

Dmitrii Emets

In this book
the first
appearance
of
Gury Puper!



TANYA GROTTER and the Golden Leech



Tanya Grotter

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«Емец Д. А.»

2003

Emets D.

Tanya Grotter and the Golden Leech / D. Emets — «Емец Д. А.»,
2003 — (Tanya Grotter)

Thunder shakes the magic school Tibidox. Lightning beat at exactly one point — the masonry on the roof of the Big Tower. And in the neglected gatehouse by the swamp Tanya Grotter discovers the forgotten prophecy of The Ancient One. If an ancient spirit is released, the Golden Leech will begin to crawl into the magic fire and the Rope in the fingerboard of the double bass will break, time will swing in the opposite direction, the revived pagan idols will go to war on the Tortoise of Eternity and the Sinister Gates will collapse! The forecasted events begin to happen one after another... And all this during the dragonball world championship, in which the composite Tibidox team must battle with the team of the Invisibles, in which the incomparable Gury Puper shines!

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Дмитрий Емец

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Prologue

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Brief Reference of Magic Spells

Printed with gracious permission of the for-life and posthumous head of Tibidox, laureate of the award of Magic Suspenders, Academician Sardanapal Chernomorov.

Sparkis frontis – combat spark of white magic.

Pointus harpoonus – sleep spell, lifts at dawn.

Firstus drumus – drying of wet clothing.

Trampli-kickli – “kicker” spell; cannot be reversed.

Painus suppressus – spell against pain.

Paranoius roofus blowout! Declinate culminate! – useless combination of spirit-banishing spells.

Fillissimo moronissimo! Scleroticus marasmoticus! – spell for erasure of memory.

Fogus sneakus – spell of burglary (black magic from the list of 100 forbidden spells).

Briskus-quickus – spell against the simplest evil spirits, Black Curtains, poltergeists, and ghosts.

Justislanderis theokssiris ! – spell against the King of Ghosts (once a year).

Grail Gardarika – spell of passage from the world of moronoids into the world of magicians; works only at one point above the island of Buyan.

Liftis-cockus —removes the chicken evil eye.

Shedus spectacus – spell of invisibility, weak and sufficiently confusing; does not apply to hair and clothing.

Solidus royalismus – spell that sometimes blocks dark magic (not more than one spark in strength).

Squeezus pullus – “embrace” spell, no need for comments.

Panidis scorchus – is it always necessary to ignite fire with the help of matches?

Trigus sputterus —puts out flame.

Nab-grab – displacement of objects to small and average distances; do not use without special necessity, not inconceivable that the transferred object will show up broken into smithereens.

Checkis trackis ransackis – search spell.

Hungeronus hungerygus – causes a sharp feeling of hunger.

Wiza cockwiza – “crammer” spell (black magic from the list of 100 forbidden spells); useful for the preparation of lessons, blocked by instructors during exams and tests.

Bowus threebowus – simple spell for lazy people, ties laces. Attention! If no laces on footwear, will tie toes!

Cleanus tubecleanus – another spell for lazy people, washes and cleans teeth; explosion possible in the presence of chewing gum in mouth.

Paperykus creepoutus – for remote displacement of papers.

Plugis cutdownis – “leaving, turn out lights.”

Furyllis ebbus trufus paradisis appedicitus hellus – fatal curse (abbreviated form).

Blowis nullis – counter-spell to imposition of fatal curse (only during the first five minutes after imposition of the curse).

Thunderium grandium – spell of chaos (black magic from the list of 100 forbidden spells).

Kaput youfinitut – spell to separate the soul from the body (black magic from the list of 100 forbidden spells).

Whoopli woepli penalbowpli – casts evil eye (black magic of average power).

Feverytb – “anti-hiccup” magic.

Trickus runtus – lifts sharp pain in the stomach.

Goatbumpy noisu – lifts “frog” evil eye (to be used no later than first turning green!)

Slopis-galoshis-idiotis – against swamp bogeys; does not work on other forms of evil spirits.

Flight

Speedus envenomus – the swiftest and most dangerous.

Hastenus plodus – average.

Pilotus kamikazis – slow, but load-lifting; equally suitable for elephants and klutzes.

Oyoyoyos smackis thumpis – safety net.

Bangus parachutis – braking.

Bangus parachutis forte – accelerated braking for special landing.

“Bewitched Pass”

Gullis-dullis(the pass) – Tsap-tsaraps (the block).

Trullis-zapullis(the pass) – Leos-zafindileos (the block).

Figus-zatsapus(the pass) – Shchups-kuroshchups (the block).

Scoring in Dragonball

Stun – 1

Sneeze – 2

Flame-extinguisher ball – 3

Pepper —5

Immobilize – 10

Chapter 1

The Durneys and the Talking Fragments

Best deputy Herman Durnev, director of the firm Second-Hand Socks and chairman of the committee “Loving Aid to Children, Pensioners, and the Handicapped,” stood before the large mirror in the lobby and fussily repaired the necktie on his emaciated neck with the protruding Adam’s apple. His long face with hollow cheeks smacked slightly of a ghastly green, and his eyeteeth jutted out slightly more than in ordinary respectable moronoids. This uncommon appearance fell to the lot of Uncle Herman by inheritance from his distant relative Count Dracula, a relationship that Durnev, however, did not even suspect.

“Ninel! Are you here?” Uncle Herman shouted. No one answered. The best deputy restlessly began to turn his neck and yell even louder, “Ninel! Do you hear me? Ninel! Bring me another tie! This dark-blue one makes me look chubby!”

Muffled, house-shaking steps were heard, as if a dray horse was driven along the corridor, and from the room, her massive body brushing against the wall, Aunt Ninel slowly appeared. The spouse of Uncle Herman was so stout that one could make three of her husband out of her and still mould a small swamp bogey from the leftover.

“Sweetie, don’t make it up! The dark-blue tie suits you very well!” Aunt Ninel cooed soothingly, affectionately putting her hands on her husband’s shoulders. Uncle Herman staggered and sagged almost to the floor.

“No, it doesn’t, doesn’t, doesn’t! I look completely bloated with it on!” The best deputy pouted and stomped his foot.

Aunt Ninel wanted to sneer that her husband had less fat than a mummy, but she reconsidered. To argue with Uncle Herman was as useless as teaching a donkey the principles of versification or holding back by the exhaust pipe a bus already started.

“Fine, dear, I’ll bring you your favourite lilac tie with the little reddish-brown flowers! Only, I beg you, calm down!” Aunt Ninel agreed and made her way into the bedroom.

Underfoot near her, coughing maliciously and hanging onto the slippers, the dachshund One-And-A-Half Kilometres was turning round and round. Earlier the dachshund even bit Uncle Herman, but since he was Lisper the Rabbit, it stayed away from him, remembering his powerful “hind paws.”

Aunt Ninel opened the wardrobe in the search for the necktie and in an instant, Uncle Herman nervously jumped on the spot, frightened by her amazed outcry. Running into the room, the best deputy saw that his wife, covering her mouth with her hand, was frozen at the door.

“Ninelie, which happened?”

“M-m-m! M-there!” Aunt Ninel mumbled in horror.

Uncle Herman rather cowardly glanced into the wardrobe. Things were chewed up and soaked with sticky mucus. Mucus was dripping from both his new black coat and his spouse’s evening gown. The smell issuing from them was so loathsome that Uncle Herman instantly understood why his wife was holding a hand to her mouth.

“I don’t understand... I took a shirt from here ten minutes ago and everything was in order! And the dog could not have done it, it can’t reach so high to nibble!” the deputy said, puckering. “Nothing is gone?”

Aunt Ninel’s eyes glided along the shelves. She abhorred touching the things with her hands. “No, nothing. Everything’s in place... Although... yes, exactly, no sweater! It was here, underneath!”

“What sweater?”

“Tanya Grotter’s sweater, the one she wore at home! And who would hanker after such junk? It’s disgusting even to wash the floor with it! I’m a fool, why didn’t I immediately throw it out?” Aunt Ninel groaned.

Uncle Herman’s knees buckled and he dejectedly collapsed onto the sofa. No, this in no way resembled an ordinary theft. Especially as even the most adroit pilferer would not know how to penetrate into the apartment through closed doors and the glassed-in balcony, on top of that in the presence of the owners!

“Again this vile Grotter! It’s always her! Her! And why did we take her into the house then? Should have sent her to a settlement even in infancy! No, ship her directly to prison from the maternity ward!” the best deputy groaned.

It did not even enter Durnev’s head that someone besides Tanya herself could steal the sweater, although even this, according to him, disgusting girl would hardly begin to chew on the things of her Uncle Herman at that.

“Good that Pipa is now resting in camp by the sea! We could at least save her from this horror!” Aunt Ninel said, full of suffering.

* * *

Soon, having dressed up in one of the suits miraculously left intact, one he had to fish out from the wardrobe with the aid of the mop, Uncle Herman left for the Duma. His clothing, hands, and hair gave off the sharp smell of cologne, which Durnev scented himself with in order to drown out the sickening stink of mucus.

Aunt Ninel summoned the domestic help, who was having a day off, and decisively started cleaning up. After putting masks over their faces, the women extracted everything from the wardrobe and sent them away for dry-cleaning. This was that same dry-cleaner where the workers were still stuttering after the acquaintance with Black Curtains, which they attempted to free from centuries-old magic dust. The domestic help had hardly carried in the enormous bags with the malodorous things, when the receptionist immediately fainted, and the manager locked himself up in the office, weighing whether he should voluntarily turn himself in at the psychiatric hospital.

Meanwhile, Aunt Ninel set off for the glassed-in balcony, where Tanya once lived from spring to late autumn, and conducted a thorough search there. “It’s time to dispose of this girl’s trash! Everything to the last pin!” she muttered, throwing into the garbage can everything that could still remind her of the orphan. Into the garbage went Tanya’s broken pencil case (special thanks to Pipa), water colours, school notebooks, book stands, and all the other things discovered in the wooden locker on the balcony. Aunt Ninel got rid of them with methodical carefulness, at the same time without taking the thick rubber gloves off her hands. “Enough surprises for us! Everything into the dumpster! Everything!” she repeated, tearing up into shreds Tanya’s school diary and furiously ramming the crumpled papers into the can.

When it was the turn of the school bag – a really nightmarish school bag, which you will rarely see even on a first-grader – a charred stump, on which the remains of varnish were still visible, suddenly dropped out of a side pocket. “And what else is this? Some vile stick! She dragged in all kinds of trash!” Aunt Ninel grimaced with disgust. She did not know that this fragment, the old bow of the double bass, flared up in Tanya’s hands during flight. Durneva decisively broke the charred stump with her knee and flung it into the can. She already aimed at sending off the worn boots next when suddenly the garbage can began to tremble, began to shake and... Aunt Ninel heard a ringing voice, which at once filled the entire balcony.

“Oh, my granny mama! With you again I am the resilient, beloved by all and irritating to many commentator Bab-Yagun! The playing commentator, by the way, which is doubly critical! If someone

intends to give me an evil eye – forget it at once: I’m secured by Yagge. Furthermore, I have elicited from Dentistikha her best reflecting amulet!

“I am sitting on my dear vacuum, fuelled by splendid rubbish and mermaid scale, and I am prepared for takeoff. There still remains several minutes until the Tibidox – Gandharvas match begins.

“On the Island Buyan – eh-eh... on which palm did I write the crib? – a remarkable July noon. The sun shines like a polished copper basin, and a refreshing breeze blows from the side of the ocean. The hangars shake from dragon roars. From the cracks pours thick black smoke, so familiar to all true fans of dragonball. Several times together with the smoke outside, the howling genies escaped, vanishing into thin air. Personally, I’m not surprised: the dragons have not been fed for a long time so that they will hunt the opposition’s forwards more actively.

“The hero-bouncers Usynya, Gorynya, and Dubynya are sitting between the platforms and angrily mumbling, when someone accidentally steps on their feet. I will reveal the secret of this mumbling. Today a mute spell has been cast on the entire trinity so that it, as has already happened before, would not deafen spectators by its howls. True, pity that there are no spells against assault and battery, otherwise the pair of cyclopes, attempting to force their way to the match without a white ticket – I swear to you, all shielding tickets are white! – would not even run to magic station prior to the beginning of the game...”

Aunt Ninel finally figured out where the voice was coming from. She stared wildly at the speaking rods, staggered, and sat down on the floor so heavily that she almost brought down the balcony. Unhappy daughter of Eve! How could she know that it is not possible to handle magic objects – even those broken and three quarters burnt – so unceremoniously? Now both fragments caught magic radio waves, and the walls of the garbage can served as an amplifier.

With each minute the voice of the garbage can became increasingly louder, increasingly more distinct. It resounded no longer just through the balcony, but also through the entire apartment of the Durneys, even penetrating through the wall to the neighbours. There behind the wall General Cutletkin was overbearingly tapping with a pencil on the table and studying the price of used toothbrushes. Uncle Herman presented this price to him yesterday with a secret intention.

“The Indian *gandharvas* are considered some of the favourites of the dragonball world championship,” the brisk voice chattered. “They say, once they began as celestial musicians, playing at the feasts of ancient gods. However, after the ancient gods together with the spirits of chaos were imprisoned in the basements of Tibidox, the *gandharvas* remained out of work and took up dragonball professionally. It happened that they have defeated even the *babai*, the Invisibles, and the Bald Mountain witches. I personally am not surprised. Not without reason these half-magician half-birds spend a large part of their life in the air. They came down to earth only to harm people – so it was, in any case, until The Ancient One put prohibition on any magic interference in the life of the moronoids.

“The *gandharvas* need no magic objects for flight, although for some reason each holds a rounded three-stringed lute. Many suspect, though true, it has not been proven, that they use the lutes for all kinds of forbidden tricks in the field. In any case, even my granny – a fan of five-hundred years! – has never seen the *gandharvas* part from their lutes.

“The *gandharvas* are very well-fed. Few of them have less than three chins, and even the tummies are also o-ho-ho! It suggests the thought: have the *gandharvas* moved from nectar to beer? Short slow-moving wings grow directly from the shoulders. The feet resemble that of an eagle or a griffin. The powerful bent claws evoke respect, although, to tell the truth, the *gandharvas* rarely run on them. More often, they use a swift general pass in the middle zone with a subsequent breakthrough to the dragon of the opposition.

“Attention! The for-life and posthumous head of Tibidox Academician Sardanapal Chernomorov is getting up onto the judicial stand. The fans applaud. In the past month, Sardanapal

has replaced the Persian magician Tistrya at the post of chief umpire. It is said, after the loss of the *babai* team, whom he clearly played up to, Tistrya went slightly crazy and ate his own ears. True, he soon grew new ones, but the sport board attached to the Magciety of Jerky Magtion did not revoke its decision.

“Nightingale O. Robber and the *gandharvas*’ trainer Kashavara walk beside Sardanapal. Kashavara feels very confident. That the chief umpire is also the head of Tibidox does not disturb him at all. Sardanapal is noted among magicians for his adherence to principles. For sure, he will be even stricter with his own team than with our Indian guests.

“And now I hurry to present to you the composite Tibidox team, if, of course, among the fans there are still those not familiar with it. Number one – Zhora Zhikin, half-back. Magic instrument – mop with a propeller. Handsome, don’t you think? Of course I’m not talking about the propeller... A good third of the female fans came to the match only just to take a look at our Zhora. Unfortunately – hee-hee! – it’s not possible to admire him for long. Zhikin usually retires in the first half-hour, since it is even more complex to control his mop than a broom. But then, if any of the opposition falls under the propeller, hungry Goyaryn will be able to refresh itself with outstanding stuffing!

“Number two – Damien Goryanov, the dark department of Tibidox. His vacuum is a Storm-100U. I must admit, it is not a bad machine with the turbine supercharger and chrome-plated pipe; however, it is far from my vacuum. Moreover, Goryanov never cleans his ears, which extremely complicates his orientation in the air...”

“YAGUN! Knock it off right now, or I...” someone began to yell in a terrible voice. Immediately after this a whistle and a deafening slap was heard.

Aunt Ninel shuddered and just in case pulled her head into her shoulders, although clearly no one was advancing on her personally.

“Just now you observed an attempt to ram the playing commentator with a Storm-100U vacuum. A pitiful, deceitful, and meaningless attempt, I hasten to add!” Bab-Yagun continued as if nothing had happened. “I, with the astuteness characteristic of me, always maintain: this powerful machine does not have sufficient manoeuvrability and it hinders disgustingly. They are carefully digging Damien out of the sand at present, and again put him back up on the vacuum. I’m certain this trivial incident will in no way affect his future play. In order to get a concussion, one must – hee-hee! – have something to shock.

“Number three – Katya Lotkova, Defence. A Dirt vacuum, with likable talismans and little funky foxes dangling. Lotkova has finally gotten rid of her dark glasses, and Dentistikha also, by the way! Hurray! This means that Sardanapal and Medusa were able to remove the extremely unpleasant evil eye virus, which made their pupils glow!

“Seven-Stump-Holes, number four, outstanding forward and outstanding comrade. True, he can change into an otter in the heat of the moment, but indeed it can’t be helped.

“Number five. With pride, I present Rita On-The-Sly and her guitar with a trailer of the Dinghy-Reagent model. Yes, an uncommon instrument, I agree. I see, the fans of the *gandharvas* mockingly exchange glances, but here you’re wrong, respected half-turk... half-bird! By the way, our Rita is called the most unpredictable player of the Tibidox team. Even Nightingale O. Robber does not know what she will do in the next moment.

“Number six – half-back Kuzya Tuzikov on his unfailing jet broom. See how he vibrates his broom – it also rushes into battle. They say foreign magicians recently proposed to give any three brooms for it, but we proudly refused them: indeed their brooms are of an industrial spell, and our broom – native stock! By the way, it began as the most common broom in the most common home of the moronoids. It swept simply awfully and irritated its masters greatly. Moreover, its exceptional capabilities for high-speed displacement were suddenly revealed. The frightened moronoids threw it into the dumpster, from where the broom, having attached itself to a flock of ducks, independently

completed the flight to Tibidox. An outstanding example of how, having talent, it is possible to make a career!

“And now attention! A replacement in the team of Tibidox. Instead of number seven, Yura Idiotsyudov, the team captain by the way, the new find of trainer Nightingale O. Robber, Coffinia Cryptova is playing! Idiotsyudov got a serious injury and is now in magic station. It is never worthwhile to tease a dragon, even if it is merely Mercury. Coffinia appears on a vacuum of the model Swine-Sportage. Automatic gearbox, sliding pipe, fuelled by mermaid scales, *barabashka* dandruff, or discarded snake skins. See how the Swine-Sportage is lovingly decorated with wreaths and shinbones! Interesting, why? Her usual black humour or does she intend to throw the bones at the players of the opposition? A fresh thought, only it’s unlikely you will frighten them with these. For Coffinia’s information, the *gandharvas* by no means live on dried apricots.

“Number eight... khm... Bab-Yagun, the playing commentator. I would even add ‘the magnificently playing,’ but to praise oneself – it’s indeed petty. Should you be busy with something during the match? Only please do not forget to direct your binoculars at me.

“Number nine – Liza Zalizina, the diving cuckoo clock. Most inexplicable that for some reason the clock just flies whereas the cuckoo only pecks, true, with aim...”

Bab-Yagun caught his breath and, after a pause, roared doubly louder, “And finally, number ten! The queen of flight! The pride of Tibidox! The courageous champ over the *babai* and She-Who-Is-No-More! Mistress of the luxurious magic double bass of the work of her great-grandfather Theophilus! I’m shaking all over with excitement pronouncing this name! Tatiana Grotter!!!”

The stadium exploded with applause. Aunt Ninel, greedily listening to the play-by-play flowing out of the garbage can, first turned grey, then grew red, and suddenly issued this deafening howl, which cracked the glass on the balcony. Staff General Cutletkin in the adjacent apartment fell off his chair and bruised his tailbone.

“Grotter! Again Tanya Grotter! She’s everywhere, I beg you! Shoot me so that I’d not suffer!” Durneva began to wail. She jumped out onto the stairs and, having looked around in a cowardly manner, tipped the can into the rubbish chute. With the noise of the applause howling, “Hurray! Long live Grotter, number ten!” the bow fragments tore along down the pipe together with Tanya’s other things. Pressing the empty garbage can against her chest, Aunt Ninel returned to the apartment and, smiling crazily at some unknown and probably invisible person, she hurriedly locked all the locks and bolts. Only after putting the last chain into the groove did this responsible woman allow herself to slip into a deep faint...

Chapter 2

A Crafty Lute and Dozens of Bonegrafts

The for-life and posthumous head of Tibidox, Academician Sardanapal Chernomorov, finally knew how to catch his playful moustaches and tie them in a knot at the back of his head. He winked smartly at Medusa, got up, and raised his hand. Several thousand fans froze in expectation. Two orange signal sparks tore away from the ancient ring of the Sovereign of Spirits, buzzed over the main dragonball stadium of Buyan Island, and deafeningly exploded.

The Gandharva-Tibidox match had begun.

Tanya hurriedly uttered *Speedus envenomus*, waved her bow, and took off, as always with pleasure sensing the resilient air resistance. The strings of the double bass impatiently hummed. The warm wood of the instrument trembled, almost alive. Here it is, excitement, anticipation of a match not yet begun!

To the right and left, on top and below, bending over their instruments, other players of the Tibidox team fuss. Here is Yagun, rattling something into the silver mouthpiece, deftly moving from hand to hand the pipe of his vacuum. Here is the beauty Katya Lotkova on the Dirt vacuum repairing talismans. Here is Zhora Zhikin trembling on the sneezing mop with a propeller, simultaneously showing off in front of female admirers. Here is Coffinia, clearly preoccupied with staying on the Swine-spottage. And who is there above? Aha, Liza Zalizina, with an offended look, blows on her finger and with a fist threatens her cuckoo for pecking her.

But the *gandharvas* were already flickering in front, first gaining altitude, then swiftly diving downward, indistinguishable from each other for the unaccustomed eye. Some of them, clearly teasing the Tibidox players, with an air of detachment strummed on their three-stringed lutes; others soared, catching oncoming air streams with their wings. Their powerful sharp-clawed paws were decorated with long colourful ribbons.

The gates of the Northern hangar were thrown open. Following puffs of smoke and long tongues of flames, a hostile dragon shot forward. Tanya looked narrowly at it and it made her ill at ease. Moreover, it immediately became understandable why the *gandharvas* hid it so thoroughly and allowed no one into the hangar.

In looks this was a typical Eastern dragon – with golden scales, a lean body flexible like a snake, many bone plates and complex growths on the scales, long whiskers and somewhat dull teeth, among which perhaps only the four jutting out canine teeth were frightening. The claws were strong, the feet powerful, but no stronger nor more powerful than, say, those of Flying Meatball, the dragon of the *babai*.

No, the advantage of the Indian dragon was not in this. Quick, invincible, it moved around above the field and fired long tongues of flame like daggers at the Tibidox players. And what a flame this was, Tanya realized when the scorching fiery jet, shot from the huge distance of the field, suddenly singed her hair and the dry heat burned her cheek.

Ff-sh-sh-shuh!

Yelling, the young Grotter waved her bow and threw her double bass to the side. Good that the flame was spent, and also the vampire bile, which she had the foresight to put on, saved her from serious burn. And this was at the very beginning of the match, when the balls were not even released!

“Oh, my granny mama! What’s happening!” exclaimed a wonder-struck Bab-Yagun. “The *gandharvas* brought with them a true winged flamethrower! Likely, there remains not a single safe place in the field. Minutes have not yet passed since the beginning of the match and Tanya Grotter has already received an annoying burn! Seven-Stump-Holes has a melted pipe, and Kuzya Tuzikov was forced to resort to the aid of water-sprites in order to put out the flame on his jet broom! Now

I understand why the *gandharvas* call their dragon Spitter! And I, a fool, even intended to look in the dictionary! But when are they finally releasing the balls? Does Sardanapal really want his team to become flying *shashlik* even before the match?”

On hearing the challenge of Bab-Yagun, the academician stopped contemplating his beard and waved his hand. “Where are the balls? Really it’s impossible to figure things out without me?” he shouted angrily.

Two genie-referees, looking askance with uneasiness at the hungry dragons, carried out the basket and, having pulled off the cover, rushed fleeing. Five magic balls of different weight and colour – flame-extinguisher, stun, pepper, sneeze, and immobilize – obeying the magic placed in them, soared into the sky and with the ballet grace of overfed bumblebees scattered along the entire field.

Simultaneously twenty players – ten from Tibidox and ten *gandharvas* – rushed to the balls, hurrying to seize the initiative from the first minutes of the match.

The dragons began to roar furiously and, whipping with their tails, advancing a smoke screen all around, ascended under the dome. Having served as “goals” in many matches, they had long since understood that the magic balls gave one trouble, especially when they appeared in one’s mouth. But to swallow a couple of the opposition’s forwards was an entirely different matter. The hungry dragons had nothing against this.

“An outstanding start to the game!” Bab-Yagun exclaimed enthusiastically. “What a tight battle for the balls! Damien Goryanov is already pressing against his chest the stun ball, which he intercepted from under the nose of the *gandharva* forward Mamarama. Here he indeed did not expect such agility from anyone! Smart, Damien, I for some reason was confident that they wouldn’t let you keep the ball!

“But what’s that there? And this must be seen! Seven-Stump-Holes rushes after an escaping pepper ball. Immediately two *gandharvas* – Ramapapa and Jelly-Backbone – are at his heels! Oh, my granny mama, if you dreamt about this Backbone, you would fall off the bed! Broad as an ox, the crushed ears of a wrestler, and a broken nose! Two hundred dystrophic persons compressed into a single jock! Seven-Stump-Holes literally clings to the pepper ball, but Ramapapa roughly shoves him with his lute. That’s right, you saw it: using an ancient instrument like an ordinary club! A disgrace! Really, will Sardanapal not interfere? He did, the whistle blows! Hurray! A penalty! A outstanding possibility to open score!”

Bab-Yagun triumphantly shot up on his turbo-vacuum of the seven-hundred series and, tilting the pipe, fixed himself at the centre of the fields, where he could see better.

“Strange! Very strange!” his voice began to be heard from there. “I for some reason thought that the *gandharvas* would protest against the penalty! Nothing of the kind! Without getting involved in a debate, they somehow very willingly catch their dragon Spitter and by a special spell force it to open its mouth.

“Seven-Stump-Holes prepares himself for the penalty throw from the eleven-metre line. Stump appears puzzled. Likely, he suspects that something is not kosher here! Nevertheless, he takes aim and... Outstanding hit! Launched by the steady hand of Seven-Stump-Holes, the ball flies exactly into the dragon’s mouth, but Spitter swiftly moves aside and gives it a push with its nose! The ball flies directly into the hands of half-back Lakshaman, who passes it to Mamarama...

“The game continues! The *gandharvas* energetically attack Goyaryn, covering it from all sides! So here is what their crafty plan consists of! Having a dragon that knows how to return balls with its nose, they, not fearing penalties, can allow themselves a rough game! Goyaryn meets the *gandharvas* with solid fire and slams shut its mouth, not allowing them to throw in a ball. Zhora Zhikin and Katya Lotkova stand by Goyaryn on top, not letting the ‘birds’ enter the ‘dead zone’ where the eyes of the dragon cannot make them out.”

While the *gandharvas*, distracting the defence, were circling around Goyaryn, a not less fierce fight was developing in the opposite part of the field. Tanya, whose cheek was still burning with pain, battled with the *gandharva* forward Grouser-Aga for the immobilize ball. In pursuit of the ball,

Grouser-Aga traced magnificent barrels in the air. Simultaneously he purposefully tried, seemingly casually, to lash at Tanya's eyes with his wings. Forcing herself not to answer this obvious provocation, Tanya pressed her chest against the double bass and, stretching out like an arrow, tried to pick the moment to seize the ball that was slipping away.

"The young Grotter has good endurance!" Medusa Gorgonova, the docent of the department of evil spirits studies, said encouragingly, turning to Tararakh.

The pithecanthropus angrily shook his enormous hand overgrown with thick reddish hair to the fingers. "Yes, she's a smart one. Plays simply brilliant! But someone must put the *gandharvas* in an inconvenient position! They will maim all of ours! See, he lashes directly at the eyes!" he shouted.

"How would you put them in an inconvenient position? It's not even possible to call a penalty for this offence. Hitting with wings is not considered a rough play. Even Sardanapal can't find fault with this – outwardly everything is according to the rules," Medusa said despondently.

The *gandharva* trainer Kashavara glanced sideways at Gorgonova and complacently slapped himself on the stomach. It seemed he understood Russian perfectly, although he also preferred to pretend to be a fool.

Noticing that the immobilize ball had glided away in the air, Tanya swiftly swung about and rushed to head it off. She nearly succeeded in grabbing it, but here Grouser-Aga, swooping from above, struck her face with his wing. The girl blinked from surprise, saving her eyes, and when she opened them again, the *gandharva* already had the ball, hurrying with it to Goyaryn.

An indignant Tanya waved her bow and, having gathered height, dashed to ram Grouser-Aga with the double bass, but here the match was suddenly stopped by the chief umpire. Someone from the opposition, it seemed, Lakshaman, was clutching the hair of Damien Goryanov, trying to take the stun ball away from him.

"Again a penalty! Spitter unwillingly opens its mouth, and the *gandharvas*, sarcastically smirking, line up all around. It goes without saying, they again hope to catch the rebound!" Bab-Yagun chattered away.

Damien Goryanov forced the vacuum to buzz in the air, screwed up his right eye, swung widely and put all his strength into the throw...

The Tibidox trainer Nightingale O. Robber began to moan and held his head. The stands started to shout with laughter. Yes, you do not see that often!

"What a hit!" the lop-eared grandson of Yage exclaimed to the entire stadium. "I have in mind that only our adorable Goryanov could throw such a curve ball! Spitter perplexedly begins to slam shut its mouth, understanding that indeed somehow a ball won't exactly turn up in it. The stun projectile describes an arc in the air and – falls directly onto the nose of the *gandharva* forward Mamarama.

"TRA-TA-RA-TA-TA!"

"The magic enclosed in the ball is freed and for a moment wraps the forward in a lilac cloud! Mamarama begins to giggle foolishly and, accompanying himself on the lute, briskly strikes up the Indian folk song *In the field a tea bush was standing!* Say what you want, but stun magic, on top of that at the dose for a dragon, – not some cup of coffee on an empty stomach!

"Joining their comrade in singing, Lakshaman and Jelly-Backbone carefully lead the cheered up Mamarama from the field. The *gandharva* clings to them and climbs to hug them. It's clear he will not be playing in this match... Interesting, is this counted as a goal for us or not? After all, the throw was sufficiently effective, although the ball did not fall into the dragon... What? I can't believe my eyes! Sardanapal has assigned a penalty to Tibidox! And now this is indeed an outrage! Indeed, it's clear to everyone that Goryanov struck Mamarama not with any malicious intent, but only as a result of a congenital squint! And no need to look at me unfavourably, Damien, I speak the truth and only the truth!" Bab-Yagun shouted.

Lakshaman got ready to break through to Goyaryn for the penalty. He floated with the sneeze ball out to the eleven-metre boundary and began to wait for Goyaryn to open its mouth. When this

happened, Lakshaman made a quick false movement, waited till the Tibidox dragon tried to dodge, and swiftly threw the ball. The mouth of Goyaryn had not yet slammed shut and the ball flew into it already. A violet flash flared up.

“Goal! The *gandharvas* get two points. Yielding to the action of magic, Goyaryn begins slowly to inflate as if it intends...” Bab-Yagun chattered on.

It was not necessary to explain anything. The magic mouthpiece was filled with a terrible rumble. It seemed even the massive rock tortoise Tibidox trembled. Whirling up sand, a sandstorm swept over the field.

“Oh, my granny mama! What an unbelievable sneeze! An instant ago something flew swiftly past me and cut into the magic dome separating the playing field from the spectator stands. Interesting, who is this picturesque pancake with feathers? Really, Lakshaman? Here it is – punishment for malicious joy! In Lakshaman’s place, I would not fly so close in order to admire the result of my throw!

“Several genie medical orderlies strive as cautiously as possible to peel the *gandharva* from the dome. I’m not mistaken if I say that he’ll need a prolonged rest in magic station. If the *gandharvas* were not immortal, the result would be even sadder,” informed Bab-Yagun.

The game continued.

The *gandharvas* were already deprived of a second player, but then they were leading in score. Seven-Stump-Holes and Rita On-The-Sly cut Grouser-Aga off from Goyaryn, but Grouser-Aga, deftly diving down, passed the immobilize ball to Jelly-Backbone. Tanya rushed after Backbone, at the same time having accidentally noticed that Ramapapa and half-back Lollifolly were not participating in the play but whispering something to their dragon. This seemed suspicious to her and she decided not to let the dragon out of her sight.

Spitter climbed in circles under the dome itself and, stretching its leathery wings, began to pull in air, fanning to an incredible size in front of the eyes. The majority of the Tibidox team, involved in the fight for the remaining balls, did not notice this strange manoeuvre. Tanya yelled, trying to warn at least someone, but her voice was carried away by the wind. And a second later the Indian dragon began to belch out short jets of flame. These were not even jets but powerful and well-aimed fiery spittle. One of them almost licked the polish of her double bass, but Tanya was able to dodge. But then the others were much less lucky.

“Did you see this mean surprise attack? Without warning, without any declaration of flame-throwing!” Bab-Yagun got roused. “Coffinia Cryptova gets a serious burn on her leg. Even vampire bile did not help. The tank of her vacuum is punched through and mermaid scale and *barabashka* dandruff are thrown out with the fumes. It’s not known how long the Swine-Sportage will be able to hold out without refuelling.

“Even worse is the situation with Kuzya Tuzikov. His jet broom blazes, but Kuzya heroically rejects using the shawl-parachute. Courageous Tuzik-Kuzik – pth... Kuzik-Tuzik... pth again... excuse me, Puzik-Kuzik... I am confused from indignation... hopes to put out the fire with a counter air stream. It’s useless! The flame only burns with air. Tuzikov already rolls off the broom to the ground and is lying on the sand face down. The medical orderlies rush to him, but Kuzya gets up by himself. It seems he succeeded in uttering the accelerated braking spell *Bangus parachutis forte*. Hey, hey, why is my vacuum braking! I didn’t intend to release a spark! I only reproduced how it sounds!”

Fiery spittle, only very recently threading thick and fast the entire dragonball field of Tibidox, finally stopped. The Indian dragon itself blew them away. Falling, it was gathering strength for new flame throwing.

Making use of this, Zhora Zhikin and Rita On-The-Sly attempted to fight their way to Spitter with the five-point pepper ball. Zhikin on his high-speed mop easily went around two *gandharva* defences and began to swing around not very confidently, getting away from a strike by the dragon’s tail.

Tanya, protecting Zhikin from above, suddenly focused attention on Grouse-Aga, who had stopped in the air all of a sudden and, smirking, began to strum on his lute. The propeller on Zhora's mop started to work with interruption, and then it suddenly died. It happened that it had also faded before, but not so suddenly. Zhikin perplexedly waved his hands and began to fall. Tanya rushed but Rita On-The-Sly beat her to him, and Zhora, hanging by the shawl-parachute, passed her the pepper ball.

Without reducing speed, On-The-Sly chased with the guitar with trailer to head off Spitter. The mouth of the Indian dragon was tightly closed, and Rita began to drift tantalizingly before its nose, provoking Spitter to flame throwing. It was a risk, but a risk justified. Nevertheless, no other possibility to throw the ball existed.

Considering that its tail could not reach such a fast target, Spitter threw open its mouth and began to angrily pull in air. Its small eyes calculated the distance to its mark, and meanwhile, it seemed, the dragon weighed which he loved more: *shashlik* grilled or beef steak with blood.

“Come on, Rita, come on! Show them where dragons spend the night!” Bab-Yagun recklessly howled, staring at them.

The stands began to rage. The *gandharva*-fans flapped their wings and produced a deafening hubbub like hundreds of quarrelsome seagulls. Vanka Valyalkin, barely chewing, hurriedly swallowed the cutlets and pickles provided by his magic tablecloth. Vanka always ate when he was upset and now he was simply monstrously upset.

“And what's this! Why doesn't she throw! Throw!” A reckless Tararakh jumped up and down on the spot and shook his *pood*-sized fists, which did not greatly please the hissing snakes, into which the hair of Medusa had transformed without being noticed by the mistress.

Nightingale O. Robber and the *gandharva* trainer Kashavara shouted something to the players of their own team, but their voices were lost in the general rumble. Then, losing patience, Nightingale whistled with two fingers like a robber. Along the field rushed a sandstorm in the shape of a snake. One of the genie-referees, playing up to the *gandharvas*, was literally swept away and was found only many days later – gone crazy and deaf in one ear.

Even the stern dean of Tibidox Slander Slanderych, and that one clearly not aware what he was doing, clutched his mermaid by the tail, which the mermaid had the foresight to leave out of the barrel, and started to fan himself with it. The mermaid began to giggle and playfully splashed him with water. Dentistikha, with disgust, straightened her glasses and moved away: she felt sick from the smell of a damp fish. “What impudence! Since when do they allow evil spirits at matches?” she grumbled in an undertone.

Having dodged the fiery jet, Rita On-The-Sly swung for a certain throw. Unexpectedly from below, from under the dragon belly, Lollifolly emerged and deftly pulled the ball out of her hands. The guitar with trailer started to twirl with the airflow from his wing. She lost control of the guitar and – turned up in Spitter's mouth.

“I'm going to fall from the vacuum!” Bab-Yagun began to moan. “The Tibidox team is deprived of another player! Escaping from the dragon's teeth and the flame, On-The-Sly dives like a swallow into the dragon's throat. I don't think that it's too comfortable in Spitter's stomach, but it's not necessary to haul her out... Hey, which donkey let the cupids out onto the field? Remove these nitwits immediately or at least put suspenders on them! Which way are the dragon handlers looking at altogether, I'm furious! They'll be gorged!”

The genie dragon handlers and both referees, fussing and interfering with each other, dashed to catch the cupids, slipping through a slot into the magic dome. To catch them all proved to be an extremely complex matter. The winged boys, and there were about two dozens of them, scattered in different directions, giggling and releasing gold arrows at random. One even managed to hit a dragon handler by the finger, and another almost became Spitter's dinner, but just in time pricked its double tongue with an arrow and slipped away.

A crafty Jelly-Backbone slyly threw the flame-extinguisher ball at Goyaryn, but in his haste, he missed. He did not succeed in picking up the ball a second time: it was necessary to escape from the red-hot jet of flame, which the Tibidox dragon breathed out. True, the flame of Goyaryn was not as long-range as those of the competing “goal,” but then the jet of fire shot from its mouth would burn anything to ashes straightaway.

The bounced flame-extinguisher ball was intercepted by Katya Lotkova, who, getting away from Ramapapa, made a pass to Tanya.

“A critical moment!” Bab-Yagun yelled. “Having gotten the flame-extinguisher ball, Tatiana Grotter, number ten, loops around, taking off from Jelly-Backbone and Ramapapa! She tries to force her way to Spitter, but the *gandharva* defence cuts her off from the dragon. Tanya decides not to gain altitude because of the short jets of fire, which the Indian dragon pours on her from above the heads of the defence. Instead, Tanya is fixed on the nearest *gandharva* half-back Lollifolly. Really an attempt at ramming? The *gandharva* is likely also considering it because he turns over on his back and puts his claws out in front. You mustn’t, Tanya, this is folly!

“Surprisingly, she did not intend to ram! Not quite a metre away from Lollifolly, Grotter sharply leans forward and, directing the bow downward, dives under the dragon’s belly. Lollifolly, recollecting suddenly, and Ramapapa, arriving to his aid, rush after Tanya in order to prevent her from entering the dead zone. Brilliant manoeuvre! Well done, young Grotter!

“Strange, I don’t understand what Jelly-Backbone is doing! He for some reason has lost all interest in Tanya and begins to strum on his lute. Indeed, he found the time! Perhaps he should also be given a little scoop in order to play in the warm sand on the shore?

“NO! DID YOU SEE THAT?”

“What is happening? Why does Grotter’s double bass begin to knock about and twirl on the spot like some nutty cello? Tanya is hardly managing to keep it in place. One of two things: either the airflow from the dragon’s wing turned it, or dark magic has again come into play, like in the match with the *babai*! Perhaps my friend Vanka Valyalkin is right when he maintains that the higher a team is ranked in the world, the dirtier its game. And now, if you do not object, I will stop chattering for a while and play a little. Possibly, our trainer Nightingale O. Robber is precisely hinting at this, for some reason he has been persistently showing me his pumpkin-shaped fist for five minutes already.”

Bab-Yagun deftly caught the pipe of his vacuum, stepped on the gas, letting out a small scattering of mermaid scales from the wide carpet nozzle, and swiftly raced to Jelly-Backbone. The cheating *gandharva* noticed the danger too late. He folded up his wings and was thrown downward, having stopped strumming on the lute. Tanya could finally level the double bass and, evading the sharp teeth on the back of the Indian dragon, made the pass to Bab-Yagun.

Gaining altitude, she saw how Yagun rushed past on the vacuum cleaner quite close to Ramapapa, who began to twirl with the storm released from the pipe, as Yagun made his way to the dragon. Spitter breathed out flame, but Yagun skilfully passed over it, the way they had mastered in training. The right hand of the playing commentator tossed up for the throw, but suddenly the Indian dragon rushed forward. Not having time to reduce speed, Yagun disappeared into its mouth, but also not letting go of the flame-extinguisher ball. And after an instant a bright flash and the inoffensive puff of smoke coming out of the dragon’s throat let it be known that the magic had successfully snapped into action.

Spitter roared hoarsely, not understanding why instead of flame only dove-coloured puffs of smoke took off from its mouth, accompanied by sounds resembling the morning cough of a smoker.

The stands exploded with shouts. Many broke away from their places, worrying about the fate of the swallowed number eight.

“What’s with Yagun? Why is he silent? Did the canines really get him? Academician, quick!” Tararakh shouted in uneasiness. Stepping on the feet of the fans, he raced to Sardanapal. The chief umpire had the right to stop a match if fatal danger threatened a player, but here from the dragon’s

stomach came the cheerful voice, “Hurray! Tibidox pulls ahead! Hey, someone tell me: did they forget to count three points for us? Pu-f-f! Well, even heat in here! I haven’t steamed in a bath for a long time! Since they drove away Granny’s Hut on Chicken Feet, and in place of it they put up some flea-pit on broiler legs like ham! And the gloom – simply pitch-dark!”

Pushing aside the genies trying to stop him, the *gandharva* trainer Kashavara climbed through under the guard dome and, turning to the players of his team, screamed out something for a while. The *gandharvas* stirred. Leaving several defenders by the flameless Spitter, Ramapapa and Jelly-Backbone rushed to Goyaryn with the pepper ball, simultaneously Lollifolly and Grouser-Aga were engaged in the fight for the immobilize ball, which Damien Goryanov on the roaring Storm-100U had already chased unsuccessfully for several minutes.

Meanwhile the playing commentator was clearly languishing from curiosity, not having any idea what was taking place outside. “Hey, you there, above! What’s going on with you? Does no one intend to save us by throwing the pepper ball? I’m all sweaty here, on top of that On-The-Sly is cursing! Her hand was stepped on, you see! But I tell you, Rita, I didn’t see you! Stop twitching, or this imported lizard will overcook us, and that’s the end of it!” Bab-Yagun’s indignant voice, intensified by the magic mouthpiece, came out of the dragon’s stomach.

Pretending that he intended to loop, Ramapapa fooled Katya Lotkova wonderfully and gathered height, finding himself right above Goyaryn’s head. Tanya guessed that Ramapapa was attempting to use the so called “sudden nose attack.” The essence of this manoeuvre consisted of striking off-hand the sensitive nose of a dragon and, waiting, while it angrily opens its mouth, to throw the ball. This trick usually would not work with young dragons – they were too swift, but here it could work with an ancient giant like Goyaryn. However, Ramapapa did not consider the firepower of the dragon. In that moment when the claws of the *gandharva* struck its nose, Goyaryn furiously breathed out flame. Ramapapa hardly had time to shield with the lute. Squeezing the charred frame of the lute in his hands, the smoking *gandharva* hid in the mouth of the Tibidox dragon.

The pepper ball attempted to bolt to the dome, but was instantly caught by Jelly-Backbone. Backbone effectively beat Seven-Stump-Holes and with a powerful throw from the middle third completed the attack into Goyaryn’s mouth not yet slammed shut. The pepper ball flared up with a white flash in the throat of the Tibidox dragon, and in the next second, yielding to magic, the dragon with loathing spat out the not completely swallowed Ramapapa. Ramapapa’s hair was sticking out in different directions from the dragon saliva. A thick layer of cinder covered his skin. The *gandharva* fans greeted the appearance of Ramapapa with loud encouraging shouts.

“The *gandharvas* earn five points! The score of the match is 7:3 in favour of our Indian guests!” Sardanapal gloomily declared. His playful moustaches managed to be untied. One of them, exactly like a woodpecker, in a business-like manner drummed the academician’s forehead as if explaining: I say, do you understand at all what is happening? We’re losing!

Kashavara began to beam with pleasure and gave Nightingale O. Robber a triumphant look. Nightingale turned away and, calmly squinting one eye, began to follow the last remaining ball in the game – the immobilize.

Now there was an intense fight precisely for this ball.

Damien Goryanov was to take possession of the ball, but only for several seconds. Then Lollifolly and Grouser-Aga took his clumsy vacuum in their claws, and the Storm-100U, thanks to them with a pipe broken off, cut into the magic barrier. Barely having time to mutter the accelerated braking spell, Goryanov’s head was buried in the warm sand.

Grouser-Aga rushed with the intercepted ball to Goyaryn, but in the air encountered Liza Zalizina and her diving clock. While Grouser-Aga was investigating the cuckoo, Liza Zalizina recaptured the ball from him and made a pass to Seven-Stump-Holes. That one attempted to make his way to Spitter, but fell into the turbulence from a hit by the dragon’s tail. Seven-Stump-Holes began to twirl, made an unsuccessful throw, and the ball ended up with Lollifolly.

The game again moved to that part of the field, where under the dome Goyaryn turned with a terrible roar. The pepper magic burnt the interior of the old dragon, it was enraged, and, knowing this, even its own defenders decided not to approach Goyaryn. Katya Lotkova (his favourite) alone circled above its head, from time to time daring to touch lightly the red-hot scale. But even she did not succeed in calming the huge pangolin.

An infuriated dragon is an easy target. Goyaryn would now open its mouth and the *gandharvas* would throw the ball from a far distance. This Tanya understood immediately. She waved her bow and, clutching the fingerboard of the double bass, raced to head off Lollifolly. The rigid strings scratched her nose, grazed her scorched cheek.

Tanya was already close by when her double bass suddenly reduced speed. Now it was moving with jolts, precisely as if it had to break through thick jelly. The girl noticed with peripheral vision that Grouser-Aga and Jelly-Backbone, as if completely not interested in the match, were resignedly strumming their lutes.

“*Solidus royalismus!*” Tanya whispered, with all her strength packed into the spell blocking dark magic. Leopold Grotter’s ring, having inherited the troublesome nature of great-grandfather Theophilus, shot a green spark. Deftly getting away from dragon flame, Lollifolly already raised his hand for the throw when Tanya’s double bass overcame resistance and again rushed forward. The heavy immobilize ball, released accurately to Goyaryn’s mouth, having met an obstacle, struck the girl painfully on the leg. Not tarrying, Tanya caught the ball and fastened it to her forearm. Lollifolly was never able to understand how the quick-moving girl suddenly appeared in the path of the ball. The stout *gandharva* gaped and began to flutter his wings shallowly, watching as she swiftly moved away towards Spitter.

Here the golden scales of the Indian dragon already flickered in front. Its narrow snake body with sharp bone plates coiled rapaciously, the leathery wings were cutting air rhythmically. Hardly noticing the yellow spot of the immobilize ball, which it hated with all the strength of its dragon soul, Spitter roared and attempted to shoot a jet of fire. However, the flame-extinguisher magic was working indeed. Only a foul black smoke came out of its mouth. Two defenders rushed to head off Tanya, but she skilfully went around them and made her way to Spitter. Teasing the dragon, the girl got ready for an instantaneous turn, but here Grouser-Aga, Jelly-Backbone, and Lollifolly joining them, started to strum their lutes intently.

“How this orchestra of folk instruments bores me! Interesting, why doesn’t Sardanapal interfere?” Tanya thought with melancholy, again casting the magic block.

The shield spell did not work this time. Either there were too many enemies or the counter magic proved to be excessively strong. Not obeying the bow, the double bass bucked and turned over sharply. Tanya could not hang on and was torn away, and in flight continued to press the immobilize ball against herself. She was just about to utter the accelerated braking spell when suddenly something flickered below. An amazed Tanya found herself on a vacuum behind Coffinia Cryptova. Moreover, Coffinia herself clearly did not arrange such proximity. “*Hastenus plodus!*” she growled out, passing onto the more load-lifting spell. The Swine-Sportage, smelling of mermaids from the pierced tank, levelled itself with difficulty. “Let go of my neck, cranky orphan! You’ll smother me! And roll off my vacuum altogether! It’s hardly flying like this way” Cryptova croaked.

Not listening to her, Tanya searched with her eyes the unguided double bass, blindly roving inside the dome. The moment she found it, the double bass slapped down with its neck against the sand, turned over several times, and stood still. Tanya shrieked. She wanted to jump immediately like a swallow from Coffinia’s vacuum and, dashing to her instrument, to nurse it precisely like a sick child. Only the thought that the match was not yet over and that she had the immobilize ball stopped Tanya.

“My double bass broke! Did you see it?” she sighed, clinging to Coffinia. “So what’s it to me? Examine your flying balalaika yourself! If only it would turn into matches altogether!” Cryptova

snorted. Speaking maliciously, she casually raised her head and began to squeal. A dark shadow covered them. From above, wings folded, the enraged dragon of the *gandharvas* dived at the girls.

“We’re dead meat! It’s all because of you!” Cryptova hurriedly swung the Swine-Sportage around and, not stopping to fill the field with shrill trills, rushed fleeing. The overloaded vacuum coughed hysterically, fell into air pockets, and definitely intended to die, emitting fumes with the remaining fuel and stinking of damp scales. Coffinia struck the vacuum with her heels, frantically shooting one red spark after another from her ring.

“Don’t be nervous, Crypt! Let it get nearer!” Tanya shouted. She was irritated. Cowardly clutching the pipe and continually changing the direction of flight, Coffinia prevented her from taking aim and throwing the ball. “What, have you gone nuts? Better make a pass to someone! This psycho-tank pangolin will finish us off!” she squealed in panic.

The raging dragon was almost hanging onto their tail. Turning around, Tanya already saw the pink depressions of its nostrils and the uneven, scaly outgrowths on the elongated predatory snout. “Increase speed, and then sharply apply the brakes!” Tanya ordered.

“I can’t! The vacuum is dying! Ah, what was I saying! Jump off, cranky orphan, I want to live!” Coffinia began to wail. She settled herself on the edge, leaned back, and knocked Tanya off the vacuum. Falling, Tanya had time to grip Coffinia by a foot. The immobilize ball, already ready for the throw, slipped from her hand and by chance stuck to the fastening on Coffinia’s forearm. “Ah-ah! What did you do! Remove it now!” Cryptova, to her horror, realized that she had gotten the pass. Trying to kick Tanya with her free foot, she let go of the pipe and chaotically waved her hands, attempting to get rid of the ball.

The immobilize ball, released with the only desire to drop it off faster somewhere, traced a semicircle in the air and – landed in the open mouth of Spitter! Dual yellow flash! The magic vapour, cloaking the dragon’s head, covered its malicious eyes with a sleepy veil. Spitter yawned and, forgetting about the Swine-Sportage vacuum and its tasty riders, set off for a long snooze on the warm sand. “And to hell with you all!” – As if its withdrawing shuddering tail was saying.

“Hey, what’s happening? Why are we falling? Who won? Oh, my granny mama, and why is everything quiet? Hey, On-The-Sly, stop pinching me! What’s with you, worried?” Bab-Yagun howled from the dragon’s stomach.

“A clean victory! We won!” Tararakh yelled, holding Dentistikha in powerful hugs. Something crunched inside the instructor of removal of evil eye. “Your enthusiasm is understandable, but my ribs!!!” she squeaked. Embarrassed, the pithecanthropus let out of Deni and moved aside. True, his repentance was sufficiently temporary. A minute later, he was already hugging Slander’s mermaid, to the terrible jealousy of the dean.

The stands roared exultantly. The *gandharvas* fans with shrill cries rose into the air and hurried to fly further away from the disgrace. The hero-bouncers Gorynya, Usynya, and Dubynya, deprived of the possibility to express their enthusiasm with howls, expressed it by slapping each other, and generally indiscriminately, on the backs and shoulders of everybody. Three more cyclopes suffered injuries.

“GOAL! On receiffing a pass from young Grotter, Coffinia Cryptoff zrows ze vinning ball! O, vhat a courageous champion Coffinia is! Vhat a brilliant technician! To zrow ze ball, vhen on her foot, like a bulldog, hangs the pushy Tatian! You all saw zat in zis match the star Tatian Grotter vaned and a new star blazed up – Coffinia Cryptoff!” Professor Stinktopp, taking on himself the responsibilities of commentator after Yagun’s disappearance into the dragon’s stomach, commented.

Coffinia, still fleeing from a dragon already asleep, finally thought to turn around. She understood that she succeeded in throwing the winning goal. “It’s me! Me! You saw that! And well, let go of my foot, Grotter! Quick away from my glory, upstart!”

Bowing and bathing in the rays of undeserved glory, Cryptova missed the moment when the Swine-Sportage finally died and plunged down. Tanya fell first on the sand and an instant

later, Cryptova on her vacuum crashed down on her. Tanya heard something crunch and, would remembered later, had time still to wonder what this could be. And then suddenly a monstrous pain swept over her and forced her to bury her face in the sand. On the other hand, Coffinia, who landed directly on her, did not suffer a bit. Soon she was already on her feet, accepting congratulations, and blowing air kisses in different directions.

“We won! What a miracle this Coffinia is! I’ve always adored her, even when she turned me into a rat! May I hug her? No, me first!” the admirers squealed. Bursting through the magic barrier, a whole crowd of fans rushed to Coffinia and began to toss her up, simultaneously almost trampling Tanya.

In about five minutes, must give him credit, a fan, not managing to reach the body of the star Mademoiselle Cryptova, focused his attention also on Tanya. “And young Grotter! Where is she? What an outstanding pass she made!” this over-enthusiastic fan of dragonball screamed. Dusya Dollova, Verka Parroteva, and ten more such impressionable fools rushed to Tanya. Feeling the savage pain in her broken leg bent at a completely unthinkable angle, with the foot turned to the side like the neck of a broiler chicken, Tanya attempted to crawl away.

“Oh, will you look at the poor thing! She’s all covered with blood! And the boot jumped off her foot! Let’s put it back on!” Dusya Dollova started to coo. “No, I’ll do it! Get away from here, fat face bitch!” Verka Parroteva demanded. “Go away yourself! Give the boot over here!” Dollova became furious. Both fans ran up to Tanya and, gripping her foot, each of them began to pull it to her own side. “Ah-ah-ah!” Young Grotter began to scream in an inhuman voice. It would not be more painful for her even if they simply chopped off her leg. “Oh, how nervous she is! Better let’s go to Coffinia!” the fans were annoyed. The impressionable persons rushed off, chased away by the scream. They dragged away the boot of the star. Then Yagge and the genie medical orderlies could finally make their way to Tanya.

“It’ll be a little painful now. Can you bear it?” Yagge asked. Biting her lips, Tanya nodded. Yagge quickly examined her leg. She ordered the genies to move Tanya onto the stretcher with great care and convey her to magic station. “And now better for you to not look in a mirror!” she hesitated. “The least that you earned is the burn, dozens of abrasions, five bruises, and a complex fracture. Must put bonegrafts under the plaster, so mind you don’t whine! It’s not too pleasant, I’m warning you!”

The panting Central-Asian genies, along whose uneven faces roaming eyes, mouths, and ears dreamily crawled from one place to another, picked up the stretcher. Understanding that now they were taking her away, Tanya raised and grabbed Yagge’s wrinkled hand. “Wait! What about my double bass?”

Yagge turned to Nightingale O. Robber. “What about the double bass of our beauty? Else she’ll in no way lie quietly in magic station!” she asked grumpily. Nightingale was at a loss, “I tried to secure it with a spell while it somersaulted along the sand. Nevertheless only the neck was cracked. Please forgive me that it turned out so.”

Tanya grimaced. She did not want to cry, turned away, but tears flowed nevertheless. And then she could not control herself and burst into tears. “Why mope, just think, a piece of wood! Better think about the leg. If it grows together crooked – to the end of your life you’ll waddle like a goose...” Yagge muttered unhappily, nodding to the medical orderlies.

* * *

The rest of the day turned out to be not especially pleasant for Tanya in magic station. All her cuts and scratches were covered with the pungent and odorous ointment, which reeked awfully of harpies and frightened skunks. The broken leg was stretched out and placed in a cast, under which Yagge, whispering something, put a whole box of well-fed bonegrafts similar to flat coins with paws. The bonegrafts immediately crawled away along the leg. They were sticky, disgusting, and forced

Tanya to experience itch and a continuous tingle. The only comfort was that behind the partition in magic station lay Bab-Yagun, getting a heatstroke in the white-hot stomach of the dragon and on top of that badly scratched by Rita On-The-Sly.

Outside, enthusiastic fans greeted Coffinia. Their roar even penetrated through the double frames of magic station. The hero-bouncers Usynya, Dubynya, and Gorynya hammered together a kind of mobile wooden dais and, having loaded it on their shoulders, carried Coffinia in triumph through Tibidox. Carried past from time to time, Cryptova appeared in the windows of magic station and smiled caustically, waving the hand with long bright green nails at Tanya.

“Everyone says that she scored, and you only interfered with her. Hampered her vacuum, hung onto her foot... Why were you so? Lost you head, huh?” Bab-Yagun asked, leaning over from behind the partition. Tanya silently flung a pillow at him. “Oh, my granny mama! Beating up the overheated!” Yagun shouted with laughter, pulling the pillow like a Napoleonic bicorne over his eyes.

Tanya turned away from him and covered her head with the blanket. She wanted to bite, to kick someone with her healthy foot, and to howl like Pipa. Who would think that from the stands everything looked so idiotic? She, it appears, prevented Cryptova from scoring! If even Yagun thinks so, what would the rest say? Gradually her anger burnt out. She started to feel sorry for herself and even cried in the pillow, but very quietly so that Yagun would hear nothing. The broken leg under the cast stung and tingled. It seemed as if the bonegrafts enmeshed her in a sticky, hot cobweb. Rocking with waves of pain and taking pleasure in the least bit of calm, Tanya finally fell asleep.

How long she slept, she did not know, but probably not for long, because in the middle of the night deafening crashes woke her. Peals of thunder shook Tibidox, forcing this structure squat like a rock tortoise to shudder all the way to the basement. The downpour lashed at the windows of magic station. It seemed a river was flowing outside along the glass. Raindrops seeped into the cracks badly calked by spells and accumulated into puddles on the floor and the wide windowsill. The sky was highlighted every second by fiery arrows of lightning – two and three simultaneously. It seemed to Tanya, whose bed stood very near the glass, as if all the lightning was beating exactly at one point – the garret of the Big Tower.

Unexpectedly, Tanya recalled the words of Nightingale: “But nevertheless only the neck was cracked!” Tanya became terrified. Stretching with difficulty to the chair on which her clothing was, the girl reached the notebook and in a hurry began to turn its pages. Crib notes for studies of evil spirits, prescriptions on how to quiet a raging dragon... But where is it? Aha! Here it is – instruction on the use of the magic double bass! How nice that once she surmised to copy it from the white birch bark, and even more pleasant that these records had not disappeared, as it happened with the attempt to duplicate a forbidden spell!

Bluish flashes of lightning snatched out scraps of phrases. The glass shuddered with each thunderclap, “This double bass... by magician Theophilus Grotter... for flights to Bald Mountain... of fine magic... material... deck boards from Noah’s Ark... inside the neck the Rope of the Seventeen Hanged Men, snapping..... to execute the innocent...”

“...avoid collision with solid objects! Violation of the rules..... liberation of the powerful curse contained in the Rope...”

Tanya dropped the notebook. And what if the Rope of the Seventeen Hanged Men broke and this terrible thunderstorm – clearly magic in origin – was somehow connected with the liberation of the ancient curse? But now Tanya was too tired to ponder the vague hints of great-grandfather Theophilus. What could have appeared to the grumbling hypochondriac magician living several centuries ago? To the magician whose voice was living in her ring?

The girl wrapped herself up in the blanket. It was damp. Behind the partition, Bab-Yagun was sweetly smacking his lips. From time to time, he stopped smacking and angrily, clearly in a dream, told someone, “And quick away from here, else I’ll make you!” And again he smacked. Heavy jets of rain lashed the glass and the overhanging tiled canopy of magic station. It was not simply a downpour.

It seemed the ocean itself, confined in an invisible cup, was hovering over the island, and made haste now to pour onto Tibidox. Tanya closed her eyes and fell asleep under the incessant noise of rain, wind gusts, and rolling thunder...

Chapter 3

The Closet Which Was Not and Is Not There

The Snake of Time is a strange essence. Having rolled up into a ring, it lies somewhere at infinity, and minutes, days, years, and centuries are trapped in a great majority of its scales. They whisper, true, that in the old days the strong black magician Ludwig Snot-Nose put a spell on the snake. The essence of this spell is that time always runs too fast in one's happy moments, whereas during unpleasant ones it drags on, like cold pasta wound around a fork and will in no way end.

During the first lesson of practical magic Tanya specifically pondered this and the vacations that flashed past imperceptibly, looking with loathing at her slippery cauldron, smelly after the summer, along the bottom of which crawled disgusting white maggots, having managed to appear not without the help of numerous Tibidox flies. But then Professor Stinktopp was extremely satisfied with this, asserting that filth gave additional magic abilities to the cauldrons.

“Not a bad rest! Three weeks lying in magic station in order to discover later that one can't bathe after bonegrafts! What's the sense of being a magician if you're allowed less than the most common moronoid?” Tanya reflected, simultaneously trying not to miss the explanations of Professor Stinktopp.

The wrinkled professor of practical magic walked leisurely around the class and, dropping quick glances in all directions with his spiteful eyes the colour of dried orange peel, growled, “For ze preparation of elixir of foresight you take one large leaf of burdock and vrap up in it flowers of fern and finely ground agate. Copy? Zen you add a splinter of a coffin, dragon mucus, fur of a dead rat, stone from ze goitre of a chicken, and boil efferyzing in svamp vater. Ven it boil, you must not lover a spoon in zere, but stir it viz a cut off frog leg! If you do efferyzing sehr gut, zen ven ze slush begin to boil – somezing interesting vill happen! Copy efferyzing? But now schnell, schnell, young dumdums! Do efferyzing as I said! And I vill vatch you viz great pleasure!”

In Professor Stinktopp's voice was concealed malicious joy, so badly hidden that all the students noticed it. Even the professor's favourite Rita On-The-Sly suspiciously raised her head. Coffinia Cryptova squinted, first trying to consider what filth would be prepared by Stinktopp.

Spurred on by an impatient Stinktopp bobbing up and down, the second graders set about pounding agate and getting flowers of fern from a leather bag. Meanwhile Gunya Glomov, transferred into grade two only because in first grade he had mortally bored all instructors, was chasing a dead rat, which had shown extraordinary quickness and bolted, having bitten Gunya's finger.

Professor Stinktopp grumbled, claiming that one of the senior pupils had revived the rat and that he, Stinktopp, would definitely report this disgrace to Slander Slanderych. Finally, Stinktopp calmed down, drank two spoonfuls of cognac with bile, and even permitted Rite On-The-Sly to partially pluck his waistcoat, which he had already been wearing for many centuries in a row without taking it off. “Indeed I didn't know it's made of rat skin!” Bab-Yagun, making a face, whispered to Tanya.

Tanya lit the fire under the cauldron and, stirring slowly with a frog leg, began to wait for the swamp water to boil. Occasionally either the boiled burdock or the flower of fern floated to the surface. The sliver of a coffin pensively turned like a compass needle in the smelly bubble coming up from the bottom.

At the same time Tanya was curiously watching Vanka Valyalkin, who recently, after attempting to unnoticeably eat a cutlet, dropped it into the cauldron. Now a thick orange smoke was belching from the cauldron; Vanka tried to hide it from Stinktopp, covering the cauldron with the lid. But this did not help. The smoke nevertheless belched, and on top of that, squeaked with a rusty senile voice. Vanka probably had disturbed the rest of some ancient genie. Now the genie was rioting and breaking for freedom.

As Vanka neither tried nor leaned on the cover, Professor Stinktopp discovered this disgrace. With a single red spark he forced the genie to evaporate, and gave Vanka a fat two in his mark book. Bab-Yagun and Zhora Zhikin, founders of the secret Order of Dumdums, immediately congratulated Vanka for initiative, and Gunya Glomov shook Vanka's hand until he himself got a two. Only then would Glomov calm down and with satisfaction sank to his place.

Suddenly Dusya Dollova almost soared to the ceiling and, miraculously not overturning the cauldron, joyfully began to yell, "Ah! All the same, they'll give me the leather suit as a gift! How cute I'll look in it!" Rushing to Dusya's cauldron, the second graders saw that it was already boiling and it reeked of a marshy slush. The rest could only see Dollova herself, who continued to squeal raptly about a leather suit. "Sehr Gut! Dolloff did efferyzing correctly!" Stinktopp approved.

A minute later, the slush boiled at Rita On-The-Sly's. In contrast to Dollova, the reserved Rita kept secret what she saw. Only here eyes were glued to the seething cauldron and she was smiling mysteriously.

And then... then everybody was spending their time rushing from one cauldron to another. In the air hung a smelly smoke, from which the eyes watered and the throat tickled. Only Professor Stinktopp alone, who adored awful odours, was pulling it with pleasure into his nose similar to a duck's beak and was smirking mysteriously.

Tanya was about to rush to Bab-Yagun, shouting that he saw the results of the semi-final of the world dragonball championship, when suddenly something started to seethe quite close by. She understood that her cauldron was boiling.

Forgetting about everything, Tanya leaned over the cauldron and began to peer impatiently into the smoking slush. For a long time she saw nothing except the burdock already boiled quite soft and the shimmering oily stains of dragon mucus. Tanya thought that something had gone wrong with the preparation of the elixir. Having decided to hide this from Professor Stinktopp in order not to infuriate him and not be enrolled into the Order of Dumdums, the girl wanted to pretend that she saw something. She sank her head lower and suddenly understood that the cauldron had disappeared somewhere. The outlines of the classroom washed away. Someone was standing directly in front of Tanya. She darted, shrieked, and fell through somewhere...

She came to from a sharp smell. Looking around, Tanya understood that she was sitting on a chair, the second graders were crowding all around, and Professor Stinktopp was holding in front of her nose a phial with smelling salt. Observing that the girl had come to, Stinktopp with explicit pleasure sniffed the smelling salt, squawked, and, winking his watery eyes alternately, asked, "Ah-ah-ah! Vat's viz you? Perhaps, you see somezing special, huh?"

"No... nothing... I simply felt sick... from the stink," Tanya barely whispered.

"Aha! You hear zis? Nerffous young Grotter fear green slime!" Professor Stinktopp drawled mockingly. Coffinia and Verka Parroteva began to neigh disgustingly.

Tanya tried not to look at anyone. She had lied to Stinktopp just now, but did not feel repentance. The truth was too terrible and it was more than possible for her to recount to Stinktopp. Indeed could she utter in everybody's hearing what she saw, how the academician Sardanapal was sitting in a tight cell, face hidden in a chipped bowl with swill, and beside him, hardly distinguishable in that seething swampy slush, stood a tall bony figure muffled in a raincoat?

For a long time, for a very long time Tanya remembered to the smallest detail the image that flickered for an instant. How real was this foresight? Is it possible to trust it? And if possible, what to do about it now – run to Sardanapal and recount it to him? It is very doubtful that the academician would treat her warning seriously.

Finally, the lesson ended. Professor Stinktopp, after stunning the class with completely insane homework, was pulled in the hammock to the hatch located in the ceiling.

"Listen, Yagun, was I unconscious for long?" Tanya asked.

Yagun shook his head. “Ne-a. At most – half a minute. I watched: any minute now you’re going to fall into the cauldron and I caught you. Vanka and I put you on the chair, and here Stinktopp was already mincing over with his little bottle. Well, and his face was malicious! I even thought: did he specially cook up all this? Perhaps, gave you some special sliver or whispered something to the slime?”

Unceremoniously pushing Yagun aside, Coffinia walked past importantly, surrounded by a whole crowd of admirers, whom she now had even more of than Katya Lotkova. After that luckily thrown ball, allowing Tibidox to advance to the semi-final, Cryptova simply enjoyed unbelievable success. When she appeared at dinner in the Hall of Two Elements, the school became quiet for several moments, after which many burst into applause. One enamoured third grader – a very shy youth by the name of Shuonk Chpurikov – once spilled over himself a pot of soup just to draw Coffinia’s attention to himself. By the way, Chpurikov came into Tibidox because every time he blushed, he became invisible without any desire on his part. Indeed, he blushed constantly.

Unexpectedly some kind of noise was heard in the corridor. Coffinia’s admirers, crowding around her, quickly rushed back to the stairs. Towards them, catching the floor with the fingers of his long arms, leisurely walked Tararakh, the instructor of veterinary magic, behind whom Usynya and Gorynya were dragging the infuriated immortal wild boar. Steam poured from the nostrils of the wild boar and fragments of an ancient, seemingly Greek or Persian, spear protruded from its back.

Noticing Tanya, Vanka Valyalkin, and Bab-Yagun, the pithecanthropus stopped and merrily turned to them, “Why are you so glum? Come from Stinktopp? What did you cook there? Temporary glue? Ointment from warts?”

“As if! Elixir of foresight... Mix with frog leg, throw in coffin slivers, and wait till it boils!” Vanka Valyalkin explained.

Tararakh’s eyebrows crawled to his forehead in amazement. “In second grade? Elixir of foresight? If I’m not entirely off my rocker, according to the program you now have yawning liqueur, decoction of malice, dense-bang mixture, and all kinds of nonsense in this vein. You muddled up something!”

“We studied elixir!” Valyalkin began to argue heatedly.

“But you couldn’t be!” Tararakh brushed it off.

“Yes, we did, did, did!” Vanka was not a bit less excited than his favourite instructor was.

The pithecanthropus wanted to object, but at this moment, Usynya let go of the hind legs of the wild boar and started to slap himself on the forehead, attempting to nail a persistent fly. The wild boar broke loose, knocked Tararakh off his feet, and swiftly dashed along the corridor in the direction of the office of Slander Slanderych. The students jumped in different directions, escaping from the wild boar. “What, have you gone nuts? And if Slander finds out that we drag a magic beast along the corridors! He precisely forbade it very strictly!” Tararakh began to yell at the heroes and dashed off in pursuit. Gorynya rushed after him, but Usynya, with his nails, picked up the murdered fly by a wing, brought it to his eyes, and contemplated his trophy with satisfaction for some time. Finally, he was wearied of it. He sighed, for some reason hid the fly in his breast pocket, and leisurely started awkwardly to follow his brother.

After the last lesson – studies of evil spirits with Medusa Gorgonova, in which they studied talking bedbugs (Vanka and Tanya were chuckling the entire lesson, remembering Professor Stinktopp and in a whisper making all kinds of interesting assumptions on his account) – the friends set off for the Hall of Two Elements. The entire Tibidox had already assembled there for the holiday dinner.

A beaming Professor Sardanapal – rosy, well-fed, with cheeks like a round loaf – in a smart red caftan with laces, with the downy beard combed, wound three times around his belt, stood up in the centre – in the enormous sun mosaic laid out on the marble floor. His luxurious moustaches – the right green and the left yellow – thoughtfully held the eyeglasses with the loose temples. Impressively puffing up his cheeks like a samovar, the for-life and posthumous head of Tibidox opened the small

chest, from which two smart fellows immediately jumped out and began with astounding speed to spread the magic tablecloths.

“Only look at Sardanapal! He’s a living Grandfather Frost!” Valyalkin started to whisper, imperceptibly nudging Tanya and Bab-Yagun. Tanya mistrustfully looked at the head of Tibidox and suddenly realized that Vanka was right. In the red caftan, with the beard, Sardanapal amazingly resembled Grandfather Frost. Perhaps, the academician only needed a fur trimmed hat and a voluminous bag. No, it cannot be that this greatest of the currently living magicians would find himself in a tight cell! Anything could be imagined in Stinktopp’s contaminated cauldron, where the swampy slush for sure was mixed with the white worms that do not form part of the elixir and spoiled it!

Sensing that they were looking at him, Sardanapal turned to their table. And in the next minute the quick fine fellows from the chest, given a special sign by the academician, tossed a tablecloth into the air.

“Oh, my granny mama, again this tablecloth with grated horseradish! I’ll hang myself to get away from these vitamins. Sardanapal really finished us off and we’re even ‘white!’ What a Grandpa Frost!” Bab-Yagun began to moan. It was not known whether the academician heard this or not, but he sternly threatened Yagun with a finger.

The ears of Yagge’s grandson started to shimmer timidly and he stuck a fork into a big lump of horseradish. It was good then that the ‘wafer’ tablecloth fell on the neighbouring table, and Seven-Stump-Holes, taking pity, passed to them a very decent cake with chocolate and condensed milk.

True, on moving the cake, Stump went a little too far and the cake left a stain on Bab-Yagun’s overalls. “What, have you gone crazy? Not playing dragonball, you know!” Yagun began to yell. “Pardon me, I absentmindedly gave you a curve ball,” the Tibidox forward guiltily made a helpless gesture.

At the end of the dinner Medusa Gorgonova loudly clapped her hands, attracting attention. “A minute! I want to make a small announcement! This morning a cupid came to us with a message from the world dragonball council! Whom the Tibidox team must meet in the semi-final has been determined. Our opponent will be...” Professor Gorgonova maintained the wearisome pause, “the Afghan Genies!”

Dead silence hung for an instant above the Hall of Two Elements, and then all at once everybody broke away from their places and began to shout. Gunya Glomov, out of the fullness of his feelings, even overturned the table. Slander Slanderych sent a cyclops to carry Gunya by an ear out of the hall, and the cyclops did it with the greatest pleasure.

In the centuries-old history of dragonball, the Afghan Genies became the world champion almost more often than the remaining teams. In overall rating, they were even ahead of the *gandharvas* and the *babai* and only marginally inferior to the Invisibles. Not without reason sports reviewers called them “the world bouncers.” Any team meeting the Genies on the play field suffered defeat with an immense score.

“Well, that’s it! The end for us! Now we’re definitely not breaking through to the final!” the defeatist Damien Goryanov exclaimed. “The main thing, you don’t fall off the vacuum. You’re of no use all the same. In Nightingale’s place I would have replaced you with Dusya Dollova long ago,” Bab-Yagun stated. Dollova winked gratefully, but the tactless Yagun immediately added, “After seeing her in the air, all the Genies will immediately begin to die from laughter and will miss all the balls. But Dusya won’t waste time; she will fall onto the head of their captain and set about squeezing him...”

A green spark, large as a chicken egg, was shot from the ring of Medusa and burst with a dry crack. “Attention please! On behalf of the instructors of the school of Tibidox I intend to give a pleasant surprise to the best player who presented herself magnificently in the match with the *gandharvas!*”

Hardly having heard about a surprise, Coffinia immediately leaped up and with the most readiness advanced forward. It seemed she was disturbed by one thought only: did she have enough

hands to take all the pleasant surprises and whether it was necessary to mobilize her boyfriends for this.

However, Medusa did not even turn in her direction. Instead, she gave someone a sign. Four grave panting house-spirits in Russian caftans brought into the hall a large, magnificently polished instrument. The cap of one of the house-spirits walking behind it was always slipping down over its eyes. Inspecting with interest what the house-spirits were carrying, Tanya absentmindedly admired the new polish, giving the instrument, which – of this she was convinced – she had never seen before, a pleasant walnut nuance.

“It was necessary for our masters to work for a while before they brought it back to the proper form. They had to replace the strings, cover it entirely with new varnish, and seriously restore the fingerboard. There was no special hurry, and for this very reason I asked them to do everything without hurry and thoroughly,” impatiently watching, as if expecting someone, Medusa continued. No one came out. Professor Stinktopp caustically giggled and looked sideways at Sardanapal.

Vanka nudged Tanya with a shoulder. “Hey, what’s with you? Fallen asleep? Go quickly! It’s your double bass!” he was astonished. “Not mine!” she growled. “What do you mean not yours? Look carefully! What, can’t you recognize it?” Vanka was angry.

Tanya did not move from her spot. The house-spirits approached her and started to chirp excitedly, clearly demanding that they be freed from their burden. Especially indignant was the one who could not fix the cap that kept slipping down, its hands were occupied. With no more doubts remaining, the girl took the double bass. The strings began to hum – softly and simultaneously, like an acquaintance. Tanya’s heart trembled. In the past month a day did not pass that she would not think about her instrument, but to the question of where it was and what had happened to it, all the instructors somehow kept significantly silent, and, in the end, Tanya stopped puzzling over it. And now suddenly this... Tanya even did not know whether she was glad or not – everything somehow was mixed up in her thoughts.

Medusa approached her. “I hope you’re not offended that we returned the double bass to you only now and in general kept everything secret? To tell you the truth, everything was already ready a week ago, but Sardanapal waited until Yagge has given you permission to begin training. This morning we finally entreated her. Try to be in shape for the match with the Genies... Well, at least you’re glad?”

“Don’t know... I’m... yes... glad...” Tanya answered incoherently. Medusa looked at her with understanding and smiled. Tanya guided her hand along the fingerboard, on which there was not one noticeable crack now. It could not be determined if the Rope had suffered or not, but she had decided not to ask Medusa directly about this. Indeed, it would be better to clarify this carefully later with the house-spirits, which, getting up on tiptoes, were standing beside her and trying to look into her face. They were also waiting for something, but what? Tanya smiled at them, but this clearly did not satisfy the house-spirits.

“And when’s the match?” Tanya asked. Medusa shrugged her shoulders. “The precise date has not been determined so far. There is complete confusion in the Sports Committee of the Magciety of Jerky Magtion. Likely, the poor devils got an evil eye again... In any event, first the Invisibles must meet with the Polar spirits. And only afterward will our match with the Afghan Genies take place. Certainly Nightingale will inform you in advance,” she said.

A good half of Tibidox had already crowded around Tanya. Students literally climbed on each other’s shoulders in order to have a look at the restored double bass. Kuzya Tuzikov accidentally stepped on the beloved corn of Slander Slanderych, which he, experiencing solitude until the encounter with the mermaid, had cherished for the past two hundred years. The stern dean of Tibidox set up such a howl that the ancient spirits imprisoned behind the Sinister Gates immediately responded to it.

“Everyone march to class, else I’ll cast an evil eye! Quick!” Slander began to yell, pouting and reddening to his bald spot. Red sparks began to leap from his ring, and several plates on the tables shattered. The fine fellows from the chest began to remove the tablecloths in a hurry. The students gushed out in different directions. Slander had a bad reputation in Tibidox. Even Dentistikha could not always remove his evil eye, especially cast in a fit of temper (or as Vanka joked, “under the hot bald patch”).

Passing by Tanya while surrounded by her retinue, Coffinia stopped and provocatively stared at her. “How do you like that, ‘best player!’ Probably you arranged everything, huh? Will my glory not be left in peace?” she was interested. “Come off it, Crypt!” Tanya snapped. But Coffinia did not lay off. “I don’t understand what these instructors find in you! With what happiness you walk around as their pet, Grotter? Not one ball you scored in the last match, and earlier the snake bow helped you – everyone knows this... Maybe you’ll tell tales on us about everything, huh?” she continued.

Coffinia’s flunkies started to neigh. While Vanka Valyalkin and Bab-Yagun prepared to give a rebuff, although the scuffle would clearly be mismatched, Cryptova moved forward and, as if by chance, pushed Tanya’s shoulder. The strings of the double bass began to hum and – Coffinia began to squeal, a sticky slush smeared on her face. Well, in general, if we look at everything from a philosophical point of view, to have a ladle filled to the brim with pudding stuck to your head is not so unpleasant indeed. Besides, the pudding was fresh, tasty, and everything in this vein... However, Cryptova nevertheless for some reason was not pleased. There live in the world such girls, whom you cannot make happy with anything even if you try till you collapse!

* * *

When everyone was already setting off to class, Sardanapal ran into the Hall of Two Elements. His untied moustaches – the right green and the left yellow – were pertly flicking on the glasses. “Quick! All students remain in Tibidox, and instructors come with me! Where’s Medusa? Where’s Tararakh?” he shouted.

“What happened?” Rita On-The-Sly started to worry. “The water-sprites and the wood-goblins are again battling for the ruins!” Sardanapal answered absentmindedly, not even noticing that he had answered someone he should not. Rita On-The-Sly was eternally mistaken as someone else. Indeed such was her magic ability.

Soon all the instructors dashed away somewhere, taking with them as heavy artillery Usynya, Gorynya, and Dubynya. The students, dying of curiosity, rushed to follow, but the cyclops at the gate had been given a strict order to let no one out. Rattling with the chain, Dumpling Maker partitioned off the drawbridge with a rail and, playing with the poleaxe, got up next to the wheel.

Gunya Glomov, Damien Goryanov, Seven-Stump-Holes, and Kuzya Tuzikov began to tease him, but the cyclops only chuckled indulgently. Attempting to bring him to white heat, the pranksters did not forget to follow whether the eye of the cyclops had started to revolve in orbit or roll under. This meant the time to take to one’s heels promptly – even Dentistikha could not remove the evil eye of Dumpling Maker.

Bab-Yagun pulled Tanya by the hand. “I know where we’ll be able to see everything! Come! Only quietly so that any Goryanov doesn’t stick to us!” he whispered, unnoticeably moving back.

“And what are these ruins Sardanapal was talking about? Where do they come from at all? Tibidox has been rebuilt!” Tanya asked.

Yagun looked at her with mockery. “What does it have to do with Tibidox? You must think there is nothing on Buyan besides Tibidox!”

“But where?”

“Well, you’re boring me with your questions! One might suppose that your last name is Pain-in-the-Neck... Later you’ll understand, run!” his ears impatiently shimmering, Yagun interrupted her.

They ran past the inside courtyard of the Tower of Ghosts and found themselves on the tight, overgrown with hawthorn, little square between the desolate wall and the tower. Having scrambled onto the shoulders of Vanka, accusing him of the intention of crushing his head, Yagun slipped into a small niche and pulled his friends after himself. They found themselves on a narrow staircase covered with a red carpet. From time to time the carpet shuddered and inflated like a bubble – under it the sleeping poltergeist Mikheich was making a racket. Somewhere below in the basements, the mixed choir of ghosts were rehearsing, performing *Kalinka-Malinka*. The chorus sounded well, but the thin treble of Lieutenant Rzhhevskii clearly interfered with it. The brash spectre sang not only past the notes but also, it seems, another song altogether.

“Hey, what are you doing there, sleepyhead? Decided to sign up for the choir also?” Yagun shouted impatiently, lowering his head already from the next landing. Tanya, looking around, got up and in no way could get rid of the feeling that she had already been here once. This feeling only strengthened when on the way they came upon two black headstones.

After noticing the friends, the headstones roused themselves. “Tanya Grotter. At long last! Uncle Herman,” was written on the headstone on the right. “Bab-Yagun and Vanka Valyalkin. To brothers from mourning Glomov,” Gothic letters mockingly began to jump on the adjacent one.

Not able to control herself, Tanya launched a *Briskus* into the headstones and immediately felt sorry about this. “Tanya Valyalkina. From grandsons and great-grandsons,” the right headstone angrily highlighted. “Tanya Yagunova, stupid orphan. From the moronoid house management,” the left one began to argue.

“Here’s a dirty trick! I was wrong to get mixed up with them. Good that neither Vanka nor Yagun noticed anything,” Tanya thought and whisked upstairs in a hurry. Soon they were already standing on the little narrow viewing balcony, the jutting out canopy that hung exactly above the ditch. Tanya thought that earlier she was never in that part of the Island Buyan and completely did not know it. The windows of her room in the Big Tower looked out onto the internal courtyard and the play lawns. The Dragonball field was on the other side.

“And there are the ruins... Where are you looking? More to the right... The-re, to where Usynya and Gorynya are running!” Bab-Yagun gesticulated. Having stared at it, Tanya saw that the ditch proceeded to the swampy bed of a brook, overgrown to a disgrace with prickly stubbles of reed, and that, in turn, ended at the lake. On the shore, half splashing in the water, half rotting on dry land, the ruins stretched, sullenly goggling at Tibidox with blind collapsed windows.

Now a genuine battle was in full swing at the ruins. Transparent, elastic water-sprites, something similar to wineskins well-packed with slime, attacked squeaking, clumsy wood-goblins. On the side of the water-sprites appeared also a shock brigade of mermaids, of whom the famous chosen one of Slander was kicking up a bigger row than all. She howled, knocked down wood-goblins with powerful hits of her tail, and threw rotten fish, which some decrepit green duckweed helpfully brought to her, at them.

“In no way will they share the ruins. One half is in the water – meaning, the kingdom of the water-sprites. But what offends the wood-goblins is that the second half joins the forest. A year hasn’t pass that they haven’t fought because of these ruins. Later they’ll reconcile, for a while they’ll live in peace, and again swing at each other’s noses. In a word, evil spirits, what will you do with them...” explained Yagun.

The instructors of Tibidox were trying to separate the fighters, but so far, the result had turned out to be the most lamentable. Medusa, forced to step back, fired sparks from the side of the wood-goblins. Professor Stinktopp already hung his head down from the nearest tree and in a thin voice squeaked the threat, “You don’t know viz whom you’re dealing! I’ll turn you into small *okroshka*! Ah, I fear height!” The academician Sardanapal, knocked off his feet, was already being tickled by two mermaids, and a third dragged over a pair of tremendous garden scissors with the explicit intention of cutting his beard. Dentistikha, attempting to pacify the water-sprites, was set down by them in a

puddle and was now angrily jumping up and down, trying to concoct an evil eye in return. Tararakh was capitally hit on the ear by a club, and in the next second, he was literally swept away by a hailstorm of dry Caspian roach from the catapults of the water-sprites.

“But it’s merry there! We have some funky Teaches!” Vanka said approvingly.

“You said it!” Bab-Yagun said proudly. “You should have seen how they battled with the wood-goblins the year before last! And the water-sprites almost carried Stinktopp off to the bottom! His pants were completely stuffed with duck-weed.”

“Listen, Yagun, what was in these ruins earlier?” Tanya asked. Bab-Yagun frowned. “Well... Ruins – they’re ruins. On the whole, incomprehensible what to fight for here. All the same neither the wood-goblins nor the water-sprites live here. Never even visit, so my granny says.”

“What, never visit?”

“Never visit. They also disdain Tibidox, in general everything built by magicians, and here bang, how angry! One word – Buyan Island!”

“But do they somehow explain this? Their hostility?” Tanya was interested. Yagun hesitated. “Ugh, fat chance! There’s never such a thing as evil spirits explaining anything to magicians. They’re by themselves, we’re by ourselves,” Yagun categorically stated. He rubbed his snub nose with a finger and pensively continued, “True, there are all kinds of rumours about these ruins. Seemingly, here was the gatehouse of The Ancient One, which he built even before Tibidox. But indeed why he abandoned this gatehouse later – I haven’t the faintest idea. Yes, supposedly, there were reasons... Look, look how incensed these evil spirits got!”

The battle for the ruins was in full swing. Several times the water-sprites forced the wood-goblins back into the thick of the woods, but reinforcement came to them – and by then they forced the water-sprites into their lake. Professor Stinktopp was no longer hanging on a tree. His excitedly kicking legs protruded from some burrow.

Finally, Usynya, Gorynya, and Dubynya, who were pelted by a hail of branches and slipping from the slime on the stones, got rather tired of being whipping boys. Their Herculean patience melted more swiftly than ice-cream on the tongue of eight graders dreaming of getting tonsillitis. “They’re beating...” shouted Usynya. “...us!” Gorynya finished. Dubynya wanted to add something more intellectual, but was not able to and, maliciously spitting out a lump that had flown into his mouth, shook his fists in silence. The raging hero-bouncers caught the water-sprites and began to pile them into the lake one by one. Having disposed of all the water-sprites, they started after the wood-goblins and soon finally pushed them back into the forest.

The reasonable mermaids, seeing that the battle was nearly over, threw away the scissors and began thoughtfully to clean the algae and snails off Academician Sardanapal. The decrepit duckweed, sympathetically clicking its tongue, with great care extracted Professor Stinktopp from the burrow.

A wood-goblin late to the battle came out of a wind-fallen tree, enormous and stooping. Standing for a while, leaning against a pine, it began to creak and again disappeared into the woods.

“That’s it, back to class! No more to do here. The most interesting has ended,” said Yagun.

* * *

Tanya was busy with lessons till the evening. It was necessary to learn dozens of spells for Dentistikha’s removal of evil eye the next day and on top of that, to prepare for the first class with Slander Slanderych, who would begin to teach the second grade protection from spirits – a subject that was not in the year before. There were the most unbelievable rumours in the school about protection from spirits. They asserted that Slander, as a former black magician, seemingly did not protect from spirits as much as set them on his students.

Bab-Yagun, repeatedly making Slander hopping mad with his tricks, feared in advance tomorrow’s class. Afraid to be caught unawares, he got hold of a pile of talismans and now hung them

unnoticeably under his clothing and concealed them in his sleeves. “As soon as Slander let loose the spirits on me – right away! – I’ll reach for a foolproof piece. He’ll get it hot! Oh, my granny mama, I’m uneasy about something...” muttered Yagun.

Having finished with the lessons, Tanya grabbed the case with the double bass and rushed to the dragonball field. She feared that the instrument would roam. Were the house-spirits, overhauling the instrument, able not to ruin the initial design of Theophilus Grotter?

Having climbed onto the double bass, Tanya uttered *Speedus envenomus!* The double bass trembled, lifted slightly above the field, as if gathering its spirit, and then swiftly jerked forward. Tanya, after weeks spent in magic station, out of practice with this speed, barely knew how to keep her place on it.

After two or three circles over the field Tanya was certain that the flight characteristics of the instrument had not deteriorated, though it manoeuvred a little not quite like before. Earlier it obeyed any, even the most insignificant movement, now it slowed somewhat.

“Tighten the pins a little so that the strings stretch. Of course, the clever fellows were too clever by half with the polishing, well, no matter, it doesn’t affect the speed,” the ring grumbled jealously.

Tanya calmed down. It meant that great-grandfather found nothing to worry about.

“And the Rope of the Seventeen Hanged Men did not break?” Tanya hurried to ask; however, grandfather Theophilus did not give this question a definite answer. The ring mysteriously hesitated, irrelevantly shot a couple of sparks, and became silent.

Having tightened the pins, Tanya got up high above the island, where constant airstreams began. One of them set off to the east, and another – into cold Antarctica, populated by mysterious spirits, which almost nothing was known about and which it was not possible to call either friends or enemies of magicians. Trying not to fall into these air streams in order not to be carried away, Tanya, keeping on the edge, flew over the shore.

Long sandy stretches alternated with eroded cliffs. On one of the sandy stretches, the bearded sea king Neptune was bashfully soaping and cleaning some of his linen. Beside him in the shallow water lay his trident. For a second Tanya wanted to rush over his head and tease him a little, but she reconsidered. Being mixed up with Neptune was dangerous. He could unceremoniously summon a storm. Moreover, according to rumours, he was a good friend of Professor Stinktopp.

A cold wind gusted from the ocean, sprays reached her, and Tanya turned the double bass around and directed it south of Tibidox – to the woods, which occupied a substantial part of the island. For some not entirely intelligible reason the students were forbidden to walk into this forest. True, the ban was extended only to strolling by foot. Along the majority of the paths were special guard spells – Slander and Dentistikha, rare masters of magical trickeries, had already worked on this for a while. If one of them was set off, Slander would immediately teleport himself to this place, and the consequences were sufficiently unpleasant for the offenders. The least it was possible to get away with was grinding earthworms in the meat grinder, preparing stuffing for the griffins, and enduring the mockery of the omnipresent ghosts all through the vacations.

“A strange thing. Why are they so attached to these woods? It’s possible even to think that the Teaches fear something. One can’t get lost there – can always send a signal spark... No, there’s clearly something else here,” thought Tanya.

Now, rushing over the forest on the double bass, Tanya attentively looked down. The further it was, the more impassable the wind-fallen trees. Moss-covered trunks piled up side by side along the paths. “Sardanapal could send cyclopes here to rake up everything, but for some reason he’s not doing it...” Tanya decided.

Keeping above the tops of the trees, she crossed the forest in a slant and again found herself along the shore – true, from the other side of the island, where the powerful roots of pines courageously fought with the friable cliffs. It began to get dusky. Tanya had already intended to turn around when unexpectedly it seemed to her that she saw a rippling white haze.

The girl guessed that, confusing directions in the darkness, she was again approaching Tibidox, but only from the other side. As for the white haze, it was rising... from the ruins. From those most uninhabited ruins of The Ancient One's gatehouse, which were now directly underneath. Tanya replaced the high-speed spell with the slow – *Pilotus kamikazis* – and approached carefully, trying to hide behind the crowns of the trees.

Smoke was pouring from the chimney, which was like a reproachful brick thumb jutting from the collapsed roof. The first two windows were half-flooded with water. Water beetles flickered flippantly among the emerald duckweed. The high stone porch-gallery, like in the ancient buildings of Suzdal, went directly out to the lake and there suddenly broke off. "One of two things: either The Ancient One had an oddity and he adored bathing in slime, or the lake flooded the house considerably later," Tanya said to herself.

The meadow still bore the tracks of the recent battle. Here and there were grooves from the boots of the heroes. Mermaid scales gleamed. From a deep ditch poked out an arc of Sardanapal's crushed glasses. On the side, next to a scrap of material from Medusa's raincoat, was scattered Stinktopp's absurd shoe with a bow like those of an old woman. Tanya picked it up and discovered inside the shoe the hidden lift, which made the short professor taller by five centimetres. "Well, Stinktoppik! A sheer cheat! I'll not be surprised if he turns out to have a hat with springs and high-heel slippers!" she decided.

The neglected gatehouse appeared not a bit better from the other side. Tanya thought that next to these ruins the Hut on Chicken Feet would simply seem like the tsar's mansion. A large stove was visible through a crack in the wall. Tanya went past, but was suddenly stunned. In the stove, managing without firewood, a bluish magic fire was buzzing smoothly. The thought flickered in Tanya that the wood-goblins or the water-sprites had started it, but then she understood that both groups abhorred fire and even in general, according to Yagun, had little interest in the structures of magicians.

After weighing all the pros and cons, young Grotter felt inside that she was not in the least drawn. On the contrary – she was even pulled to get further away from here. Moreover, she accidentally discovered that one of the bushes was somehow twinkling strangely and seemingly spreading a bit. Furthermore, its leaves were not shaking from the wind. On close examination, Tanya understood that a dark magic guard spell was stretched on the bush. "Aha, Slander tried! Here's indeed a workaholic pest!" Tanya thought, wisely keeping further away from the bush.

After jumping onto the double bass, she dashed to Tibidox, deciding that she must attempt to clarify why a fire was burning here. But, only how to find this out? Tanya could well imagine what would happen if she turned to the dean himself with this question. Slander would drop a quick glance at her with his closely set eyes, and in the next minute, it would be necessary for her to take a bucket and with cheerful parade step, singing a song of the industrious evil spirits, to set off to gather stinkbugs. No indeed, better to find out everything carefully from Sardanapal. It goes without saying, if that one is in a good mood and near him does not loom the disgusting sphinx living on the doors of his office and letting no one in without an invitation.

* * *

Late in the evening, having wiped the double bass with great care and stretched the strings, Tanya put the instrument away in the case. Just as she began to put it under the bed, a chuckle reached her from above. "Well, get away from here quick, blockhead! Or I'll launch a *Briskus!*" Coffinia threatened someone.

Cryptova had dragged herself to bed long ago and before going to sleep was turning over a thick comic book for dark magicians. Coffinia never read anything else except comics. "Indeed! I'm not about to stuff my head with such nonsense!" she snorted. Occasionally Coffinia, for amusement, shook the comic book. Little yellowish-green devils fell from its pages and chirping in panic, hurried

to climb back in. Cryptova, giggling, tied together the tails of some of them and was delighted as, pulling each other in different directions, they fell and rolled behind the bed.

“Well so, are you leaving or not?” Coffinia again shouted. Lifting her head, Tanya saw that Lieutenant Rzhevskii was strolling along the ceiling of their room. This time the brash spectre was dressed in a turban and a robe with tassels. For some reason he even had a beard attached onto himself. True, the red and dark-blue nose of an alcoholic nevertheless gave him away. “The floors are painted – can only walk on walls and ceilings!” Rzhevskii giggled.

“I’ll walk you!” Coffinia continued to rumble. “I’m counting to three! One...” “*Pointus harpoonus!*” Lieutenant quickly shouted. Something sparkled. Tanya saw that the spectre, by some improbable means, was holding an ancient signet ring on his hand. Coffinia instantly collapsed with her nose in the pillow. The little devils from the comic book immediately started to run gloatingly along her clothing.

“What, have you gone nuts? Why did you lull her to sleep?” Tanya was astonished.

“There are types who need to sleep it off!” Rzhevskii said noncommittally. “And now keep quiet! Utter no names! I’m here incognito! If Eyeless Horror finds out that I was here, then that’s it – off with the head! I also have – hee-hee! – in my back twelve knives and one little dagger! Another nine and I’ll bust, as my friend the cornet Svintsov said.”

“Why? Since when can you not wander anywhere you fancy?” Tanya was interested.

“I can wander anywhere I want, day or night. I simply want no one to find out that I was here at yours. Just making sure that Coffinia will tattle to no one. After *Pointus harpoonus* it’s rarely possible to recall the circumstances with which you dropped of...” Lieutenant began to neigh and collapsed from the ceiling onto the floor.

Cutting into the rug, he lost his shape, flickered, but was restored quickly. Perhaps only the beard was lost and the head flattened a little, which, however, little affected his cognitive abilities. “Brr! Some passage for evil spirits! I hate to suffer dampness! Like visiting your own grave... Nasty there, and I’m a complex and delicate person!” Lieutenant shivered, flowing between Black Curtains.

The Curtains stirred predatorily, but, having sorted out whom they were dealing with, immediately subsided. They related indifferently to spectres. It was not possible to make a mess of ghosts by muffling up the head. Furthermore, it was not possible to peep into their dreams, which later, while flying, could be shown to the entire Tibidox.

Tanya leaned over and picked up the ring, which had fallen from Lieutenant when he curiously rammed the floor with his head. “Where did you get this?” she was interested.

“Ah-ha, this! Hugo the Sly lent it... possible to trust Hugo. After all, he’s also a spectre, although he prefers to live in his book and doesn’t show himself anywhere from it,” Rzhevskii informed her.

“Why is it that Hugo gave you the ring? He’s indeed stingy,” Tanya doubted. She remembered very well the resilient roguish author of *Tricks of White Magicians*, with whom they slipped through to the Vanishing Floor at night.

Lieutenant Rzhevskii delicately looked down. He was modesty itself. “Eh-ehh... You see, here’s the situation... Hugo accidentally lost his powdered wig and was suffering greatly. Even named a reward for the one who finds it...”

“And here, of course, you made your appearance?” Tanya asked.

Rzhevskii beamed with pleasure. “To snatch the wig was not quite as simple as you think. I had to take some pains!” he bragged. “And, have you considered why I dared all this? I awfully want to let you in on a secret.”

“What secret?”

“A terrible, fatal secret! A secret, next to which the Vanishing Floor and even the Sinister Gates are small fry... So, interested?” The Lieutenant stared wide-eyed for more mystery. However, “wide-eyed” was an understatement. No one asked him to pop his eyes out of orbit and puff them up like balls. Ghosts have their own ideas about humour.

Tanya waited. She did not believe too much in the existence of a fatal secret. Lieutenant Rzhevskii could be lying completely and this should not be taken seriously. True, now and then he succeeded in smelling out something actually worthwhile.

Rzhevskii listened suspiciously. Then, continuing to stand by the window, stretched out his neck a couple of metres – any giraffe would envy this telescopic neck-rod – and whispered heatedly in Tanya’s ear, “Imagine, these blockheads think that no one else knows about the closet of The Ancient One and about the box. But I was right next to them! I saw everything! Slander even launched a *Briskus* at me, and then cast a mute spell! But I dashed to Hugo, and that one found a way to remove the spell. And at the same time lent me the ring! True, for this he was being generous after he lost the wig...”

The spectre stared narrowly at Tanya, checking how successful he was in intriguing her. Tanya forced herself to yawn. She knew that she only needed to show curiosity and the brash Rzhevskii would begin, teasing her, to filter news drop by drop. “Remember that terrible thunderstorm? All the time lightning was striking the Big Tower?” the spectre continued offended, not waiting for any question. “Towards the morning Slander, Medusa, and Sardanapal decided to check why it hit precisely this place and not another. They took torches and went along the stairs up to the garret. They hoped that no one would notice them, but I by chance turned up beside them...”

“By chance?” Tanya doubted.

The Lieutenant blushed complacently. “I was just hiding on the stairs. Thought, perhaps, I would frighten someone, and here suddenly were footsteps and all the trump cards of Tibidox appeared – ace, king, queen... Well, you understand, it would be foolish not to add the jack to this suit. I became invisible and floated after them. They climbed up to the garret, then went out onto the ledge outside – a sufficiently wide ledge there – and began to examine. But then Slander suddenly began to yell, ‘Look, here’s a crack!’ Sardanapal and Slander enlarged it with some spell and squeezed through inside. And then Medusa also after them...”

“And you?”

Rzhevskii stared at her indulgently. “Do you wish to laugh, young lady? I was there even earlier, nevertheless I’m not a joke, but a ghost! And an attic! A tight little closet, really a hole! Cobwebs in the corner. But most suitable as a hiding-place. Moreover, The Ancient One was clearly keenly aware of the fifth dimension. Sardanapal, that one said in general, ‘Strange room! I swear by my beard, it exists from within, but not from the outside!’ While he and Medusa discussed why The Ancient One needed all this, Slander noticed a box on the floor. He leaned over in order to take it, and – wham! bam! – he was pressed into the wall! What a show!!! Slander – and in the wall! Spread out like some dead toad! He in a rage shot several fight sparks at the box – but if only it would whimper, it didn’t even char! Imagine? I was downright thrilled! This powerful fight magic – and nothing.” Describing this scene, the spectre enthusiastically grunted.

“And then Sardanapal undertook the matter,” he continued, “he squatted near the box and as if nothing were the matter took it in his hands. ‘You see what the problem is, Slander,’ he said. ‘Here is very interesting protection – only a white magician can take this box in hand. Only The Ancient One knew how to impose this protection.’”

“But Slander is now white!” Tanya exclaimed.

“Now white, but was originally black, and then later moved to white... In any case, the box in no way accepted him as white. Slander, it goes without saying, almost blew a gasket, but only what can you object to here? The magic of The Ancient One is magic of The Ancient One.”

“And what was in the box?”

“Wish I knew! Sardanapal opened it slightly all of a few moments, and then immediately slammed it shut and demanded Slander and Medusa to keep everything secret. ‘The most terrible thing,’ he stated, ‘I myself don’t know what can take place if what’s inside falls into the wrong hands. Even if this falls into the right hands, the consequences are unpredictable!’”

“And you didn’t try to have a look in there? You’re a ghost! You could pass through the wall just like that!” Tanya was astonished.

Rzhevskii winced. The question clearly did not please him. “Hm... Well, eh-eh... I tried to poke my nose, but nothing worked for me. The box didn’t let me through. Its walls are absolutely impenetrable. Moreover, I accidentally floated out of the shadows, and here Slander noticed me... I didn’t even have time to look around and they immediately put the mute spell on me and banished me with a *Briskus*. And even with what! How often they jerked me, but to do this! I was simply screwed into the floor like some shabby corkscrew. Trust me, it’s difficult for me to figure out where was my head and where were my legs... I don’t even know how everything ended: whether Sardanapal hid the box in a new place or left everything as it was,” Lieutenant acknowledged.

Discussing the box, he did not forget to roam around the room and poke his nose in everywhere. He flew up to Coffinia’s bed, rumbled the sheets and, having looked into the powder-case, loudly snorted, “What a pity my girlfriend, Unhealed Lady, is not here! All these flasks and jars are right up her alley. By the way, you know, she recently found in herself 300 new sores and all night flew after Eyeless Horror, transferring them! That one almost hung himself again. And then – hee-hee! – only add this: Lady said to Horror that he needs to order glasses! To blurt that out to our Eyeless! Allegedly, he has such a foul nature because he doesn’t wear glasses. And he did nothing to her, only turned entirely green and evaporated.”

Tanya got up. She believed that Lieutenant had already spilled everything known to him and would simply carry on with nonsense now. “Listen, one thing I don’t understand. If it’s such a secret, why did you prattle to me? What’s the point?” she asked, looking at the snoring Coffinia. The ones with tails from the comics, not losing time, painted green moustaches on her. Tanya attempted to drive them off, but they overturned the phial with the bright green polish onto Cryptova’s nose and with an excited chirp hid under the pillow. The girl thought that in the morning Coffinia would appear like a true hussar in profile and like a pig in full face. Her painted moustaches were clearly a match in size.

Lieutenant Rzhevskii waved his hands and, after jumping, leaving dirty tracks, passed through the wall. “What do you mean why? You insult me, my dear! You want to ask someone, anyone will tell you. Where Baby Grotter is, instantly all kinds of nonsense will begin! Only don’t ask why it is so. I adore it when everything is interesting, when everything boils, goes from the feet to the head... Understand? Terribly boring to live hundreds of years continuously, when all around nothing interesting happens.”

“Uh-huh,” nodded Tanya. “Only don’t think that I’ll get mixed up in anything again.”

“You’ll get mixed up, and not by half!” Lieutenant assured her. “By the way, if you’re interested, we could set off for the garret and see if the box is in place. Only not today – Eyeless Horror is hanging around somewhere there today. How about going in three days, at full moon? Horror will leave for the basement to thunder with shackles, and we’ll rush by.”

“I’m not going with you,” stated Tanya, but, likely, the spectre did not particularly believe her.

Unexpectedly, uneasiness appeared on his face. He listened anxiously, growled something about nasty spies who would not stay away from him, the good-looking, began to make noise with the knives, and quickly began to thread into the ceiling. He definitely began a new attack of paranoia. “One head is better, but two make a pair! So, in three days! Ciao, baby!” he whispered mysteriously and disappeared.

Chapter 4

The Latest Magic News and the Wax Figure

Have you already forgotten Genka Bulonov, who made Tanya Grotter's existence a misery when she was living at Uncle Herman's and going to the same school with Pipa? In the body of the taciturn and sullen Bulonov, outwardly resembling more a barrel with legs or a safe with pedals, dwelled a vulnerable and dreamy soul. Fairly often, hiding in a corner, Bulonov sat down on a stool, hugged his knees, and began to dream. Dreams appeared like a pink sweet haze before his small, often blinking eyes. Sometimes Bulonov imagined that he would become a space pirate, sometimes the dictator of an entire planet, and sometimes clearly scaled down his little plan and dreamed of nothing but robbing a bank and fleeing in a car from pursuit.

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