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SERGEY BILARIN



THE SPINDLE OF FATE

DEFEATING THE DARK

Sergey Bilarin

**The Spindle of Fate.
Defeating the Dark**

«Издательские решения»

Bilarin S.

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This is the first story in the “The Spindle of Fate” series. It depicts a battle between Heaven and Hell for the right to possess the Spindle of Fate. This ancient artifact chooses an ordinary young girl, Marina, as its Keeper. Envoys of the rival powers set out for Earth. However, is Marina such an ordinary girl? Let the book take you away to the illusory world of dreams.

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The Spindle of Fate. Defeating the Dark

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Introduction

This is the first story in the “The Spindle of Fate” series. It depicts a battle between Heaven and Hell for the right to possess the Spindle of Fate. This ancient artifact chooses an ordinary young girl, Marina, as its Keeper. Envoys of the rival powers set out for Earth. However, is Marina such an ordinary girl? The book also contains other short stories in the science fiction and fantasy genres. Let the book take you away to the illusory world of dreams.

The Spindle of Fate. Defeating the Dark

Outside, at what seems like just a stone's throw away, darkness was gathering. Here, almost on the fringe of human settlements, the rays of the sun were unable to diffuse the darkness which was victoriously advancing. It overwhelmed the sparse little trees, the rocky slopes covered with thin grass, and the spongy bogs. Like a painter or sculptor, the dark, coming up in waves onto this disconsolate landscape was altering all of creation. A boulder covered with blue moss became a bush with big red berries, a gully turned into a meadow, and trees kept coming out of darkness and disappearing again.

In the dark haziness one could see patches that were more or less light. At times they overlapped, intersected, overwhelmed, and interfered with each other as if playing cat-and-mouse. Sometimes the patches would fuse, forming crazy masterpieces, as if born of insane brains, or they would suddenly harmonize into rather rational pictures. However, all these metamorphoses lasted only for short moments. And once again the darkness would reach out its tentacles to chaotically touch this queer world.

The Priestess of Flame turned away from the window and tried to concentrate on a conjuration. However, one thought kept reeling in her head: "Perhaps, I am next". Three votareesses of Flame had already disappeared without a trace, and most likely it would not be it. The girl couldn't sleep in spite of the late hour. Turning her gaze to an hour-glass, she sleepily noticed that the grains were slowing their lazy falling and were dropping resonantly. Slower and slower, until one of them, the last one, was hanging, failing to make it to the bottom. A long echo faded in the quietness.

She felt somebody's presence, shivered and turned round. At the threshold of her rooms darkness was falling. No, it was not the darkness, but a man in a dark cloak with the hood pulled low over his eyes. Might he be a pilgrim, or perhaps a wanderer? Or could he be one who searches for knowledge and wishes to learn? It was already late; how did he get here? The guards should not have let him in. If there is a sancta sanctorum on Earth, this place should be it. Two steps away, up on the roof, the Sacred Flame burns, its magic light shining down on the world.

While she was brooding, two pitch-black clots formed around the night guest's silhouette. It was both scary and unfathomable. How could the dark have gotten into the heart of the Tower of Light? The unicycles of darkness were transformed into sinister-looking monsters and started approaching her slowly. The stranger's fleshy lips shivered into a grin. The girl tried to stand up and run away, but was unable to, no matter how hard she tried. She tried to absorb the light coming out of the glowing pillar in the middle of the room, but, alas, could not. Barely conscious of her own body, with a final, desperate effort, she got up on her feet, then fell down on the rug and... regained consciousness, awakened by her own scream.

Oh! It was only a dream... But, Oh, Lord of Light, this nightmare seemed so real! The fatigue gained during the day was the cause. And the troubling situation with her sisters' disappearance... The whole of The Circle is baffled. We have to do something, but they are so weak. Her thoughts circled crazily in her mind and amassed into one tight bundle.

A gust of icy wind cooled down the feverish body of the young sorcerer. Her transparent clothes exposed, rather than covered, her white body. Whipping around, she saw the silhouette from her recent nightmare. He was here! This is no dream! She wanted to defend herself with a guarding gesture but her hands wouldn't obey her. As the stranger stretched out his dark palms towards her and began coming nearer, she realized in horror that she could not even scream.

A seagull's shriek woke Marina out of her reverie and brought her back to earth, or rather to a desolate coast. The daystar hanging almost in the zenith was pouring ultraviolet onto the beach. The sea was whispering something sleepily and the foam swirled at her feet. All around was peace and quiet.

“Well, I will take one more plunge and then go home, or my skin will peel off”, Marina said to herself reproachfully. She was enjoying her well-deserved rest. Her last year in school had been hard, but she got all A’s and had already enrolled in a university.

She walked into the water and plunged in, it keeping her eyes open, and submerged herself again into the astounding world of the underwater realm.

“It’s so beautiful, I don’t want to go back. Probably, if I were a mermaid, I would have lived here”, the girl thought. She did look like a mermaid, slim and fit, with long hair and large eyes the color of the seawater. She plunged in a few more times, to memorize the enchanted view.

Marina came up to the surface and looked back toward the shore. Yes, picturesque, but nothing more. There was no room for the harmony of the sea depths there. Why did she feel like coming to this deserted and, you might say, wild place? As recently as yesterday she was relaxing at a civilized resort, lounging on a tanning bed under a sunshade, surrounded by a crowd of babbling tourists and their yelling children, with the screeches of Soviet and foreign pop-stars coming out of all the loudspeakers around. And now today, all of a sudden, she felt like being alone. Her gut feeling had brought her to this place.

She walked back onto the shore, bent down to pick up her towel and noticed a glittering thing. An odd spindle-shaped shell fit in her hand. Marina lifted it, brought it closer to her eyes and peeped inside, in the hope of seeing the owner of this amazing tiny house. However, the peculiar residence was empty. Then she put the shell against her ear and heard the deep breath of the ocean, so remote but nevertheless, so close. Eventually, she put the mysterious trove to her chest, uncertain if a decoration could be made out of it.

“I’ll take it home and decide what to do with it then”, Marina thought. She felt lighter than she than she had ever felt before.

Heaven was a real madhouse. The whole space was filled with myriad cherubs scurrying to and fro. Angels were running around like crazy after the Spindle of Fate disappeared. Doing their utmost to solve the problem that had popped up, they were getting even more confused. The Apostles were searching all the dimensions, but in vain. There was nobody to consult, which aggravated the matter even further. God had left this dimension and nobody knew where he was!

A six-winged Seraphim was giving the last instructions to a young angel on the ninth cloud to the left:

“Repeat back to me: what is the essence of the Spindle of Fate?”

“It decides the fates of all living beings. It is the Creator’s main tool, his will is second. At present it has disappeared from its dimension, where it was kept sealed by demons. It is in the humans’ world”.

“OK. You have been selected, trained, and blessed. You do navigation on the spot. Time to go. *Benedictio Domini sit vobiscum*. God bless you,” Seraphim was noticeably worn-out and exhausted.

Suddenly Heaven quaked and grew crimson. The Seraphim digressed for a second, then continued in rapid-fire:

“Demons are attacking us! Nationhood mobilization declared. You have to leave immediately. The battle is to take place in a different dimension.”

“I want to help,” the angel’s face was set in lines of impatience.

“Your contribution will be invaluable if you fulfill the task you have been given. You are the youngest of us, but you carry a fragment of the Lord. Repeat the task.”

“Infiltrate the humans’ society in the form of a man. Find the Spindle, get it back to Heaven. May I start?”

“Your point of contact will be here. May God be with you.”

And away the angel went.

In Hell the order superseded the anarchy. The Army of Hell was getting ready to attack Heaven. Demons were putting on their military harness and cleaning their weapons. Devils were saddling dragons, gargoyles, even vampires, in other words, all those who could carry them up in the skies. Gazillions of sinners were inbred into a few looking monstrously organisms. Lucifer, clad in white cloak, his beautiful assembly glowing excruciatingly bright, appeared on the balcony between two sulfurous torches:

“My brothers, my dear friends! Today is a Great Day. The day when Heaven will fall before our assault and the end of the world will come, a world that is built on lies, deception, and injustice.”

Next to a cauldron in which to boil sinners that had been abandoned because of the war, a hoary-headed devil was giving final instructions to a young demon:

“Let nothing stop you. We need a victory. It’s a unique chance. Not only has the Spindle disappeared, but the Old Man is nowhere to be found. The moment is as good as it gets! If we get hold of the artifact then we will be able to extend our boss’ rule to the whole Universe.”

“...the age of universal well-being and prosperity will come. Each will receive according to his needs... That little thing is somewhere on Earth. Find it and you will be able to contact the Spindle. My will shall be done! Onward, I shall lead you on to victory! Hurrah!” The horde gave out an evil roar. The assault has started.

“Hurry, you must go. Expect no aid from us. Everybody has gone off to war. Even I am going. See, I’ve gotten myself a little rifle, just for this purpose,” he said, waving a rusty weapon of an odd design.

“Knock them dead!”

“I will!” the devil answered emphatically.

He looked behind and saw the Army enter a huge dark portal spread to cover a half of the sky. Legion by legion, the fiends were leaving for the battle field in a different dimension.

The young demon spit out. The spittle flared, the soil sizzled. He grinned, snapped his fingers and jumped nimbly into a glowing circle that appeared in front of him. The light ozone odor dissolved quickly in the miasmas of this devilish place. Meanwhile monsters of all types were marching forward one after another to the last battle against Heaven. It was in his power to help them win.

Borya Zimin had been wishing to radically change his life for a long time. For this reason Lada Zimina-Pokovskaya (a countess, by the way) was not surprised by her offspring’s sudden decision. Let the kid relax at the southern coast. He graduated from school, his university tuition is paid, and the dean called with avowals of love. You bet, for such amount of money. The only thing that ran afoul of the habitual style of life was her son’s early appearance in the dining room. To be more exact Boris made his mother happy by his mere presence at breakfast.

“Well, everything’s changing.” Lada thought looking at her sonnyboy devour starters.

The old Labrador Henry was huddled under her chair, growling indistinctly. Borya finished his meal, got up from the table, and asked the dog:

“Well, doggy, will you go with me down south?”

Henry bared his teeth and tried to crawl away. Lada stood up for her pet:

“Leave the old guy alone.”

“By the way, Mom, you could do with a little freshening up as well,” her son cooed, and pecking her on the cheek, he left with the waddling gait of the master of the universe.

“That’s probably true. It might be time to take a breath”, the countess thought as she watched a posh white car leave the courtyard. It might be a good idea to find myself a lover.

Lada did not conceal a pleased smile as she picked up the phone and dialed a number.

“Out running around again until all hours, you butthe...” His stepfather stuttered and started coughing uncontrollably. “You are killing your mother!”

They were sitting in a smoky little kitchen; the parents at the table, both bloated and unkempt. Grisha leaned against the fridge examining them. In spite of the early hour, on the table there were already an open bottle of vodka, a can of herring, and a plate with a few pieces of brown bread on it. s

Looking at her son with eyes bleary from alcohol, Verka lifted her hand against him, but Grisha caught it gently and firmly:

“I love you, Mom!”

Poryvayeva burst into tears. She cried, each tear taking away the burden that had weighted on her all these years after her husband’s death. And as she cried, her gaze became lucid and coherent. She stood up, took the bottle from the table and resolutely emptied it into the sink.

Kolyan realized that a new life was starting that exact moment in their family. As strange as it sounded, he proved happy about it. He gave Vera a hug. The two together saw Grisha to the door and set about cleaning up the place. The apartment had been awaiting this for many years.

“Sorry, my dear lady. May I engage you for a dance?” it’s been already a third pesky admirer in the last half hour. But what a style!

Marina subdued an impulse to rebuff this suitor as well. The first one started constructing the greeting with the word “look, there” and was recommended the sea shore as his destination. The second youth asked “Miss, do you dance?”, and she replied “No, I sing!” However, since she has come to the disco anyway, she had better have fun. She mercifully let the third guy take her to the dance-floor.

Marina liked dancing. She could move well; and God had endowed her with beauty and a good figure, for which reason she kept catching admiring glances of the male audience. This attention was pleasant although a bit irksome. The reason was a red dress, with a low-cut back, that she found in her aunt’s closet. Kid, the butler, even confused her with his mistress. He complimented her and wondered if the attire was discreet enough for a disco and partying at night. As she was putting on a pearl necklace, Marina asked Kid to pick her up and take her home. Kid agreed, added a pair of strapped sandals to her outfit, and took his leave. She put up her hair into something that looked like a crown and walked out into the night.

Actually she wanted to stay and examine her aunt Isolda’s enigmatic mansion. For sure this house was full of luring mysteries. However, some inner impulse directed her to the shore, to the disco on the pier. So, here she is, moving in tune with handsome young men whereas the gentle breeze is softly touching her heated body with its cool fingers.

“Thank you. I have never had such a fair lady before. I mean, a dancing partner.”

Marina noted again the admirer’s subtle style, smiled to him and headed for the bar. Yes, the guy seems well-bred. This manner of speech, though, might have been nothing but a trick that he catches naïve girls with. Never had she thought of a serious relationship with a guy. There was no time: her studies ate it all up. And then, of course, there was her father. What would he have been like, her boyfriend that is?

Suddenly, in front of her an image of a young man appeared as if woven of laser beams. She understood: that was him! She felt the chemistry! However, the imaginary construct vanished in the thin air, giving room to a cheerful bartender. He took her order and paid her an unequivocal compliment. Marina was about to drown the bastard in the cocktail he concocted when a pleasant voice called her by name. She looked round and saw her schoolmate, Borya Zimin, a blond hunk. He was wearing linen pants and had no shirt on under his jacket. His sunglasses were settled up on his forehead. A thin gold neck chain and plain sandals on his bare feet emphasized this austere attire.

“Hi, babe! May I join you?” the youth said, coming nearer than good manners permitted.

“He is not a bad guy,” Marina thought, “but he had never been interested in her before. He had his own life, his own little whims, those of a typical golden boy. A real Pinocchio; rich, but a blockhead nonetheless. And what’s he doing here anyway?”

“I came to relax. Went to the disco and here you are,” it was as if she had asked the last question aloud. “What a pleasant and unexpected encounter”.

“Yes, glad to see you. How are things?” Marina tried her best to be polite. “Have you been accepted to any schools?”

“I’m going to be an economist. But let’s forget about business, it’d be better to talk about us,” Boris’ answer was disconcerting.

“About us?” Belova’s eyebrows went up. What’s wrong with him? The speed at which he moved surprised her, but he was appealingly forthcoming at the same time. Why not flirt with him a bit? She is at a sea resort, there’s nothing serious about all this. Just holidaying, there’s nothing wrong with that. Her thoughts seemed to belong to somebody else and they surprised her.

“Well, let’s talk about us.”

“You are so beautiful, smart and attractive”, the guy started talking a mile a minute. “Why don’t we start dating?”

No sooner had Marina responded than a third character of the play interrupted:

“Hello, Marina. Do you remember me?” there he was Grisha Poryvayev, as large as life, by the bar. He had on quaker-blue jeans and a black T-shirt that accentuated his well-muscled body. His pitch-black frowzy hair was harnessed in a baseball cap. Tennis shoes and a complete absence of any jewelry emphasized the youth’s sporty look. He didn’t even have a wristwatch. Boris screwed up his face in revulsion when looking at Grisha.

Marina and Grisha lived in the same apartment building, just different entrances. They had known each other since they were little. They were not exactly friends, but their relationship was close and warm. Something else was disturbing: what was it about this disco that drew everybody to it as bees to honey?

“It is the best disco in town. I was sure I would find you here,” it seemed as if she kept talking aloud. Or is he able to read her mind?

“It’s all very strange,” Marina thought, “but if Fate decided to rule this way why don’t the three of us keep having fun together? The party is in full swing, spirits are high. They are young; their whole lives are ahead of them. “This night will belong to us,” Marina decided, “we will put off answering questions until the morning.”

“Shall we dance?” this suggestion was accepted with more enthusiasm than was warranted. They plunged into a foot-tapping rhythm and remained happy for a while.

However, this mood didn’t last long. Trying to decide who would take the lady home, the young men had a serious quarrel. Marina vainly tried to make them listen to reason; neither wanted to give up. The quarrel threatened to turn into a fight. The girl didn’t expect to see what happened next.

First complete silence fell. The spotlight, people’s silhouettes, even a moth that was flying by froze for some inexplicable reason. Only at the very far end of her consciousness did Marina notice a guy and a girl keenly observing what was going on. The time stoppage seemed to have no effect on them. They kept exchanging whispers and tried to call a minimum of attention to themselves. The young men were too busy with their quarrel to notice anything around.

“Today is not your day, little angel,” Boris hissed, towering over Poryvayev, his eyes narrow, a fire raging within. “Give up and I won’t take your life.”

“The time has not come yet for Heaven to fall and for me to get out of the way,” Grisha answered him accordingly. His powerfully built figure seemed to be charged by the surrounding energy.

Could it be that she is asleep and seeing all this in her dream? However, then something extraordinarily weird occurred; although how much worse could it get?

Suddenly Marina found herself on a rocky clint Looking down, she was paralyzed with fear. The girl was standing on top of a cliff many kilometers high, at the base of which the endless sea was seething. No, not sea, but rather myriad weird and scary creatures fused into one shapeless mass. It

was throbbing and causing an uprush of fear. Emitting on the horizon, the sea of creatures swelled up as a gigantic ugly sprout and started rising up into the air. .

An even more fantastic view was happening in the skies. A cloud of sparkles that proved to be consisting of angels and cherubims kept fusing and breaking apart in an attempt to form something meaningful. At last they have succeeded; Marina gasped. Covering the whole sky and obstructing the view of the clouds, glistening wings stretched; a huge sword held by a gigantic angel fell on the head of a terrible leviathan that jumped out from inside the pile of mutilated bodies.

Shrieks, moans, screams, all merging in one grandiose outcry almost made Marina faint. The pain was intolerable. Still she had time to notice the two frozen silhouettes of her two admirers on a clint a bit above her. Their eyes were closed, either sweat or tears where streaming down their cheeks, in short they were wet as if after a heavy rain.

Suddenly the apparition dissipated. The quiet came back but gave way to loud music. All of them are in the bar again; the idle audience is dancing around them. The young men were staring around.

“Who cancelled my curse?” Borya shouted, wiping the sweat off his forehead.

“Sorry for interrupting, but it is late and time to go home,” a short slim young man was standing in front of them. He had a black leather collar on. The studs on it were gleaming in tune with the lights in the hall.

“Something’s fishy here,” Grisha said, breathing heavily.

“That’s what I’d say,” Boris agreed and looked at Grisha very attentively. His eyes narrowed. He hissed: “Look, kid, don’t get on my nerves, or you’ll be sorry...” Marina could swear that she saw a forked tongue in Zimin’s mouth.

“We haven’t decided yet who will take Marina home,” Poryvayev muttered. The quarrel that ended abruptly was going to start anew.

“We are all going together to our place,” Kid stressed the word “together”.

“Where is this ‘our place’?” the blond young man sniffed in disdain.

Marina coughed:

“To my place. This guy is my aunt’s butler. I am staying with her.”

“We’d better go, the ice cream is melting,” Kid smiled and they set off.

“What a huge house,” Poryvayev rolled his eyes admiringly. “A whole medieval castle!”

“Is this some kind of joke or do you really live in this museum?” Boris asked when they stopped at the openwork wrought iron gate.

“Castle? Museum?” Puzzled, Marina studied the mansion. It was nothing but a typical two-storey building; there were lots of this kind in this little resort town. She turned round towards Kid and asked:

“Maybe there’s something wrong with my eyes, but are we in the right place?”

Kid hurried to calm her down:

“It’s all right. It is our home. Welcome!”

When Marina passed the gate, he looked at Marina’s companions, made a grimace, and teased them:

“Castle! Museum! Scared the gal! She knows nothing!”

Indeed, how could she, the most ordinary 16-year old girl, know that this house is older than the entire town, that it is five stories high, and that it does look like a knight’s castle? She could not see the gargoyles on the downspouts rapaciously bearing their teeth into darkness.

A few minutes later, Marina cozily settled down in an armchair with a cup of hot chocolate in her hand. She asked thoughtfully looking in front of her:

“Guys, do you feel someone else’s presence in the house? As if somebody else is around here not hurrying to come in sight?”

Kid, making the table, was about to drop the ice-cream bowl he was holding. Borya looked at him expressively and slowly said:

“Rather no, than yes. I feel just pleasantly tired. I feel like reading a good book before I go to bed.”

“The library is upstairs,” Kid announced.

“What are your plans for tomorrow?” Grisha asked when Boris went upstairs.

“I wish I knew,” Marina said wistfully. “We’ll see tomorrow. Do you have any suggestions?”

“Yes. Let’s go to the beach, have a swim, sunbathe, pick up shells, you know...”

“Oh, I found one today, a bonny thing, strange.”

Boris climbed the stairs and looked around. With a gimlet eye he noticed an amazingly shaped shell on a carved little table next to a mirror. His eyes lit up. He triumphantly came up to it, a smile playing on his face. As his fingers lightly touched the shell, his face suddenly fell and his smile faded. But just as quickly it returned, even brighter, and his eyes narrowed cunningly. He shouted:

“Marina! I have spotted a wonderful seashell – up here. How about giving it to me as a gift?”

Hearing these words, Poryvayev grew pale, sprang up to his feet, waved his hands as if trying to prevent her from answering. However, the young girl as if not noticing his odd behavior, said loudly:

“Take it! My pleasure!”

Grisha dashed upstairs. He ran up to the little table where the spindle-shaped shell was lying. He looked at it and muttered:

“Is that it? That exact thing?”

Boris viewed an answer redundant. Grisha took a combat position, put his hands in front of him and started muttering something. Zimin raised his hands above his head as if stretching. He was waiting for a severe magical blow ready to deflect it. However, Poryvayev hesitated and stood still. The demon wanted to attack first, but gave it another thought. They both froze like flies in amber. Kid slowly entered the room.

“I am the warden of this house,” he said calmly. “The house does not want you to feud in it. You are welcome to do so outside. However, inside you suppress your ambitions and live in peace.”

“Then have him give me this thing,” Grisha whispered loudly.

“I will give it to you only if my room is across the hall from Marina’s.” Poryvayev looked pleadingly at Kid.

“Good,” a mysterious force let them go. The warden left the room. Grisha snatched the shell:

“You’re a dope,” he said abruptly to Zimin and raised the shell over his head as if it were a trophy.

“So are you,” Zimin shot back.

Poryvayev suddenly went limp and he slumped to the floor like a marionette whose strings had just been cut. Grinning, Zimin looked down at the body then turned away and began to examine the spines of the books.

When the angel, his eyes crazy with happiness, returned to the heavenly kingdom, his big brothers immediately paid attention to the demon’s odd behavior. Then they confirmed that that shell was indeed the artifact, something like a cell phone. However, Marina had already used the Spindle of Fate tuning it to her frequency. For this reason, the shell itself was nothing more than a bonny thing, nice looking but, nevertheless, useless. As for the angel, he had to go back right away to find a solution to that problem. Joking, his good-natured big brothers bade him farewell and saw him off back to our world.

Poryvayev sat down, palpated his head, found a large bruise at the back, and winced. He didn’t catch up Zimin before he reached the door.

“I thought you would be absent longer,” the demon said and laughed. “I used to think that the Angel’s ire was a metaphor. Now I can see that it exists. Live and learn. Sorry for the platitude.”

“Don’t tempt me; a lot of bans have been dropped,” his voice was resolute and confident. “I am on an important mission.”

“Oh, yeah! Now you understand that the ring doesn’t work, the shell is useless. Take the bull by the horns, to be more exact, take care of Marina,” Boris was whispering, “the Spindle can be operated through her. I will gain her trust. She will become my tool without knowing it.”

“I will not allow you to do it,” the angel replied to him.

“How will you be able to stop me?” the demon broke into a smile. “Will you kill me or what? Perhaps, you will take care of the girl yourself. She is pretty good from the human point of view”.

“Stop it,” Grisha growled. “You know that angels are chaste.”

“Who’s forcing you to sleep with her?” the devil said with a leer. “Just a little fooling around and the girl with the Spindle is yours. To the greater glory of your boss, right?”

“I’ll say it once more: do not tempt me,” Grisha said, stamping his foot for emphasis.

“OK, as you wish, I am gone,” Zimin turned round and walked up to the door. “Time to act. If you don’t want to take part in this merry competition, just step aside and observe. Enjoy watching virtuosos of seduction at work.” He touched the door handle to open it.

The angel tried to stop him:

“Don’t do that!”

“Look and see how to do it!” Boris triumphantly declared opening the double door wide. “Sorry, I made you wait,” he graciously addressed Marina upon returning to the living room.

“Grisha, by any chance is that the shell that I gave to Borya?” Marina was curiously studying the angel’s reddened face.

He had no sooner opened his mouth than the demon interjected:

“My dear, it is indeed. Grisha managed to wheedle it out of me. He told me he collects shells as mementos of his wonderful vacations. I simply couldn’t refuse him. He was so eloquent.” And he glanced scornfully at the angel.

“Uh, yes. That seems about right,” Grisha murmured. And screwing up his courage, Grisha turned to Marina and said:

“Marina, I want to give you a gift. Take this ring, hope you will like it.”

Out of his pocket he pulled a ring with a skull on it; two large rubies were glowing in the eye sockets.

“It is so gothic!” Marina exclaimed and put the ring on her finger. “It matches my dress perfectly, doesn’t it?”

“You are beautiful!” The boys assured her all together.

“I found this attire in my aunt’s closet. Kid said that I look like Isolda a lot.”

“I have a gift for you as well. And it comes straight from the heart,” Zimin said. “Please take this pendant. It will tell you when your guardian angel is close by”.

Demon came up to Marina and in a showy and dramatic fashion, draped a chain with a heart-shaped pendant with little wings around her neck. The pendant glowed warmly.

“Dinner is served!” Kid appeared out of nowhere. “Help yourselves.”

The friends had no sooner enjoyed the dessert than something hummed booming downstairs. Kid was gone like the wind. The boys hurled after him, having only time to tell Marina:

“Stay here! Don’t leave!”

However, the girl did not follow this advice. In a couple of minutes, she was going downstairs to the basement. There she saw a rather curious scene.

Boris was shaking his finger at a petite, slim young girl with luxurious black hair and a rather revealing outfit. She was holding her hands up in front of her, as if trying to deflect his words. Her eyes were green and full of a fear that gave way to a complete absence of expression.

“You’d better help me!” Boris exclaimed.

Grisha and Zimin started waving their fingers as if in an attempt to weave the visitor into an invisible cocoon. She was growing more and more frozen. Seeing Marina, the visitor, with a final, desperate effort, cried out:

“Madam Isolda! Help me!!”

And she went almost completely limp. Suddenly, out of nowhere, Kid appeared:

“Everything’s all right. No reason to worry,” he gestured and freed the captive off the invisible manacles. Failing to keep balance, the stranger fell down in the middle of a five-pointed star drawn on the floor.

Marina dashed forward to help the night guest on her feet. She felt that the latter needed assistance.

“You know my aunt, so we have to assume that this isn’t the first time you’ve been in this house. But how did you get in? And why are you here?”

“Through the window,” Boris joked. Then he immediately dropped his voice and added, threateningly. “You decided to clean out the house while the mistress was gone. Is that it, you thief?”

“She is neither a burglar nor a thief,” Kid said. “Be respectful. In front of you is Praya, the Priestess of the Circle of Light, the burgomaster of the City of Zueraf from Damramir!”

“Priestess?” Grigoriy’s eyebrows went up.

“Dam-ra-mir?” Marina slowly repeated the strange word in a low voice.

“Burgomaster?” Boris snorted disdainfully; nothing could surprise him.

The priestess was bombarded with questions from all sides. She shook her head, as if trying to finally wake up from a deep sleep and said:

“I can see that, I will have to tell you a bit about myself and why I am here.”

On the way upstairs Marina noticed that their visitor was evading shadows and dark corners. In the living room Marina settled down in an armchair, Grisha sat down on a little sofa, Boris remained standing next to a table, while Kid snuggled by the fireplace and kept adding logs into the fire. Sothern nights are extremely chilly.

Praya walked up to the fireplace:

“May I have a seat here? I feel somehow more comfortable when the fire is near. What shall I start with? I don’t know how to describe my world for you. One day I found a book titled Seven Underground Kings in the library. There was an illustration there depicting a huge cave with a city inside that was lit up with a ball of light. It is very similar; the difference is that our world has no walls. Where the light ends, Darkness and Chaos begin. The world is lit up with not one but a few Lights. I am one of the Priestesses of this Sacred Flame. Madame Isolda taught occultism and potions classes. Lo and behold, one by one, girls of our class started disappearing. We were in despair and decided to seek your aunt’s help...”

Marina, who up until that moment had been calmly listening to the story, stood up and asked crossly:

“Can somebody here explain to me what is going on? How did this young girl get here? What were you doing to her when I got here? How can we understand her if she’s from a different world? Besides Russian, I speak English, but I can understand her without a problem. What is this, a practical joke? If it is, it has failed. Well, which one of you is going to talk?” She looked at each of the young men in turn.

“Perhaps, you?” she jabbed her finger at Praya who drew back reflexively and almost fell into the fireplace. “No, you have said enough.”

“Maybe, you?” she looked at Boris. He shrugged his shoulders and sipped his cocktail. “Nothing to say, huh?”

“Could, you, Grisha, possibly quell my worries?”

“I think it’d be better if I did it,” Kid stood up. He took a deep breath and started talking. “I shouldn’t do it, but I have no choice. Your aunt Isolda is a witch. So is your mother. The only difference is that the first one is dark while the second one is light. An incredible future was foretold for you. Hence, your father decided to protect you against magic of any order. However, there is no escaping your fate. So, here you are.”

“My mom? What are you talking about? My aunt is a witch? It’s nothing but words, you have no proof, she is not here. Where is your evidence?” Marina’s voice rose to a shriek.

“I am a vampire and werewolf, a half-blood, a wild hybrid. I’ll give you proof, just don’t be scared.” What used to be Kid fell down on the floor. What rose up in its place was a creature with a vicious maw filled with razor-sharp teeth that seemed to be ready to break out and devour the visitors. A gigantic dog wearing a leather collar with glittering studs all of a sudden sat up on its hind legs. Looking into Marina’s eyes, the dog asked her:

“Is that enough? Are you convinced now?”

It was Marina’s turn now to sit down in shock. Grisha took her hand and patted it. She murmured:

“I think I’ve had too much to drink. A talking dog, just imagine that.” Her eyes closed, her body sank limply into the soft embrace of the pillows.

“What vigor!” Boris whispered admiringly. “Three people could not make her sleep! Unbelievable!”

“As a matter of fact, I had a hand in this, too,” the priestess declared.

“What a mess!” Grisha was as nonplussed as his friends were.

“Things will look better in the morning. It’s time to go to bed. Let me show you to your rooms.” Kid was trying to make everybody understand that the party was over.

Marina heard nothing. She was sound asleep.

Marina was dreaming. First, the talking dog offered her a cocktail, and then it pushed her off the pier into the sea. Marina turned in a mermaid and swam down into the depths. There, in front of her the spindle-shaped shell appeared, giving off an iridescent glow.

“Hello, Marina! I am the Spindle of Fate.” A sense of serenity enveloped her and she began to listen intently. “The Supreme Being created me to guide the lives of all people. When he left me, he lost control over me. And those in Hell made good use of the opportunity. They limited my influence on people, allegedly in order to ensure their free will. The angels want to give control over people back to God. I believe that everything should be left as it is now. I have decided to go over to mortals. Kid didn’t lie: you were prophesied to become the second after the Creator. However, this will happen only if you agree to accept me. I have chosen you on purpose. There is the ideal balance of forces in you.”

“Why? Tell me, I don’t understand,” Marina wanted to find out more.

““A long time ago, an electrician, a total stranger, was passing by the ward in the maternity hospital where your mother was waiting to give birth to you. Stopping next to your father, the electrician told him:

“Your daughter will hold the fate of the whole world in her hands. She will become the second after God. People’s lives will depend on her.”

“The prophecy,” Marina mused, as if she had witnessed the scene as a bystander and not as a participant.

“Yes. Your father was scared. He knew that your mother was a Light sorceress. He decided to save you from Fate. He forbade your mother to see you. He told you that she died giving birth, but she is alive. Your father unknowingly made the prophecy real. If you became a sorceress I would not have come to you.”

“Wait, I don’t understand. Are you a male or female?”

“I am not an object; I am Power. Power cannot have gender. You may call me as you wish. With my aid you will be able to understand people, know everything about the past, foresee the future a bit, and change the present. You have already become susceptible to magic. You have felt the heart of this house, you have witnessed the battle of illusions between your companions, you have learned to understand the languages of others. However, beware, try not to meddle with people’s fates too often. It is very difficult for a human. As time passes it will become easier, and then you will occupy your position.”

“How shall I call you?”

“Vas!”

“Vas... If I call for you, will you come?”

“I am always with you. You don’t have to call for me. I am part of you. For now, go. Wake up!”

“Good morning. It’s time to get up!”

“May I linger for a bit longer?” Boris was murmuring when suddenly his sleepiness vanished, as if by magic. He propped himself up on one elbow and angrily asked Grisha: “How did you get in here?”

“I came through the wall,” the young man answered nonchalantly continuing his attentive examination of the dragon tattooed on Boris’ right shoulder.

“Don’t you dare try to sic him on me,” Grisha said pointing at the dragon with his finger, “or I’ll torch him. By the way, you haven’t ever thought of turning your face to the Light, have you?”

Zimin wasn’t taken aback by this abrupt change of topic. He whined:

“I’m not even fully awake yet. I am not ready for edifying talks!”

“You must always be ready for edifying talks since life could end suddenly and unexpectedly.”

“What the hell are you doing here anyway?” Zimin gave him a sullen look.

“Do you know where Marina is?” Grisha asked vacantly.

“In her room. No, wait. She is out of town. She, she is not in this dimension. My pendant... I can’t feel it,” he sounded worried.

“So, the chica is not that simple. Beware of Greeks bearing gifts,” Grisha grinned.

“You hypocrite. The little ring has its own secret as well. Wait. Marina is here, let’s go.” Borya leapt off the bed, clapped his hands and was suddenly dressed in the same clothes as yesterday, though instead of a neck chain, he now wore a bracelet. He headed resolutely for the door pushing Grisha aside.

“I have made a decision to go to Damramir,” Marina informed the young men authoritatively.

“Good for you. I will help you pack and get the portal ready.” Kid was acting like a first class butler, receiving the information phlegmatically.

“Marina, tell me,” the angel hesitated, “where have you been?”

“What a strange question, Grisha!” Marina frowned and then smiled. “I was asleep.”

“Yes, girls do sleep sometimes,” Zimin said slowly; the sarcasm was clearly evident in his words. “I would have had enough sleep too had it not been for someone who shall remain nameless.”

“I was sleeping,” Marina went on failing to notice the demon’s remark, “and dreamt that I could help Praya.”

“That’s wonderful but I doubt that she is anxious to get your help,” the little vampire said. He was about to leave but turned around at the door. “Last night she tried to go back to her world through the portal. I didn’t let her go and persuaded her to sleep on it. She must really be afraid of something since she, as exhausted as she was, was determined to make a leap through the portal.”

“Yes, I am frightened,” Praya said appearing in the doorway. “I am afraid of these thousands of cold eyes looking at me from all directions of your strange world. The hungry eyes of Chaos.”

“You are probably, referring to the stars,” Borya guessed and immediately started to put on airs, “My dear, there is no reason to be afraid. Just look: our world is beautiful. Go out on the balcony to enjoy this beautiful view. Of course, the view cannot compare to your beauty!”

He offered his arm to the priestess and led her out onto the balcony. The breeze and morning freshness gave Praya goose bumps; sunrays caused her freckles. She shivered slightly and sneezed:

“Boris, you keep forgetting that I am not barbarian. I have been here before. You don’t have to try to impress me by acting the part of a gallant gentleman. Your manners are impeccable. I am already spoken for and I will be faithful to my chosen one. Yes, we live a lonely life in solitude. Dwellers of other dimensions are very rare visitors. We are not cave-dwellers. We live by our own rules. However, now we need help but not teasing or light flirting.”

“Oh-ho!” That was the only thing the demon could have out.

“What a rebuff! This is our style,” Poryvayev was fascinated and thought to himself: “It’s not going to stop him, though; it’ll just encourage him.”

Marina thought indignantly:

“Why is he trying so hard? Why, just yesterday he was practically pledging his undying love for me, and now... He is acting rather strangely. In fact, everything about this whole situation is rather weird. Aloud she said as calmly as possible: “Borya, I seem to recall that in Praya’s world, there is no sun. She might get sunburned.”

“Oh, no! I will save you, lovely priestess! Let’s go, I will concoct a sunscreen cream. I know a wonderful ancient recipe,” he led Praya into the house. “Don’t worry, we’ll help you.”

When Poryvayev and Marina were alone, she looked at the young man, her eyes narrowed, and slyly asked:

“Tell me, Grisha... this ring you gave me yesterday... Where did you get it? Did you buy it at a flea market?”

Poryvayev responded angrily:

“At a flea market? This is not some little trinket. It can tip you off about the presence of evil nearby. The skull’s eye sockets will start glowing.”

“Why are they glowing now? Is there a demon somewhere around? No! That scares me!” Marina started shivering.

“No, hold on... It must be the little vampire, you know, the guardian.”

“Look, the pendant is glowing as well. Borya said that it reacts this way in the presence of heavenly beings. Could there be an angel around? How interesting!!!” Her fear had suddenly been replaced by curiosity.

“Hm, maybe that’s your guardian angel? Or maybe that’s Praya. After all, she is human and there is a particle of God in her.” Grisha had no desire whatsoever to confess.

“She is gone, but the glow remains, and it’s even brighter,” Marina persisted.

“Well,” Grisha said resolutely, “sooner or later you must be told the truth. I am an angel.”

“You?! You can’t be. I don’t believe you.” Marina didn’t expect this.

“Look into my eyes,” the young man said quietly.

Marina did as she was told and saw Potyvayev’s eyes change color, his whole body was filled with a light from within, his hair grew longer and started fluttering as if in a breeze. Two enormous snow white wings unfurled from his shoulders. Grisha’s entire frame was glowing with an ethereal light; he radiated a divine grace. The pendant was throbbing with a pristine light.

“It is not fair!” The demon shouted from the doorway. “You took advantage of my absence to...”

“To do what?” Marina asked. Grisha was quickly transformed back into an ordinary young man. He eyed Zimin with a certain curiosity and ran his fingers through his hair.

“To gain attention, Marina, your attention. By now you have, of course, realized that we are not ordinary people. We are messengers. We both have been dispatched to help you. We will be accompanying you wherever you go.”

“It is so bizarre, but mostly pleasant. Thank you, guys.” Marina was touched.

“Our pleasure,” the demon bowed ceremonially.

“You can count on us,” the angel echoed.

Kid appeared in the doorway and announced that everything was ready for departure. Zimin and Poryvayev went down to the basement. Marina was about to follow them but the guardian stopped her:

“I know where you are going and I hope you will find this gift useful,” the guardian said, offering Marina a golden cigarette lighter.

“But I don’t smoke!” she exclaimed.

“It will help you in the most unexpected moment. Take it,” Marina relented and took the proffered lighter.

A few minutes later, the young girl joined Zimin and Poryvayev waiting for her in the center of the pentagram. She stood between them facing the priestess.

“*”, Boris sang jokingly, “Darling, this is your first interworld trip, isn’t it? Here, you’d better take my hand.” *You are in the army now, oh-oo-oh you’re in the army now*

“Is it necessary?” Praya was nervous and tense and didn’t know what to do with her hands.

“*, let’s all join hands, friends,” Poryvayev chanted playing along with Zimin. The girls had no choice but to obey. *A vacation in a foreign land*

“Step back! The doors are closing! Train leaving for Damramir!” Kid chimed in, just as playfully as the travelers.

Marina wasn’t at all nervous; she realized that her friends were trying to shift her attention away from the upcoming transition. She was grateful and, playing along, said:

“Let’s go. *” *The sergeant calls “Stand up and fight!”*

She wanted to examine everything very carefully. What will the transition between the worlds be like? However, when the world beyond the circle blurred, speechless delight overwhelmed her, made her clench her hands, and groan. Her knees buckled and she would have fallen, but her admirers caught her and kept her standing. The weakness Marina felt lasted just a minute and then she pulled herself together and calmed down.

They looked around and found themselves surrounded by small houses that, thanks to the bamboo poles used to construct them, looked as if they were made of matchsticks. Looming over this cheerless landscape was an openwork tower belching flames into a sky roiled by black clouds.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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