

MORE THAN
BAD
INTENTIONS



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Anna Sikorska

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Translated by Anthony P. Sciscione

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MORE THAN BAD INTENTIONS

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To Tom, who made it happen.

Chapter I.

Earth

He pulled up the collar of his long black coat and curled up into himself. Even though it was autumn, the atmosphere of Earth was clearly disagreeable to the demon. He shuddered with disgust when he recalled the pitying looks people gave him when, at the start of his exile and utterly lost, he was trying somehow to adapt to life in their dimension. They looked at him as they would upon a mad derelict, but he didn't pay much attention to it then. He was too shaken by what he perceived as an unjust sentence of banishment from Hell. He probably really did look crazy and helpless.

By night he roamed about, and days he spent in empty apartments which he was able to get into with ease. He wallowed in a stupor that he could not break free from. All this, because of a stupid accident... He shuddered, remembering that first month on Earth, a gradual descent to the depths of despair and helplessness. He was using what little magic he had left to survive, one day at a time, until the period of his exile came to an end. For three years he was banned from his native dimension, without help or even the slightest concern shown him, and without access to the powers of the Abyss. Hell forgot about those who were sentenced to banishment.

Three years, and after only a month, he was a mere shadow of himself. That is, until the moment three shaven-headed gym rats decided to mess around with a bum. His reflexes kicked in—both physical and mental—and he left behind human wrecks, bones broken and minds on the verge of madness. The ease with

which he did so caused him to break into a fit of satanic laughter. He knew then that he would survive three years on Earth without a problem, despite the reduction of his usual abilities. He may not wield the full power of a demon, but he was decidedly better than those wretched creatures called humans.

Darreth was walking aimlessly through the streets of the city, listening to the latest Behemoth album and ruminating about the future, when he sensed something familiar. A sudden impulse urged him into a nearby pub, but the trail quickly went cold. The demon ordered a beer and stared blankly at the wall. Sipping the drink, his mind wandered to old times. He had visited Earth three times in the past, but things were different then.

The first time he came to this dimension was with his father, in order to select a model for their castle. That was right about when the twins hatched and the family had to live far from Hell's Center, at the Northern Rim. He remembered arguing with his father over a single turret, which could have been demolished later. He was only forty then, but he got his way: the castle had no turret from the very beginning. The demon smiled at the memories. Yes, that was a hell of a good time. And later, when...

"Excuse me, is this seat available?"

A soft but assertive voice shook Darreth from his reverie. He fixed a murderous glare upon the intruder. She was a tall, shapely girl with short blond hair and grey eyes. Annoyed by this sudden interruption, he was about to make some rude comment when abruptly he sensed from her that same familiar impression that had first drawn him into the pub. He took control of himself and invited her to sit down. She sipped her beer and looked at her companion.

In his preferred human form, Darreth was a youthful, handsome man in his thirties. A thin face with shapely, rather sharp features was made charming by green, inscrutable eyes. Long, wavy black hair ran down his shoulders. There was, perhaps, something demonic in his appearance, but certainly not in a negative sense.

The girl realized that her curiosity had been taken as insulting and shifted her

gaze to the beer mug. The demon noticed her embarrassment and felt a sudden urge to help her out of the situation. He was intrigued by that sense of the familiar that still eluded recognition.

“Nice place,” he said. “Do you come here often?”

“Yes.” Under the influence of his stare she got even more confused. “No, actually, I’ve only been here a few times.”

Darreth let out a short laugh.

“Ah, it’s even worse for me,” he replied. “This is my first time here.”

“And where have you been?”

“Here and there. I’ve only recently arrived in this city.”

There was silence, during which the girl stared at the demon again. For Darreth, this scrutiny was becoming oppressive.

“Do you like me that much?” he asked.

Sylvia blushed, not answering.

“I want to know why it is you are looking at me that way,” he hissed. He couldn’t stand when someone looked at him for too long. The girl stayed quiet for a moment, then softly blurted:

“You have something to do with magic. You have to. There’s no way I’m wrong.”

That was it! Magic had attracted the demon to the girl, and though it was only a weak, human form, it was still a familiar element in an otherwise alien world. Darreth whispered conspiratorially:

“I am a Master. Is that what you mean?”

“Yes! Yes!” Sylvia’s fascination was profound. “Teach me, so I can attain that dignity.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“I will do whatever you want. I already know the basics, but I’ll never get that far alone. Will you teach me?”

“Impossible. You’d have to graduate from the Academy of Evil, Magic and the Hideous Arts. And here we run into two insurmountable problems. First, the

academy no longer exists, thanks to my own carelessness.”

The girl was not daunted.

“It’ll be rebuilt.”

“Yes,” muttered Darreth. “In about three Hell years, which is to say, no one knows when.”

And until then, I have to suffer the likes of you, he thought. *Damn accident!* A moment of inattention had secured him the title of “Master,” and three years of banishment.

She was thinking.

“That’s alright,” she said. “Until then, teach me enough so that I can easily get into the school. I’m guessing there’s an entrance exam?”

The demon nodded.

“There is,” he said. “But you won’t get in even if you pass it.”

“Why? You won’t teach me?”

The demon shrugged.

“I can teach you, there’s always some fun in that. But they won’t accept you because of your origins.”

“What’s wrong with them?”

Darreth smiled.

“Wrong?” he asked. “Quite the contrary. There is nothing wrong about them, since you’re not a demon.”

“What?!”

“You’re not a demon.”

“Do you mean, that’s what you are?”

He couldn’t hold back any longer.

“Yes,” he said, grimacing slightly. “I am.”

“And you come from Hell? Actual Hell?”

“Yes. From the Northern Rim, to be precise.”

“Excellent!” she exclaimed. “I know a demon!”

“Not so loud! Do you want everyone here to know?”

Sylvia shook her head. She understood.

“Do you live around here?” Darreth asked.

*

It was late the next morning when the demon awoke, stretching languidly. The previous evening he had gained a student and a lover in the same person. Pretty good for the first day of his new life. He looked around. Ah, how could he forget about the apartment?

He got up and went to the kitchen. It was decorated in a modern style, with black-and-white cabinets with chrome handles running down one of the longer walls, the one without a window. Opposite them stood a table with three bar stools. The room looked too tidy for one belonging to a practitioner of magic, but Darreth suspected that this was just a façade. He opened the first cabinet from the side and was not disappointed; the mess inside was difficult to describe. In a drawer which would usually store silverware, he found coffee. It would suffice. He poured a little into a mug on the counter and filled it with hot water. He could use as a base any drink he wanted, then transform it (sweeten, stir, heat or cool) with magic, but somehow he was never able to change the taste or effect of coffee. With the smoking mug in hand, he went over to the microwave, which appeared to have something inside.

After breakfast the demon took a walk around the apartment. It was a spacious, two-bedroom affair in a high-rise apartment building. One of the rooms served as a modern, tastefully decorated living room, where on a quite comfortable sofa they had spent the previous night, but the demon much preferred the dark bedroom – it was there that appearances gave way, and he felt the Magical emanations.

He looked around the bedroom more closely. This room was not too big, but was quite spacious. Beneath the window was an Ikea bed – a wooden frame with two mattresses, both for sleeping and for performing magical rituals. Beside it, on a large dresser, were various figurines and objects of apparent ritual use. The

demon opened one of the dresser drawers, then the next. More of the same stuff. In the third and fourth he found underwear. Fortunately, as he had already been considering hightailing it out of there due to his hostess's insanity. He figured she would have much more space if she got rid of all those things, which really had nothing to do with magic.

Besides the dresser there was also a wardrobe (full of clothes), packed bookshelves, a TV suspended from the ceiling, and a soft, smooth, beige carpet, upon which sat a portable computer. On the sand-colored walls hung paintings depicting the forms of various demons and devils, alternately close and far from the mark. Darreth couldn't clearly pin any of them down since he knew almost no devils, which came from the lowest caste in Hell, and most demons have almost unlimited abilities to change their form.

He shrugged and turned his back to the images. On the bookshelf he noticed a row of texts dealing with black magic. He opened the first on the end, read a few sentences and burst out laughing. No wonder people made pacts with Hell so easily – they didn't know anything about it. Nor about magic, for the most part. He opened the computer and browsed a few websites, became sadly convinced that his banishment was absolute – he couldn't even log in to Hell's website. He sent his family a consolatory email, saying that it was all his fault and adding in a few macabre jokes for the twins. Tired, he made himself comfortable in the bed and turned the TV on.

*

Over the course of three months, Darreth taught Sylvia magic, with mediocre results, and in his free time he roamed about the city. He visited all the museums, watched a good deal of the plays shown in the theater, all the films shown in cinemas and broadcast on television, as well as a ton of stuff from the internet. He visited nearby monuments (aside from churches, which he only admired from afar), shopping centers, restaurants, clubs and bars. He read newspapers and the most popular books. He quickly made up for his lack of knowledge about Earth

and its inhabitants, and decided he liked this dimension for the opportunities it created. He found a gap in the market – well, not a gap exactly, but a domain in which he could easily eliminate the competition. He planned to spend the next few months building up his image, at once informing the world about his existence and surrounding himself in a fog of mystery. He would cast curses, for an obligatory fee, of course. He figured that he could act negatively against people without any consequences or risk of exposing his true nature (so many evil human wishes come true, that a few intentional magical actions would certainly escape notice). The services had to be expensive (but always effective) and elite (so that the service provider could choose the customer himself, and that the latter would feel distinguished for that reason). With everything worked out and ready to go, and with the time come to cast the first curses that would establish the company's reputation, the demon felt weary. He wanted a vacation before he really got to work.

He didn't want to travel far, and he was already tired of people. But he wanted a miserable little "touch of evil" in his infernal form. He teleported to the castle at Leczyca, Poland, the perennial seat of Boruta, a demon known to the Poles since ancient times. The host was not at home, so Darreth decided to shorten his wait by taking a tour through the halls of the castle. He changed his appearance to look more familiar: aged himself a bit, added a few pounds, fleshed out his facial features. He shortened his hair and sprinkled it with grey. Finally, he planted a small bald spot on the top of his head.

The demon had already looked at half of the modest castle, familiarizing himself with the images of devils rendered in various materials and styles, as well as in genre scenes from distant times, and was on his way to the tower when his sensitive ears picked up a familiar sound in the basement – Boruta was trying to teleport, an art forbidden to devils. Evidently he was having little success.

When Darreth transported himself underground, he found Boruta digging himself out from a pile of clutter. At the sight of the intruder, he straightened up with dignity, hid his tail and said angrily through his teeth:

“What are you looking for here, man?”

“A local devil, but I think I’m in the wrong place,” the demon answered.

“You want to steal my gold!” said Boruta.

“Nonsense. I’m just looking for some entertainment.”

“You’re about to get some!” cried the devil, and he attacked Darreth with a spell that turned him into a frog. Then he went to squash the amphibian with his hoof, but to his amazement, it disappeared, and upon the wine barrels sat an amused young man, swinging his legs.

“Who are you?” stammered the devil, terrified.

“Your nightmare,” said the young demon gravely. Then he laughed at Boruta’s growing panic.

“Actually, I’m a cursed soul looking for relief. And also the treasure, of course. For what is peace without gold?”

The devil had almost recovered himself, so he asked cautiously:

“Are you not, by chance, a demon?”

“About time! I thought you’d never figure it out.”

Boruta grew pale with fear, recognizing at once his unfavorable situation of having been caught trying to teleport. Straightaway he paid tribute to this representative of Hell’s higher caste. Darreth was genuinely amused at the gesture. He decided to stay in the role, walking around the basement, casually flushing a few rats out of their burrows and watching them scurry off, disoriented and scared.

“Perhaps you’ve got something,” he said haughtily, “that will make me reconsider reporting back to Hell about your ‘magical’ exploits.”

“To what do I owe this great mercy, my Lord?” asked the devil with a note of hope in his voice. It was in truth a rather slight one, as he knew the exceptional malice of demons.

“It’s boring here on Earth, especially when one can’t reveal his true self...” Darreth cut short his statement, giving the devil a chance to interpret his words.

He did not disappoint. Boruta understood the allusion in a way most appropriate for the demon.

“It’s terrible, Master, how much sacrifice is required for these secret missions.” He nodded his shaggy head. “How might I make your stay here more pleasant?”

“I have some time. Too little to get to Hell and spend some time out, but too much to waste it among people. I would like you to briefly describe the situation prevailing in my world.”

“In Hell, Master?” said the devil uncertainly.

“Yes.”

“Forgive me for asking, but can’t you contact some demon? They probably have better information. You’ve also got the internet.”

Darreth scowled.

“Of course I could, you goatspaw! But the location of my stay must remain secret.”

“Yes, Master, I understand. Would you like some wine?”

Darreth nodded. Boruta pouted the liquor into a crystal goblet which he had plucked out from somewhere in the neglected, musty dungeons of the castle, and asked:

“What would you like to know, Master?”

“Tell me about the recent developments in Hell.”

“Well,” began the devil, “the position of Satan still remains A’Steroth’s, but the election will be happening soon.”

“When?”

“In the year of Kssittle, so about two Earth months.”

“Time flows differently here, unevenly in relation to Hell,” the demon noted.

“Yes, Master, but I’ve learned to convert it. I’ve been living here for quite a while.”

“Right. But, go on. Who’s in the running?”

“Zirrenth, Restoth, Filzarreth, Asserith, Geelorth. These for sure. Possibly

others.”

“That’s what I thought,” muttered Darreth. “What about hereditary succession? Have they not found the contender?”

“No. I’ve heard nothing of that for thousands of years.”

“You mean since the disappearance of the Jewel of Demonic Sovereignty,” the demon added, and they both fell silent.

“Master,” Boruta said hesitantly, “If I reveal a certain secret to you, will you refrain from reporting back to Hell about me, and allow me to continue experimenting with magic?”

“That depends on the secret.”

“I know where the Jewel is.”

Darreth became so excited he jumped down off the barrels.

“Are you sure?” he exclaimed.

“Absolutely.”

“Then tell!”

“Okay, Master. I once made a mistake when teleporting back here from Hell and ended up on a different plane. Then I saw the Jewel. It shone with an ominous light and captivated everyone who looked upon it. Regrettably, I did not have the Key, and I am not a demon. The guard of the Jewel noticed this and sent me back here. Since then I haven’t been able to find this plane. However, I did manage to hear him mention its name, before he sent me back.”

“And what did it sound like?”

“T’lirranorrgern.”

A moment later Darreth was already back in Sylvia’s apartment, walking nervously around the room as he considered the situation. In order to become the lifetime Demonic Sovereign, otherwise known as Satan, one had to come from an aristocratic family in Hell and possess the Jewel. Darreth met the first condition, but as for the second...

To get the Jewel, he thought, I’d first have to obtain the Key that has been hidden for thousands of years, then reach the Jewel, and finally, be accepted by

it. A trifle! Especially since I don't know where T'lrnanorrgera lies, and my teleportation ability has recently been limited to the plane on which I am staying. Hell consume me! I will have to make use of the usual Gates. If I can find the Key, that is.

He didn't even think about how unrealistic this sudden desire was, and how abnormal this sudden awakening of a lust for power. The Jewel of Demonic Sovereignty possessed his dark being, destroying all of his previous plans, desires and dreams. There was no object more desirable nor more powerful in any dimension for every Hell-born creature.

"I have to leave here," declared Darreth to a surprised Sylvia.

"Are you coming back?"

The demon smiled wickedly.

"I don't think so," he said. "But you will get by just fine on your own."

"I definitely won't forget your teachings," the girl assured earnestly. "Can you tell me where you're going?"

"Basically, yes. I am setting out to find the Key to the Jewel of Demonic Sovereignty."

"That's not far."

"Not far?"

"Right. You have to go to the mountains, as you know."

"No, I don't know. Tell me." Darreth tried to hide his surprise and excitement. He was already so close to the prize!

"There is a passage to Grenthi in the Tatraa."

"I know it," the demon whispered.

"That's precisely where the Key is hidden."

"Why didn't you tell me this earlier?" he cried, losing control over his emotions. The lust for power burned in his veins.

"You would have gone looking for it, instead of teaching me," Sylvia admitted with disarming frankness. "Anyway, what's the Key worth to you, when you don't know where the Jewel is?"

“You have a point,” he said thoughtfully. “But it will always come in handy. You have to start somewhere.”

Chapter II.

Grenthi

The Gate was inside a stone sepulchre, and could only be entered at night. These were the gateways set up in this place by a messenger of Hell a long time ago, and only its inhabitants were able to pass through it to Grenthi, the strange Land of the Half-Living.

Darreth waited for dusk to fall and plunged into the cool darkness of the tomb's corridor, so pleasant and familiar to him. When he reached the end, he saw something like a door in the middle of the large room, on the catafalque. Black within blackness. Because it was only a shade darker than its surroundings, the Gate was imperceptible to humans. But of course, Darreth was a demon.

The newcomer waited a few more moments, making the bats guarding the tomb uneasy. However, when he showed no interest in the coffin removed from the catafalque during the creation of the Gate, they relaxed and hung in expectation under the vault of the cave. Darreth contemplated for a moment the fate of any people who might happen to be nearby, but he forgot them as soon as the Gate stabilized and he had crossed to the other side.

He found himself on a small hill with a vast plain stretching around. As usual in Grenthi, perpetual twilight reigned. The shadows of the sparse, unnaturally twisted trees and high burial mounds gave off an eerie impression, if only because there was no moon nor other source of light to be seen.

The only variation within this monotonous landscape was a mountain discernible on the horizon, capped with a conspicuous dark splotch resembling a castle. Without any idea of where to start looking for the Key, Darreth directed his steps toward this citadel. He preferred not to teleport for the time being, since the uniformity of the surroundings was liable to have negative effects.

He walked along a dark cobbled road, winding through this strange land directly to the mysterious castle on the hill. It was flanked by contorted trees, spiny bushes and scanty clumps of grass. The funerary mounds seemed practically to be natural formations. The sound of his footsteps, which normally would ring out loudly on the pavement, was rather muffled and distant, as if itself half-dead. The wind blew between the mounds, but where the demon walked, not the slightest breeze disturbed the air. Dank air.

Darreth picked up his pace. He literally flew over the last feet of the path.

Standing before a formidable gate of richly carved, tarnished bronze, he raised the massive knocker and rapped three times.

A small door embedded in the gate opened, and there appeared an old hunchback with bluish wrinkled skin. Pale-grey eyes like those of a fish pierced the intruder, and rather long arms made an indefinite movement. After a moment, this strange doorman produced some throaty murmurs and, in a voice that seemed to come from a deep well, said:

“What?”

Undaunted, Darreth replied in his most imperious tone:

“I want to see your master, the ruler of this castle.”

“You may want it,” the hunchback said.

And still the demon kept his cool.

“So bring me to him,” he ordered.

“The master is at a banquet.”

“Maybe at the neighbors’ barrow the next field over?” Darreth jeered.

“No,” said the doorman with stoic calm. “The master is hosting the banquet.”

“Then go and tell him that the Lord of Hell wants to speak with him. Go on,

now, hurry it up,” he said, adding to these words a little spell to compel the fulfillment of his wish. The hunchback disappeared behind the door, closing it in Darreth’s face.

The sand in the hourglass had not yet refilled when the servant returned. He swung open the door and said:

“My master, Lord Azatar of the House of the Dead, will kindly receive you.”

Then he led the young demon through a series of winding corridors and staircases up to the ballroom.

It was a long but narrow chamber. The few windows carved out beneath the ceiling let in only a residual amount of light, so that the primary lighting came from large wax candles set on the long tables. Their glow seemed to revive the reliefs covering the walls and ceiling, as well as the many columns in the room.

Drifting about the hall like shadows were more figures similar to the hunchbacked doorman, equally bluish and lifeless. Some were eating with gusto the decaying dishes under whose weight the tables buckled. Funereal music permeated the scene.

The sight of all this only mildly affected Darreth – he was accustomed to look upon horrors much worse – so he casually made his way over to the throne of grey stone standing atop a catafalque, and the individual sitting upon it.

Azatar from the House of the Dead was even more faceless than the rest of the attendees of this grim affair. Time had worn away all the characteristic features of his face, giving it a corpse-like appearance. Most of his hair had fallen out, making his skull look more like a kneecap.

Besides this, Darreth noticed signs of progressive decomposition in the person of his host. Surely this one had long ceased to be Half-Living, and had become an ordinary corpse – which means he had lost his right to remain in Grenthi.

When Azatar looked at Darreth, the latter was shocked by his face – a pair of unusually vivid eyes shone with a blood-red glow, like rubies set in that dead

face. Darreth, however, was not a demon for nothing. He shot the host such a treacherous and cryptic look, that it compelled Azatar to avert his gaze.

“Welcome to my humble household, sir. To what do I owe the honor of hosting you?”

The demon snorted.

“It is no honor, Azatar. And this household is not yours anymore.”

“What do you mean by that?” the castle’s ruler said with surprise.

Darreth looked around and noticed that many of the guests were listening to their conversation with unnerving curiosity.

“I was just joking. I would like to request a meeting in private,” he said. And then he added in a whisper: “For your own good.”

Azatar, who desired no conflict with Hell, readily agreed to the demon’s proposition. They went into a small chamber that served as an audience hall for envoys from Heaven and Hell. It was cozily furnished, with soft armchairs and a fluffy rug. There were relatively fresh white flowers set on a worn teak table, and in the air hung the smell of stale incense, and something like the distant echo of music. Darreth sensed in the room numerous protective measures against the potential use of magic against the master of the house.

Azatar sat in a deep armchair at the most protected point of the room and directed his guest to sit down likewise. The demon immediately took advantage of the invitation. A servant brought in a jug of wine, some snacks and a hookah. None of it was fresh, but that was typical of Grenthi.

Azatar sent the servant away and poured the wine for his guest himself. Darreth sighed, drank the bitter liquor and lit the water pipe.

“You said something strange,” the host began.

“What?” the demon asked distractedly.

“You suggested that this castle did not belong to me.”

“That’s true.”

“But that’s absurd!” he protested. “My family signed a contract with Hell, under which we rule this part of Grenthi.”

The demon nodded.

“That’s also true. But the contract should have expired a long time ago already.”

“Why?”

“Well, it’s a bit complicated, actually,” said Darreth thoughtfully. He did not know about the contract between Azatar and Hell, but he knew how his dimensional-kin went about things. “And I wonder how you’ll get out of it.”

“Out of what?”

“The fraud, although that’s just my opinion. An audit will confirm whether I’m wrong. Expect infernal officials in the near future. And I hope that you will accept them better than you have done myself.”

The host looked dumbfounded at the demon, rapidly scanning his memory for anything that would have caused him to lose favor. He remembered something, and sighed.

“It’s about my nephew,” he said with resignation. “I was afraid of that. But he was not even a direct descendent, and the throne did not belong to him.”

“Are you sure? Who will take power here after you?” Darreth seized upon the information he had obtained as the last hope he would realistically have. Now he had to make proper use of it.”

Azatar let out another heavy sigh.

“I remain childless,” he said. “I have no successors.”

The demon feigned concern.

“Oh, that’s bad. Very bad. You’d have had to have kept your nephew among the half-living, rather than send him back to Hell. There’s likely nothing to be done anymore...”

Azatar sat aggrieved. He could not have known that there was such a bureaucratic mess in Hell, that they probably hadn’t noticed the arrival of his relative, and they certainly wouldn’t have connected the two. It was only a matter of time, of course, but this time could stretch practically to infinity. He looked hopefully at Darreth. Hell’s inhabitants were known for taking bribes and

he was willing to attempt one, not suspecting that Darreth was driving in the same direction.

“Is there any way out?” he asked with caution.

Darreth leaned back in the armchair, pretending to think. After a moment he smiled slyly and said:

“Let us consider. The contract is between Hell and your family, not you personally. We can’t do anything about that. We could use the interregnum argument, but Hell in all likelihood wouldn’t go for it. We can pretend that everything is fine with you, but let’s not lie to ourselves. You’re rotting, plain and simple. You should have left Grenthi long ago. Your remaining here can only be explained by the lack of a successor, and that’s a weak strategy. On top of that, this nephew... there’s really no reason for us to leave you here.”

The host nodded, then asked even more meekly:

“Perhaps you might touch me up a bit, Lord of all Hells?”

For the first time, he used the official title. Darreth thought about it seriously this time. He was no longer playing only with the ruler of part of the Land of the Half-Living, but also with Hell. This could result in eternal banishment and deprivation of nobility, and then even the Jewel of Demonic Sovereignty wouldn’t help him. Unless he were to send Hell a little gift... yes, that’s what he’d have to do.

“That would help,” he said. “If only it weren’t for that nephew... are you sure that he was indeed your nephew?”

“I don’t understand,” he stammered.

“How’s that? It’s simple. Are you sure that your sister-in-law’s son was really your brother’s?”

Azatar finally caught on to the ploy and brightened up. At least, as much as was possible given his state of decay.

“You are brilliant, Lord of all Hells!” he exclaimed. “I am indeed not sure; quite the contrary. There were even rumors about my sister-in-law and some officer. Wonderful! So, we’ve got it sorted out, then?”

“Not so fast,” said Darreth coldly. “Haven’t you forgotten about something?”

“Of course, of course. What is it you desire, my Lord? As a token of thanks for solving my problem.”

Darreth gave his host a protracted look.

“I’ve got to—how did you call it?—touch you up. But perhaps you might offer me some wine. And remove the magic shields, or there’ll be no touching-up.”

Azatar hastily summoned the servant and ordered him to bring more jugs of wine. He also removed all the safeguards protecting him from his guest’s power. Darreth examined his host from all sides, muttering something under his breath. He filled in a bit of illusory meat and flesh in various places and inspected his work. Dissatisfied, he added some grey hair and thinned it out.

“Tell me, Azatar,” he said, continuing with his magical actions, “could you get for me the Key to the Jewel of Demonic Sovereignty? I’ve heard that it’s in Grenthi.”

“I could, if it were still here. But...”

He broke off at the entrance of the servant, who filled their goblets with wine and retired discreetly. Darreth took up both and handed one to Azatar, changing the liquid to a slow-acting poison in the process.

“To our collaboration,” he said, and they completed the toast.

“But, speaking of the Key,” the demon resumed, “why can’t you get it?”

“Because it’s not here. And it hasn’t been for some time now. During the time when the last of the First House died, we were asked to keep the Jewel of Demonic Sovereignty. It was still whole then. A little later, two groups arrived from Hell. Before my grandfather’s very eyes, the Jewel broke into two parts. One group took the Key, the other the Jewel itself, and they departed.”

Azatar was silent for a moment.

“There’s something wrong with this wine,” he whispered, and slunk to the floor. Darreth watched, speechless. The poison was only supposed to take effect after a couple of hours. He bent over Azatar and hissed:

“The Key.”

“Fables. It’s all fable...”

Azatar’s head slumped, the blood-red radiance of his eyes faded, and the illusory features bestowed upon him by Darreth dissipated. He swore, having forgotten that in Grenthi everything was in a perpetual state of decomposition, and that a poison could not be late-acting – it could not slowly kill an organism already half dead. This one here would no doubt reveal to Hell the purpose of his journey, and the hiding place of the Key. He swore again. He hadn’t learned anything substantial.

Immediately, he teleported from the castle without specifying a destination. He knew he wouldn’t end up outside of Grenthi, but maybe his subconscious would show him the right path. He found himself in front of the Gate. An inscription beside it read, “Only for those who really want it. Welcome to the Land of Fables.”

Darreth nodded thoughtfully. But he had obtained a clue.

Chapter III.

The Land of Fables

The young demon passed through the Gate and found himself in a sunny clearing within a beautiful virgin forest. He let out a heavy sigh. If only he had been greeted by a group of peasants fleeing in horror, half of his problem would have been solved. He would have become the hero, or rather, villain of some fable and thus earned the right to hang around on this plane. As this had not happened, he would either have to find some individual to fill in for, or create his own story, and considering the main purpose of his quest, and the likelihood that Hell was pursuing him, he had no time for this.

The forest was just like any typical, sunny forest. There were no gnomes, trolls, nor even wolves. Darreth didn't know what character to assume in order to fit into the nearest fable, nor in which direction to seek the Key. He chose north.

He proceeded onward at a brisk pace, looking around in vain for some creature suitable for his vile plans. Just a normal sun-lit forest all around. Things were going poorly right off the bat. He had ended up in the worst land, and it didn't surprise him at all that someone had hidden the Key here. The Land of Fables was governed by its own laws, one of which stipulated that if you did not belong to any story, you must disappear. Literally. Nobody ask you to leave, you just dissolve. Luckily, the process was not instantaneous and Darreth had a bit of time. Very little time, to be precise.

The sun's rays filtered through the branches, bushes and trees radiated a cheerful green, and flowers lent color to the undergrowth, but Darreth was filled

with a black despair. After wandering through this forest for several hours, the only notable change was the appearance of birds. At this rate, he could no longer wait for some suitable creature to impersonate.

Immersed in gloomy thoughts, he almost missed a very critical message. It boomed out through the forest as though through loudspeakers mounted in the trees. He froze and listened for it again. Then, he quickly began altering his character. He lopped off some height, brightened and lengthened his hair, softened his facial features. He also changed his clothing. Finally he conjured a picnic basket with dummy contents for lack of time and hurried to the path leading toward the grandmother's house. He felt stupid, but at least he had a chance of surviving. For the message was:

“Wolf seeking Red Riding Hood. Hurry! Meet at the usual place.”

Gotta take what you can get, thought Darreth when he stumbled upon the wolf lurking in the roadside bushes. When the wolf spotted him, he came out onto the path and took on the appearance of the commonest village idiot.

“Where are you going, little girl?” asked the wolf, and leaning over Darreth he hissed, “And where were you?! You know this is the only way we can survive in this world.”

“I'm going to grandma's. I'm bringing this basket for her,” answered Darreth in the sweet voice of Red Riding Hood, and then, still smiling, added in an icy whisper: “We should leave this story and go find some treasure. This place is full of it.”

The wolf was dumbstruck.

“What've you... got... in the ba-asket?” he spit out finally. “Surely you don't mean to change anything!”

Darreth felt the ground beneath him becoming unsteady.

“I'm gathering flowers for granny, it's still early,” he said, calling the wolf back to order. Then he added quietly, “Think about it until we meet back at the cottage.”

The wolf nodded and ran back toward granny's house. With one sweep of his

hand Darreth picked up a substantial bouquet of flowers and sat pensively. The fact that the wolf and Red Riding Hood were also newcomers worked to his advantage. Surely they must have been through at least a portion of the Land of Fables, and would be able to tell him where he might find the Key. At least, the wolf might. But on the other hand...

If they were emotionally bonded, he would not be able to carry out this farce for much longer. He would think of something. He shrugged and stood, because the setting sun indicated it was time to get to granny's house. He teleported to the door, pushed it open and went inside. He expected most any version of the events besides the one he'd learned in school (as part of "Constructing Nightmares," they had had lessons on fables).

The wolf lay in granny's bed, having gobbled up granny, and Darreth found himself becoming impatient.

"Wolf!" he yelled, stomping his foot, while at the same time aware that he looked silly doing this in the form of a young girl. "Get yourself together. Spit out granny and let's get a move on."

"I haven't decided yet," the beast murmured meekly. "Granny's digesting."

Darreth gritted his teeth.

"Granny will not digest, and you know that just as well as I. The hunter will come, cut you open, pull the old lady out and cram you full of rocks. Do you want to go through that again?"

"Aren't you forgetting something?" The wolf suddenly became more alert.

"What?"

"That now it's time to swallow you!" he exclaimed, leaping from the bed with rows of sharp, glistening teeth lining his open mouth, and his claws extended, ready to tear through flesh. He pounced on Red Riding Hood, but failed in his attempt. Darreth stepped back and instinctively created a protective shield. The wolf passed through it like butter, so he then cast a repulsion spell. The animal fell against the wall, slid down it and tried to rally for another attack, but he was already entangled in magical bonds that only a creature of Hell could

remove. Unfortunately, these magical actions caused Darreth to revert to his most-used form.

“You’re not Sandra,” the wolf rasped.

Darreth sighed and sat down on a nearby chair.

“I’m not,” he admitted. “But you’re not a wolf. At least, not from this fairy tale. I wonder how you got here?”

“That’s none of your business,” he snapped. “I won’t answer any of your questions until you free me.”

Darreth shook his head slowly.

“I’m not that stupid. There’s a lot of magic in you, and I find that strange. You and Sandra came here and took on the characters of this fairy tale to survive, because you know the rules of this realm. But I’m willing to bet that this isn’t what you’re here for. Am I right?”

The wolf was silent. Darreth looked at him reproachfully and raised two fingers of his left hand. The animal showed surprise, and then anxiety. Finally he started to claw his way up the wall, so that he stood only on the tips of his claws, skipping from one paw to the other. Darreth approached and observed his work with interest. The planks were starting to turn black, and smoke was snaking out from between them.

“To think,” he said thoughtfully, with the cold tone of a scientist, “that I have always considered these kinds of spells primitive and useless. Perhaps I must change my views. What do you think?”

The wolf started to squeal.

“I see that you agree,” the demon said, still looking at the floor. “Look at how this wood holds up. It should already be up in flames. I’ll have to speed up the process, as I don’t have much time. Anyway, do you know what roast wolf stuffed with grandma tastes like? No, I’ll bet you don’t.”

He waved his hand and the temperature rose sharply. Tongues of fire licked across the boards. The wolf howled.

“What’s wrong?” Darreth asked with mock concern.

The animal desperately scratched at the wall, trying to climb it.

“I’ll tell you what you want,” the wolf squealed. “Just put it out!”

Darreth blew on it, and the fire vanished instantly, leaving only the blackened floorboards.

“Go on.”

The wolf sat down on the magically cool floor. He licked his scorched paws and looked reproachfully at the demon.

“We came here by accident from a dimension called Guppo. We were using spells to move around inside guarded places, and the magic somehow became malformed. We lost our original forms and ended up here. We’ve been playing out this little show for about ten years, knowing the rules that govern this place, and we don’t know how to get back. We’ve tried to go out and look for the way, but keep almost ending up victims of the Land of Fables. I guess that the real wolf and Red Riding Hood have found themselves in our places. And that’s the whole story.”

Darreth sat down, pensive. This didn’t surprise him. His new acquaintance probably knew less about this world than he did. He would have to rely on their being able to jointly create a narrative that would allow him to survive and get closer to finding the Key. He was considering whether it was indeed worth the trouble to get involved with the wolf at all, when he heard a rustling outside the window. Without even turning around, he brought the intruder under the same constraints binding the wolf, extending them at once. Then he just glanced over. A young girl returned his look, red with rage.

“What are you looking at?! Let me go right now! What do you think you’re doing?! You come here without a word and barge into someone else’s fable and…” the rest of the harangue stuck in Red Riding Hood’s throat as the demon cast a spell of silence upon her. Although, he could read on her lips the epithets he’d be hearing had he not done so.

“That’s better,” he said. “In any case, this isn’t your fable.”

The girl looked with astonishment at the wolf and mouthed a question to

him.

“I told him. I had to. He’s some kind of an evil spirit, I think.”

Little Red Riding Hood looked at the charred floorboards and nodded. Her eyes expressed a question.

“I am a demon,” Darreth clarified, at the same time under the distinct impression that he was making a mistake. “And your friend didn’t want to cooperate. Unfortunately, by the time he did, it was clear to me that I was wasting my time, and the two of you could be of no use to me. I’m going to leave you here and go on by myself. In case you want to take revenge or some similar stupid action, I’m going to keep the binding spell in effect until tomorrow. And don’t count on help – I’ll make sure the hunter won’t be going anywhere either.”

With these words, he got up to leave the cottage.

“Maybe you could let me out?” spoke a voice behind him. “This wolf is already digesting me.”

The demon turned around, surprised, and laughed. In all the commotion, he had forgotten all about the grandma.

“Give me a good reason to do that.”

“You would keep this tale alive.”

“Why would I be concerned about that?”

“Yes... you’re right. I forgot that you are a demon. How about this, then. To hell with this tale, I’ve had enough of it. Free me, and I’ll show you the way through the Land of Fables.”

Darreth thought about it for a moment, then reached for the knife.

“We’ll do it in the traditional way,” he said with a malicious smile. “Well, almost.”

He tossed up the knife and directed its movements from a distance. Soon the wolf’s belly was sliced open, and the old woman emerged from its depths. He closed the wound to stop the wolf’s groaning. At the same time, the hunter walking nearby was surprised to notice his hands beginning to fade, and went

home suspecting some illness. Inasmuch as he was the only original figure in this tale, he disappeared before he reached it, never even understanding why.

In the cottage, the magical bonds expanded even more to encompass the grandma. This time, the demon was pleasantly surprised. The old woman looked like a living nightmare. Her long scraggly hair, hooked nose, unhealthy complexion and hunched figure meant that she could easily be taken for a witch.

“You’re also perhaps not from this tale, are you, grandma?” asked Darreth.

“No. I don’t recall anymore which tale I’m from. I’ve changed character so many times, been so many old ladies, and I don’t remember many of them. What I do know is how to survive here, and I’m happy to change things up. I just don’t know what story we’ll both fit into. I don’t know any about an old woman and a young man.”

She looked doubtfully at the demon. He laughed.

“Don’t worry about that. I will change form when the need arises. Do you know any tales about treasure in the area?”

“I do, my boy.”

“So let’s go, granny. We don’t have much time.”

He released her from the binding spell and led her toward the door, transforming himself on the way out into a poor peasant. Now he could just pass as the grandson of this old lady.

*

They wandered through forests and meadows, not feeling any effects from being outside of any particular tale.

“Apparently we’ve created our own,” remarked the grandma.

Darreth looked at her as though she were mentally ill, but ultimately he had to admit that she was probably right.

“If that’s so,” he said, “then we can also form a continuation. And a conclusion.”

But the old woman shook her head.

“It’s not that simple,” she said.

“No?” The demon stopped. “And what’s so complicated about it?”

Grandma kept walking, so he had to catch up with her to hear the question:

“Do you know how fables arise?”

“Yes. Someone — a parent, grandparent or some other storyteller — stuffs an innocent child full of sad little stories, which typically end with the victory of good over evil.”

“That’s a way of looking at it,” she muttered. “Do you like fairy tales in general?”

“Sure. Brothers Grimm. Some end so badly. You know, the little louse scalds itself while brewing beer, the little flea weeps, the little door creaks, the little broom sweeps, the little cart runs, the little ash-heap burns, the little tree shakes, the little girl breaks the jug, the spring begins to flow and everyone drowns. I think that’s all.”

“I believe so,” the grandma said, nodding pensively. “But what’s important is that you understand the basics. Now, an advanced course. First, the durability of a tale in the Land of Fables is dependent on how frequently it is re-told in other dimensions, particularly that of humans. Second, a tale having many versions can behave in three ways. The first is that it may break down into two or more distinct stories, if all the versions are persistent enough; the second is that it will maintain only the most popular version, if its prevalence is significant; and the third is that it will consist of all versions, if these are more or less equally popular, and differ only in such small details that a division into two stories does not occur. Finally, stories strive to preserve their original content, and that’s why when you assume the role of a hero, you must play according to the plot or the tale will start over again. Just remember one thing – these laws are unchanging, laid down from above by who-knows-what, like laws of nature. No one decides from here the development of a given story, everything depends on people and beings related to them, and things just happen here.”

The demon nodded.

“That reminds me of a film...” he began.

“What is a film?”

“It’s a kind of story told through moving images. Anyway, it’s not important. Who rules over this land?”

“No one. Every story constitutes a distinct whole and is governed according to its own rules. There is no general authority, only the one rule I’ve just told you about.”

Darreth considered this.

“In that case, why are we still existing?” he asked.

They sat down beside a stream, and the grandma produced two slices of bread and two pieces of cheese from a knapsack. She offered a portion of it to Darreth, and sighed.

“Besides complete stories, there are also ‘snippets,’ or fragments in which the tellers usually interrupt in order to start from the same place, or which they repeat because they don’t remember what is supposed to happen next. If you wind up in a snippet, you can go through this whole land without awareness, or even a slight suspicion of the laws governing it. We sound like,” she looked critically at him, “something along the lines of: ‘... and then silly Hansel and his mother went off in search of happiness and a better life.’ Or some kind of thing.”

He cast a lethal look upon her. Luckily for her, he didn’t invest it with magical power.

“And we can’t be sure when this ‘snippet’ will end, is that right?”

“That’s right,” the woman replied with some hesitation. “But seeing as we’ve already stumbled into one, we can continue in it and follow it to the Gate. That’s probably the most sensible way to get out.”

“I suppose so.” Darreth thought it over for some time, and when he next spoke, his face showed uncertainty.

“If I leave here through the Gate,” he began, “and go out among humans, I can tell someone a story, so that it will come true here. It won’t last for very long, but if I can also tell it to a crowd, it will exist here for good. Is that right?”

“Children.”

“What about children?”

“You’d have to tell the story to children. And they must know that it’s a fairy tale. Otherwise it will materialize in the Land of Lies. Oh, and remember, good must win out, and not in too cruel a fashion, because then it will end up in the Realm of Nightmares. These Grimm Brothers tales of which you are so fond play out on the boundary of these worlds. Not quite fairy tales, not quite horrors.”

Darreth nodded sullenly. Why should it be easy?

“Fine, then.” He sighed. “I’m going back to Earth through the Gate. I will tell a group of children a story about how I found a certain treasure. Then I will transport myself back here and take my place back in the tale. Then I’ll collect the treasure and go on my way.”

“Yes. To the border of the Land of Fables,” added the grandmother. “Beyond there, the object will cease to exist.”

“You’re not being very helpful!” Darreth said, irritated.

“I am helping,” she replied, offended. “But if you don’t like it, you can fend for yourself.”

They continued wandering around in silence. They passed villages, fields, meadows, and finally came to a hill, on the summit of which sat a large rock.

“We’re at the Gate,” the old woman said unexpectedly. Although, she was now rather a middle-aged woman, having become progressively younger during their passage through the woods away from the cottage.

“Go on, then,” muttered the demon, still annoyed.

“Are you sure you want me to?”

He looked at her, surprised.

“What does that matter?” he burst out. “It was you who wanted to find the Gate and get out of this goddamn land! Nevermind that you were supposed to help me. If I had known what would happen, I wouldn’t have cut you out of the wolf! Now go on, before I do something really mean to you.”

He sat resignedly on a small stone and stared off into the distance. The woman sat down quietly beside him.

“You didn’t really want to leave,” she said softly.

He nodded, angry, still refusing to look at her.

“Are you looking for the treasure that you mentioned? We can go and find it, if you really want to.”

“Forget it,” he snapped. “I’ve got a plan already. I’m going to tell some children the story of my journey through the Land of Fables exactly as it happened, step by step, ending with my finding the treasure. Then I will incarnate myself within the tale. It’s just too bad I didn’t think of it sooner. Let’s go.”

He started toward the Gate, but the woman stopped him, saying:

“That’s no use. Don’t you remember? Every tale is a distinct whole living out its own realization. You’ll simply manage to create another story. An original one, I must admit, but nevertheless a story which takes place within the Land of Fables as a reproduction, not an actual happening! If you want something which is external to this world, and has been brought here and swapped with some fairy-tale item, then you must find it, not create it from scratch! Why can’t you understand such a simple thing? How...”

He didn’t hear the rest of sentence, because in his exasperation he took away her voice. It was clear to him now that from the moment he left the cottage in the forest, he had not even progressed a single step. Worse, even – he had only lost time. True, he now knew how to survive in this strange world, and even how to shape events within it, but this didn’t bring him any closer to getting or even locating the Key. He had serious doubts about the intentions of this former “grandmother,” what she knew and where she had come from, but she was all he had left. He decided to risk it. Looking at her, he said:

“We can talk. I’ll restore your voice, if you can try to behave rationally.”

She tried to respond, but after not hearing the effect of her efforts, she nodded vigorously.

“Very well,” said the demon. “Let’s start with the basics. Who are you?”

“I don’t know. Probably a shepherdess.”

“What do you mean ‘probably’?”

“Well... as far back as I remember, I was in the role of a shepherdess in the Land of Fables. Then I got bored and went to look for another fairy tale. I’ve been peasants, princesses, grandmas, mothers, daughters, servants, so many things I can’t remember them all. Always supporting characters, never a main role. It was easier for me to move around like that.”

“Right,” said the demon. “But something doesn’t jibe here. What you said before implies that fairy-tale characters can’t exist outside of their own stories.”

She readily acknowledged this. Having now confessed her original role, her appearance began to change, until she assumed the form of a fair-haired, rather plump girl of medium height. She looked to be about twenty. The pleasant expression she wore reminded Darreth of something, but he couldn’t remember exactly what.

“Yes,” she replied. “That’s why I said that I didn’t know who I was. I remember my life starting from the role of shepherdess, and in that sense I’m no different from the others living in this world. Maybe if I had known that I could not exist outside of my fairy-tale incarnation, it would really be so. What do you think?”

“No,” he said firmly, shattering her illusion. “I may not be entirely certain of how things work in this realm, but you’re kidding yourself. None of the purely fairy-tale characters recognize their own limitations, nor the possibility of existing outside the stories they inhabit. Not even the supporting ones. They’re just living out their lives.”

Darreth spread out his hands and shook his head.

“You choose stories for yourself. You must be from elsewhere than here. But where?”

“That’s why I wanted to explore beyond the Gate. So far I haven’t managed to get anywhere, and I thought I might recall something on the other side. That,

or cease to exist, which would also solve my problem.”

She spoke softly and looked very fragile. Not knowing why, Darreth suggested:

“I know how to find the Gate. If you can lead me to what I’m looking for, we can work out a deal.”

“Really?” She looked at him, again hopeful.

“Yes. But, for obvious reasons, you’ll fulfill your end first.”

“Alright,” she said eagerly. “I’ll take you to the treasure. Does it have to be big? I’ll bet, the biggest. Let’s see...”

“Shepherdess!” he interrupted. “You told me yourself. It’s a specific treasure, not just any one. And I’m not interested in any impermanent imitation. Is that clear?”

She nodded.

“Anyway, do you have a name?” the demon asked, looking to placate her.

“No, but call me Shep. You know, short for ‘shepherdess.’

“So I shall. I am Darreth.”

“Do you know what we’re looking for?”

“Yes. Most likely a ring with a stone missing. It could be inconspicuous, or very spectacular.”

She sighed.

“That’s not much to go on. We could find hundreds of things like that, and none of them might be what you’re looking for.”

“If we find it, I’ll know that it pertains to me. Besides, I can recognize things from worlds other than the one that I’m in. I just need a guide who can show me the way to the next treasures. Let’s go. We’ll start from the cave,” he said, pointing east. They headed toward it. The girl seemed to be thinking hard about something.

“What about living beings?” she asked finally, when they had climbed the gravel path to the hill in which the cave had been hollowed out.

“What do you mean?”

“Do you recognize beings from outside a given world, or just objects?”

Darreth thought for a moment. Suddenly he understood what had seemed off to him about this shepherdess, which he had felt even back when she was a grandma.

“I do,” he said, “But I had a problem when it came to you. You both belong to the Land of Fables, and are foreign to it. I can’t quite explain it, but maybe going through the gate will shed some light on your origins. Well, here we are.”

These last words concerned the entrance to the cave, which now came into view of the weary travelers. It was tall, narrow and partially covered with stones. The demon squeezed through it, and the shepherdess followed. They had walked a few steps into the narrow tunnel, when a shower of falling stones covered the entrance even more. The girl rushed toward the light, wanting to escape from the cave while she still could, but Darreth restrained her.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “We’re not going back that way.”

She looked at him, startled, but said nothing. The corridor made three distinct turns and then became at once narrow and brighter, illumined by a pale-green crystal glow.

“There’s light up above,” said Darreth. “So the rock layer isn’t too thick. We shouldn’t have a problem getting out. If it comes down to it, I’ll teleport us back to the entrance.”

“You’ll what?”

“Tele... transport us.”

“You can do that?”

“Yes. But I prefer not to risk it without knowing the area. I try to use that ability only when I can see, or at least know, the destination. Trust me, you don’t want to experience the effects of an unpremeditated transfer. Sometimes you can’t do it without changing your shape.” Noting her look of displeasure, he added: “Something I’m guessing you can’t do?”

“You saw the top of this hill,” she said.

“Yes.”

“So then why...”

“...did we have to climb?”

She nodded.

“Maybe I needed to think a bit. Or maybe I’m just naturally mean.”

The corridor widened into a kind of large room covered by a dome with a hole in the center. It was the size of a palace, and there was a heap of jewels piled in the middle of it. Necklaces, crowns, chains, bracelets, earrings and of course rings, all mixed up with no semblance of order. The pair groaned with discouragement. For them it was just a pile of worthless scrap metal that they would need to sift through, painstakingly, piece by piece, one priceless object after another, every littlest...

“Do we really have to do this?” Shep asked.

“Perhaps not,” said the demon, hesitating as he carefully inspected the pile. “I see only three objects here that could be what I’m looking for, but they may not be. Let’s dig them out and take a look, then we can move on.”

According to Darreth’s instructions, they scattered the valuables like a compost heap and picked out three rings. Darreth placed them in front of him, muttered a spell and rubbed them with his hand, which under the influence of his infernal magic had grown hooked talons. At this moment, something flashed. The demon touched each of the four rings with a claw and shook his head.

“It’s none of these,” he said. “Although, we’ve only chosen three.”

He looked inquiringly at the girl, who only shrugged.

“Maybe it roll out of the pile.”

As she said this there was a rumbling, and through the opening the next load of jewels poured in upon them. Darreth quickly grabbed the shocked Shep by the hand and teleported them outside. Unfortunately, he wasn’t able to specify where “outside” he wished to go, and a moment later he was standing face-to-face with the giant who was finishing up unloading his gold supply into the hole of the dome.

“Nice piggy bank,” he muttered. “But how are you going to break it open

later?”

“Like this!” yelled the giant, striking the dome with his fist and leaving a marked indentation in the portion upon which the pair stood.

“All right! I believe you!” cried Darreth. “Stop! You’re saving up now, not cashing out!”

The giant looked at him with astonishment, utterly failing to comprehend the demon’s words. Then he caught hold of Darreth with two fingers and lifted to inspect him closer. As far as Darreth recalled, there had never been any particular interest in giants in Hell, since they didn’t exist in the real world. Consequently, no spells or enhancements had been conceived that were powerful enough to be useful in such a situation. Darreth considered changing form but decided not to, as he likely would be unable to grow large enough. All he could try was to enhance one of the spells meant for people and hope for success. He got to work, making the spell stronger, stronger...

The giant poked Darreth with the finger of his other hand and chortled, watching the demon rock. He swung his body, and in a moment was standing on the giant’s palm. From there, he bowed to his host and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket. He made a show of conjuring pigeons from it, each of which left behind a feather in his hand. The giant grunted with delight.

“Shep!” the demon yelled. “Look out, it’s about to get windy!”

He smiled and bowed again to the giant, extending his open hand. Upon it lay a beautiful ball of interlaced pigeon feathers, glistening in the sun. Still smiling, now a bit more mischievously, Darreth gave a gentle blow. The ball rose and began to perform a complicated pirouette on the winds that carried it. The giant, delighted by the new, shiny toy, laid aside the demon and tried to capture the ball.

Darreth looked at Shep.

“Hold on to me. Literally,” he said, and made some delicate movements with his fingers. The winds carrying the feathery ball mimicked these motions. The girl hugged the demon and nestled herself into him, recognizing what was about

to happen. Darreth propelled the ball higher until it was directly inside the giant's left nostril, then he whirled his finger in a spiraling motion.

The powerful sneeze sent them flying two hills away, and the next blew them over one more. They landed on their backs atop a boulder, covered in mucous. Once they had cleaned themselves off a bit, Shep looked at Darreth admiringly.

"That was so ingenious," she remarked. "And beautiful. I thought demons just destroyed everything."

The ground shook.

"Only things we don't need," he said. "Besides, we prefer more subtle methods. Now come on, there's a river south of here, and probably another treasure beyond it."

"All right. When will he stop sneezing?" she asked. "The ground is shaking."

"When he expels the ball," Darreth said, shrugging. "Same as anyone."

And then he thought – never. The feathers would unravel, and he'd never be able to get them all out. Sometimes they'd settle in a way that would give him occasional relief, but never totally fall out. Herein lay the hellish subtlety he had mentioned.

*

Wandering from treasure to treasure, through forests, cities, castles and caves, becoming more and more tired and discouraged by their fruitless searching, they finally came upon a poor fisherman's cottage, leaning with age.

"Could it be here?" the demon asked.

Shep nodded, then yanked Darreth's arm, forcing him to crouch. She pulled him toward one of the windows, which was barely hanging on by the hinges.

"Lean in a bit and take a good look at this guy," she whispered. "You'll have to change into him."

Darreth looked back, committed the appearance of the landscape to his memory, then passed his hand over the cracked windowpane while reciting a spell. He stood, pressed a finger to his lips warning Shep to remain silent, then

waved a hand gesturing her to stand also. They looked inside the house. At the table sat a couple whom life had worn down, and whose best years were far behind them. The woman was angry, yelling at the kindly-looking man. He cringed to himself and just nodded obediently. Finally he took his cap off the table and headed toward the door. Darreth and Shep retreated around the corner of the house.

“What should I do?” the demon whispered covertly.

“Whatever,” she whispered back. “But you have to get to the lake before the fisherman does and find the goldfish. This is the only way to find out where your treasure is hidden. Otherwise we might wander through the Land of Fables the rest of our lives without so much as a hint of where it may be. Now go, go!”

Darreth sighed and teleported to the edge of the forest. He took on the form of an old beggar and waited for the peasant.

“Hello, fisherman,” he said. “I see that something troubles you.”

The old man let out a heavy sigh and confessed:

“My wife, she’s a greedy one. Not a bad woman, but she’s gotten it into her head that she might become a noblewoman, you see, and I’m going to ask the fish to make her wish come true.”

“This fish?” asked the demon, producing from behind his back a fishbowl with a goldfish inside. The peasant inspected it and shook his hoary head doubtfully.

“No,” he said hesitantly. “I don’t think so. That’s rather a sickly-looking one.”

Darreth swallowed a curse. He had thrown together a typical goldfish without bothering to take a glance at its magical version. Since he didn’t have time to wait for the next telling of the tale, he made up a story about a sick fish which required diligent care in return for fulfilling the fisherman’s desires. The peasant was convinced, and brought the fishbowl back to his cottage. Darreth smiled mischievously, because he had managed to ensure the story would continue as expected, and he knew what awaited the man with the fake fish.