn't had time to practice. The spell was a bit more complicated than the one for summoning the scarab beetle.

Now he had the opportunity. The person uttering the words of power had to do the same as when summoning the scarab beetle. With the difference that instead of summoning a fire beetle, he needed to summon a goblin. The hand gestures also differed slightly. After extracting the

creature from its world, one had to name the object and "imbue" it with the goblin.

In general, Eugene understood everything except for the word "imbue." But he could try. In complete silence, except for the sounds of the road, Eugene approached the bars again. After the gestures, he found a small creature with green skin in his hand. It looked very much like a lizard with a huge nose, a pair of long pointed ears, sad eyes, and very thin limbs.

The creature curled up in his palm, not even trying to resist. Eugene grabbed it by the ears and brought it up to his eyes. Sure enough, he wasn't mistaken; the creature was somewhat transparent. Through it, he could see the rapidly changing landscape of the road. Eugene tried to push the goblin through the bars. Nothing worked. It felt like an invisible wall was between the bars, resolutely refusing to let anything through except Eugene's hands.

The goblin was being squished, but it remained calm, almost apathetic. Only after the third attempt to push the goblin did it let out a short but very heavy sigh. Eugene's arm was already starting to ache. He tried to imbue the goblin into the lock on the cage door.

Just the same, the creature smeared over the lock. The goblin stubbornly refused to be imbued. He didn't want to give up. In a fit of despair, Eugene pressed the creature so hard into the lock that it turned into a pancake, spreading over the entire lock's surface. When its paw touched the cage bars, it was sucked inside.

"Open the cage," Eugene whispered.

The cage door immediately opened. However, the lock did not allow Eugene to leave his place of imprisonment. The door swung back and forth, opening and closing as if an invisible wind was pushing it.

"Open the lock," Eugene tried whispering again.

The door froze. After a slight hesitation, it continued its pendulum movements. The goblin had no power over the lock. He couldn't do anything with it.

"Open the cage as quickly and forcefully as possible."

The door flew open with such force as if Eugene had kicked it open with a running start. The lock, clinking sadly, flew to the side of the road and disappeared into the grass.

Eugene performed the gestures again. He extracted the goblin and imbued it into the next nearest cage.

"Open the cage as forcefully as possible."

The second cage was opened. Eugene grabbed the bottle with Ba'al, which was bouncing all over the floor. Wick, sitting in his cage, watched Eugene with silent admiration.

The driver, a tall demon with deer antlers, still didn't notice the escape of two prisoners. He calmly drove the cart, whistling a cheerful tune to himself.

Eugene tried to get to Wick. There was catastrophically little space on the platform. The cages stood close to each other. Eugene, pressing his back against Ba'al's former prison, stepped over the driver. The demon snorted and turned sharply. Eugene couldn't keep his balance. One of his hands was occupied with the bottle; the other was holding onto the bars. The inertia of the turn was too high.

The bottle with Ba'al slipped from Eugene's fingers. Eugene flew in one direction, and Ba'al in the opposite. After two flips in the air, the bottle shattered into pieces, hitting the driver-demon right on the back of the head. The cart slowed down and stopped. Eugene lay on the ground, waiting for the sky above his head to stop spinning chaotically. He gripped the grass tightly with his hands. The sky, as if responding to this action, slowed down. His head was pounding, and his arms hurt.

"Hey! What are you doing?!"

Eugene cautiously glanced sideways, trying to make out the owner of this stern voice. It was the driver. He was walking toward Eugene, rubbing the back of his head. Eugene turned his gaze to the sky, waiting for it to come to a complete stop.

"Don't make me call for backup, kid."

There was a flash, and for a moment, the clouds, still spinning and swirling, were obscured by the flying body of the horned demon.

Ba`al

My fingertips were smoking. I still couldn't tell if I had hit or missed. Everything around me was spinning and blinding with vibrant colors. It was all because of that damn holy wine. It served its purpose well, hindering the casting of spells and clouding my thoughts. Whoever came up with it, I'd like to shake them by the throat.

Standing up, I tried to move towards the fallen Eugene. My walk resembled that of a sailor who had just stepped ashore. Every step risked the ground tilting and sending me overboard. Yet, my mood was high, thanks to the wine.

"Get up, boy! We've got... hic! ...fun things to do!" After about a dozen steps, I realized he was further away than I had initially thought.

"Alright, fools, you're done for!" The demon emerged from the bushes, gracefully landing a moment ago. He pulled out some kind of orb from his pocket and smashed it in his hand. The shards scattered, and a piercing squeal followed. Behind me, I heard a rumble. Turning around, I realized a few things.

First, the cart was actually a platform hovering in the air on clusters of shimmering air and fire. Second, these clusters were two djinns. They were the source of the

rumble as they lowered the platform and carefully set it on the ground. Then they turned and headed towards me.

I tried to move out of their path. They adjusted their route. One of them raised his hands, and a binding spell flew towards me. I sidestepped, letting it pass. Eugene started to stir on the ground. But it seemed unlikely that I could grab him and escape. The holy fumes hadn't dissipated, limiting my abilities. All I could do was slow them down and buy some time.

Precise spells were unreliable now. So, I went for area effects. After clapping my hands, a strong wind rose. Forming a cone with my hands, I directed it at the two djinns. They didn't panic and raised protective screens. This type of shield isn't as effective as a full barrier but it serves its purpose and requires much less energy.

The wind didn't relent, pushing the djinns back towards the cart. They resisted fiercely. I took a step forward. The pressure increased, and the djinns were pushed back again. My energy reserves were dwindling.

Wind manipulation wasn't my specialty. I could roast them with fire for hours without causing much harm, but still. I took another step forward, realizing I didn't have enough strength for another. My head was clearing slowly. The holy wine fumes dissipated under the adrenaline rush. There was an explosion behind me. Another blast sent the djinns crashing into the cages, toppling them over.

"Throw them inside, Ba`al! Quickly!"

Eugene appeared in my field of vision. He was performing hand movements, summoning another fire scarab. I stopped generating the wind. A well-aimed explosive blast sent one djinn into the cage. I think I even broke through his shield. Eugene threw the scarab at the other one. My fist completed the task, flipping the surprised djinn gracefully behind bars.

"Close the doors!" Eugene shouted.

The clanking of locking cages and the clicking of locks followed.

The silence of the moment was broken only by our heavy, ragged breathing.

"And where... is... the horned one?" I asked, catching my breath and mimicking two horns with my hands.

Eugene looked at the "two pairs" of horns in surprise—two real and two mimed. He blinked and understood.

"Over there," he waved towards the lying body, "I think I killed him."

"If you had killed him, he would have gone back to his world. Since he's lying there..." I coughed, my throat dry, and my eyes watering. I hate wind spells. "...he's just unconscious."

There was a soft clap.

"Guys, that was very impressive!"

Wick stood in his cage, applauding.

"Teach me how to do that?"

Eugene smiled and climbed onto the platform to free his fellow novice.

Chapter Seven:

«Gentlemen, there are too many of us here. There must be a traitor among us. It's an unbreakable law of the genre»

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The Grand Temple

Krombin knocked on the massive doors of Rothschild II's office. After being granted permission to enter, he braced himself and opened the door. It was always a challenge, requiring significant effort to move such a masterpiece of carpentry.

"Sir, you asked for a report on the front lines."

Krombin raised his head, finishing the sentence. He always entered the office with his head bowed as a sign of deep respect. Once again, Rothschild II was not at his desk. He was conversing with another creature of darkness. This time, it was a rather cute yellow critter. Its height barely reached Krombin's knee and it appeared to be some sort of rodent. It looked quite adorable, except for its oddly shaped tail, which seemed to be broken in several places.

"You choose amusing helpers, my friend," the creature said in a deep bass voice.

"Let's take a pause," Rothschild II waved dismissively, "report."

"The border squads of Bullia have been suppressed, sir. Our troops are steadily advancing deeper into the country. The estimated time to capture the capital is five days."

"Three. You have three days. We cannot give them the opportunity to understand what is happening. They have a certain stockpile of weapons. I wouldn't want to lose too many servants and soldiers."

"Yes, sir." Krombin bowed deeply. "Also, the novice and his demon, who managed to hide during the..., " he glanced at the yellow visitor, "Temple of the All-Father incident, are expected to arrive this afternoon."

"From the Temple of the All-Father," Rothschild finished for him. "Oh! So Maah kept his promise. Well, well. Thank you, Krombin, you may go."

"Listen, Nomekop, are you familiar with Ba`al?" Rothschild turned to the demon.

"Ba`al... Ba`al..." he said slowly, savoring each letter. "No, you know, I don't recall. Is he one of yours?"

"Indeed, and you know, we used to have a wonderful relationship despite his bad temper. And he's an excellent worker. Maybe you could take him into your unit if we come to an agreement?"

"If you vouch for him, of course. It's been hard to find anyone lately who can cover your back in a critical moment. But you're missing another point, old friend."

"Which is?"

"So far, we've only discussed the amount of territory I need to capture. How many creatures will be under my command. This is all, undoubtedly, interesting and helps to understand the overall situation..."

"I sense you're about to say 'but.'"

"Indeed, I am," Nomekop rumbled. "My 'but' is that I have never commanded armies. My passion is duels. A certain knightly representation of honor and valor. In one-on-one fights, agility and speed decide. In wars, it's all about the number of corpses on the defeated side. Simple scorekeeping. What I'm saying is, I don't think I'll make a good general for you."

"That's the beauty of it," Rothschild smiled. "You won't have to think at all. All I want from you is to keep a few hundred creatures in line and direct their victorious march in the right direction." Rothschild scoffed disdainfully. "Some wouldn't figure out how to scratch their own asses without a command."

"I hope my lightning will help them choose the right hand and position. Am I allowed to use spells against our own?"

"What? Sometimes it's absolutely necessary! I knew you'd support me."

"Well, I haven't agreed yet." The demon smiled and winked. "Let's talk about my reward."

Ba`al

We had moved quite far from the site of the last battle. We left the cart behind. Without the djinns, it was just a platform, and there was no way we were going to lug it around on our backs.

Pushing through the forest, I looked back at my companions. They were just exhausted, dirty children.

"Stop, let's take a break," I commanded. They collapsed to the ground right where they stood. The spot for our rest turned out to be quite fortunate. We were on a small clearing, so small that the three of us nearly filled it completely. Using a bit of levitation, I dragged over two tree stumps.

"Sit down and catch your breath. I'll look around. So far, nothing dangerous or suspicious was visible."

I didn't wait for instructions or orders. This kid had recently shown his best side. It turns out he can stand up for himself. I had thought that all they were taught was how to blow snot bubbles expertly. It's nice to be wrong sometimes, no doubt about it.

After moving thirty paces from the campsite, I heard the sound of water. Wonderful, time for a bath. I circled the perimeter and saw nothing dangerous. It was a dense forest, and at least for the near future, we were not in any immediate danger.

A squeak came from the bushes behind me. Judging by the sound, it was a small animal. Though it could have been a demon pretending to be something small and harmless. I put my hand behind my back, whispering a fireball spell. One had to be ready for anything.

A squirrel's face peeked out of the bushes. It sniffed the nearest flower, then glanced at me. For a while, it just stared at me, eyeing me with one eye, then the other. Realizing it wasn't in danger, it fully emerged. I was about to cancel the spell, not wanting to waste energy, but then I tensed up again.

The squirrel was up to my waist in height, about the size of a small calf. That wasn't the only thing that caught my attention. It had eight limbs. I hadn't seen such a cute monstrosity in a long time. The squirrel, sniffing around the clearing, occasionally glanced at me. It jumped very gracefully, as if the extra two pairs of limbs didn't bother it at all. It showed no aggression or magical abilities. I reduced the power of the fireball to the size of a match head and threw it at the squirrel. It scared and darted up a tree, disappearing into the branches. Interesting and very strange.

I strained my ears. Nearby, I heard the tapping of a woodpecker. I became curious. If there were such squirrels here, I definitely wanted to see other inhabitants of this crazy forest. The source of the noise was ten paces away. The woodpecker was routinely busy, extracting insects from the tree bark. Everything would have been fine, but it was balancing itself with an extra pair of webbed wings.

It seemed this world reacted strongly to the concentration of magic in one place. It felt like there had

been a nuclear accident in a neighboring town, and all the animals had mutated. In reality, it was much simpler and a bit safer.

In all my travels, the animals, humans, birds, and other creatures had always been the same²⁴. There were, of course, local-level sorcerers who forcibly infused animals with magic. This resulted in terrifying and insane creatures. Here, it seemed to be something similar. Judging by the calmness of these animals, they felt quite normal. This meant that there was no sudden infusion of magic. There remains only one solution – it was just a manifestation of excess magic. The environment absorbed it, changing and adapting. It was a fascinating and unique sight that made me think about how much magic can affect the surrounding world. To clear my conscience and satisfy my curiosity, I ran to the water source. The sound of water could be heard from afar.

The water was flowing and crystal clear, an ideal place to wash off the dirt. The fish didn't attract any attention. They were just larger in size, that's all. But it was hard to surprise me with that. The fish did not attack the submerged leg and showed no aggression. I stood a little longer on the shore; the weather was wonderful.

The sun was shining brightly. The wind was blowing gently from one side to the other. A sense of peace and tranquility overwhelmed me, reminding me of times before all these wars and conflicts. Outbursts of admiration for the environment are usually just reflections of the experiences of a being in captivity. Shaking my head to dispel the daydreams, I decided to return to the camp.

"Well, boys and girls, let's go swimming! I noticed a little river not far from here," I waved my hand behind me.

²⁴ I mean within my own kind. As for the outside, a fish doesn't look much like a human. Although...

"What?" Eugene jumped up, "Who are you calling 'girls'?"

"Calm down, firecracker! Don't be so nervous, kid. You are, of course, the manliest of the manly. The most testosteronic of the testosteronic. All settled? Calm now? I was talking about your girlfriend, whom you haven't introduced to us yet."

Eugene froze, slowly turning to look at his companion.

"Just don't tell me I'm the only one who sees her. That damned holy grog should have worn off by now."

Ba'al paused, but nothing happened. Eugene still looked silently, seemingly unable to utter a word. The silent scene dragged on, with no applause in sight.

"You're a girl?" Eugene jumped up in outrage. All the accumulated fatigue instantly evaporated.

"Yes, it's true..."

"WHAT?! How did that happen?"

"Listen, I'm not an expert, but I can explain. You see, it's all about biology."

"Shut up, Ba'al. It's not your turn now. And you," he turned back to his interlocutor, "speak up, come on!"

"Eugene, listen, no one knew, it was my secret. I..."

"Well, in a couple of years, everyone would have noticed. I just have a nose for such details..."

"Shut up, Ba'al."

"...well, my parents wanted a boy, but I was born. They needed a boy to send to the temple to serve the Allfather and, in return, receive a reward from the state. They decided that since a girl was born, they wouldn't get anything and would have to spend on my upkeep."

"And they decided to play it zero? Smart move..." I made another attempt to intervene in the conversation.

"Yes, that's roughly how it happened. They made a deal with the temple's treasurer that he would keep the

reward and teach me as a boy-novice. That way, everyone would benefit."

"That's nonsense," Eugene stated.

"And you think your parents gave you up for a good life?"

"My parents wanted me to have a good life filled with the meaning of righteous service."

"Did you hear that from them personally?"

"No." Eugene looked down. "Still. You lied to us, I mean, lied to us."

"To whom 'us'? You and all the brothers? They weren't interested in the treasurer's affairs. People always want to be friends with such people and not poke their noses into their lives unnecessarily to avoid quarreling."

"What about me and Ba'al?"

"Kid, why are you dragging me into this? Let's all calm down. Let's start the conversation anew."

I approached the girl and extended my hand.

"Ba'al, the most gallant of all the dukes of Hell."

"Vikky," she took my hand, shaking it slightly.

"Eugene, isn't it nice to meet our young companion?"

Eugene didn't respond. He turned and stomped angrily towards the water.

"It's okay, people usually become kinder after a bath."

"I thought people become kinder when they have no problems. No problems – no reasons for sadness."

"You know, you are a very smart little girl."

Soon Eugene returned. He was completely wet but cleaner and still just as sullen.

"Just a tip, don't take it the wrong way. Next time, try washing without your clothes on. That way, it'll be easier to reach those already hard-to-reach places," I smiled.

"I tried to wash my clothes," Eugene grumbled.

He approached the small fire I had recently lit. Eugene bent down, laying the contents of his pockets on the ground at a safe distance from the fire.

A sharpened piece of metal, the accursed scroll, a few coins and bills. Perhaps he didn't give me the entire amount. Bending his legs, he plopped down next to the fire, stretching out his hands to it. During this movement, a small glass vessel hanging around his neck on a cord popped out from under his robe. Inside this vessel was a rolled-up scroll.

Most likely, this bottle was sealed with some spell since I didn't feel any power from it. And I didn't sense my name in it. And it should be there. Eugene's pockets were empty. All the contents were on the ground. Using the method of deduction and induction, one could conclude that the contract was in this scroll.

Vikky quietly got up from her place and walked towards the water. We were left alone, and for the first time in a long time, there were no explosions. It was possible to talk a little openly.

"So, commander, where are we heading?"

"We need to find one person," Eugene still looked offended.

"One? No problem, we can quickly find them. I think they should live somewhere around here. We'll find the person, and then you'll let me go, right?"

"I didn't say just anyone, but one specific person."

"Name, lineage to the third generation, distinctive features? We'll find him quickly, and then you'll let me go?"

"Well, he has a sword, and he sits on a mountain."

"One person with a sword on a mountain, got it. Easier than pie. So, what about letting me go? You're a good guy, and I haven't had this much fun in a while. But put yourself in my shoes, I have a ton of urgent business too."

Eugene, still looking at the fire, pursed his lips.

"I give you my word," the boy said in an even voice, "that once we avenge all my brothers, you will have your freedom."

"Well, that's at least something," I dragged out. "So, remind me again, why do we need this guy with the metal piece?"

"We need to appear before Rothschild II; only he can decide our fate."

"Weren't we being taken to him in the cages?"

"Yes, but if we have the person from the prophecy with us, our words will carry more weight than just from two boys... I mean, a boy and a girl."

"Oh, so he's from the prophecy. Well, that changes things. I believe in all prophecies, zodiac signs, omens, and so on," I slowly rolled my eyes. "Alright, as you say: the sooner we start, the sooner we finish. Which way?"

"To the west from here, about two days' journey, there's a mountain. Let's hope he's there."

"Great! And if not?"

"And if not, then your release will be postponed even longer."

"Got it, let's hope he's there."

Vikky returned, looking much fresher. After a brief exchange of phrases, everyone went to sleep. The kids were exhausted from the day. Eugene collapsed where he sat by the fire. I positioned myself on the opposite side. Vikky lay down between us, using a clump of moss as a pillow.

I don't dream. I have never seen the colorful delirium of a dream. It is for this reason, I think, that people love to sleep so much. Their existence is already just a fleeting moment, but they always gladly shorten it with sleep.

For some time, I pondered my current situation. After Eugene's and Vikky's breathing became steady and calm, my adventurous spirit took over. Though the boy gave me his word. Well, you don't believe people at their word,

right? The temptation to break the contract right now was enormous. I was indeed having fun spending time here. But, first of all, my work isn't going anywhere; it's only piling up. The longer I stay here in subjective time, the more Beelzebub will demand from me. It's been over a week, and I still haven't acquired a single soul. There is a good chance they will write off this call as a vacation.

And secondly, Eugene is an interesting guy, he really has potential, but I categorically don't want to lose my honor. If something can be done right now, it must be done.

I lifted my head and looked at Eugene. He was sound asleep, curled up by the fire. The scroll lay near the fire alongside other junk left to dry. From under the robe, or rather what was left of it, the vessel with the scroll inside peeked out. No, this was a temptation I couldn't resist.

I transformed into a snake, very similar to the one that tempted the first humans on Earth. Snakes are silent and swift. The only problem is sight

. Snakes see stationary objects blurred. Nature still molded them into perfect predators. I silently slithered around the fire. I could see perfectly how Eugene's chest rose and fell with the coveted vial. Zigzagging, I slipped through the junk lying by the fire.

My gaze was focused on the target. I needed to crawl closer to carefully remove the vial from Eugene, then break it, split the scroll with a spell, and "at home in Hell, even the walls will help."

The plan was as follows: quickly climb onto the scroll and from there bite through the cord with the vial. If done quickly, Eugene wouldn't even have time to wake up before I was already relaxing at home. I lunged forward. A flash of light illuminated our little resting place. Pain seared my side, and I was thrown into the bushes.

For a while, I lay unconscious, eyes rolled back and tongue out. Coming to, I returned to my form and healed the

wound. My side hurt terribly; I spent a lot of energy on recovery. The most annoying thing was that I didn't understand what had happened. There were no sounds of battle or cries of the wounded from behind the bushes. Fully recovered, I parted the branches and peeked out. The scene was the same: Eugene and Vikky sleeping, not subjected to any visible danger. Stepping out of the bushes, I held the branches with my hands. The silence was so profound that you could hear the caterpillars rustling under the tree bark.

Tiptoeing, I approached Eugene. Everything was in its place, except for the scroll. It was slightly turned. A clear trail of its movement was visible on the ground. Extending the little finger of my right hand, I decided to push the book back to its original place. A flash of light filled my field of vision. This time, the tree became an obstacle to my graceful flight. It maliciously struck its trunk along my spine. Small branches rained down on my head.

"Ba'al, what are you doing?" Vikky, sleepily rubbing one eye, looked at me.

"Shh, quiet," I pressed a finger to my lips. "Judging by the flashes... uh... of lightning, it will rain soon, and I decided... uh... to cover you with branches so you wouldn't get wet."

"Then it would be better to just create a protective dome or something." Losing interest in the conversation, Vikky turned over and fell back asleep.

I looked at my right hand; the little finger was missing. Rolling my eyes and rolling up my sleeves, I set about recovering again. Damn scroll was also magically protected. And when did the kid manage to learn such a thing?

Eugene

At dawn, the trio set off. Despite the lightning at night, everyone had managed to get a good night's sleep.

They had been walking for half a day, avoiding large gatherings of people. This was quite difficult, as the roads were often filled with vehicles packed with demons. All the demons wore the same uniform, as if they were being transported to a huge football match.

"It looks like the war is starting," Ba`al commented on the latest stream of demons.

This time, along with the demons in the vehicles, there were also complex metal structures of unknown purpose.

"Maybe someone attacked us?" Vikky suggested.

"If that were the case, there would be far fewer smiles on their faces. It's more likely you attacked someone."

Eugene didn't join the conversation. It seemed as if reality had long since left him, and now he was in some parallel world full of madness. They traveled for several more hours. Vikky, walking a few steps behind Eugene, sped up to catch up with him.

"Listen, don't you think Ba`al isn't entirely honest with you?"

"In what sense?"

"Well, don't you think he wants to get rid of you quickly and avoid following your orders?"

Eugene hadn't thought so until now. After these words, doubts began to creep in. He thought about it for the first time.

"But he can't harm me in any way; we are bound by a contract." Eugene immediately tried to dismiss the doubts. The Allfather commanded not to doubt, only to believe. Doubts inevitably breed suffering.

"And what, he can't betray you?"

"No, of course not," Eugene smiled. "It's simple: he can't harm me or, through inaction, allow harm to come to

me. He also has to follow all my orders and make sure he doesn't die himself. Simple and reliable."

"So everything is under control? Because I'm starting to get worried about these demons. They are not like us."

"You can't think of them that way! We are all creatures of the great Allfather, and we all walk under him."

Vikky looked at Eugene in surprise. She hadn't expected such an answer.

"Do you think I want to get you killed?"

Ba`al had silently crept up behind them. A moment ago, he had been ahead, diligently clearing the path. He skillfully used his tail like a powerful machete, cutting through obstructing branches. Now his sly face was positioned between Eugene and Vikky.

"Want me to show you something? Look," Ba`al made passes with his hands and then blew on his palm.

Nothing happened.

"Somewhere in this forest, within a radius of ten to fifteen steps, a small..."

"Ah!" Eugene stopped and grabbed his leg.

"...thorn," Ba`al finished.

"You damn demon! I'll..."

Ba`al waved his hand over the pricked spot. The wound healed before their eyes. The only reminder was a hole in the sole.

"So, this was just a small experiment to demonstrate my loyalty. I really enjoy our little adventures. And if you keep your promise, we'll part as friends. But if not, believe me, I'll find a way to get back at you. And you definitely won't like it."

Satisfied, Ba`al walked ahead again.

"My word is strong and unbreakable, demon!"

Eugene rubbed his injured leg.

"Are you in your right mind?" Vikky fussed around Eugene.

"Listen, don't be offended. Want me to create a rainbow for you? Maybe that will calm you down?" Ba'al laughed at his joke, which only he understood.

Chapter Eight:

*«Knowing the destination of the journey
and our current location, it's not difficult
to chart the most effective route.»*

© *Christopher Columbus*

The Grand Temple

The meeting of the holiest was technically already underway, although some members, including the head of state, were absent. Around the arched table sat nine temple abbots. The hoods of their dark robes were pulled over their eyes, so the upper part of their faces was indistinguishable in the shadows. This was one of the traditions. The hoods provided anonymity.

During the court, when delivering an acquittal, the accused might remember the faces of those who voted for punishment. And what followed was all too obvious: revenge. It's a deep-seated emotion. Many believe it's one of the core aspects of human nature. Revenge, to some extent, is inherent in all people.

The belief that hoods would save from vindictive accomplices was the sole basis of this conviction. It was this precaution that cemented the tradition. Give a person something to believe in, and they will do it, often taking it to an absurd level. Invent a belief and tell them it was held by their "ancestors," and they will follow it. The funniest part is that they will even defend it. People are so amusing.

The noise of excited voices echoed through the courtroom. Each was convinced that declaring war on a neighboring state was not something to be done so easily. This decision had been made unilaterally by Rothschild II, not collectively. Each of the nine present was outraged by

this development. The disputes and approving murmurs had been going on for more than half an hour. Finally, the doors to the hall swung open. Rothschild II approached the table with a majestic step. The first sounds of his steps were distinctly audible in the newly formed silence.

"My friends, you don't often call a general meeting of the holy court. To be honest, this is the second instance I can recall. The first was when I was appointed head of Wulliria."

Rothschild smiled. Although his attire mimicked the robes of all present, his hood was not pulled over his face. He had no reason to fear for his life. Threats amused rather than scared him. No gang or local elite dared threaten this man. There was something about him that made even the bravest hearts beat with fear.

Those seated at the table lowered their heads.

"We wanted... if it were possible... we are, in fact, interested... where are the other holy abbots now?" one of the figures, without standing up, turned their head toward Rothschild.

"You noticed too? Well, I can only guess where they actually are. Perhaps, and I repeat, only 'perhaps,' they decided to rebel against the current government. They suddenly wanted to disrupt the balance and existing order. They couldn't reconcile with the sacred expansion," Rothschild leaned on the table with his hands. "Maybe they wanted to leave our people without a leader and thus disrupt the natural path to grace. And it was instigated by their oldest temple among those standing on this land. A temple that guards the scroll. The servants, unfortunately, succumbed to their pride and vanity. For which, perhaps, I emphasize, only perhaps, they paid the price."

His voice was even, and his words were like nails being hammered into a coffin lid. He loomed over the table like a gravedigger, blocking the last ray of the sun.

Rothschild took his hands off the table and clasped them behind his back. The echoes of his last phrase fluttered around the room in despair, trying to escape but failing to leave. No one at the table dared to speak.

"Or maybe..." the bishop continued, lowering his voice even more, "...maybe they were foreign spies bribed by the Bullians. But, quarreling among themselves, they were destroyed by their own employers. And we just became unwitting witnesses to the massacre. What choice do we have but to restore order in the neighboring state, having every right to do so? After all, it was not us who attacked them, but they us. We need to remind them that we are not just humble servants of the Allfather, but we can also show our neighbors their place in this world."

At the last words, Rothschild II turned his back to the others.

"And since I tried to answer your question, esteemed holy abbots, now answer mine. Which version do you like better?"

"Is that... is that a threat?!" a figure at the end of the table stood up.

"What are you talking about? Of course not. It's a question, as I just said," Rothschild, without turning around, headed for the exit. "So, I give you time to think, discuss among yourselves, and all that. You won't be disturbed."

After closing the doors to the hall behind him, Rothschild made passes with his hands. A step away from his feet, fiery lines traced a pentagram. The floor inside the drawing collapsed, forming a portal.

"Horror, will you always react so slowly to my orders?"

An entity with a broken, festering, but very muscular body slowly emerged from the portal. The creature had no legs; they were replaced by numerous arms. The limbs

braced against the floor, walls, and ceiling. The corridor was noticeably tight for the creature.

"Lock the doors and make sure no one leaves until I return. All entries and exits are on a toll basis. The price is life. I'll check when I get back."

Ba`al

We climbed the mountain. From afar, we could see the cave in the center of the slope. However, it turned out to be much farther than it seemed when we were at the foot. Personally, I enjoyed the walk. It had been a long time since I'd been in nature. Everything around was green, beautiful, and smelled fresh, and the higher we climbed, the cleaner the air became. I'd definitely spent too much time at work. Once I complete my soul quota, I'm heading straight for a vacation. Eugene and Vikky were struggling behind, trying not to fall behind. Placing my foot on an especially large boulder, I stopped. Our small group was halfway to the goal. It was time to savor our achievements.

"Smell the adventure, kids?" I said.

Eugene caught up with me and collapsed on the rock. Vikky sat down next to him, leaning against it. The sun was gradually setting behind the horizon. The view from this spot was simply magnificent. Below the slope, there was a small village, followed by a forest stretching to the horizon. Occasionally, the last rays of sunlight pierced through the gathering rain clouds. A calming sight. In a word, beauty. For those who live in densely populated areas, spending a few days in nature is a holiday.

By the time night fell and the first drops of rain began to fall, we had reached the cave. And the funniest thing was, it was completely empty. There could be no mistake. There was no way we could have overlooked or missed anything.

The cave went no deeper than twenty steps. Eugene, who had been dragging his feet on the approach, ran around the space twice, almost looking under the boulders.

"Maybe the phrase was meant metaphorically? You know, like they say: 'And a white, pure hero will come and defeat all the bad black bandits'?"

"No one says that, Ba'al! You better help calm Eugene down and figure out what to do next," Vikky replied.

Eugene stopped pacing like a raccoon in a box.²⁵ He approached the entrance to the cave. For a few minutes, he stood there watching the rain, breathing nervously. You know, I have excellent hearing. His panting both amused and slightly irritated me. You don't need my intellect to understand that the boy was somewhat upset.

"Well, don't be so upset," I said soothingly. "Let's go to the tavern, warm up by the fire. Maybe they'll let us spend the night. When we were climbing, I noticed one. Right at the foot of the mountain. The name was something strange... I don't remember exactly, something starting with 'A'."

I approached the boy and put my hand on his shoulder.

"Really, don't be upset. It happens. And tomorrow, after you get some sleep and feel better, you can fulfill the contract and let me go."

Eugene glared angrily but said nothing. We spent a few very wet hours descending the mountain. As you know, descending is faster than climbing. But few explain why.

²⁵ Have you ever put a raccoon in a box? It's quite a funny activity. But there are two dangerous moments. The first is when you're putting it in the box, and the second is when you open the box. At these stages, it's very easy to lose your hands. In every other aspect, watching the little animal try to escape from the dark space is just hilarious.

Falls contribute significantly to the speed, adding a few painful memories.

Dodging the rain, I ran from shelter to shelter. I like watching rain, but getting soaked is a different matter. After all, I am a resident of Hell, and that shouldn't be forgotten. Eugene and Vikky, completely exhausted, trudged directly under the rain until they thought to ask me for protection. I had to create a low-power fire shield.

After a few more turns, we all stood before the sign of the tavern: "The Prancing Demon."²⁶ Without wasting another second, we stepped inside. The abrupt change of scenery puzzled everyone except, of course, me. The streets were completely deserted. Even the lighting fairies don't fly in such weather. Inside the tavern, however, there was a real crowd, it was bright and warm. All the seats were occupied by ordinary people.

Among my kind, there was only a group playing live music. Relatively live: one of the musicians seemed to be a ghoul. The atmosphere was conducive to fun and drinking, which most people were doing with great pleasure.

A crowd of people with wooden mugs gathered around the gaming table. A skinny old man with a long beard sat at the table. A dice game... How impenetrably primitive, just awful.

We approached the bar. It was metal and not very even. There was no one behind the bar. No human, no demon. As was proper for a true bartender, he was absent. While we stood around and Eugene rummaged through his pockets, looking for small change, the old man who led the ancient gambling game—heads or tails—walked behind the bar.

"So, have you made your choice, gentlemen?" he stroked his beard with a time-withered hand.

²⁶ I did say there's a letter "A" in there!

"So, you're both the bartender and the dealer?" I smiled.

"I'm also the owner of this establishment. And the games are just for pleasant pastime," the old man smiled.

"What can we get for this money?" Eugene poured out all the junk he had collected in his pockets. A few coins and a banknote with the image of Great Grenwurd.

The old man leaned over the bar, assessing our savings.

"You almost have enough for a pint of hot grog. The best medicine in such weather."

"And what about discounts for kids?" Vikky spoke up.

"Discounts for kids should be given by their parents," the old man smiled. "However, I can offer you a chance to play and increase your funds. Then you'll definitely have enough. And if you're really lucky, you could buy drinks for your whole company."

The old man spat and wiped the steel counter. He smiled at his reflection in the polished surface and headed back to the gaming table. From there, the dissatisfied cries of regulars could already be heard.

"Give me all we have. I'll multiply these locals by zero."

I reached out my hand over the remnants of our savings.

"And if you lose everything? What will we live on?" Eugene covered the money with his hand.

"Stop me when I'm wrong. But as far as I can see, you're cold and tired. You need to warm up and get some sleep. Otherwise, at this rate, you could die... although, actually, not a bad idea. Forget everything I said. Let's just wait."

"Yuge, let him try. It won't get any worse."

"What did you call me?"

Eugene raised an eyebrow and looked at the girl. Vikky averted her gaze. The silence dragged on, she must have acknowledged her mistakes.

"Sorry, I just... I just wanted to..."

"Alright, but you better watch it, demon."

Eugene removed his hand from the money and smiled conciliatorily at Vikky. Ba'al quickly grabbed the small change and approached the gaming table. Such a chance to have fun couldn't be missed.

"Can I join you, gentlemen? Maybe you could teach me a trick or two, eh?"

The crowd fell silent. Just a moment ago, there was fun and laughter, bitter cries of losers, and enthusiastic cheers of winners. Now there was complete silence at the table.

"I'll speak for everyone," the old bartender stood up. "We don't deal with demons. Call your master, we'll play with him."

"Gentlemen, I see you're honest people, and beating young ones who are already underfed is wrong."

"I said my word. Call your master. We don't deal with demons."

After these words, the old man enthusiastically shook the cup with dice. For him, as for everyone at the table, Ba'al seemed to cease to exist. Oh, I'll come back to this world. Oh, and a terrible punishment awaits you all for such insolence.

"Listen, Eugene, we have a little problem. They refuse to play with the greatest player in heads or tails. They're afraid, what can you do, can't blame them for that. Most likely, my fame precedes me, which is not surprising. We'll have to come up with another way to get money."

"No need. I'll play."

"Friend, don't be offended, but we don't have that many attempts for you to even learn to play like me," I glanced at Vikky.

She spread her hands, showing she had nothing to do with it.

"So, we'll play my way."

With these words, Eugene headed to the table. Passing by Ba'al, he took the money from him. The crowd buzzed at his appearance. The spectacle promised to be quite entertaining.

"Sit down, young man, right on the floor. Want to play dice?" the old man smiled.

"Playing dice isn't interesting. You have no chance. Let's play something else."

The crowd laughed. People were having a good time.

"Why isn't it interesting?"

"You see, I know what numbers will come up on the dice. Because of that, I'll keep winning. And you're honest people, I don't want to deceive you."

"Well, surprise the old man. I bet a gold coin that you're just messing with us."

He knocked the cup over and placed a gold coin on the table.

"I bet all we have," Eugene laid out his funds.

"There's more than one gold coin here. I don't place more than one gold coin in the first bet."

"Then for the rest of the money, just answer my questions."

Eugene turned his back to the gaming table. The old man lifted the cup. On the table lay three dice, showing three, five, and two.

"I ask you to add the first number on the die to itself and add three more. Without saying it out loud, of course. Then multiply the result by five."

The audience murmured, counting on their fingers.

"Then add the number from the second die, multiply by ten and add the number on the last die. So, what's the total?" A bead of sweat rolled down Eugene's temple.

"Five hundred and two," the old man said with a squint.

The surrounding people continued to add and multiply, but a few regulars nodded in agreement.

"Correct," Eugene smiled. "Just testing your arithmetic skills. So, the dice show three, five, and two."

The table erupted in noise. We stood two steps away from Eugene, and it nearly deafened us. How the boy endured it, I don't understand. People screamed, laughed, and whistled approvingly. Someone even slapped the boy on the back with all their might. Eugene staggered but stood firm.

"Well, that's correct," the old man grunted in satisfaction once the crowd quieted down. "Maybe you'll test our counting skills again? Let's double the stakes."

Eugene turned to the speaker.

"Of course, easily."

"But now let your companions stand behind me," the old man laid a few banknotes on the table and waited for Ba'al and Vikky to follow behind him. "So they don't give hints."

The old man deftly gathered the dice and shook them again. Now on the table lay six, one, and three.

"So, what do we have now?"

"I still want to make sure you're not drunk and can think clearly. I don't want to beat drunks."

The crowd murmured.

"Multiply the first number on the die by four, then the result by ten and add the number on the second die. Add a zero to the sum and add the number on the last die."

"Two thousand four hundred and thirteen," the old man was the first to count again.

Eugene nodded.

"Correct, you're not as drunk as I thought. So, you won't be upset by a loss. The dice show one, three, and six."

The crowd fell silent. Only the music and loud gulps of beer remained. The old man laughed loudly. At that moment, people joined in.

"Take it, boy. This money is yours. Before you take it, tell me your name."

Eugene glanced at the dice. Everything was correct.

"Eugene, my name is Eugene," the boy slightly bowed his head. He always respected his elders.

"Come behind the counter, I'll treat you on the house."

The old man went behind the counter, took out two wooden mugs, and filled them with beer. He placed one in front of Eugene. The foam reached the edge and trickled down in a neat drop. He twisted his mustache and took a satisfying sip from his mug.

"Well, young man, that was an interesting show. Your funny tricks entertained us. It's not customary here, but as a distraction, it's interesting to change the rules sometimes. So, what did you say your name was?" the old man took another sip, then licked the remaining drops of beer from his mustache.

Vikky and I stood silently, watching as the old man stubbornly ignored us.

"My name is Eugene, and with me are my companions Vikk and Ba'al." Eugene constantly dealt with old brothers and was used to monotonously repeating the same thing.

"Vikk, I see, very nice," another full mug slid across the metal surface and landed in Vikky's hands.

"...And Ba'al," I added emphatically, "I'm also infinitely pleased to meet you."

I nervously drummed my fingers, waiting for my portion of beer. The old man didn't even turn his head in my direction. Well, you know what! I'll wait for such as you in Hell. I have enough patience for everyone.

"My name is Harrygene, but everyone calls me Old Harry. So, where did you learn these tricks?"

"I had good math teachers. I loved the subject."

The old man grunted, adjusted his mustache, and took another sip of beer.

"I like you, young man," Harrygene smiled. "But I asked 'where,' not 'from whom.' You're a novice of the Temple of the All-Father. So, what are you doing so far from home?"

Eugene looked at Vikky in surprise, then his gaze slowly moved to me. The boy's brows began to move towards the bridge of his nose. His eyes turned into slits, and his nostrils flared. He looked at me like an angry hamster again.

"Why are you looking at me? Did I tell him anything? Do you think I run around all the streets of cities shouting, 'Listen everyone! A boy outwitted me, he hasn't even gone through puberty yet, but he already managed to enslave me! So, know, he's from the Temple of the All-Father. And his name is Eugene.' Do you really think I'm a complete idiot?"

"Don't waste your nerves, young man," the old man grunted contentedly. "You're wearing rags, but it's impossible not to recognize them as novice robes."

"Not many people can recognize temple attire and understand all the nuances," Vikky placed her empty mug on the table. "I bet you also spent a lot of time in the temple."

"Yes, that's right," the old man beamed. "About forty-six years ago, I left the Temple of the All-Father."

Old Harry refilled the drinks and brought out dried bread with herbs. He was called from the gaming table. The old man waved his hand, and his place was taken by a large man with a smoothly shaven face. Judging by how quickly the game resumed, it seemed he was the official deputy. No dissatisfied shouts followed, confirming my suspicions.

"Yes, those were the days," the old man rolled his eyes in nostalgic ecstasy.

"Old Harry, why did you leave our shared home?"

"Excuse him, young and foolish," I placed my hand on Eugene's shoulder. "He doesn't respect his elders, what does he know about sailing the sweet waters of memories? So, how about a mug of beer for me?"

"Here, Ba'al," Vikky pushed her nearly empty mug to me.

I looked at Vikky with respect. Eugene barely managed to finish a third of his first drink. This girl would make a great battle companion someday. If she took up something useful for the team, she'd be priceless.

Eugene

Inside Eugene, everything froze. He knew that the truth was written in the scrolls. There was no doubt about it. But somewhere deep down, a nagging doubt gnawed at him, suggesting that it was all lies and mere fantasies of Grenwurd. Now, meeting Harrygene, everything fell into place. The old man was the perfect embodiment of the hero from the prophecy.

"You know, when I became a monk," began old Harry, "I was granted access to the sacred scrolls. About two years later, I reached the study of the prophecy. It was then that I realized the truth that no one else saw. At least, back then, I was fully convinced of it. I left the Temple and went to the mountain to find the person from the prophecy and join them. I was young and thought radically. Find the

one who wants to save the world and help him. The mentors didn't share my enthusiasm. Many didn't believe in this prophecy at all."

Here, old Harry paused his story and took a huge, satisfying gulp from his mug. Ba`al, seemingly unintentionally, covered his face with his hand. From under his hand, a trunk with a bony tip emerged, crawling down to the barrel of beer from which Harrygene had been serving everyone. The trunk hesitated for a few seconds. Finding a weak spot, Ba`al punctured the barrel and started siphoning beer through the trunk. The demon's face instantly took on a more friendly appearance.

"My throat was dry," the old man smiled again.

He took a big gulp and swirled it in his mouth, savoring the taste.

"My demon, I don't even remember his name, brought me a sword. I have no idea where he found it. This sword right here."

Harrygene tapped the surface of the bar with his knuckles. Eugene and Vikky lowered their gazes to the metal surface. Ba`al was still occupied with depleting the tavern owner's supplies. The metal surface was actually a huge sword, the length of Eugene's height and three beer mugs wide.

"In those days, people were kind. Many would jump out from behind bushes to show you the way. When I reached the mountain, I noticed the cave. It wasn't as easy to spot as it is now. Trees used to cover the cave. When I discovered it was empty, I chopped down the trees in anger. I was young and foolish, what can you do," the old man finished his mug and slammed it on the table.

"We came to this mountain for the same reason. We wanted to find help. Maybe this prophecy isn't true," Vikky rolled the empty mug along the sword-table.

"But he is the one we are looking for! Don't you understand?" whispered Eugene, turning to Vikky.

In his excitement, Eugene knocked over the mug. It rolled off the table, spilling beer on the sword. Vikky caught the mug with her free hand and placed it next to hers.

"How about adding handles to them? So they don't roll off as much," chuckled an increasingly cheerful Ba`al.

"Eugene, listen, if Harrygene sought him and didn't find him, then this mythical chosen hero doesn't exist."

"On the contrary! He himself is the person."

Harrygene, who had tactfully stayed out of the argument until now, coughed loudly to draw attention.

"And how did you, at such a young age, get so far from the Temple? I don't think they let you go. And you don't look like oath-breakers."

"There is no more Temple. It was burned down. Burned to the ground. We need to report to His Holiness Rothschild II about who did it. To find and punish the traitors."

"Well, we hope you can help us," nodded Vikky.

"Well, I have long been disillusioned with the prophecy, but I am always ready to help my brothers from the Temple. So, stay here tonight, and tomorrow we will head out."

"We will go? So you will come with us after all?"

"If everything you say is true. These are dark times."

"Aren't you too old for journeys?"

"Vikky... Vikk, what are you saying?" Eugene was concerned.

"Actually, my sword and I can be useful in any journey," Harrygene did not seem offended at all. "Here are the keys; tomorrow we head out. Ah! It's been a long time since I sharpened my blade!"

Everyone, quite tired, retired to their rooms. Eugene and Vikky were given one to share, while Ba`al was settled

separately. "It's not fitting for servants to sleep in the same room as their masters."

Eugene was shy about undressing in front of the girl, so he decided to sleep in his clothes. He carefully and respectfully placed the scroll and other contents from his pockets in the nightstand by the bed. Vikky acted more wisely: she dived under the blanket first and then kicked off her novice's robe from under it.

Despite the rain outside, the room was quite warm. The heat from the fireplace on the first floor perfectly warmed the entire building. Eugene, trying not to look in Vikky's direction, reached out and extinguished the candle lighting the room with his fingers. The tired children fell into a deep sleep.

Eugene jerked awake in the middle of the night on his bed. It was dark all around. The dim street, blurred by the rain, hardly provided any light. Everything was quiet. Eugene couldn't understand what had woken him. Footsteps were heard outside the door. Then a crash, as if someone had fallen and got up again. The door opened. Eugene started casting a spell to summon a fire scarab.

"Hey! Eugene, if you're having battles here, you should invite me. Listen, I was tossed out of bed, I thought you were being killed here!" whispered a voice from the darkness.

"Ba'al, why did you come?" Eugene whispered back, lowering his hands.

"Can't you hear worse at night than usual? I said I was brought here. Never mind, just next time, if you decide to have some fun, take a piece of advice, my young friend: never leave a lady on the floor."

"What are you babbling about?"

"I'm not judging, but you could at least pick Vikky up from the floor. Or don't they teach you how to treat ladies

in your Temple? They have lots of organs vulnerable to cold, you know."

Eugene turned his head to the adjacent bed. Vikky was not on the bed. Lowering his gaze, he saw her bare back, reflecting the pale moonlight. He looked up at the ceiling and whispered to the girl.

"Vikky! Vikky!"

There was no answer.

"Ba`al, can you... well, you know?"

"Boy, your manners at the monastery are something else, I'm shocked."

Ba`al stomped over to the lying girl, picked her up, and laid her on the bed.

"Is she alive?"

"Don't overestimate your strength, boy. Of course, she's alive, just sleeping. Tired, probably. You stallion!"

"Get out, demon!"

Ba`al, humming a cheerful tune to himself, left the room, gently closing the door behind him. Before the door closed, a clear voice could be heard from the doorway singing, "We lay two pillows where two hearts lie..."²⁷. Waving dismissively at the demon, Eugene turned, wrapped himself in his blanket, and immediately fell back into sleep.

²⁷ Folk lewd songs. You can't take words out of a song! But how soulful people used to sing...

Chapter Nine:

«Lord! Why must I suffer through all of this?!»

© *An Atheist*

The Grand Temple

Rothschild walked down the corridor to the demon guarding the door. The creature was shoving something into its mouth with two of its limbs. The sounds of chewing could be heard from the end of the corridor. A shoe fell out of the occupied maw. Judging by its expression, it was still hungry. The demon looked like a festering puppy with ten legs that hadn't been fed for a thousand years. Rothschild waved his hand in the air. Obeying his will, a portal opened a meter away from his feet.

"Is there anyone left in there?"

The demon had already half-climbed into the portal but stopped. After a bit of consideration, it pulled itself up with its hands. Its head rose to the same level as Rothschild's face. The demon calmly nodded while continuing to chew, crunching sounds emanating from its maw. It then decided the conversation was over and disappeared into the portal.

"Not the most pleasant sight, but I'm no beauty myself," Rothschild smiled and pushed the door open.

"Sir!"

"Master!"

Two people jumped from their seats and rushed towards Rothschild.

"I see there are still seven of you. Well, it's nice to see that the majority of 'us' are patriots of our homeland."

"We immediately agreed with your decision!"

"Not even a s-second of h-hesitation."

"Listen, I don't remember anyone stuttering."

"It's n-nerves, my lord. It will p-pass."

"Wonderful, just wonderful! I suggest everyone take their posts in the temples. We need to increase the number of demons we summon. There will be other countries. I propose we start preparing for this now." Rothschild turned and headed for the exit.

The door to the hall slowly opened. A tired Krombin appeared behind it.

"My lord! There is news that requires your immediate attention."

"What now... no peace for a moment. We just discussed everything." Rothschild muttered this under his breath, but in the complete silence of the hall, it sounded exceptionally loud.

"The message arrived just now. May I proceed?" Krombin demonstratively cast a glance behind Rothschild.

The remaining saintly patriots hurried to the exit, muttering, "We really should go," "Things won't do themselves," "Time to get to work."

"Speak." Rothschild loomed over his servant like an immovable monolith.

Krombin felt as if he saw fire burning in his eyes. Hesitating, he tried to buy time, searching for the right words.

"Your order to take the capital of Vulliria in three days..."

"Well?!"

Krombin shifted his weight, took out a handkerchief, and slowly wiped the sweat from his brow. Gathering his courage, he quickly spoke as if jumping off a waterfall.

"That order is undoubtedly wise, but the enemy is showing incredible resistance. Our deployed formation, certainly a sound tactic, was broken on the flanks. The left and right are bogged down in local skirmishes, and the center has pushed too deep into enemy territory, where it is now surrounded and fighting to advance. The enemy's coordination is stifling our strength and mobility."

Throughout the speech, Krombin's eyes gradually closed, as if bracing for a blow. After the last word, Krombin stood with his eyes tightly shut, sweat pouring down his face. Moments passed slowly, but nothing happened. Krombin made a second superhuman effort in the last ten minutes and opened his eyes. Rothschild still towered over him. However, this seemed less frightening than the thin smile on his face.

"I... want... to see... Maach," Rothschild said slowly. "Go and prepare the sphere."

Within three minutes, everything was ready. Rothschild leaned over the sphere. Krombin, bowing, left the room, closing the door behind him. He had never been so frightened of his master before. Outwardly, Rothschild hadn't changed, but something inside, something in his manner of speaking or acting, had. These changes evoked a primal fear in Krombin.

"I'm listening, my lord."

Maach's figure appeared in the sphere. Judging by his horizontal position and the occasional flaps of his wings, he was on the move.

"Maach, how kind of you to finally get in touch. I'd like to know how the task I assigned you is progressing."

"I'm currently on it, my lord. Ba'al and the boy managed to escape near the Main Temple, approximately five hours away. I am personally leading the search. I assure you, it will be done."

"Are you trying to ruin me?! Do you want every demon in the world to laugh at me?!" A sound like a small inferno exploded in the room. Rothschild's patience snapped.

"Of course not! Everything is under control, just taking a bit longer."

"Under control like our army being surrounded? Do you even think about what you're saying? While you're 'personally' dealing with trifles, hunting down ONE!... JUST ONE!... Demon and ONE boy, our plans are falling apart!"

Maach assumed a vertical position, occasionally flapping his wings to balance.

"I wasn't informed about that. I will immediately contact the commanders..."

"Why don't you inquire then? You might learn something new!"

"Of course! Consider it done!"

"In the nearest town, take command of a dozen imps. A few of my personal guard demons are already on their way to you."

Following Rothschild's hand gestures, the shadows in the corners of the room grew thicker. Slowly, in the center of this darkness, four burning eyes appeared. Two tall demons with matte-black skin and red eyes stepped into the light. The remaining wisps of shadow were absorbed into their bodies, forming leathery wings. The demons bowed to Rothschild and flew out the window. Solid fellows, strong and resilient. Rothschild looked away from them. A clear plan of action calmed him slightly. Everything could still be salvaged. His plans had never failed before.

"I'm sure with this support, you'll find the runaways faster. If they resist, destroy them. I don't have time for hide-and-seek games. After contacting the army commanders, report back. If you can't control the troops

remotely, head to the front lines. Remember, this is your top priority."

Rothschild waved his hand over the sphere, ending the communication. The last word, after all, must always remain his.

Eugene

Since Vikky was still asleep, Eugene carefully got out of bed. He felt the mission was fully successful. It was already dawn outside. The rain had stopped. Through the gaps in the poorly assembled window, pleasant aromas of fresh dampness wafted in. It was time to start training. Eugene did a few warm-up moves. His sleepy joints needed to be prepared for exercise.

He tried to summon a lower-order creature as quickly as possible. He needed to perfect this skill. Summoning creatures was the only weapon available to him for protection. After about ten attempts, Eugene was satisfied with the result. Practice needed to be continued daily.

"It's so pleasant to hear the pitter-patter of little feet on the floor."

The door creaked open, and Ba`al appeared.

"Quiet!"

Eugene nodded towards the still-sleeping Vikky. Ba`al made a disdainful face.

"You were hopping around so much that she woke up long ago."

"Woke up, but still trying to sleep! Only some wise guys won't let me!" came a grumble from under the blanket.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you. I was just practicing."

"If you had shared the book, we could have practiced together."

Eugene felt embarrassed. Vikky was right again.

"We can start now if you want."

"Friends, whatever you're starting, Garidjin is already preparing breakfast."

"I don't need your handouts."

It seemed Vikky was one of those people who are absolutely awful in the morning.

"Turn around, at least let me get dressed."

"What haven't I seen, child?"

"The point is not what you've seen or not, demon. The point is I don't want you to see me specifically."

"Oh, please. As if I have nothing better to do than watch you two."

Eugene delicately turned and began examining the wall in detail. The tavern's renovation didn't stand out for its novelty. It was immediately obvious that all attention was paid to the hall, where crowds gathered daily. The walls in the room hadn't been updated for a long time. The issue wasn't money, but rather that the owner simply wasn't interested or didn't find it necessary.

"Okay, I'm ready. If you're still up for it, we can start."

"I need full trust. Promise you won't lie to me again."

"About what?"

"About everything. Starting with you being a girl."

"Are you still upset about that? No. I haven't lied about anything else."

"Alright," Eugene sighed with relief. "Then let's begin."

He approached the rickety nightstand and took out the tablet. Flipping through a few pages, he found the right one.

"Here, we'll start with summoning a fairy. It's the safest servant." Eugene turned to Vikky. "First, read everything, then we'll start practicing."

"Good morning, young people!" Garidjin burst into the room. "Ba'al said you're already up! For a good journey, you need a good meal."

The old man had a plate full of freshly baked pastries. Eugene froze with the tablet in his hand, his eyes glued to the food. He suddenly realized how long it had been since he'd had a proper meal. The smell from the pastries twisted his stomach, as if a crowd of imps were fighting inside. Thick, viscous saliva filled his mouth.

In the temple, he ate food that was more nutritious than tasty. Festive days were a break from the routine. On those days, parishioners from nearby villages and towns would gather at the temple, each bringing a small gift, usually something homemade and delicious. After the sermons, the central hall with the tablet would fill with tables and food. Eugene liked the holidays not only because he could stuff himself but also because they were days of genuine smiles and warm conversations. The novices had a separate table, but they weren't overlooked. Everyone got their share.

"Take a fresh pastry and come downstairs," Garidjin said.

Eugene carefully put the tablet back and approached the old man. He tried not to show how hungry he really was. It didn't work well, but Garidjin didn't let it show. The old man smiled and handed Eugene the plate of pastries.

"Downstairs, there's a whole mountain of baked goods waiting for you. In my old age, I've taken up cooking. It often happens. First, you just want to rest, then settle down somewhere. Then you arrange your household. And then you go out just enough not to lose sight of it."

Eugene half-listened. He was already on his third pastry. The first two had been swallowed without chewing.

"Well, since the summoning lesson is over," Vikky said sarcastically, "I guess I'm ready for breakfast too. I'll

meet you downstairs; I don't want to spoil my appetite with pastries."

She walked around Garidjin and disappeared through the door.

"Come on, Eugene."

The old man put his arm around the boy's shoulders and led him downstairs.

Ba`al

Through the window, I watched an intriguing sight. People emerged from their homes and moved in two opposite directions. Nothing unusual about people going somewhere in the morning, of course. The amusing part was how they did it. From the chaos of the crowd, two orderly lines formed in opposite directions. It most resembled a herd of sheep being driven into a pen.

Something clinked behind me. I spun around, bending my knees, ready to leap out of the line of fire at any moment. Vikky raised her eyebrows in surprise. She was already sitting at an improvised table, serving herself food. Due to the lack of long tables, two large ones had to be put together.

"Listen, you sneak up like a demon."

"If you were a girl and had to learn to be inconspicuous among boys in the temple, you'd learn to walk like this too."

"Yes, that's about how I learned."

"Were you a girl before?"

I didn't have time to respond to this witty remark. Even though I had taken a breath for a worthy retort. Eugene and Garidjin had already come down and taken their seats at the table.

Old Harry had changed beyond recognition. Yesterday, he looked like a typical owner of a forgotten tavern: long hair falling to his shoulders, clothes that were

once decent but had lost their newness and acquired stains. Now, before me stood a completely different man. His hair was cut short. His head now resembled Eugene's, except that Eugene's hair wasn't gray yet. He was also wearing a neatly tailored leather armor.

"Well, while we're eating, let's discuss our plans and goals."

Eugene settled at the table and heaped a pile of porridge, a couple of roasted legs, and five pies onto his plate. How does such a small body hold so much food? The others were more modest, limiting themselves to soup and a pie.

"Young man, where are we heading?"

Eugene got distracted for a moment and tried to say something. His mouth, stuffed to the brim, resisted. A few chewed pieces of pie fell onto his plate. Eugene closed his mouth and swallowed loudly.

"Excuse me, Garidjin. Everything is just so delicious, I can't stop."

"Don't worry, young man," the old man smiled into his mustache.

"We planned to reach the Main Temple of the All-Father. There, we wanted to speak with His Majesty Rothschild II. I know he will listen to us and find the culprits. Those who destroyed my... our home."

"I'll go get some fresh air."

These conversations didn't interest me much. I decided to take a walk. My mood was wonderful for some reason. I felt like action and adventure. As I approached the door, I turned around.

"Since you're going out, Ba'al, could you bring a map? We need to plot our route."

"Will do, master," I sang in a sweet voice.

He noticed, the rascal. Oh well, I'll go get the map. Listening to Eugene whine about his beloved temple makes me want to vomit.

Outside, the air was wonderfully fresh and slightly damp. The crowds were still bustling back and forth. I merged into the crowd and let the flow carry me. The rapid human currents swept me to a small temple. It was slightly smaller than the one I first encountered in this world.

The crowd paused, forming a queue to the temple. I decided there was nothing interesting here, so it was time to merge into the opposite flow. A heavy sigh came from my left. I turned my head with interest. The sigh came from a man in a modest gray suit.

"Eager to get into the temple?"

"Of course, if I don't get into the first eighty people, I'll have to wait another year," the man didn't turn his head towards me and continued to watch the gates intently.

"Uh-huh, I see. Tell me, do you really want to get in there?"

"Are you mocking me?" He did turn his head for a second. Then he realized he was distracted and continued talking, now looking back at the gates. "I don't have time for idle talk. My business is on the brink. I don't have money to pay summoners. If I don't learn to do it myself, I might be living on the street in half a year."

"I actually wanted to help you. We take good care of all parishioners. We offer you an exclusive contract. Of course, you'll be in the front lines safe and sound."

I briefly moved my hand behind my back and materialized a scroll-contract. It seemed like an eternity since I last did this. Handing over the scroll, I put on my most welcoming smile.

"How much do you want for your services?"

"You don't have to pay right now. It's a deferred payment. Besides, the fee is standard. We have no need to

fleece our parishioners. Just write your name in the column after the number one."

Without taking his eyes off the gates, he signed the contract. I nodded and stepped away. After mingling in the crowd for a while and occasionally thrusting the scroll under people's noses, I managed to organize a regular queue by list. The demon who opened the gates was pleasantly surprised by my work. Of course, not everyone managed to sign, but now sixty-three souls were added to my tally. The queue began to enter the temple in an orderly fashion. After a few steps, I found myself outside the temple grounds.

How long it had been since I worked. The annoying itch in my hands and head ceased for a while. My thoughts became organized. Many can't do without natural or artificial drugs; I couldn't imagine life without work before²⁸. Now I wander the world like a lost soul. At this rate, I might even lose my position as a duke. Competitors are constantly breathing down my neck.

After wandering around the inner territory of the temple for a while, I came across a huge goods shop. A kind of medieval supermarket. It was strange to see such structures in an old village. Industrialization, like death, is relentless and tireless; sooner or later, it comes to everyone. Passing through the transparent sliding wall, I found myself inside.

Eugene hadn't given clear instructions on what to buy, nor had he given me any money. Pondering this, I chewed on my lips. Wandering back and forth wasn't an option; it was undignified for someone of my rank. There's another way, more fitting for my status—we'll steal.

²⁸ Earlier? What does 'earlier' mean?! I still can't imagine what to do if I'm not working or engaged in some task. Everyone should have something to do.

The shop's staff wore uniforms consisting of vests and blue caps with the store's logo. They were all demons, except for one girl. Probing her thoughts, I directed my hooves toward her. As I approached, I adopted an extremely awkward demeanor.

"Excuse me, I understand you're the one in charge here?"

"That's right! Are you here on an errand, demon? Speak up, don't drag it out, I'm up to my ears in work without your long pauses."

"In a sense, you're correct. Actually, my task is to work here, if I may say so. I was sent from... the main store, they said you were short-staffed."

"Really? Oh, finally they did something! I've been telling them for months that I need more hands! After they sent me a few idiots who exploded from their own mistakes, the head office stopped responding to me altogether! They tell me if you can't..."

I quietly cleared my throat, bringing her out of her managerial rage.

"There's a room with uniforms over there." She waved her hand deeper into the store. "Change and quickly get on the register. You know what to do?"

"Of course, ma'am."

"Great! End-of-day roll call in my office."

She said the last phrase on the run, clicking her small heels in a direction unknown to me. A woman of excellent form and substance.

After changing, I headed to the register. On the way, I went to a small stationery section, selected a map, and proceeded to the register. The queues were indeed long, resembling three giant angry pythons. They writhed, coiled, and slowly moved. I sat down at one of the eight free registers. Immediately, the pythons lost their tails, creating another smaller queue at my register.

"Inventory check! One second!"

Simply walking out with the map wasn't enough. I'm not just a petty, malicious thief. Opening the register, which essentially just slid out from under the counter, I rolled the savings into a tube and stuffed it into my pocket.

"Now! Now! Just one more minute!" I shouted to the dissatisfied customers.

I headed in the same direction as the female manager who had so kindly hired me for this wonderful job. After making a few laps between the rows, I returned to the registers.

"Just about ready, I said five minutes and it'll be done!" I announced as I zoomed past the crowd.

The security was dealing with some guy. A huge gargoyle was holding him by the leg, shaking the contents of his pockets onto the floor. I concentrated and raised a protective barrier around them. This would delay them for a while if they happened to notice me.

In any case, the path to the exit was clear. Behind me, the queue was going wild, with shouts and threats flying. No cashier dared to raise their head. They diligently exchanged goods for customers' money. Everyone knows: a satisfied customer poses less of a threat to life than a dissatisfied one.

After some time, I finally reached the doorstep of the tavern I needed with a light, hurried step. I had discarded the vest and cap in the bushes a dozen houses away. I raised my hand, intending to open the door, but heard indistinct noise inside. Several voices were quietly conversing. The door abruptly opened, leaving me standing with my hand outstretched.

Eugene

The old man was washing the breakfast dishes. According to him, he couldn't leave his beloved tavern untidy.

"Are you sure you can go with us?" Eugene asked.

"Of course, lad, it'll be a pleasure for me," Haridjin replied, clattering dishes in the kitchen. To him, the conversation was over. Vikky had carried the last batch of dishes and was now sweeping crumbs off the table. She stared straight ahead, seemingly lost in thoughts known only to her. Everyone was helping as best they could, except for Eugene, who stood idle.

"Vikky," Eugene whispered. "Vikky!"

Vikky blinked and turned her head. "What's gotten into you?" she whispered back.

"Do you need any help?"

"Found yourself a helper, huh? You never seem to get anything done right," she said sarcastically.

Eugene felt that Vikky might be upset with him. Or maybe it just seemed that way. Girls were strange creatures, causing trouble and then acting like it was his fault. It was much easier dealing with the boys at the temple.

"What activities did you like the most at the temple?" Eugene decided to take a different approach, a tactical maneuver. Sometimes, solving a problem directly isn't the best way; you need to flank it and look at it from a different angle.

"I liked music."

"You enjoyed singing in the choir?" Eugene was surprised. All his friends hated choir practice. Each boy had his own way of enduring the torture of those sessions. Eugene usually zoned out and waited for the interesting lessons to begin, like demonology and mathematics.

"I won't tell you anything more."

"Sorry, I just didn't expect that answer. You're the first of my acquaintances to like it."

Vikky finished sweeping the crumbs and started rearranging the furniture. They had put two tables together for breakfast.

"Of course, you didn't expect it! You can't even sing! You bleat like a sea goat underwater. My dad told me I took after my mom. She had a beautiful voice, the only thing I inherited from her." Her tone turned somber.

"Don't be sad. We all love our parents, and even more so the All-Father. He gave life to us and our parents."

"Yes. He did. But unlike the All-Father, my dad forbade me to sing." Vikky smiled.

"Will you sing for me?"

Vikky returned the heavy tables to their places and arranged the carved chairs. "Not now, maybe later," she smiled wider.

"Well then, everything is ready, we can leave!" Haridjin returned from the kitchen with a huge sack.

"And what's this? Are we taking it with us?" Eugene asked.

"These are our supplies. We can't go on a journey without provisions." Haridjin smiled, patting the sack.

"Well, let's get going. We just need to find Ba'al. He's taking too long." Eugene waved his hand, signaling them to follow him. Haridjin shouldered the sack and followed, with Vikky bringing up the rear.

Pulling the handle, Eugene opened the door. Behind it stood the demon, his familiar smiling face with a triangular goatee looking at Eugene.

"Did it really take you this long to get a map?" Eugene grumbled, squeezing past the demon with an outstretched hand.

"Next time, try giving money for the things you need. It'll be quicker that way."

"Did you steal again?" Eugene whispered.

"Of course not! I'm not some petty thief. I borrowed it for an indefinite period." Ba`al also whispered.

"So no one got hurt?"

"People suffer constantly; it's their hobby," Ba`al confided.

"You know what I mean!"

"Let's just live and let live."

"If he'd killed someone, the place would be swarming with demons by now," Vikky added in a whisper.

"Let's go, kids, we need to get to the main road of the village, then we can navigate using the map." Haridjin gestured in the right direction.

Behind them came the loud fluttering of dozens of wings. Six imps and one demon familiar to Eugene landed on the ground.

"Well, well, it seems we've found you after all. You know, Ba`al, if the store hadn't helped us, we'd still be looking. This is the second time you've made the same mistake. Aren't you ashamed? You don't deserve to be called a demon, you impish freak!" Maah sneered.

"You know, Maah, if you wanted to see us, you could've just sent a message. A pigeon or even a fairy would do."

Haridjin put down the sack and cautiously stepped back into the tavern. He retreated step by step until he disappeared inside. Eugene was surprised by this act. He didn't expect cowardice from a warrior of light. Taking a deep breath, Eugene pushed Vikky behind him and stepped forward toward the newcomers. The tavern doors closed with a heavy thud behind them.

"Esteemed Maah, if my demon robbed the store, he will be severely punished. Also, I'd like to apologize for our escape..."

"It doesn't matter anymore, kid..." Maah placed his right paw on the hilt of his sword.

"Now my guys," he gestured to his retinue with his left paw, "will finish you off once and for all."

"But... what about taking us to trial?"

"Consider me your judge!" The lion's face twisted into a grin, his eyes flaring red, reflecting the light of his flaming sword.

The imps, hilariously bouncing in their tiny armor, pointed their spears forward and charged. Ba`al threw a red bolt of magic at them, scattering the imps in all directions.

This gave Eugene a moment to gather his thoughts. Ba`al was already engaged in a magical duel with Maah. They both shot vertically into the air. Ba`al took the form of a woman in a light dress, her legs merging into a long snake's tail. Large feathery wings unfurled behind her. Constantly dodging, Ba`al tried to get closer to his opponent.

Nearby, there was hissing and commotion. Eugene tore his gaze away from the figures circling overhead. Maah's shadow had not followed its master but hadn't disappeared out of propriety either. The spot where Maah had taken off was strangely unsettling. The shadow trembled again and slowly crept toward Eugene, twisting and changing shape, hissing as it drew nearer. Meanwhile, the scattered imps helped each other up, hastily straightening their bent armor.

"Vikky, stay behind me."

"Maybe I should just stay in the tavern?"

"Oh, well, go ahead... sure."

The first imp reached Eugene, swinging to strike. A boot flew over Eugene's shoulder, hitting the imp square in the face and knocking him back.

"Thanks, Vikky... I got a bit flustered."

"I need you alive, start casting spells!"

Eugene blinked and began summoning fire scarabs. The shadow slowly but inexorably advanced. For several

minutes, Eugene managed to hold off the imps. They dodged, twisted, and retreated. Six more imps in similar armor arrived at the scene.

"We need to flee! Follow me!" Vikky shouted and darted to the right.

Several imps intercepted her immediately. The shadow split in two a few meters from Eugene. Before him stood a pair of identical pitch-black demons. Their humanoid shapes were unnaturally elongated, sending chills down Eugene's spine. Suddenly, their arms elongated into blades. In an instant, one stood before Eugene, the other before Vikky. They moved so quickly Eugene hadn't noticed their approach. Above, there was a crash as Maah and Ba'al plummeted back to the ground.

A wave of hot air swept over Eugene. The smell of burnt fur filled the air. Eugene realized his own hair had singed. The next explosion scattered more imps and the shadow looming over him.

"You're getting old, Maah... gkhm... Old! Even without my weapon, I can bring you down!" Ba'al coughed and appeared to be limping.

With a snake's tail, limping looked especially odd. Maah looked equally awful. One wing was missing, the other hung broken. Half of Maah's mane was torn out. The infernal dukes' duel continued. Both raised their hands, weaving intricate spells.

Eugene gathered his strength and threw a scarab at the second shadow. The beetle hit the center of the silhouette. The explosion temporarily dispersed the outer layers of the shadow, revealing a shiny black scale beneath. The demon wasn't seriously harmed but was momentarily immobilized, restoring its outer layers. Eugene glanced at Vikky.

He had to come up with something quickly. The second shadow was closing in on Vikky. She had no way to

defend herself, having not learned any spells yet. Eugene was hesitant to summon more scarabs. The shadow was too close to Vikky, and he might accidentally hit her with one of the beetles. Vikky managed to dodge a series of slashing attacks. Her surprised expression showed she hadn't expected such success.

After another series of whistling slashes through the air, Vikky found herself backed against the tavern. The first shadow had recovered and was slowly advancing on Eugene. Using the shadow demon as an unusual shield, the imps moved behind it. The battle had taken its toll on them too; they were visibly exhausted and no longer charged recklessly.

The shadow advanced. Under its pressure, Eugene had to retreat step by step. He tripped over a stone and fell. A ball of feathers and scales rolled past the imps' backs.

Continuing to hurl beetles at the shadow in front of him, Eugene glanced back. Vikky raised her hands in a futile attempt to surrender. Grabbing a nearby stone, he cast a spell to summon a goblin.

"Smash it against its head!" Eugene threw the stone at the shadow near Vikky.

Scrambling to his feet, he retreated towards the tavern. The stone, like a small bee, buzzed around the shadow's head. It couldn't cause any damage but did a great job disorienting the demon. Every time the demon tried to attack, the stone hit its head. Another swing, another hit. The demon couldn't strike. Vikky managed to slip past the demon and run to Eugene. Another explosion rang out, and the stone with the goblin was destroyed.

Eugene unleashed two scarabs in quick succession before his vision darkened. He was incredibly tired. Kneeling, he sent out another beetle and collapsed onto his back.

The tavern door flew off its hinges and crashed into one of the shadows. Haridjin sprang from the opening. His eyes were filled with hatred and glowed with righteous fire. In his left hand, he held a sword. A sudden flash of light. Eugene didn't even notice the sword's movement. Everything seemed to lose its sharpness. The sword stopped in front of Vikky's face. One of the shadow demons crumbled to ash.

The second shadow, the one the stone had attacked, froze. The imps followed suit, trying to remain as inconspicuous as possible. The demon's front limbs elongated and curved, gradually forming two sickles.

It took Haridjin one leap to reach the demon. Another slash, and the second shadow turned to a pile of dust. The sickle-like arms in a defensive position didn't save it. The sword passed through them without any resistance.

The imps stood and stared up at Haridjin. Ash rained down on their heads, but none dared to blink. The old man slowly lowered his gaze to the imps. A third swing, and two imps popped like soap bubbles. The rest fled.

Ba`al crashed into the tavern roof. Tearing off shingles, he landed near Eugene.

"Persistent little brats," Ba`al sprawled out on the ground in the most comfortable position.

He looked pathetic. He was in his favorite form of a red demon. One eye was swollen shut. His horns were gone, seemingly sliced off by something very sharp. His goatee was almost entirely burnt, and what was left smoldered slowly. Lying on his back, he cast a binding spell on the smoldering Maah.

"Decided to take a break too?" Ba`al gently nudged Eugene.

"Huh? Is Maah defeated?"

Eugene didn't open his eyes. Whenever he looked up, everything spun. The only way to stop the carousel was

to tightly close his eyes and press his back into the grass. Vikky crouched beside Eugene.

"Are you okay?"

"My head is spinning so much; I can't focus. Here, take this and keep it... just in case."

Eugene pulled out the scroll and handed it to Vikky.

"I can't run away. It mustn't fall into the wrong hands. Keep it safe."

Vikky nodded, taking the scroll. She stroked Eugene's hair.

"It'll be alright."

Ba`al

Maakh cut through the spell with his blade and landed in the middle of the road. The demons bravely lined up behind him.

"Well, if you mean whether he's defeated... ahem... Morally? I would say "yes."

I chuckled quietly, occasionally interrupted by a cough.

"Get out of the way, old man. Your death won't benefit Rothschild.

Maakh tried to push Garridzhin aside with his fiery blade, and paid the price for it. The old man, who had been standing still in a battle stance, swung his sword, and the demon's arm with the blade was severed.

Seeing the world with one eye is only comfortable if you are a cyclops. Otherwise, the aim is slightly off. I propped myself up on my elbows.

An interesting scene: old Garridzhin chased Maakh all over the street. Spells were slicing through the air with a whistling sound, cut by the sword's shining white light. Maakh managed to twist away and threw an explosion at

Garridzhin's feet. The old man was knocked back several meters.

"Wow! I've only seen such a blade once. It's a magnificent and powerful weapon."

Maakh rolled over and found himself next to the demons. He immediately grabbed one of them by the throat and cast a power-drain spell. Green streams flowed from the demon's body to Maakh.

With a quiet "puff," the demon vanished. Maakh left nothing, he drained the poor creature completely. The demons were bewildered. They were stunned with fear. After the second drained companion, the rest realized they were doomed.

"So, such blades were with the paladins in one of the worlds. They were consecrated by our business competitors."

Maakh addressed Garridzhin while continuing to restore his lost strength. The binding spell surrounded and gathered the demons into a heap. With quick movements, Maakh touched each demon in turn and finished his task. Garridzhin had already risen and resumed his attack on the demon.

He moved not directly but slightly sideways, as if approaching in an arc. In front of him stood a fully restored Maakh. The severed arm was back in its place. After a flick of the wrist, the fiery blade flew and settled into its rightful owner's hand.²⁹

I closed my eyes, or rather, my eye. I took a breath, then exhaled. Well, it was time to help; I couldn't just lie here forever. Focusing, I crawled into the center of the battle. When my hoof was level with Eugene's leg, I gave him a nudge. He shouldn't get too relaxed. He had sprawled

²⁹ And why didn't I think of it myself? In the heat of battle, thoughts undoubtedly work incorrectly.

out here. Eugene opened his eyes and, just like I had a few minutes ago, propped himself up on his elbows.

"Are we still alive?"

"If we don't help the old man, that could change very quickly" I grumbled, shifting my elbows.

A few meters away, Eugene finally joined me, crawling in the same manner.

"Why are you crawling?"

"I don't know; you crawled, so I followed."

"You have more strength; you can just get up and walk! I'm almost falling apart; I can manage one or two more spells at most."

"I'd love to eat something."

A fireball zoomed overhead, followed by a whirlwind of blades.

"Are you kidding me?" I even stopped from such audacity.

"I'm telling the truth; I'm really hungry. Once we kill Maakh, we'll need to eat."

"I'd love to have a head injury like yours, kid. But I'm glad you're not suggesting we negotiate with him."

Garridzhin looked battered. His clothes were scorched in several places. His legs were occasionally convulsing with cramps. But his hands gripped the sword tightly. It felt like even in death he wouldn't let go of his weapon.

Maakh was bombarding Garridzhin with spells and striking with the fiery blade. The old man was attacking less and less, waiting for the moment for a final surge.

"As soon as the old man launches an attack, throw everything you have at Maakh. I'll do the same. And we'll hope that it works."

After a few dives that the old man successfully blocked, Maakh found himself with his back to us. I nudged

Eugene with my hoof. At this signal, my fireball and the boy's scarab flew towards the demon.

Our efforts didn't cause much harm to Maakh; he was still at the peak of his strength. However, they managed to do enough. Our spells struck at the same moment, sending the Duke of Hell flying straight onto Garridzhin's extended sword.

It was spectacular. Light pierced through Maakh's chest, and he ignited like a match. A small inferno explosion followed, knocking down everyone who was still standing. One of the Dukes of Hell became vacant...

Chapter Ten:

«It's good to have friends who are ready to cover your back. Right, Brutus?»

© *Gaius Julius Caesar*

The Grand Temple

"Mr. Chief Ambassador, listen to me now. You understand that if you start helping Bullia, our main export product, magic, will simply stop coming to you."

The portly representative of the Universal Union Alliance became nervous. His fingers fidgeted over his suit, constantly adjusting nonexistent creases.

"But it was you who attacked the neighboring country."

"You're just misinterpreting my actions."

Rothschild II moved closer to the communication sphere. "We were attacked. We're merely defending ourselves."

"Your troops are at the outskirts of Bullia's capital, not the other way around!"

"Do you really want their troops on our territory? For us to lose and..."

"What are you talking about? You've misunderstood me. The Union is concerned about what's happening... we do not support... armed conflicts between countries."

The ambassador was broken. Rothschild understood that even making the call through the sphere was something he didn't want to do. He was compelled. The funniest thing was that most of the heads of the Universal Union Alliance were in his pocket. Eighty-six out of one hundred and

twenty wasn't bad. The remaining thirty-four were watched over by shadows.

Everyone has their weaknesses; this truth is as old as time. Many call such methods bribery, blackmail, or intimidation. Rothschild II preferred to call it diplomacy.

"Listen to me, dear Bilges. There will be no conflicts. We will simply punish those who disturbed the peace in our beloved country. A few more days, and it will all be over. The less they resist, the fewer the casualties. It's clear to everyone."

The figure in the sphere paused for a moment. It wasn't clear if the connection was malfunctioning or if the ambassador was contemplating.

"We would still prefer to avoid any casualties. But given the circumstances, please promise me personally that everything will go as you said."

"Of course! You know, I've been running the country for several decades. And I've always kept my word."

Another ten minutes passed as everyone agreed and expressed words of support and concern. After a few more minutes of reassurances, attention turned to increasing the volume of magic supplies to certain countries. Also, some new countries were ready to sign contracts for supplying priests with magical creatures. The magical trade was gaining popularity at a frantic pace.

Eventually, the international communication session ended. Rothschild sighed and ran his hand over the sphere.

"What fools. Soon, the fire of war will ignite in your countries as well. The human habit of sacrificing others to ensure one's own well-being is simply astounding."

Rothschild approached his desk and took his cane. He twirled it thoughtfully in his hands, then struck it hard against the floor. The door to his office opened, and a clerk

stood there. He froze with his hand raised, ready to knock on the open door.

"Sir, your... um... your daughter is requesting an audience."

"Tell me, Crombin. What news from Bullia? How much longer will we be tangled up there?"

Rothschild seemed not to have heard what was said to him. He stood with his back to the clerk, gazing at the enormous stained glass window, and twirled the cane in his hands.

"The battalion commanders are expected to provide reports on the progress of the battles at any moment. I'll analyze them and immediately..."

"They can talk about their combat exploits in any pub. I need a report on the completion of our campaign. Where is Maakh?"

The clerk lowered his gaze. A bead of sweat slipped from his forehead and silently shattered on the stone floor.

"I will find out and report. So what should I do about your..."

"Let her in. She should have appeared a long time ago."

Ba`al

I got up. My legs were trembling from exhaustion. The last explosion had scattered everyone. Garridzhin had been thrown onto the road and lay there motionless. Only his chest rose and fell, indicating that this sturdy old man might still make my life difficult.

Eugene had turned onto his back and was breathing heavily, mimicking a loyal dog to its master.

There were still no inhabitants around. The village seemed completely deserted. I couldn't understand why at least half the population hadn't rushed to the noise of the battle. Maybe they were still hiding in the local temple or

were occupied with something else. I straightened up and stretched my back, staring at the sky. The vertebrae responded with a cheerful crack. Why was I even doing all this?

I could have simply fled and waited for the boy to die. At one point, I felt like I was losing my mind. Maybe not entirely, but a significant part of it. To confront a Hell Duke armed with true weaponry while being completely unarmed myself was beyond reason.

Demons are generally not inclined to open confrontation, since our life, though eternal, is singular. That's what happens when you get attached to humans and succumb to their carefree way of life. As my grandfather used to say, "You can't crawl inside a person; it's better to turn them inside out right away."

"All right, get up! We need to move before the rest of the guards show up."

I extended a hand and helped Garridzhin to his feet. He stood up and immediately pulled his hand away. After that, he disdainfully glanced at me and wiped his hand on his clothes with disgust. With his other hand, he leaned on the blade that had saved his life. There was no denying, the old man had a certain fortitude. A true defender of the light. Disgusting.

Eugene took some time to get up. The boy just wouldn't rise on his own, and any attempt to lift him by force caused him to collapse like a worm on the road. I resolutely refused to carry him on my back.

Garridzhin watched my efforts in silence. He didn't interfere with advice, which was a relief. I struggled with the boy for a while longer, then shrugged and straightened up.

I turned my head and looked questioningly into Garridzhin's eyes. He responded with an emotionless, steady gaze. I pretended to throw a sack over my shoulder

and nodded at the old man. Why not? Let him help, the unfortunate paladin. He merely twirled his trembling finger by his temple. Well, if that's the case, so be it. And so our journey was delayed by a few more hours until the boy could stand on his own. Swaying and stumbling, we headed along the previously discussed route.

Eugene

Eugene and company trudged along the road in complete silence. Each was lost in their own thoughts. Garridzhin occasionally grunted and muttered something under his breath. Ba`al took every opportunity to jab at one or the other. Meanwhile, Eugene couldn't shake the feeling that something was missing.

This "something" was very important and immediately noticeable. However, Eugene struggled for a long time to catch the thought. His head was still ringing. Every muscle in his body ached and was constantly threatening to give way. He was completely exhausted from the battle. In his attempt to protect Vikky, he had surpassed himself.

Suddenly, Eugene stopped in his tracks. Ba`al and Garridzhin continued walking silently and unhurriedly. The demon was the first to notice Eugene's halt.

"What's with the green face? Did you forget to use the bathroom?" The demon's brazen grin infuriated Eugene.

"Where's Vikky? Vikk, where is he?"

Ba`al's face grew long. He slowly counted the squad on his fingers. Garridzhin, having taken a few steps, also stopped and turned around.

"Allow me to report, commander. He's not here."

"I know that, but where is he?"

"Well, listen, if I'm to keep track of every person, I won't have any time left for myself. If you need him, you go find him."

With that, the demon turned and continued down the road.

"Hold on a minute, horned one."

As Ba`al passed Garridzhin, he felt the old man's heavy hand on his shoulder.

"You can't just scatter your companions like that. We need to go back; maybe he's sitting in a tavern waiting for us."

"Yeah, after the couple of hours we spent at the tavern tending our wounds, he couldn't have come out to meet us?"

"The tablet... I gave her the tablet," Eugene whispered.

The demon's keen hearing picked up the words. Ba`al's ears instantly perked up towards Eugene. He looked like an angry cat.

"You did what? Well, bravo. My intuition tells me we've been left in the lurch anyway."

"Vikky wouldn't betray us," Eugene whispered back.

"Well, besides outright betrayal, there are plenty of other possibilities. For instance, one of my favorites is bribery. Or something banal: Vikk might be running in fear toward a neighboring country. It could also be that it wasn't Vikk. Maybe a demon took his form. Anything could happen. But the fact is, we're now without the tablet. Remind me, what was the plan?"

"Vikky wouldn't have done this to us!" Eugene shouted in despair.

"She? Who are you talking about?"

"Vikk is Vikky, as in girl," Eugene said slowly, syllable by syllable. "I promise I'll explain everything later. In detail. For now, we need to snap Eugene out of his stupor. The best way to bring anyone back to their senses is a good dinner, a warm bath, and a soft bed."

"Vikk is a girl?"

"Later, all later. For now, take us to the nearest not-so-large settlement."

Ba`al

It took some time to persuade Eugene. At first, he didn't want to listen to anything and quietly muttered, wiping tears from his face. This was understandable; the boy was losing acquaintances like an old man loses his hair. And yet, as the last strand of hair, I remained his last friend. Ugh! I meant to say, I was his last friend.

As we walked the road behind Eugene, bringing up the rear of our small group, I initially slowed down and then came to a complete stop. This was beyond the pale! Calling people "friends"? They were merely expendable material that provided us with the necessary resource—souls. What crazy thoughts! I shook my head and quickened my pace. After spending so much time in this world, my essence was starting to soften. I desperately wanted to go home, to my cauldron. I longed to feel again the tearing heat and scorching cold. How good it would be to be home.

We traveled all day and by evening found a small village with about a dozen houses. We constantly had to change our route and make stops. The roads were teeming with creatures of all kinds. Some groups of small beings were carrying djinns. Others, like a flock of griffins, flew over us, forcing us to hide in the bushes.

So, having reached the forgotten village, we decided to stop. To avoid drawing too much attention, we chose the most dilapidated abandoned house.

Most of the houses were empty, which gave a depressing impression. The village seemed deserted. That's what we initially thought. However, about three houses at the other end of the village had lit windows. The other buildings were long abandoned and looked pitiful: walls

were cracked and partially collapsed, and there were no windows at all.

It was fortunate that this was not an architectural tour and Garridgin was not our guide. I would never go to such a tourist agency again. The old man busied himself with his backpack. It was time for him and the boy to have something to eat.

A pile of dry firewood was already gathered. All that remained was to add a small spark to light the cozy fire. As soon as I ignited the fire with a well-aimed fireball, a pile of plaster from the building rustled and fell. After a brief flurry and some quiet cursing, everything quieted down again.

I quickly scanned our team. Garridgin was already drawing his enormous two-handed sword. I stood up, keeping my knees half-bent, ready to spring in any direction. Eugene seemed to have gotten to his feet even faster than me. He spread his arms and tilted his head, focusing his gaze from under his brows on the danger. What a fierce lad.

I raised my hand with a lit fireball, ready to cast a spell, and looked questioningly at Eugene. He shook his head slightly in the negative. Rolling my eyes so hard I almost scratched my neck with my pupils, I threw a binding spell at the suspicious pile.

Empty boxes, broken windows, and other remnants of civilization gathered around the three imps. They formed a sort of junk donut with demonic filling. They looked extremely pitiful and very familiar.

"We!"

"We surrender!"

"We'll go to war, just don't destroy us."

The imps began to chatter, interrupting each other.

"Calm down, 'patriots.' No one is mobilizing you. Aren't you builders by any chance?"

"Us? No!"

"What makes you think that?"

"We're just collecting trash here!"

The imps chattered again. Garridgin straightened up and calmly approached the prisoners. A brief swing—and the sword stopped a palm's length from the imps' heads. Eugene relaxed his hands but was ready to fight at any moment.

"Builders, are you? Do you know us, sir?" The central imp, after exchanging looks with the others, quickly became the spokesperson.

"Guys, you're not in a position to ask questions. Better tell us briefly what you're doing here?"

"As you know, all-knowing sir, there is a war going on. And every demon is now required to be sent to the front to fight for our great country."

"So that's why there are so many supernatural beings around. I thought they were chasing us."

"And what's the war about? Have we been attacked?" Eugene couldn't hold back. He too wanted to interrogate his first prisoner.

"Of course, young sir, the Bulliics have gone mad and attacked us."

"They've been waiting for the moment to destroy our temples and ruin our well-being. Envious fools," the imp on the left grumbled.

"Do you mean the temple near Aston?"

The central imp clicked his tongue and gave a grim look to his companion. Then he turned back, and his face again radiated universal calm and blissful kindness.

"You are as perceptive as your servant, sir. But not only that temple; the enemy has also destroyed two nearby temples..."

"But those weren't Bulliics. Those were demons dressed in the temple robes of the Grand Temple."

The imps silently glanced at each other. It seemed they were exchanging information through gestures.

"Excuse me, young sir, but could the Bulliics not have dressed like that?" the imp on the right cautiously asked.

I had to tighten the bindings slightly. The imps gasped and almost simultaneously nodded. They understood my message and asked not to tighten it further. The central imp's eyes bulged slightly. Still, he nodded gratefully when the bindings stopped tightening and ceased.

"Why are you tormenting them, demon? Let me just mercifully remove their heads."

"Let Eugene decide," I nodded towards the boy.

"Where will you go after we let you go?"

"Far from everyone, most merciful sir. So that no one and nothing notices us. We haven't seen you and don't know you."

The imps on the sides nodded vigorously.

"Let them go. To hell with them. I'm hungry." Eugene said, sitting closer to the fire.

I loosened my grip and removed the spell. When the imps had already run a respectable distance away, I couldn't resist and still struck them with a fire whip. An extremely weak and equally effective spell. The power was enough only to set the tails of the fleeing imps on fire. Let them start remembering what HELL is. Soon enough, they'd return there one way or another. And there, it's the most popular spell.

Recalling Hell made me a bit sad. Just recently, all these matters and concerns about souls were driving me mad. Now, memories of torturing souls brought a melancholic nostalgia. It felt like I had been in this world for an eternity.

Eugene

The imps had fled about half an hour ago. The fire crackled peacefully. Garridgin was sharpening his weapon. Although to Eugene's eye, the weapon didn't seem to need sharpening at all. Ba'al dug a trench in the ground and covered it with grass. A chimney of sorts had formed in the ground, emitting smoke ten meters away from the camp. Afterward, he sat away from the group and occasionally threw twigs into the fire.

Eugene was finishing his sandwich. Garridgin, having completed the endless honing of his sword, approached and sat down next to him.

"Tomorrow, around noon, we'll reach the Grand Temple. Have you ever been there, lad?"

"No, I haven't."

"Well, briefly then. The Temple itself is on a hill behind a huge wall. Even flying over it isn't something just anyone can do. And if there's a war now, it's guarded even more securely."

"Do you think we won't be able to get inside?" Eugene asked anxiously.

"I wanted to find out if we have any plan regarding this. And I'd like to hear it to be prepared for tomorrow's actions."

Eugene fidgeted and anxiously ruffled his hair. He glanced at Ba'al, who was watching the fire with an indifferent gaze. Then he turned back to Garridgin.

"We have a plan, but there are some details I'd like to think over. Maybe you should lie down and sleep for now, and at midnight, Ba'al will wake you up, and you can relieve him from his post."

"You suggest trusting a demon?" Garridgin jumped up.

"Well, he'll be under my watch. You trust me."

Garridgin shrugged.

"As you say, Eugene."

After these words, the old man moved away to the house and leaned against the wall. As soon as he closed his eyes, his breathing evened out, and he fell asleep. Eugene approached the brooding Ba`al.

"What should we do now?" Ba`al asked without taking his eyes off the fire.

"Nothing needs to be done."

"Ah, so you just decided to come over and have a heart-to-heart talk? Spending time with a servant is the best pastime for any slave owner."

Ba`al grunted. The flames were reflected in his eyes, and the flickers of fire danced on his face and horns.

"Why did Maah call you a 'demonic bastard'?"

The demon blinked and broke his contemplation of the eternal.

"What?!"

"Well, remember, near the tavern, he shouted various insults and called you that. Also, it was easier to kill the imps hiding here, but you wanted to let them go. I saw it."

"The story is actually quite funny," Ba`al chuckled. "Once upon a time, I was indeed an imp. I worked, brought souls to Hell, tortured sinners, kindled fires, carried all sorts of burdens. One day, a sorcerer summoned me and sealed me in a bottle. My task was nothing more or less than to kill whoever uncorked the bottle. The bottle ended up with a merchant, where it remained.

Ba`al thoughtfully rolled his eyes. A melancholic smile appeared on his lips. He was completely immersed in the long-past times. Eugene realized it would be a long story. He leaned against the wall and slowly lowered himself to the ground, trying not to make a sound as he sat down.

"Probably, that merchant wanted to kill some enemy of his or maybe just cause trouble for people. Since it wasn't

directly stated that I had to kill the first person who opened the bottle, I offered the guy to trade his soul for his life. And I'd take the soul not immediately but after his death. With one condition."

Ba'al's smile grew even wider. He clearly took pleasure in these memories.

"He had to sell the bottle for half the price he bought it for. I thought I'd gather a dozen souls in one go and meet my quota in Hell. I didn't account for one thing: people would start changing currency. As a result, I languished in the bottle for a huge amount of time. Hundreds of people who were among the first to open my little prison had died. Naturally, I should note!..."

Ba'al glanced at Eugene, who listened to the story with great interest. Ba'al gave the boy a skeptical look but found no signs of distrust.

"...So, being in a confined space with souls and unable to send them to Hell, I began to consume them. As a result, I became a demon. Quite a powerful one, by the way."

"And what happened next?"

"Well, then an old man opened the bottle. Judging by his appearance, he thought he'd bought a drink. I promised to drink him and... well, let's just say, he drank to his fill."

"You're a terrible, treacherous creature!" Eugene exclaimed.

"I'm merely doing my job. Maintaining the higher order of things."

"Don't tell me you don't enjoy it!"

"To do what you do well, you have to be in love with it to the tips of your horns. That's not even the most interesting story. Sit down and I'll tell you. Sit!"

They sat there until midnight, keeping the fire from going out, until Garridgin came to relieve them from their posts.

Chapter Eleven:

*«Listen, let's just hurry up. I'm very eager
to get home»*

© *Odysseus, son of Laertes*

The village where they stopped for the night was in close proximity to the Main Temple. The sun had just risen over the horizon, and the majestic walls were already visible above the treetops.

The morning proved to be somewhat uneasy. The dawn's rays painted the stone buildings in a golden hue. A patrol of minotaurs in the Main Temple's cloaks was searching for two people, an old man and a young one, as well as a demon. Garridjin, on watch, was awake. The old warrior's keen hearing immediately picked up noise from the residential buildings.

Garridjin silently approached the sleeping Eugene. He gently touched his shoulder, trying to wake him as softly as possible. As soon as Eugene opened his eyes, the old man placed a finger to his lips and gestured to indicate danger. Once he was sure the young man understood and started to get ready, he woke Ba`al with a kick to the ribs. The foot barely grazed the demon's clothing as it flew past him. Ba`al rolled over, letting the old man's foot pass by.

Garridjin, losing his balance, swayed but did not fall. The silent argument continued for a while. Garridjin was the first to relent. Waving his hand, the trio set off. Fortunately, they managed to leave the place silently and quickly before the good-natured locals could point out their possible location.

Approaching the fortress walls, they were met with a huge queue of people and demons. Many were on foot, standing in place. Some, evidently wealthier ones, were sitting on various forms of transportation, ranging from flying platforms to levitating spheres. The head of the queue reached the open gates.

The people in the queue looked tired but determined, each step bringing them closer to their coveted goal—to enter the Temple walls.

The entrance to the Main Temple was represented by enormous heavy gates. Both sections were open. In the middle stood a guard in armor with a distinctive heraldic cloak. On either side of him stood two four-meter-tall, hairy men. Before allowing anyone through the Temple walls, everyone was thoroughly inspected and scanned. Most likely, they were also cross-referenced with wanted posters. Humans were handled by the guards, while demons were inspected by the giants.

From the massive gates, a four-wheeled covered cart shot out at full speed. Upon reaching the nearest turn, it turned around without slowing down and sped off further.

"Well, we're not going to stand in this huge, stinky human centipede, are we?"

Ba`al pinched his nose with one hand while making swatting motions with the other, as if fending off an invisible fly.

"So, demon, you have a different suggestion?"

"Well, of course!" Ba`al smiled. "Just wait for me here. Let Eugene play with the kids, and you can sit down and rest. You must be tired. After all, you're not young..."

Ba`al didn't get to finish. He hunched his shoulders, and Garridjin's blade flashed like lightning at the spot where the demon's temple had just been. The sword made two more swipes in an arc, which Ba`al barely managed to evade.

"I was just joking! Why are you getting so worked up right away? Save your strength, old man. You don't have much of it anyway."

Not a muscle twitched on Garridjin's face. In the next moment, the blade resumed its dance. The old man's fierce and silent onslaught eventually forced the demon to change form, and he shot up into the air as a small fairy.

"Now, let's check the air currents."

Ba`al saluted and flew into the air.

Ba`al

I teased the gloomy old man a bit, and it immediately lifted my spirits. Although perhaps the change of appearance to something less noticeable played its part. I flew up above the crowd of people and ascended even higher.

The ascent took quite some time. From below, the walls seemed tall but not excessively so. From the height of my flight, a stunning panorama of the fortress surrounded by green meadows and forests unfolded.

The walls had platforms of quite decent width. Patrols of small entities marched back and forth. Reaching the end of their patrol area, they would turn around and march back. So I had to climb even higher.

Below me, the full splendor of the Grand Temple was revealed. Contrary to expectations, everything was designed with perfect symmetry. At the center was a fountain with a massive statue. From above, it was unclear what the statue was meant to depict. The fountain was located in a small plaza, from which six streets radiated outward. It seemed as if the architects had built the temple with the idea that even from above, it would appear perfectly correct and symmetrical.

High above the walls, fairies flew in chaotic order. There were extremely few of them to ensure the integrity of

the entire perimeter. I smiled and rubbed my paws together. Well, it was incredibly simple. Just needed to rise higher, and the problem would be solved.

With joy, I made a leap forward with the intention of landing on the statue's pinnacle. It would be a perfect spot to calmly devise a plan to get the two people at least singly through the same route I had explored. As I flew over the fountain, I noticed the water swirling in all the colors of the rainbow, creating a magical spectacle.

My leap ended abruptly. After traveling less than ten steps, I slammed my forehead into an invisible but very palpable wall. After being thrown back slightly, I rubbed the spot of impact with my palm. From the outside, my actions would resemble the craziness of a fly banging against glass.

In this rudimentary way, I was able to determine that the invisible wall was more like a dome. It was also important to note that the dome was solid and had no cracks. Trying to breach the dome with magic without alerting the entire guard was unlikely to succeed.

After trying a dozen spells that wouldn't disintegrate me, it became clear that the dome was well-made and impervious. I had to return to the surface.

Once back outside, I shook myself off and changed my appearance again to that of a fairy. I would try to find a breach in the wall. Using a light wind spell, I darted around the perimeter of the Grand Temple. The walls contained no visible embrasures. The only openings were the large gates through which the crowd entered, and a smaller opening for guards or a service entrance. I slowed down and approached closer.

The doors were hewn from a solid rock. It was as if someone had simply taken a huge boulder and decided it was a great idea to use it to seal an opening. There were no handles or peepholes. Feeling along the edge, I realized that the stone was perfectly fitted to the wall. There was one last

idea to check. Raising a small fist, I knocked. The stone rippled like water, and a face formed from the waves.

"Please proceed to the main entrance. These doors are a service exit," said a goblin's voice tiredly. After the last word, its face disappeared and dissolved into the stone. I didn't even have time to catch my breath to respond. Well then, let's try again. I knocked once more.

"Please proceed to the main entrance..."

"Let me through, I'm guarding the dome above, I need to pass," I quickly rattled off.

"...service exit," finished the goblin, and dissolved again. That little bastard! He was starting to annoy me. I raised my paw with a fireball and threw it at the door. The charge was completely absorbed by the stone without any visible damage.

"Please be reminded that damaging the property of the Grand Temple may be punishable by death. In the event of another attempt to use magic to cause harm, it will be considered as property damage. Appropriate measures will be taken."

"Well, well, it seems there are indeed other words. How dare you threaten me here? I am a Duke of Hell!"

After another knock, the face appeared again.

"Please proceed to the main entrance..."

At the letter "o," the goblin received a blast of inferno straight inside. A dull explosion sounded. Its face once again rippled and melted away, leaving only an open mouth with spreading cracks. I wrapped the boulder, which was crumbling inside itself, in chains with a spell.

"That's better, that's how it should have been from the start."

Inside the cocoon, there was dust left. I dispelled the spell. The passage was open.

The Grand Temple

"Father, I have completed your task and brought the tablet."

"Excellent, Vikky, excellent. Hand it over here." Rothschild II extended his hand. "What caused the delay? You found it a long time ago."

Vikky approached the table and handed over the tablet. "I'm delivering the tablet to you. There were difficulties in obtaining it. I tried to take it several times before I realized that it could only be obtained if it was given to you voluntarily."

"Ah! The old classic spell of inheritance. I knew old Grenwurd would come up with something like this." Relaxing in his chair, Rothschild took the tablet. "It's quite powerful, father."

"Well, I don't think it was a huge problem for you."

"No, it just slowed me down."

"Excellent, splendid. At least someone can handle the simplest tasks. I'm pleased."

A momentary pause hung in the air. Rothschild flipped through the tablet. His face displayed a range of emotions—surprise, a slight smile. Vikky stood, hands neatly behind her back. The silence stretched on. For some time, the only sounds in the personal office were the rustling of pages and Rothschild's quiet mumbling to himself.

"The content is quite comical, of course. Does anyone really believe in this so-called 'prophecy'?"

"But isn't it for a prophecy that you need it yourself?"

Rothschild laughed loudly and heartily. He even wiped a tear with the tip of his cane. "Of course not. Prophecies don't exist. The world is inherently chaotic. No one can know the future. Especially not a mad old man."

"Of course, you're right, father. I wanted to ask. I did fulfill your command." Vikky averted her gaze from Rothschild.

"Command sounds too formal. It was more of a task."

"Of course, a task. So did I complete it?"

"Certainly, Vikky, with some nuances, but indeed, you did."

"Then can I go wherever I want?" Her voice became barely audible.

Rothschild stopped flipping through the book, closed it with a loud thud, and scowled. "You ask as if I had controlled every step for all these years. Was fulfilling one almost a request from your father already a burden for you? Or did you somehow suffer especially?"

He rose from his chair and walked away from the table. In his right hand, he held his cane. Each step was accompanied by the tap of the cane on the stone floor, sending out showers of tiny sparks. Rothschild took a few more steps until he was by Vikky, towering over her.

"No, I..."

Still quietly and without lifting her head, Vikky spoke. Rothschild's tall figure loomed like a skyscraper.

"Alright then. I'm not angry with you." He tapped the cane and turned his back to Vikky. "Don't take all this as a prison. This is all yours too."

Rothschild gestured around the office. As he moved his arms, torches flared up on the walls, and demons crawled out from the walls. Once they appeared, they bowed and remained in that position. Pulsing lines of light, radiating warmth as if the ground beneath them was alive and breathing along with them, illuminated the floor at Vikky's feet.

The entire stone floor was covered with stripes. After Rothschild waved his hands, they seemed to come alive, as if he had disturbed a nest of hundreds of little snakes. They emitted a bright red light. The lines twisted and coiled into spirals, intersected and moved around.

Eventually, they formed twelve pentacles arranged around the office. Their centers sank down, revealing passages to unexplored worlds.

"All this and even more, eventually the whole world." Rothschild lowered his hands. At that moment, all the portals closed, and the pentacles faded. The demons straightened up and stepped back, blending with the walls. Only the torches continued to burn, casting eerie shadows.

"But you promised that I could..." Vikky tried to speak up again.

"...that you would be able to go wherever you wanted. I remember. You're just like your mother. She also thought I kept her locked up. And I did love that ungrateful demoness."

Vikky clenched her fists. Her father's voice always carried a note of disgust when he mentioned her mother. And sometimes she felt that part of that disdain was directed at her as well. But she wasn't to blame for being a half-blood. She was simply born that way.

"The world is harsh, Vikky. I don't think people will accept you if they find out who you really are."

"The world isn't harsh, it's vast. And people in it are different."

Vikky raised her head just as Rothschild turned around. Their gazes met. The silent confrontation lasted for a few seconds.

"Look at that! The little demon is showing some teeth. You know very little about this world so far."

"I'm almost forty years old, father."

"And that's just it." Rothschild impatiently interrupted, taking his former place behind his desk. "You're still only forty, and you haven't seen the world. But I'm willing to partially agree with you. It's really time for you to get acquainted with it." He sat in his chair and pulled

some papers closer on the desk. "Yes, yes, let's see. Exactly! I have a wonderful task for you..."

"But, father, you promised!"

"Don't you dare interrupt me, child!" The echo of Rothschild's shout reverberated through the office, and his eyes blazed with fire. In a moment, he regained his composure and continued in a calm voice. "You will be able to see the world and serve the good of our homeland. And, of course, you will be under supervision. Should anything happen, assistance will be provided." Rothschild raised his hand and touched the connection orb.

"Krombin."

"I'm listening, your holiness!"

"Krombin, summon Maach, tell him to drop everything and appear before me. He needs to urgently brief Vikky."

"Sir, I haven't been able to get in touch with him for four hours."

"Well, find other ways or..."

"Certainly, your holiness, I'm already working on it."

Rothschild removed his hand from the orb, and the connection ended. He shook his head in dissatisfaction and leaned back in his chair.

"This is what today's workers are like. You assign them important tasks, and they tell you why they can't handle them, while others don't even get in touch all day."

"Well, I can certainly answer one of those questions..."

Eugene

"Have you already figured out what you're going to tell His Holiness Rothschild II?"

Eugene and Garridgin were sitting by the side of the road. Ba'al had been gone for a few minutes. They had

moved off the main path to avoid causing any disturbance. The line of people waiting to enter the Main Temple didn't decrease; in fact, more visitors kept arriving. There was tension and fatigue in the air, but also hope for a better future.

Across from Eugene, a group of children in simple clothes had gathered on the road. They were about five years younger. Three boys and five girls. All stood in pairs, holding hands. An elderly lady was running around them, trying to keep them together. It looked very much like a field trip, similar to those conducted for younger generations in educational institutions. Eugene had seen such trips at his own Temple. He shook his head, shaking off the memories.

"I'll just tell him the whole truth as I saw it. Maybe it's a conspiracy against him, and with my help, it can be prevented."

"Maybe it will work if you take it head-on. But I still suggest you think through your speech a bit more carefully."

A cart flew out from the gate, almost knocking down those trying to enter. The covered cart on four wheels was speeding along at full tilt. The driver, resembling a wooden log with a beard, was waving his arms, making the cart go even faster.

Everything happened so quickly that Eugene didn't even have time to understand what was happening. The cart was approaching. Only a few meters remained to the group of children. Garridgin jumped up, drawing his sword as he ran. The woman was pulling two children by their hands. She was clearly struggling to keep up.

"Out of the way! Special transport!"

The cart was already a meter away from the nearest girls when Garridgin thrust his sword into the ground and braced it with his shoulder. He was positioned directly under the guiding wheels. His muscles strained, holding the

weapon in place. The cart leaped as if on a ramp, flying over the terrified children.

A few meters ahead, the cart landed on the ground. Part of the cover flew off to the side. It turned out to be packed to the brim with a variety of small creatures. From imps and lowly demons to small harpies. All were dressed in the clothing of the Main Temple. The cart swerved a few times, regaining control, and continued on its way forward.

Eugene jumped from his spot and ran to Garridgin. The old man sighed heavily and got up from his knees. Sheathing his sword, he quickly turned to the children.

"Are you all right?"

He patted the nearest girl on the head, messing up her hair. The children stood in stunned silence for a few more seconds. Then, along with the woman, they rushed to Garridgin with joyful cries.

"Thank you! Thank you so much!"

She threw herself around the old man's neck, nearly making him bow.

"You're the strongest person ever!"

The girl whom Garridgin had patted ran up and hugged him. The other children soon swarmed around the old man. Everyone began chattering. Each child wanted to shout out to the others.

"I want to be just like you when I grow up!"

"Did you see how he lifted the whole cart with one hand?"

"I'll go home and tell my father!"

"My father can do the same. He can even lift a tower with one hand. Yep!"

Eugene approached the old man surrounded by children.

"Wow! I didn't even have time to react. And you..."

"Yes, it's almost reflexive, you see. I can't help but intervene when children are in danger."

"Is that why you agreed to help us?"

"Of course, partly so," Garridgin smiled. "How else would you have managed without me? Can't leave you two in the care of a demon?"

Garridgin spent another five minutes peeling the noisy children off. The line continued to move inexorably, and they needed to proceed further. The children were reluctant to part with their rescuer.

"Hey, slackers!"

The bushes nearby rustled, and a cunning face of Ba`al emerged from behind them. Eugene turned and approached, trying not to attract too much attention.

"Did you find the passage?"

"Of course! You don't mean to say you doubted me?"

The bushes rustled indignantly. Garridgin finally bade farewell to the children, quietly wiping away his tears of emotion. Noticing that Eugene was arguing hotly with the bush, he quickly approached.

"What's going on here?"

"I'll repeat once more for those who just joined," Ba`al sighed. "You follow me closely, step by step, and I'll lead you inside."

Chapter Twelve:

«Safety procedures are a religion you can choose not to believe in, but the rituals must be followed»

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Ba`al led them to a rounded doorway shrouded in darkness. The tree canopies blocked out any sunlight. The passage was about twenty paces from the central gate. Due to the sparse vegetation near the road, they moved cautiously to avoid attracting attention. Initially, Eugene thought the children would follow Garridgin, but they quickly lost interest and began chasing each other, keeping the woman occupied.

Ba`al stood by the passage, gallantly allowing everyone to go ahead. Garridgin was the first to step in. He paused a bit for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, then proceeded with careful, short steps. He didn't draw his sword and probably wouldn't have been able to maneuver it in such a narrow passage anyway.

Eugene glanced at Ba`al. He received a beaming smile and a nod from the demon.

"Come on, don't dawdle. We don't want to be noticed. Do you need extra problems?"

"Of course not."

"Then don't make me tell you twice. Move forward." Ba`al gently nudged the boy in the back. Eugene stepped into the passage. Pebbles crunched softly underfoot, turning to dust. He took two steps and closed his eyes, trying to adjust to the darkness. Somewhere ahead, the faint footsteps

of Garridgin could be heard. The old warrior would have been completely silent if not for the creaking of his knees.

Eugene opened his eyes and immediately received a push in the back.

"Listen, you're not planning to stand here all day, are you? Come on, come on, our goal is close. Soon, I mean, you'll meet the one you came here to see."

Eugene frowned and moved forward.

"Do that again and I won't let you go after the meeting," he said over his shoulder.

"Don't start a fight you can't win, kid," the demon grinned, sealing the entrance. The last tiny rays from outside ceased to exist.

A flash followed, and a small flame, the size of a candle, burst from Ba'al's palm.

They proceeded down the stone corridor. Doors were visible on both sides. Eugene's attempts to open them were unsuccessful. It was decided not to break them open yet to avoid drawing unwanted attention prematurely.

Garridgin found the next door. He pressed the handle and pushed it gently. Inside was something like a storeroom. There was no light here either. Buckets, mops, and parts of guard armor were scattered around. Overall, there was nothing interesting or useful.

The next door opened by the old man was much more intriguing. It was a sort of guard room. The open door immediately attracted the attention of those inside. Among them was a familiar face, or rather a face or mug.

It was one of the imps released by Ba'al in the village the previous day. A brief scene followed where everyone recognized each other. The imp jumped up from the table where he had been sitting and pointed at the group.

His interlocutor was as shaggy a giant as those at the gate. Scowling so that only his nose was visible from the uncovered part of his face, he stood up. The guard room was

too low for his massive frame. So, standing up straight ended with his hunched back pressing against the ceiling.

"Well, it seems we've been sold out," Ba'al shrugged.

"There they are! That's them!" the imp yelled. "Can I leave now?"

The giant grabbed the imp with one hand. The imp fit entirely into his fist, only the horns sticking out. With no visible effort, he threw the imp into the midst of his colleagues. The imp flew across the room, performing a graceful pirouette. An armored minotaur caught him, saluted, and left despite the protestations of his captive.

"To. The. Front," the creature growled slowly with effort.

With his other hand, he pointed at Eugene and the others.

"These. For disposal."

"Whatever happens, keep moving behind me. I'll take you to the Main Temple, and once inside, you'll be on your own," Ba'al whispered.

Garridgin, gradually advancing, moved to the left, trying to get out of the way or at least increase the area of engagement. When the giant issued his order, two djinns rushed at Garridgin. He successfully dispersed one with a counter strike of his sword. The second retreated, not wanting to share the fate of his comrade.

Ba'al charged forward, hurling a bright red energy burst at the giant. The giant didn't even try to dodge, and the spell hit him directly in the chest. Nothing happened. The giant simply absorbed it without feeling any discomfort. Ba'al took a few more steps forward and cast a spell of shackles. Translucent purple tendrils aimed at the target. Touching the giant's arm, they completely absorbed into it. The magic proved powerless.

"This is bad; it's a chugger. My spells don't work on him."

Ba`al grabbed Eugene's hand and pulled him under the cover of Garridgin. The old man was swinging his sword like a madman, keeping the djinn and two werewolves at bay. With another sweep, he dispersed the second djinn, leaving the werewolves alone. The chugger extended his arms and moved forward, carving a groove in the ceiling with his head.

"Duck!" Ba`al shouted.

Garridgin followed the advice and crouched, momentarily halting his wild blade dance. At the same instant, fireballs flew at both opponents.

The fur instantly ignited³⁰, disorienting the opponents. Garridgin was not idle. Without wasting a second, he swung his sword in a long arc, turning both werewolves into two charred piles of fur on the floor.

"Now, let's run! Ideally, let's avoid getting caught by him, or he'll eat us," Garridgin urged as he prepared to flee.

Ba'al led the way, dashing towards the exit where the minotaur and the imp had gone. He leapt onto the wall and spiraled around the giant, slipping between his arms.

While the chugger was trying to grab the demon, Eugene ran underneath him. Garridgin made sure the boy was safe and moving out of danger, then quickly followed the same path. As he reached the door, the giant spotted him. With an incredibly long arm, the chugger twisted around and grabbed the old man by the leg. Garridgin fell but kept his sword tightly gripped.

The giant pulled him towards himself, opening a maw large enough to swallow two people. Garridgin tried to

³⁰ Fire should be used wisely. Matches for wolves are not toys.

claw at a groove in the stone floor, but his hands kept slipping.

"Ba'al, do something! Quickly!"

"What am I supposed to do? He's immune to magic!" the demon snapped back.

"YOU. WILL. DIE. HERE," the loud roar echoed from the depths of the giant.

Eugene threw two fiery scarabs into the giant's mouth and continued running forward. Inside the chugger, two muffled explosions were heard. It had no effect on the monster; it didn't even flinch, only a thick black smoke billowed from its mouth.

Ba'al aimed an inferno at the ceiling. The spell left a dent, and rubble rained down on Garridgin.

"Sorry, I thought it would help," Ba'al apologized.

Meanwhile, Eugene reached the old man and grabbed his arm. Planting his feet firmly on the floor, he pulled in the opposite direction. Garridgin finally regained his bearings and managed to escape the monster's grasp. The old man's legs were already brushing the giant's tongue.

Old Harry coughed loudly, twisted in the monster's grip, and slashed at its neck. The giant's head snapped back, and the monster melted away like ice cream in the sun. Before anyone could catch their breath, the sound of heavy footsteps and clinking armor came from the corridor where Ba'al stood.

"Well, did you catch your breath? Then let's run," the demon said with a dazzling smile, and hurled a lightning bolt at the noise.

Ba`al

"Are you keeping up?" I shouted, glancing back.

Eugene and the old man were struggling to catch up with me. But with my four legs, it was easier for me. I had

taken on the form of a manticore. Now, with a satisfied look, I ran, using the speed of a lion. The scorpion's sting on my tail found its mark with each strike.

In the narrow corridors, smaller creatures had no chance of dodging, and those who were larger, I left to the young man and the old man so they wouldn't get bored either. After a couple of corridors and turns, we burst outside and found ourselves in the square.

Overall, we hadn't attracted any attention yet. Everyone was busy with their own affairs. People dressed in heraldic cloaks were urging demons to load faster into carts. Others just wandered around the square, looking around. So, we could breathe a little easier and avoid making sudden movements to avoid drawing attention.

A sudden cry came from the left.

"Destroy the spies!" A massive centaur pointed at us with a halberd. Instantly, all eyes were on our modest selves.

"Don't stop! The weak and the old are usually thrown off a high cliff," I shouted and dashed into the right alley.

According to what I saw from the height of my fairy flight, this alley led straight to the most lavish building after a block. Eugene was running alongside the old man. So it wasn't easy for them.

Although Garridgin was strong, the years and a sedentary lifestyle take their toll. First the catacombs, now the streets. Not every professional athlete can handle such a gallop. And let's not forget the dodging and fencing. Overall, I must admit, he was holding up well.

Eugene was doing his best to support him. From time to time he stopped and threw fire beetles at the pursuing guards. Of course, I didn't stay out of it either, hurling lightning balls.

The pursuers managed to catch up with us only after we entered the central building of the Grand Temple. After that, they stopped and seemed to be preparing for a siege. I never understood this decision.

"Everyone alright?"

I stood on the stairs leading into the depths of this monumental structure. Everything was covered in carpets embroidered with gold. Quite bizarre, in my opinion. The fairies in their lanterns didn't attempt to attack us or obstruct our stay. They bowed politely and smiled. I love good service.

"Alright," Eugene grunted, catching his breath.

He was covered in mud. In places it was scorched. But determination burned in his eyes.

"You won't get away, demon."

The old man looked worse. A thin stream of blood trickled down his left arm. He was also clearly limping on his left leg.

"You guys go on, I'll catch my breath here. I haven't had this much fun in a long time."

Garridgin leaned against the wall. He slowly turned his head and smiled at Eugene.

"No 'go on.' We came here together. We'll also appear before Rothschild II together. Ba'al, heal his wounds," the young man said in a commanding voice.

"Alright, alright. No need to shout. I won't be able to heal completely. It's hard for me to gauge the flow of power. Overuse might make him explode."

"Don't lie to me! You healed my leg!"

"That's what I'll try to do."

I extended my hand towards the old man. A little energy, and that's enough. In an instant, Garridgin looked much better. His wounds closed up, and his breathing became more even.

"Now that's better. Now everyone follow me," Eugene commanded and, without looking back, started up the stairs.

For a while, we wandered through corridors and stairs. We didn't encounter anyone, except for fairies. They kept grinning stupidly and bowing, which was starting to irritate me. After another turn, we met a man.

"Greetings! My name is Krombin, I am the secretary of His Majesty Rothschild II. If you are looking for His Excellency, please follow me."

"Yes, thank you. Sorry for coming unannounced... We have an urgent matter, and outside....," Eugene stammered, almost stumbling over each word due to embarrassment and confusion.

With a wave of his hand, the man stopped the young man.

"Rothschild II is already expecting you in his office. Please follow me. Oh, and if possible, try not to destroy anything here. I'll have to clean up afterward. Thank you very much for understanding."

After these words, he turned around and walked away, beckoning us to follow.

"Listen, maybe you shouldn't mention that we wrecked half the Temple. It won't make us look more attractive," I whispered in Eugene's ear.

"Truth will overcome any lie, Ba'al," he replied, also whispering.

It was much easier to follow the guide. He turned at the right places, and twice we passed through familiar areas but turned in different directions. We arrived at a small door.

"This is my office," Krombin said. "You need to go to the end of the corridor; there is a single door there, you can't miss it. His Holiness Rothschild II will see you personally."

He stopped by his office, watching us with his gaze. Eugene reached the large door first. It was carved from a single piece of wood and covered in metal. Eugene pulled on the handle unsuccessfully. I turned to Krombin, who was still standing in his place.

"The door is open, pull harder," the man called out.

I gently pushed the young man aside. I grabbed the handle and pulled. The door was indeed heavy, but it turned smoothly on its well-oiled hinges. After opening it, I let the young man and the old man go ahead. I wished this would be over soon. I could practically feel a warm bath waiting for me.

Eugene rushed in first and, after taking a few steps, fell to his knees. I thought he had just stumbled, but the old man, who was walking a bit slower, did the same. Oh, these human customs of falling at the feet of someone of higher rank. I walked behind them with a proud stride.

On the opposite side stood a desk cluttered with all sorts of junk. From papers to dried animal legs. Behind it, in a beautiful high chair, sat what was probably the master of this hall. And next to him stood our acquaintance. Well, well, she managed to get here before us.

"Your Holiness, Most Reverend Rothschild II, allow me to address you with a speech. No later than a week ago, my Temple was destroyed by entities dressed as guards of the Grand Temple."

Eugene was pressing his forehead against the stone floor and muttering as if he had memorized this text in advance. He didn't stop for a second. How did he manage not to run out of breath during such a long speech?

"I am absolutely sure that these were those trying to incite war between two friendly countries and tarnish your pure name with their actions. Allow my brother from our temple to confirm my words if my words are not enough for you."

"Enough. I have heard enough," Rothschild II interrupted Eugene. "You will be executed for treason against your country in the presence of the All-Father. Your demon will be sent to the front to atone for his audacious actions."

"Hey! Why am I being dragged into this? What exactly is my fault?" I couldn't hold back.

"According to my information, you are responsible for the dispersal of my army general Maah."

Eugene finally lifted his head and saw Vikky. His face, for a few seconds, resembled a slot machine. His expressions changed one after another.

"Vikky? Is that you?" Eugene asked, stunned.

He stopped on a deeply astonished expression. Not the strongest choice. If I were in his place, I would have gone with anger.

"There's no time for idle arguments." I whispered in Eugene's ear.

Rothschild waved his hand, and eight enormous demons crawled out from the floor. Mountains of muscles rolled on their backs. I had never seen such massive ones. They were pumped with energy to the brim. Rothschild issued a command, and they hurried to execute it. Four demons for Eugene and Garridgin. No one touched me yet. The demons didn't have special magic, but they were incredibly strong. They bound the young man and the old man and lifted them off the floor. In this position, the demons stood still, waiting for further orders.

"Ba'al, I want to offer you a cooperation on mutually beneficial terms. Without coercion."

His voice seemed terribly familiar. His appearance I had also seen somewhere before. And if the familiar voice was spinning right on the tip of my tongue, the appearance was harder to place.

I took another careful look at Rothschild. At first glance, he looked like an ordinary old man. There were plenty of such people everywhere, nothing special. An elegant suit and a not very long beard. But what if the beard were longer? A joyful click went off in my head, and everything fell into place. My head spun from such a sharp rearrangement.

"Satik? Is that you?" I asked cautiously.

"Actually, Sataniel, if you please!" Rothschild laughed in response and got up from his desk.

"Who?" Eugene was in complete confusion.

"Alright, alright, let's go with your version. I didn't expect to meet you like this," I ignored Eugene's irrelevant question.

Interestingly, this wasn't a guise adopted by Sataniel. There was no trace of magic from him. He was indeed in a human body. Ugh! How disgusting!

"Remember how well we got along before? You were a wonderful subordinate, and I was a good boss. I propose you gather souls here and return home with new statuses."

"Father, what is he talking about? What are you talking about?" Vikky couldn't stand it.

She came out of her silent stupor and rushed at Rothschild-Sataniel. She grabbed his suit sleeve and shook him.

"What new statuses?" I smiled. "You must be confusing me with someone very foolish. There is only one position above a Duke in Hell, and we both understand that perfectly well."

Did Sataniel completely lose his mind? Maybe he had spent too much time among humans? It had never done anyone any good. There are plenty of examples. Sphinxes went mad over riddles and were once great warriors. Brownies were once the greatest inventors, now they just

repair shoes for people and get scared by the slightest rustle. And I won't even start on genies and various vessels.

"We can make a few changes to our shared home."

"Not now, Vikky! Can't you see we're having a dialogue with Ba'al?"

Sataniel pulled his hand out of Vikky's tight grip.

"Stand still, daughter."

"Daughter? You've even managed to acquire children here? Your kettle must be completely broken."

"I mean, I don't understand anything."

"Be quiet!"

Sataniel extended his hand forward, and Eugene's and Rothschild's faces were covered by a binding spell.

"Listen, I understand everything, but to be this hysterical? It's not like you at all," I said.

"Yes, maybe you're right. This idiot, dead for so many years, still somehow affects me," he agreed, regaining his calm tone.

"Just give me an answer to one question, and then you can let me go. Is this Gredwurd's body or not?"

Sataniel suddenly burst into laughter. He laughed for several minutes. The demons exchanged puzzled glances and smiled idiotically. Vikky stood in complete shock. Apparently, the girl's worldview was shattered. Finally, the laughter gradually subsided and stopped altogether.

"Yes and no," he said. "Yes, this is indeed Gredwurd's body. The old man was a strong-willed and powerful man. He taught himself to summon all sorts of small things until the idea of summoning me came to his mind. He wanted to cast spells himself and possessed me. As if I were an ordinary goblin and he a simple wall. For six months or a year, I poisoned his mind, and by the end of this time, I had settled in and taken full control of the body. Here's the trick: according to his stupid contract, I can't harm him and can't allow anyone else to..."

During his pompous monologue, he began pacing back and forth, looking straight ahead. He seemed to notice no one but Ba`al. His words were filled with sadness and malice.

"Well, you can imagine the further course of events yourself."

"And the 'no'?" I asked.

"Hmm?" Sataniel responded.

"Well, you said 'yes and no.'"

"Oh, right!" He theatrically slapped his forehead.

"How could I forget. No means I won't let you go. You left me without a general, as I already said, and you will have to take his place. The question is whether by your own will or by contract."

Well, I had heard enough. I hoped Eugene had too. I was fed up with this world. I don't know how Sataniel had spent so much time here. But the result was clear. He had just gone mad. It was time to act. I pretended to fully support Sataniel and bowed deeply.

As my head lowered, I threw my arms to the sides. Two chain spells shackled the two demons holding Eugene. I have to give credit to the guy—he was only momentarily disoriented, and then actively joined the commotion.

Eugene threw two fire scarabs at the demons still holding Harrygene. It did little damage to them. But it momentarily weakened their grip and lost balance. That was enough for Harrygene. He twisted in the arms that were squeezing him and broke free. With the next move, he drew his sword, and that's when the demons felt their end.

I hoped in vain that the deposed ruler of Hell would stay on the sidelines. He struck his staff and spread his arms. Swarms of small creatures emerged from the walls.

"You did this in vain, Ba`al. I pitied you. So weak. Without your armor. Without your real weapon. And you spat on my kindness."

"'Spat'? That's an idea."

I transformed into a basilisk. Sharp claws slashed through enemies, and precise poison and fire spitting kept them at bay. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Eugene summon a fairy that helped him and warned of danger from the rear.

I also saw fire scarabs scattering enemy ranks. The old man didn't lag behind—his sword dance was as good as my spells. Demons and devils couldn't get close to him within striking distance, and he was crushing them all indiscriminately.

There were a lot of creatures; they were coming through open portals in the floor and emerging from the walls. And as my strength began to wane, the number of enemies visually thinned out. The endless stream reduced its onslaught. So, victory was near. Just needed to hold out a bit longer.

Then Sataniel joined the fight. With one Inferno spell, he demolished almost half of my body and a dozen small creatures around me. I had to shift to a smaller form. I chose the form of a demon. I dodged the next blast and hurried to Harrygene's back. He almost hit me in his excitement.

"Allies! Allies!" I shouted, waving my hands. The blade stopped just a hand's breadth from my throat. The next moment, Harrygene quickly turned around, deflecting a flying spell. My strength was low, and I decided to cover the old man's back, throwing fireballs at the snarling teeth of the monsters coming at us. Eugene, having dealt with his share of enemies, joined us.

Suddenly, the floor beneath us became sticky. I used my tiny wings to stay in the air. All others, except Sataniel, sank into the floor up to their knees.

He pointed his staff at Harrygene. The next moment, the blade was already deflecting spells. The same happened with the next three.

"Hmm, you're interesting. What kind of sword is that you have?"

Sataniel waved his staff, and tentacles emerged from the portals beneath our feet. Harrygene jumped, breaking free from the floor that was holding him, and cut through three tentacles before leaping at the demon. We had to deal with the other tentacles ourselves.

Sataniel was having a blast. He sent three spells at Harrygene and a couple at us. Apparently, so that we didn't relax either. All his remaining assistants pressed back into the walls. They had an unenviable fate of being caught between two fires. And they wisely chose life.

Taking advantage of Sataniel's scattered attention, Harrygene ran up to him. A swing of the sword, and a wound appeared on Rothschild's chest. The demon roared and jumped back, immediately taking cover behind his desk. The wound continued to widen, and it seemed that a little more and it would permanently divide the upper and lower parts of his body.

Sataniel fumbled on the desk, trying to find something. His hands were already not listening well. Finally, from under a pile of papers, he pulled out a tablet. The same tablet I had stolen from the temple. He closed his eyes, placed his hands on it, and began to cast a power-draining spell.

The energy quickly began to flow through his body. The wound stopped widening and immediately closed up. With the excess energy, Sataniel floated off the ground. He hovered a few meters up, continuing to drain power from the tablet. Harrygene jumped, raising the sword for another strike.

I had almost no strength left, and with my last spell, I increased Harrygene's speed. Then I collapsed on my back. I needed to catch my breath. Eugene was also exhausted; he turned his back to me and ordered his fairy to use all her pollen on me. This gave me a bit more strength and vitality.

Sataniel opened his eyes. They burned with blinding white fire, like two suns. The tablet turned to dust and sifted through his fingers. He extended one hand forward. Smoke-green tentacles of the power-draining spell emerged from the tips of his fingers. As soon as one of them touched Harrygene, he fell to the ground like a sack. The sword bounced several times off the floor and rolled away. The old man showed no more signs of life.

"He was a glorious man, considering his age. But he chose too dangerous a weapon for himself."

Eugene didn't take his eyes off Harrygene's body.

"No! This can't be! He had nothing to do with this," Eugene muttered quietly.

"Now it's your turn, boy. What's your name? Oh, it doesn't matter, give me the contract of your servant."

Sataniel extended his open hand forward. He was still hovering above the ground, so he had to lean quite low.

Eugene snapped out of his daze. Rage and anger filled his mind. He rolled to the side and threw fire scarabs. The beetles didn't reach their target. Sataniel was protected by the most powerful protective cocoon. Eugene tried to jump and dodge, bouncing and retreating, but it was of little use.

Sataniel watched the boy's efforts with the same interest a giant elephant might have watching an interesting dancing flea.

"Just give him the contract already. I'm useless without my trident anyway," I muttered, propping myself up on my elbows.

Eugene stopped performing the wild monkey act.
"Alright, here it is!" Eugene shouted.

He removed the vial with the scroll from his neck and threw it to Sataniel. He didn't even have time to realize what was happening as the container with the contract flew through an arc and landed in the protective cocoon. A flash, and nothing was left of my obligations.

"Be ready, Ba`al!" Eugene shouted.

"Ready for what..." I started.

Colors began to flash in my eyes, and I was swept away. Away from this world. Back to my own Hell.

"...what?"

I finished the phrase already standing in front of my own cauldron, where something was stirring and bubbling. The first thing I did was grab my favorite trident and felt my powers returning. Now it was time to check what was in the cauldron.

Eugene

Ba`al twisted into a spiral, shrinking into a tiny point before vanishing completely.

"You deprived me of my chance for revenge, boy. You will die a terrible death."

Eugene quickly cast a summoning spell, replacing the mention of "fairy" with "Ba`al." He reached out through the open portal. For a moment, Eugene thought it wouldn't work, but then a clawed hand grasped his forearm. He gripped it in return and pulled with all his might.

Ba`al emerged from the portal. He was entirely different. His body was covered in dark metal armor. In his hands, the demon wielded a massive trident, one and a half times taller than himself.

"Well then, round two?" Ba`al winked. "I was starting to think you wouldn't call."

"What a twist!" Satanail laughed.

Laughing hysterically, he sent several red bursts toward Ba`al. None of them reached their target. Ba`al simply dodged most of the spells, continuously casting spells in return. The last burst was deflected by Ba`al's trident and sent back to the sender. After that, the hysterical laughter ceased.

Now it was Ba`al's turn to go on the offensive. He swung his weapon, causing the walls to shake and a crack to spread across the hall. Lava flowed from the crack's center. Eugene sniffed—it smelled of sulfur. He touched his head and indeed, his hair was smoldering. Stepping back, he found himself closer to the walls and further from the hostile forces.

Satanail tried to dodge, but the lava stream followed him. Ba`al wasn't idle, casting one spell after another. The air was filled with magic. The demon's forces were evenly matched.

"Is this personal, Ba`al? Or are you defending the human? We are higher beings! We can't get attached to a resource."

Without waiting for an answer, he directed a dozen spells at Eugene. Ba`al jumped and appeared next to the boy, raising a magical shield.

"You're wrong," Ba`al growled briefly. "Humans are interesting and honest, though they do stink sometimes. But they should choose their own fate. We can't force them."

Satanail hurled spells, not giving Ba`al a chance to attack. The lava stream continued to follow him, forcing him to keep moving. Ba`al seized an interval between attacks and dropped his shield. He fired from his trident like a gun, sending huge smoky tentacles toward the target.

"Hit!" Eugene shouted.

The spell entangled the demon and lava began to pour over him. His body started burning. The flesh cracked.

Satanail cut through the tentacles with a swing of his staff and broke free.

"Just look at him..." Ba`al clicked his tongue.

Freeing himself from the chains, Satanail extended his staff forward, and a thin, bright orange stream shot out from its tip. Launching himself, Satanail flew toward Ba`al. Everything happened quickly. The chains couldn't hold, and Ba`al didn't manage to raise his shield. He was thrown backward, pinning him against the wall along with Eugene.

The armor absorbed the damage, and Ba`al was fine, but the boy looked bad—one arm was bent at an unnatural angle. The wall suddenly became soft and absorbed Eugene, leaving only his face exposed. Ba`al raised his trident, surrounding himself with a cocoon.

"Round three!" Ba`al grinned.

In the next moment, they were engaged in hand-to-hand combat. Eugene couldn't see clearly what was happening; his vision was limited. He couldn't move. His breathing was labored, and his arm burned with fire.

The demons darted around the ruined hall like two frenzied cats. After another explosion, they were thrown apart. Ba`al looked worse; his armor was scorched, and his trident was bent.

Satanail looked even worse. Chunks of flesh were falling off him and splatting onto the floor. White light was streaming from his open wounds.

"After I disperse you, I'll burn this whole world to ashes, Ba`al."

"You're all talk; you didn't even leave a scratch on me."

"You..."

Satanail didn't have time to finish. Harrygene's blade pierced through his chest. The next strike separated Gredwurd's head from his long-dead body. Vikky pulled the sword from the corpse and threw it to the floor.

"I was almost done! I would have finished him! Why did you do that? Huh?"

"Because it was the right thing to do," Vikky replied. "He lied to me my whole life. And he wanted to destroy this beautiful world. I did what I had to."

"Hey, could someone get me out of here?" Eugene shouted.

Ba`al approached Eugene. Vikky followed his lead.

"Listen, sorry, I completely forgot about you. How are you?"

Ba`al, trying not to touch Eugene, cut a piece of the wall with his claw. Vikky helped break off chunks of stone, crushing them to dust with her bare hands.

"So, you're really a half-demon?" Eugene asked.

"Yes, I used to think my mother was a demon. She seduced my father with a spell, and I was born. But it turned out it was the other way around."

"Did Satik seduce your mother and give birth to you?"

Vikky glanced at Ba`al, and he fell silent.

"Of course, he didn't give birth to me..."

When Eugene was pulled out and his arm treated, he quietly asked Ba`al:

"Can you somehow help Harrygene?"

"Resurrecting the dead is a thankless task, believe me. And there's nothing to heal—all his strength was drained. Replenishing it is impossible. It just doesn't happen," Ba`al shook his head negatively.

They stood over the old man's body, bowing their heads.

"He was a wonderful person. And a great mentor." Eugene wiped his tears.

"He was a strong warrior." Vikky hugged the boy's shoulders.

Ba`al opened his mouth to speak but waved his hand and turned away.

The scorched and charred doors creaked. Vikky ran up and grabbed her sword, while Ba`al ignited a fireball in his hand. Krombin peeked out from behind the door.

"E-e-em. Can I help with anything?"

"We... need the best place for a burial." Eugene turned and looked resolutely into Krombin's eyes.

Seeing Ba`al's fireball and Vikky's sword, Krombin hesitantly took a step back, but seeing the determination in Eugene's eyes, he stopped.

"The best place for a burial?" he asked, tilting his head slightly.

Eugene, keeping his gaze steady, nodded.

"Yes. We need a place where we can bury our friend with honor."

Krombin thought for a moment, then slowly nodded.

"There's one place," he said, "an old cemetery to the north of the Temple. No one has been buried there for many years, but the place is sacred. Let's go, I'll guide you."

He turned and slowly began to walk forward, gesturing for them to follow. Ba`al extinguished the fireball and lifted Harrygene's body. Vikky lowered her sword but kept it at the ready, remaining cautious.

"Are you sure we can trust him?" Vikky asked quietly to Eugene, following Krombin.

"No," Eugene replied, "but I don't think he can harm us."

They passed through narrow corridors covered in dust and cobwebs. Every step echoed loudly in the darkness. Finally, after a long descent down steep stairs, they emerged into the open. They saw an old cemetery covered in moss and overgrown with weeds.

"Here we are," Krombin said, stopping by ancient stone gravestones.

Eugene, Vikky, and Ba`al carefully approached the central area of the cemetery. Ba`al swung his trident, and a hole appeared in the ground. He gently placed the old man's body into it. Vikky stood guard, vigilantly scanning the darkness around them. Eugene, sitting by one of the gravestones, began reciting a prayer to ensure peace for the souls of the departed.

Gradually, energy gathered around them, fireflies began to form a circle, illuminating the burial site with a soft light. Feeling the support of his friends, Eugene finished the prayer and stood up.

"May his soul find peace," he whispered.

Feeling tears welling up, Eugene stepped forward and bowed his head.

"Harrygene," he said, "you taught me many things. You almost became a father to me. I promise I won't let you down and will do everything I can to protect those who need it."

Krombin, standing aside, slowly approached them.

"If I can help with anything else, just let me know," he said. "I'll try to do everything I can."

Vikky and Eugene, feeling a sense of inner harmony, turned to Krombin.

"It's time to go back," Ba`al said. "We have a lot of work ahead of us."

They returned to the castle, leaving the old cemetery behind. The night was calm and peaceful, and they knew they had done everything possible to honor the memory of the fallen. Tomorrow would be a new day, and new challenges awaited, but now they were ready for whatever lay ahead.

Epilogue:

Ba`al

I said my goodbyes and spent a few more days helping the boy settle into his new place. Since he had uncovered the conspiracy and the true nature of Rothschild II, the Sacred Council decided to consecrate Eugene as a bishop. It was clear that no one wanted to take responsibility for the mess they had created.

With Satanail's death, most of the warring army returned to their respective realms. The entities recruited from across the country were recalled by decree of the new high priest.

Vikky turned out to be not only a loyal assistant but also a valuable ally. Her knowledge of the inner workings of the temple and her diplomatic skills helped Eugene establish relations with other temples and clergy. Together, they developed a plan to strengthen the temple's defenses and prevent similar incidents in the future.

We had one last drink together, and I set off for home, leaving the boy to deal with reparations and apologies. Eugene is a smart lad; he'll manage everything. Besides, he won't be completely alone. Vikky promised to stay for a while and assist as the chief advisor. Overall, I'm not abandoning him.

I felt a sense of lightness and was whisked back to Hell. I stretched my back and cracked my knuckles.

"Alright, time to get back to work!"

During my absence, my soul collection metrics had lagged behind significantly. But I don't regret the time spent at all.