

Dmitrii Emets



TANYA GROTTER

and the Vanishing Floor



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The Vanishing Floor**

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Tanya Grotter has no luck. When Sardanapal, Medusa Gorgonova, and other instructors rebuild anew the destroyed school of magic Tibidox, they send the students home. Here Tanya is also forced to return to Moscow to the Durnev family. On top of that, as an obligation, she has to take with her a full trunk of troublesome ghosts. Well, not too bad! During training in Tibidox Tanya had time to master something, so that Uncle Herman and Aunt Ninel will have to be unhappy. And here finally the time comes to return to Tibidox. It has been rebuilt anew and is even better than before, but the Vanishing Floor... Something incredible has happened to it. Nobody who dared to venture there had returned. Or nevertheless some did?

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Prologue

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Chapter 1

The Trunk with Ghosts

Something flew by with a whistle, someone began to yell, somewhere glass showered down. A normal morning of a normal day in the normal school for difficult-to-raise magicians, Tibidox, located on the Buyan Island in the ocean-sea.

Black Curtains sniggered maliciously. Tanya Grotter tore herself away from the rather thick reference book *Dragons: Breeding, Training, Treatment* and ran to the window. Something interesting was happening in the small clearing in front of Tibidox. Two very strong cyclopes, who were assigned the job of carrying boulders for construction, were arguing and now, with knotty clubs, were enthusiastically beating the daylight out of each other. One of the clubs shattered, and a fragment, having traced a beautiful arc in the air, fell down precisely on the nose of the hero Usynya, who, having placed a stretcher under his cheek, was peacefully dozing in the shadow of the Cove Oak.

A minute later Tanya watched as Usynya, catching hold of one of the cyclopes by the legs, was spinning him with a whistling sound. The other hero-bouncers Dubynya and Gorynya, appearing at the howls, started to laugh aloud, having discovered that their brother's nose had swollen up and acquired the colour of beet. They gesticulated, nudged each other, and finally demolished the section of a wall miraculously surviving till now. And here Usynya already let go of the legs of the cyclops and that one, like a candle soaring into the sky, crashed with his head into the Big Tower. Bricks rained down. The cyclops, as if nothing had happened, got up and touched his forehead. "*Thimply knowth a hundred thuch clown! Again will be penalty!*" he lisped unhappily.

Drawn by the noise, Medusa Gorgonova, associate professor of the department of evil spirits studies, jumped out onto the small balcony of the Big Tower. She was holding a kicking swamp bogey by the collar. She had recently caught it on the tabletop in her office, where it was scratching with its nail all kinds of filth. Noticing the crumbled wall, Medusa from indignation unclenched her hand. The swamp bogey, exactly like a toad, flopped to the floor and rapidly bolted somewhere, swearing bad words and threatening troubles to Tibidox. But Docent Gorgonova had already forgotten about it. She had to investigate the brother-heroes and the cyclopes that cast off all restraint. Medusa's cheeks were burning and her hair started to hiss like snakes. Though, why *like*? Only – shh! – what woman likes it when her little secrets are revealed?

"*Sparkis frontis!*" Medusa shouted. A dazzling fight spark flew off her magic ring and several huge boulders immediately crumbled into powder. The enormous cyclopes fell onto the ground and unsuccessfully attempted to hide behind blades of grass covered with white hoar frost. It was well known to them that an angry Medusa was not one to be trifled with.

"*Fillissimo-moronissimo!* What is this?" Docent Gorgonova shouted. "Two weeks of work and no result! Even wrecked what the titans didn't touch! Do you imbeciles understand that the children have nowhere to live? That the roof leaks? That the arches of Tibidox will collapse any minute now?"

The cyclopes began to tremble slightly, and the hero-bouncers guiltily dropped their eyes. "We what? We did nothing... The cyclopes... s-s... they started first," Usynya began to mutter, despondently sniffing his beet-red nose.

"They? Well, march back to work, or you'll be left without dinner!" Medusa frowned and tossed up her ring, a new spark flared up. The spark, as this happens with magicians, gave the necessary strength to the spell: *Hungeronus hungerygus!*

Tanya was hearing this spell for the first time. "Interesting, what is it for?" she started to think, but immediately felt such wolfish hunger that she almost sank her teeth into Black Curtains. At this moment, she could eat absolutely anything, even Aunt Ninel's day-before-yesterday oat *kasha* with a

crust, which Pipa called bullet-proof. Tanya believed that Medusa's magic also accidentally snagged her: indeed, she also saw the spark.

The cyclopes and the brother-heroes at once stirred and started in a hurry to rake up the stones into a pile. Hunger drove them on. "No dinner until you finish tidying up! Clear? Deadbeats!" Medusa shouted. She turned sharply and, swift as always, left the small balcony.

Chewing on a sandwich by chance left over from breakfast, Tanya moved away from the window and again took the book in her hands. Will she not always be looking at cyclopes? Moreover, from the huge crack in the ceiling a stream of water had been flowing down for a long time behind the girl's collar. "And indeed it's because of me that everyone is suffering!" Tanya thought guiltily.

After that incident when she carelessly let out the titans from the cave and they, battling Plague-del-Cake, smashed half of Tibidox, it became impossible to live here. If one was looking into this, from the entire enormous school of difficult-to-raise magicians there remained only the basement, the Hall of Two Elements, and the Big Tower with the Main Staircase. But even they had suffered a great deal.

The drafts roamed along the corridors, in the middle of the night they began to slam windows, and whipped rain into the numerous cracks. It was also uncomfortable even for the ghosts, a quantity of them populating Tibidox. Deprived of their beloved Tower of Ghosts, where they knew every little corner, the phantoms wandered in groups along the corridors at night, moaned, rattled their chains, and spoiled everyone's mood.

Moreover, the time was a long way from summer. December. And really how is it possible to keep busy when the entire floor ices up in the class on practical magic? And in removal of evil eye all students are forced to sit in fur coats, and teeth nevertheless clatter so that you cannot utter a single spell?

Tanya got up in order to slam shut the door thrown open by the draft. Shutting it, she casually saw how Slander Slanderych – a lopsided little fellow with tiny gimlet-eyes, a former black magician who moved over to the white – sneaked along the corridor on tiptoes. He pressed against his chest a very healthy live little fish, which was hitting him on the nose with its tail. Tanya surmised that the stern dean of Tibidox was running to the pond to feed the mermaid. Everyone was surprised that, till now, the pond with the mermaid had not yet frozen, and they said that it simply did not manage without powerful magic here. The mermaid had grown terribly stout from constant overeating, and its nature had become extremely quarrelsome. All day it rolled in the slime, devoured fish, and flung algae and snails at the enamoured Slander.

An offended cupid happened to be on the watch for the dean and released an arrow into him! Academician Sardanapal had already tried several times to remove the spell from Slander, but he was unsuccessful. Love magic is the most delicate and the most complex of all magic. Only the one who cast it can remove it. But the cupid just flatly refused – he was still mad at Slander for breaking his favourite bow.

"Oh, indeed these mermaids! Simply: an evil spirit! It recently doused him entirely with leeches – just from mischief. You love me, it says, so prove it. So the poor wretch was walking around entirely covered with leeches. One is even directly on his nose," grumbled Yagge. Earlier she was not particularly sorry for Slander, but now she even started to pity him once in a while. Yagge was the old sorceress running the magic station. Furthermore, she was also the grandmother of Bab-Yagun, a good friend of Tanya.

Tanya concentrated and, forcing the escaping thoughts to flow again in one direction, sat down to her task. She had to do this because the reference book *Dragons: Breeding, Training, Treatment* had already started to snort unhappily and release sparks. A little more and it would singe the blanket on the bed. It was better not to toy with dragons, even if these were not dragons themselves but merely a book about them.

Recently, not without the influence of her friend Vanka Valyalkin, Tanya had firmly decided that she would dedicate her life to veterinary magic. Perhaps this is not remarkable – to treat sphinxes, harpies, mermaids, centaurs, dragons, which become fewer and fewer from year to year in the magic world? And this is in the magic one! In the world of the moronoids they have almost completely ceased to encounter these strange half-magical creatures. Not without reason the moronoids – normal people – have already almost stopped believing in them.

Moreover, Tanya hoped that the skill to get along with dragons would help her show good results in the favourite game of all magicians – *dragonball*. The rules of the game are simple: two teams of ten players each, two dragons, and five balls: sneeze, flame-extinguisher, stun, pepper, and immobilize. The mouth of the hostile dragon serves as goal. Not everyone has the power to throw a ball there, especially since the battle is fought in the air. Moreover, the dragon of the opposition does not in the least sit on the spot, obediently opening its mouth. Nothing of the kind! On the contrary, it moves swiftly, shoots out a flame, and with all its might tries to swallow tarrying players. Therefore, it frequently turns out that a good half of the forwards languish in the tight stomach of a dragon and hope that someone would throw into its mouth a pepper ball, which will force the dragon to spit them out.

For this very reason, Tanya dreamed now to learn everything about dragons and be on good terms with them. Quick tempered, swift, furious, dragons yielded to no one nor put up with any training. They even got accustomed to the players of their own team with enormous difficulty and frequently, confused, swallowed them instead of players of the opposition.

Tanya sighed and turned the page. How dreary to sit and cram one paragraph after another. Especially since it was not homework but her own whim.

THE RIDDLE OF FLAME THROWING

If your dragon ceased to breathe out fire, it is evidence of its internal weakening. In this situation, a usual tincture of red pepper, mustard, and sulphur should help, in a proportion of 3:4:2 diluted with nitro-glycerine half-and-half with mercury. Give eight buckets to drink three times a day. The mixture is dangerously explosive! Do not shake and carefully adhere to the proportion.

“Eight buckets!” Tanya repeated, pondering how to pour these buckets into a dragon if it, for example, does not want to open its mouth? Squeeze its nostrils? Or perhaps appear with a ladle and say, “Koochi-koo! Open the little mouthie, my little one! A spoon for mummy, a spoon for daddy! Mind you don’t push the bucket or it will jerk so that not a lace from mummy will remain!” Tanya was annoyed. They always write a lot in these reference books, and later you rack your brain trying to figure things out! “Will have to ask Tararakh tomorrow. Indeed he knows exactly how to dose dragons,” she thought.

The immortal pithecanthropus Tararakh – instructor of veterinary magic – was her favourite teacher. Perhaps she also went with similar pleasure to Medusa Gorgonova’s studies of evil spirits. But this was not too surprising, since the subjects in many respects intersected. Among the magical and half-magical essences encountered was a great deal of dangerous evil spirits, which, before being treated, still needed to be tamed as well. Precisely this – taming of evil spirits and studying their habits – also occupied Medusa.

Unexpectedly someone violently pushed open the door, and Coffinia Cryptova, Tanya’s roommate, barged in.

Coffinia, a girl with a very special sense of humour, was from the black magicians. It was her bed in the shape of a gigantic coffin occupying almost the entire space by the window. And a skeleton by the nickname of Page served as her hanger. Several times a month it came alive and began to wander around the room, clicking its teeth. Once it even devoured Tanya’s boots. In a word, Coffinia Cryptova was quite a character. A worse roommate could not be imagined even in a nightmare. However, Tanya did not complain. Uncle Herman’s daughter Pipa, with whom she grew up before coming to Tibidox, was not a bit better.

Having looking askance at Tanya, Coffinia, without taking off her shoes, flopped onto the bed. "Hello, stupid orphan! I have excellent news for you. You'll become bald from this news, and on your nose will appear a new birthmark, even uglier than the one you lost thanks to She-Who-Is-No-More!" she stated.

Tanya looked at Coffinia, calculating whether to launch a fight spark at her. Okay, let her live. If Coffinia was guilty of anything, it was only that her home had a slippery windowsill, and the bassinet, into which she was placed for the first time, turned out not to have a bottom. "Well, and what's the news?" she asked.

Coffinia folded her hand around the telescope and, deliberately stretching out a pause, began to examine Tanya with interest through the hole. "What, you don't know? You haven't been informed that tomorrow they're pushing you out of here? Only imagine: you're returning to your green uncle-vampire and his fat wife, where you lived on the balcony! How do you do, here I am, give me the bagel hole for dinner and candy wrapper for dessert!"

"For what reason? Drop the joke, Cryptova!" Tanya said. Simultaneously she was recalling whether she had done anything recently. Of course not, everything was like normal.

Coffinia snorted. "What jokes are here indeed? They're pushing all of us out. Pity not you alone. Sending us home until Tibidox is rebuilt anew. All the same not possible to stay here now that Sardanapal has decided to send all the students home. Our dean, Professor Stinktopp, agreed with him, so that we, black magicians, are also off... Toodleoo, on a quiet boat! Cheerio, Tibidox!"

Coffinia got up and, throwing open the cabinet, began to toss things onto the bed, clearly deciding what to take with her and what to leave behind. "Not to forget the bat miniskirt, the gloves with claws, and the stockings on heels! Must make the eyes of the moronoids immediately pop out of their heads," she mumbled to herself.

"It's the truth! Everything is true!" Tanya suddenly realized. Her eyes darkened. The reference book slipped from her hands and crossly started to fly around the room, breathing out a tongue of flame exactly like a true dragon. Tanya did not even notice this.

Is it really necessary to forsake this dear, this beloved Tibidox and return to Uncle Herman and Aunt Ninel, who cannot stand her, dress her in cast-offs, and force her to eat vermicelli so slippery that they hang on the fork like dead worms, then stick excellently on the glazed tiles in the kitchen?

Tears choked Tanya's throat. She could not remain in the room anymore and ran out into the corridor. In the common room, she saw Bab-Yagun and Vanka Valyalkin, who, moving away to the window, were quietly deliberating something. Hardly glancing at their depressed faces, Tanya surmised that everything already was known to them. So that is why they have not visited her the whole day today!

"Why? Why didn't you tell me? Even call yourselves my friends! Really honestly, I had to find out everything from Coffinia!" she shouted and, noticing that both boys at once hung their heads, she rushed down along the stairs.

"Wait! No one understands why Sardanapal so decided! No one! Here the matter is clearly bad!" shouted Vanka Valyalkin, the slender mop-headed boy in the long yellow soccer shirt, which his father once gave him as a present. Tanya's best friend, he alone of all the students persistently refused to change into the cape and robe of Tibidox. A boy who for two weeks hid a harpy under his bed and treated its wing. And this despite that the claws of a harpy are impregnated with fatal poison and legends circulate about their bad nature. Now Vanka was about to rush after Tanya, but soon stopped and helplessly sat on a step.

Tanya herself did not remember how she rushed through the Hall of Two Elements, turned into the wide corridor of the teachers, and turned up by Sardanapal's new office, where he moved to when the Tower of Ghosts collapsed. She pushed the door and, swallowing her tears, ran in.

* * *

Tanya found Sardanapal during a moment of extreme busyness. The academician of white magic, laureate of the Award of Magic Suspenders, head of the legendary Tibidox, Sardanapal Chernomorov was chasing his gold sphinx around the table. The hungry books on black magic, which he sometimes used for removing spells, were bobbing up and down excitedly and beating on the bars of a large cage. “Now, did you see this impudent one? Carried off my meat. And it’s for feeding the books!” the academician complained on noticing Tanya. Sardanapal’s luxurious moustaches were angrily waving in ringlets, and the terribly long beard first became invisible, then appeared again.

Tanya wanted to say something, but she was not able to. She only sobbed and, turning, attempted to run out of the office. Sardanapal caught her by the hand. “What’s with you, girl? Dreamt of Plague-del-Cake again?” he asked with uneasiness. In the entire Tibidox only two – Tanya and the academician – were not afraid to call the terrible sorceress, the lady of Chaos, by her name. The rest preferred to use the vague – She-Who-Is-No-More.

“It’s t-true? True that tomorrow everyone will have to r-return to the moronoids?” Tanya uttered, stuttering.

The moustaches of Sardanapal drooped despondently. “Alas,” he sighed. “Alas! The Ancient One sees I tried so that you would learn about this as late as possible, but there is simply no other way out... In a couple of months, it’ll be necessary to interrupt lessons. I know that you don’t want to go to Uncle Herman and Aunt Ninel, but only for a short period... Otherwise it’s simply impossible.”

“But why?”

The academician helplessly parted his hands as if attempting to cover at once the numerous cracks on the walls and the ceiling. “You can see for yourself! Tibidox, of which we were always so proud, resembles a sieve. One more corner tower collapsed the day before yesterday, and the rest are held together on a wing and a prayer. Magic no longer helps. And even what magic is here? Will you cast a spell between each brick? And to rebuild Tibidox in one night would even be beyond the power of the great Ancient One.”

“But the cyclopes? And the heroes Usynya, Gorynya, and Dubynya? They’re working!” Tanya asked with distrust.

Sardanapal made a contemptuous face. “Did you see how they work? These giants are amazingly confused. They put up one wall and bring down two. In Tibidox it’s cold, it’s uncomfortable. The Atlases no longer hold up the arches – what can they support when everything has crumbled? – and from idleness they’re loose along the corridors. Yesterday one of them accidentally stepped on Professor Stinktopp – a remarkable scholar and splendid magician. Just that in the darkness his bald spot resembles a mushroom so that the mistake of the Atlases can be understood in principle. The poor wretch has three hidden breaks. Certainly, Yagge will join his bones, but it’ll take time. Here I decided that it’s worthwhile to send you all away for a time and do major repairs. To drive away all evil spirits, all wood goblins, all giants, and to invite a few more genies on the side – and make everyone help build. Then it’ll make sense.”

“But why send us away? We could live in the Big Tower! It’s solid, and even enough space for everybody!” Tanya proposed, clutching at a last straw.

Sardanapal’s moustaches straightened and began to toss about like the wipers of a car. “No, no, and again no,” he said inflexibly. “No one will remain here. Yes, the Big Tower is solid, but... You see, there is one more reason, which you have no idea about...” The academician cautiously looked around at the sphinx, leaned over slightly, put a finger to his lips and whispered, “Only remember: what I’ll tell you is a secret! No one must know about this! You swear to keep the secret?”

Tanya promised. Sardanapal leaned towards her ear and said quietly, “Three days ago Medusa, Slander Slanderych, and I went down to the basement and discovered that the foundation had fractured.”

Tanya shrugged her shoulders. She saw nothing awful or at least interesting in this news. “Well, so?” she asked. “Everywhere is full of cracks now! There the corner tower collapsed, and nothing, no one was frightened. Seal them up, and that’s all there is!”

Sardanapal looked at her reproachfully. “You don’t understand. The cracks are very near the Sinister Gates! And any second they can go deep down. Then Chaos will escape from the dungeon, the ancient gods will break loose and smash the island to pieces! This is the main reason why we insist that all students leave Tibidox. Only we, the instructors, will remain here, and we’ll make repairs in earnest. I hope we’ll be able to strengthen the basements and create a durable magic barrier. Just remember: not a word to anyone!”

“Agreed,” nodded Tanya. Sardanapal had communicated his seriousness to her. Now she understood how dangerous the cracks in the foundation were. Indeed Tibidox was not only a school for difficult-to-raise young magicians from the “white” and “black” departments. Tibidox was also a fortress-prison: ancient spirits, heathen gods, and Chaos are confined in the basements.

After Shurasik, enslaved by She-Who-Is-No-More, with the gold sword cut the Hair of The Ancient One into two, the balance of forces between good and evil, intact for millennia, was disrupted. And although she, Tanya Grotter, was able to prevent Plague-del-Cake from opening the Sinister Gates and setting Chaos free, this threat existed as before. The forces of evil are immortal. They are there in the basement – roaring and shaking the Gates. Now it is always necessary to be on the alert.

“Can I stay? I’ll help. Please!” Tanya asked.

Sardanapal shook his head. “Impossible. If you stay, others will want to stay, and you yourself understand what this can lead to... We’re also taking a risk – we’re releasing into the world of the moronoids a whole crowd of half-educated magicians! A nightmare! Slander Slanderych is horrified even now by what you’ll be up to there.”

Tanya became ashamed that she could not keep herself in control and broke into the office of the academician. Now when she found out the truth, it became clear to her that Sardanapal’s solution was singularly valid and it would be impossible to change it.

“By the way, Tanya, I have a commission for you...” the academician continued. “Not as a service, but for friendship. You’ll take something with you to the world of the moronoids. Medusa thought and... eh-eh... I decided that during repairs much can suffer or be lost. It’ll be better if we send them with those whom we trust.”

“What shall I take with me?” Tanya was interested.

Sardanapal knitted his brows. His moustaches began to jump with such animation and inspiration that they were actually conducting a symphony. “First, you’ll take with you Black Curtains...” he said.

Tanya almost began to moan. Only not Black Curtains! Possible to think that here, in Tibidox, they have spoilt her blood a little. “Oh, not them please? Why do I need them? They’ll fly at night and peek at dreams. Or they’ll scare someone half to death,” she objected.

“Now precisely for this very reason why someone must keep an eye on them,” Sardanapal retorted.

Tanya nodded. She knew that it was useless to argue with the head of the white department of Tibidox. Especially when Medusa supported him, and he had decided...

“And you’ll also take this with you!” Sardanapal clicked his fingers and a huge leather trunk crept out from under his table.

The trunk took off and dashed towards Tanya at an enormous speed. The girl in fright shielded herself with her hands, certain that now she would be knocked from her feet. But the trunk turned

out to be light. Likely, it was empty altogether. “But what’s inside?” Tanya asked, stretching to the gleaming locks.

“STOP! Must not open it now!” the academician said quickly.

“Why?”

“You see...” Sardanapal hesitated, looking sideways at Tanya. “Well, but you’ll find out all the same. There are ghosts in there.”

“Ghosts?” Tanya asked again dejectedly. Next to the ghosts, Black Curtains, palmed off on her at first, immediately began to seem like a trifle. “And what ghosts are there? Not Eyeless Horror, I hope?”

“What’s with you, what’s with you!” the academician smiled. “We’ll hand Horror to someone among the senior pupils. In this trunk are merely Lieutenant Rzhevskii and Unhealed Lady... Take them with you, they’ll only interfere with us. It’s clear that you must be very careful: the moronoids must on no account find out what you have in the trunk. They treat ghosts very incorrectly. Some, they say, even faint.”

Tanya dejectedly sat on the trunk. Here is such an assignment – completely in the spirit of Academician Chernomorov. Rzhevskii will again tell his idiotic little jokes and show off the twelve knives in his back, and Unhealed Lady from morning till evening will moan and complain about her problems.

“Trust me, there’s nothing for you to worry about!” the academician continued briskly, with each second becoming more animated. “You see the seal on the handle? On the sealing wax is the impression of my ring. Ghosts fear it with dread. Not for nothing the ring once belonged to the Sovereign of Spirits! But even if there is no seal, all the same they wouldn’t rush out.”

“Why? Don’t ghosts pass through masonry, penetrate through walls? But here’s nothing but a trunk,” Tanya said with distrust.

“This is a special trunk. You see, it’s made from the skin of Minotaur, a terrible half-bull, which was once conquered by Theseus. Ghosts can’t pass through it... Here look!” Sardanapal picked up the trunk and energetically shook it. It was true that no one tumbled out of the trunk, but then the ghosts confined in it came alive.

“Hurray! Long live the swing! I want more!” Lieutenant Rzhevskii yelled with laughter, and Unhealed Lady began to moan that she was dying and demanded that they immediately summoned a doctor for her.

“I cannot be in the society of this cad anymore! He doesn’t change his socks and always tells the same anecdotes! He smokes stinky cigarettes! He steps on my hat with roses!” she complained.

“She lies all the time!” Lieutenant yelled indignantly. “It’s me who must be saved from her! She drinks iodine the whole day and passes on her sores! And this hat of hers with the roses! Might as well be cacti pin on! To hell with it!”

Tanya and the academician exchanged understanding glances. Unhealed Lady again started to keen, threatening that now she would nail this dork with her umbrella.

“Don’t wail! What do you want?” Sardanapal asked her.

“Supply me with a thermometer! Give me medicine! Drink *bruderschaft* with me with a wineglass of ethyl! Or I’ll kill everyone! I’ll add rat poison into the tea! I’ll fling my appendix at everyone!” Unhealed Lady threatened.

Academician Chernomorov smiled and twirled a finger by his temple. Likely, the threats of the spectre amused him.

“They’ll arrange these free concerts at Uncle Herman’s? The entire building will come running to us!” Tanya was concerned.

“What’s the seal for? Here look! You take this here and you pull slightly this way... Especially slightly in order not to break the wire!” Sardanapal pressed the seal with two fingers, turned it slightly, and the voices of the ghosts at once fell silent as if the sound had been turned off. “Here’s the whole

deal! This I call 'to put in one's place' and 'to tighten the screws.' While the seal is intact and the trunk is closed, you won't have any trouble with the ghosts. Now and then, you can even let them get some fresh air so that they don't wither away from melancholy. I don't see any great harm in this," said the academician.

Unexpectedly his gold sphinx pricked up its ears and began to growl quietly. Hasty steps were heard in the corridor, and Dentistikha ran, stumbling, into the office. She was tiny, round, young, with bangs like a pony's over her eyes. She taught removal of evil eye to white magicians and imposition of evil eye to the black. She adored reading abstruse verses and smelling flowers. True, this did not interfere with her putting strong curses on the students for training purposes, so that sometimes for half an hour they rolled on the floor with a sharp pain in their stomachs, attempting to recall the neutralizing spell. "It was your homework! Next time you'll be more responsible for your lessons!" Dentistikha said in such cases, pensively turning in her fingers a cornflower or a camomile.

Now the instructor for removal of evil eye was behaving as if she was beside herself with terror. "Professor!" she shouted, choking. "Quick! The Vanishing Floor... it appeared again... I just climbed up along the stairs and saw how someone's shadow slid there, and then... It's simply a nightmare! I'm barely alive!"

Tanya was startled. Until now, she would swear that the instructor for removal of evil eye simply could not be frightened in the least. Once during a class Eyeless Horror (the most terrible ghost in the entire Tibidox) stole up to her and with a terrible howl rushed at her from behind. Most likely Horror reckoned that she would begin to squeal and disgrace herself before the entire class, only that he picked the wrong victim. Turning slightly, Dentistikha with a shield spell nailed him to the wall and, as if nothing had happened, continued to explain the theme. After this incident, the children gave her the nickname the Great Tooth, which she knew about and was proud of. However, now it was difficult to recognize the Great Tooth. Is this really her, barely alive with fear, hanging onto Sardanapal's sleeve?

"Professor, do something! I beg you!" she exclaimed, continually looking around fearfully. "Why are you silent? You know that once the Floor appeared, then... Must do something immediately! Indeed someone can go on the stairs, and then... True, I met Slander, but if he won't have time..."

"Quiet, Deni! Later we'll have a talk! We're not alone!" Sardanapal severely pulled her up sharp, nodding towards Tanya.

Suddenly recollecting, Dentistikha covered her mouth with her hand.

"Time for you to go!" the academician turned to Tanya. "Pass the word that tomorrow after dinner everyone must be in the Hall of Two Elements. Absolutely everybody! Yes, and take the trunk!"

Looking sideways with curiosity at Dentistikha, Tanya said goodbye and left. For a second the thought flickered in her to linger slightly at the doors, but the gold sphinx slipped from the office after her and set up guard. Academician Sardanapal knew how to guard his secrets. "And I don't greatly want to know anyway!" Tanya muttered and went to her room. "Two months... Two months with Uncle Herman, Pipa, and Aunt Ninel, when the most interesting thing is happening here! I could howl! Indeed better Plague-del-Cake than Uncle Herman!" she grumbled, kicking before her the trunk with ghosts.

She was already approaching the Main Staircase when Slander Slanderych jumped out to meet her. Now the dean was without the little fish, but was smudged with slime up to his eyes. Likely his rendezvous was again unsuccessful. Noticing Tanya, the dean decisively barred her way. His small colorless eyes, bunched up above the bridge of his nose, were glued to the girl's forehead. As it happened, it seemed to Tanya that everything froze inside her. His terrible imperious glance worked this way. "Where are you going?" Slander bellowed. "Ah well, go back! Can't go along the Main Staircase!"

“Why not? It was always possible!” Tanya was surprised.

“Not your business why not! I’m closing off this Staircase from this minute! Forever!” Slander Slanderych shouted and, turning away, hurriedly began to cast shield spells. Red and green sparks flew alternately from his ring. When it was necessary to place a defence, the dean of Tibidox always came running willingly to black magic. And the cyclopes were already stomping along the corridor to them. An instant and they were already standing still along both sides to the entrance. “Stand here and let no one through!” Slander ordered them. “And you, Grotter, go! Can’t stand here!”

“For sure this also has to do with the Vanishing Floor... Well, is it really fair that they hide everything from us?” Tanya thought with sadness.

Chapter 2

The Cupid in the Cupboard

In all of Moscow, there was not a family drearier, more troublesome, and more insufferable than the Durneys. It consisted of Uncle Herman, Aunt Ninel, and their daughter Pipa (short for Penelope). It was even hard to believe that the Durneys were relatives of the Grotters. True, this relationship was distant: Uncle Herman was the second cousin once removed of the grandmother of Leopold Grotter, Tanya's father. The Grotters had no other relatives among the moronoids. Specifically for this reason, when Tanya's parents perished in the struggle with Plague-del-Cake, Sardanapal and Medusa stealthily brought the one-year-old girl to Uncle Herman, placing her in a double bass case on his threshold.

Tanya was now standing with this case made of dragon skin at the doors of the Durneys' apartment. Only this time she had the flying double bass in the case, and in her left hand, she was holding the bundle with Black Curtains tied up with a special restraining magic lace. While the lace was whole, Black Curtains would not be in the position to play any of their tricks.

Near Tanya's foot was the trunk, in which the ghosts were quarrelling in an undertone. Lady was pestering Lieutenant with stories about her sores, of which she had more than were mentioned in the medical encyclopaedia. In any case, during those long hours that Tanya was flying over the ocean, gripping with her knees the varnished sides of the double bass, Lady had time to list only those of her ailments beginning with the letter A.

It somehow reminded Tanya of Uncle Herman with his outrageous hypochondria. Durnev only needed to sneeze casually and would immediately go to consult his doctor. If even a head cold was added to the sneeze, Uncle Herman would lie in bed, cross his arms on his chest, and start to say goodbye verbosely to Aunt Ninel and Pipa.

"Two months! I must live here for a whole two months!" Tanya repeated, looking at the door with melancholy and not deciding to ring the doorbell.

"Quiet! I'll ring now!" she said to the disagreeing ghosts.

"Holy moly, how terrible! I've already fainted!" Lieutenant Rzhevskii, laughing aloud, began to yell.

"What did you say your relatives are called? Uncle Pullman and Aunt Flannel? I'll show them my tonsils and describe the hepatic colic! I'm sure it'll be instructive for them!" Unhealed Lady said with enthusiasm.

"Oh yes! Oh yes! Indeed most interesting!" Lieutenant mimicked. "My head simply slips off from interest! Ah, you hold it! Shmak!"

Unhealed Lady squealed loudly. "And you, army wit, put the head back on! Discovered how to waste your energy with your head! Brr, what abomination! It's blinking at me so disgustingly on his knees!" she shouted angrily. Lieutenant again burst out with the idiotic laughter.

"I warned you! Either you sit quietly or... In short, you forced me!" Tanya adjusted the seal on the trunk and both ghosts in a flash became quiet.

Gathering her courage, Tanya rang the doorbell. "Interesting, how will the Durneys react to my return? Most likely not very pleased!" she thought.

The sound of the doorbell had not yet died down but the dachshund already began to bark in the apartment. The dachshund was called One-And-A-Half Kilometres. Fat and troublesome, it was a worthy member of the Durnev family. Its favourite occupation was to nip at the heels of guests. If it was chased into the corridor, then from malice One-And-A-Half Kilometres would drool into the boots there.

In half a minute, a door was already thrown open in the depth of the apartment, and thick heels started to thump resonantly on the linoleum. Tanya shivered. Aunt Ninel! Her steps could be recognized out of a thousand. “Why are you barking, my young rat? Come to mommy!” Aunt Ninel started to lisp like a child. Her thick heels finally stopped thumping, and Tanya understood that she was being narrowly examined through the peephole. “Oh, no!” Aunt Ninel howled in an ugly voice. “Oh, no! Herman! Herman! It’s your niece! Not without reason some skeleton was choking me all night tonight!”

Someone else’s footsteps were heard. This time they were quiet and sounded approximately like this: “juk-juk-juk.” Uncle Herman was three times lighter than his spouse. Emaciated, with a green face, he strongly resembled a vampire. And even, it seems, he was related to Count Dracula. However, not along Tanya’s line but along some entirely different one. In any case, Yagge so asserted. Only, in contrast to his relative with big fangs, Uncle Herman was not a magician. And he did not believe in magic at all. Here he would be astonished if he were to find out that Tanya had not been living in the railway station these several months but studying in a real school for magicians. “Yes, it’s her! I said: frost hits, and she’ll drag herself along without a peep!” Tanya heard the venomous voice of Uncle Herman. “Pipa, Pipa, come here! You also take a look!”

Guessing that now a maliciously rejoicing Pipa would look into the peephole, Tanya as a preventive measure stuck out her tongue. It was well known that the Durnev’s daughter could not stand her. During her entire early childhood, Tanya was poisoned by contact with Pipa. How often she insulted Tanya, locked her on the balcony, told tales, and played dirty tricks! During the time that Tanya was in Tibidox, the school of magic, Pipa could hardly have changed for the better.

“Tanya Grotter! Oh no! It’s really too much that she’s here! I so hoped that something had happened to her! That a brick had fallen on her head or they had put her in prison!” Pipa began to yell, turning away from the eyehole.

“Pipa, what are you saying? Never say that. We must pity a poor orphan. She’s not guilty that she has good-for-nothing parents and she herself is useless just like them,” Aunt Ninel said in an affected voice.

“No-o! Mama, papa, don’t open! Let’s barricade it and not let her in! Let her roll back to where she came from!” Pipa began to squeal, hanging onto her mama’s leg.

“Calm down, Pipa! Not possible not to let her in. The journalists find out and they’ll spoil your papa’s career. Better we quietly get rid of her later to the boot camp for children with criminal inclinations,” Aunt Ninel whispered.

“Why later, why not right now?” Pipa yelled. “If you let her in, I’ll leave home! It’s because of her I’m bald! And she also scalded me with tea! Give her a rug and let her spend the night on the stairs! Is that clear?”

However, Aunt Ninel and Uncle Herman decided otherwise. The lock clicked, the door was thrown open, and Tanya found herself face to face with the Durnevs. Aunt Ninel towered in front of everybody like an unapproachable bastion, like a hippopotamus in a house robe and soft slippers. The dachshund was seething in her arms. Uncle Herman was standing slightly to the side, and Pipa was looking out from behind his back. The hair, which Pipa had lost, attempting to flood the magic book with glue, had time to grow slightly and now stuck out like a short prickly hedgehog. But Pipa had four times more pimples. And she was even in pyjamas. “So, it’s night time at the moronoids now! Oh, I saw that it’s night! Why did I not consider it immediately? I roused them!” Tanya recollected suddenly.

However, in this case the circumstance played into her hands. “Do you know what time it is? Almost three o’clock!” Aunt Ninel said grumpily. “Already late tonight, I’ll have a talk with you tomorrow!”

Thus far, Uncle Herman had kept silent; however, his small eyes maliciously drilled into the unknown leather trunk and the bundle with Black Curtains. Tanya surmised that now without fail Durnev would be interested in what these things were and where she took them from.

“Uncle Herman, and how are your rabbits getting on?” she asked, hoping to soften him up. “Already asleep?” Her question – the most innocent, it would seem – forced all the Durnevs to turn blue with rage. They could not stand to recall this episode in their life. About how Uncle Herman, trying to box Tanya’s ear, hit the magic double bass. And magical instruments do not like it when they are so treated. As a result Uncle Herman thought of himself as Lisper the Rabbit, brought into the apartment a whole one hundred big-eared fellows and even gave an interview on TV, stating that he was giving up a political career because he adored animals...

“I don’t want to hear about the rabbits anymore! We sent them away to the zoo! Understand? Predators must also be fed,” Aunt Ninel said gloatingly.

“By the way, papa was again elected deputy! Voters almost unanimously voted for him after that interview... Papa is now terribly popular! He even signs autographs!” Pipa added.

“But indeed Uncle Herman... You also truly loved them! You yourself were the very rabbit Lisper...” Tanya was surprised.

Uncle Herman began to stomp his feet. Since he was very emaciated, in order to stomp louder, it was necessary for him to jump up high. “NO! Keep quiet! I was not anyone! I’m Herman Durnev – deputy! Head of the best faction and chairman of the most humane committee! Is that clear?” he roared, sputtering. He turned so green that Tanya was afraid that he would hit her, and moved aside just in case. “Clear, clear. In fact, I’m going to bed...” she said, sadly thinking that Uncle Herman was much more likable as a rabbit.

Although Uncle Herman almost choked her, the recollection about the “carrot-cabbage” period of his life forced the best deputy to forget about the suspicious trunk. He pressed his temples with his hands and, swinging like a pendulum, left for the bedroom. Behind him, mincing with short legs, Pipa ran away. Only Aunt Ninel was left with Tanya. “It’s now winter, cold on the balcony, you’ll sleep in the big room! And only try to roam at night along the apartment – I’ll skin you! No switching on the lights! Don’t touch the TV!” she said, looking somewhere at the wall above Tanya’s head. Aunt Ninel locked all the locks of the entrance door, slid in the chain, and withdrew, following Uncle Herman.

“Welcome! Now I’m home!” Tanya thought sadly. Having climbed onto the sofa, she hugged her knees with her arms. She recalled the farewell with Bab-Yagun and Vanka Valyalkin. Parting, they exchanged addresses. Will they write? She left Tibidox only six hours ago, but now solitude was already gnawing her like a worm. She terribly needed someone close and loving, with whom she could talk about everything.

She moved the trunk with ghosts under the sofa, placed the bundle with Black Curtains on the armchair, and lay down, pressing the double bass against herself. “Only you are left with me! Don’t even know if we’ll be able to fly around here.” sobbing, she said to the double bass. The strings of the double bass began to hum sadly.

* * *

The dreariest days stretched on. As if the Durnevs had agreed to poison Tanya’s life, to make it as unbearable as possible. Pipa spied on her all day and rushed to tell tales at the slightest excuse. Aunt Ninel harassed her with endless faultfinding, but Uncle Herman did not generally notice her, as if there was an empty place instead of Tanya. He even hardly addressed her by name, and once when Tanya sat in his chair in the kitchen, Uncle Herman demanded with disgust, “Get *it* away from here! *It* doesn’t fit here!”

Then when the journalists came to them, Uncle Herman transformed unrecognizably. He forced Tanya to sit down next to him, embraced her around the shoulders, and said, “I’m awfully glad that

she was found! She's like my own! Although, you know, there are so many problems with this girl. My wife and I took her from a difficult family..."

"Practically from the dumpster!" Pipa immediately chimed in.

"Daughter! It's impolite!" Aunt Ninel was falsely horrified, but immediately she began to whisper loudly, "Although, speaking in strict confidence, so it was... What work it was for us to clean her and teach her the basics of using a knife and a fork!"

Tanya patiently endured all this, although she was a hundred times cleaner than Pipa, and indeed used the fork better than Aunt Ninel herself, who cleaned her nails with it. The Durneys simply adored telling filth about Leopold Grotter and his wife Sophia. Until she was ten, Tanya did not know that her parents had perished. She thought that her papa was in prison and mama begged in the station. In any case, the Durneys lied to her this way. She only learned the truth in Tibidox that Leopold and Sophia Grotter were the greatest magicians and they perished protecting her, when Tanya was not even a year old.

In school – in her old moronoid school – everything was generally awful. Tanya did not assume that she had time to be so estranged from it. All the subjects seemed terribly confusing to her. There was neither flying journals nor smoking cauldrons nor instructors coming down from the ceiling like Professor Stinktopp in a hammock. No one treated griffins in class like Tararakh nor cast evil eye like Dentistikha so that it would be merrier to teach the spells. Everything was boring and ordinary. But the worst was that there was no magic piloting – Tanya's favourite subject.

The classmates, incited by Pipa, looked at Tanya suspiciously and all the time tried to find out where the birthmark on the tip of her nose had disappeared to. Did she have plastic surgery? How could they know that what they assumed as an ugly birthmark was in reality the Talisman of Four Elements, lost during Tanya's struggle with Plague-del-Cake? Then Genka Bulonov – a confused dolt who once by chance spied Tanya as she was flying on the double bass – was at her heels and badgered her with stupid questions. Soon this tired Tanya, and she in earnest began to consider putting a small curse on him so that he would leave her alone.

* * *

Returning from school on Friday, Tanya discovered that Aunt Ninel was standing by the armchair and holding in her hands the bundle with Black Curtains. "Here's a forgetful person! And why didn't I hide them?" the girl remembered suddenly. Shouting "Don't open it! Mustn't!" Tanya rushed to the bundle, but Aunt Ninel had already clicked the scissors. The severed magic lace slid to the floor and, after becoming a quick-moving snake, briskly crept away behind the radiator.

"What heavy tassels! But you know, it doesn't matter! Old-fashioned, but stylish! Where did you take them from?" Durneva asked suspiciously, examining the curtains in the light.

"They were given to me..."

"Ah yes, I know... that most cranky old man!" Aunt Ninel exclaimed contemptuously. Knowing that the Durneys would not believe her all the same, Tanya did not tell them anything about Tibidox. They for some reason decided that the girl lived an entire month with some old man and his wife, the address of whom she refused to tell, and this mobile old man allegedly gave Tanya the curtains and the trunk as gifts.

"Know what I've decided? I'll hang them in my bedroom! It'll be stylish!" Aunt Ninel stated. "Only they must go first to the dry-cleaner! Must be three kilograms of mud on them!"

"Never dry-clean them! Under no circumstances!" Tanya was frightened, noticing that the edge of the curtains began to quiver angrily. As any self-respecting magic object, the curtains were terribly proud that they had not been cleaned since the time of The Ancient One.

"Possible – never... Forgot to ask you! March to do your lessons!" Aunt Ninel snorted and left, after throwing Black Curtains over her shoulders. It was clear she could not have noticed what was

perfectly evident to Tanya standing behind her. Namely, that Black Curtains vindictively depicted the skull and crossbones. The skull for some reason subtly resembled the face of Aunt Ninel.

Tanya sighed, understanding that it was not possible for her to change the mind of Aunt Ninel. She was thick-skinned like a hippopotamus and obstinate like an entire herd of donkeys. “Well, okay! I warned her. Then she’ll not complain of insomnia now!” Tanya mumbled and glanced under the sofa, checking if the trunk with ghosts was intact. The trunk was in place and Tanya calmed down. So, Pipa had not yet gotten here, although she was also always hanging around somewhere nearby.

* * *

That night Tanya could not fall asleep for a long time. She lay on the sofa, looked overhead at the off-white ceiling with the very large crystal chandelier similar to a wasps’ nest, and thought about Tibidox. A blizzard was howling beyond the window. It caught the dry biting snow, whirled it, and threw it at the window.

It constantly seemed to Tanya that someone was drumming on the glass, therefore, when there was knocking on the window for real, she did not immediately pay any attention. Only when the knock indeed became quite loud, Tanya turned and... almost yelled from rapture! Incredible! On the outside was a cupid in red suspenders and chilled to the bone. Cupids, or amours, were the postmen of the magic world. With a bag over their shoulder, they rushed around all day from one magician to another and handed out to them letters, messages, and telegrams.

Tanya threw open the window. The cupid flew into the room and, cheeping angrily, started to shake out the snow from the quiver with the arrows. Then he began to shake his mailbag in exactly the same manner, and two envelopes slightly soggy from the snow fell out of it. One letter was from Bab-Yagun and the other from Vanka Valyalkin. “Hurray! Mail!” Tanya was pleased, pressing the letters to her chest.

Not being able to decide which of the two to read first, she shuffled the envelopes with her eyes closed and opened the one that turned up on top. It was the message from Vanka Valyalkin.

“Hello!” Vanka wrote. “Everything is like normal with me. I did not go to my parents, you know how they are at home. They simply drink terribly. If I turned up, they would begin to take up the belt – no doubt about it.

“Now I’m living with grandmother, missing Tibidox... Remember how wonderful it was to treat firebirds and unicorns? But here it’s better not to deal with harpies: they stink terribly and their claws are sharp.

“Now recently in school one fellow, older than me, already thirteen, started to pick a fight, got into my knapsack, and drank the tincture for mermaids. The misfortune of fish scales terrifies him, indeed, he has them on his hands, his cheeks, and on his neck, and I do not know what to do to make them go away. I wrote Tararakh, but so far, he has not answered. I even do not know whether he will answer, because pithecanthropus is not the best with reading and writing. But indeed Tararakh can also ask someone if he wants to... Either Stinktopp, Yagge, or Dentistikha. On the other hand, this fellow had it coming, because he was simply making my life miserable. There are those sorts of things here! And you also write me, do not disappear.

“I frequently remember you. Indeed you know that I... (several more words were crossed out many, many times). In short, so long! Write!

“By the way, completely forgot to tell you. Recently I saw an enormous bird. Well, terribly similar to Lifeless Griffin! True, I just did not grasp whether that was it or not. If it was, it is impossible to understand what is it doing in the world of the moronoids? Well that is all, so long once again, be careful just in case.

“Your friend Vanka.”

Having attentively examined the deleted words in the light, Tanya smiled and opened the envelope from Bab-Yagun. If Vanka wrote his letter on a normal sheet crookedly torn out of a school notebook, then Bab-Yagun used a large piece of birch bark. On the reverse side of the birch bark, there was one of his granny Yagge's prescriptions, in which she prescribed to someone crocodile tears and stonecrop seedpods.

The letter of Bab-Yagun was completely in his spirit, that is, without "hello," without "good-bye," and even without punctuation marks. A continuous flow of the consciousness: what I see, so I write. But at the same time it came not from anywhere but from Tibidox itself. Bab-Yagun was the only student, whom they allowed to remain in the school during repairs. Sardanapal simply could not send him off anywhere because Bab-Yagun had no relatives in the world of the moronoids. There was no one at all except Yagge.

"Here I recently disassembled the vacuum put a new nozzle on the pipe now it will not sneeze on me during takeoff True grandmother says whenever I repair the vacuum she then joins my bones because something slips out of position inside if my hands grow as they normally grow in others Interesting but you sometimes examined your double bass although there is surely nothing worth doing inside Tanya you play dragonball excellently well my granny and I always recall how you then marvellously threw the flame-extinguisher ball into the mouth of the dragon of the werewolves then we were all simply stunned that on the whole somebody almost tumbled down from the bench Pity only the match did not finish because the dragons fought and this pig Shurasik cut the Hair of The Ancient One into two and cooked up all this mess of course maybe we will still play Recently I was in the hangars of the dragons Goyaryn is now in hibernation and Mercury's wound from the spear has already healed although each day Tararakh goes to it as before"

"Here something strange is going on in Tibidox they tell me nothing but only Slander as you remember shut down the Main Staircase and they are all afraid of something cast a heap of spells everywhere Simply it became impossible to walk each second something snaps into action And yet now such a construction is going on here that wow from everywhere gathered house-spirits and wood-goblins and giants and all kinds of evil spirits well you really will not believe how many They build day and night Usynya and Gorynya barely manage to bring stones to them and Dubynya cannot work because the suspension bridge fell on his head He wanted to explain how the bridge works and poked with his crown Granny says another would be beaten down he got nothing except a brain concussion and since then is giggling all the time but will soon be fine"

"How is it with you there Uncle Herman not very irritating if he is you tell me I will sort it out with him He is indeed as harmful as She-Who-Is-No-More And here yet one more piece of news When they investigated the blockages in the basement they did not find She-Who-Is-No-More Sardanapal says nothing dreadful but indeed at least a small speck should remain"

"Recently I heard how Dentistikha talked about this with Tararakh only they immediately stopped talking when they saw me and ordered me to go where I was going but I was not going anywhere I was simply going for a walk because I am bored here alone Granny says study your lessons but I am sick of studying when there is no one to study with and there is nothing to do"

"Maybe soon I will attempt to make my way to that Staircase which Slander blocked up because it is terribly inconvenient all the time to go on the far Staircase how can there be something terrible on the Staircase there"

"Well that is all I am going because the cupid got tired of waiting while I finish the letter and here he searched for Granny's candy and spilled all her tinctures well I am in a fix because he can then fly away but I have a strong-willed granny She will definitely let someone have it"

Tanya reread Bab-Yagun's letter two or three times before she understood his scribbling. "Again disassembled his vacuum!" she thought merrily, deciding that Bab-Yagun had not changed a bit. He always so loved to tinker with magic technology. True, it would be better he stopped his restless hands, because a vacuum with vertical takeoff is a delicate piece and requires special handling.

At the same time, Tanya wanted to re-read the letter from Vanka, but here someone started to chirp indignantly and the cupid began to pull her by the nightshirt! She had completely forgotten about him! Tanya became conscientious that she did not concern herself with the postman.

“Are you frozen? Do you want to warm up by the radiator?” she asked. The cupid shook his head and pointed with a finger first to his mouth, and then to his stomach. He was clearly demanding that he should be fed. Chubby cupids had a terrible sweet tooth. Not without reason they were usually paid with pastries or candies for the delivery of mail. They recognized no other forms of payment. “Fine. Let’s go to the kitchen. Only be quiet... Otherwise we’ll even wake someone up,” Tanya whispered and slipped into the corridor first.

The apartment of the best deputy Herman Durnev, a relative of Count Dracula, was not small at all. Of washrooms alone there were three complete ones, and in the corridor even a place for washing hands. Only Tanya was uncomfortable here. She liked much more the intricate labyrinths of Tibidox – with drafts buzzing, with mysterious chests in the niches, with moth-eaten Turkish flying carpets, which the feet sank softly into.

The cupid, not falling behind, flew after Tanya, flicking his suspenders in anticipation of sweets. In the darkness, he did not make out the turn and hit his forehead against the door of Pipa’s room. Bang! “Who’s there? What do you want?” the daughter of Uncle Herman shouted with a sleepy voice from behind the door. The cupid, massaging the lump on his forehead, started to squeak indignantly, voicing everything he was thinking about this door. Tanya grabbed him and covered his mouth.

“I ask: who’s there?” Pipa repeated nervously from behind the door. Tanya understood that another second – and she would begin to squeal. It was necessary to think of something urgently. “Arf-arf!” Tanya growled quietly, scratching the door with her nails. Indeed if anything, she simply knew how to mimic the dachshund excellently. Hearing the familiar bark, Pipa was calmed in a flash. “Get away from here, One-And-A-Half Kilometres! I’m not letting you in! You’ll slobber over my slippers!” she yawned, dropping her nose into the pillow.

In the kitchen, Tanya disconcertedly stopped by the cabinet, in which Aunt Ninel stored sweets. She was certain that in the evening Pipa even glued secret threads and hairs around the cabinet. If one of them was torn, tomorrow a terrible screech would rise. But how was Pipa to know about the existence of the outstanding spell *Fogus sneakus*, which Tanya learnt from Coffinia? For one who used this black magic spell, it was possible not to fear locks and bolts. True, it was necessary to enter all closed doors only backwards.

After whispering “*Fogus sneakus!*” Tanya turned and, pushing a hand through the door of the cabinet, started to fumble inside. Numerous packets rustled. Although Aunt Ninel was eternally on a diet, it did not prevent her from regularly replenishing the stock. “Aha, here... What do you want: cookies, wafers, candy, cakes, chocolate, or fruit drops?” Tanya asked, by feel determining which was what. The cupid began to bounce excitedly and pat himself on the stomach, showing that he wanted absolutely everything. “And you’ll not burst?” Tanya was amazed. “Well okay, you wanted it!”

When in half an hour she laid out the last cake on the table, the cupid could not even push it into his mouth, although he tried to do this with both hands. His stomach was extended like a rubber pear, and the suspenders, it seemed, were ready to break. Gratefully squeaking, the cupid flapped his wings and attempted to take off. However, the best he could manage was to fly half a metre. Here strength finally left the overfed postman. He blinked drowsily, smiled blissfully, folded up his wings and collapsed with a dreadful crash onto the table.

Tanya rushed to him. She was convinced that the cupid had broken his neck, but someone with a wrung neck would not be breathing heavily and so sweetly in dreams or put under the cheek a wafer wrapper. Tanya belatedly recalled that Medusa in homework on *evil spirits studies* advised them on no account to overfeed cupids, because they do not have a sense of proportion. But he asked so sweetly that she could not refuse.

“What am I to do with him now?” Tanya thought. Scolding herself, she began to sweep up crumbs from the table, but here someone’s hasty footsteps were heard in the depth of the apartment. There was already no time to ponder. Grabbing the cupid by the hands, Tanya managed to shove him into the dish cupboard. She had hardly slammed the door shut when someone broke into the kitchen.

Light flared up. A blinded Tanya closed her eyes. When she again assumed the ability to see, she discovered that before her emerged an infuriated Uncle Herman. By his feet, the traitor-dachshund burst into barking. “What are you doing here? Who permits you to come at night into the kitchen? You know how sensitively I sleep!” Uncle Herman roared. “Rice porridge for supper was too little for you?”

“No, not too little. I adore it when porridge sticks to the plate,” said Tanya, attempting to push unnoticeably with a foot a chocolate foil under the table. Of course, this was not hidden from the penetrating eyes of the best deputy. “You’re lying! You’re a spoilt insolent liar! Exactly like your own father!” he hissed. “Go lively to your room and don’t dare go anywhere! I’ll speak with you in the morning!” Tanya turned and, having shrugged her shoulders, left for her room. Uncle Herman, wheezing angrily, dragged himself behind her. The dachshund remained alone in the kitchen. It looked around suspiciously, sniffed, and started to growl at the dish cupboard.

After some time the door of the cupboard was thrown open. An angry cupid looked out from there, on his head was Aunt Ninel’s favourite dark-blue cup pulled down over the eyes. On seeing the cupid, One-And-A-Half Kilometres began to sneeze with malice. The cupid could not stand everyday rudeness. Not thinking for long, he brought down onto the dachshund a large saucepan, which covered its head. Yelping in fear, the saucepan began to crawl under the chair. Yawning, the cupid carefully shut the doors, placed the quiver under his head, and again fell asleep.

* * *

In the morning, Tanya waited for a dressing down and even severe punishment from the Durnevs, but Uncle Herman had left early for work, and Aunt Ninel was in a completely complacent mood. When Tanya came into the kitchen, she was sitting at the table and eating a lemon. Tanya only needed to glance at this and her jaws immediately closed. Aunt Ninel herself did not even pucker.

“Every self-respecting person should compulsorily eat a whole lemon in the morning!” she briskly informed the girl. “It’s extremely useful! It restores acidity and cleanses superfluous information from the brain! Please pass me a saucer! Nowhere to spit out the pits!” Tanya was about to move to the dish cupboard, but suddenly remembered that the overfed postman was sleeping there.

“Why are you dawdling? You want me to get up myself?” Aunt Ninel impatiently shouted. “No need, I’ll do it!” Trying to obstruct the door with her back, Tanya carefully opened the cupboard slightly and with relief took a deep breath. The cupid had disappeared. Likely, he woke up early in the morning and flew away. Tanya handed the Aunt the saucer and sat beside her.

“Ah yes! This morning they brought your curtains back from the dry cleaner...” said Durneva. “Already?” Tanya asked fearfully. She did not think that they would manage so quickly at the dry cleaner’s. Aunt Ninel raised her eyebrows. “It was unexpected for me too. By the way, earlier for some reason I didn’t notice that some stutterer works at our dry cleaner’s,” she said. “Soon some stutterers will also live here,” Tanya thought, but she did not begin to spread this. Why load superfluous information into Aunt Ninel’s brain purified by a lemon?

A yelp reached them from under the table. One-And-A-Half Kilometres, relaxed and absent-minded, was lying on the rug and tenderly looking at Uncle Herman’s old cap, which the best deputy usually pulled all the way down to his eyes in the warm season, protecting his crown from the impact of the sun. On the dachshund’s forehead was a lump, and the inverted saucepan lay beside the cap.

On Sunday, Aunt Ninel and Pipa left immediately after breakfast for the club to go bowling. They did not take Tanya, but she also did not long for it. After dragonball all other games seem

uninteresting. And really can anything be compared to the wind whistling all around, and you, gripping the double bass with your knees, speeding away from the dragon overtaking you, and then, sharply swooping down, throw into its mouth a flame-extinguisher or pepper ball?

Seizing the opportunity that no one would interfere with her, Tanya wrote letters to Vanka Valyalkin and Bab-Yagun. "I'll hide them under the carpet, and at night I'll send them out!" she decided. It was dangerous to summon a cupid in the daytime. A chubby tot with wings, flaunting red suspenders, would for sure catch the eyes of moronoids.

Tanya pulled out from under the sofa the leather case, wiped the dust off it and clicked the ancient clasp. The lid was thrown open, and the girl saw the magic double bass of Master Theophilus Grotter – a great inventor and even greater grumbler, whose voice now lived in her ring.

In Tibidox Tanya trained every day, and now, she only needed to glance at the instrument and the irrepressible desire appeared in her to experience again the thrill of flight. "Certainly, Medusa and Sardanapal warned us. Moronoids, they say, will see you, and all such things... But indeed I must practice, otherwise how am I to play dragonball in the spring? And in order that the moronoids would not notice, I'll simply get to a necessary height and that's all. Will they begin to examine a tiny speck, on top of that even against the sun?" Tanya thought, easily finding justification for herself. She got dressed and, taking the double bass, slipped to the balcony.

It was a sunny frosty midday. The snow that had fallen in the night sparkled so that it was painful for the eyes to look at. Tanya climbed onto the double bass, comfortably holding the bow and, whispering, "*Speedus envenomus*," let out a green spark from the ring. Oh-oh-oh! At the same moment, the double bass tore away from the place and like a bullet soared into the sky. Not without reason Tanya used the highest speed of all existing flight spells. An instant – and she was already flying, deftly manoeuvring between the multi-storied houses. When it was necessary for her to make a turn, she leaned forward, folded an elbow firmly around the fingerboard, and with the bow indicated the direction to the double bass.

Imagining that the dragon of the enemy was striving for her, Tanya first soared steeply up, then dropped down like a stone, getting away from its attacks. For a long time she had wanted to work out the method, which Nightingale O. Robber, a black magician and their trainer of magic piloting, called "instantaneous turn." The essence of "instantaneous turn" consisted of: fleeing from the dragon, deftly turning around on one's instrument and, continuing to fly backwards, throwing the ball straight into the open mouth. After this, it was necessary to lean back sharply and direct the flying instrument in a perpendicular dive. It would sound simple, but everything is simple in words, in actual fact to turn around on the swiftly rushing instrument, managing not to lose the bow at the same time, was almost impractical. And indeed immediately after the throw it was still necessary to avoid the dragon's flame, which it for sure would breathe out, and to sweep over the same ground without crashing into it.

"Here Bab-Yagun would be amazed if it works for me! Especially during a match! He would simply faint! And Coffinia? She in vexation would gnaw off all her nails together with the fingers!" Tanya dreamt. Over and over again she worked on "instantaneous turn" and persistently faced the fact that during a turn it was not possible to hold the bow precisely. The double bass began to stagger and stalled, and so, if the dragon were close by, she would already turn up exactly in its mouth. "And if they would give me the pass now? The ball would fall onto the head of the chief referee! And referees can't stand it when balls fall down on them from above, especially a pepper ball..." Tanya reflected unhappily.

After twenty minutes of practice she was finally certain that to fly far on the double bass backwards with all one's might is not for everyone. Here is one of two things: must be a born dragonball player or a complete lunatic! It is not surprising after all, who would even dare to fly blindly, not seeing but rather guessing what is happening behind one's back? The flow of frosty air

will literally knock one down from the instrument, and meanwhile behind the back who knows from where the shaft of a crane or the narrow tower of a high-rise will emerge.

Tanya deftly slipped near the fingerboard of the double bass and was already sitting normally, facing forward. In front of her were four identical grey nine-storey buildings, which closed around the soccer area in the courtyard. The girl leaned slightly forward and, stretching out the arm with the bow, went into a dive, after deciding to slip through between the buildings. The double bass obediently swooped down.

She had already made up her mind to gain altitude again when suddenly a figure in an orange raincoat flickered on one of the roofs. Tanya was just feeling surprised that a moronoid would be wearing the same raincoat as a magician, when suddenly the figure threw up his hand, and in the next moment, the bow in the girl's hand flared up.

The flame only engulfed its tip at first, but the whole thing was already blazing after a second, and the fire stole up to her hand. Tanya began to yell and from the suddenness almost unclenched her hand. Only at the last moment did she recall that she must never drop the bow. The double bass would be out of control without it and would smash itself up. Wincing from the pain, Tanya held the blazing bow even more firmly and, having screamed out the safety net spell: *Oyoyoys smackis thumpis*, began to descend. Here it was already not a question of landing beautifully. The main thing was not to break her neck and to try not to break the instrument.

Thirty metres, twenty... The snowdrifts became white between the buildings. The ground swiftly approached. The double bass almost no longer obeyed the bow. Tanya saw that she was falling straight for an electric cable. If she ran into the wire at this speed, it would simply cut her in half or cut off her feet.

Instantaneous turn! There was no other way out. Tanya quickly bent over and with her whole weight leaned back as in the most complex, the final element of "instantaneous turn." And the "turn" worked! It worked in the most improbable circumstances! Forcing her back against the double bass and merging with it as one, the girl slipped between the cables, managing to not catch a single one!

"*Bangus parachutis!*" she screamed out the braking spell. The ring of Grandpa Theophilus in a hurry shot out a green spark. Thankfully, this time at least it dispensed with the tiresome lectures. And – the spell worked, snapped into action at the very last moment!!! The double bass was again on the ground, having obeyed the bow, which was now a fused stump, already for the last time. It reduced speed, hung in the air and sufficiently inoffensively collapsed into a large snowdrift.

Rolling off the instrument, Tanya dropped the bow and hurriedly thrust her burned palm into the snow. Icy needles pleasantly stabbed the reddened skin. Blisters already began to swell up on three fingers of her right hand.

Suddenly Tanya turned her head. Some recent recollection pierced her, struck her like a slap. The figure on the roof! Continuing to keep her hand in the snow, Tanya tossed up her head, examining the nearest buildings. No, not this, again not this... Here is that fourth grey building! The ominous figure in the orange raincoat was still on the roof. Holding onto the rails, he attentively peered down. Likely, the man in the raincoat wanted very much to determine whether Tanya managed to survive.

Ascertaining that the girl was on her feet, the silhouette in the raincoat angrily waved his hand, turned quickly on the spot about three times, the raincoat flared up, and he disappeared. Tanya was sorry that she could not make out the face: the distance was too great. She could not even tell roughly what was on the roof: a man, a woman, or an adolescent. But one thing was certain. Recently there was a strong magician on the roof and this magician attempted to kill her. To kill prudently. If she had been at a loss and let go of the bow, there would not have been time left for her already to utter the braking spell.

Tanya recalled that in the second before her bow caught fire, from the finger of the unknown person a purple point precisely jumped! A red spark, which could only be released from the ring of a black magician! Tanya became terrified. Downright terrified. Really, was all this real? To whom

is her death necessary, especially now when Plague-del-Cake is no more? Or the fears of Medusa are true and she is alive? Was it Plague herself or one of her assistants? There were clearly more questions than answers. Recalling that Sardanapal permitted writing him whenever she wanted, Tanya thought that she would send a letter today. Once she is facing imminent danger here in the world of the moronoids, then perhaps they will allow her to return to Tibidox before the appointed time?

Tanya loaded the double bass onto her shoulder and meandered home. Now when she did not have the bow anymore, the magic instrument became a heavy burden. After a while, tired, Tanya stopped to take a breath and leaned it against a bench by some entrance.

Her palm was hurting terribly, and the girl tried feverishly to remember whether she had a suitable prescription or spell somewhere in the notebooks secretly brought from Tibidox. At dragonball trainings and especially during matches she frequently got burns. But then Yagge was always nearby with the outstanding remedy – vampire bile. This universal remedy against burns, if one does not consider the nightmarish smell, had only one unpleasant special feature – one only needed to lick it accidentally or simply touch it with the tongue and one would immediately be transformed into a vampire. It transformed instantly and irrevocably. For this very reason, the vampire team was never lacking in good players. Now only where to get vampire bile here in the world of the moronoids? Interesting, what kind of face would Uncle Herman have, if she, as a joke, ask him to run to the drugstore for it?

The iron door of the entrance clanked. From there, a lady in a fur cap came out, decisively dragging behind herself a round-shouldered young oaf with a bandage on his forehead. Noticing Tanya, the lady stopped and said sweetly, “Misha, look, what a good girl! She plays on the double bass even on the street, in freezing weather! Yet even with a stick you can’t be forced to walk into a music school!” “To hell with her! She’s simply a crammer! A geek who memorizes!” the young oaf hissed, looking sideways with annoyance at Tanya. And in spite of the absurdity of her situation, despite that someone recently attempted to kill her, that her palm was scorched, and water was squelching in her boots, Tanya burst out laughing in spite of all these developments.

Chapter 3

The Tracks on the Ceiling

When Tanya finally dragged the double bass to the apartment of Uncle Herman and Aunt Ninel, her knees were already shaking from fatigue. In order to ascertain that no one was at home, she energetically rang several times. No one answered, and the girl decided to use magic. Having cautiously looked sideways at the door of their neighbour, Staff General Cutletkin, responsible for toothbrushes in the army and who adored peeking through the eyehole, Tanya whispered "*Fogus sneakus!*" and with her back pushed her way into the apartment.

Turning up on this side, she already wanted to open the door and drag the double bass in behind her, but here something dropped onto her nose. Tanya mechanically wiped the drop, glanced at her palm, and suddenly her throat tightened. On her palm was something sticky and red. Looking up, she saw on the ceiling large red tracks leading in the direction of the bedroom of Aunt Ninel and Uncle Herman. The girl became terrified. She carefully sneaked into the bedroom and... saw Lieutenant Rzhevskii, who was strolling along the ceiling upside down. The soles of the ghost were smeared with ketchup, the very large bottle of which was retained by some miracle in the hands of the spectre.

When Tanya ran into the room, he released the bottle, and it, with a loud smack, crashed onto the carpet by the very feet of the girl. "Missed! Give me the ketchup, I'll throw again! But you stand right there!" Lieutenant ordered.

Tanya flew into a rage. What will the Durnevs say when they return and casually look at the ceiling? Whom will they consider guilty? Pipa? Of course not! Even if their Pipa blew up the Kremlin, the Durnevs would only be touched!

"Where are you standing?" Lieutenant again began to yell. "I told you to stand there, foolish girl! Company, aim! At Tanya Grotter in volleys – fire!"

"Now there will be volleys at you! *Sparkis frontis!*" Tanya shouted, throwing up her hand. A green fight spark left the ring and struck the ghost.

Beginning to moan, Lieutenant collapsed from the ceiling onto the bed of Uncle Herman and Aunt Ninel. "Oh, no, only not this... What have you done? I'm mortally wounded! I'm dying!" he sobbed, pressing with his hand a wound on his stomach, from where a thin stream of bluish smoke was floating out. "What will Sardanalap say, what will Medusa say? I'll now disappear! The end for me! Another minute – and I'll be no more!" He became more and more transparent, shrivelling in front of her eyes.

"I... I didn't mean to..." Tanya was at a loss.

"Ah-ah, you didn't mean to..." the ghost groaned, fading in plain view. "Didn't mean to, but killed me, a foolish but inoffensive ghost, who wished harm to no one... Really I'll never see beloved Tibidox, I'll not hear the sound of ocean surf?" Lieutenant Rzhevskii looked up at Tanya reproachfully. His incorporeal hand, light as a puff of wind, touched her hand imperceptibly.

Tears welled up in Tanya's eyes. "Please forgive me, I didn't mean to... What should I do now?" she shouted.

"What should you do now?" Lieutenant wheezed. "I want you to know one thing: it was a dishonourable duel! But remember, I don't agree to die alone! Still a last shot for me!" With these words, Lieutenant Rzhevskii extracted from the air a very large machine gun and, rising slightly on his elbow, started to pour long bursts onto Tanya. Spectral cases flew around the room. This firing did not cause any more harm. "Rat-a-tat-tat! A last shot... one more... The last dozen cartridge clips! Pushkin smears d'Anthès on the wall!" Lieutenant howled, coming alive right before her.

General Cutletkin living on the other side of the wall got woken up by the clatter, fell from the sofa, and dove under the table. Half awake, it seemed to him that a war had begun and hostile parachutists were stealing the boxes of toothbrushes and toothpastes from his balcony.

Meanwhile behind the wall the finally revived spectre discarded the machine gun and started to jump on the bedspread, spilling feathers from a pillow. Tanya, still in tears, looked at him spellbound. "Well, you look at this little fool: she thought that it's possible to kill a ghost! Really possible to kill a ghost! And she believed it!" Lieutenant Rzhevskii laughed loudly.

Tanya with relief understood that the fight spark caused no harm to the spectre. To frighten off ghosts there is another reliable spell *Briskus-quickus*. Tanya already intended to utter it, but first she decided to clarify by what means the ghosts managed to get out. "Why are you not in the trunk?" Tanya asked.

"Because we were thrown out of the trunk! Thrown out insolently and inconsiderately!" a sad voice from the cabinet complained, and Unhealed Lady floated out through the door. By some mysterious means, Aunt Ninel's lilac scarf was retained on her neck, and the nose, powdered by something, turned red from tears. Likely, the suffering Lady poked her nose into moth-eaten small packets.

"Who threw you out of the trunk?" Tanya asked quickly. She tried to talk as little as possible with Unhealed Lady, because that one could chatter anyone to death.

Unhealed Lady winced, "And it's interesting to you? Really? It was an unpleasant girl with a fat face. She didn't want to hear about my ulcer. And she squeals simply abominably. If I were alive, I would have had a cardiac arrest on the spot. But, fortunately I'm already dead..."

"Pipa! So that's who let you out!" Tanya exclaimed. Suddenly everything became clear. For some reason Pipa returned home alone without Aunt Ninel, and got to her trunk after all. "Excellent! Well, you did me an ill turn!" Tanya said bitterly. "And now Pipa most likely is already rushing to bowling in order to broadcast everything to Aunt Ninel!"

"Not likely! She isn't rushing anywhere! She's frightened and sitting in our trunk! It's the only place we can't penetrate into because of the Minotaur skin!" Unhealed Lady stated.

"What? Pipa's in the trunk?" Tanya did not believe it. She rushed to the sofa. The seal with Sardanapal's personal stamp was dangling on one wire. However, the stamp itself, fortunately, was whole. Someone was wheezing quietly in the leather trunk.

"Now you believe that she's there?" Lieutenant Rzhevskii was interested. "She hid there when I – hee-hee – asked her to repair a little knife in my back. We occasionally moan so that she doesn't get bored there. Here watch!" Issuing blood-curdling moans, the spectre started to fly above the trunk. The trunk began to shake a little and bob up and down. The daughter of Uncle Herman began to squeal.

"Rzhevskii! Leave her alone, I say!" Tanya ordered, after considering that Pipa could go completely crazy from terror. Moronoids are quite unfit for such encounters. But Lieutenant was not thinking of stopping. The more violently the trunk bobbed, the more worked up he got. He even started to pour ketchup onto the trunk, groaning, "Blood! Blood everywhere!"

"Well, stop! *Briskus-quickus!*" Tanya shouted angrily. The spectre was pulled with a loud chomping sound into the floor, and Unhealed Lady, becoming a grey fog, quickly darted into a vase. "Never handle ghosts this way. Terribly dusty in here! I have choo... aller... choo! gy!" the vase immediately began to moan.

The trunk stopped shuddering. The one sitting in it was clearly listening. "Come out, Pipa! Otherwise you'll suffocate," ordered Tanya.

"I'll not come out! It's you, guilty of everything! Cursed witch! Must burn you on the stake!" Pipa answered from the trunk, managing to sob and hiss at the same time.

Tanya was angry. The daughter of the Durneys, as always, stuck to her own repertoire. "Come out, I say! Who asked you to look in there anyway? Did I ever ransack your things?"

“So what? This is my apartment, my parents’. And all the things here are mine, nothing here is yours... Oh-oh-oh! I’m scared! Fo-o-ol!” Suddenly Pipa’s voice trembled, and she burst into tears. Tanya almost went deaf. Lieutenant Rzhevskii with his frightening howl was simply an amateur compared to Pipa.

Unhealed Lady, hiding in the vase, had just been describing some of her regular sores. On hearing Pipa’s sobbing, Lady decided that Pipa was crying from sympathy and also burst into tears herself. “How touching! Didn’t think that the history of the corn on my heel would upset you so. Not exactly like all these insensible donkeys!” she said, sobbing.

Lieutenant Rzhevskii, already recovered from the action of the restrain spell, carefully floated out from the corridor. This time the restless spectre was in a dark-blue work robe, with a mop in his hands. He had clearly borrowed both from the cabinet of the maid who came to the Durneys three times a week. “Little lady, I very much apologize! A cleaning woman was called? I’m here!” Lieutenant asked and, without waiting for an answer, started to fly around the room, grinding red tracks onto the ceiling.

Tanya understood that if Pipa was not immediately driven out of the trunk and the ghost returned there, this could end with anything. Once and for all, the ghost completely letting himself go would destroy everything in the apartment and start to fly through the entire building frightening the neighbours, and Pipa would sob and squeal until someone called the police.

“That’s it, Pipa, come out! Out of there quick! I need the trunk!” Tanya ordered. She tried to open the lid but Pipa clutched with a death grip and held it from within.

“Wait! Now I’ll drive her out!” Lieutenant Rzhevskii made use of the fact that the lid of the trunk was slightly raised during the fight, and, holding the mop atilt, infiltrated through the slit. “And here’s also the brigade of maid-psychopaths with new rags for the nose! Need to wipe your tears?” he cooed.

From the trunk was heard no longer a screech but a howl. The lid was thrown open, and Pipa jumped out like she was scalded, pursued at her heels by the off-his-rocker spectre and by Unhealed Lady. Moreover, Lady got the idea into her head to tell Pipa how once during an operation the surgeon left his glasses in her stomach.

Pipa howled non-stop, arbitrarily rushing along the room and trying to force her way through into the corridor. But every time Lieutenant Rzhevskii appeared in her way, with a straight face juggling his own ears and nose. Pipa waved her hands at him and jumped back.

Tanya sat on the bed and, having propped up her head with her arms, was observing all these disgraceful goings-on. Then she recalled that she had left the double bass on the stairs, and went out for it. The double bass was in the same place where she had left it. Staff General Cutletkin was too frightened to stretch his greedy paws out to it.

“Enough is enough! Must also go insane gradually!” she thought, returning. “By the name of the Sovereign of Spirits go back!” Tanya pronounced and, sitting down, touched the warm seal with the stamp. Something flared up dazzlingly. A whirling tornado stirred the curtains. An unknown force pulled the ghosts into the trunk. The lid was slammed shut. Sighing with relief, Tanya carefully repaired the stamp and began to move the trunk under the sofa.

By inertia, Pipa still ran around the room several times, and then she jumped out into the corridor and from there began to threaten Tanya with all kinds of trouble. “Now you wait! Papa will see the ceiling, and then they will precisely send you to the colony for minors!” she squealed.

“But I didn’t smear the ceiling!” Tanya objected.

“But I’ll say that you did! You, you! Nevertheless, no one will believe in ghosts! I’ll say that you took a boot, put it on the mop and made prints on the ceiling!” Pipa started to giggle disgustingly. She recovered amazingly quickly after the shock.

This threat was the last straw. Tanya flared up. She pressed Pipa into a corner, took aim at her with the middle finger, released a pair of green sparks as a warning, and pronounced with utmost

seriousness, “*Fucusdruidis pipus beyond max-convertus!*” After this, Tanya turned and quietly walked to her room.

As she also expected, a worried Pipa rushed behind at a trot. She was terribly suspicious – well, simply a spitting image of Uncle Herman. “Wait! What did you just say?” she muttered.

“What did I say?” Tanya did not understand.

“Well this... pipus boaris... fucus... something there...”

Tanya turned and, squinting, looked at Pipa. “Ah, that’s what you’re talking about! It’s a delayed spell of transformation!” she explained significantly.

“Whose transformation? And why delayed?”

“Because it doesn’t act immediately! And it’s even a trivial spell in general, don’t pay any attention.”

“Trivial?” Pipa asked again distrustfully.

“Uh-huh. Simply if this evening I have any trouble or you blather anything unnecessary at all, you will grow pig ears, and bristle will appear on your face! You will go to school in a gas mask... Hey, Pipa, what’s with you?” Pipa began to tremble. She remembered very well the fur, which grew on the hand of her chief toady Lenka Mumrikova, when they attempted to flood with glue the teach yourself book of magic.

Not without reason Pipa was the daughter of the deputy. In a flash she considered everything and horror appeared in her eyes. “But if you have no trouble?” she quickly asked. “If there isn’t any?”

“Hmm... Then, possibly, the spell won’t snap into action,” said Tanya, looking at Pipa attentively. She already understood that she had won. The senseless spell composed in a hurry proved to be right on target. How would Pipe know that delayed magic comes only in third or fourth year instruction? Nevertheless, moronoids are moronoids. They believe any fortune-teller advertising in the newspaper!

* * *

Tanya also never found out what Pipa made up precisely and how she explained to her parents the mess in the apartment, but there was no trouble for Tanya. Most likely, Pipa simply slandered someone among her friends, because she also was sensible enough not to mention the ghosts. The Durnevs only undertook this – they called in a team of plasterers in order to repair the ceiling urgently.

Now and then Uncle Herman was sufficiently indecisive and was generally softer than usual. In a week, a TV crew would come in order to film the best deputy in the bosom of his family. Durnev was already prepared beforehand: he mastered an affectionate smile in front of the mirror and, thinking that no one would hear him, rehearsed solemn speeches in the washroom. Tanya distinctly made out, when the water was draining, how he was repeating, “Herman Nikitich Durnev... And this is my family! Welcome to our hospitable home!”

Durnev said to Tanya, “We’ll have Nikolai Shmyglikov as a guest, he hosts *Meet the Family!* Think of it, because you’ll also be in the shoot! I already warned the TV cameramen that we have adopted a poorly brought up orphan. They are interested in you. Try not to show your worst side. And in order that you won’t stir too much, you will also hold the dachshund in yours hands.” “And if nothing else the rab... reptile,” Tanya corrected herself on noticing how Uncle Herman immediately turned red.

Tanya especially did not listen to Durnev’s instructions because she was certain that in a week she would already not be here. Today she will send the letter, and tomorrow or the day after Sardanapal will allow her to return to Tibidox. And how can it be otherwise?

In the evening, when the Durnevs had settled down to sleep, Tanya carefully switched on a lamp and sat down to write a letter to the academician. “Must not disturb him too much,” she thought, with a swish pulling out a double-sided sheet from a notebook. “I’ll begin seemingly casually...”

“How do you do, dear Sardanapal! You asked me to write how things are with me, how I am studying, and about my spirits in general. I am studying indifferently, because you know what textbooks the moronoids have. Unbearable boredom, but they are not textbooks. They do not fly around the classroom, and the pictures in them do not come alive...”

“And now I have some insignificant matter, because today someone tried to kill me. Someone with a fight spark set fire to the bow when I was working on the ‘turn.’ Only please do not be disturbed, because my spirits are fine. The Durneys do not bother me much. That is, they do, of course, but it is possible to live with.

“The ghosts are behaving well. Recently they chased Pipa into the trunk. Pipa herself was guilty, because no one asked her to poke her nose where she should not. Aunt Ninel cleaned Black Curtains (well and were they in a rage!) and hung them in her own bedroom...”

“Certainly you will allow me to return to Tibidox. But for the flight I need a new bow.

“Hope to see you soon

“Respectfully yours Tanya Grotter.”

Tanya finished and applied her ring to the letter. She repeatedly saw how adult magicians signed this way. The ring of Theophilus Grotter hesitated sufficiently and with explicit enjoyment made a beautiful imprint. It did not even need an inkpad for this.

Having summoned a cupid with the special whistle, Tanya entrusted the envelope to him. The cupid poured alphabet cookies into his mailbag and pushed off, hurriedly flapping his wings and breaking through into air pockets.

Tanya collapsed onto the sofa. Her burnt palm was hurting, and little sparks of fuzzy recollections jumped before her eyes. The double bass... the bow... the figure in the orange raincoat... knives in Lieutenant's back... the violet pimples of her dear cousin... ugh... possible to go crazy. “But soon all this will end!” she thought. It cannot be that after this letter Sardanapal would not allow her to return to Tibidox. And once that is the case – goodbye, Durneys! Hello, the school of magic!

Chapter 4

Thirty-Four Firemen

Sometimes it is pleasant to wake up at night. Lying there, looking at the ceiling, thinking about anything. Or even to sit in the kitchen and secretly drink a cup of cocoa. But with one exception... If you are not woken up by Aunt Ninel's terrible howl, as happened to Tanya towards morning.

Tanya, with a jerk, sat up on the sofa, half-awake and not understanding who was howling and why. Then she jumped and darted into Aunt Ninel's bedroom. Aunt Ninel, with her head covered by Black Curtains, was squealing and floundering in horror. Uncle Herman was jumping beside her like a confused billy goat, not knowing from what direction to approach and in general only having a vague idea of what was happening.

Not a minute had passed but Aunt Ninel already resembled the cocoon of a rare butterfly. "Herman! Do something! Cut them, I'm suffocating! Quickly!" Aunt Ninel shouted.

Finally, the bewildered deputy began to yank down from the wall the sharp yataghan, which had been presented to him at a reception in the Turkish embassy. His hands were not only trembling but shaking. Tanya understood that one more second – and instead of one quarrelsome aunt, she would have two. The Curtains in anticipation of this sniggered sarcastically.

"HERMAN!!! Cut!" Aunt Ninel again began to yell, rolling on the bed like a black cocoon. It seemed she could not imagine what was threatening her. She was afraid of the curtains but should fear Uncle Herman instead.

The bug-eyed best deputy with a reckless look raised the yataghan. It was necessary to interfere promptly. "*Briskus-quickus!*" Tanya muttered in an undertone, unnoticeably letting out a green spark. This plain, frequently used spell worked excellently against both ghosts and simple bio-vampires like the curtains. Not without reason Medusa taught it in the first lesson on evil spirits studies. The Curtains instantly went limp and Aunt Ninel could get out.

"Ugh! I can breathe again!" she was pleased, but suddenly began to squeal, seeing above her Uncle Herman with the raised yataghan and his eyes screwed up. Durnev was pale and determined. True, such trembling struck him that the bright blade jumped in his hands, presenting explicit danger to both Uncle Herman himself and those around him. The following five minutes was spent disarming the best deputy and sheathing the yataghan.

"What was it? Ah, understandable... I hung the curtains poorly. They fell from the ledge, I got tangled and almost choked... But only how could they fly so far away from the window?" Aunt Ninel groaned, opening the medicine drawer.

Tanya sensed that it was awkward for her aunt that she appeared before the girl looking so foolish. Tanya wanted to explain that Black Curtains would suffocate no one. They would only spy into dreams in order to show them later all day. But Uncle Herman did not allow her to open her mouth. Coming to and discovering that Tanya was in their bedroom, he began to jump on the spot and howl, "And what did you get here for? Well, march to bed, until I hand you over to the orphanage! Why kind of habit did you pick up roaming around the apartment at night?"

"Please look over there!" Tanya said, nodding to Aunt Ninel. Uncle Herman turned around. "Wait, Ninelie, you're already drinking a third phial of valerian! You'll calm down so much like you're dead!" he began to worry.

"I'm shaking all over!" Aunt Ninel said in an icy voice.

Uncle Herman decisively took Tanya by the shoulder and pushed her to the door. But still, before the door was slammed shut, the girl saw that Black Curtains was already mirroring with all its might some dark-blue cutlets with paws, doing a round-dance around a huge fir tree with a sausage

for a trunk and sausages as branches... So here is what Aunt Ninel was dreaming about, the third week she tried unsuccessfully to get into the new dress!

Tanya knocked herself on the forehead with a bent finger and returned to the sofa. Thinking to herself what oafs the Durneys were all the same, she again intended to lie down to sleep when suddenly someone began to drum persistently on the window. Outside the window was the same cupid, managing to get around here and there amazingly quickly: all in one night.

This time the cupid had equipped himself much more industriously. He was without the suspenders, and a dark-blue scarf was wound around his neck. The cupid exchanged Sardanapal's letter for three gingerbreads and a jar of jam, loudly took a deep breath, and flew away in an extremely business-like manner.

Tanya unsealed the envelope.

"Dear Tanya!" Sardanapal wrote. "I am answering you immediately, while this winged old fox is gnawing pastry and leaving an awful lot of crumbs on the floor... I, of course, understand that you want to return sooner to Tibidox, but repair is not yet finished. All the cracks in the basement are by no means sealed, and of the five collapsed towers only three are restored thus far... There are also many problems with the heroes. Yesterday Usynya on a bet ate a bag of cement and now lies in magic station with terrible constipation. Yagge cannot think of a way to help him. By the way, recently Medusa also spent a whole day in magic station because of a terrible headache. She was talking about dismal assignments, and also the huge quantity of trouble with evil spirits.

"Here is another piece of news, which will interest you for sure. Last night your friend Bab-Yagun attempted to sneak onto the blocked off Staircase. He succeeded in slipping past the cyclopes, but he completely forgot about the guard spells of Slander Slanderych...

"Now Bab-Yagun sits by himself in his room, because it is possible only to jump with frog feet. I hope this example also teaches you something. Slander, whose spell he ran up against, claims that the frog feet will remain with Bab-Yagun for about a week or two, but if there is an attempt to neutralize the magic sooner, then they can remain even for life.

"Tanya! Now about the main thing!

"Each day many letters from Tibidox students come to me! It would be pleasant if all as one did not invent different nonsense in order to return before the appointed time. Gunya Glomov writes that he accidentally bit the dog and the dog went mad. Rita On-The-Sly allegedly transforms into a vampire at night and chases her parents, and Dusya Dollova maintains that terrorists took her as hostage and are demanding ransom: a box of chocolate, but if there is no chocolate, then they will also settle for fruit drops...

"You say that someone tried to kill you, but Medusa and I do not particularly believe this. Most likely, the bow in your hand caught fire for some other reason. Maybe you accidentally uttered the ignite spell? Remember, the ignite spell is not a toy!

"You will be able to return to Tibidox, but not earlier than a couple of weeks, together with the rest of the children. Repair is taking place at full speed so that we hope to be in time, if not completely, then at least partially.

"I am still sending the cupid with the letter to you. But in any case do not attempt to set out for Tibidox yourself! You can perish! The spell of passage is blocked for all except the postmen! To get from the magic world to the world of the moronoids is practically impossible now. Except for a very strong and experienced magician. For the rest it is almost certain death.

"Now about something pleasant:

"Medusa sends you a new bow as a gift. Only she demands a promise that you will not begin to fly anymore in the world of the moronoids and in particular, to perfect any 'turn' there. The bow is enchanted in such a way that we will immediately be notified about any illegal use and we will draw the appropriate conclusions.

"With respect,

*“Laureate of Award of Magic Suspenders, Academician,
“Sardanapal Chernomorov.”*

Tanya read Sardanapal's answer three times before its meaning reached her. A refusal! They forbid her to return to Tibidox! Sardanapal did not believe her! And he even wrote: *Maybe you accidentally uttered the ignite spell? Remember, the ignite spell is not a toy!* “Yes, you heard it! What do they take me for? Is there generally such an idiot, who will begin to utter the ignite spell when his instrument is coming out of a dive?” Tanya thought indignantly.

Two weeks! A whole two weeks! And indeed New Year is already almost at hand! It turns out that on the night of the holiday, when in Tibidox, according to rumour, many joyful miracles always happen, but she has to spend it with the Durnevs! Every avenue of approach to the fir tree, as always, would be barricaded by gifts for Pipa, and only in the most distant corner would be scattered a packet for Tanya. In it would turn out to be old ski boots of Aunt Ninel, some vest without buttons from Uncle Herman, a bottle of shampoo or anything in this vein. That depended on what fantasy got hold of the Durnevs.

Tanya's eyes started to smart from this explicit injustice. Although the academician and Medusa could also be understood. So many stupid letters came to them that they no longer knew what and whom to believe.

The girl thought for a bit and recalled that the letter nevertheless contained something pleasant. A bow! Remembering Medusa's gift, she attentively looked over the envelope. The bow was clearly absent, and moreover it could not be here: there was simply no room.

Tanya already wanted to call back the cupid, who had clearly forgotten to deliver a parcel to her, when suddenly a low whistle was heard. Into the window swiftly flew something thin and sufficiently long, resembling an arrow. It flew and froze directly under the chandelier reminding one of a wasps' nest.

Tanya apprehensively stretched out her hand, but the bow already jumped by itself into her hand. Tanya was stupefied. Her previous bow did not fly by itself and it was more of a burden in flight. The new one, it seemed, imagined excellently that it should do so. Made of magnificently polished dark wood, it was elastic and light. It seemed that it was impatient to race through clouds, steering an unrestrained speeding instrument. “Obstinate with character, but at the same time sensitive and obedient. A bow not for an amateur but for a true pro. And the most valuable – it can't be lost. It finds the hand by itself!” Tanya immediately determined, filled with appreciation for Medusa.

If Medusa had not extracted a promise from her that she would not fly in the moronoid world, Tanya would instantly test the bow. But now regardless of what she wanted, it was necessary to keep her oath. You will not cheat Medusa: not without reason the evil spirits whisper that she sees to three metres underground. And then there are also these notify spells, which it is better not to get mixed up with... Tanya opened the case and with great care placed the bow next to the double bass. Then she ran her hand along the warm dragon skin and closed the ancient copper clasp with the mysterious runes. Must wait.

The days before holidays always seem long and the lessons infinite. The second hand seemingly sticks to the dial, and it is better not to look at the minute hand, because soon the feeling emerges that it is moving backwards. The deep fallen snow has turned into slush, then snow falls again, and again becomes slush. In short, melancholy. Melancholy outside and inside.

Tanya let the spectres out of the trunk several times. However, the ghosts were also somewhat sad. Lieutenant dispiritedly made noises with his knives, and Unhealed Lady complained about her health almost half as usual, which was already suspicious in itself.

“Hey, what's with you? Offended perhaps? I'll let you loose!” once Tanya asked them.

“She calls this loose – to poke the nose into your aunt's powder-case or to tie Uncle Herman's necktie into a knot! Ha, ha, and again ha! What, don't you know that it's New Year soon?” Lieutenant growled unwillingly.

“Now it’s excellent! Be glad! A holiday!” Tanya said.

As if hearing obvious nonsense, the spectre indignantly flickered before her eyes. “What’s to be glad about? The King of Ghosts always comes on New Year and kills one of us... Wonderful occasion for happiness! I’m simply touched, what ignorant people one has to deal with!”

“The King of Ghosts?” Tanya perplexedly asked him to repeat. “But indeed ghosts are immortal, how is it possible to kill them?”

“Not on your life!” Lieutenant cleared his throat. “Immortal! And why then forget the knives in my back? You’re joking unsuccessfully and – wow! – twelve spoons and one dagger... Really, it couldn’t be explained in an amicable way? Well, so it’s not possible to put feet on the table and to rush to the ball with cutlets? True, then I was still alive, but what’s the difference?” Tanya was interested. She heard for the first time the tragic circumstances, with which Rzhevskii became a ghost.

Unhealed Lady also wanted to have a say, and she interrupted Lieutenant. “He’s right...” picking at her ear with a thermometer, she barged in. “Immortal is only the one who was never born. Yes, in contrast to the so-called living, we cannot be pierced with a sword or killed with a brick! We’re not afraid of head colds and we pass through the majority of obstacles. But the King of Ghosts has been given unlimited authority over us. Once a year one of us spectres compulsorily disappears and a new one appears. Of course, no one wants to vanish. Even I, in spite of all my ailments... a-choo! still want to live...”

Lady looked around at everything with a distressed gaze. “And besides, although alone, if you could call it that, even a pig could feel!” she declared. “At least someone asked me in the morning, ‘How are you feeling, my dear? Is your back aching? Blood hammering in your temples?’ But no – everyone only runs away even before I have time to appear! They screwed up their faces as if I am a leper!”

Observing that his companion again started whining, Lieutenant with a loud chomping made his way into the floor. A whole minute passed before his head, carefully looking around, appeared in the flowerpot.

“Well then... the King of Ghosts. In Tibidox before New Year, we always hid, but someone disappeared nevertheless. Last year Crackpot Grandpa vanished... He was such a strange spectre, clearly not in his right mind. All the time running and searching for something. Didn’t want to hear about my migraines and the polyps in my nose!” Unhealed Lady continued with such a reproach as if this was also the reason why he disappeared.

“And what was he searching for?” Tanya asked with sudden interest.

“Crackpot Grandpa?” Lieutenant responded. “Either treasure or something... He was generally terribly tight-lipped. Only walked through walls and forever disappeared somewhere. No one ever heard his voice in 300 years. True, they said that he alone knew the way to the Vanishing Floor, a way along which it’s possible to return.” Tanya moved forward. It was the second time she heard about the Vanishing Floor. So it means there is a safe passage!

“What’s with you, Rzhevskii?” Lady suddenly exclaimed fearfully. “Why are you telling her this? It’s a secret... A secret of all the ghosts! If the King finds out, he’ll send you a marker, and then...”

“Don’t barge in, pain in the neck! I told her nothing! How can I describe to her the way when I myself don’t know where it is?” Lieutenant growled. Rzhevskii pretended to be brave, but it was noticed that he was pretty disheartened.

Soon Lieutenant became a wave of smoke and dived into the trunk. Unhealed Lady, continuing the non-stop whining, rushed after him. After understanding that they would tell her nothing more, Tanya slammed the cover shut after them.

In the week before winter vacation, two teachers – for Russian and for geography – in one stroke came down with the flu. The principal put in as replacement so much mathematics that numbers and fractions, Xs and Ys were literally dancing before everyone’s eyes.

The mathematician in the school where Tanya and Pipa studied was simply a nightmarish type. His name was Igor Valentinovich. A huge person with a dove-coloured nose and hair straight up like a hedgehog, he resembled Lifeless Griffin. Perhaps he did not smell like rotten stuff but merely earwax. Tanya was almost certain that Professor Stinktopp, the head of the “black” department of Tibidox, would like him.

Most of all Igor Valentinovich hated jokes and approximate answers. He would give “twos” for the slightest deviation from rules. And he set many rules. Margins in notebooks must be exactly four squares. The compass must be to the right of the ruler. In the pencil case there must be two ordinary pencils; moreover each sharpened at both ends. The textbook must be propped up on the bookstand. The mark book must lie immediately behind the textbook, opened onto the page where observations were usually written. A hand raised was strictly perpendicular to the desk – and so on without end. And finally the last, the most impossible rule consisted of knowing all these rules by heart... But then at the same time there was simply deathly silence in Igor Valentinovich’s class. Any student coughing by accident instantly pulled his head in his shoulders.

On that day, the mathematician for some reason was especially out of humour. Having sullenly greeted them, he wrote on the board a problem and ordered everyone to solve it. The problem read as follows:

At a contest, 34 firefighters put out 75 bonfires in 3 minutes. How much time will 3 firemen need in order to put out 109 bonfires?

Tanya despondently stared at the board. Well, the moronoids know how to invent problems for themselves! Any, even the dumbest, student of the school of Tibidox, even that Gunya Glomov, would make short work of these bonfires in a second! In order to extinguish a fire, one must say *Trigus sputterus* and release a magic spark, and all fires would go out, no matter how many are nearby. Five or a hundred and five if you want. And all firemen, if they are not magicians, have no choice but only to sigh, to water the flowers with the hoses, and to exchange helmets for something to do.

Reflecting on this, Tanya mechanically began to sketch firefighters and bonfires in her notebook and she was so absorbed that she shuddered when above her head she suddenly heard a furious howl, “GROTTER!” Lifting her head, Tanya with horror discovered that Igor Valentinovich was leaning over her notebook and enraged like hundreds of swamp bogeys.

In Tibidox no one was forbidden to sketch during lessons. Well, you say, is this really bad if you have in a notebook thirty-four firemen running with their ladders and axes, from time to time vaulting over from page to page? And they will certainly rush, because all figures drawn by a magician immediately come alive. Sometimes even before there is time to draw ears, hair, and feet on them. And it is most inconvenient. Try drawing a helmet on a firefighter who rushes along the page like one possessed.

“Grotter, what are you doing? I’m asking you!” Igor Valentinovich repeated with fury.

“Nothing,” Tanya answered fearfully, quickly covering with her hand the scattering firefighters, who were threatening the mathematician with their hoses and crowbars.

“I also see for myself that it’s nothing! But you must solve the problem!” Igor Valentinovich grew red. “Hand over the mark book!”

Tanya tarried, afraid to remove her hand, under which the little fellows bustled, quickly dragging away their ladders. The mathematician grabbed the bookstand, but there was no mark book in place. As ill luck would have it, Tanya had forgotten it at home, because all night she was writing letters to Vanka and Bab-Yagun.

The ruler, which Igor Valentinovich was holding in his hands, broke with a crack. “And no mark book? Parents to the school!” he ordered. “Immediately! March at a trot! One foot here – the other there!”

“My papa won’t come. And mama also won’t come. They don’t intend to turn red for this fool. We’re already keeping her out of charity! She’s not pla... m-m-mne-mne... Phew!” Pipa wanted still

to blurt out something, but suddenly she was choked by her own eraser, which somehow turned up in her mouth for some unknown reason.

“There are no parents, there is no mark book, doing nothing for the lessons... Excellent, simply excellent,” the mathematician said darkly. “Then I’m forced to take drastic measures. I’ll not endure this person in my class. Someone call the principal here... no, better the director!”

“Let me!” Lenka Mumrikova gladly volunteered. Having loudly whispered to Pipa, “Well, that’s it, the end of Grotter!” she swiftly got out of her seat and ran out of the classroom.

Meanwhile, Igor Valentinovich noticed the ring on Tanya’s hand. “And what’s this even? How often have I asked you not to wear jewellery to school! Here hand it over, I’ll deliver it to your guardians! You’re still too young to wear such things!”

Tanya made a tight fist. It was not only that her magic ring would end up with the mathematician, but also later with Uncle Herman. Without the ring, she would not be able to do anything, not even to summon a cupid to send news to Tibidox.

“I’m not handing it over!” she said quietly but distinctly. Tears welled up in her eyes. Even when she was suspected of the theft of the gold sword, she did not feel so bad.

“NOT HANDING IT OVER? Then I’ll take it!” Igor Valentinovich finally went crazy, roared, and started to tear the ring forcefully off her finger.

Magic rings do not like such treatment. If someone were capable of removing them, then it would only be a strong magician knowing the special spells, and indeed not a moronoid. Moreover, Tanya’s ring was special, with the dreadful nature and squeaky voice of Grandpa Theophilus Grotter. True, it could only talk for five minutes a day, but then the quarrelsome nature constantly remained in it.

“Don’t!” Tanya shouted, but it was already too late. Hissing, “Here’s to you!” the irritated ring released two green sparks. The sparks slid along the mathematician’s nose, then spilt up, one dived into his right ear, and the other – into the left. At the same moment, Igor Valentinovich’s hair stood up on end. His pupils enlarged, started to rush about in orbit in confusion, and crossed at the bridge of the nose. Tanya was frightened. Exactly the same thing happened to Uncle Herman’s pupils before he changed to Lisper the Rabbit. Really a rabbit again? But no, this time it was clearly something new.

Instantly forgetting about Tanya, Igor Valentinovich released her hand and ran up to the board. “We’re continuing the lesson! Sit quietly everyone!” he began in a stern voice. “I’ll show you how to solve such problems... I crack them like nuts... It’ll require three firemen... eh-eh... By the way, why are the names of the firefighters not written in the textbook? It’s a disgrace! Let’s assume one... m-m... Vasya, the other Peter, and the third... third... m-m...” The class came to life. “Sergey!” Genka Bulonov proposed.

“Right, Sergey... Where do you know that from? And likely such a fool judging by appearance!” The mathematician was pleased. “Vasya and Peter put out the fires, but Sergey...” “Frolics with a cigarette lighter...” Pipa prompted, with difficulty spitting out the eraser.

“With A CIGARETTE LIGHTER?” Igor Valentinovich shuddered. If earlier his imagination did not go beyond decimal fractions, then now it seethed and gushed. “Exactly, with a cigarette lighter!” he quickly continued. “Other firemen put them out, and he, the vermin, would flick the little wheel – and again a fire! They put out, and again he – flicks! A nightmare! The problem is deadlocked! Stupid endlessness!”

In extreme uneasiness, Igor Valentinovich started to run around the classroom. He even lost one boot but did not notice it. “Oh-oh! What a disaster! Give me this Sergey! I’ll show him what to set on fire! And if a paper plant is close by there? And if it has dynamite in storage?” he yelled.

There was a short knock on the door. The director looked into the classroom. He was small and round, awfully similar to the letter “O” trimmed with a crew-cut. Lenka Mumrikova was bouncing gloatingly behind his back. “Well? I was in a conference. What’s this again about Grotter?” the director asked unhappily.

Hearing a new voice, Igor Valentinovich stood still. His crossed eyes began to blink suspiciously. “We’ll look into Grotter later... Who are you? Why are you late? Mark book on the table!” he bellowed to the director.

“Who, me? Me?” the director did not understand.

“Yes, you! What are you, new? What is your name?” the mathematician continued to rumble.

“What’s this, a joke? I’m Sergey Andreich...” the director said mechanically.

The mathematician twitched as if he was stung. His eyes darted in different directions and again came together at the bridge of the nose. “Aha! Sergey! You’re incredible!” he said in a sweet voice. “We frolic with the cigarette lighter? We interrupt solving the problem? We want to set the school on fire?”

The director stepped back. “I don’t understand you,” he said perplexedly.

Better if he was silent. The mathematician immediately leaned over him threateningly and gripped him by the collar. “You don’t understand?” Igor Valentinovich began to bawl. “Of course you understand! Well, hand over the cigarette lighter here! You started a hundred and nine bonfires, drunk! They wrote about it in the textbook! And what if the cask has gasoline?”

The director escaped, stepped on the foot of Lenka Mumrikova, and jumped out of the classroom, muttering something about the psychiatric hospital.

“Stop! And they still take in such firemen! Parents to the school urgently! And grandma and grandpa also to the school! And let everyone come with a belt!” the mathematician shouted, pursuing him.

Tanya ran out after them. And not because of this! In Tibidox they were very strictly forbidden to use magic in the world of the moronoids, but she has been doing that almost every day. She will get it good from Sardanapal and Slander Slanderych!

“Lift the spell immediately!” she whispered to her ring. “In no way possible!” the ring creaked in the voice of Grandpa Theophilus. “It’s a three-day spell. And, besides, I already don’t remember what spell I cast. I have – hee-hee! – total sclerosis.”

“A pretty kettle of fish! But is there anything you can do?” Tanya was angry, watching how the gym teacher Prikhodkin, running up, tied up the kicking and spitting Igor Valentinovich. “What can I do? I can sing!” the ring, on thinking it over, said and struck up tediously, “*Two merry geese were living at grandma’s!*”

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