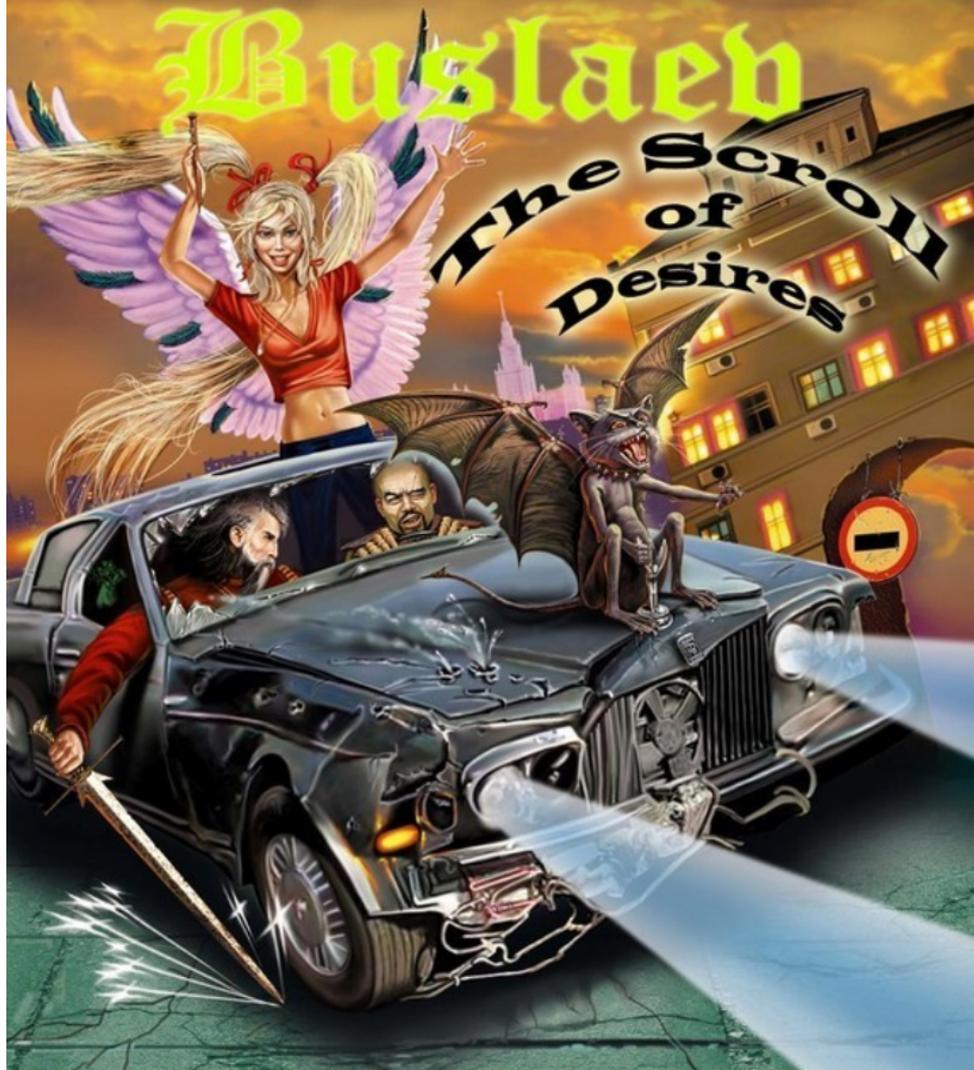


Dmitrii Emets

Methodius

Buslaev

The Scroll of Desires



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Methodius Buslaev.
The Scroll of Desires
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Methodius Buslaev. The Scroll of Desires:*

Аннотация

В стародавние времена маг-алхимик Бругус изготовил свиток желаний, на который наложил заклинание усиления. Свиток он спрятал в одну из двух шкатулок, защищенных магией Света, и отправил их странствовать в лопухоидный мир. За прошедшие века свиток приобрел чудовищную магическую силу. Свиток желаний – артефакт нейтральный. Он может служить как Тьме, так и Свету. Ищут его златокрылые, ищут и стражи Мрака. Если Тартар обнаружит шкатулку со свитком первым, произойдет катастрофа... А еще мудрецы из Прозрачных Сфер утверждают, что история свитка напрямую будет связана с Дафной, стражем Света, и Методием Буслаевым – будущим повелителем Тьмы...

Содержание

Chapter 1	6
Chapter 2	31
Chapter 3	65
Chapter 4	89
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	97

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The Scroll of Desires

Oh, friend, why worry about the secrets of existence? Why torture body and soul with difficult reflections? Live happily, spend time in joy; at the end, they will not ask you why the world is as it is.

Look at the morning, arise, young man, and breathe the joy of dawn! A time will come when you will search and not be able to find this moment of life, which so surprised us in this illusory world. The morning threw off the cloak of gloom, what is there to mourn? Arise, we will make use of the morning, because many mornings will still exist, when there will already not be a breath in us.
Khayyám

It is a ridiculous thing for any man to dispense with wickedness in himself, which is in his power to restrain, and still strive to suppress it in others, which is impossible.
M. Aurelius

The soul is a living essence, simple, incorporeal, reasoning and intelligent, making use of a body, and being the source of its powers of life and growth, sensation and generation. It is a free essence, presented with the ability to want and to act, changeable in will,

having the min... as its purest part.
St. John of Damascus

Chapter 1

Rendezvous with the Unlucky Wretch

Moscow had not yet managed to cool down after the hot and stuffy June day. The sun was lying breathlessly on the roofs and panting; however, dim evening shadows were already roaming along the ground. The drainpipe, which Daphne touched in passing, was scorching hot. She winced. Trying in every way not to be different among normal people, she had recently adjusted her pain threshold, making it the same as that of moronoids, and now she never got tired of being surprised by new sensations, constantly making some new discovery.

For example, after thoughtfully drinking boiling water, it is possible to warm up for the rest of one's life. New footwear gives lots of discomfort. A bitten tip of the tongue hurts for a whole week. If we immediately start on ice cream after tea, teeth begin to ache and the enamel cracks like ancient cliffs. If running romantically barefoot through a puddle, a jagged bottle bottom can easily cut the sole. In general, moronoids do not have a life but continuous limitations. One has to remember so many of all kinds of nonsense!

Manoeuvring between passers-by, Daph continued her jaunt, not having a specific goal or route. At this hour in house № 13 on Bolshaya Dmitrovka, they were accepting reports from succubae

and agents. Ares politely asked Daph to disappear somewhere and not to scare the nervous Gloom folks with her Light essence and the flute protruding out of her knapsack. Daph herself was glad to leave. The dejected plasticine faces hardly inspired her to continue making acquaintance and, in general, to creative work.

The infernal cat Depressiac, sitting on Daphne's shoulder, had not given up its attempts to get rid of the overalls. These were black leather overalls, entirely covered with snaps and zippers. Daph had acquired them in the store Petfun. The overalls hid the wings, which even now swelled under them like two mounds. Furthermore, Daph could not control herself and, giggling, purchased for the cat a tiny choke collar – leather with bright long studs, which jutted out, true, not on the inside, as in serious collars, but on the outside. Depressiac was indifferent to the collar, tolerant, but in all of an hour, it rolled on the ground with a heartrending screech, attempting to strip the collar off with its back feet.

Daph crossed Kaloshin Alley, and passed Krivoarbatskii Alley, when suddenly on Plotnikov Alley a black limousine of unprecedented length blocked her way. Hey, this was some limo! With cast wheels, a herd of horses under the hood, and sparkling with a waxy shine in spite of the specks of mud on the doors and the fenders.

Daph stopped, patiently waiting for the limo to pass. However, it did not move, occupying almost the entire width of the alley. After shrugging her shoulders, Daphne wanted to squeeze

through between it and the wall of a house, but the automobile sharply backed up and, with the bumper almost resting against the house, again blocked her way. Through the tinted glass, Daphne could not see who was sitting in the car. True, it seemed to her that she could make out the flame of a cigarette, glowing crimson like the furious eye of the Cyclops.

Depressiac on Daph's shoulder stopped battling with the overalls and was on guard. The cat's tail began to flick dangerously. It arched its back. It started to hiss, digging its claws into her shoulder, and baring its small triangular teeth. Simultaneously Daph at the telepathic level perceived waves of fury and fear issuing from the cat. Fury was okay. Depressiac, possessing a nature as nice and pleasant as Tartarus itself, continually flew off the handle and threw itself on any dog without exception, be it even the size of a pug-dog named Uncle Baskerville. But here fear... This was something new. Depressiac did not even particularly fear the Garden of Eden rock griffins coming alive. Daph was downright worried. Her cat possessed stunning intuition and it was a bad sign that it feared someone or something.

Daph's hand slid to the flute and extracted it from the knapsack. However, before taking any measures, it was worthwhile to determine precisely what she had come across. She concentrated, squinted slightly, and looked at the limo with *true sight*. She discovered no magic and calmed down, after deciding that she was dealing with those usual moronoids, with

hormones running wild, that every pretty girl has to contend with from time to time. Nevertheless, this relief lasted altogether only for a moment. Suddenly, on adrenaline rush, Daphne's heart began to skip like an elastic. Her stomach cramped up. The long hair, grey almost to white, stood on end, disobeying the law of gravity, and invoking in a small part of the public a complex, close to hallucinatory, association with the terrible Tibidox sorceress M. Gorgonova. This happened at the moment when Daph understood that she not only discovered no magic but also NOTHING at all inside the limousine.

The usual space that one looks at with *true sight* was empty. By definition, a void cannot exist in the world. Even if there is no magic in it, there are hundreds of other weak energies and flows, which tint space similar to watercolour on a background. Each thing has its essence, and these essences constantly act on each other. Thus, two identical ballpoint pens, one of which, say, was used to write a denunciation and the other a postcard to a beloved grandmother, are two completely different pens from the point of view of magic. A moronoid can easily confuse them but never a guard of Light or a guard of Gloom. And atoms have absolutely nothing to do with it here.

However, in this case internal sight showed *nothing*. Everything was cleaned out. The limo was just *that*. No more and no less. As if it was never on the streets, scaring cats and passers-by. No one's thoughts, which had to touch it at least casually, were imprinted on it. And at the same time, it was very proper,

sleek, and ideal. It created this sensation that a compact black hole, carefully tied up with pink nylon threads, gaped inside the limousine. Daph had never had the chance before to encounter this protective shield. She suddenly realized that she had met something unknown and extremely dangerous. Would the flute help here? It is not known how an unknown something will react to its attacking trills. Suddenly it dawned on Daph that *true sight* was simply not enough here. Or, possibly, the look was not long enough... If she would be somewhat more persistent and...

The limo suddenly roared, took off, and, having made a U-turn in two stages in the narrow alley, disappeared in the direction of Prechistenka Street. Its license plate was bespattered with mud, and next to the left rear headlight was a sticker of a skull. And this skull, speeding away, ominously winked at Daph.

Daphne followed the strange automobile with a puzzled look, and then set off for the subway station Smolenskaya. She walked and reflected. She was certain of one thing: there was no way of explaining the appearance of the limousine as chance. Someone specifically wanted Daph to understand that he was following her. Did this clearly and demonstratively, barely hiding. And what was more: *he knew ahead of time* where Daph was going and where it was possible to meet her. And this put her on guard the most. It alerted her because even Daphne herself, wandering without any purpose around a city centre she was poorly acquainted with, *did not know* this.

Daph was still seething and indignant for a long time, recalling

the defiant red spot behind the tinted glass, but soon youth and flippancy took over, and, after seeing a little store near the subway, she counted the change in her pocket. Depressiac's collar and overalls left Daphne almost without cash, but Daph somehow had not decided for the time being to ask Ares for money. Well, is it not ridiculous for an omnipotent guard of Light to find herself in this idiotic position? There was only enough change for one thing: either potato chips or a pop. After weighing all the pros and cons, Daph bought the cheapest bottle of pop, believing that pop without chips was nevertheless still pop, but chips without pop would be a snack merely hanging in mid air and without any meaning.

Not too long ago, Daphne without a twinge of conscience would teleport everything she needed from a shop window or, simpler, pay off the salesperson by flicking her finger and generously transforming the dish for small change into gold; however, now this would be unpardonable carelessness. Guards of Light would immediately spot a change in the mystical field, would determine the individual magic style, and after several minutes a detachment of golden-wings would be here. And this time it would be doubtful if she could slip off. No luck can continue infinitely.

Daph, as before, remained a wanted fugitive guard. The incident with the labyrinth, which gave Methodius Buslaev *the force*, had hardly changed Daphne's life. Like a ropewalker, Guard General Troil was balancing on the thin wire between life

and death. However, to the rest of Light, she was now a traitor with black feathers in her wings. A traitor banished from Eden.

Pensively looking at the bottle cap preventing her from reaching the pop, Daph pondered whether it would be proper if she allowed Depressiac to bite it off, and whether it would evoke some harmful interest among the moronoids. In the end, she decided not to upset them. Their short seventy-year life is already so full of all possible shocks. "A head cold keeps them awake. A heart attack makes them sit up," Julitta usually added. Daph opened the bottle against the edge of a phone booth scratched by many predecessors and, looking forward to the coolness, she began to raise the bottle to her mouth. Suddenly her hand trembled. The pop splashed on her chest.

That same limo was ten metres away. It was obvious that it had travelled along Glazovskii Alley, in a mysterious manner passed all signs and obstacles, and in a round about way dragged itself over here. Daph's mouth became dry like having the sands of the Sahara in it. Her first thought was to dive into the subway where the limo precisely could not follow her, but her second one was to approach the car confidently and demand an explanation. However, the first option seemed cowardly to Daph, and the second required super-courage, which so far she had not discovered with the most thorough search. As a result, Daph did neither, but something in the middle: namely, after remaining on the spot, she drank the pop in large mouthfuls, although the pleasure had already been poisoned. The coolness now gladdened

her no more than a butterfly accidentally flying under the jets of a waterfall. The limousine remained at the previous place. No one left it.

“If these were guards of Light, they would have summoned the golden-wings. Moreover, flashy cars are not our kind of transport. Ours would come on a bike and, helping an old lady cross the street, would unintentionally destroy a dump truck with maglody. If guards of Gloom... hmm... this vulgar car is more their style. But why would they follow so obviously, when even without it the world is full of invisible spirits serving Gloom? Why would guards of Gloom follow me in a limo, if I’m living at Ares’, what would they have in mind? But what am I afraid of after all? Yes, must approach nevertheless! This is simply shameless! They are getting on my delicate kiddie nerves!” Daph was angry.

After putting the bottle down on the asphalt, for encouragement she touched the bronze wings hanging from a lace on her neck, took the flute out of her knapsack and, having gotten up to the limousine, knocked loudly on the window. Moronoids looked at her with surprise. This girl’s brain was clearly tied up in knots. She threw herself at the car, kicked it, beat it with her fists, and swung the flute with a determination even a savage would not have clubbing a tortoise crawling out to the sand. And here on her shoulder was a rather weird-looking, bald cat, clearly sick for a long time as a kitten, in overalls and a bright collar, arching its back and hissing.

“Hey, who’s there? What do you want from me, huh? Come out!” Daphne shouted. However, the window of the limousine remained raised. Even almost burying her nose in it, Daph saw only her reflection in the mirrored surface. In that moment, it seemed to the stupefied Daphne that radiance originated from her reflection, and a golden semicircle of aura appeared above her head. She grew numb, not believing her eyes! The glass of the limousine reflected true essences, and for that reason, the car could only have very distant relation to the world of the moronoids.

The instant Daph understood this, the limousine again started and began to drive away quickly. “Aha! You’re running away! There, there, you get out of here, get out of here! Spin the pedals, before they break your buggy!” Daphne began to yell triumphantly. She sensed the triumph of a Neanderthal, who, having used cries and firebrands to drive out of a cave an old bear with tangled fur, moved in there with his entire family, and, just in case something else might still be hiding in the dark, let the mother-in-law in first. In the end, again trying to knock on the car roof with her flute, she ran several steps, but, after catching curious looks from the passers-by, recollected suddenly and, filled with the same consciousness of victory, dived into the capillary network of Moscow alleys.

In approximately half an hour, Daph crossed Boulevard Ring at Strastnoi Boulevard, above the Chekhov subway station. Having already stepped onto the pavement, she felt a prick of

anxiety. She realized belatedly but very distinctly that someone was following her and, moreover, had been doing so for a long time. Daph stopped abruptly and turned around. A tall, athletically built man in a short leather jacket and a silver belt with a buckle in the shape of a skeletal hand was following as if glued to her. After noticing that Daph was looking at him, the man was startled and stared at the sky with such a deliberate look, as if he had discovered at least enemy parachutists there. Daph laughed – it was so absurd. Probably, her contemptuous laughter reached the stranger's ear, because suddenly he, not disguising himself anymore, decisively made his way to Daphne. His right hand slid into a pocket.

After jumping over a bench – on one side an enamoured couple was huddling timidly, and on the other side a student of land reclamation, with abstracts and a bottle of beer, was sprawling imposingly, occupying a large part of the bench – Daphne, dodging, dashed away to run on the lawn. Depressiac was jumping on her shoulder like a dashing rider from the Perm Circus. Daph ran quickly. The world fell away. Mothers with strollers, trashcans, freshly planted lindens along the boulevard – everyone and everything enjoying themselves, spinning, leaped into her eyes like busy spots.

It seemed to Daph that she had lost her persecutor, but unexpectedly he appeared directly in front of her – appeared so suddenly, as if he was not running but simply standing, arms crossed on his chest, and waiting for her. In a panic Daph jumped

over a cast iron fence, scared the rushing cars with swift chaos of movements, and darted to the first entrance she came across. Gripping the long wooden handle, she jerked it, was pleased that there was no code-lock, and dashed up the stairs. She shot past mailboxes, flew up ten steps at a time, and... An iron door rose up directly before her. A cursed code-lock was installed nevertheless, though not below, but for some reason between the first and the second floor. Petty and mean villainy!

Daph realized that she had gotten herself into a trap. To hide in the entrance was obvious foolishness on her part. Indeed if one is on the run, then run to a crowded place. She pushed the door with her shoulder and began to press the buttons chaotically – it was useless. The stupid heartless iron was not going to let her pass. Then Daph grabbed her flute, ready to resort to an attack maglody. Let golden-wings trace her, but she was not surrendering without a fight! “We’re forcing our way through, Depressiac! Get ready!” she whispered. The cat started to hiss and protracted its claws with the sound of a switchblade unlocking. It, like yesterday’s cutlets in the fridge, was always ready.

Footsteps were already thundering on the stairs. First appeared the toes of heavy boots, and in an instant even the persecutor. Drops of sweat on his wide forehead stretched out in a chain like the Kurile Islands. As before, he was keeping a hand in his pocket. “Hey you, stop! Just move and you’ll be sorry!” Daph shouted, quickly bringing the flute to her lips. This

was a serious threat. The power of maglody was not inferior to an automatic weapon. In any case, Methodius so asserted, having once observed how Daph used maglody to break into smithereens bricks he tossed up on her request. The stranger moved away, anxiously eyeing the flute. This was already strange. Moronoids were usually amused when someone threatened them with a flute. Probably, the long-standing influence of the proverb “Born a fool, die a fool.” had an effect. “Gosh! You forced me to run a little after all!” he said, panting.

“No jokes! What do you have in your pocket? Take out your hand... slowly... even slower... no sparks, no tricks! I’m warning you!” Daph nervously repeated. “Fine, fine. You also calm down!” After shrugging his shoulders, the man slowly took his hand out of his pocket and unclenched his fist. Daph distrustfully moved a little forward. On his palm lay small silver wings, from which a bright light radiated like waves. They differed from Daphne’s bronze wings, hanging from a lace on her neck, in that both wings were looking back a little, having a barely noticeable sharp bend. If the bronze wings had the likeness of an eagle’s wings – these more resembled the wings of a storm petrel or an albatross.

“What, are you also a guard of Light? But why are your wings not quite right?” Daph asked already much more peacefully, however, without lowering the flute. “Yes, I’m Light. But I’m not from Eden. I’m not among those who consider you a traitor and thirst for punishing you!” the stranger said with a smile. “Hmm...

Sounds somewhat drunk. Then where are you from?" Daph asked not without a challenge. Fate again began to tempt with its opportunity for everyday rudeness. "I'm from the Transparent Spheres, my dear child! I'm your guard-keeper! My name is Essiorh!" Daph grew numb. The flute in her hands lowered by itself. The Transparent Spheres, situated at the top of Seven Heavens, were home to those who stood over the guards and protected them. Even Troil's guardian was there. "You are my guard-keeper? You?" she asked distrustfully. "And why not?" the stranger was astonished.

Daph stared at him with suspicion. It goes without saying that she knew her guard-keeper undoubtedly existed. But that he would look so... eh-eh... unconventional. She must admit that she had visualized something much more respectable. So bald, with tortoise-shell glasses, slightly boring, drawling, with a music folder under his arm, and a tiny speck of green on his cheek, under which hid a small and decent teacher's pimple... But here... ahem... military boots, all in leather, provocative belt... hmm... to analyze in general, amusing. After securing such a guard-keeper, here she would also be able to remain in her usual style.

Essiorh, after bending his head, looked with a critical eye at his own figure and the belt with the buckle in the shape of a skeletal hand. "Is my body troubling you, my child? Perhaps you don't know that keepers from the Transparent Spheres, in contrast to you Eden guards, cannot be on Earth in their

true bodies? Must admit, this brutal appearance, a mountain of muscles and the chin of a savage also disturbs me; however, it appeared there were no other bodies in our terrestrial storage. Selection was poor to almost nil. Taking into account that a talking dog is somewhat frivolous for a first meeting of a guard and his keeper, I nevertheless would take a human body. Moreover, there were still... hmm... a few other reasons.”

Daph nodded. “Good it’s not a dog. My cat... On the whole, I want to say that we could slightly scratch a dog easily. People would then think that the dog had been frolicking, excuse me, with a circular saw.” “Even a talking one?” Essiorh was horrified. Daph nodded dejectedly. “Alas. I don’t think that it would have time to speak. Even with the word ‘hello’ it would only reach the letter ‘e’...”

Essiorh reproachfully shook his head. “Ahem... Well, so there it was... My good child, I hurried in order to inform you: your immortal essence and your wings are in great danger.” Daph dropped her eyes. Essiorh looked at her with the well-developed incinerating severity. Daph learned severity № 27 of the General Catalogue of Reproaches and Moral Admonitions for Influence on Mortal and Immortal Essences Endowed with Conscience (program of class 97 of guard-educational high school). “Wow, they teach our keepers using the same textbooks!” she was mentally enraptured.

“Listen to me, unhappy child! Listen and be frightened! It’s not enough that you – voluntarily or not – stepped on the slippery

path of service to the guards of Gloom, not enough that your new masters steal eide! Not enough that the circle of your contacts is composed of agents, cursed witches, pagan tramps..." he was rattling like a machine gun. After perceiving that he had made a slip of the tongue, Essiorh winced slightly; however, he did not begin to correct himself. He thought it would probably just slip through. "Who are these pagan tramps? Surviving Trojans grown wild? Dangerous specimen probably? Perhaps you had in mind pagan gods?" Daph asked pitilessly.

However, her sting did not succeed. Essiorh already knew how to wriggle out. "...Don't interrupt! I have no other designation for these pagans imagining themselves as gods... And the succubae, disturbing the righteous sleep of mortals with exciting visions, perhaps they belong to the society, which a guard of Light needs? But the speech is not even about this! After all, all this can be written off as an accident and errors of youth. You did something more terrible, quite nightmarish!" Essiorh lifted a finger and traced an inspired line, one end of which rested against the nearest cloudlet, and the other on Daph's nose. Daphne waited with trepidation for the continuation. And it followed immediately.

"An impression of your Light wings has turned up on the scroll stolen by one of the servants of Gloom. With your action, you have stuck a dagger into the heart of Light! You have messed up the veins of good and evil! Do you at least understand what you have done?" Essiorh got carried away. His voice rose increasingly

higher. The entrance glass started to vibrate. The code-lock grew warm. The bright buttons began to weep with the scorching metal.

Daph coughed politely but persistently. “Can I ask a question?” “Ask!” Essiorh said, clearly grieved by the desire to be contrary and to refute all her arguments. “You said: ‘An impression of your wings has turned up on the scroll.’ On what scroll?” Essiorh frowned. “What? Are you pretending? You dare to deceive me? To lie to your guard-keeper?” “But I’m not lying. I saw no scroll... That is, I saw three railroad cars of scrolls, but something that special, I would remember... And I didn’t leave an impression of my wings anywhere!” Daph stated, after looking at Depressiac. “And what do you think of that?” The cat kept its opinion to itself.

Essiorh started to seethe with indignation. He aimed a reproachful finger at Daph and was about to continue the disclosure, but unexpectedly stopped short. “Eh-eh... What day of the week is it today?” he asked absent-mindedly. “Monday,” announced Daph with doubt. She knew the moronoid days of the week rather poorly. “Yes, exactly. It was Monday morning, since the agents trooped over to Ares,” she added, after thinking it over.

Essiorh held his head. “Oh, woe is me! I mixed up everything! Having travelled here from the Transparent Spheres, I didn’t consider the difference in Earth time, didn’t think about the natural celestial lead, and warned you about an event, which

hasn't yet occurred, thus destroying the immutable law of freedom of choice." Here Essiorh, not sparing his body, hit himself hard on the forehead with one of the rings. He did this with such zeal that an imprint appeared on his forehead. "Now I'm forced to take leave of you! But remember what I said to you!" he stated and started to move back hurriedly, clearly intending to disappear.

"Stop!" Daph shouted. "But was it you in the limo? May I use the informal 'you' or is this impudence?" The keeper stopped. "Informal 'you'? This is impudence, but you may," he said after some wavering. "Where, where was I?" "In the car following me. Well, tell me, this is important to me! Why were these tricks necessary? In order to play a little on my nerves?"

Essiorh looked at her in bewilderment. "Well, it'll be known to you: I found you only twenty minutes ago. Found with the help of that indissoluble tie, which always exists between a guard and his keeper. I was in shock. I've become a complete stranger to the mortal world. I was last here during the times of ancient Babylon. I remember I found a whole crowd of idlers and, in order that the people would not lounge around with nothing to do, I proposed to them to build a tower. The usual small tower. Who knew that the moronoids would get so carried away? My boss was very unhappy."

"Fine, not you, so not you. But did you see the limo?" Daph continued asking. "No. I must assume you have in mind one of those vehicles with a nice young woman at the wheel attempting

to knock me down when I was pondering something on the pavement?” Essiorh tried to be more specific. Daph looked searchingly at him and decided that it was possible to believe his words. That Depressiac related to Essiorh benevolently served as an influential argument in favour of Essiorh speaking the truth. Taking into account its specific character, of course. In any case, it did not strain itself and did not hiss at him as at the limousine. “It means, not only are the golden-wings and the keeper from the Transparent Spheres interested in me... I’ve become popular. Only this form of popularity somehow is not much to my liking,” decided Daph.

“Why haven’t you been in the mortal world for so long?” Daph asked, after deciding to appear attentive. It would seem the innocent question embarrassed Essiorh. “After the Babylonian incident I began to have trouble at work... Eh-eh... I was slightly in the wilderness when you appeared. And here they remembered me,” he drawled evasively, staring at his very strong mitts with polite informative interest.

“Could nobody be entrusted with such an important issue? I have me in mind.” Daph was filled with enthusiasm. Essiorh smiled with a forced smile. Someone who recently fell from a chair and now attempts to present this as a joke would smile so. “Oh no. I fear that the issue is much simpler. No one else agreed to take you... All shoved you aside as they could. Finally, they found the last one. Alas, this last one turned out to be me. You and I, as the moronoids very rightly say, are worms from the same

coffin.”

“What, what? Peas from the same pod?” “Worms from the same coffin!” Essiorh obstinately repeated. “And don’t argue! So they say. I read it in the dictionary, when preparing for transplanting to the human world.” “Ah, I understand! Sniffka said that Guards of Gloom cast an evil eye on one publication of the moronoid phraseology dictionary. Her good friend, having found out about this, immediately purchased twelve copies to give away to friends. So here, according to Murphy’s Law, he miscalculated, Sniffka turned out to be his thirteenth friend and didn’t get this dictionary. She was very hurt!” Daph elaborated.

Essiorh turned a deaf ear to her words, thinking about something. “Daphne! I have a request for you... a personal one... I’m asking you not to tell anyone that I showed up with my reproach sooner than I should have. We’re very strict about this, taking into account that I also have earlier blunders. Can I hope that everything will remain between us?” Daph nodded patronizingly and slapped her keeper on a shoulder solid as granite. “Have no fear! I’ll sew a zipper on my mouth and zip it shut every time I try to squawk... Depressiac is also a reliable lad. Except for a good fight, night flight, and Persian cats, he has no other weaknesses. And also no interests, by the way, if we don’t consider raw meat.”

Someone had already been drumming nervously for a long time from within the iron door accidentally welded shut by Essiorh’s reproach. It no longer made any sense to remain in the

entrance. Daph and Essiorh left, not waiting for the moronoids to summon the Emergency and Disaster Relief Ministry or the fire department.

Twilight slowly thickened above Moscow, exactly as if someone had dimmed the brightness of a monitor screen sequentially. The wind played on an unglued advertisement. Automobiles with maniacal perseverance rushed along the ring of boulevards. Their drivers diligently made a show of having important business somewhere. And, it goes without saying, none of these simulators of stormy activity, masters of beating the air, was concerned that here, two steps away from them, Daphne the guard of Light was discussing the fate of the moronoid world with her keeper from the Transparent Spheres.

Suddenly Depressiac emitted a warning guttural sound. Daph looked up. She felt a sharp uneasiness. While she was in the entrance, something changed in the magic field above Moscow. Neutral and sluggish earlier, now it blazed like the aurora borealis. Daph scrutinized the sky over the roofs of the houses. It seemed to her that to the right, somewhere very high, two golden points flickered. Before Daph had time to focus on them, the points disappeared. Almost immediately in another part of Moscow, somewhere awfully far away, in the outskirts, an additional point flickered. It traced a semicircle and also disappeared. The points resembled not even sparks but timid yellow maple leaves, when in the evening murky forest the last ray of the sun suddenly falls on them.

“Golden-wings. There are about two scores of them above the city. They appeared about ten minutes ago,” Essiorh announced with knowledge of the matter, answering her unvoiced question. “What are they doing here?” Daph inquired with uneasiness. “Hmm... Strange question. They’re searching, of course.” “For me?” “This time it’s not you. Although, if they catch sight of you, there’s no doubt they’ll immediately attack you. So, no noticeable magic. Be quiet as a dead mouse in the fourth power generator... Ouch, again the jinxed dictionary! But now, if you’re interested, look over there... Over that house on the corner, found it?” “No.” “Look closer. Higher than the billboard, higher than the attic... Do you see a fat black blob? Well!”

Daph looked hard and actually saw what Essiorh was talking about. In the air, a round-shouldered little fellow in a raincoat was leisurely moving away from them. He was going along and piercingly examining the walls of the houses. Obstacles did not exist for his small colourless eyes. Neither concrete walls nor iron roofs – nothing could cover or hide. The small sticky hand would reach out to everywhere. The sticky fingers would close over the most important and the most secret. On an adjacent street Daphne saw yet another figure exactly the same. And another one. And another. The figures were moving in parallel, block after block combing the city.

Daph grabbed the collar of the cat dashing from her shoulder and a spike in the collar pricked her finger. “Who are they? Darts of Doom?” she asked indistinctly, licking her wound. Essiorh,

puzzled, looked sideways at her. “What guards? Don’t amuse me! Ordinary agents. Hundreds of them all over the city, but all the same the agents have to be careful. Golden-wings are not in the mood nowadays. They attack continually.” “Really?” “I don’t lie without sound reasons!” Essiorh was insulted. “And guards of Gloom don’t protect their agents?” “Whatever for? What are such agents to Gloom, dozens of races flattened and banished to Tartarus? Gloom has never particularly spared clay and plasticine. By the way, are you aware that some recently prepared agents even have blood? We discussed this at briefing. Their blood is the powder for office printers diluted with Troika cologne or ethyl alcohol. Ligul mocks the image and likeness any way he wants...” Essiorh said with bitterness.

Unexpectedly he turned sharply, caught Daphne by the elbows, and quickly carried her under the arch. Moronoids eyed them with alarm. Some heroically disposed men even came to a halt. Daphne, as soon as Essiorh put her down on the ground, waved her hands, showing that everything was in order and no one was attacking her. “Quiet! Certainly no one can cut into the conversation of a keeper and his charge, but nevertheless it’s better not to be noticed!” Essiorh whispered, pressing against the wall and carefully looking out of the arch.

Daph saw how a round-shouldered agent in a raincoat suddenly tossed up his head, looking out at someone, then stooped, drew himself together, and in a cowardly manner dived into the attic window. Almost immediately, a bright flash drew

a line in the sky. Above the street, *something*, impossible to see with moronoid sight, rushed past in a golden radiance. Dazzling wings and a stern profile flickered, prolonged by a flourish of the flute.

For a while the golden-wings obviously pondered whether he should continue pursuit along the back alleys with attics and sewers, which creations of Gloom so loved, and then, after reconsidering, rushed after another agent, the one combing the region from the area above. The agent, down on his luck and losing his head, rushed along the boulevard from one signboard to another and only at the last moment, escaping from maglody attack by the guard of Light, desperately dived with his plasticine head into the sewage grid for rainwater. He dived, sunken into liquid clay there, and was hidden.

The golden-wings gained altitude and disappeared behind the flat roof of the cinema. After ascertaining that danger had passed, the agents came out of their refuges, shook, somewhat restored their flattened forms – especially the crumpled one squeezing himself through the grid, and continued to comb the city.

“What are they doing here? Both agents and golden-winged? Why so many of them?” Daph asked with apprehension. “Searching. Both these and others. Only here, for some reason I believe more in the intrusiveness of plasticine villains,” Essiorh remarked sadly. “And the agents are not searching for me?” Daph asked just in case. Essiorh looked at her with compassion.

“My good child! Are you at this again? As they once told us at briefing: the double repetition of a question indicates either depressive sluggishness or maniacal suspiciousness. Why would Gloom search for you when you’re already with Ares? No, they need something else,” he explained, with his tone showing that he was not about to explain what this *something* was.

“Fine, don’t tell. But can we play a little game of hot and cold?” Daph quickly asked. “You may. But I promise nothing,” emphasized Essiorh. “It goes without saying. Perhaps they need, by chance, that scroll, on which the impression of my wings would be found?” Daphne asked. “I’ve said too much,” the keeper growled. “What value does the scroll have? Why is it so necessary to Gloom? Essiorh, don’t be stubborn! Why hide from me what’s already known to all?” Daph quickly asked.

The guard-keeper was perceptibly embarrassed. The secret had turned out to be somewhat painfully transparent. Nevertheless, he continued to persist, “Time for me to go. We’ll still meet! Till we meet again! And don’t be offended! I can’t, I simply don’t have the right...” After nodding to her, Essiorh quickly jumped out of the arch. His prompt retreat resembled a flight. When, coming to her senses, Daph rushed after him, the street was empty. Only the wind was rocking the “No parking” sign suspended from a wire.

Pondering over the strange events of the day, Daph slowly wandered towards Bolshaya Dmitrovka. In a minute, not a single suspicion was left. Suspicion had strengthened little by little and

changed into truth. The truth included the fact that her guard-keeper was a chronically unlucky wretch. “The most muddle-headed guard of Light simply by definition must have the most spontaneous keeper. Everything is logical. Don’t you think, huh?” she asked, turning to Depressiac. However, the cat was thinking about the dog across the street, sufficiently far from them. It was moving extremely insolently, holding its tail curled up, barking at cars, and ambiguously sniffing posts. Daph had to hold Depressiac tightly by the collar to end the discussion.

Chapter 2

Grabby Hands

Methodius kicked the chair in irritation. For a solid half-hour, he had been trying with mental magic push to light the candle standing on the chair some a metre away from him. However, in spite of so small a distance, the candle persistently ignored him. Then when Methodius got mad and attempted to put everything connected with this failure out of his head, the candle fell and in a flash became a puddle of wax. Moreover – what Buslaev discovered almost immediately – the metallic candlestick also melted together with the candle.

“I don’t know how to do anything. I’m a complete zero in magic. I have it either too weak or too strong. And I’m this future sovereign of Gloom? All of them are delirious! Better if Ares would teach me something besides slashing with swords!” Methodius grumbled, rewarding the chair with one more kick. The chair went off along the parquet for half a metre, wobbled several times in pensiveness, and changed its mind about falling.

Despite the fact that July was no longer simply looming on the horizon but literally dancing a *lezginka* on the very tip of the nose, Methodius, as before, was living in the Well of Wisdom high school, where annual exams had not yet ended. Vovva Skunso, having grown quiet, did not allow himself to play any tricks and

was as polite as at a funeral.

The director Glumovich greeted Methodius every time he saw him in the hallway, even if they had met seven times in the day. At the same time, Buslaev constantly felt his sad, devoted, almost canine look. On rare occasions, Glumovich would approach Methodius and attempt to joke. The joke was always the same, “Well now, young man! Tell me your confusion of the day!” Glumovich said in a cheerful voice, but his lips trembled, and his forehead was porous and sweaty, like a wet orange. Every time Methodius had to exert himself in order not to absorb his fuzzy dirty raspberry-coloured aura accidentally. Nevertheless, Glumovich did not ignore exams, and it was difficult for Methodius, frequently letting his studies slide in previous grades. For the most part, it helped that even without him there were enough meatheads among Well’s noble students. Nature, having succumbed to a hernia in the parents, was making merry to the maximum in their children.

After throwing the damaged candlestick – it had not yet cooled and still burned the fingers – into the wastebasket, Methodius left the room and set off aimlessly wandering around the high school. The soft carpeting muffled his steps. Artificial palms were languidly basking in the rays of a florescent light. There were practically no students in the hallways. In the evenings, the parents dropped by to pick up the majority of them, and then on the other side of the gates by the entrance would line up a full exhibition of Lexus, Mercedes, Audi, and

BMW. The Wisdom Wellers were usually more or less lacking in imagination. Waiting for their young, the padres of well-known last names winked slyly at each other by flashing signal lights and honking horns, greeting acquaintances.

Methodius slowly made his way along the empty high school corridors and, for something to do, studied photographs of earlier graduates, read the ads, the timetables, and in general everything in succession. He had long ago discovered in himself a special, almost pathological attachment to the printed word. In the subway, the children's clinic, a store – everywhere boring for him, he fixed his eye on any letter and any text, even if it was a piece of yellowed newspaper once stuck under the wallpaper.

Here and now, he was interested in the amusing poster by the first aid station. On the poster was depicted a red-cheeked and red-nosed youth lying in bed with a thermometer, either projecting from under his armpit or like a stiletto piercing his heart. A white cloudlet with the following text was placed over the head of the youth, "Your health is our wealth. At the first sign of a head cold, which can be a symptom of the flu, immediately lie down in bed and stick to bed rest. Only this way will you be able to avoid complications." Instead of an exclamation mark, the inscription was crowned with one additional thermometer, brother of the first, with the temperature standing still at 37.2.

Methodius instantly assessed the originality of the idea. He practically could always simulate a head cold. However, in half of the cases even a simulation was not necessary. "Eh, pity I didn't

know earlier! Must say I've ruined my health! How many school days spent in vain... But it won't work with Ares, I fear! Can't dodge the guards of Gloom with a head cold!" he thought and began to go down the stairs.

Soon Methodius was already on Bolshaya Dmitrovka. House № 13, surrounded by scaffolding as before, did not even evoke the curiosity of passers-by. A normal house, no more remarkable than other houses in the region. Methodius dived under the grid, looked sideways at the guarding runes flaring up with his approach, and, after pushing open the door, entered. The majority of agents and succubae had already given their reports and taken off. Only a vague smell of perfume, the stifling air, the floor spattered with spit, and heaps of parchments on the tables showed that there had been a crowd here recently.

Julitta looked irritated. The marble ashtray, which she had used the whole day to knock some sense into agents' heads curing them of postscripts, was entirely covered in plasticine. Aspiring to cajole the witch who was losing her temper or at least to redirect the arrows, the agents told tales about each other. "Mistress, mistress! Tukhlomon is playing the fool again," one started to whisper in a disgusting voice, covering his mouth with his hand. "Where?" "Hanging over there." Julitta turned and made certain that the mocked Tukhlomon was in fact hanging on the entrance doors, with the handle of a dagger sticking out of his chest. His head was hanging like that of a chicken. Ink was dripping from his half-open mouth. This nightmarish spectacle

would impress many, only not Julitta. “Hey you, clown! Quickly put the tool back where you took it from and come up to me! I counted to three, it’s already four!!!” she began to yell.

Tukhlomon, squinting like a cat about to be punished with a sneaker for bad habits, sadly opened his eyes, freed himself from the dagger, and on bent knees approached Julitta. The witch pitilessly and accurately knocked him on the nose with the heavy press of the Gloom office. The agent made a face feigning fatal and eternal offence, wiped his watering eyes, and after a minute was already twisting like a grass snake around Buslaev.

“How is the future majesty? Hands are not sweating?” he spitefully asked, squatting down. “And how are you? Don’t sneeze continuously at night, the conscience isn’t itching?” Methodius answered courtesy with courtesy. “Nothing. Thanks... It’s only you who sleep at night... We work at night as in the daytime! Please be good enough to see for yourself!” the agent answered. “Don’t kill yourself!” “I won’t. Be kind enough not to worry. For your sake I’ll look after myself,” Tukhlomon answered mysteriously. He giggled and took off, politely shuffling alternately with both feet.

Ares, as usual, was staying in his office. One could only go to him by invitation. The chief of the Russian division of Tartarus was there almost without budging – day and night. Only recently, warning no one, he disappeared somewhere for almost three days and then re-appeared suddenly, giving no one any explanation.

Next to Julitta Aida Plakhovna Mamzelkina found room for

her own body. Aida Plakhovna's cheeks were rosy and her eyes bright. She likely already had time to dip into the honey wine. Judging by the contented look of both, Julitta and Aida Plakhovna were busy with the most pleasant matter on Earth – slander. After putting her bony feet up on a chair, Mamzelkina looked through the far wall of house № 13, which was no obstacle for her all-seeing eyes. It was that brisk evening hour, when all kinds of two-legged upright-walking essences were hurrying somewhere or returning from somewhere. Moronoids were scurrying about along sidewalks, lanes, pedestrian crossings, and bridges of the megalopolis of ten million.

“Julitta, my dove not yet dead, look over there!” Mamzelkina cackled. “What a serious, dignified man! What kingly carriage! How he carries his portly body, how solidly and peacefully he looks in front of himself! See how everyone yields to his path! They must think that this is the prefect of the region going around his domain in search of something else to knock down! In fact, this is merely Wolf Cactusov, untalented writer and quiet hen-pecked husband, whom the wife has sent out for dumplings at the corner store. Isn't it true how deceptive the first impression is? Interesting, how would this turkey sing if I remove the covers off my tool now?” “Perhaps we can check?” Julitta innocently proposed. Aida Plakhovna threatened her with a finger comprised, it seemed, of only some joints and bones. “Not supposed to. There was no order for the time being... My doe not yet shot, I don't do unauthorized activity! I

have an establishment! That's that, my cemetery treasure!" Aida Plakhovna edifyingly said.

Julitta sighed so sadly that all around for one-and-a-half kilometres all gas burners went out, and leaned back against the chair. "Why so sad, dear? Feeling miserable?" Mamzelkina asked sympathetically. "Oh, Aida Plakhovna! I'm miserable," complained the secretary. "Why?" "Miserable that no one loves me. In the evenings I get so tired of humanity that I want to nail someone." "You, girl, drop this! Don't lose control of yourself! There now, I see all your agents are walking around crippled! Don't be heavy-handed and muddle-headed!" Mamzelkina said sternly.

She turned around and saw Methodius standing still by the doors, looking at her with curiosity. "Oh, and this, the little chick not yet slaughtered, is hanging around here! Everyone wanders around! I walk around the city, look along the sides. I have no strength! Agents prowl, golden-wings prowl – and everybody needs something! And now even this, young and green, was roaming! Well, why do you wander, dear, why do you stroll?" the old woman began to moan. Methodius muttered something unhappily. He had his own opinion regarding who was hanging around and who was quaffing honey wine.

Aida Plakhovna threw up her hands. "I dare say you've grown bolder, to talk to me so! I've heard much about your feats, heard much! Passed the Labyrinth, seized the magic of the ancients, but so far haven't found the key to the force... Don't grieve, big-

eyes, everything will come together. What won't come together will be hidden. What won't be hidden will lie as dust. Gloom also wasn't built in a day." Methodius nodded impatiently. He did not like it when they hinted to him that sooner or later he would become the sovereign of Gloom. This was as intolerable as the flattery of agents and sweet giggling succubae.

Mamzelkina quizzically inclined her head to one side and started to move with such speed on a chair towards Methodius, as if the chair was mincing along on bent legs. "Why so sullen, huh? Is your spiritual pain troubling you? How's your eidos, kinfolk? No grabby hands have reached it for the present? Watch, many such hands here, oh, many!" she moaned.

"Don't you try to scare me with empty threats! I'm not so easily deceived!" Methodius snapped carelessly. Lately he had gotten so used to being rude to agents that now it was not easy to break the habit. He would be rude and at once felt like he sweated from his own bravery. The encased scythe, standing in the corner, tinkled nastily. Its shadow, falling onto the wall and mysteriously crushed, formed into the words, "Mors sola fatetur, quantula sint hominum corpuscula." (Death alone reveals how small are men's bodies (Latin) Juvenal, *Satires*, X)

However, Aida Plakhovna either was in a good mood or had decided to turn a blind eye this time. "And, dear, I don't understand what you're talking about. What jests... We don't need to deceive others. We're working people, we're mowers... Except eide, we require nothing from others... We're not

chemists, not carpenters, we're grave workers! So, my diamond, you're my unfilled hole!"

Meanwhile Julitta reached for a large piece of chocolate slipped to her by one enterprising succubus and rustled the foil. With her usual thoughtlessness, she did not treat Methodius, and Mamzelkina, besides honey wine, abused nothing. "Now yesterday I thought of something..." said Julitta with a mouth full of chocolate. "Thought of you! You have a strange last name for the sovereign of Gloom. Buslaev! It's kind of suspicious in our difficult time. That is, I understand, of course, Vaska Buslaev, Novgorod hero, swung a shaft, this and that... Likely good and reliable all the time... Only not quite for a leader nevertheless. You would be better as Petrov or Smirnov."

Mamzelkina did not agree with her. "Ne-a, my dear, no use talking nonsense. He shouldn't be a Smirnov. Many Smirnovs are wanted. Indeed, I know. And if the initials also coincide – now that's a real misfortune. Once I drag one into Tartarus, but it turns out: namesake! 'You made a mistake,' they tell me, 'old woman! Do you just snatch anyone?' But what mistake did I make? Here's the order: Smirnov P.A., 1964. Here you are: Smirnov PA, 1964! Receive the goods!" Aida Plakhovna said and rubbed her hands.

"So, did you take him back?" Methodius asked. Julitta began to laugh, looking sideways at the confused old woman, who, out of surprise, even dropped the ladle with honey wine. "My dear, who would kindly take him back from Tartarus? We're not a government office for little fellows to run here and there. Already

brought in – such a slim lie is customary and you drag along another load. Okay, my sweets, I've chatted too long with you already... I have people who have exceeded their allotted span in white light!" Aida Plakhovna started to mumble in a hurry.

Obviously steering clear of the slippery theme, she took down the dirty knapsack from her shoulder and poured out for Julitta a whole pile of soiled parchments onto the table. The witch made a face when the parchments rolled out onto the table. Many of them had brown dried spots and fresh mucus covered the others. "Now here, my aspen coffins, are invoices for suicides, and here are those who mortgaged their eide in life, meaning they miscalculated a little with the terms... And atheists, desecraters, and those philosophizing... as they negotiated a separate invoice with Ligul ... Will you sort it out, dear? If you can't, here's the complete list. One grave to another!" Mamzelkina talked at a great speed.

Checking whether anything remained in her knapsack, Aida Plakhovna decisively shook it. A trapped parchment fell out onto the table. "And who's this?" Julitta asked. "And this is... a suicide. The wretch swallowed sleeping pills. She decided to frighten her husband a little. Twice she did it and they pumped them out. Did it the third time and here her husband was detained at work... Someone brought him a game disk! As if all these aren't attached to our Chancellery," willingly explained Mamzelkina. "Careful with the parchment, Juliatta, my little birch not yet sawn! Here the eidos is glued underneath, so as not

to be mislaid. Take some pains with the receipt! Eide without a receipt will cost you dearly. Later you can't render an account!"

Julitta unwillingly wrote a receipt, took the stamp pad out of the box, and began to stamp with loathing where needed. She had hardly finished as bloody letters oozed on Mamzelkina's copy.

Delivered: Mamzelkina A.P.

Senior Manager of the Necro-department

Accepted: witch Julitta,

Russian Division of the Chancellery of Gloom

Secretary and Laboratory Assistant

Witness: Buslaev M.I.

Student of Gloom

Mamzelkina had not yet read the parchment when the letters suddenly became milky and that part of the record, which concerned the witness Buslaev M.I., vanished into thin air. Methodius began to blink dumbfounded. The old woman sternly threatened him, "Oh, I know whose trick this is! It's all your unsold eidos making a row! Doesn't matter, I implicated a witness for the pile. And it's okay without him," muttered the old woman.

Aida Plakhovna carelessly put the receipt into the knapsack and, staggering, picked up the scythe. "I'm going, kids, I'll mow a wee bit. Already the legs don't walk but the hands toil over everything. Well, if I take to my bed for good, how will people on Earth die, my hearts? Take care, Juliatta, take care, little orphan! Look after Ares, it's hard for him. Ares suffers, indeed I feel for

him. It's all the cursed memory! And you, Methy, be healthy! Here, I know, trouble will come with such speed that you'll be in a terrible mess!"

"What trouble?" Methodius asked. "A-a-and, my dear, one immediately sees how green you are! Who asks Death about the future! If I answer you, then I'll have to cut you down! So, interested?" Mamzelkina glanced at Met so pointedly that he even stepped back. A hot and empty abyss blazed in Aida Plakhovna's small eyes. "No, don't!" he said in a hurry. "As you wish! Suit yourself, paradise saved! Ciao, clear-eyes, and you know to watch over your eidos. Perhaps your eidos isn't better than others'. I've transferred many of them, I know the price of each... But indeed awfully powerful forces stand behind it, your eidos, they do, they do... Here's like in the casino: now and then, the seven is so bound to the eight that even an ace can't butt in! Clear?" "Clear."

The old woman smirked. "I love intelligence. Are you indeed intelligent?" "Yes." "That's nice. And look after your Daphne! Indeed a painfully bright girlie – lest something doesn't work out. Because of her. And... with her... Understand me?" It seemed to Methodius there was a hint – a very clear hint – in the old woman's words. But to what extent her prophecy had to do with the near future – this he did not know. Buslaev felt that everything was not so simple here. Oh, how complex!

Aida Plakhovna left, dragging her legs. Her dry, efficient cough reached them from the outside, and almost immediately

somewhere on an adjacent street the siren of an ambulance howled heartrendingly. Whether these events were connected, Methodius did not know. Although he would not be surprised to find out that the old woman started her work while she was still here. True pros of the necro-department never stop working for a moment. Their scythe shoots up and falls down ten times a minute.

After the departure of the industrious old woman, Methodius and Julitta remained in reception together. Julitta, on whom Mamzelkina dumped a pile of parchments requiring sorting, was again in a bad mood. After the succubae and agents, she, according to her own expression, took a long time restoring the acid-alkaline balance in her soul. Moreover, she had the usual date in the evening and had to scrape on the walls and gather together at least a bit of good emotion. Not wanting to be like a sponge taking in her dark mood, Methodius, for something to do, set off for the room adjacent to reception.

This was a tight and gloomy nook by the stairs; the furniture there was only a sofa so decrepit that Methodius would not be surprised to find out that Noah himself slept on it in his ark. Something was gnashing in the dark, exactly a key turning in a lock, and a hoarse voice said, "The old sinner Protagor said, 'Man is the measure of all things: of things which are, that they are, and of things which are not, that they are not.' With these words he wanted to say, 'If a man believes in the gods, then they exist, if he doesn't, then they don't.'"

“Who’s here? I ask: who’s here?” Methodius nervously asked. He did not receive an answer, but wings started to flap, and Buslaev realized that Ares’ ancient prophetic raven was talking to him. The raven was so old that its feathers had come off in some places and dull pink skin peeped out. Now and then Methodius was surprised that the raven was still alive. Neither Ares nor Julitta ever fed it and generally, they extremely rarely recalled its existence. However, Methodius knew precisely that the raven was with them even in the lighthouse.

His eyes gradually grew accustomed to the semidarkness. Methodius saw that the door of the cage was wide open. The raven was sitting on the back of the sofa and looking about askance. “Pour some water for you perhaps?” Buslaev proposed. The raven ruffled up indifferently. Methodius did not know whether the bird understood human speech or thoughtlessly repeated phrases heard sometime long ago. He sat in the semidarkness, listening as the large bird stirred in the dusk, sat for nearly half an hour, thinking about something vague. At first in his thoughts was Irka, whom he had treated rather poorly, not visiting her for a long time, and then finally Daph with her enormous white wings supplanted her.

When Methodius was going to return to reception, the raven suddenly pecked the back of the sofa and said, “*Into the cloth of centuries is interweaved this parable. She was a guard, and she threw onto his neck the lace with the wings, not knowing that she has to fall in love with him and share immortality with him. She*

did not know that the moronoid world would begin to draw her in, so that at some point in infinity hearts and fates will unite. So let the flute play!”

Methodius quickly took a step towards the raven. “What are you talking about? Daph? What does it mean?” he nervously asked. However, the bird had already become silent again and was only indifferently walking along the back of the sofa. Whether this parable was from the past or the future, whose cloth was not yet woven, it was impossible to understand. After struggling with the raven for about ten minutes, Methodius nevertheless secured from it the next phrase, “*He said: Dhul-Qarnayn! Gog and Magog are doing harm to this land; shall we pay tribute to you so that you would set up a barrier between us and them?*” the bird said hoarsely, finally baffling Methodius. Buslaev angrily turned and left.

He expected Julitta alone in reception, but during his absence there appeared Daphne and Tukhlomon, having already had time to forget that he had gotten it on the nose with the press, returned for some reason. “Strange that I did not hear them come in,” thought Methodius, turning around to look at the closet. “Interesting, did Daph hear how I tried to find out about her from the raven? Although, perhaps not.”

Daph removed the overalls from the cat, leaving only the collar, and now the naked and terrible Depressiac, after stretching its wings, flew around reception. Occasionally it hung onto the heavy velvety drapes or with furious mewling ripped

with its razor-sharp claws into one of the spying pictures. Julitta, in her leisure fond of shooting with the pistol at the pictures or practising throwing a dagger at them, treated this vandalism with moderate benevolence.

Tukhlomon was hanging around Daph and whining monotonously, entreating her to let him have her wings. The agent's face was twisting every which way and changing hundreds of sugary expressions per minute. The rather bald top of his head gleamed. The trimmed sideburns looked very appropriate. Over all he was so annoying, like he had been put together by sweaty hands. "I don't need the wings forever! I'll just keep them for a while! Pretty please! My cherub! How much does it cost you to gladden a sick old man? I implore you! Clearly a noble lady! Please be so kind! I thirst for Light! I'm tired of Gloom, the poor old man! I'll kiss the hem of your dress! Smooch-smooch-smooch! Darn, a thread got stuck in my teeth! Don't let the old soul perish!" he repeated, crawling around on his knees. Daph shook her head. She could very well imagine what happened with those guards of Light, who out of good will loaned their wings to agents. "I want to go to Eden! To sing in the paradise choir, to gobble apples of knowledge and spit out the seeds! At least let me understand, what Light is, huh? I yearn for Light!!! Pretty, pretty please!"

"Stop! Stop taunting!" Daph got mad. "Listen, Light! He never stops! Use your knee and give it to him in the nose!" Julitta, tired of listening to Tukhlomon whining, advised her. On hearing the

advice, the agent helpfully started to move his nose up to Daph. “I beg you, light of my soul, please don’t trouble yourself! With a knee, or a leg, may even pull my hair out, or trample on my fingers! And if you desire to shoot me with a machine gun, I’ll even bring one! Everything for the fine noble lady! Only give me the wings, huh? Uncle Tukhlomon is so wretched, so unlucky! A sin to refuse him, big sin! To refuse Tukhlomon is the same as smacking an orphan with a crowbar!” he started to sweet-talk, touchingly puffing up his cheeks.

Realizing that there was no other way of shaking him off, Daphne decisively reached for the flute. On noticing this, the agent began to crawl away quickly. He did not fear a crushed nose or other damages, but here it was a bad joke with the flute of a guard of Light. A single unique maglody could convert him into a puddle of malodorous plasticine. “Okay, okay, Uncle Tukhlomon is leaving! Only, I beg you, no need for music! I have weak eardrums! I’m not dancing today!” he whimpered, on all fours running behind Methodius and using him as a cover.

Methodius greeted Daph. She answered him dryly, looking to the side. It seemed to Buslaev that Daphne had been diligently avoiding him for a couple of weeks already. And if she nevertheless addressed him, then she would quickly get worked up and begin to argue trifles. Methodius could not find any explanation for this. He was sure that he had not offended Daph. Although, on the other hand, he could also have blurted out something careless. It is always so with these girls. They are

eternally offended by some phrase, which you yourself do not remember. “Did I say that?” “You did.” “When?”

“Depressiac!” Daphne said, with alarm looking at the cat, which, swinging on the drapes, was thoughtfully examining Methodius. “I warn you! If you, like last time, allow Mr. Buslaev to pet you and at the same time don’t scratch his face, I’ll have to wash you with bleach. Moreover, both inside and out.” Tukhlomon, inflating his cheeks and, simultaneously slapping them with both hands – a sound “puff!” came out – guffawed fawningly, appraising the scope of the fantasy of the guard of Light. “I don’t need your cat!” Methodius said, offended. “Wonderful. Because I was serious about the bleach. I don’t want your microbes on my cat,” said Daph.

“Ah, what imagination! Uncle Tukhlomon is having fun from head to toe! If you want to realize your dreams, Light, Tukhlomon will climb with pleasure into a washer so that you could start it! Can pour bleach into my ears! Can even spank with a shoe! Let’s agree on a payment! Besides your wings, I don’t need anything!” the agent started to babble cautiously. Daph looked at him with loathing. Meanwhile, Tukhlomon, having jumped to his feet, was already leaping around Methodius, exactly like a baboon out of the zoo. “My usual compliments to the future sovereign! Have you decided to wipe your feet on me? Or a fist to the forehead? It’s soft, won’t hurt your fist! Or the cheek. I’ll puff up the cheek!”

“Stop!” Methodius said. Tukhlomon was not a bit offended.

“Well no, then no. It’s never too late for one good person to hit another. And indeed I, must admit, regard the matter with favour. I recently came from Ligul to Ares and to you all. Literally dashed here in a minute: one leg here, the other already there. Hurried with the speed of light!” “Consider that I’m already fainting from joy! What next?” Julitta muttered. “What do you mean ‘what next’? I came from Ligul!” Opening his eyes wide like a picture of bewilderment, Tukhlomon repeated.

“I already heard this. What does the hunchback want from us?” the witch said. Tukhlomon looked at her with mocking reproach. “What hunchback-eh is he? Yes, his stature is small, stooping a little, but not this. Is it really nice to reproach him for this? Is it really moral-eh? And where’s the heart of kindness, where’s the patience? Tut-tut! I have to tell Ligul how you appreciate him here! Oh, I have to!” “You mean to squeal?” Daph refined in an icy voice. “What bad words you use, girl! Squeal, fie! Not squeal but inform in the name of triumph of law-eh and order-eh!” Quick to take offence, the agent corrected.

“Tukhlomony, my little dead fish, cut the sound! Else, I’ll force a woollen sock down your throat! You know me!” Julitta frowned. “It won’t help. Indeed, I’ve swallowed many socks in my century! Nowadays everyone has rich fantasies! Here even Daph, our darling guard, wants the cat to scratch Methy, the sovereign of Gloom! And fill the cat up to its eyes with bleach! And now a sock! Here a moth eats it and doesn’t choke!” the agent brushed it off. “So, does it mean you’ve eaten socks? And how are they,

tasty?” Daph asked with curiosity. “Not tasty, but possible to consume!” the agent willingly answered.

“And now the main thing. The purpose of the visit, so to speak. I have to deliver an invitation! Ligul summons Ares, Methodius, and Julitta to England. To William the Conqueror, head of the British division of Gloom. William gathers his own to an exclusive party on the occasion of the anniversary of the Norman invasion. There will be the most noble bigwigs ever existed!” “When is it?” “Tomorrow.”

“Of course, I’m not summoned?” Daph mockingly asked. Tukhlomon shrugged his shoulders, expressing regret with his whole appearance. “Not supposed to, my beautiful. Gloom assembles there, and though you’re a fugitive, you’re Light nevertheless! No good! Here if you let me have your wings, then no problem, this very second! Will you, huh?” Daphne silently reached for the flute, forcing the agent to end the propaganda instantly.

“Clear. What time?” Julitta asked. “Midnight tomorrow. Will you deliver the invitation to Ares yourself, my sweet, or will you consent to give me a kick to attend to him? Under the fieriest eye-eh?” Tukhlomon asked maliciously. “I’ll do it. Off limits for you there. Stay here and wait.” Julitta disappeared into the office, closing the door behind her.

In a couple of minutes, Ares came out of the office and stopped in the middle of reception – stout and breathing heavily. A deep scar lined his swarthy face, dividing it into two unequal

halves. “Since when does Ligul send Tukhlomon to summon us to William? Does William not have messengers?” Ares asked with displeasure. “Indeed it so happened. The two of them summoned together. Communicating. When I turned up, William was Ligul’s guest. They were sitting, steaming in lava. They wanted to send a messenger, but I volunteered. Messengers, I think, are also forced labour! Must feel sorry for them out of the kindness of one’s heart,” answered Tukhlomon, bowing. He spoke humbly and flatteringly; however, his alert blinking eyes were literally frozen on the bridge of Ares’ nose: this way they would catch any indiscretion.

The swordsman stretched out his hand and, taking Tukhlomon by the plasticine ear, pulled him towards himself. If Tukhlomon had not gotten on his toes, his ear would have remained in Ares’ fingers. “So you feel sorry? Oh, don’t lie! Perhaps you’re sniffing around for Ligul? You want to be both here and there – to get on well everywhere?” Ares asked with disgust. “Indeed no!” Tukhlomon was insulted. “I come to you with my whole soul... Sigh! For what?” “Parchments handed in, stamped, prolonging the stay? Swell. Now get out of here! Julitta, my sword!” “Why the sword? No need for a sword! As I understand, it’s such an elegant hint-eh that it’s time for me to depart? Uncle Tukhlomon precisely intended to say that he’s in a great hurry! Anything for Ligul? No? Well, don’t, don’t! I was simply asking...” the agent began to bustle. Looking back in a cowardly manner, Tukhlomon hurriedly dragged himself to the doors, pasting on the slightly

torn ear on the way.

“Stop!” Ares unexpectedly ordered him. The agent stopped, moving slowly in alarm on fragile plasticine legs. “Come back!” Tukhlomon sadly returned. “Agent, recall: did Ligul tell you about the small chests? Only before you start lying now, think, is it worthwhile for this to be your last lie,” Ares said threateningly. Tukhlomon clearly became ill at ease. He unhurriedly reached for a red kerchief covered in polka dots, unfolded it, and blotted his forehead in the same efficient movement with which a hostess sweeps crumb off the kitchen table. “Eh-eh... well... There was something like that. I sorta heard,” the agent mumbled indistinctly. “Clever boy! If you were to lie, you would be leaving for Tartarus. I can make it so that for ten centuries you won’t be able to move into a single most pitiful plasticine body. And no Ligul will stop me.” “This I know-eh. You can-eh,” despondently nodded Tukhlomon.

“Excellent. If you’re so all-knowing, then another question: have they found the chest yet? Who has it?” Tukhlomon opened wide his loyal eyes. “I cannot know-eh! This is the secret, hidden by Gloom-eh!” “Really? How annoying! Julitta, did you bring the sword?” Tukhlomon began to tremble. He already considered that after saying A, he had to say B. Otherwise in a spell it was easily possible to turn up in Tartarus forever. “No need for the sword! I remember-eh. There are all of two chests, in which *it* can turn out to be. The chests are precisely twins. A moronoid by the name of Anton Ogurtsov has the first. This we

already sniffed out.” “Does the moronoid suspect what’s in it?” “How is it possible? Moronoids are complete fools. How would he know about the secret bottom?” Tukhlomon giggled. Ares slightly inclined his head and quietly repeated “Anton Ogurtsov.” Nothing changed on his face. Methodius was ready to swear that, on barely hearing the name, he already knew everything about this moronoid. From the first cry to the last sigh.

“And who has the second?” Ares quickly asked. “With the second one it’s more comple-x. It constantly changes position in the moronoid world. We’re totally knocked off our feet! Better if the hiding-place turns out to be in Ogurtsov’s chest!” the agent stated. Ares looked inquisitively and menacingly at him. “You’re not lying?” “No. That is, in general, it happens, I lie-eh. Can’t do without it. But now – no-eh,” Tukhlomon began to tremble.

The swordsman of Gloom encouragingly slapped him on the cheek. “Smart boy! I hope you won’t forget that you have to bring the contents of the chest not to Ligul but to my hands? Right?” Tukhlomon began to stir in alarm. He was in a panic like a cockroach accidentally hiding in a gun barrel and hearing the dry flick of the lock. Must be, he had other instructions on this score. “Well yes, but, generally, I promised-eh...” he muttered. “I commend you for your consciousness. And consider, if *it* turns out to be at Ligul’s, as a result of sheer luck, for example, I will be VERY offended. Understood?” Tukhlomon bowed, scared, and promised to deal with everything personally. “I won’t pass it to anyone! Have no doubt!” he said with regret. “Now, well done!

Off with you!” Ares ordered with disgust. The agent bounced and teleported, leaving behind a small cloudlet of stink.

“He’ll squeal. In vain you talked to him this way. It seems to me Tukhlomon fears and hates you,” said Daph. Ares looked at her seriously. “He’ll squeal?” “He will. If he hasn’t already gone to do so. You really don’t know?” Daphne was astonished. “I know. He’ll squeal no matter what. On me, you, Met, and Julitta. He would even squeal on himself, if there were any profit in it. To betray anything and anyone is all the same to him, since he has already betrayed all under the sun.” “Then what are we to do?” “Nothing. Never stand on ceremony with this type. There’s only one way to curb those like him: the force that can crush his plasticine head. In the final analysis, even the spectre of Faceless Kvodnon wouldn’t be able to count on his loyalty,” said Ares with contempt.

“Faceless Kvodnon? Who’s this?” Methodius naively asked. This name – Faceless Kvodnon – had barely sounded in the spacious hall when something changed. Glass began to ring. The parchments fell like rain from the table. An unnatural wind touched their faces, after lightly powdering their eyes with dust. Methodius sensed waves of danger and death. They were so tangible that they almost became physical. Julitta faded and shrivelled. Depressiac, swinging on a group portrait of the big shots of Gloom, stopped meowing heartrendingly. Fear, hanging in the air, was so resilient that Methodius blocked the perception, trying not to absorb its energy. Something suggested to him that

in this way, it would be easy to be deprived of his essence, his eidos, and in the end, even his life.

“Damn!” Ares said, slamming a wide-open window, beyond which the construction netting was billowing. “This happens because *he* uttered this name! He, Buslaev!” Julitta croaked. She became white as chalk. Methodius had not seen her like this even when Ligul was raging here, threatening to send the witch into Tartarus.

“Facel...” for some reason Methodius started again. Ares ran up to him and, covering his mouth with a firm hand, began to breathe heavily through his cut nose. “Keep quiet! No more words! I regret that I mentioned him... at all...” “Why?” Met asked, barely after Ares removed his hand. “At some point you’ll sort it out yourself. For the present, remember: any uttered word materializes. One cannot fail to hear his true name, even if it’s spoken in a whisper. Provided, of course, that you have attained revelation. You’ll hear your name everywhere, even if a vampire buried three metres deep in the tundra whispers it. You will hear and you will perceive it as a summons or a request for help. Especially when the one who utters it is endowed with a force, which he doesn’t know how to control. Understand now?” Methodius moved his fingers in an ambiguous manner that it was possible to consider as either yes or no. He wanted very much that Ares would not cover up his mouth again with a firm hand.

“Now on to business... Tomorrow, I think, we’re all visiting William. Must understand that it’s necessary for both him

and Ligul. A sin to ignore so amiable an invitation, especially delivered by such a quick messenger as our Tukhlomon... Methodius and Daph, I'll not detain you! Try and remember any business, if you have any! If not, quick to Glumovich's nursery to stock up on overdue information from the fields of physics, biology, and other inexact sciences. Julitta, you stay! Must put things in order here and sort out the parchments!" Ares turned and set off waddling to the office.

Looking at him from behind, Methodius carelessly thought that it was difficult to believe that the best swordsman of Gloom was in front of him. Now his chief more resembled a champion or boxer grown stout, to whom an armchair and a good mug of beer has long been dearer than the sport of his past. He thought and was immediately sorry, because Ares suddenly turned around, and, in the next moment, Methodius felt that the point of a dagger was tickling his neck.

"First consideration," Buslaev heard Ares' voice. "It's dangerous to look at the back of the head of people and even more so *nonhumans*. What is taking place behind our back, we often see better than that what is created before our eyes. No stress, no excess thoughts, and all the more no fatal fastidious looks. Leave them to tragedians from a theatre destroyed by fire. Got it, Signor Tomato? Answer only 'yes' or 'no'." "Y-yes," Methodius articulated, feeling how a sharp sting pricked his neck.

"Second consideration, indirect result of the first. If you want

to hide something from someone, place it in front of his nose. Got this too?” “Yes.”

“And finally, third consideration: don’t think badly of those, for whom you work. This is not only dangerous but also uncomfortable. Even Ligul, who invented it, doesn’t encourage duplicity. Clear?” “Clear,” said Methodius, his eyes following Ares’ wrist.

“That’s a good boy, Signor Tomato,” approved Ares. “I’ve long noticed: moronoids understand much quicker when you threaten them with a blade or simply any heavy object. It clears even the densest brains excellently.” “Nothing of the sort! It only humiliates the person!” Daph, appearing next to them, objected. “One can’t humiliate a person. His own nature humiliates him. Nothing has changed for thousands of years. Humanity was like a tribe of monkeys, and so it has remained,” said Ares sternly.

“Man did not originate from monkeys. And indeed you know this very well. I learned in school that guards of Gloom started this rumour in the moronoid world. Isn’t it so?” Daphne said. Ares frowned, showing that the matter was not common knowledge here. “Very well, I agree, it didn’t happen... I imagine that it’s monkey originating from the best part of humanity. Gorillas – from athletes, baboons – from politicians, and macaques – from the intellectual elite. Need proof? Easy! In the moronoid world, Signor Tomato, there is only one law – the law of the strong. They trample down and kick the weak (them first of all) – morally, and often even literally. Besides the right

of strength, for some reason they have not come up with other rights.”

“You forgot one additional human right. The right to pardon and to create good, in spite of everything,” said Daphne obstinately. Methodius looked at her in amazement. He did not suspect such internal strength in his frail guard of Light. Neither did Ares, perhaps. Because he suddenly calmed down, stopped flying into a passion, and said conciliatorily, “Well, well, little one! Curtail your Light propaganda, or I can think of something else! At least, if it’s convenient, don’t continue in the same spirit. Just that sooner or later you’ll find a fork in your neck, a half-eaten sausage with the tracks of your best friend’s teeth will be pinned to your teeth... Philanthropy, alas, is punishable.” There was not a hint of humour in Ares’ voice. He hid the dagger, lightly pushed Methodius away and left. The office door shut.

Julitta approached and, after examining Methodius’ neck, whispered at the shallow cut. “Don’t be mad at him! Now and then Ares gets that way... Frequently in the lighthouse, he would be quiet for whole weeks, and then would suddenly begin to joke spitefully and laugh at Light and Gloom at once. At such times, it was best to keep quiet. Then it would let go of him and he again would be as before...” Julitta said softly.

“Why is he so? Will you explain?” Met asked. If Daph posed this request, the answer would be a decisive no. But here Julitta hesitated. She related well to Methodius. After looking sideways at the office, with a flick of her finger she placed a circular

shield to protect against eavesdropping. Ligul the hunchback's face in the group portrait of the bigwigs of Gloom stretched resentfully. Simultaneously on the adjacent landscape with a view of a humble cemetery in the spirit of Zhukovsky, the outermost gravestones stirred disappointedly. Even Ares from the office – and that one could hardly x-ray the magic barrier, although it was unlikely part of his plan.

“I think it's all because one can't half-serve Gloom. Gloom itself punishes its servants, taking away their dearest, with the blood wrung out of them. Take any of us. All of us are either unhappy, without eidos, with a gaping wound in the chest that will never heal, or puffed up narcissistic blockheads (tomorrow, Methodius, you'll see them), or generally natural freaks like Ligul. Staunch supporters of Gloom are actually few, although there are, certainly...”

“Why then do the rest serve?” Methodius was astonished. “Well, my dear, you've got to be kidding! It's very simple to find oneself on the side of Gloom: only carelessly stumble on the slope once and... you'll be rolling down indefinitely. Although now and then you're rolling merrily, in style, you don't argue with this...” The twenty-year-old witch snorted, remembering something. Possibly, the next date, casino, or bar, which she was going to smash soon. It was not her habit to retain the tension of a thought for long. Julitta was as quick to calm down as to flare up.

“Although, on the other hand, I have difficulty visualizing Ares among the guards of Light. Right, Daph? How is it with

your imagination?” Julitta asked. Daph thought for a while and tried to answer honestly, “The stone griffins would not like Ares, and this, and that... Although among us, for example, are complete bores. Tedium and bigotry are the main unpleasant features of Light. Or, more precisely, are our main temptations.”

“Listen, Julitta, who is this F’less? Well, do you understand whom I’m talking about?” Methodius asked in a whisper. “Are you still being obstinate? Okay, I think it’s worthwhile to tell you nevertheless, although Ares would disagree. After all, couldn’t you indeed also find this out from the Book of Chameleons? If you weren’t such a lazy person?” the witch winked at him with a hint. “Uh-huh!” Methodius agreed, surprised that the thought of the book did not come to him earlier.

“Kvodnon – only I beg you, Met, don’t repeat it, you have some black tongue – is the true host of Gloom. Its only sovereign. Faceless Kvodnon is the second and true face of Two-faced Kvodnon. Got it?” Methodius began to shake his head, digesting the information. “Faceless is the true face of Two-faced? Now I’m even more confused.”

“For some reason I thought so. It’s always necessary to explain for a long time elementary things to a moronoid. But here genies, let’s say, understand such fine points immediately. You say to them, ‘Listen, friend, there was Two-faced Kvodnon, and now he’s Faceless Kvodnon. So don’t you forget it, friend, when we say simply Kvodnon, we imply the previous Kvodnon in his administrative quality; when we say Two-faced, we imply the

collective essence of Kvodnon; when we say Faceless, we're talking about the present.”

“Who-oh, come again! I also don't understand. Didn't our golden-wings strike down Kvodnon? During the decisive battle? Really not so?” Daph was surprised. “We even have an annual holiday in Eden!” Julitta looked at her with mockery. “Well, you're our merry fellow here! Why don't you enjoy yourself? Play your pipe a little? Especially if the occasion exists.” “Jokes, jokes. Nevertheless, I don't understand: Faceless, Two-faced, simply Kvodnon... How many of them are there?”

“The number of young child prodigies swiftly increases. It goes without saying, in reality there's only one Kvodnon. Darling, the golden-wings destroyed the body of Kvodnon, thus converting Two-faced Kvodnon to Faceless. Moreover, golden-wings knew how to do it such that Kvodnon will never be able to be personified. Not in one of the existing bodies, not even in an agent. In any case, it's considered so. Many of us doubt that golden-wings knew how to destroy the immortal essence of Kvodnon. Do you know why? *Because they didn't!*”

“But I thought Ligul is now the sovereign of Gloom and they intend me for his place,” said Methodius thoughtfully. Julitta burst out laughing. “Who, who in the place of Ligul? You? So that he would push off to make way for you. No, Ligul is himself, and you're yourself.” “You're certain?”

“Who is Ligul, if we look closely? An ordinary manager! A pimple on the body of Gloom! An upstart, the head of the

Chancellery, which takes stock of nasty deeds of moronoids and their eide. Some eide go into our darc but a small portion. Maximum one third. Where do you think the rest goes? At least, let's say, that eidos of the unlucky suicide, which Mamzelkina recently brought over? Do you think it'll reach Ligul? Only crumbs from the lordly table fall to his lot!"

"To whom will it go then?" "Now here again Faceless Kvodnon surfaces, his spirit, his true shady side, about which no one knows anything... This eidos together with many others will be dropped into a dark vessel, which stands in the centre of Tartarus, on a three-legged support with lion feet."

"Why?" "Oh, there are many versions. Even Ares hardly knows them all. The most widespread: Kvodnon, who by the very fact of his existence makes up Gloom, needs this. The vessel on lion feet is special. Not even an artefact but the first artefact. Hundreds of eide and parchments covered in writing about the acts of mortals have already been deposited into it daily for many centuries. And, until now, take note: the vessel has not been filled. Moreover, to steal anything from the vessel is impossible by definition. It recognizes only one owner, whom no one has seen for a long time already."

"Kvo..." "Shh!" Julitta looked at Buslaev with the long-suffering patience of a mother explaining to a year-old child that he should not poke papa's eye with a fork. "Oh-oh-oh! Papa will get boo-boo!" "Possibly. Whether Kvodnon exists or not, don't let this paradox trouble you. A moronoid always learns

about the existence of Kvodnon at the very last moment, when Mamzelkina's scythe has already dropped. Someone, after all, composes the lists... hmm...of harvest for our manager. And, indeed you can trust me, it's not Ligul. Otherwise, I would have been in them long ago."

Methodius suddenly perceived how his hair started to throb, ache, and hurt. It was a strange sensation, almost a warning, emerging exactly at the moment when he wanted to pose a question to Julitta. But he did, nevertheless. Simply because he was Methodius Buslaev. Stubborn as the log, on which Eddy Khavron sat. "Listen, if K exists... then why did Ares either in jest or in earnest call me the sovereign of Gloom? Or does K... intend to hand over his authority to me?"

Julitta blew on her long bangs. "Puff... Well, you, pardon me, pose some questions! I myself don't know how the rest goes here, but, I think the authority of Kvodnon is now of another kind. Kvodnon is now a spirit, and the authority of a spirit is always more ideological than real. The sovereign of Gloom in his present understanding – it's...to compare it to something...well, like a king. Only I immediately warn you: don't be flattered. Yes, a king has authority and power. He can execute or show mercy. He can declare war or make peace. Everything, it would seem, is tiptop. But you see: a king can be overthrown, poisoned, executed, struck down in battle, or in the end, he can die by himself. And furthermore, the usual story is: 'The king is dead... Long live the king!' Isn't there such a thing?" Methodius unwillingly nodded.

Julitta looked at him sympathetically and continued, “Here Kvodnon – the old, solid Kvodnon, not the current, Faceless – once keeled over in battle with Light, and now they carefully cultivate you to fit on his throne in order again with your help to try to even the score with Light. If not you, sooner or later another Buslaev will be born. However, no one can become Two-faced Kvodnon and the more so Faceless. He’s unique. He existed primordially. He’s more ancient than this world.” “This Gloom of yours is a muddled organization,” said Daphne, shaking her head. “Don’t say it, Light. A simple horror, so muddled. On the other hand, it’s more understandable to me than that Eden,” agreed Julitta.

Behind the door, Ares gave a resounding cough and struck the table with his fist. Julitta hurried. “Well, that’s it, party’s over! Chief’s in a bad mood! Daph, Met, take your infernal kitty away – it had gnawed a corner off the marble table over there! – and march to Glumovich’s school to lead the poor fellow to a heart attack! Methodius, you will be needed tomorrow at midnight. Make a note of it!” she stated.

Chapter 3

Minister of Scrofula, King of Aspirin

In the infinite flow of humanity that crawls along the subway escalators all day and a substantial part of the night, thousands of female faces flicker. They float past and are lost in the expanse of the subway reeking of rubber and the twisting passages under the streets. Their motley army includes: battalions of workaholics and regiments of harassed housewives, squads of sympathisers and artillery battalions of stinkers, logistic units of prisoners of the office, cavalry of hundreds of adventure seekers, divisions of wild hysterical women, draft reinforcements of bluestockings, strategic reserves of former wives, lawless detachments of good-natured mindless ones with canine fur on their skirts, and finally, platoons of poor devils supplied with the newest weapon of tears.

However, one ought not think that it is possible to cover all skirts rushing about with the above given modest classification. Some do not fall into any classification at all. A martyr, a pivot, or pouty lips and all ears? And this is still nothing – a mild case. There are even some, whom a guard of Gloom will not talk about, that are everything before him, and he will only scratch his head and go away. Women are like water. They never stay in one spot and frequently flow from one state to another. To take at least this one or that one there... Today she is a bluestocking, tomorrow

a nice frump, the day after a harassed hostess or prisoner of the office. It seems, all the same, she gets off quickly at the terminal. But that is a denial. A woman is always capable of surprises. Suddenly a miracle happens – and a recent bluestocking takes off like a speeding rocket. A phoenix flares up where there were recently the ashes of a person.

Zozo Buslaeva, mother of Methodius, belonged to the now extended category of women-motors. Their main special feature is that they spend their entire life in fussy and chaotic motion. For them, an hour spent in one place is equivalent to a year of strict confinement. It was now necessary for Zozo to spend her days exactly in one place. Recently she was sweating over the post of secretary in the firm Construction Battalion Forever, busy with deliveries of construction equipment. The owner of the firm was Isadora Cutletkina, General Cutletkin's wife, through whom Khavron arranged the job for his sister. However, Zozo saw Isadora herself only once. Moreover, their dislike for each other was mutual. However, this had no influence on anything. Isadora was barely at the office. The owner and director, as is well known to many, are often treated differently.

Five days a week from ten in the morning to six in the afternoon Zozo accepted and put her signature on papers, on which demolition hammers chiselled, asphalt spreaders rumbled, crane clamping mechanisms clanked, paint sprayers hissed like a snake, and Black and Decker pistol drills droned hollowly. In her time free from the drills, Zozo answered the phone, entered into

the computer requests for spare parts for cranes, or sorrowfully watered the flowers.

Next to her behind the wall, in the large room occupied by the sales division, the telephone shrilled non-stop. The old informer Xerox squeaked idiotically. The drywall-covered wall, against which it leaned, shook nervously. Sputtering managers flew along the corridor like clamorous flocks. Something like fastening chains and construction gloves reigned over their bickering. The flock with the gloves had barely managed to rush past and a new invasion turned up. The door was thrown open, someone looked in and shouted, "Seen Tsitsin? Where's that idiot?" Zozo vaguely and languidly waved her hand in the air as if entreating: all of you stay away from me, I know nothing. The flock of lynchers setting off in pursuit of the idiot Tsitsin had only just disappeared but a commotion again began in the corridor. Zozo plugged up her ears in order not to hear the managers' sorrowful whine, but it was not possible to work on the computer with plugged ears, and she willy-nilly tore her hands away from them.

They were again getting excited behind the door. There along the corridor they were dragging Tsitsin, caught red-handed in the cafeteria in an attempt to purchase a bottle of Holy Spring mineral water. "What were you thinking when you wrote 'Country of Recipient Egypt' in the documentation on a snow blower?" they yelled at him. "Don't blame me! They screwed up the order!" a velvety tenor objected with dignity. "But you're not

a moron! You could consider that the most severe frost in Egypt is twenty plus degrees!” “I warned the deputy Alex Kurilko, and he said: stop! I can’t work when they say ‘stop’ to me! I have two higher degrees! And let go of my arm immediately! You have sweaty fingers!” the tenor defended himself. “Aha, right away! Go, go!” the voices said and, judging by some suspicious sounds, they were urging on Tsitsin in the back.

Zozo wanted to scream and, screwing up her eyes, threatened the monitor with her fist. She felt like a prisoner of the dull office Cyclops with the spat-upon whiskers, which she wanted terribly to hit on the head with the cover torn from the Xerox. Stretching and straightening her numbed back, she glanced through the window at the crows bathing with pleasure in the air eddies by their high-rise, and smiled at some of her own obscure, mysterious, but very pleasant thoughts. Nevertheless, even in these dreamy moments her fingers continued as usual to run along the keyboard, concrete mixers and dumpsters jumped in the columns assigned to them, and the stapler clicked loudly, biting into the papers.

Zozo was despondent. She wanted a personal life or at the worst to be on leave. But for the time being there was no chance for either personal life or leave. It was hot in the office. The air conditioner did not get rid of the stupidity and boredom of the place. The yogi and essayist Basevich had disappeared somewhere. He had stopped phoning and, apparently, running in the morning. Other adequate candidates had not yet showed up.

A couple of weeks ago, on a wave of drawn-out absence of fish, Zozo put up a notice on an Internet dating site, accompanying it with a scanned ten-year-old photograph, in which she in a low-neck dress was tenderly embracing someone's collie. The photograph seemed very good to Zozo. True, with the scanning and the reduction a certain special expression in the face adding attractiveness had vanished, and it was necessary to cut out Methodius, who, to tell the truth, was also in the photograph, neatly using Photoshop. In Zozo's opinion, he decreased her chances for personal happiness. A pale, light-haired child with an aloof look, moreover, appeared too adult for his then three years of age.

Soon, to Zozo's happiness, letters started to arrive. She immediately eliminated some, held others in reserve, listlessly answered a third, doubting for a number of reasons whether it would be worthwhile to lead it to a personal meeting. And then one more letter arrived, and Zozo understood with the nose of a bloodhound: *he*. Although the letter itself was sufficiently sluggish and spineless, and even the last name was some vegetable: Ogurtsov. Anton Ogurtsov.

* * *

Are you all still following Calderón, convinced that life is a dream? Untrue! Life is a nightmare. The only comfort is that a nightmare is short-term. People fear possibly everything.

There are many thousands of fears or phobias. The fear of darkness is called achluophobia, cold – frigophobia, solitude – isolophobia, being buried alive – taphophobia, open space – agoraphobia, daylight – phengophobia, beard – pogonophobia, going to bed – clinophobia, standing or walking – stasiphobia, being robbed – harpaxophobia, work – ergasiophobia. Not in any way fewer than phobias are manias. The most inoffensive consists of the incessant washing of hands. Besides manias and phobias, there are some dozens of “philiias” not promising their possessor anything except troubles, frequently criminal.

According to statistics, one phobia and a couple of manias haunt the average unremarkable moronoid. Rarely can someone brag about more. However, such unique examples nevertheless exist. In Moscow on Stromynka Street, in the beautiful elite house with turrets and circular windows lived a certain individual, who strove for absolutely all existing phobias and more than half of the manias. Anton Ogurtsov was that remarkable individual. He had wide shoulders, chubby cheeks with the insolent bloom of a piglet, and a firm nose of good breeding. He would even be considered a handsome man, if not for an eternal expression of hunted terror in the eyes and pursed lips.

A former medical student, who quit during second year, he knew too much. Even now, ten years later, occupying a post of average importance in the office of an Austrian firm producing disposable serviettes, cotton swabs, and paper towels, Ogurtsov

suffered from a multitude of his knowledge. The medical student who failed to complete training saw dangers where others let them slip satisfactorily. What indeed, it seems, is more pleasant than messing around in one's nose with a finger? By no means, attention! Being excessively absorbed, it is easy for you, darling, to join the ranks of clinical idiots. How? Easy! Pursing his lips, eternally stiffened in expectation of misfortune, Ogurtsov would explain to you that, by extracting snot stuck in the nose, it would be easy to bring on an infection through the capillaries, which in turn cause a clot of brain tissues.

“And this is only the beginning!” Ogurtsov would exclaim and, rolling his languishing eyes tormented by Graves' disease, would disclose a terrible secret. Fish accumulates mercury. Canned foods increase the probability of cancer. It is easy to suffer a stroke getting up too quickly from a chair. The sharp foil of Alenka chocolate can cut a vein if we saw it with this foil for a certain time. And our food? What is it if not a cemetery of pesticides, herbicides, preservatives, and hormonal additives!

Now if only all the horrors of the world were limited to this! How easy, how nice it would be to live then! Alas, a hundred times more things were known to the unhappy Ogurtsov. Take transport. Aircrafts fall into oceans. Trolley buses burn like matches. If a trolley bus did not burn today, that means it burned yesterday. Buses only pretend that they have routes and stops. In reality, they patiently search for closed-down railroad barriers in order to demolish them and then go lifeless. And the subway?

The air in it is full of the worst infections. An escalator, breaking down, seizes with its gears a poor fellow off his guard and drags him into its clanking womb. And the maniac-machinists, rushing into the tunnel with a grin at its mouth, and passengers pinched by the pneumatic doors?

The ill-fated Anton Ogurtsov lived sadly, very sadly, in the world. He did not live but dwelled in it. Even in the evening, falling in exhaustion onto his bachelor bed, covered in antiseptic sheets given to him free of charge for advertising purposes, he could not drop off with dreams of escape. Ogurtsov was lying and remembering that streptococci were living in his pillows, the cup of tea drunk at night could cause vomiting, and a smouldering mattress was capable of suffocating a sleeping person in five minutes. In the middle of the night, he woke up in a cold sweat. It seemed to him that the protective vent over the pipe was ripped out and the apartment was filled with methane. Furthermore, a mean little falsetto regularly whispered to him that, according to statistics, ninety percent of people die in bed. The same tireless little falsetto suggested to Anton Ogurtsov to watch his health vigilantly.

At different times, the employee of a foreign firm suspected he had spondylarthritis, peritonitis, pyoderma, helminthiasis, iritis, astigmatism, cancer, lymphadenitis, polyneuritis, endocarditis, cirrhosis, tracheitis, leprosy, and gingivitis. The fact that none of these diagnoses was confirmed did not weaken his natural hypochondria.

There was not a single prominent medical notable, to whom Ogurtsov would not show himself. Homeopaths, virologists, dermatologists, allergists, bacteriologists, gastroenterologists, therapists, toxicologists, and physiotherapists – all knew him in person. To all of them, the worker of the serviette front demonstrated his athletic trunk and vigilant eyes of a paranoid. It was impossible to disengage oneself from the frightened Ogurtsov, burning with desire to learn the truth. He clung like a leech and cried on the doctor's shoulders, imploring, "Professor, please don't deceive me! Tell me the truth, no matter how brutal!"

In despair, doctors used the last resort – they sent the minister of antibacterial serviettes to their colleagues, also venerable notables, against whom they had a grudge. Doctors exchanged Ogurtsov like iron ingots, hastening with his help to play a dirty trick on their foe. As a result, the histologist sent Anton to the cardiologist, the ophthalmologist – to the balneologist, and the endocrinologist – to the orthopaedist. At parting, each notable nevertheless considered it his duty to write some prescription for Ogurtsov to remember him by. As a result, in Anton's kitchen cupboard were set up in rows: Papazol, Asparcam, riboxine, Nitrosorbid, norsulfazole, Erynitum, ethazole, Senade, Sustak, theophylline, Levomycetin, cholosatum in blue bottles, cholosatum in red bottles, Teturam, Nembutal, Nootropil, Suprastin, hydrocortisone, and the most favourite of all medicines, the name of which Ogurtsov uttered

after two passionate sighs – amoxicillin 0.123 %. So far, the powerful organism of the athlete was coping successfully with all this trash, devoured daily in unthinkable quantities.

The duke of serviettes and master of the order of cotton swabs did not exactly have harmful habits, in fact, not at all. He had solid lines in this column. When they smoked in his presence, he turned green. Sometimes he drank wine, but exclusively within the framework of treatment with grapes at one teaspoon twice a day. Ogurtsov was even tenser with girls. If it so happened that some girl approached the sinewy handsome man with an interest, Ogurtsov would immediately turn to flight. Where others saw girls, he saw hordes of microbes, hepatitis, and the flu.

When Ogurtsov turned thirty-five, his parents, living in Noginsk outside Moscow, sounded the alarm and took him in a tight Nelson hold, forcing him to get married. After being obstinate for half a year, the hypochondriac employee of the disposable serviette firm gave in. He sighed submissively, swallowed vitamins, and began to read ads on the Internet. Having written Zozo a very modest letter – the first letter in his life unrelated to business, he was extremely surprised when white hands immediately caught him and quickly mobilized him for a date.

* * *

Ogurtsov waited for Zozo where all Muscovites deprived of

imagination meet: at the Pushkin monument. He had a large bouquet of roses in his hands. “Are you Zoe?” he asked in a business-like manner. “Me? Yes.” “Then this is for you. Please hold the flowers carefully. Don’t get pricked! They’re fraught with sporotrichosis,” warned Ogurtsov. Zozo almost dropped the flowers. She did not know what this sporotrichosis was, but the word sounded terrible.

In the meantime, Anton Ogurtsov straightened his Herculean shoulders and solemnly uttered another truth, “Since we’ve already met, it’s not worthwhile to stand by the road. Here I estimated and realized that in those ten minutes I waited for you, my lungs had taken in around four hundred million microorganisms. People don’t have immunity to many of them.” Zozo patiently nodded just in case. She had long been used to being hit exclusively by psychos. Indeed, she had such karma.

“Let’s go somewhere for a bite? I just came from work,” she proposed. This simple proposal provoked the most unexpected reaction. The employee of a foreign firm absent-mindedly stared at her. Zozo perceived how his intellect broke through the shroud of hygienic thoughts, descending from the height of the stars, where spiral viruses flew and gloomy intestinal bacteria soared, to the sinful earth filled with microbes.

“Hmm... Eh... Well, yes...” “You’re not against it?” “Of course not. Of course, it’s possible to get a bite, only where?” Ogurtsov asked. “What’s the difference? Well, at least over there!” Frivolously flirting with sporotrichosis reigning on the

thorns, Zozo waved the roses in the direction of McDonalds. Anton stared at her wildly and his chin shuddered involuntarily, “Are you serious? Carcinogenic preservatives, trans fats, and artificial carbohydrates there! How can you not be ashamed!” Zozo was humbly ashamed, but at the same time remarked timidly that all food without exception was harmful and what to do now – die of hunger?

The trainer of cotton swabs thought for a bit. Zozo began to languish. “I’d have dinner all the same! I’ll pay my own shot, if that’s what embarrasses you,” she said persistently, feeling the beast of hunger. “Is money really the matter? So, let’s go! It seems there’s this one place...” Anton said sourly. The necessity for a heroic deed was clearly visible on his noble face.

They went somewhere, turned, turned again, and slid under an arch. Although the sun was raging on the street, here dampness reigned. Having squeezed through between parked cars, they passed one more playground, and dived under one more arch. Here Ogurtsov stopped. Above a small basement with a sparse artificial palm at the entrance crowded the bright letters: DREAM OF YOGI.

“What’s this?” Zozo asked in horror. “A vegetarian restaurant. Someone – don’t remember who, don’t remember when – described it as very good,” the marquis of serviettes proudly explained. He took a serviette from his pocket, wrapped it around the door handle, and with disgust opened it. After Zozo had entered, Ogurtsov discarded the serviette and whisked sideways

through the closing door, contented that he had slipped away from the bacilli dwelling on the handle. "Now down the steps! Careful, might fall!" he warned. It was possible to fall fifty times. Namely, there were so many steps.

The restaurant was in a former air-raid shelter. It was chilly in its only hall, like in a tomb. Anton Ogurtsov looked around knowingly and sat down at the far table next to the fire extinguisher. The restaurant was completely empty. Only by the door, a strange sleek little fellow with a lively, exactly elastic face was hunting with a fork the only radish on his plate. He was hunting with such zeal that Zozo even thought that perhaps he was mocking someone. However, the sleek little fellow persistently did not look in their direction.

After some time a pale waitress crept out to them. All things considered, it was obvious that she was extremely surprised by today's influx of visitors. After leafing through the menu, Ogurtsov ordered the Dual Health salad, asparagus, and carrot juice. The waitress again crept away somewhere. There appeared to be sluggish movement beyond the partition to the kitchen.

Zozo was bored and frozen. Ogurtsov folded a napkin into a ship. "So, are we going to keep quiet? Do you intend to talk about something?" Zozo nervously asked. The king of disposable towels did not answer. After finishing the ship, he took the next napkin and made a toad. "Hey! I'm here!" Zozo shouted. "Is it possible to find out what you're thinking?" Again, she did not get an answer. The duke of hygiene, without raising his eyes from

the table, kept silent and planted the toad into the ship. “That’s it! I’ve had enough! I’m leaving!” Zozo decided. She was already almost getting up when the waitress appeared from the kitchen with a tray. Two tall glasses of carrot juice stood on the tray. Caught unawares, Zozo remained on the spot.

On seeing the juice, the single-use dandy came alive and began to move his fingers. “Here are some plain glasses! I love everything elegant!” he said inopportunely. “What a coincidence! Me too!” Zozo said, glad that her collocutor had come out of his lethargic dream. “Imagine, recently I bought an excellent box in an antique store. Here indeed is a feeling of style!” “Ah, what’s so special about it?” “Well, it’s all so... ancient... carved, from mahogany... on the lid the sun and two such winged... dragons, perhaps? Everything with great taste!” Ogurtsov had difficulty describing it precisely. The little fellow hunting the radish froze.

“And what do you keep in the box?” Zozo asked with the tenderness of a psychotherapist. But Ogurtsov had already become quiet. He took his fork and with disgust began to scrutinize it in the light, checking if it was washed. “What? Medicines, which must be stored in a dry dark place. The box is excellent for this. Above are several small compartments, and a deep one below. Furthermore, there are several drawers. I store vitamins there,” he said edifyingly. “And where do you store your vitamins, Zoe?” “Eh-eh... In the fridge,” Zozo lied. She thought that if she had vitamins for real, in two days Eddy would pig out on them and have an allergic reaction. Her brother eternally

suffered from an undivided love for anything free.

Ogurtsov chewed the asparagus critically. Before swallowing, he processed each piece with saliva no less than thirty times. One could read the thought on his face that the digestion of food was an important and necessary labour. The muscles of his strong cheekbones moved vigorously. Zozo looked at him with irritation. She wanted to hurl the plate with turnip at him, then catch a taxi and go to bite someone. Having put an end to the asparagus, Ogurtsov looked at Zozo in the manner of a bird and, making up his mind, started to gurgle with the carrot juice.

“It’s bad to live alone. Solitude depresses me. I need a beloved soul next to me. Zozo, a man cannot exist without a woman. Downright unreal after all,” he complained, full of suffering. Zozo choked on the juice from surprise. Passing from an innocent conversation on a box to family life was much too unexpected. “No, Zozo, a man cannot be without a woman at all,” Ogurtsov continued to develop the thought. “Here, for example, if he has problems with the heart at night, who would phone emergency? I’ll teach you mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, Zoe! And we will give each other injections! You have a light hand, I hope?” Zozo began to look around uneasily. She in no way expected this turn in the conversation.

“So will you agree?” The encouraged Ogurtsov was enthusiastic. “Will I agree to what?” Zozo did not understand. “What do you mean to what? To marry me.” “So soon? I don’t suit you. I don’t know how to make mustard plasters. It’s better

for you to look for a nurse,” unexpectedly for her, Zozo blurted out. Accurate female intuition suggested to her that before her was a complete and incurable psycho, whom no injection could already save. The employee of a foreign firm extracted a feeble bird sigh from his powerful chest. He was not offended. Rather he was distressed. His eyelashes were long like a girl’s. “A nurse? Do you think so? I didn’t think about it. Perhaps it’s better than a doctor-resuscitator? This, in my opinion, is more reliable, what do you think? In other words, more extensive!” he seriously asked. “Absolutely. All the best! And good luck to you!”

Zozo got up and began to move back. She was already imagining buying a large chocolate bar at the kiosk. With the thought that chocolate was harmful, she started to feel better. “Please stop! I probably should escort you?” Anton asked. “By no means! I can manage!” Zozo refused and forever disappeared from both the Dream of Yogi restaurant and Anton Ogurtsov’s life.

The king of towels finished drinking the carrot juice in small gulps and felt his own pulse. The pulse was normal. As if Zozo’s departure also did not affect his blood pressure. Ogurtsov thought with relief that all matters of amour were finished today. At the same time, it seemed to him that the little fellow with the crushed face and pushed-out shoulder blades winked insidiously at him from the adjacent table. Acting in the best traditions of a public health ministry, Ogurtsov was not immediately disturbed. He paid the bill and left, again wrapping the door handle with a

serviette in order not to get microbes – airborne ones – on his hand.

* * *

Ogurtsov walked home: good it was not far. He walked and fearfully pulled his head into his shoulders. The insolent stooping little fellow with the crushed face – the same one that had winked – in some mysterious manner seemed to him to be anywhere and everywhere. He jumped in shop windows, passed by in trolley buses and taxis, with a leash on his neck ran after small dogs and, swinging his legs, sat on the fence of an avenue. One time he even managed to grin slyly from the street ad of a fashion magazine, where, smacking his lips over the empty casing of a sausage, he sat unsteadily on the shoulders of the very young model. Ogurtsov's mouth went dry. He felt like a complete paranoiac and began to consider in earnest a visit to a psychiatrist.

Having finally forced his way into the entrance of his building, he stared at the concierge, as if suspecting to see the sly stranger. He stared and calmed down. The concierge was the same as before. A clean little old lady was sitting in a glazed room with geraniums, listening to the radio, and reading something. After greeting her and having gotten a “good evening” in response, Ogurtsov was about to walk past her when suddenly something compelled him to look around fearfully. The concierge was reading – Oh God, no! – the Iron Men magazine

for bodybuilders, with the same dreadful insolent little fellow staring out of the cover the whole time. He was naked to his waist and emaciated as the skeleton of a Caspian roach. After ascertaining that the minister of cotton swabs noticed him, the little fellow began waving at him and sending air kisses.

Ogurtsov rushed into the elevator and, after poking a button with his finger, got up to his floor in a hurry. On finding himself in the apartment, he slammed the door shut, turned the key four times, bolted and chained it. On legs like cotton, Anton set off for the kitchen and there, knocking a spoon against his teeth, he hurriedly drank three tablespoons and one teaspoon of red wine. Ogurtsov was never like this. It was already akin to a reckless attempt to pour alcohol into his liver. However, the Herculean organism of the king of serviettes managed even this.

After hiding the bottle and spoon, Anton limply wandered into the room, intending on lying down on the sofa and thinking over a call to the psychiatrist. After pushing open the door, he froze on the threshold and... started to croak in horror. On that very sofa he was aiming for, a pillow behind the back, the insolent person with the lively, somewhat flexible face was lounging. In his hand was a large pistol, which the shady character, tongue hanging out from enthusiasm, aimed directly at Ogurtsov's heart. "Hands up! Everyone stand, lie, sit! No one leaves, walk together! Bang boom, everyone is dead!" he said in a vile voice. Ogurtsov's knees buckled from fear. His pulse went off the scale.

Meanwhile the little fellow jumped from the sofa and ran

around the room, shattering everything around. Glass clinked, a chair toppled over, pills gushed out from the overturned night table. Yanked out pages of the medical encyclopaedia fluttered, demonstrating terrible colour pictures of trophic ulcers. “Where’s the box? Confess voluntarily and we’ll let you go in half the sentence!” the little fellow shouted threateningly, brandishing the pistol.

Ogurtsov did not answer; however, his doe eyes slid by themselves to the cabinet. The strange character ran over and jerked open the door. A collection of cups rained down. The last to fall out of the cabinet was the ill-fated box. The insolent little fellow stretched out his hand, but immediately, having said “oh,” jerked it back, after barely touching the lid. One of his fingers flared up and burned almost to the joint. The agent began in panic to shake his hand, groaned, and started to mould his finger anew, lengthening the remaining part. “I hate these artefacts from Light, even if I weren’t Tukhlomon! Even almost no power is left in it, nevertheless still can’t sneak up on it... What to do? Ah, I know!” he muttered to himself. Waving the pistol, he beckoned a trembling Ogurtsov to himself. “Hey, you, boy, well, get over here! Take your box! Open it! Wider! Let’s have a look! Away with the medicines, they’ll no longer be of use to you.”

Pale from horror, Ogurtsov started to whimper, shaking out the pills onto the carpet. Tukhlomon fixed his eyes upon the bottom of the box. “Ah, here it is! Press with a finger on the bottom next to the right edge! Hold, don’t release! What, didn’t

know, perhaps? Now with the other hand a quick turn of the sun on the lid! Turn more bravely! It'll not bite you! Ready? And now release the bottom! Don't hold it, I say! What, it moved? Take it out! I dare say, you indeed didn't even know that it has a secret bottom here!"

Not taking his eyes off the little fellow and his terrible pistol, Ogurtsov took out the bottom of the box. Tukhlomon greedily glanced in; however, he only saw a pitiful handful of sawdust. The agent's face shrunk in disappointment. It was crushed like a rotten apple, on which a sole had stepped. He clearly hoped to behold something more remarkable there.

However, the agent quickly pulled himself together. "It turned out to be a mistake... Your box is an empty shell. The bees have to fly further for honey!" Tukhlomon said sweetly. He approached the window and, fidgeting the flexible nose, thievishly looked out. He was probably checking whether there were any dangerous golden sparks nearby. At this moment, he was very similar to a thievish rat. He discovered no guards of Light. Tukhlomon grinned. "Remember, if golden-wings come flying to you after me, you will give my regards. Uncle Tukhlomon, you tell them, ordered you. Remember? Won't fall into decay?" he anxiously asked Ogurtsov. After this, he waved to Anton and set off for the door.

The king of serviettes was about to feel relief, understanding that his life had been preserved, when suddenly Tukhlomon stopped halfway and slapped himself on the forehead. The sound

was like a hand slapping on flabby dough. “Ah, yes! A tiny little thing! I broke down the little box but forgot something else... Get over here, friend! Lively!” The agent suddenly appeared next to Ogurtsov. His plasticine mouth moved apart. The duke of cotton swaps saw the decayed teeth and the tongue covered with green mould, through which a worm was leisurely crawling. There was nothing more loathsome in the world than this mouth. Ogurtsov was instantly covered with squeamish sweat. Trying not to breathe, he pressed his back against the wall.

“Give me your eidos!” Tukhlomon pronounced in a terrible voice. “No-o!” shaking, Ogurtsov mumbled. What eidos was and why it was demanded, he did not know but for some reason felt that it was something extremely necessary to him. “WHAT?” the agent roared frightfully. “You won’t? Give it, trash, or I’ll kiss you! But together with the kiss are transferred influenza, meningitis, tuberculosis, and heart diseases!” “No-o-o...” Anton groaned, but already with new intonation. An instantaneous, goodness knows from where, gust of wind seized the ripped-out pages of the medical encyclopaedia and flung them in his face. “Yes, my dear. A medical fact. With the kiss are even transferred chickenpox, smallpox, angina, and diphtheria. And no need to check, I know my medicine! I myself made them up on Ligul’s order!” Tukhlomon inflexibly stated.

The agent suddenly grew terrible. He turned blue like a drowned man. Now he occupied a good third of the room. “GIVE ME YOUR EIDOS, YOU NOBODY! Or death! Repeat!

‘I transfer my eidos to Tukhlomon and reject all rights to it.’ WELL!’ The terrible green mouth moved to Ogurtsov. A smell of damp earth and rot issued from the mouth. The nightmarish tongue covered with holes again thrust out. But even this seemed not enough to the agent. He raised the pistol and pointed it at Ogurtsov’s forehead. “Eidos or life! Choose! Death of body or death of spirit! Speak, or I’ll shoot!” The terrible voice roared like a snake picking its way into Anton’s heart.

“Death of spirit... I reject all rights to eid...” hardly moving his lips, Anton announced. “Eidos!” Tukhlomon helpfully prompted. “I reject all rights to eidos and transfer it to...” “I’m Tukhlomon. I have neither mommy nor daddy! Repeat, don’t tease the little orphan!” “To Tukhlomon!” Ogurtsov repeated dejectedly. The agent smiled pleasantly and in approval slapped the duke of hygienic sheets on the cheek. “Has to be a bit louder, so it’ll come off! Well done, did everything for papa! And for that I love you, because you’re papa! Because you, sour puss, obliged Tukhlomon!” he said affectionately and in rhyme, mangling the known children’s verse.

Tukhlomon slammed shut his terrible mouth. The stench instantly disappeared. There were bags under Tukhlomon’s eyes and his face sagged and became flabby, exactly like a tomato touched by mould. The shoulders drooped, the chest fell. And even the agent himself suddenly appeared as a pitiful and negligible creature. With sudden and shameful enlightenment Ogurtsov suddenly understood that the one he so feared, the one

he was squeamish about, turned out to be simply trash – the most ordinary and harmless plasticine. Both the worm and the terrible pistol seemed to be plasticine also. The muzzle of the pistol drooped and crumpled. Tukhlomon, after looking sideways at the pistol, carelessly rolled it up into a lump and stuck it to his leg. The lump stretched, spread, and grew into place as if poured. “Very useful little thing! Ah-ah, you wouldn’t know how much trash I’ve already modelled from it: bombs, engagement rings, small trunks with money, deputy’s ID cards...” he shared the secret.

Ogurtsov, feeling ashamed, realized that he had become the victim of an immense bluff. But it was already too late to change anything. The agent, shuffling in a senile way, approached Anton and, putting an arm all the way up to the shoulder into Anton’s chest, extracted something. It was not painful, perhaps slightly disgusting. Ogurtsov also did not understand what was taken away from him, but experienced a terrible void.

“Well, that’s it here! As you see, it’s not painful at all. One, two, and it’s ready! He didn’t even have time to gasp, as Tukhlomony ate the eidos!” the agent stated in a friendly manner, greedily examining what was lying on his palm... “How miserable the clients are now! You scare one with a herring, kiss another, slip a syringe to the third in an hour of need – and that’s it, pack the goods... Eh, darling, you made a fool of yourself! Perhaps I could really do that to you? Not on your life! It’s said: hair won’t fall near the head! Just shout, stamp your feet, be a

worm!”

Ogurtsov took a step forward and, grabbing the agent by the shoulder, mumbled some broken and indistinct words. It seemed he was asking, almost praying for the return of something to him, but he knew already that this “something” was lost to him forever, and together with it everything good, what was and what could be, was also gone. Hope was lost.

“Well, be good, dear, don’t get sick! Now you have to be even more on your guard against diseases, because your immortality is all lost! Hee-hee, very funny even! All you have to do – hee-hee! – is to kick me with one-third strength or drop the box on me! I’d immediately be gone! I have no power, I’m plasticine, puny! Now farewell, poor devil! Take your vitamins, my dear, and don’t sneeze!” Tukhlomon said with false sympathy, resolutely freeing himself from Ogurtsov’s fingers. Having carelessly waved to the sultan of disposable towels, the agent coolly took a step into the wall and melted away. Ogurtsov stood for a little in the empty room, and then, sobbing, squatted down and sadly began to gather the pills off the carpet. In his chest gaped an invisible black hole.

Chapter 4

How many sixes in the ace?

After moving her fingers apart, Julitta with tender emotion examined her hands. “Ah, how beautiful they are! And indeed my feet are not any worse! But no one appreciates them except the idiot genies! Everyone sees only a heavy elephant!” “Can never say ‘heavy elephant’. It’s meaningless. ‘Heavy elephant’ is like ‘enormous moose’. It goes without saying that a moose is enormous. Simply enough to say ‘elephant’ or ‘moose’,” Daphne remarked.

Julitta placed her arms akimbo. The lights in reception shook alarmingly. The hanged men in the pictures started to squint. The antique statue in horror turned away and covered its face with its hands. “Turn off the sound, Light! I can even call myself a hippo. But if anyone squawks again about moose, let him consider: the cemetery is full of free holes!” the witch said threateningly. “No one called you anything! The discussion dealt with entirely different things!” Daph obstinately objected. “Yea, yea! The conversation about elephant, moose, and other planktonic insects, of course, started purely accidentally! Watch it, Light, I’ll chop off your wings!”

Seeing that Daph was offended, Depressiac arched its back and started to hiss. The witch nodded with satisfaction. “Well,

that's it! I warned you! Now someone will be deprived of a tail! I see right through you! You're a blonde only in appearance, but in your soul you're a mean brunette!" she said darkly. "Just you dare touch my cat!" Daph was angry. In the next second Julitta materialized a small sword, and Daph – the flute. Depressiac, not having anything that could be materialized, extended its claws. The world briskly rolled to a war.

"Perhaps let us declare a truce? Well, at least for half an hour?" Methodius asked, yawning. He had already gotten used to the fact that at least on the whole Daph and Julitta got along well, nevertheless about three times a day they would start a showdown. Julitta thought for a bit. To arrange a slaughter in reception was not in her plans. Moreover, she already had time to cool down. "What about you? Do you have anything against a truce?" she asked Daph suspiciously. "Consider: in half an hour I'll make mincemeat out of you!" "Uh-huh. I'll mark the time," nodded Daph, putting away the flute. Julitta carelessly threw away the sword, smiled, and moved over to hug Daph. Soon, having finally calmed down completely and swallowed some candies, the witch was already reading out from memory to Daphne and Methodius a brief history of Gloom and the Chancellery in Tartarus.

For the most part, as Methodius understood, the history of Gloom was divided into two periods. The first – before the loss of the sovereign of Gloom, and the second – after. Faceless Kvodnon either actively did not interfere in the history

or preferred to operate the marionettes invisibly. After the loss of Kvodnon the forward hunchback Ligul soon moved into the spotlight. Approximately in the same epoch William the Conqueror, then a simple guard of the Norman division, without consultation with Ligul took England after knocking off Harold. It is incomprehensible how William managed to beat the rap. He remained to carouse in England whereas Harold was recalled into Tartarus forever. Several centuries later they placed Bonaparte over Normandy and France. Julitta, as she stated, was never especially interested in the details of behind-the-scene manoeuvring and therefore had simply forgotten all the others.

For example, she forgot about Hastrubal, a guard of the second rank managing the Carthaginian sector, whose son Hannibal, by an Earth woman, at first accomplished successful aggressive marches through the entire Italy and Sicily, and then with a bad joke angered Kvodnon, who wiped Carthage from the face of the earth, first overthrowing Hannibal, and after him in the heat of the moment also Hastrubal.

There existed, furthermore, the dark history of the half-magician, half-guard Odysseus. Odysseus' path in life was full of ups and downs. Kvodnon either promoted him to a guard of the first rank, demoted him almost to the fourteenth rank, sent him into exile, or generously showered him with eide. As a result, poor Odysseus, on waking up, did not know what fate awaited him for the day: a reward or a sequential box on the ear. With grief, he took Troy, after making the horse move

subsequently becoming famous with chess players. Then, after many years of wandering, he settled down at his place in Ithaca, in the interim beating up agents, who had been allowed to get out of hand during his absence. Later this method of disciplining agents received wide acceptance and was even included in the plan for training guards of Gloom.

The ancient history of the moronoid world, in which Gloom willingly interfered, was even more entangled. The Ancient Greek division of Gloom at first was split into many subdivisions: Athens, Thebes, Sparta, Smyrna, Pylos, Argos, Delphi, etc. Each division wallowed in its own vice: in Sparta they fought and severed darc, in Athens they philosophized, in Delphi three words could not be linked together without fogging the truth. Division heads quarrelled among themselves, packed wars of local importance with tonnes of agents, in a fit of temper rose in rebellion against Kvodnon, and at full strength set off for Tartarus to fan lava. They gave Greece first to the Persian division of Gloom, and then the Roman.

In connection to this Kvodnon uttered one of his crown phrases. "Guards of Gloom must suggest vices to people and not give themselves up to them." The bores and toadies, as Julitta said, more of them in Tartarus than in the upper world, immediately forced sinners to carve this saying on cliffs in eighty-metre high letters and smooth them with tongues of incandescent mercury. This seemed not enough to others, and in Tartarus an ascetic party was formed in haste. The guards belonging to this

party stopped giving in to any vice, be it even a comparatively innocent exhalation of sulphuric smoke. Following the lecture of Kvodnon, these guards, dressed in white garments and with wings whitened in lime, suggested to people the most loathsome vices. But, alas, it was unsuccessful. Seeing that the vices were not corroborated by personal examples, people started to cool towards them or carried them out listlessly, without any taste for them. Kvodnon, filled with alarm upon seeing that the inflow of eide was decreasing, in a directive order sent the entire ascetic party to sweat their guts out in fiery Gehenna. They again revived the fashion for vices, and the huge letters on the cliffs, instructing one not to give up to them, were hacked away by the efforts of all those sinners. So in Europe, following Gloom, the transition from the grim Middle Ages to the impetuous Renaissance came to be.

Daph listened with half an ear to Julitta. She was busy with Depressiac and, continuously playing on the flute, accelerated the healing of its wounds. Here, in the screened residence of Gloom, it was possible to play the flute without fear that they would locate her. Last night her beloved cat grappled with an entire pack of stray dogs. The scuffle started because of such a commonplace trifle as a dead crow. As a result the crow still remained intact and the pack of dogs thoroughly thinned, whereas Depressiac had a torn ear and a deeply bitten through shoulder. But this was still bearable. If it were an ordinary cat instead of the infernal cat, it would for sure have joined the crow

in its journey to the other world.

Ares came out of his office around midnight. Methodius hardly recognized him. He was in an austere black tailcoat, strikingly different from his usual red spacious caftans. “I hate formal receptions! With great pleasure I would set off there with a sword and chop everything up like cabbage,” he muttered and, suffering from sulphuric breath, stared at Methodius. “And why is this pale individual in stretched jeans? Bear in mind that you’ll also need a tailcoat... Julitta, take care of it! Another question for the curious: Met, how are you with teleportation? As always or slightly better?” “Eh-eh... Well I...” Methodius began. “Clearly,” nodded Ares. “No need to continue further. Well, aren’t you ashamed, Signor Tomato? The magic in you is no less than in a third of Tartarus, but even a normal wall is an insurmountable obstacle for you. To say nothing of such a comparatively simple trick as teleportation. Such is even in the power of modest Tibidox magicians.”

“Does this mean I’m going nowhere?” Methodius asked in disappointment. Ares’ eyes sparkled mockingly. “Why so quick about going nowhere? Certainly, you’ll not reach England on foot. However, to fly on a broom or a flying carpet is not our style. There is, however, a way...” Ares turned and hailed quietly, “Mamai!” From the wall walked out an unknown limping agent – small, slant-eyed, terrible, with a flat Mongolian face. He took a step and stared at Methodius with a wild look. It made Daph standing beside him uncomfortable. “Get acquainted,

Methodius! This is Mamai! Once the khan of the Golden Horde. Killed on the Kulikovo Field. Subsequently they sent him from Tartarus for being unsocial, which, between us, is almost impossible. Now and then, when a chauffeur is needed, Mamai renders me this service. Mamai, is the car ready?" The khan nodded sullenly and, on turning, made his way to the door. He treated Ares as if without any respect, merely observing decorum. He simply despised the rest.

They went out. Beside house № 13 stood a low terrible car without glass, cut all over by splinters, covered with spots of rust, with a third of the roof crushed, and burnt tires. Methodius and Daph stared at Ares in amazement. The baron of Gloom smirked. "Ah, I know! Personal automobile of Field Marshal Paulus. Destroyed by mortar fire near Stalingrad. The Marshal himself, however, turned out not to be in it at that moment. Mamai, you did finally remove the remains of the chauffeur? Signor Tomato is squeamish." Mamai spat through his teeth and, after lingering, nodded. "I did!" he growled.

"Are we going in this piece of junk? To England?" Methodius asked in distrust. He would never assume that such a coach was capable of moving at all. "Trust me, with Mamai this car will go anywhere you want. To England, to the Moon," Ares said seriously. "And now let's be on our way! Julitta, you haven't forgotten the tailcoat for Signor Tomato? He has to change on the way! Mamai, time for us to go!"

The khan with effort opened the rusty door. The car smelled

of swamp and rotted seat leather. Ares sat down first in the car. After him, lingering a little was Methodius, and Julitta was the last. Daph and Depressiac remained outside. The cat hissed. If it had fur, it would be standing on end. Likely, the cat sensed the heat of Tartarus emanating from the car. Methodius glanced at Daph in search of encouragement. She waved to him and immediately turned away, remembering that she was angry with Buslaev. Mamai lowered himself heavily onto the driver's seat, seized the thin melted steering wheel, sneering obviously, touched the torn off hand brakes, not even taking the trouble to start the motor, and... the heavy car rushed forward with the speed of a comet.

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