

# Dmitrii Emets



Sensation!  
Gury  
Puper love!

## TANYA GROTTER

and the Throne of the Ancient One



Tanya Grotter

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**Tanya Grotter and the  
Throne of the Ancient One**

«Емец Д. А.»

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## **Emets D.**

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Давненько в Тибидохсе не было таких неприятностей! Похищены основные источники магии: предметы, принадлежавшие когда-то Древниру. Правда, существует еще трон древнего мага, энергии которого хватит на тысячелетия. Но беда в том, что никто не знает, где он находится. День ото дня запасы магии в Тибидохсе иссякают, и все ученики отправлены в мир лопухоидов. Таня Гроттер и Баб-Ягун оказываются в семействе Дурневых... Но ничего в магическом мире не может быть важнее драконбола. Все с нетерпением ждут матча команды невидимок со сборной Тибидохса. Интригу накаляет то, что легендарный Гурий Пуппер наконец влюблен. Сотнями летят купидончики с цветами и письмами! Интересно, кому Пуппер их посылает? Без охмуряющей магии тут явно не обошлось... Но Таня совсем не этого хотела!!!

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# Дмитрий Емец

## Tanya Grotter and the Throne of the Ancient One

### Chapter 1

#### New Chairman of V.A.M.P.I.R

On a cloudy May evening, when raindrops and recently awoken flies were drumming on the glass from two different directions, the famous Durnev family was sitting in the living room. Uncle Herman was holding a laptop on his knees and, with mouth contorted by eagerness, finishing the welcome speech to the 7<sup>th</sup> All-Russian Conference of Pensioner-gardeners.

“You cannot imagine, Ninel, how crucial this is! In our country only pensioners and home gardeners vote! If they support me, I’ll realize my old dream and be able to run for president! It’s only important that elections be in winter, otherwise these haters of Colorado beetles would slip off to their vegetable gardens!” This was already the third time he explained it to his spouse.

Madame Durneva mumbled agreement. She could only mumble because she was devouring smoked turkey and pineapple slices. Someone had told her that it would be possible to lose weight eating turkey together with pineapple. Aunt Ninel approached the matter responsibly. She stocked a whole freezer full of turkeys and stuffed the refrigerator with pineapples. True, for the time being she had continued to grow fat, but comforted herself with the thought that not all natural medicines work immediately.

Pipa was also not lounging. With her feet tucked under her, she was sitting on the sofa and thoughtfully contemplating with a magnifier the three in her diary, evaluating how to improve it more skilfully to a five. The three was very promising – with a small upper tail. Pipa had already tried using a blade on the three, when suddenly beside her appeared her papa, tired of amusing his brain with pensioner-gardeners.

“Here, let me!” the best deputy demanded decisively. Pipa anxiously looked sideways at her papa and bunched up her eyes, ready to start wailing if necessary. However, the best deputy had other plans. He confiscated his daughter’s blade, skilfully reproduced a suitable trace of a handle, and, after a minute, an exceptionally credible five began to shine in the diary. “Here, daughter! Live and learn!” he said edifyingly, kissing Pipa on the head. Having displayed a dose of tenderness, Durnev turned and again trudged to his gardeners.

“Stop! Hands up!” Pipa ordered, aiming an index finger at her papa’s back. The best deputy stopped and obediently lifted his carrot colour palms up to the ceiling. “We agreed: for each five I get fifty roubles! Forgetting something?” Pipa demanded.

A moved Uncle Herman shoved his hand into his pocket and, after taking out his wallet, started to rummage in it. Not waiting for him to find fifty roubles, Pipa pulled the wallet out of her papa’s fingers and insolently took possession immediately of several hundred-rouble notes. “Why so much?” the best deputy was astonished.

“What why? What about buying a DVD? A new film about G.P. has just come out recently! He’s so darling in it! The eyes are nice and kind, and not a single pimple!” Uncle Herman yawned. He was uninterested in listening about G.P., especially as his daughter had already been blabbering on about G.P. these past two years. Posters with G.P. were glued along the hallway; G.P. was also on dishes in the kitchen. Moreover, the clever thin-nosed face in round glasses looked out even from



the bathroom towel, with which Pipa wiped her hands. “Well done, daughter! Never let slip your advantage! But enough about G.P., else I’ll howl!”

After putting away the wallet a good deal lighter, Uncle Herman drew Pipa to himself and took aim for a new kiss on the head of his beloved offspring, but at this moment, the bell in the hallway was roused from a dream and produced something between the *Funeral March* and *Dance of the Small Swans*. Uncle Herman missed from surprise and painfully bumped his nose against Pipa’s head.

“Ninnie, my sunshine, will you not take a look at what blockhead is ringing our doorbell? What fad is it to come without an invitation?” he frowned.

“Right away, pumpkin! Your little dove will only have a small piece of pineapple! Otherwise the small pile of turkey will be so lonely in her stomach!” Aunt Ninel responded.

“Don’t believe her, Pop! She already ate ten yogurts and fish steaks during the day! On top of that, my box of chocolates disappeared somewhere...” Pipa rattled on her dear mommy. She was always more daddy’s girl.

Aunt Ninel clicked the TV’s remote. On its twentieth channel appeared an image from the camera recently installed on the landing. At the present moment, the camera was obediently taking a picture of the large grey tile and General Cutletkin’s iron door. “I see no one! There’s no one, Herman!” Aunt Ninel said in amazement.

“What, no one? Then who rang?” the best deputy frowned. He rushed to the phone and dialled the concierge’s number. The concierge confirmed that no one went up to them. Uncle Herman and Aunt Ninel exchanged glances. Both simultaneously thought of one and the same thing. Or, more precisely, of one and the same person. The idyllic family scene was destroyed.

“Really Grotter again? I’ve only just begun to recover! Indeed only two years has passed since she was here last!” Aunt Ninel groaned.

“Ha! Tanya is not so bad! The main thing is that they don’t leave us a new orphan! Mom, see if there is a case or at least a garbage can?” Pipa snorted.

“Stay here! I’ll go look!” Uncle Herman decisively ordered. He tiptoed to the door and, not trusting the video camera, looked into the peephole. Then Durnev carefully turned the lock, removed the chain, and abruptly jerked open the door. He vaguely hoped to catch someone unawares, but there was nobody to catch. The landing was actually empty.

Uncle Herman shrugged his shoulders, and was already about to shut the door, when suddenly he noticed a long envelope on the mat. The Durnevs’ Moscow address was carefully written accurately in the top right-hand corner of the envelope. There was no stamp. This meant that the envelope could in no way have been delivered in the usual manner, through the mail.

“Herman, what’s there?” Aunt Ninel fearfully shouted, running up to her husband.

“Here,” answered the best deputy.

“What a strange envelope! Not from America? I hope there’s no anthrax inside?” Aunt Ninel cautiously said.

“Nonsense! I was already sick with anthrax in childhood. It seems, soon after mumps. Or after meningitis? Well, unimportant. In any event, this was before the rabid dog bit me,” Uncle Herman dismissed it and courageously unsealed the envelope.

Inside turned out to be a dense sheet of paper. In the centre, written in large golden letters:

“Dear Mr. Herman Durnev,

We report to you with satisfaction the end of the lawsuit that began in 1632. The final physical and astral death of the second contender for the inheritance – Empress C.A. Ligula – served as the reason for the termination of the lawsuit.

According to the resolution of the supreme board of Transylvania, you have been declared the sole heir of your ancestor. Furthermore, in accordance with point 13.13/666 of our code you are automatically designated as the lifelong honourable chair of V.A.M.P.I.R.

After taking into consideration all the facts, the main consultative board of V.A.M.P.I.R. unanimously considered that the close relationship and the natural qualities of your character compensate for the absence of magic abilities in you.

In the case of your agreement, the regalia inherited by you will be sent to your home soon.

Yours truly,

Malyuta Skuratoff,

Supreme Judge

Transylvania, Anaemia Valley,

12 May 20..."

Uncle Herman read the letter three times. Even – according to his habit of seeing a false bottom in everything – brought it to the light. However, this revealed nothing. Perhaps only that the paper was heraldic. A gloomy castle on a cliff was used as the heraldic element. Durnev shrugged his shoulders. "I understand nothing. Supreme board!" he said.

"Excuse me, Herman! Don't turn it down! What if they'll even give us a blinker? The fact of the matter is that I drive to the supermarket without a blinker! I'm already ashamed to show myself in front of Isadora Cutletkina! Imagine, besides a blinker, this guttersnipe has a true IFV as an escort!" Aunt Ninel was angry.

Uncle Herman with unease looked sideways at the neighbour's door and dived into his apartment. "Shush! What are you, nuts? How often have I told you not to swear at Isadora! Maybe not today, but tomorrow they'll give a star to Cutletkin yet! Just consider what he will be then! And afterwards, he'll be useful to me! Yesterday he promised to purchase from me two hundred railroad carloads of old woman's stockings!" he whispered to his wife.

"Stockings in the army? Why?" Aunt Ninel was astonished.

Uncle Herman mysteriously brought a finger to his lips. "Shush! State secret. Even I'm not let in. Perhaps they stretch them over rockets for conspiracy. Or for weaving camouflage nets. Even no need to alter anything here: the stockings have holes all the same."

Aunt Ninel pulled the letter out of her husband's fingers. She attentively studied it and said, "Herman, we don't know what this 'V.A.M.P.I.R.' is. What if it's something good? Well, for example... eh... 'Virtual Association of Muffins, Pies, and Ice-cream Rolls'?"

"Nonsense! I don't want to lead cakes!" Uncle Herman exclaimed with contempt.

His spouse's view again slid along the written lines and, full of suffering, she knitted her brow in cognitive effort. "Herman, bunny, listen!" she began.

Her husband first turned yellow, and then grew red. "WHAT DID YOU SAY?" he gasped. Remembering, Aunt Ninel covered her mouth with her hand. All names of the little beast with long hind legs were under strict taboo in their family. Every time she intended on turning on the TV, Aunt Ninel would attentively study the schedule in order to be absolutely certain that there would be nothing with big ears.

"Oh, Herman, excuse me! I don't know what came over me!" she squeaked. "I wanted to say, what if V.A.M.P.I.R. is the Veritable Association of Mass Pictorial and Information Reportage?"

Uncle Herman ceased to change colours. He pleasantly turned pink instead and jumped slightly from excitement. "Exactly! You're right, precious! Why didn't I guess it myself! V.A.M.P.I.R. – Veritable Association of Mass Pictorial and Information Reportage!" he was inspired. Tears welled up in the best deputy's eyes. "I knew it! I had a feeling, I hoped! My public activity and stainless reputation are known to all! The free democratic press has chosen me as its chief! You have to agree, Ninel, it's an exceptionally wise and foresighted choice!" Moved, he sobbed, collapsed onto the sofa.

"Yes, dear!" Aunt Ninel agreed. The dachshund One-and-A-Half Kilometres came out from under the sofa and began to bark with senile spite, spitting on Uncle Herman's slippers. It could not stand it when they shook whatever was over it. The worked-up deputy took aim and kicked the dachshund back like a soccer ball.

“Shut up, you, unprincipled publicist! Know your place! And I will shut anyone up for freedom of speech! Let those donkeys in Duma again try to turn off my mike! I’ll... I’ll... In short, for the time being I don’t know what I’ll do, but they will be sorry!” Uncle Herman raged.

He jumped, pulled himself up to his full considerable height, and exclaimed, “Hey, you there, I agree to be the honourable chair of V.A.M.P.I.R. and receive all regalia! Ninel, look, is there an address or phone number on the envelope? I’ll answer them!”

“Herman, I don’t know where the envelope is! It was just here but as soon as you shouted that you agree, it flew away somewhere!” she fearfully reported to her husband.

The director of the firm Second-hand Socks was stunned. “WHAT, FLEW AWAY? A LIE! Most likely, this vile dog dragged it away! Hey you, come out! Ninel, get the mop!”

Suddenly the letter from Anaemia Valley tore itself away from the sofa and, with edges quivering, attempted to bolt to the window following the envelope. “No-o-o-o! Stop! Catch it, Pipa!” After issuing an inhuman howl of a fooled careerist, the best deputy rushed after it. Trying to grab the letter, he gesticulated like a windmill in the style of the secret Shaolin School. In that same school, at the dawn of his enterprise, Uncle Herman successfully sold seventy marked down *Dream of a Fireman* ashtrays as incense burners from the tsarist collection of bronze. Durnev almost managed to catch the letter, but the sheet flared up in his hands. The brown fiery spot, which rose first in the centre, became a bluish flame an instant later, and consumed the entire letter.

Durnev, with a face that had turned green, froze in the middle of the room and examined closely the large flakes of ashes on the carpet. “Everything’s lost! We didn’t memorize the address!” he said dejectedly.

Aunt Ninel stared at her husband with horror. Large drops of sweat appeared on her upper lip. “Cookie, only, please, don’t be frightened...” she said.

“What’s wrong?”

“Your tee... teeth...”

Durnev himself had already sensed that something was not right with his teeth. Covering his mouth with his hand, he rushed to the mirror. Here he irresolutely removed his hand. Four thin sharp canine teeth – two on top and two below – came together almost very tightly. “Ninel! It seems I now know what this ‘V.A.M.P.I.R.’ is!” Uncle Herman said hoarsely.



## Chapter 2

### The Sleeping Adonis

Vanka Valyalkin held onto the battlement and, leaning down, pulled the loose end of the fabric to himself. Ruby-colour letters flared up on the fabric:

***TIBIDOX GREETES THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL CABIN RACES!***

A mischievous gust of wind tugged at the banner and Vanka, who did not have time to fasten it, almost flew off the wall. Tanya and Bab-Yagun miraculously managed to catch his tangled feet.

“Ugh! How mean it is to use third year students – already almost fourth year – for all kinds of nonsense! Even trained harpies could hang a banner!” Vanka started to grumble.

“Uh-huh, they could! Only they would rip it with their claws. And how it would stink later! You wouldn’t be able to breathe!” Yagun stated.

“Nonsense! It wouldn’t stink! There are completely decent ones among harpies. Ask Tararakh!” Valyalkin began to argue.

“Don’t nitpick, soccer shirt! Think, only ninety banners. And for this we’ll be able to sit in the first row. Even closer than the instructors. I arranged for it!” Bab-Yagun tried to calm him.

“The last time you also negotiated for the giants’ races! As a result they put us in the most inconvenient section and next to Slander on top of that!” Vanka reminded him.

“My granny mama! And how was I to know that Slander would sit there? I could not forbid him from settling himself right in front of our noses and even chatting all the time with his mermaid! This time everything will be different!” Yagun assured him.

Tanya doubtfully looked sideways at him. “Okay, what’s there to argue about?” she said conciliatorily. “We already hung four banners. Let one slip. A small matter! Only eighty-five remain!”

From that memorable day of the match with the Invisibles, more than one-and-a-half years had already passed. And there was no way to call these one-and-a-half years colourless or insipid.

In life – be it the life of a moronoid or a magician – things rarely happen gradually. Much more often fate, sneaking up, hits one on the back of the head with a popgun of surprise. First you, a modest employee, despondently while the day away on an office chair in front of a monitor, bored stiff, then suddenly such a whirl of events spins you that even the bank director shakes your hand for a long time, not noticing the coffee spilled on his knees.

Or otherwise: a moronoid restrains himself for seventy years, runs in the mornings and gargles, in order to wake up one day grey-haired, with knees shot, sagging jaw and, after looking into the mirror, say sadly, “Good morning! Hey, kinsmen, give me, perhaps, a pistol and a half-glass of ethyl green!”

However, there are also pleasant transformations. A schoolboy, standing in gym almost as the last in height, will suddenly appear in September as a tall husky lad with a brittle bass, and his chief tormenter, earlier teasing him on every change, would stand as if by accident closer to the instructor.

In the months that we did not see Tanya, she had changed a lot. She had grown, grew prettier, and in the morning already glanced with anxiety at Black Curtains – would they reflect Vanka Valyalkin, feeding Finist the Brave Falcon with fresh duck meat, or Bab-Yagun on his vacuum cleaner and with a black formal bowtie on his neck? She no longer laughed at Coffinia, when from the same Curtains, sometimes Zhora Zhikin, and sometimes Gury Puper, pulling up their shorts, winked maliciously.

Frequently Tanya relived that moment when she attacked the terrible mouth of Keng-King with the immobilize ball, and Gury Puper sped to cut her off. Sequence after sequence she played over that moment of the match. Pity, everything also ended this way with nothing. At the most critical moment,

Grafin Cagliostro, the chair of the board of arbiters, arrived in a great hurry on an enchanted dental chair. He interrupted the match and made quite a scene.

“Why did you start the game without me? How dare you? You’ve violated all the decrees of the sports committee of the Magciety of Jerky Magtion!” shaking with fury, he stated.

“My friend! We already delayed the game for almost half an hour. If we did not let out signal sparks, the spectators would have smashed the stadium. Pity that you were late,” said Sardanapal.

“WHO WAS LATE? Me? I was here an hour early!!! Someone set the spell of passage in such a way that I was carried past Tibidox ten times and fell into a swamp!” Grafin Cagliostro began to yell, spattering droplets of poisonous saliva. Those that fell onto the judicial stand changed into live cockroaches. Squeamish Dentistikha moved aside and brought a scented hanky up to her nose. Now everyone had already noticed that Grafin Cagliostro appeared, let us say softly, poorly. He was covered entirely in slime, and in his ear a quite ordinary – definitely not a golden one – leech was moving. Tararakh for some reason was embarrassed; he unnoticeably moved aside and started to pick his nose with a thick finger.

“Oh, oh! Vhat misfortune! An unknown person played a nasty trick on you! I am all in absolute horror!” Professor Stinktopp started to lament and excessively eagerly set about shaking the algae off Cagliostro.

“Enough! I am voiding the scores of the match! Here’s my seal!” Having pushed Stinktopp aside, Cagliostro stuck a hand into an inside pocket. A frog jumped out of the pocket. Judging by the sizes of its eyes, it was clearly suffering from Graves’ disease.

“And this is all that confirms your authority? In that case we have a full bog of them,” Medusa filtered the words through her teeth.

“Do you want to joke, darling? I’ll end this farce! This fixed match!” Cagliostro shouted. He rummaged in his pocket and, after snatching out a fairly wet parchment, waved it.

“But, please, if you call off the match and void the scores, then what will become of the championship? According to the laws of your ... my apologies, our Magciety, an interrupted match can resume no earlier than two years,” said Sardanapal.

“This is wonderful! I’m not hurrying anywhere! But while a new game date hasn’t yet been set, the Invisibles, as before, will be considered the world champion!” Cagliostro vindictively hissed and in an undertone pronounced, “*Actus cheat macaqis interruptum toughis!*” The parchment with plenary powers changed into an enormous bat. The bat rose above the field, puffed up, and burst into a dazzling violet flash. The stands began to drone angrily. The genie dragon handlers, on order, surrounded the dragons and began to crowd them towards the sandy arena, intending on driving them into the hangars.

“There! You know this spell, Sardanapal. And you know the rules! There will not be a match between the Invisibles and Tibidox in the next two years under any condition. Now even The Ancient One wouldn’t be able to do anything,” Grafin smirked. Sardanapal clutched his heart. His beard rushed forward and made an attempt to wind around Cagliostro’s neck. The academician barely had time to hold it with a hand.

A bench fell with a deafening bowling strike. Tararakh got up. His huge lower jaw trembled. In his eyes were tears. “This mole interrupted the match... He interrupted when his celebrated Invisibles already almost lost! What is created now in the children’s minds?” he said hoarsely.

Grafin Cagliostro alarmingly looked sideways at the pithecanthropus and began to move back. Tararakh moved slowly but determinedly. The benches fell one after another. “I’m warning you, I’ll defend myself! I have a blue belt in combat magic!” Cagliostro began to yell.

“I have a fist the size of your head!” Tararakh said affectionately. “Better stand on the spot, slug, or it’ll be worse!”

“Academician! What, aren’t you going to interfere? Get your gorilla away from me! He has the eyes of a killer!” Grafin began to whimper.

Sardanapal turned away. "What, in fact, is happening? My laces are untied. I see nothing," he said, ruefully examining his boots. The laces on them not only were untied, but also were so tangled up by some mysterious means that they presented a big enough threat to life and demanded immediate attention of the academician.

Tararakh finally overtook Cagliostro, shook a barely noticeable speck of dust off the shoulder of the chair of the board of arbiters and, having almost tenderly picked him up off the ground, pulled him by the jacket lapel towards himself. "You'll not get away with thi-i-i-is!" Cagliostro said wistfully and, having tucked in his elbows, blinked in a doomed manner.

The dragon Keng-King of the Invisibles, not having had time to be taken away from the field yet, was considerably surprised. It had never seen a flying person with a trashcan on his head. This striking spectacle became so ingrained in the soul of the impressionable pangolin that for a long time it still did not spit out the swallowed players and only languidly sighed... Nevertheless, the match had already been put off, and nothing could be done about it.

The cabins participating in the races began to arrive the next morning, when the school day had only just started for the third years. Good that the first lesson was veterinary magic, and Tararakh himself would also enjoy taking a look.

The pithecanthropus wavered for about five minutes, casting askance looks at the window, from which a large part of his students no longer tore themselves away, and then stated, "Ahem, attention! I propose to change the theme of the lesson! Write! Cabins on Chicken Legs. Hmm... Special maganatomical features and all such in this vein. Ready? Then I don't understand why you're still sitting? Get on your feet and march to the courtyard! What hints don't you understand?"

The third years jumped with a triumphant roar, overturning desks, and moved towards the doors. Only Shurasik alone remained on the spot. "But what about the seven-headed hydra? Really, will you not dictate the symptoms of diarrhea in aquatics?" he squeaked in protest.

The pithecanthropus stopped. The question caught him by surprise. "Eeee-ehhh... Excellent, Shurasik! I was thinking exactly whom to entrust with guarding the hydra! Keep an eye on it, lest it climb out from the portable tub!" he said, shutting the door.

Shurasik remained in class alone. Water splashed. The third of the hydra's seven heads leaned out of the tub. The small spitefully derisive eyes stopped at the unhappy guard. "Shoo! Quick! March! Ugh, you're told!" Shurasik shouted in a cowardly manner. He took a mop and started to push the hydra back into the tub. The third head disappeared, but the fourth appeared almost immediately. The wood crunched. The mop broke into two and disappeared in the hydra's mouth. Shurasik even did not have time to notice precisely which one. After dropping the remaining stub, he clutched his stomach. "O-o-oh, no! I'm not okay! But only bears and hydra suffer from diarrhea!" he shouted in protest.

They poured out into the courtyard just in time. The first cabin was already marching onto the drawbridge. The guard cyclops Dumpling Maker saluted it, placing a huge hand against a protruded ear.

The cabin moved with a quick march step, throwing the pimply chicken legs out far. A moss-grown hag with one tooth in her mouth and bushy eyebrows looked out of its window. The straw roof of the cabin, similar to a mop of wheaten hair, bounced. Sparks fell from the chimney.

Slander Slanderych winced and attempted to send the genie Abdullah for the reference book on fire prevention. "Go yourself, worthless! Don't load the snowy donkey of my patience with granite blocks of your mistrustfulness!" the quarrelsome genie began to roar. He was upset with the principal for not allowing him to read solemnly to the guests his *Poem of a Thousand Curses*. After hearing that a snowy donkey served as the genie's patience, Slander was so puzzled that he gave up and went unnoticeably away to the side.

Following the first cabin, its friends were already rumbling on the drawbridge. Dumpling Maker was standing so still, chest out, eyes staring, with a hand exactly stuck to one ear. Miraculous bliss did not disappear from his face even when one of the cabins, making room for a neighbour, carelessly

bumped him into the ditch. I'll not understand where the natural Greek gets such sergeant-major zeal from! Russia treats all alike!" Professor Stinktopp muttered disapprovingly.

In total the participants in the prospective races were seven Russian cabins, two Ukrainian huts, three Northern yurts on deer hooves, and the highlight – High-rise on Broiler Legs. The latter was so enormous that it was necessary to enlarge the gates with a special spell. When finally it managed with improbable efforts to squeeze through into the internal courtyard of Tibidox, it began to seem from the outside that an additional tower had appeared in the school of difficult-to-raise magicians.

"Perhaps we'll persuade it to stay?" the academician Sardanapal asked.

"No way! I've heard about it! It has such a temper that it'll start to kick all of them here. It spends its entire life on foreign tours for this very reason... Hey, Tararakh! Take the children to the side! Don't get any closer!" Medusa began to worry. The students unwillingly moved aside.

Worked up by the long passage, the cabins still trampled for a while in the courtyard before they agreed to move up to the previously marked areas. The distance between the areas was measured such that one cabin could not kick another. Here they stood, occasionally creaking from time to time and shifting from foot to foot.

Yagge walked between the cabins and cordially greeted their mistresses. It was obvious from everything that Yagge had been acquainted with the majority of them already for about seven hundred years, no less...

"Granny also had such a cabin once. Someone chased it away. Granny went for slippery jacks – returned, and tsk-tsk! Really, there're such snakes!" Bab-Yagun informed Vanka.

"What, so she didn't find it?" Kuzya Tuzikov asked, putting his tousled head between the friends.

"Shutters repainted, door hung somewhere else – you just try to find it! Get away from here, reactive broom! Nothing to smile about!" Yagun frowned. He wanted awfully to send an itch or the chicken evil eye to the insincerely sympathizing Tuzikov, but had to keep himself under control. Slander was spinning around hereabout, and Yagun had only recently been transferred back to the white department. Sardanapal did this after yielding to Yagge's requests, and, as he expressed it, "until the first prank."

"Yagge, old lady! How are you? Still squeaking so-so?" suddenly someone shrilly shouted behind their backs.

"Solonina Andreevna! It's been donkey's years!" Yagge – not very willingly, as it seemed to Tanya – embraced and kissed the middle-aged emaciated red-haired witch. Ginger was almost a beauty, but a gigantic saucer-sized pink beauty spot on her cheek slightly spoiled her looks. Solonina Andreevna's cabin was lean and long-legged. It had a unique roof covered in green tiles and Venetian blinds instead of curtains and geraniums decorated the windows. Moving away, Yagge several times glanced back at Solonina Andreevna, who was smiling so broadly with feigned happiness.

Sardanapal and Medusa, until then admiring from the little balcony the idyllic scene of the chicken-legged, had already come down into the courtyard.

"How do you do, kind hostesses! How do you do, witch-grannies!" the academician affectionately greeted all.

"And good health to you, host! Oh, come, how the beard was neglected! Exactly Tsar Gorokh!" the old ladies answered not in unison. Sardanapal's smile widened.

"Oh, I see, everybody is here! Lukerya-Feathers-on-the-Head! Glashka-Curdled-Milk! Big Matrena! Small Matrena! Aza Camphorovna, my respects!"

The witch-grannies began vying with each other to shower Sardanapal and Medusa with presents of bunches of mushrooms and kegs of pickles and sauerkraut. The Northern witch-grannies brought cartilaginous fish and smoked deer ribs. Solonina Andreevna presented a monograph of her own composition, entitled *The role of a gossip in the informational field of a planet. Cultural-logical aspect*. The Ukrainian ladies presented lard and a bottle of vodka, which Medusa immediately

removed far from the eyes of the academician. The witch-grannies smiled with understanding. Inspired by the successes of his rival, Professor Stinktopp rashly wanted to butt in for gifts, but they gave him nothing except a dead crow and a hissing black cat. Whimsical witch-grannies did not award black magicians.

When the instructors, students, and guests left for the Hall of Two Elements for the holiday dinner, the drawbridge again started to move like a piston and Dubynya, Usynya, and Gorynya tumbled into the courtyard. In recent months, they had been assigned to guard the coast far from Tibidox. There the hero-bouncers rarely caught the eyes of the instructors and were thoroughly out of control. They built a home-brew apparatus and now and then, bored without *shashlik*, secretly brought down a deer in the forbidden forest. In time, the mischief of the heroes reached such a degree that Sardanapal, stepping out on the wall, sniffed the wind and could not understand why it smelled like booze.

Dubynya, Gorynya, and Usynya knew nothing about the cabin races and now they were rather puzzled, after discovering that the entire enclosed courtyard was jammed with chicken-legged little houses. “What chicken coop did they set up here?” Gorynya said. “Right away I’ll crow like a rooster!” Usynya stated. Dubynya also wanted to say something witty, but, as it regularly happened with him, again experienced a crisis of genre. So, not thinking up anything, he carried the club over his head and advanced forward.

Clucking worriedly, the cabins darted to the sides, dropping bundles of straw from the roofs. A yurt on deer hooves hid behind a Ukrainian hut. Only High-rise on Broiler Legs remained in place.

Inspired by the easy victory, Dubynya moved towards it. “Why did you stand here, lanky? Now stomp!” he raised his voice at it and struck its leg with the club. High-rise on Broiler Legs shouted cockily and swung the hurt leg. The kick turned out first rate: Dubynya, flying away with the speed of a cannonball, was visible from a distance – from all the windows and towers. The trajectory of his flight was excellent and corresponded to all moronoid laws of physics. After tracing a gigantic arc and admiring the Buyan Island from the height of a hero’s flight, the projectile named Dubynya landed somewhere in the region of the coastal cliffs.

Gorynya and Usynya, thinking of cajoling High-rise with their clubs, stopped. “Listen, brother, what was I thinking? Must first go look for Dubynya,” Gorynya, scratching his forehead, said. “But you, high-rise brooding hen, don’t be glad! You would think it has a brain! We’ll return yet!” Usynya added, and both heroes, pulling their heads into their shoulders, stepped back into the forest.

The small-minded cabins, with chicken happiness surrounded High-rise, clucking with the liveliness of an experienced brooding hen...

\* \* \*

At the end of the solemn dinner, smoothly turning into a not less solemn supper, Tararakh, bashfully picking his teeth with a knife, approached Tanya. “Tanya, we need to have a talk! Let’s go away to the stairs!” the pithecanthropus said. Vanka Valyalkin with offence turned away. Earlier Tararakh did not have secrets from him.

“Oho, what secrets we have! Maybe Tararakh’s planning a revolution in Tibidox?” Bab-Yagun mockingly whispered to him. Vanka nearly flung a plate at him. “Okay, don’t be offended! What kind of intrigues can Tararakh come up with? He’s a pithecanthropus! What intrigues could there be in the Stone Age? A club on the head – that’s the entire cave revolution,” comforting him, added Yagun.

Tanya and Tararakh went away to the stairs of the Atlases. Here only the Atlases could overhear them, but they were interested in nothing except their primary occupation. “I have a request for you... Only keep it from everyone! Agree?” Tararakh continued.

“Agree,” said Tanya. She shifted from foot to foot, waiting until it would be possible to return to the puff pastry. After several weeks with the radish tablecloth, she needed something less nourishing and useful. For example, a rich pastry with cream and the complete absence of vitamins.

“Are you getting ready for exams?” Tararakh asked.

“Yes, kind of,” Tanya pronounced not very confidently, involuntarily thinking whether she spoke the truth. On one hand, together with Yagun and Vanka, she still had not yet touched the textbooks. On the other hand, they had already tried for a week to hatch from malachite a spirit of omniscience, watering it with dragon tears and keeping it in the cold. The spirit actually hatched, but every time such an idiot came out that not only was it incapable of prompting, but it also did not even remember its own name.

“Look, Tanya, you study well... So that it would just fly out of your mouth! So that any second, even when you wake up at night, everything would still be in your head... Of course, it’s also possible to spark on a grand scale without knowledge. Here it’s not even necessary to be a professor, but simply to be smart. For another professor, work so piles up that only the nose remains to be seen...” Suddenly noticing that he was refuting himself, Tararakh became silent and bashfully wiggled his toes. He always walked around barefoot, asserting that in shoes he felt like a rhinoceros with prostheses.

“There’s something about all this I don’t like. He started talking about studies... What if all his asps crawled away again and there’s no one to gather them?” Tanya cautiously thought.

Taking heart, the pithecanthropus took a deep breath, breathed out with such force as if blowing out a candle burning somewhere at the other end of the hall, and approached the essence, “Tanya, tonight I want to go to the cabins. I’m interested in seeing how they’re doing there. Building a nest or, perhaps, sleeping while standing.”

“Go. Why not?” Tanya said.

“Also – what if I’m lucky and some cabin lays an egg. I would put it into the bird Sirin’s nest – it could hatch me a cabin. And I could then give it to Yagge as a present...” Tararakh continued to mutter.

“Wonderful. Yagge would be pleased.” For the time being Tanya did not see what the secret here was. Perhaps Tararakh was afraid that she would let out the secret to Yagun, and he – to his granny, and then it would not be a surprise.

“Wow-wow! And I say: wonderful!” Tararakh was inspired. “So, it means, you agree? You will sit with the Sleeping Adonis?”

“With whom, with whom?” Tanya asked him to repeat.

Tararakh brought a finger to his lips, “Shush! Later you’ll find out. Only consider: you have to sit the whole night. Otherwise it won’t work.”

“But who is this Sleeping Adonis?”

“Later you’ll find out. I can’t tell you for the time being. So, yes or no? I haven’t asked you to do anything for a long time.”

“Well, okay,” yielded Tanya.

“It means yes?” the pithecanthropus asked again with distrust.

“Yes, yes, yes, yes!” Tanya despondently repeated. She already reckoned that it would be possible to take a puff pastry with her. Moreover, a sleeping adonis is rarely seen. It would be interesting to take a look. Even if the adonis suddenly woke up and was annoyed, it was always possible to push him to Verka Parroteva or Coffinia.

Tararakh beamed. “I knew that you’d agree! You won’t be sorry!” he blurted out, “My den in ten minutes then! Knock this way: one-two-three, one-two... Only remember – not a word!”

Tanya returned to the table. Bab-Yagun and Vanka with curiosity looked sideways at her but asked nothing. “I have to be absent... I cannot tell you anything because... Well, in short, we’ll meet after breakfast!” she said, confused. “Uh-huh,” Vanka indifferently turned away. Tanya, knowing him very well, understood that he was downright outraged.



She was guiltily at a loss, wrapped a large piece of puff pastry in a napkin and slipped from the Hall of Two Elements. Having gotten up along the stairs of the Atlases, she turned into the first dark corridor. This was not the shortest way to Tararakh's den; however, the girl hoped that precisely here she would meet no one. The torches hissed in an unfriendly manner and poured out sparks. Wheelchair's loose spokes jingled somewhere in the nooks. Tanya, without stopping, threw a *briskus* at it.

She was already halfway to Tararakh's den when suddenly a dark silhouette floated out from a niche, barring her way. Tanya squealed. Two torches went out with her screech. Somewhere above a glass cracked. Indeed if anything, the baby Grotter knew how to squeal and did this skilfully. Pipa gave her the lessons. Here, in Tibidox, she improved her technique with Katya Lotkova and Verka Parroteva – two famous panic-mongers. The figure started back and, after plugging up his ears with his hands, issued a bird cry. Simultaneously his face came into a lunar ray pouring through a stained-glass panel like a bluish stream. Tanya recognized Slander Slanderych.

The colorless eyes of the principal froze the girl from her head to her heels. It seemed to Tanya that an icy lump began to form in her stomach. Prickly sparks ran through her body. "Grotter, immediately shut your mouth! You stunned me! What are you doing here?" the principal hissed.

"I'm going for a walk!"

Slander grinned distrustfully. "Here? What, no more suitable places for a walk?"

"There are," mechanically answered Tanya.

"Then what are you doing here?" the principal squinted.

"Eh-eh... Everywhere is full of people. And here no one prevents me from concentrating. I'm thinking over a composition on the theme of *The Use of Rancid Jellyfish for Magic Purposes!* You can ask Professor Stinktopp. He assigned it to us!" Tanya said, in a hurry groping for the first explanation she chanced upon.

"Fine, I'll definitely ask Stinktopp whether he permits you to be loose along the corridors," Slander promised with a threat. His eyes like sticky worms crawled along Tanya's arms and stopped at the napkin. "So. A bundle. What's in it?"

"Pastry," Tanya was lost.

"Really? Hand it over!" the principal demanded. Then Slander Slanderych behaved unpredictably. He threw the bundle onto the floor, hung over it like a hawk, and began to hack the pastry to pieces, not paying attention to the cream and the jam smearing his fingers. At the same time, he contrived to keep his magic ring in readiness in order to throw a combat spark if necessary. Finally, the pastry was destroyed and even trampled by his feet. On the floor remained only an ugly mash on which wasps began to congregate. One of them even stung the principal's finger. For some reason this calmed Slander down. "Wasps cannot be mistaken. This was truly pastry..." he said to himself quietly. "Okay, Grotter, go! Only don't think that I believed you! You still have to give an explanation, and very soon!" He bored Tanya with his view one more time, and again withdrew into the niche.

Tanya had time to notice a little folding there, created with the help of the simplest magic. "Aha, Slander sits in ambush! Interesting, who is he on watch for? And my pastry is something he did not like!" she thought.

Soon, after contriving not to bump into anyone anymore, Tanya stood at the door of Tararakh's room, trying to recall the prearranged knock. But she did not have time to knock, as the door was thrown open and the pithecanthropus literally dragged her inside by the sleeve. Likely the impatient Tararakh was on duty at the door, peeping through a crack. He put his head out into the corridor and, after looking at both sides, locked the door.

Tanya looked around with curiosity. Not without reason Tararakh called his room a den. To call it something else was somehow difficult. Soot covered the walls with the exception of those places where the pithecanthropus scratched with a stone the silhouettes of deer and aurochs. Piled up in the corner was a not bad collection of spears, knotty clubs, and rock axes. There were especially many

axes. Tararakh hewed them into shape in the long winter evenings, remembering the times in the caves. A fireplace was laid out in stones in the middle of the den, leaves and dry grass lay next to it by armfuls. Tararakh slept on them, asserting that it was much more comfortable this way. "Still!" he said with pride. "The bed must be repaired, linen cleaned, so once a year I throw the straw into the fire, and I'm able to gather new leaves from there!"

"Did anyone see you?" Tararakh asked anxiously.

"I did. Stumbled upon Slander. He was hiding in wait for someone," acknowledged Tanya.

The pithecanthropus dropped the log, which he was going to toss into the fire. "Where was this? Far from here?" he asked seemingly casually.

"Ne-a, not very. You know, between the stairs of the Atlases and the Tower of Ghosts there is a little curved corridor where the torches always go out."

"Ah, understandable!" Tararakh said. It seemed to Tanya that he feared to hear something else and was now at ease.

"And he even crumbled and trampled my pastry. Do you know why? His brain all tied up in a knot perhaps?" she was interested.

Tanya thought that Tararakh would be surprised or at least agitated by the action of the principal, but this for some reason did not occur. The pithecanthropus listened to the information about the pastry without any special interest. He only muttered, "Pastry... Oh! Slander left something. *This* in no way can be pastry, although who knows him, what it'll turn out to be..."

"What are you about talking? What is *this*?" Tanya quickly asked.

"I cannot tell you. Honestly speaking, I know little myself. Still, there are some guesses..." Tararakh answered evasively.

The pithecanthropus approached the curtain dividing his den into two halves. He already undertook to draw it aside, but suddenly took his hand away and turned to Tanya. "I can't. This isn't a joke! You must take a terrible oath that you'll be silent as the grave! Understand?"

"Do you have in mind the fatal oath?" Tanya asked with trembling in her voice. Tararakh sternly nodded. Tanya felt dryness in her mouth. To her, as to everybody in Tibidox, it was well known what the fatal oath was. A magician, uttering the fatal oath of his free will or under coercion, can no longer destroy it under any conditions. Even a random disturbance of the oath – for example, if, not keeping himself under control, he tells the secret to his closest friend – entails an agonizing and terrible death.

"Are you ready?" Tararakh asked.

"I swear that I will never describe to anyone or under any condition what I will see now! No one will find out from me about the Sleeping Adonis! *Strike thunderus!*" Tanya blurted out. The green spark, tearing away from her ring, hung in the middle of the room, after changing for a moment into the likeness of lightning. Precisely the same lightning would pierce Tanya if she decided to make a slip of the tongue.

"Sorry it was necessary to demand the oath from you... But I think you will soon understand everything yourself. Be introduced: here is the Sleeping Adonis!" Tararakh said, decisively parting the curtain.

Tanya involuntarily recoiled. A crystal coffin was swinging on silver chains behind the curtain. The girl irresolutely approached, looked at the Sleeping Adonis, and in her heart confined the worm of disappointment. She must acknowledge that she expected to see something else. In the crystal coffin, breathing heavily with hands under a cheek, was a short-legged man with such porous cheeks that they were the right size for planting flowers. A drying carnation doubled over pitifully in the buttonhole of his white dress coat.

"Phew, how terrible! What's in his family tree? Crocodiles?" Tanya asked.

Tararakh merrily evaded the question. "What do you want? They did not find him in time; here he was also a little dusted! But then this is the real Ludwig Champignon! Somewhere here even his uniform was signed. It was mandatory that they marked all Sleeping Adnoises in the Middle Ages..."

Wait!” Tararakh fussily began to inspect the collar and showed Tanya the nametag. “Here you see! What I did say? Ludwig Champignon!” the pithecanthropus was pleased. Tanya did not begin to disappoint him, although it was clearly “**Gottfried Bouillon**” on the nametag. She had long since known from Vanka that the pithecanthropus read and wrote rather poorly.

Tanya looked at Tararakh, and her suspicion suddenly started to nag like a dental drill. “Know what, Tararakh... I’ll sit with him, but I won’t kiss him! If you need this, indeed better call Coffinia. She would even kiss a frog. And if it’s necessary to squeeze and tickle – it’s Dusya Dollova,” she stated.

Tararakh was even frightened. “You... What thought is that? The reason I asked you to sit with him is that I was certain: you will not begin to kiss him. Or else, he, for all I know, will wake up! All these Sleeping Adonises are a little nutsy. He’ll roam and annoy everyone. And then may even be violent. Yes, in general he’s somewhat...kind of strange. I don’t entirely like it.”

“Listen, Tararakh! Where did you get this Gottfri...Ludwig Champignon? What’s he to you in general?”

The pithecanthropus reproachfully stared at the girl, with his entire look showing that Ludwig Champignon was not particularly necessary to him. Even more, he would be glad to be done with him, but could not in view of specific circumstances.

“You have to understand, here’s some business... It’s a personal request of Sardanapal. I could not refuse. The academician found him in a cave on the coast approximately one month ago. Earlier the entrance into the cave was covered with sand, and here a storm washed away the sand. Sardanapal saw a crack, squeezed in, and looked: he was in the cave, before him a coffin on chains, and an inscription carved on the cliff above the coffin. I was not so good with reading and writing, but from the words of Sardanapal the meaning was this: ‘Caution! Deferred curse! The year he is taken away will be the year of terrible ordeal for all of Tibidox!’ Now do you understand why I made you take the oath? The discussion deals with the fate of the entire Tibidox!”

Tararakh scratched his stubbly cheek with his short fingers and with annoyance pushed the crystal coffin, swaying on the chains. “Medieval magicians loved to play dirty tricks on descendants. Some even contrived to invoke a pile of deferred curses hastily and quickly died in order that they could not be abolished,” he complained.

“Wait! Really, when they’re alive, then...” Tanya started in amazement.

“Aha. What, didn’t you know?” the pithecanthropus interrupted her. “While a magician is still of this world his curse can always be annulled, although sometimes it’s even necessary to wreck your brain, but when he’s dead – now that’s it indeed. How he cursed – so it is. Earlier you even know how it happened: let’s assume a weak magician had a stormy fight with a strong one. He’ll curse him, and quickly jump into a pond with a rock tied to his neck. Well now indeed the strong magician can disappear to nowhere – the curse can no longer be removed, even if you collapse! Later The Ancient One stopped this practice and so arranged that hence deferred curses could not be imposed. But only there’s little sense all the same: do you know how many curses are placed from previous times?” Tararakh even waved his hand, showing that there was a whole pile of such trash everywhere.

“I can imagine how troubled Sardanapal was when he read this warning!” Tanya said.

“‘Troubled’ is not the word! He immediately realized that all this is serious, and began to think how to get out of this. To leave him in the cave – vacations will start any day now. All kinds of curious fools will run along the coast and for sure will stick their noses into the cave. Then at night, he transferred the crystal coffin into Tibidox, handed him over to Yagge, and ordered her to protect him like the apple of her eye. ‘Put him,’ he says, ‘into any remote room in magic station and lock it. Only not in the basement, it’s full of evil spirits.’ But you know Yagge! In a couple of weeks, she was already tired of this Adonis and began persistently to get away from him. Her patients, you know, recover poorly when there’s a coffin in the next room. They, perhaps, even don’t know about it, but it’s unpleasant for her. In short, she got rid of him back to Sardanapal, and that one to me. He knows that I would never kiss this beggar and will allow no one to approach him. Besides, who would come

into my den? Perhaps Professor Stinktopp once every hundred years wanders in to drink a glass or two. These adonises are simply all the same to Stinktopp... And the adonises, if you look closely, feel the same also.”

Unexpectedly Tararakh was on guard. The Sleeping Adonis noisily turned in the coffin and opened his eyes. Tanya yelled. Tararakh rushed to the coffin and, rocking it, started to sing in a hoarse voice: “Bye-bye! Quick beddy-bye! Will come a grey top, you will bite into a chop!” The Adonis blinked drowsily and, having closed his eyes again, began to smack his lips sweetly. Tararakh stopped singing and moved away from the coffin. “Ooh! It still works, but getting worse every time... Okay, I’m going. Else I’ll miss how the cabins are settling,” he said.

He was about to move to the door, but Tanya seized his hand. “TARARAKH! Why didn’t you tell me that he wakes up? You were hoping that I would stay, right?”

The pithecanthropus was terribly confused and, although there was no one else besides Tanya and the Adonis in the den, lowered his voice to a barely distinguishable whisper. “You understand... This matter here... It started very recently. He’s not so much awake, but like he suffers sleep-walking! I didn’t know this earlier. But somehow I woke and he was not here. I rushed into the corridor and searched! Barely found him – he had almost strayed into the Hall of Two Elements. I threw my arms around him and dragged him, but he’s strong as a vampire! He pushed me – and I flew away! Good that I thought of singing a lullaby. He immediately calmed down and fell asleep directly on the floor. I could barely drag him back... You do this, as he begins to wake, immediately sing a lullaby – it’ll immediately bring him down.”

“I don’t know any lullaby!”

“Unimportant! You can sing whatever! Deafen him even with a military march... He’s...not especially fastidious. The main thing, don’t be silent. As soon as he begins to stir – immediately sing... Well that’s it, I’ve to speed along!” The instructor of veterinary magic deftly freed himself from Tanya’s hand and slipped to the door quicker than the girl had time to hold him. Steps merrily thumped along the corridor. Whistling, Tararakh, having gotten leave for the entire night, rushed to observe the cabins. Tanya tossed another couple of logs into the fire and sat down on the straw.

Four hours later the Sleeping Adonis stirred again. Tanya had to swing the coffin for a long time, singing contemporary pop – the only thing she could recall. The last vacation Coffinia dragged a moronoid radio into Tibidox and now listened at night to everything that she could catch. Sometimes she invited Gunya Glomov and egged him on so that he would dance together with Page. Once, the jealous skeleton even bit Glomov’s ear. The pop acted as stimulation on the Sleeping Adonis. He turned and gnawed the pillow. Then on the move to rap, Gottfried immediately yawned and dropped off. Happily, Tanya changed to *Kalinka-malinka* and, having stopped swinging the crystal coffin, returned to the fire.

Drunk on the new gifts of the musical world, the Sleeping Adonis did not wake up for a long time. Tanya stood firm, making circles around the fire and examining the beasts on the walls of the den, until approximately two in the morning. Tararakh was not much of an artist, but he carved with inspiration and with his entire soul. Tired of wandering back and forth along Tararakh’s den, Tanya shovelled straw with the intention of constantly having the crystal coffin in the field of her vision. She lay down, for a while honestly stared at the snoring adonis, and then merely for a second shut her eyelids that had grown heavy and – fell asleep.

Already toward the morning, a vague sound woke Tanya. It seemed to her, not quite awake, that a rock axe fell in the corner. The coals had almost gone out. The Sleeping Adonis was sitting in the coffin and smiling in the dark with bluish teeth. The lid was carefully leaned against the coffin and slightly rocked together with the chains. Fear like thousands of brisk ants was running along Tanya’s veins. She was absolutely paralyzed. The words of all the songs poured like dry peas out of her memory.

The Sleeping Adonis clumsily got out of the coffin and, stretching out his hands forward, made his way to the door. Not noticing Tanya, he stepped over her, nearly stepping on the coals, and went out into the corridor. “*Pointus harpoonus!*” Tanya whispered, quickly lifting her ring. The ring of Theophilus Grotter ejected a green spark, but it was pale and, barely flaring up, withered away. Tanya recalled that the Sleeping Adonis was under the action of a deferred curse and any other magic was powerless here.

Finally fully awake, she rushed after the sleeping Adonis, but that one had already disappeared somewhere. The corridor was empty. Only water drops, making their way through the cracked stained-glass panel, fell resonantly from above onto the flagstones, and torches not yet extinguished were hissing and smoking with a pinkish flame. Tanya rushed first in one direction, then the other. The twisting corridors of Tibidox were interwoven, exactly like a snake. To search for the Sleeping Adonis in these labyrinths was almost useless, especially not knowing where he had headed.

Suddenly Tanya recalled that Tararakh had told her about the Hall of Two Elements. What if the lethargic Adonis again was drawn to there? Then he would bump into Slander for sure, if that one were again in ambush. Without turning over in her mind what she would say to the principal if he again intercepted her, Tanya ran to the Hall and the stairs of the Atlases. Torches flickered like spots and spread in her eyes. Her heart was pounding and leaping in her tight rib cage. She was already in the gallery between the Tower of Ghosts and the stairs of the Atlases, when unexpectedly her feet painfully hit a step that had jumped out from nowhere. Tanya fell and whimpered very quietly, nursing a hurt knee and whispering heated reproachful words to the step.

Suddenly in front, where the main corridor intersected with the secondary one and where there were almost no torches at all, loomed someone’s shadow. Not pondering, Tanya rapidly crawled away and hid behind that same step, of which she recently spoke critically. The girl herself seriously could not explain what compelled her to hide. If this was the Sleeping Adonis, then indeed he was precisely necessary to her! On the other hand, it could not be excluded that this would turn out to be Slander. The most correct thing was to look closely first and only then to begin singing a solo.

The figure froze at the intersection of the corridors, listening. In the dusk, his face seemed greased and indistinct. The unknown one was dragging something bulky towards himself. After standing a certain time in reflection, he again hoisted the load onto his shoulders and, swaying from the weight, was hidden in one of the passages.

Tanya moved out of her shelter and inaudibly ran after him. A low sound compelled her to freeze. On a small magic stool, leaning his head against the wall and stooping, Slander Slanderych was sleeping in ambush. “Swim over here! Closer! Even closer! You have such a cool tail!” he muttered in dream. The flame of the torch trembled. The shadows fussily ran along the principal’s face. A bittern screeched in the Tibidox swamp. Slander shuddered and began to grind his teeth. The cry of the bittern by some mysterious means evoked in the sleeping one an assault of jealousy. “No, no! I don’t want fish oil! Take the spoon away now! I hate you, I don’t want to love! I saw how you winked at the water sprite yesterday, this wet nonentity! I’ll dry up the pond, yank out his beard, throw him to the sun!” the principal began to moan.

“The wretch! Why did he fall in love with a mermaid? It would be much more correct to fall in love with Parroteva. It’s simply impossible for her not to be pleased,” thought Tanya. Lately Parroteva stuck her nose into her affairs so often that the baby Grotter frequently thought of her with irritation. When she had finally sneaked past Slander Slanderych, the Sleeping Adonis – and who else could this be, since Slander was sitting on the chair? – had disappeared with his load to God knows where.

Not finding the Sleeping Adonis in the Hall of Two Elements, Tanya searched for him till dawn. And not having discovered anyone this way, she dejectedly meandered into Tararakh’s den, pondering with shame what to say to him. Having stepped over the threshold, she almost turned into a pillar of salt. The Sleeping Adonis again was lying in the crystal coffin and, having thrown his arms

behind his head, was selflessly snoring the *Eroica*. It only remained for the girl to straighten the coffin lid so that his snore would not resound along the entire Tibidox.

“Whom did I see there in the corridor? Was it him or not? And if not, then where did he drag himself to?” Tanya thought. Suddenly she understood that she would say nothing to Tararakh. The pithecanthropus so believed that she would manage, the reason why he asked her, and put her on the spot. No, better if Tararakh finds out nothing. Moreover, Gottfried Bouillon is already in place – intact and not been kissed. There is likely no reason to faint.

Having calmed down, Tanya again sat down by the fire. She no longer wanted to sleep. Beyond the window in the tower, the guard cyclopes were exchanging loud exclamations. The morning approached.



## Chapter 3

### High-rise on Broiler Legs and Obstacle Course

Near noon, the entire school of magic assembled in the main dragonball field. True, it was necessary to re-equip slightly for the cabin races. The protective magic dome was removed and paths were marked in the sandy arena. Around the field stood the cyclopes, whom Slander had rounded up to keep order. The cyclopes yawned and, leaning on their clubs, stared uneasily at Usynya, Gorynya, and Dubynya. Dubynya looked fine, although his nose was slightly displaced to the side, and a well-ventilated opening appeared instead of one of his front teeth.

There were almost no vacant spots on the stands, except on the very top, from where, besides the clouds, which the playful cupids, having slipped through to the match without tickets, continually looked out of, it was impossible to see anything at all. The transparent silhouettes of the ghosts soared between the rows. Lieutenant Rzhevskii bowed to acquaintances, half of whom attempted to launch a *briskus-quickus* at him. Eyeless Horror, after rolling in Wheelchair to the races, entertained all those desiring with candies, on which were traced crossbones and skull.

On Unhealed Lady's neck hung a supporting muff, looking as if three scores of tassels were already pulled off it, and her jaw was tied up with a towel. "Toothache!" she complained to everyone. And woe to the one who asked "where?" "HERE!" Lady answered, with explicit pleasure extracting her jaw from the muff. The compassionate spectator involuntarily grimaced, and Lady, noticing this, would start to hit him with the spectral umbrella and squeal, "You just look at this dry stick! Cad! And he doesn't want to hold it!"

Tanya and Vanka Valyalkin were sitting in the first row not far from the judicial bench. Bab-Yagun, who had bustled with the banners more than anyone else, was not with them. Sardanapal suddenly recollected that the races did not have a commentator, and sat Yagun down on the commentator's tower, something similar to the tower of a volleyball judge. Yagun could see much better from it. True, he had to rattle non-stop, but he managed.

Coffinia, sitting beside them, unceremoniously occupying Yagun's place and twirling her head in all directions, nudged Tanya with an elbow. "Grotty, look! Thirty-three heroes! Now someone would faint, eh?"

"If you must – faint!" Tanya muttered. She distrustfully examined the stand, on which handsome young men, daring giants in suits of scales of burnt gold, were sitting in glory and studying the playbill with the schedule of the rounds. Despite having heard about them often, she was seeing them for the first time. "And why are they alone? Where's Uncle Chernomor?" Tanya asked. Coffinia twirled her index finger at her temple and silently pointed at the place of the chief judge, which Academician Chernomorov was occupying. Suddenly recollecting, Tanya bit her tongue. Indeed, she had to slip up like this, and on top of that before whom!

"Dear spectators! With you again I'm the dear to all and irritating to many Bab-Yagun. Usually you can admire me in the field, when I courageously go into tailspin on my roaring vacuum. But that's for dragonball matches. Now I, wise and courageous as an antique god, am on the commentator's tower! Oh! Here I already see in the fifth row the pathetically sour, plain face of my best friend Damien Goryanov!" with crimson ruby ears, Bab-Yagun started. "So that you would crack! Antique god!" green with malice, Damien Goryanov snorted. The shielding vest of Bab-Yagun began to crackle, having successfully deflected an evil eye.

"The cabins have crowded onto the start zone before me. By the efforts of Slander Slanderych on each cabin is a linen strip with its number – from 1 to 13. Certainly, this is a very wise, and I would even say shrewd, decision of the Tibidox principal. What if we confused a Chukotsky yurt with High-Rise or a Ukrainian hut?" Yagun said maliciously. The vest again began to crackle – loudly

and hysterically like a zoomer. This time he had to deal with a much stronger evil eye: Yagge sternly stared wide-eyed and threatened her grandson with a fist. Slander Slanderych discontentedly rubbed the bridge of his nose and turned away.

Bab-Yagun, like many great speakers, now and then forgot what he had recently said; he looked at his palm and was glad that he had safeguarded himself with crib notes. “Cabins on Chicken Legs are a very rare mythological form, relating to the kind of zoomorphic structures with no foundation. A new cabin can hatch not more frequently than once every hundred years. In the tree belt of Russia – and they dwell nowhere else – there remained so few of them that they have long been listed as endangered. For this very reason, in order to draw attention to this unique form, they have decided to carry out yearly reviews in Tibidox.”

“Don’t harp on, Yagun! I would really cry from tender emotion! Cutie-tutie, the poor little housies! So that they would step on your tongue!” Coffinia Cryptova shouted from her seat.

Yagun experienced a strong desire to launch a combat spark at her. “I believe my granny. She says that a Cabin on Chicken Legs is not simply a small wooden house with a stove. It’s even a friend. A real friend for centuries. When they drove away her cabin, Yagge almost died of disappointment. Clear to you?”

“Clear. Somebody was a walking vacuum and became an enthusiastic cabin fancier. Any day now he’ll set up an incubator and breed Buyan full of kicking houses,” again shouted Coffinia. Gunya Glomov and Damien Goryanov started to neigh disgustingly.

Bab-Yagun considered that there was no sense for the entire stadium to witness the bickering and quickly changed the subject. “The first international cabin races consist of three stages. The first stage – orientation in locality, the second – Caucasian trick riding, and the last – obstacle course. The winner is based on the total marks of the results of all stages,” he declared.

Shurasik started to write in such a hurry in his little notebook that he blunted his pencil. The rest of the nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine spectators did not begin to record but entrusted to memory.

Slander Slanderych, overbearingly inflating his cheeks, went out onto the field. “Cabins, listen to my command! Line up! Be still! Le...right! About turn!” he gave the order in a business-like manner. The cabins treated his words with total disregard. None stirred from its place. Only High-rise on Broiler Legs turned around alone. “Well done! Good girl!” Slander patronizingly addressed her carelessly and suddenly began to squeal: “Hey! What are you doing?” He grasped too late that High-rise turned around because it took into its head to pelt him with sand. And it would be much more convenient to rake up sand standing backwards.

The stands howled with laughter. The disconcerted Slander withdrew hurriedly. The mermaid, whom he as usual delivered to the races in a barrel, hit the water with her tail and splashed Slander. The principal became much cleaner, but then immediately smelt strongly of fish. “Very flattering! Simply very flattering!” grimacing, a squeamish Dentistikha said. She plugged up her nose with a hanky and in a hurry moved to another bench. The mermaid, offended, tried to splash her but missed, and all the water fell on Rita On-The-Sly. On-The-Sly did not mind at all. Since she was three, she had adored pickled herring, the smell of which was close to that of the mermaid.

“Lukerya-Feathers-on-the-Head! Number one! I ask you to love and not to complain, if anyone gets hit by an evil eye by mistake!” Bab-Yagun declared. From the cabin jumped out a decrepit but very frisky old hag. Her right foot was bone, and a yellow tooth grew from her lower jaw. The tooth was a one and only, but then of such a size that it was visible even from the next-to-last row. Lukerya-Feathers-on-the-Head whistled smartly, instilling a slight envy even in Nightingale O. Robber. “Auntie Lush! I begged you! Let them think that I learned it myself!” Nightingale Odikhmantevich muttered unhappily.

“Well, cabin! Turn your back to the forest, your front to me!” Lukerya-Feathers-on-the-Head gave an order. The cabin immediately began to creak, shuddered from porch to shutter and from

shutter to roof, and began to search pensively for the forest, turning the single window with geranium in different directions. After brief searches, the forest was discovered. True, at the same time, it also found that Lukerya-Feathers-on-the-Head and the forest were located on the same side; therefore, to turn facing Lukerya with its back to the forest was positively impossible.

Leaving its position, the cabin started to go around its mistress in order to turn up between her and the forest, and almost trampled a junior arbiter who was a former shaman. “Stop!” Sardanapal yelled. “Discredited! Next!” “What? No matter! I’ll win back with Caucasian trick-riding!” Lukerya said. Thumping her bone leg, she climbed back into the cabin and angrily slammed the door.

Following the unlucky Lukerya appeared Glashka-Curdled-Milk, Big Matrena, Small Matrena, Solonina Andreevna, Aza Camphorovna, and other participants. The cabins had different successes with orientation in locality. The Chukotsky yurts managed better than the others did in the first stage. They found not only the forest, cliffs, and Tibidox, but even navigated by the sun, and clearly showed by deer hooves where the equator was. High-Rise on Broiler Legs also passed orientation completely worthily. Unfortunately, at the same time two more shamans and one genie suffered while they were bustling around with tape measures.

However, the cabin of Solonina Andreevna obtained the highest mark; it knew how to carry out surprisingly complex tasks and cleanly turned seventy-two degrees towards the named shoe of Sardanapal – exactly the one with a glued heel. And this despite that it received commands in Latin!

“Well now? Who will deliver the prize ribbon for the first stage? According to the rules, it’s expected to be tied on the right foot of the cabin winning the stage!” Sardanapal briskly said.

“Perhaps we’ll send an arbiter? The cabin is quite ready to kick. Anything can happen!” Dentistikha cautiously said.

The for-life and posthumous head of Tibidox shook his head. “It seems they have already trampled all the arbiters. It has to be one of us! I propose Professor Stinktopp! Who’s ‘for’? I’m ‘for’!” he said. Immediately went up a forest of hands. No one liked Stinktopp. Only Dentistikha restrained, not risking to vote against her immediate superior.

Professor Stinktopp turned yellow as a lemon. “I reject! I’m tired of being trampled! Who wrote ze rules – let zat vun also anser for his sick fantasies!” he screamed.

“And that is a completely sensible proposal! Isn’t that true, colleagues? I agree! Who made up the rules? I ask: who made up these idiotic rules? Why does no one confess? I’ll find out all the same!” Sardanapal repeated angrily.

“You made up the rules,” Medusa whispered to him.

“Oh? Really? That’s annoying!” Sardanapal said when he finished muttering about absent-mindedness and lack of sleep over a hundred years. Professor Stinktopp’s twelve thousand wrinkles beamed malice.

An awkward pause appeared. Yagge, long looking slyly at the field, rescued the head of Tibidox from a difficult situation. “Well now! Hand the ribbon over here! Let’s see whether it has forgotten me, as I approach the cabins,” the old lady volunteered.

The brow of the academician cleared up. “Alright then!” he pronounced happily. “I think we can go to meet our deserved contributor. Eh, colleagues? You’re not against it, Slander Slanderych?” The principal of Tibidox was ‘for’. With both hands. He already began to fear that they would send him to the cabin.

When Yagge appeared on the field, Solonina Andreevna began to bustle, attempting to take the ribbon from her. “Indeed allow me! It only likes me! It doesn’t allow strangers to approach, barely understands Russian!” she said.

“Indeed true! Well, cabin! Come here, little hut!” Yagge ordered quietly. The cabin obediently ran up to her, pattering the tile. Solonina Andreevna pursed her lips. “See, it does! And she said: it doesn’t understand! Well, my dear, give me a paw!” Yagge again ordered. The cabin clumsily raised a sharp-clawed foot and, balancing on the other, stretched it out to Yagge. The old lady tied the

ribbon on and, after slapping the cabin on the long leg, moved aside, giving Solonina Andreevna a victorious look.

“Well done, Granny! Simply cannot believe it!” Bab-Yagun was enraptured. “And what’s going on over there? Academician Sardanapal gets up and raises his hand with the ring. One of two things: either he wants to drive away with sparks the harpies that have already made the fans sick with their heart-rending cries, or he is going to announce the Caucasian trick-riding. This will become clear very soon. According to the rules, Caucasian trick-riding is held in three groups. First group – cabins and huts. Second group – yurts. Third group – High-rise on Broiler Legs. Oh, my granny mama, I was nearly blinded! Why does Sardanapal let out such bright sparks? Caucasian trick-riding begins!”

The cabins jerked from their places, instantly tossing a cloud of sand into the air. Dust clouded up the stands. Those sitting in the first rows got most of it – they turned out to be in the centre of a sandstorm. “Thanks to Yagun! He had to play such a dirty trick! Three days busy with banners in order to swallow sand!” Vanka said, in a vain attempt to make out at least his own feet.

“Shurasik! Do something!” turning around, Tanya shouted. The sand squeaked on her teeth. But, as luck would have it, nothing floated up in memory except the now already quite unnecessary *Speedus-envenomus*.

“Useless! According to the new rules, all serious magic is blocked in the field,” despondently answered a voice from the adjacent dust cloud.

“How about evil eyes?”

“Evil eyes and jinxes – these are not magic. They’re petty underhand actions of worthless envious people!” Shurasik categorically stated.

“Oh, come on, how indignant! And the day before yesterday he put an evil eye on Verka Parroteva! The wretch for half an hour considered herself a Bengal tiger and was chasing Dusya Dollova. What did she yell? ‘I’m a tiger-dolleater!’ Must invent some such thing!” Coffinia beat around the bush.

“Dollova asked for it. No one asked her to put a spitting spell on my inkpot! She spoiled my entire notebook on study of evil spirits!” Shurasik complained.

The dust finally settled down only when the cabins had run off to a decent distance. Tanya saw that the cabins rushed by in uniform little jumps, similar to dancing. They braked on the turns and flapped their doors.

Suddenly the shutters of the end cabin were thrown open, and a rheumatic bent granny changed direction on the windowsill. “Ah! Fir stick, forest thick, a bachelor went quick!” she shouted smartly and, after waving to spectators, courageously climbed up onto the roof. The spectators greeted her with friendly applause. The jumping cabin rigidly entered the turn, leaning to the left.

“Dangerous moment! Lukerya-Feathers-on-the-Head almost flies off the roof; however, she miraculously manages to hold on. I’m sure she used her unique tooth. The cabin again gets onto a straight stretch and Lukerya reaches the chimney all the same! Bravo! First of all the participants! Not without reason she was waiting so for Caucasian trick-riding! I recall that according to the rules of the contest Lukerya must still squeeze through the chimney into the cabin, light the stove and, having first cooked the cutlets, entertain the spectators... Ha-ha! Did they really check the cutlets? Here I’m teasing my friend Vanka Valyalkin, a big fan of cutlets! But it’s actually necessary to light the stove! The participant, the first to do this, will receive the ribbon as winner of this stage!” Afraid to miss anything interesting, Bab-Yagun continually jumped up onto the seat of the tower and gesticulated.

Tanya waited with impatience until the cabins again turned up in her part of the stadium in order to see something at least. But here the yurts on deer hooves, appearing as a separate group, rushed forward and everything again was hidden in dust. “Somehow I’m not meant to be a spectator. Quite another matter to be a participant!” Tanya thought, forced to breathe through the shawl.

“A minor defect of the organizers, of course, cannot spoil the pleasure of the spectacle!” Bab-Yagun stretched himself out to the utmost from the tower and everything was excellently visible to

him. “You’ll see how Big Matrena skilfully trick-rides! True, I foresee that for a sportswoman of such a build it won’t be easy to squeeze into the chimney! Solonina Andreevna deftly jumps onto the tiles, clinging to a ledge with an umbrella. Not bad! Glashka-Curdled-Milk, number three, uses a not less inventive motion! She throws a cat tied with a rope onto the roof. The frightened cat takes off into the chimney and there only remains for Glashka to secure the rope. Now she indeed won’t fall down...”

Shurasik sneezed sadly behind Tanya. “I can’t even see my little notebook!” he said in sorrow.

“Write blindly!” Vanka advised him.

“I also write blindly. Only the paper is somewhat strange and the line in no way ends,” said Shurasik.

“Watch what you’re doing! You’re writing on my back! And I was wondering what’s crawling on me!” suddenly Coffinia began to yell. Shurasik began to tremble and dropped the pencil.

Bab-Yagun, having sat too long, jumped up on the tower. “Oh, my granny mama! Slander Slanderych with a green flag signals High-rise on Broiler Legs to start! I’ll now become deaf! What a nightmarish crash! The stadium shakes. The spectators fall like ripe apples from the benches. Interesting, what rules did Sardanapal devise for this cabin? Will someone really have to clamber onto the roof? You fall – your bones really won’t be whole... Oh, I see that for High-rise there is an insignificant change in the rules. The witch-grannies inhabiting it – and there are about two scores of them inside – briskly clamber along the fire escape, helping each other...”

High-rise, shaking the stadium, moved to the other end of the field. The dust settled down. Again, it became possible to breathe without the shawl.

“Cryptova, ah Cryptova!” Shurasik sorrowfully asked.

“What’s with you?” Coffinia snapped.

“Don’t twist about! Let me copy from your back what I wrote down earlier.” Coffinia silently pulled the notebook out of his hands and flung it onto the field.

“Ah, Chukotsky yurts?” Bab-Yagun exclaimed with feelings. “I never assumed that it’s possible to dash so swiftly on deer hooves! Here only the rules of Caucasian trick-riding differ a lot for yurts than for cabins. They don’t have brick chimneys! The mistress of a yurt must get outside and, having gone around the yurt, must again be at the entrance. Naturally, the yurt rushes at a gallop at the same time! Lukerya-Feathers-on-the-Head has disappeared into the chimney already quite a long time ago! It seems to me, I see smoke! Yes, so it is – even sparks occasionally escape outside. I’ll be darned! Interesting, with what is she stoking? Did she shove a dragon into the chimney? In big-time sports anything can happen.” This time the attack evil eye was so powerful that even the shielding vest did not help. Yagun flew off the commentator’s tower and ploughed his nose into the sand. An insulted Lukerya-Feathers-on-the-Head angrily slammed shut the shutter.

While Bab-Yagun shook himself down and again got back up the tower, the judges had finished assigning marks for the second stage. Lukerya-Feathers-on-the-Head got the prize ribbon. The second place went to Solonina Andreevna. The third was divided between Glashka-Curdled-Milk and the mistress of one of the Chukotsky yurts. High-rise on Broiler Legs, unable to control itself, kicked a cyclops that had accidentally ran out onto the field and was disqualified from this stage. Meanwhile a team of house spirits and a score of genie dragon handlers attempted to extract Big Matrena, who was stuck in the chimney. Fatty sighed and cursed those, thanks to whom she climbed into the chimney.

“I’m really furious! Not exactly coping and then hurled evil eyes already!” Bab-Yagun was indignant, again nestled on the tower. “Okay, who wants to harp on an old thing! I managed at the proper time! Any minute now the third stage – obstacle course – will begin! The limitation on serious magic has temporarily been lifted. The genies and surviving shamans are rushing along the field, creating fabricated obstacles. The first obstacle, which the participants have to overcome, is a deep ditch. Immediately after the ditch are artificial wind-fallen logs. And finally, an impassable swamp, which can be passed exclusively along the mounds concealed under water. According to the assurance

of experts, during prolonged wanderings in a forest cabins have to overcome similar obstacles under natural conditions in search of worms...”

“Yagun! What nonsense? I’ll take away the mouthpiece!” Sardanapal was outraged.

Yagun cautiously covered the mouthpiece with a palm. “I’ll take back my words! They don’t peck worms! And they stagger so along the forest just for fun! But, Academician, is it worthwhile to carp at such trifles? It suppresses my artistic imagination!”

“In my opinion Yagun’s...full of it!” Coffinia said, displeased. Shurasik began to nod in agreement. Since she took and flung away his little notebook, he was upset with the entire world.

“But what do you want? A cabin race isn’t dragonball, which everybody understands! We wouldn’t be able to say anything coherent at all, but he’s doing just fine! He shouldn’t stop talking!” Tanya interceded for Yagun.

Bab-Yagun precisely did not become silent for a moment, working like a true verbal machine gun. “Sardanapal lets out a start spark! Cabins, yurts, and High-rise are rushing forward, scaring arbiters and cyclopes! Here it is – the culmination of the contest! Crowding each other, bumping with wooden sides, the cabins approach the first obstacle. The first to jump into the ditch is Small Matrena’s cabin. On her tail literally hangs Lukerya-Feathers-on-the-Head! After it, barely lagging behind, Solonina Andreevna’s cabin navigates with its feet. One of the yurts is forced to withdraw – deer hooves refuse to climb into the water and stop on the shore. It’s right: you wash, only wash away your luck!”

“First deep thought I’ve heard from him! Isn’t it true, my dear, very exact reasoning? Perhaps, you also don’t sit in the water all the time?” smiling, Slander Slanderych remarked, trying to put his arm around the mermaid’s waist. “Go away, pesky!” the mermaid squealed and playfully lashed the principal’s fingers with her tail.

“The fight has become more intense!” Yagun shouted a little too much. “Who will reach the opposite shore first? What’s this storm? I understand nothing! Ah, it’s High-rise, jumped into the ditch and now forces a crossing of the obstacle. It splashes right to the bottom: the water barely reaches its knees. The ditch overflows its banks! What sprays! Even fell onto my lot! How unlucky for those sitting in the first rows! They’re probably now wetter than frogs!”

“Mock away, lop-eared! Doesn’t matter, after the races he’ll be waiting at mine! Possible to think that he put us here on purpose!” Vanka said angrily. His yellow soccer shirt was sticking to his body. Water was flowing down his hair. His boots were squelching. Tanya was hit not a bit less, but she, comforting herself, attempted to look at the situation from another angle. “It’s okay, Vanka! It’s not all that bad! No dust now!” she comforted Valyalkin. Coffinia, examining the genealogy of the cabins and dousing High-rise with verbal mud up to the chicken great-grandmothers inclusively, was choking with indignation.

“Small Matrena and Solonina Andreevna are the first to reach the wind-fallen logs. Small Matrena’s cabin attempts to jump over the obstacle while running at full speed and topples over. Unlucky cabin! It’s lying with its foundation up and mournfully jerking its feet, trying to hook onto anything. Interesting, how is Matrena there? Will she be able to get herself out or require the help of genies? Somehow, things don’t work out for the Matrenas today, I would say... Solonina Andreevna’s cabin with long thin legs shows more smarts. It clambers directly onto the logs, digging its claws into the bark. Outstanding manoeuvre! Aza Camphorovna’s cabin passes Lukerya-Feathers-on-the-Head! It’s gathering speed! Will it really also decide on a leap? This is folly! Indeed, doesn’t Small Matrena’s failure teach it anything? An outstanding leap – best of all that I’ve seen! At the very last moment short wings slide out of the dormer windows on the roof of the cabin. The cabin flaps them and manages the obstacle like a laying hen taking off to the fence!”

“Not bad! They’ve passed Solonina Andreevna! Look at Yagge! How she stares at these cabins – and indeed also wet from top to bottom!” Vanka said in rapture. His mood had improved visibly. Having taken from his pocket a cold cutlet, he looked over it thoroughly, removed a thread from the



magic tablecloth, and started eating. Bab-Yagun was not mistaken – Vanka adored cutlets. However, his maimed magic tablecloth issued nothing more besides cutlets and cucumbers, so it left him nothing else. “Fat is detrimental!” grimacing, Shurasik remarked. “Too much talk is even more harmful. You’ll catch a cold and die,” said Vanka and stuck his hand into his pocket for the next cutlet, which the magic tablecloth already had time to prepare for him,

“Oh, my granny mama! That beats all! High-rise doesn’t waste time on a leap! After gathering speed on Broiler Legs, it blows off the wind-fallen logs, scattering them like matches! Making use of this, the yurts and Ukrainian huts immediately rush into the breach. Now only the swamp and two cabins – Solonina Andreevna and Aza Camphorovna – separate High-Rise from victory! Lukerya-Feathers-on-the-Head also still hopes for victory. It seems her cabin is employing new tactics! It’s going to let High-Rise pass in front, using it as a live ram, and go around it before the finish! I swear by its bone leg, this is the right tactic! Used it myself now and then in dragonball!”

“Aha! No other way with Goryanov. He takes everyone down indiscriminately. Both us and the visitors,” confirmed Tanya. She involuntarily recalled the last match with the Invisibles. Nightingale O. Robber at training the day before said that two years had already almost elapsed. A new match with the Invisibles, still the champions, could take place already this autumn, if Magciety of Jerky Magtion would not invent new tricks. “And it’s time then to work hard, work, and again work! So that even at night the dragons flicker before yours eyes! First time in two hundred years Tibidox has developed a professional team, and we must not miss the chance!” Nightingale finished his speech this way.

“Solonina Andreevna’s cabin freezes on the edge of the swamp, painstakingly groping with a foot for the mounds. Behind it, Aza Camphorovna’s cabin pushes ahead step by step! Oho, what Aza Camphorovna has come up with! She gets up onto the roof and tests the bottom with a pole! Solonina Andreevna sticks her tongue out at her from the window! Aza Camphorovna answers her with well-aimed spittle! What unsportsmanlike behaviour! The long-legged cabin is already in the middle of the swamp and soon must get out onto the shore... High-Rise, short of breath, is running up to the banks of the swamp. A witch-granny is jumping excitedly in each of its windows and giving advice. The poor broiler brain! Will it manage with this volume of information? High-rise for a while marks time thoughtfully and begins to go back, taking a running start. Leap! The slime flies in different directions! The entire stadium is now already flowing in slime! Even Academician Sardanapal is wiping with his famous shawl of the Milky Way. They say that when the academician sneezes into it, a shower of meteorites appears in all the moronoid telescopes...”

“YAGUN!”

“And why did I say that? It’s altogether only an unverified rumour! Oho! The swamp turned out to be deeper than High-rise assumed! It vanishes in the slush at a depth of the Broiler Legs and sinks in floor after floor. The witch-grannies in panic climb to the roof along the fire escape. Interesting, how will all this end? Aha, after falling in almost to the roof, High-rise nevertheless gropes for the bottom, pushes off, and begins to row! Bravo! Lukerya-Feathers-on-the-Head’s cabin jumps after it. The substantially shallow swamp no longer hides the mounds. Oh, how careless! One Ukrainian hut, two cabins, and two yurts nevertheless contrive to get stuck in the swamp and blunder their success! The rest have moved onto the shore and are racing to the finish! Who will succeed in being first? In front of all is Solonina Andreevna’s cabin! Lagging far behind it hurries Aza Camphorovna’s cabin covered in slime, on the heels of which pursue Lukerya-Feathers-on-the-Head and High-rise on Broiler Legs. Last trudges Big Matrena’s cabin.”

“Nothing unusual about her trudging! Big Matrena is one-and-a-half times the size of Aunt Ninel!” Tanya remarked thoughtfully. “And three Aunt Ninels equal an elephant,” Vanka qualified, once having seen a photo of Aunt Ninel.

Yagun rose on tiptoes. “The finish line is getting closer! A little more and Solonina Andreevna’s cabin will reach it. Hey, Granny, what are you doing? What did you forget on the field? Someone please detain her, else they’ll trample her!”

Two cyclopes, spreading their arms wide, rushed to Yagge, but the old lady hushed them with a tooth, looked sternly at them, and the cyclopes completely wilted. Yagge ran out onto the field and stopped slightly right of the finish line. “Sashka-messy-slob! Well, recognize me?!” having whistled no worse than Lukerya, she shouted loudly.

“Oh, my granny mama! I’m probably going nuts!” her wonder-struck grandson began to jabber. “Solonina Andreevna’s cabin stands still by the finish line, not stepping over it. It turns to my granny with a squeak! Solonina Andreevna hits it with an umbrella, but the cabin is not obeying. It runs up to Yagge, losing tiles on the way. The mistress, not expecting this trick, tumbles out of the window, miraculously hooking onto the window-sill with the umbrella.”

“Sashka-messy-slob! Come up as before, like mother trained you!” Yagge ordered quietly. The cabin stopped. The green tiles finally crumbled. Under it revealed a tattered roof of straw and brushwood, with the rook nests in the chimney.

Solonina Andreevna sat on the sand, mechanically holding the opened umbrella over her head. Yagge, red and indignant, advanced on her. “So, foreign beet, did you try to fool me? How do you like that, herring, covered up the roof! Painted the porch! And aren’t you ashamed, shameless? She thought that I don’t recognize my cabin on feet! It was a long-legged chicken!”

“You’re out of your mind! It’s an insolent seizure of property! Such can only happen in Russia! I have Antarctica citizenship! Magciety of Jerky Magtion will not leave this alone!” Solonina Andreevna squeaked.

“So that’s how it is, even dragged in Magciety! That’s right, muddle things up! We will now ask the cabin, whose it is. Well, Sashka-messy-slob, tell us, who’s your mistress!”

“Cabins don’t talk! You’ll prove nothing!” Solonina Andreevna objected, with anxiety observing how the cabin, from which she was thrown out recently, began to move back.

“And now we’ll see!” standing akimbo, Yagge promised.

An amazed Bab-Yagun feared most of all to let slip anything. “Don’t know what my granny was planning, but the long-legged cabin clearly intends on a penalty kick. It runs back a couple of dozen metres, rushes forward, and... Contact! Go-o-al! Solonina Andreevna passes over the stands and disappears into the depths of the forest, accompanied by an entire flock of harpies. Now it’s understandable whom these stin... eh-eh... exotic smelling persons are fans of! My granny deftly jumps up onto the porch and shouts something to the cabin! The cabin swiftly rushes forward and steps over the finish line an instant before Aza Camphorovna and Lukerya-Feathers-on-the-Head! VICTORY! Everybody, I can no longer do it, please comment on it yourself! I’m running to them!”

Yagun jumped from the tower. In the same second High-rise on Broiler Legs arrived at the finish line and everything clouded up with dust. When the dust finally settled, everyone saw that Yagge and Bab-Yagun were standing in the middle of the field and affectionately hugging the chicken legs of their newly found cabin...

The fans poured out onto the field with joyful howls. The cyclopes, after setting up chains, tried not to let them through, but Usynya, Dubynya, and Gorynya, who wanted to magtograph against a background of cabins, literally dared them.

The for-life and posthumous head of Tibidox, not stingy on compliments, awarded the winners. Yagge and her cabin won the shining copper samovar. For Aza Camphorovna and Lukerya-Feathers-on-the-Head, one received a magic tablecloth and the other a new mortar and broom.

“Outstanding broom! A beauty for going anywhere! Simply for Puper in the team if nothing else!” Nightingale O. Robber winked smartly, presenting it to Lukerya. The old woman looked over the broom, picked at the edge of the mortar with a yellow nail strong as tortoise shell, and remained contented. “What Puper! We are no worse than any Puper!” she screeched.

“Tararakh, Slander, Deni! Why are you standing? Please invite all the grannies to the table! Medusa, on this occasion it’s not a sin to pass the cup, eh? Are you with us, Professor Stinktopp? How’s your magic block, it’s not in the way?” the academician asked. The for-life and posthumous

head of Tibidox contributed an increase to the wild activity. The tip of his nose was blazing keenly. The moustaches were conducting the combined orchestra of cyclopes. The earlobes were blinking like semaphores. The downy beard first disappeared, then again reappeared.

Medusa sighed. She understood too well what this meant. She cautiously looked sideways at Stinktopp, certain that she would meet his condemning view, and...already sighed with relief. Professor Stinktopp's cheekbones were covered with a tender maidenly bloom. His chin flushed a bright tomato colour. "Please, possible to tug in a cup or two! I zink, as an exception I must not break from ze collectiff!" he said.

Leaving the cabins in the courtyard, the witch-grannies and the hosts poured into the Hall of Two Elements. The air there was ringing with the strokes of hundreds of wings. Cupids were hanging above the magic tablecloths and hurriedly filling their quivers and mouths with chocolate candies and pastries prepared for the guests. "Well, shoo! Quick! Here I'm after you!" The academician, slapping with his hands, yelled with laughter. On seeing Sardanapal, the winged babies scattered to different sides, not forgetting to drop a dish of cakes on Professor Stinktopp's nose.

The merry-making turned out boisterous and jolly. The magic tablecloths barely managed to produce new foods. The children gobbled pies with cabbage or apple jam, washing them down with zesty lemonade. When so much was drunk that it already got up the nose, Medusa generously waved her hand and changed the lemonade into hot chocolate. Moreover, this was precisely hot chocolate and not the pitiful kiddie cocoa – an absurd moronoid invention.

Tanya, Vanka, and Bab-Yagun were satisfied. Not so long ago, they succeeded in casting a centenary evil eye on the radish tablecloth – so capital that all the food from it reeked of slops for a hundred metres. Sardanapal for a while persistently asserted that radish was good in any form, but the squeamish Dentistikha and Medusa seized the tablecloth from use and hid it for a hundred years, until the period of the evil eye had elapsed. So that now their table, as before, participated in the daily battle-lottery for chocolate, pancake, donut, and other decent tablecloths.

The difficult-to-raise students of Tibidox drank chocolate and with interest cast looks at the teachers' table, where the hosts and guests were already singing Russian folk songs. Lukerya-Feathers-on-the-Head and Big Matrena particularly excelled. With her rich high voice – you will not believe it! – the Great Tooth herself sang the second part. When she sang: "*How could I, a mountain ash, get over to the oak? Then I would not bend and shake.*" tears welled up in Slander Slanderych's eyes. The theme of unrequited love was especially dear to him.

But almost a miracle took place near the end of the party. Professor Stinktopp was so excited that he performed a Tyrolean dance, and instead of "*Olé!*" shouted "*Solé!*" Then he slowly went along the hall on his hands. The students were thunder-struck. Rita On-The-Sly expressed the best of everyone's thought. First, she looked intently at the instructors for a long time and then, incredulously shaking her head, announced, "Yes, Teaches are people too! Who would have thought?"

Bab-Yagun touched Tanya's shoulder. "Tan, they're calling you from that table there!" he said.

"Me? Who?" Tanya was astonished. She raised her head and saw that Lukerya-Feathers-on-the-Head was beckoning her. She got up and, smiling just in case, approached the old woman.

"You don't say, what a dark complexion! Would Theophilus Grotter be your grandfather?" Lukerya asked.

"Yes."

"Indeed, I knew the old guy... A lion among all the fine fellows, here only his nature was so nasty to the point of collapse!"

"Faber est suae quisque fortunae (Every man is the architect of his own destiny. (Appius Claudius Caecus))!" Flaring up a spark, the ring said.

Lukerya-Feathers-on-the-Head burst out laughing; the unique yellow tooth began to jump in her mouth, showing up in the most improbable places: first on top, then below, then completely disappearing somewhere under the hooked nose. "I recognize the dear by the gait, and the old grouser

by the ring in Latin...” said the old woman. “So, that means you’re Tanya? I’ve heard much about your exploits. Manage to learn?”

“Manage,” answered Tanya. Questions about studies always irritated her terribly. And not because she learned badly. Quite the opposite. Simply there was some obligation in this question. It seemed to Tanya that they posed it in ignorance, that they would ask a teenager and then forget the answer in five minutes. She promised herself that when she had quite enough of it, she would also ask the adults, “Manage work?” “Yes!” “Please continue in the same fighting spirit!”

“Distressing without parents, perhaps?” Lukerya asked.

“Never better!” Tanya said with a challenge. To be an orphan is doubly distressing. It is not enough that you are deprived of the people closest to you, but you are also forced to answer idiotic questions and to listen to feigned sympathies.

The old woman gave her a penetrating look. “What do you know, proud! Right, never bare your soul to everyone. You only have to do that and they’ll spit on it! Pity! I know what I’m talking about,” encouragingly said Lukerya. She took out a wooden snuffbox with the portrait of some old man (for a moment the thought flickered in Tanya: and what if this is The Ancient One?) and opened it. From the snuffbox jumped out a tiny black cat and, growing bigger on the run, it dashed to tease Sardanapal’s gold sphinx, which was too big and could in no way get under the table.

Lukerya-Feathers-on-the-Head sniffed the tobacco. “Don’t think, Tanya, that I simply called you over in order to delve with my callous finger in your wound. I want to give you a gift. Perhaps, you don’t often receive gifts. Here it is! They’ll be useful to you yet!” The old woman did not let out sparks, did not utter incantations, but suddenly a towel and a wooden comb appeared by themselves in her hands.

“Thanks, but I’ll not take them,” said Tanya.

“Take, don’t refuse! Obviously not stolen, I present my own!” Lukerya ordered.

While Tanya was having some doubts whether she should accept the gift, Sardanapal’s gold sphinx began to roar and jumped at the cat. The table, at which sat Zhikin, Parroteva, Liza Zalizina, and several first year magicians, toppled over. The cat, having jumped out from under it, rushed to Lukerya. Behind it on its heels, blazing with fury, rushed the sphinx. Lukerya-Feathers-on-the-Head stamped with her bone foot. The cat, growing smaller on the run, jumped into her snuffbox and disappeared. The repeatedly fooled sphinx travelled by with its feet on the flagstones and made off with nothing. While the thunder-struck Tanya was coming to, the old lady thrust the comb and towel into her hands, slammed shut the snuffbox, and leisurely walked away.

Tanya had barely returned to Vanka and Bab-Yagun when a concerned Yagge, short of breath, ran up to her. “What did Lukerya-Feathers-on-the-Head say to you?” she whispered.

“Nothing. First about my grandfather, then gave me a towel and a comb as presents. Should I not have taken them?”

Yagge sighed. It seemed to Tanya with relief, “Why not? Not without reason people say: they give – take, they hit – run. Lukerya is not an unkind old woman but a soothsayer. Aside from her, there remain no such soothsayers in the world already. What she says, so it will happen. Not along, not across, but right into the heart with a word! She told you nothing? Recall!”

Tanya honestly thought. “No, likely nothing much... Yagge, but how does she conjure without a ring, without incantations?”

“But that’s how she does it. All real witches conjure only this way, from the heart... A ring is but a magic wand, perhaps made for fools. Where can the fools develop a heart and amass kindness in themselves in hundreds of years – they took the wand, hooked on the ring, and made a mess of things... If Lukerya said nothing to you, you know it’s for the best,” Yagge said and went away.

But in Tanya’s memory, as always with delay, floated up the words of the witch. “They’ll be useful to you yet!” Lukerya said, giving her the comb and the towel. Only is it worthwhile to consider this prediction? Perhaps the old woman only wanted to say that she will comb her hair with the comb,

and even the towel will come in handy? And was it not a strange story with the cat, that the sphinx attacked precisely the minute when she had already turned down the gift? Here, crack your brain. Not life, but continuous riddles.

\* \* \*

In the evening, after the satisfied witch-grannies had departed, Tararakh went out into the courtyard of the school of magicians. For some time the pithecanthropus, swaying, stood in the middle of the courtyard and ambiguously squinted at the moon, and then, having turned to the Big Tower, demanded, “Tibidox, Tibidox, turn your back to the forest, your front to me!” The huge stone thing remained motionless; however, it seemed to the impressionable Tararakh that the arches of the tower contemptuously trembled, and the thin spire on the roof, from a distance similar to the broken frame of a pair of glasses, became double. “Hey you! What kind of cabin are you after this! You’re indeed a monolithic cabin!” the instructor of veterinary magic said reproachfully and withdrew, leaning back heavily.

## Chapter 4

### Rabid Rodeo

Uncle Herman looked out the window and twitched with loathing. Nature was in midday high spirits and grandeur. Aspen fluff was twirling in the air. Pigeons were strolling along the sticky roofs of garages. Such a spectacle would move anyone else but Uncle Herman sensed nothing except the strongest irritation. In recent days, bright sunlight for some reason caused a sharp pain in his eyes. Even along the corridors of the Duma, he walked around in dark glasses like a Mafioso in hiding.

Someone to the right of the best deputy delicately gave a cough. Durnev lowered the blinds. Aunt Ninel, dressed in the expansible robe of a retired geisha, was holding a little tray in her hands. “Herman dear, your lace socks and red checked handkerchief,” she announced.

Uncle Herman grimaced and pointedly kicked the tray. “How often have I told you that I don’t wear lace socks anymore!!! I need black leather pants and a whip!” he bellowed.

“Herman, my dear, but they won’t let you into Duma with a whip! Neither leather pants!” his spouse softly objected.

Understanding that Aunt Ninel was right, Durnev deflated like a balloon, and obediently put on the lace socks. “You’re right, Ninel. It has become completely impossible to be involved in politics. Imagine, some wise guy made handrails out of aspen in Duma. I got a splinter and the wound still hasn’t healed after two weeks!” he said unhappily.

“A nightmare, simply a nightmare!” Aunt Ninel began to nod sympathetically.

Approximately in half an hour Durnev, almost under compulsion decked out in a completely decent, greyish-brown suit, was ready for the Duma. After presenting a victory kiss on her husband’s pale forehead, Aunt Ninel with relief escorted him from the apartment. Forlornly shaking her head, she set off for the kitchen. A substantial part of her life flowed exactly there, among smoked turkey, pineapples, and small packages of donuts.

After becoming the honourable chair of V.A.M.P.I.R., Uncle Herman had sharply changed. In the bend of his back appeared something kingly. His green face acquired a royal grouchiness. Now and then in the evening, he would stand still before the mirror and, after advancing his teeth – now he could do this at will, would proclaim, “Everyone trembles! I’m the king of vampires! Heir of my ancestor!”

Once Pipa carelessly beat around the bush, “Pop, some vampire you are! You’re even allergic to tomato juice! Interesting, how do those clever fellows from Transylvania know about this?” Uncle Herman got so mad that for the first time in his life he shouted at his daughter and even threw a pillow at her.

The dachshund One-and-a-half Kilometres hysterically howled from under the sofa. It had not come out of its refuge for several days already. This shift in its psyche happened after the best deputy attempted to bite its paw. Uncle Herman was not guilty: it was full moon.

Aunt Ninel alone treated her husband’s whims completely quietly. After Lisper the Rabbit, she had acquired immunity for life to all the idiosyncrasies of her successful husband.

However, let us return to that ill-fated morning. Aunt Ninel did not have time to eat the eighth dumpling and to place in the oven the next super-useful turkey, when unexpectedly there was a knock on the door. In essence, this would not be too strange if this were not the door to the balcony. For some time Aunt Ninel extremely anxiously considered whether she should hide under the table, but afterwards armed herself with a cleaver and sneaked into the room. “Again this Tanya Grotter! Eternally created heaven knows what on the balcony!” Aunt Ninel indignantly thought.

The knock on the door did not stop. Having carefully looked through the glass, Uncle Herman’s spouse saw on the balcony a pair of enormous leather boots with spurs, which, bobbing up and down,



was angrily kicking the door. Next to the boots lay a sword in scabbard and a small metallic crown, which resembled more a hoop. “Aha, it’s the regalia of Herman! These psychos from Transylvania nevertheless sent them to him! I must hide these pieces somewhere, while Herman hasn’t gone completely crazy!” Aunt Ninel decided.

After stepping out onto the balcony, she grabbed the boots, sword, and crown and, after looking them over, returned to the room. The dachshund One-and-a-half Kilometres again howled from under the sofa. This time its howl was especially hysterical and heart-rending.

“The boots aren’t bad! Stylish! And likely my size!” Aunt Ninel dreamily thought, carefully touching with a finger the tinkling little wheels on the spurs. The crown and sword interested her much less. There were traces of rust on them, and therefore Durneva with disgust carried them at a distance with an elongated arm. “Drag these pieces of iron to the consignment store perhaps? Only how much will they give for this rubbish there? Let them stay!” the spouse of the best deputy thought, hiding the newly gained regalia into the lower part of the storeroom. There all kinds of household rags and everyday chemicals were stored. It was the only place in the house where Uncle Herman, with his eternal allergies, would never stick his nose into.

Aunt Ninel had already gone out into the hallway, when suddenly the storeroom started to move like a piston, shaking floor and walls. In the adjacent apartment, General Cutletkin’s, a tank helmet fell from the mezzanine. A crimson glow flooded the room. However, this lasted a total of several seconds. The storeroom stopped shuddering. The glow faded.

Ninel Durneva noticed nothing. Obeying the call of her heart, she had headed off with her body and soul into the kitchen, greedily pulling air into her nostrils. In the oven, having spread its pimply wings like a growing-old beauty in a solarium, the turkey was browning.

Ah, Aunt Ninel, Aunt Ninel! If you have at least five kopecks of intelligence and intuition, you would not leave the sword, crown, and boots in your home for anything in the world. You would get rid of them, destroy them, throw them into the furnace in the boiler room! Ah, Aunt Ninel, if not five, at least a kopeck of smarts for you! But what is not there is not there...

\* \* \*

In one of the June evenings Tanya, Vanka Valyalkin, and Bab-Yagun were sitting in the common room and despondently looking at the cracked malachite. Near the malachite, giggling like an idiot, soared the recently hatched spirit of omniscience.

“I told you: don’t overdo it in freezing weather! It wasn’t necessary to put the stone in the basement!” Vanka said dejectedly.

“What basement? Didn’t we really need the cold? Simply Tanya shouldn’t water it with those tears!” justifying himself, Bab-Yagun stated.

“What those tears? Perhaps Goyaryn is no longer a dragon?” Tanya was indignant. She adored Goyaryn and visited it almost each day. The terrible Tibidox dragon had gotten so used to her that it allowed her to clamber onto its back. When she stroked it on the nose, it squeaked contentedly. Being with Goyaryn, Tanya felt as peaceful and secure as in the double bass case in early childhood.

“Of course it’s a dragon, no one is arguing, but it’s old. I said, one must get tears from Mercury,” said Bab-Yagun.

“Here you could get it from mercury. Who’s stopping you? Not enough empty jars?” Vanka said noncommittally.

Yagun threatened Vanka with a fist. “And you hold your tongue, soccer shirt! No one stops me. It’s Mercury itself... It would not begin to sob into the jar, even if you collapse. And you can’t even get within ten metres of it...” he snapped.

The friends were fighting because they knew: this attempt to enlist the support of the spirit of omniscience was the last for them. Even if they were to do everything correctly now, the new spirit

would hatch no earlier than in three weeks, when it would already be useless. Time was moving on. Exams, although they so did not want to think about them, were moving with the speed of an express train. Every time before exams, Tanya experienced the unpleasant feeling that she knew absolutely nothing. Vanka asserted that this was all because of Slander, who set pre-exam jolting upon the school, alleging that it would help everybody study better.

Shurasik was sitting in a corner by the stove and with concentration leafing through *Self-taught magic self-defence. Spells, incantations, curses. Group battles with spirits and evil spirits. Advice for the nervous*. “Someone please attack me, huh, people? Why will no one attack me? I awfully want to test the spell for smearing on the wall – *Smackus wholus capitalist*. Or at least let someone whack me with a sledge hammer – I feel wretched!” he whined.

“Why do you feel wretched?” Vanka Valyalkin was interested.

“Why? You really don’t know? They exempted me from exams!” Shurasik complained piteously.

Bab-Yagun gave him a searching stare, trying to understand whether Shurasik was playing the fool or this was actually bad news for him. “Really? Some simply heartless people! You, brother, stand firm! The school for difficult-to-raise magicians isn’t a health resort! They practice the most terrible tortures here since olden times!” he sympathized.

Shurasik jumped. In his eyes blazed a wild fire. “They said that I answered well in class! But I know that I answered poorly! Think for yourself, Yagun: of the thousand questions I only solidly know nine hundred and ninety-six!” he shouted and, grabbing Bab-Yagun’s shoulders, started to shake him.

“A nightmare! And they indeed keep such dimwits in Tibidox! Glomov and I are ashamed of you!” Bab-Yagun said. He jerked from side to side, vainly trying to be freed.

In agitation, the slender Shurasik assumed the strength and tenacity of a vampire. “I’ll suffocate you, you lucky thing! It’s not right! Why will you get to sit for exams, but not me? I don’t want to be on vacation a month early! Better let them throw me behind the Sinister Gates!” Shurasik squealed, fingers squeezing Yagun’s neck.

Yagun wheezed. It was time to hurry to his aid. “*Steamus releasus!*” Vanka Valyalkin whispered, letting out a green spark, which slid into Shurasik’s ear. Shurasik relaxed. They moved him to the couch and covered him with the little magazine *Gossips and Fantasies*, which Rita On-The-Sly had forgotten on the table. The periodical rustled its pages to lull him to sleep. Occasionally nonsense, similar to large insects with human faces, fell out from it and, shouting, sped to the corners. A few tried to hide in Shurasik’s ears. The unconscious honour student began to giggle blissfully.

“It’s for his benefit! After *Gossips and Fantasies*, many smart fellows became normal. It was even possible to talk with some,” said Vanka.

“Really? Somehow I don’t believe it!” Tanya said.

“This I tell you!” Vanka began to argue.

“Look at the cover!” Tanya proposed.

The colourful little magazine *Gossips and Fantasies* had transformed before their eyes into the starkly designed *Herald of the Highest Magic*. The insects with human faces rose up on their hind legs and assumed the appearance of tiny professors-astrologers. Each of them with a sense of self-respect carried a flag. On the flags flickered the inscriptions:

***How to determine fate according to three thousand stars and a can of beef.***

***Twelve formula e of magic stuttering.***

***Transformation of hobbits into moronoids. To and back.***

***Magic beards. Trimming methods. Styling.***

***Computations of timetables of fading of magic sparks in different climatic zones.***

“Well now, the whole index is scattered about! And just how did Shurasik manage to change one magazine into another? But then it’s now understandable why he’s always giggling!” Tanya was surprised.

“No! Shurasik is incorrigible! Must slip away before he comes to,” Vanka sighed.

They had already gone out, taking with them the cracked malachite in order not to leave any evidence for the sharp-sighted Slander, when Shurasik, even in drowsiness, raised himself on the couch and shouted, “*Smackus wholus capitalist!*” His ring released a red spark. The friends hurriedly bent down. Still, there was something Shurasik, limp after *Steamus releasus*, did not count on. His couch leisurely rose into the air, gathered momentum and, at the last second turning on its side, slammed Shurasik himself into the wall. The honour student, shaking his head, his eyes gradually becoming intelligent, looked out from behind the inverted couch.

“Akela has missed!” Bab-Yagun said sympathetically.

“Now he missed – in five minutes he’ll hit. He’s bothersome,” said Tanya.

To avoid meeting Shurasik, they dived into the corridor where the rooms of the dark department were. At the end of the corridor, the friends slid around the corner and listened. Shurasik was not chasing after them. Must be he had not yet come off the wall.

Unexpectedly Vanka Valyalkin stood still in a hunter’s stance, like a setter sensing game. “No one heard anything?” he asked.

“I didn’t,” said Tanya.

“Me neither. Perhaps you have glitches again? Medusa set them loose on you when you wrecked her experiment, remember?” Yagun reminded him. Glitches were small dreary fellows with musical gifts. Vanka had just finished with these meticulous invisible beings.

Vanka shook his head. “Ne-a, not glitches. Here’s something else!” he said.

Suddenly the door nearest to them began to shake, as if Nervous Tremor, one of the mad poltergeists of Tibidox, who, by the way, had secretly fallen in love with Lieutenant Rzhevskii, was beating it from within with a fearless head. The friends involuntarily moved towards each other.

“Well, what did I say? Who has glitches now?” Vanka exclaimed triumphantly.

“Everyone has glitches. They usually roam in groups,” Tanya remarked philosophically.

Vanka placed an ear to the door, attempting to understand what was taking place on the other side. “This is Goryanov’s room. What if something has happened to him?” he asked.

Bab-Yagun winced. “With Damien? What can befall him? I can’t even sit with him at the same table – my soup turns sour.”

At this moment, someone on the other side shouted loudly, “*Wildus chamberus!*” A red spark burst dully. Its reflection was visible even in the corridor through a crack. The rings of Tanya, Yagun, and Vanka Valyalkin glowed by themselves. A moment and the door again began to shake like mad.

“Oho! Did you see this spark? Such doesn’t happen with ordinary magic! Someone there uttered an incantation from the list of hundred forbidden ones! See what it did to our rings, they simply went berserk!” Vanka Valyalkin said, blowing on his ring.

“The hundred forbidden ones?” Tanya was startled. “Never thought that Goryanov was capable of such!”

“Really? Say also that you imagined to yourself Damien as a cupid with golden wings!” Yagun cut her short.

Something began to rattle on the other side of the door. The floor under the children’s feet started to vibrate, to thump with resonant impacts. “Ahhh! Save me! Forty people hold me!” someone began to squeal shrilly. Tanya, Yagun, and Vanka broke into the room and froze on the threshold.

In the room were Gunya Glomov, Seven-Stump-Holes, and Zhora Zhikin. The owner of the room, Goryanov, was lying on his stomach on a bulky wooden bench, clutching it with his hands. The bench was furiously bucking and shooting up almost to the ceiling, pushing off with its short wooden legs. Likely, it was aspiring to throw Damien off itself at any cost. “Help! What are you all waiting for? It’s kicking me!” Goryanov yelled, continually hitting the bench with his nose, which had already swollen up like a pear.

During one of the jumps, Goryanov let go. The bench bucked. Damien plopped like a toad down onto the floor. The bench fell on top of him like a dead hippo. It seems it was gratified by the thought of holding a second post as a monument. After thinking about this, Goryanov issued a blood-curdling howl and hurriedly crept away under the bed, escaping the solid wooden legs of the gone berserk furniture.

“*Solidus realismus!*” Seven-Stump-Holes said, pronouncing the abolishing incantation. The bench froze. Stump looked it over, felt the legs, checking if there were any cracks, and was satisfied. “Threw down one more. Who’s next? Perhaps, dandy here?” he said, turning to Zhora Zhikin.

Zhikin started to puff in embarrassment and somehow quite elusively moved away to the door. “Generally I’m not against it. But I have an appointment today. Extremely important! I don’t want to show up at it with a nose like yours,” he glibly said.

Seven-Stump-Holes touched his swollen nose. Tanya believed that Stump also had time to greet the bench with his nose and now for the restoration of fairness wanted everyone to have a swollen nose. “Aha! He has a date! Name at least one day when you don’t have dates or when they’re not important! Then I’ll drag you here and sit you down on this bench! We all agreed, and now no use ducking!”

“Stop! You psycho!” Zhikin snapped.

Seven-Stump-Holes smiled evilly and spat with aim through the window. “I’ll not stop! Tell me when you don’t have dates, dandy!”

“Okay! Right away!” Zhora Zhikin thought seriously and, reaching for a notebook, started to thumb through it.

“So... Thursday I have... Friday, Saturday, Sunday – also have,” he muttered.

Seven-Stump-Holes ran up and impatiently tore the notebook out of his hands. “And you have to admire this! Our dandy has a date every day, and sometimes even two... And just how does he manage? You don’t use the bisect spell, no? Well, well! Here look, Wednesday this week you have a window!”

“No, Wednesday I also have a date,” Zhikin said in a hurry. “The most-most important! So important that I specially put it in code. Do you see the mark?”

“Where’s the mark? Aha! Crossbones! I’ll hazard a guess who this can be! Coffinia! On Wednesday you have a date with Coffinia!”

Zhikin uneasily glanced at Gunya Glomov. “Nonsense!” he blurted out. “I’m not meeting Coffinia! It’s... eh-eh... Verka Parroteva!”

Seven-Stump-Holes again tried to spit through the window but missed a little. “You don’t fool us! Since when does one put in crossbones as the code for Parroteva? Would draw a bird or something similar with a beak... Or no, if you were to meet with Parroteva, even the cyclopes would know about this! She would jabber to everybody! Don’t lie, dandy! Acknowledge that the bones – it’s Coffinia!”

Zhikin turned pale as a toadstool. Gunya Glomov, scowling, was watching him narrowly. “Why do you say that? Coffinia’s not my type! She’s terrible! And on the whole her hair is violet... If I even agreed to meet her, then only to pass her the summaries of Stinktopp’s lectures...” Zhora muttered unconvincingly.

“Really? How caring! But then why put it in code? Ah yes, so that insolent competitors would not take away the summaries! It’s so understandable, don’t you think, Guny?” Seven-Stump-Holes was touched.

The heavy cognitive work taking place in Glomov’s brain was finally completed. Gunya swung. He never used magic in fights, preferring to employ approved moronoid methods. With the shrill cry of a wounded seagull, Zhora tried to place a magic block, but he did not have time. Glomov’s fist had already arrived at the destination station.

Seven-Stump-Holes looked with satisfaction over Zhikin's nose. "That's it! Fairness is restored. Even, in my opinion, a little more than necessary! No matter, Zhikin, don't whimper! Scars decorated, decorate, and will decorate a man. Even if they're not on the forehead," he remarked.

Damien Goryanov came out on all fours from under the bed. After ascertaining that the bench was kicking no longer, he shook down the dust and...only now he saw Bab-Yagun. Discovering his enemy, Goryanov immediately put the most indignant of all available expressions onto his sour face. "Hey, whites, this is my room! I don't remember inviting any of you as guest! Want to steal something?" he shouted.

"Calm down, Damien! Pin the rap on someone else," Bab-Yagun said merrily. "What are you busy with here? Let me guess! You've set up a society of bruised noses? Holding an organizational meeting?" Goryanov started to seethe. He screwed up his eyes, advanced his head forward, and, like a bull, rushed at Yagun. Yagun quickly stepped to the side and substituted a foot. "Recently you observed the attempt at a ram, undertaken by Damien Goryanov, number two. The wretch completely forgot that he had sent his vacuum Storm-100U off for repairs and achieved a ram by auxiliary means. You can contemplate the consequences of this inconsiderate act on the floor!" he commented.

The enraged Goryanov jumped and again wanted to rush at him, but Seven-Stump-Holes decisively caught him by the collar and moved him aside. "Welcome, whites! Outstanding! You'll fall in love with us darks, hee-hee, as a friend of my Grandpa Vii said... Don't you want to participate in our nice magic fun?" he asked.

"Nice fun – jumping on a wacky bench?" Vanka Valyalkin asked,

"It's called RABID BLACK MAGIC RODEO! Heard about it?" Seven-Stump-Holes pushed the bench with a foot. It did not move. It required a next injection of magic for the awakening.

Vanka and Bab-Yagun exchanged glances. Rabid rodeo was an ancient entertainment of the black magicians of Tibidox. It was forbidden but not forgotten all the same. Berserk benches, animated by black invocations, frequently mutilated unlucky riders. Rabid rodeo was even more dangerous than dragonball. Dragons rarely tore up players, more often swallowed them whole and kept them inside till the end of the match. The braking incantations and vampire bile saved dragonball players from serious injuries and burns. There was not any kind of insurance in rabid rodeo. A violent spirit, installing itself into the furniture, forced it to skip around the room and, after unseating the rider, pitilessly trampled him. Whoever managed to stay on the longest was considered the winner. Or at least who managed not to have to go to magic station.

Seven-Stump-Holes, squinting, searchingly stared at Vanka and Yagun. "Well, Yagun, will you take a risk? Or you, Valyalkin! Don't want to have fun? Climb on the bench, and I'll say *Wildus chamberus*!"

"That won't wash!" Vanka decisively said.

"Why's that?"

"*Wildus chamberus* is a forbidden spell. Even your Professor Stinktopp doesn't use it."

"What are you saying? Again a wise guy! Shurasik hasn't stung you by any chance? Or not, indeed..." Stump squinted maliciously. "Yes, he's simply afraid! Only look at this little white wizard! He's shaking with horror!"

"Stop, Stump! He's not afraid!" Tanya stepped in for Vanka. "No one is afraid. However, if The Ancient One introduced a spell into the list, it means he had a reason."

"Everyone knows that The Ancient One was overcautious. He placed all reviving spells in this list. Probably did not even examine each individually. What can be dangerous in *Wildus chamberus*? So, a bench jumps and calms down," Zhora Zhikin said and contemptuously shrugged his shoulders. His nose was already bruised, so now nothing prevented him from taking Seven-Stump-Holes' side.

"Well done, dandy! I'm proud of you! If The Ancient One actually wanted these spells not to be used, he would on no account make up this list!" Stump stated.

Tanya involuntarily thought that he was right. The list of a hundred forbidden spells, ciphered with special student code, not allowing them to disappear, had long ago already passed from one Tibidox student to another. And everyone secretly, almost under the blanket, learned them by heart, although this was most strictly forbidden. The Ancient One, in spite of all his brilliance, was a bad psychologist. If he did not actually want the forbidden spells to be known, he would have included them in the school program and made them strictly compulsory.

"I so thought that the whites are afraid! The whites, they're nothing but whites... Only for them to walk arm-in-arm with Tararakh and glance at Sardanapal's mouth at what clever thing he will say, eh, Vanka? Do I speak right or not?" Seven-Stump-Holes was maliciously interested. Vanka turned pale. He silently pushed him in the chest and made his way to the bench.

"And you're not afraid that it'll bruise your pretty little nose? Ah yes, no one is waiting to go on a date with you – then it's another matter. Who will go on a date with you at all? I would like to see the girl who needs this scarecrow in a soccer shirt! Harpies and such mistake you as one in the garden!" Stump continued to mock.

Vanka silently sat down on the bench and threw a leg over it. Even without this, the sharp features of his thin face got even sharper. "Begin, *Stinktopper*! I'm ready!" he said.

"Don't do this! They especially egg you on!" Tanya shouted, rushing to Vanka. She looked at Gunya Glomov so decisively that the healthy fellow moving towards Valyalkin recalled how a spark once scorched his tongue and stepped back.

Meanwhile Yagun was already standing across from Zhora Zhikin. "Intervene or I'll touch up your nose on the other side!" he warned.

"Is that so! Very scary!" Zhora dodged, but for some reason did not begin to interfere.

"Get down! Don't be silly!" Tanya was still trying to drag Vanka from the bench, but already understood that this was useless. At times, the calm Vanka became more obstinate than a donkey. And this was precisely such a moment. Seven-Stump-Holes had clearly succeeded in inciting Tanya's friend.

"Move away! Stump, cast your spell! I don't want to soil my ring with it!" not looking at Tanya, Valyalkin said.

"Don't want to soil it, then don't! But we're not such moralists! *Wildus chamberus*!" jumping to the side, Zhora Zhikin and Seven-Stump-Holes shouted in a chorus. The dual red sparks blinded Tanya. The ring of Theophilus Grotter became red-hot and burned her finger. "How many forbidden spells are possible? I'll have thermal shock!" it squeaked with the voice of Theophilus Grotter.

The bench revived. The red spark gave it improbable quickness. If it skipped like a bull in a rodeo earlier, now it was as if a rabid dog bit it. It managed to be immediately everywhere, bending and bucking with either the front or the hind legs. Vanka clung exactly like a tick. In contrast to the dark magicians, he did not flop with his stomach on the bench but sat up like an equestrian. He held on to a piece of wood with the left hand and balanced with the right, retaining equilibrium. The bench, as if deranged, jumped around the entire room. Furniture crashed and fell. Escaping from its wooden legs, Goryanov, Seven-Stump-Holes, and Zhora Zhikin evacuated under the bed and only rarely decided to put their noses out from under it. Even Tanya and Yagun were forced to step back to the door, ready to slip into the corridor if the bench attacked them.

"What's going on there? He hasn't fallen yet?" Stump continually asked with hope.

"Ne-a, still holding on!" Gunya Glomov answered with a hoarse bass. Not knowing by what means he had turned up on top of the cabinet and from there, as if from a captain's bridge, he viewed the room.

"Yee-haw! Scatter, wet noses! Here it is, your rabid rodeo!" Vanka shouted, flashing by at a gallop around the room.

"My granny mama! What brilliant technique! Respected spectators! Get your moist palms ready for a stormy applause!!! Without a saddle, the born rider Ivan Valyalkin is staying on the

prancing bench, adapting to all its intricate movements! The bench throws out all new tricks, but everything is useless! Valyalkin holds onto it as if glued, to the disgrace of the entire dark department of Tibidox and of Professor Stinktopp personally – the head of these confused pranksters!” Yagun started to rattle. It was evident that he missed commentating.

“Would you shut up, Yagun! You were dark probably for more than a year!” Damien Goryanov answered from under the bed.

“I was, but not anymore!” Yagun retorted coolly. “Why the emotion? I’ll be darned! Look at Vanka! Strange that with this talent he, until now, is not in the dragonball team! Yes, it’s possible to replace Zhikin and Goryanov easily together with one Vanka!”

In a couple of minutes, when everyone understood that Vanka was not going to fall, Seven-Stump-Holes and Zhikin disconcertedly came out from under the bed, ascertaining beforehand that the bench was not close by.

“That’s it, enough! He has stayed on three times longer than any of you! Stop your crippled stump, Holes! It’s already clear that he beat you!” Tanya ordered Seven-Stump-Holes. She was the first to feel that Vanka was beginning to tire. Although so far he had managed the jumps of the rabid furniture, Tanya surmised from the tension on his face what it had cost him.

“*Solidus realismus!*” Stump unwillingly barked. But, in spite of a flashed spark, the bench continued to skip. Seven-Stump-Holes repeated the incantation three more times, but with the same result. On the contrary, from the sparks the bench began to jump with doubled fury. A lamp broke. Gunya Glomov fell down from the cabinet like an overripe pear. “It’s useless. It doesn’t work!” Seven-Stump-Holes said gloomily, lowering his hand.

“Why?”

“Don’t you know?” he snapped. “*Solidus realismus* is only effective with one red spark, but Zhikin and I plastered it with two! Who asked him to release a spark together with me? This dandy is only good for crashing from the mop and going to very important dates!”

“Don’t you blame it on me, Stump! And generally magic will run low in the course of time, and it’ll be exhausted!” Zhora Zhikin said with hope.

“It’ll get tired, uh-huh! This is not a horse for you, one that gets tired. What, don’t you know that this is reviving incantation from the banned list? We have sunk so much magic into this bench – enough for a thousand years...” Seven-Stump-Holes appeared disheartened. To leave Vanka on the berserk bench was not part of his plan. He indeed only wanted to break the nose of a moralist from the white department. Nothing more.

Tanya did not tear her eyes from Vanka Valyalkin, not knowing how to help him. Likely, from the constant jerks and hammerings Vanka began to feel giddy. His right hand, by which he retained equilibrium, no longer waved so decisively. Several times, he fell first to one then the other side and only miraculously held his ground on the smooth wooden board. It was impossible to jump off now and Vanka understood this. With such galloping, this was almost equivalent to immediately wringing one’s own neck. Moreover, a second later the berserk bench would turn up on the spot where he landed.

“Hang on, friend! Try *Bangus parachutis forte!* And then immediately a safeguard!” Bab-Yagun shouted. Possibly, Vanka would have had time to follow his advice, but here the bench bucked and galloped sharply to the side. Vanka had time neither to swerve nor even to shout *Oyoyoys smackis thumpis*. He hit his head against the wall and, stunned, was thrown off the piece of wood squirming with spite. Vanka had not yet dropped down and Tanya was already rushing to him.

“Tanya, the bench!” Bab-Yagun yelled. He tried to knock down the bench with a fight spark but missed.

Tanya threw up a hand, already understanding that she would not be able to swerve from the bench, pouncing on Vanka and her. The cold hand of horror affectionately took her by the throat. Confused thoughts knocked around like bowling balls in her head, “Now it’ll collapse, now, now...”

Moments went by, and all the time the bench hung in the air. Seconds stretched into eternity. Tanya tried to jump, to grasp Vanka, to drag him away to the side, but could not even move from the spot. Time, resounding in her consciousness, remained the same unyielding for her body, grown in the magic double bass case on Aunt Ninel's balcony. And then it seemed to Tanya that beyond the window a red glow flared up, with feelers of light pulling Tibidox into its shaky pinkish circle. As if an invisible giant released a red spark from a huge ring the size of the sun.



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