



alana k. SOLOMO
ANNA ALEXANDER: MASTER OF THE
VOID

PART II

Alana K. Solomo
**Anna Alexander: Master
of the void. Part II**

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Аннотация

Anna's struggle against Ruvars's ancestors, his father and brothers, continues. They, Darkness itself, obstruct her union with Ruvars, seeing in her a threat to their order. Her rage is fueled not only by their bond but also by her ambition – to free what, according to the brothers, suffers justly. In this battle, Anna is helped by Milana Mila, whose secret power becomes an invaluable support. And this is only the beginning of a new, even more exciting and thrilling story.

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Alana K. Solomo

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Chapter 1.

An important conversation

Soon, two brothers, so different in age and temperament, yet bound by blood and a common goal, Ruvars and Stefan found themselves at the foot of a palace that seemed more like an ancient castle than a building erected atop mighty pyramids.

Their hurried arrival startled the servants and the peacefully dozing guards, who scattered instantly like a flock of frightened birds. Countless maids and nannies holding infants seemed nothing more than shadows of human children. Their pale faces, reflecting the cold sunlight, resembled masks devoid of feeling and life, than people. The movements of the maids were perfectly precise but lacked warmth and maternal tenderness. The children resting in their arms seemed merely precious cargo, a symbol of wealth and the continuation of lineage, rather than living, breathing beings in need of love and care.

The youngest of the brothers, consumed by simmering anger and bitter disappointment over Anna's absence, felt his carefully planned scheme to bring the girl back from oblivion sinking into a swamp of endless waiting, forcing him to stay close to his overly slow brother.

Stefan, on the other hand, was jubilant. Cheerfully handling his triangular dice, he mentally offered thanks to unknown forces

for the generosity in the form of Ruvars and for the fact that his thousand-year-old problem seemed finally on the verge of being solved!

He eagerly absorbed the beauty around him: the bright sun, sand dunes, and the azure sea, which seemed here to be a miracle, an exotic adornment of this place.

Stefan bitterly thought about the harsh and cruel world in which his remaining brothers were left, and the heavy trials that still awaited them.

– I want to know exactly what you need from our father?! – Ruvars suddenly interrupted his thoughts sharply. After all, he once cursed you! Do you really believe that his resentment could have faded so quickly?

Stefan was certain that there had been no curse. Their father, sitting at the top of the demonic hierarchy, had only managed to hold onto power with the help of those words about the curse, and few knew about it: only the two of them, Stefan's late mother, and Agrat.

– I don't think so, my craftiest and wisest of brothers! And now you will see it for yourself! – replied Stefan, reaching for the handle of the nearly three-meter-tall golden door.

Agrat stepped forward to meet the brothers. A beautiful woman, whose light curls cascaded like a waterfall onto her white shoulders, was the very embodiment of a clear sunny day. Stefan couldn't take his eyes off her, she was so beautiful.

Once, in her already female incarnation, this being had taken

the place of his mother, but now she had become even more beautiful and dear!

Ruvars, following Stefan, bowed in reverence. They greeted her as if she were a deity, who she indeed was: a bright star destined to illuminate the paths of humans, beings, and creatures, when necessary, dwelling in the realms of light and darkness.

Agrat knew that people expected a miracle from her, some kind of deliverance from the oppressive everyday life, and she was ready to become that miracle. After all, she felt the power pulsing through her veins, the knowledge that penetrated every cell of her body. Agrat understood that she carried on her shoulders the responsibility for the future of her children and beyond, for their possibly bright future. But this “bright” future was only visible somewhere beyond the horizon, hidden by the fog of uncertainty and fear of Samael.

With a light movement of her hand, she summoned silence. And then, in the ensuing ringing silence, her voice sounded – pure, strong, and full of hope. A voice capable of conquering hearts and inspiring feats. She was an echo of justice and their love for her, guiding toward dreams that were bound to come true.

– I am glad to welcome both of you and welcome home! – the woman replied, slightly stretching out her words and giving them a warm smile.

– How beautiful you are, the greatest of all living goddesses of the universe! – Ruvars exclaimed in admiration, unable

to restrain himself.

The woman, like a blossoming bud, radiated wonderful grace, knowing that she was the highest being of her kind, a being dwelling between two worlds and the void. She could calm the elements and partially heal illnesses, drive away pitiful and helpless enemies, and grant strength to the beings of their world. Agrat, a magnanimous and peace – loving goddess, who once knew neither mercy nor fear in the underworld, had suddenly become the gentle and loving wife of the most cruel and powerful demon of the underworld – Samael.

A couple, having unwillingly lost countless opportunities: to live for their own benefit, to create the human family everyone dreams of, or simply to live happily, turned away from all of this. However, they gained something greater than mortal bodies, power, and riches of the earthly world! Samael and Agrat acquired dominion over non-human beings! And while their family did not need worldly goods and was an ideal in the eyes of other demon-gods, envy and slander toward them were as great as their kindness and truth. The whisper of envy crept through the corridors of their palace like a poisonous asp, curling around every corner and penetrating the most hidden recesses of their flawless world. Their union, which seemed unbreakable, became a target for malicious schemes. Intrigues were woven behind their backs, and even the most loyal servants could turn out to be traitors, bribed by the thirst for power and the desire to dismantle the mighty family. But Samael and Agrat remained

steadfast. Love and devotion to each other served as a shield against envious and slanderous people who sought to destroy their family. They knew that the truth would always prevail and were ready to fight for their ideals until their last breath. After all, even in the very heart of darkness, there is always room for light.

But now, Agrat didn't notice the sad look on her younger son's face and focused all her attention on Stefan, who was radiant with joy at just the sight of her.

– Since our last meeting, you have changed so much, my dear Stefan! – she said.

The man blushed like an ordinary person. He wanted to kiss the hands of the woman who had not abandoned him during one of the hardest periods of his life, when his mother had passed away.

– Oh, lady Agrat, you are even more beautiful than you were before! I cannot help but admire your otherworldly beauty! You are truly a goddess! – Joe began, then faltered when he saw the silhouette of the father behind the woman.

Samael, the proud and ageless demon, was happy to see his son but did not show it. He knew that the humanity within him was a beautiful part of what even darkness could serve for the good!

– Father! – Stefan whispered barely audibly and bowed.

Ruvars followed his brother's example, and both of them, standing at his right hand, felt the effect of an irresistible force, surpassing all the powers they had known before, but...

– My son, my kindest and most humane son! How did you dare to come to us, knowing all that has been done against you and your mother?! – Samael asked, not hiding his guilt.

Stefan blushed again. The flush of awkwardness from the father-son exchange spread across his cheeks, which caused surprise and displeasure in the elder of the brothers, that is, himself.

– I knew you needed to save your power! After all, you would have lost everything if you hadn't taken that step! I knew you never truly wanted to curse me along with mother, but back then we also had no reason to return! That's why I decided not to show myself to you! But now your son, my younger brother, wished for this, which means I am here! – Stefan blurted out in one breath.

Samael was struck by the wisdom of his older son! He wanted to ask him about life, about what he had been doing all this time, but instead he approached him and hugged him. At this, Ruvars, eyes wide open and not understanding what was happening, interrupted them with his nervous voice:

– Perhaps you can hug each other another time?! At the moment, I have a lot of things to do, and I would like to leave this place with Stefan as soon as possible!

The youngest of the brothers did not heed the words of his brother and Samael, for his thoughts were entirely absorbed by Anna, and her return meant everything to him! The youngest of the brothers longed for the girl to return to his embrace as soon as possible, for he could not imagine any fate for her other

than coming back.

– And here is my other son, now the most magnanimous and cunning of the seven and a half demon brothers. And anyone who knows him understands that he did not take this decisive step without reason – he became mortal for the sake of the beautiful Anna, didn't he? – Samael looked at his son questioningly, causing him to raise an eyebrow in surprise.

Everyone around started whispering. Foreign footsteps, shouts, and cries were clearly heard. The sound of trumpets greeted Ruvars, and then Stefan, in that exact order, for the elder brother was still not taken seriously as the younger one was. And even though Ruvars was no longer the rightful master of his circle, not one of the favorite sons, and not even a polite master to his former servants, the hope for his transformation still lived on in Samael.

A long, gold-embroidered tapestry in the huge throne hall depicted scenes from the heroic past of their lineage, ancestors who had served the dark power for centuries, but for some reason, Ruvaras saw in it only a reflection of his own inadequacy. And it was a certain contrast between the bright future foretold for Stefan and the dull present in which he was caught.

His gaze involuntarily slid toward the throne, on which Samael was seated. His face, as if carved from stone, revealed no emotion. Ruvars knew that his father was expecting some kind of sign from him, a confirmation of his readiness to accept his role. But what could Ruvars offer other than disappointment

in himself?

Meanwhile, Stefan was handing out smiles left and right, displaying his confidence and charm. He knew how to play to the audience, how to win hearts, having been half – human by birth.

Ruvars felt a wave of envy rise in his chest but immediately suppressed it. After all, envy is the fate of the weak.

The younger of the brothers took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. In the end, he was still Samael's son, and the blood of their lineage flowed through his veins. The hope for Ruvars' transformation was just an illusion, but his father would not allow it to fade completely, and that was exactly what Samael intended to show his son.

– Father, Stefan and I had a serious talk about you! But, as I see it, there's no need for that anymore, since there's no feud between you, – Ruvars said with interest.

Samael felt triumphant inside: he had managed to sway the whole family to his side! After all, their father's word was law for them! And while the brothers had only heard of Joe by reputation, just a few years ago he had dared to appear in their "lives" and show that he was worthy of their attention.

Stefan was the eldest of the brothers, older than Nestor by nine months, nine days, and nine hours. Some of the brothers had disliked their half-brother from the very beginning, but Stefan, thanks to his human nature, did not see this as enmity. After all, above all, they were blood brothers to him, which meant that nothing else mattered.

– Ruvars, the plans that swarm in my head are incomprehensible to you! For centuries I have ruled the circles of the underworld, our family, the boundless flow of souls, assigning those who came to me, keeping track of all living and non-living things in our abode and beyond. For millennia, the existence of the underworld has rested on my tireless work, on me, as the sole master of the place where now your four brothers reign! I have never lost a battle and have preserved everything for you! – Samael’s voice thundered.

Joe lowered his head, and Ruvars stared at his father, ready to renounce everything just to get to the essence of their visit.

– And now you are here, beside your parents, and only Sardo’s absence prevents me from accepting that you three have broken your vows and left your circles for humans! How could you dare to do such a thing?! – Samael roared.

At that very moment, the space above them blackened, and fiery drops rained down on them.

Ruvars frowned and turned to his mother, expressing his displeasure. Agrat noticed her younger son’s confusion and immediately understood the reason for his anxiety – after all, Ruvars rarely showed such emotions! She did not want to interrupt Samael, because then the outcome of the conversation would lead to certain consequences, which Agrat was keen to avoid.

The fiery rain intensified, and the gloomy veil above the heads of the gods and creatures once again transformed into

a nightmarish scene, repeating over and over.

– I lived with the thought that you would become my heirs for millennia and continue my work! – Samael shouted.

Stefan stood silently, lowering his head, and, like the most obedient son, did not dare to contradict his father. He was displeased with himself, but what outraged him most were his brothers, who lived in perpetual darkness, counting the hundreds of years of their existence to become the last judges for humans.

The elder brother felt compassion for all living things on earth, whether animals or people. He despised gossip, envious people, and slanderers, destroying monstrosities that, under the guise of “purity”, misled living creatures, appearing to them in the form of good. Joe was afraid to admit to himself that his strengths would remain undiscovered, and that he would vanish without ever knowing how wonderful it is to live where any magic is within your reach!

As for Ruvars, his demonic distrust of everything living, except his main goal, had disappeared. Now he was a man, even if only partially, and carnal pain was something he knew firsthand! And sometimes the horror that lurked within him awoke with its former strength, when his existence could become fatal or extremely dangerous to others...

At that moment, the desire to disappear, to forget about his purpose, was so strong that the demon wondered: should he refuse his older brother's help and just leave, vanish in an unknown direction? But then he wouldn't be able to bring Anna

back, without whom he saw no meaning in continuing to exist.

Joe glanced stealthily into Ruvars's eyes and was struck by the strength of the emotional bond between his younger brother and Anna. Even having turned to dust, her life hadn't ended! After all, she wasn't being let go by the devil himself – what more proof is needed that demons can feel too?

– Father, with all due respect to you and to the noble queen Agrat, my mother, allows me to fulfill my mission here and now! I do not wish to argue with you, let alone ignite a conflict, but I long to reclaim that wonderful beauty you yourself spoke of and to live in happiness, rather than endure a colorless existence! Six centuries is enough time to fulfill one's destiny, isn't it? – said Ruvars, putting all the strength of his determination into every word.

Samael was astonished by his son's selflessness, his zeal to renounce immortality and bear the burden of mortality. He was struck by Ruvars' unyielding will and the dignity with which he expressed his request – not demanding, but sincerely asking! The head of the demonic lineage could not help but admire the fact that Ruvars rightfully deserved the title of the wisest among the brothers.

– I will ask you only one question and demand an immediate answer! – Samael's voice sounded like a clap of thunder.

Ruvars tensed, sensing a trap in his father's words.

Stefan mentally said goodbye to that corner of the underworld where he was allowed to feel happy, certain that his younger

brother's answer would provoke Samael's anger.

– Why do you want to resurrect a mortal, when you have everything it takes to be immortal and rule your circle for many millennia? – Samael asked, fixing his son with a gaze that seemed to burn right through him.

Ruvars realized that his father was deliberately trying to draw words out of him, to convince him of the futility of rejecting his inheritance. But the desire to be near the one that teetered on the edge of life and death was stronger than any argument.

He heard her voice in his mind, felt her breath nearby, as if speaking with her in reality. Without these sensations, he could no longer imagine his existence.

– I have gained a heart and I wish to remain mortal, because Anna has appeared in my life! The visions of the underworld no longer bring me joy, and I do not intend to remain your prisoner for another eternity, or even longer! – Ruvars replied firmly.

Samael was so stunned by his son's words that he momentarily lost the power of speech. Agrat smiled faintly and shifted her gaze to Samael, who seemed to be experiencing a personal betrayal and deep disrespect for his authority.

– Say what you need and leave! I do not wish to converse with those who chose the beating of a mortal heart over immortality! – suddenly exclaimed the head of the great family, and fiery drops once again streaked the space above their heads.

They drummed on the roofs of majestic palaces and buildings, where resided rulers no less noble than Samael and Agrat. But

none of them dared to complain or object to the fiery rain. After all, Samael's name was on the lips of all the gods living nearby, for some forbidden, for others sacred.

Chapter 2.

Awakening by voice

The deserted plain where Anna lay was surrounded on all sides by four giant royal cobras. Frozen in their warning postures, they seemed to watch for prey that had strayed into the thickets of tiny cloudberryes. This ominous sign warned all living and non – living entities of the dwelling of evil that no creature capable of harming the fragile being or disturbing its rest could penetrate the world of darkness.

The girl's ashes floated in the air, as if oblivion wrapped the mind of someone who seemed on the verge of disappearing. Anna had been shattered into the tiniest particles, barely discernible to the eye. They swirled in the air, performing their whimsical and perhaps final dance. The girl was not a whole, but existed in a state of disintegration, splitting into billions of particles, with her entire being on the brink of complete physical annihilation. The pain inside was no longer merely physical; it penetrated every cell, every atom of her body, like a poison corroding the very foundation of her existence. Her consciousness flailed, distorting reality, turning familiar outlines into nightmarish visions.

Memories surged in waves, sometimes scorching with icy cold, sometimes burning with hellish fire, demanding an end

to these torments. The faces of loved ones, fragments of phrases, and moments of happiness now seemed like a distant dream, almost erased from memory. She felt the connection with the world her friends inhabited slipping away, as the threads linking her to reality tore one by one.

But in this chaos, in this agony of disintegration, a new spark flared up – the very spark of hope and will to live. Something inside, buried deep beneath layers of pain and despair, refused to give up.

Clinging to this spark, she held onto it mentally and painfully, returning piece by piece from oblivion. It promised a long and arduous journey, but she knew there was no other choice.

Perhaps, in her oblivion, Anna was saying farewell to her friends: Azazel and Triiter, or perhaps she was thanking Lion and Anastasia for the emotional thrill they gave her...

Most likely, she did not blame Mark for his action, possibly done against his will. But more than anything, she longed to see the younger of the brothers and work alongside him, like with a being that had saved her life twice. The girl was bound to Ruvars by a single strong thread, and that very thread was his demonic power, which did not allow Anna to disappear in the triumph of reason over chaos...

On the bier of her silence, Anna controlled nothing: neither life nor death, neither malice nor joy...

Now she was at the mercy of the younger of the brothers and his power, which, like a wild beast, did not know what to do or

how to exist in a “body” that did not exist. In a state, that could not be recognized by either the higher beings, which dwelled on her level or the lower ones inhabiting the flow of darkness.

Anna’s power seemed as if it had been trapped in a cage, and she could only break free from the snare through the demon and his assistance. Selfish and once self-absorbed Ruvars could not find peace, watching the dust motes floating inside the vacuum sphere. He forgot all his problems and shut his eyes to everything happening around him. His thoughts were only where there was still a glimmer of hope for the salvation of a person who had become a breath of fresh air for him.

Ruvars didn’t know what to do next or how to move forward! He was afraid of making the wrong step, just as Anna once feared, and of harming his friend.

Hoping to hear or feel something approving that might give him confidence in his next step, Ruvars went to... Anna.

Noticing the approaching figure, the cobras reared up, taking on a threatening posture. They hissed furiously, keeping their eyes fixed on Ruvars, opening their mouths wider and wider, like enraged dogs. Two of them stretched to their full length as soon as they saw that Ruvars was crossing the boundaries of their territory.

He leaned forward slightly to look into the eyes of the snakes, knowing they were supposed to recognize him.

– Forgive us, master, but we didn’t recognize you at once! Are you now a human, with a beating heart in your chest? – hissed

one of the cobras in a human voice.

Ruvars smiled and once again took the form of his former ‘master.’ He was pleased that they recognized him, but the reptile’s words touched him, emphasizing his human nature, albeit incomplete!

– I hear a heartbeat! – suddenly said the second one, in the same human voice as the first.

Ruvars was slightly taken aback by the tone in her voice, which sounded like a verdict. Could it be that she didn’t understand who was standing before her?

The cobras, as if parting in a bow, cleared the path for their former master, once the curse of their dwelling. He was aware of his duality, accepted it, and understood how tormenting the process of rebirth from darkness into light was for a demon!

Ruvars’ path had been paved with heavy and harsh lessons. Every misdeed, sharp and relentless, pierced his very essence to the core, tempering his will and twisting his morality. Rejected by his family, hunted by the angels of darkness, and misunderstood by humans, he wandered through worlds, gathering fragments of past glory and hope into a bottomless well of despair, that is, of his very existence.

And now he had to learn to see the light in people, the higher links in the unjust chain of life, who had fallen into his circle not by chance, but to “continue” their path.

The demon did not crave praise or guidance. Cruel and stubborn, he yielded to no one in the boundless expanses of the

abode of darkness or in the cold void. His name, spoken in a whisper, struck fear even in the most hardened criminals brought before him for judgment, and his gaze, piercing the darkness, made the very foundations of existence shudder. He was the embodiment of chaos, the architect of destruction, an untamed whirlwind sweeping away everything in its path.

In his past – if one could even speak of a past for a being so ancient and beyond time – there were moments of the fall of empires, the fading of stars, and the birth of stories. He was both observer and participant in the greatest tragedies of the universe, a centuries – old witness to the transience of all that exists.

He was surrounded by legions of servants, lower – ranking demons, and ready to carry out his every will, no matter how monstrous it might be. They bowed to him not out of fear, but from the highest sense of devotion, admiring his power and his ability to sow destruction.

But even in this realm of darkness and despair, in the very essence of the demon, there flickered a sense of something else. No, not kindness, but a certain semblance of longing. He saw the worlds he had created crumble, and despite his destiny, he felt a fleeting, painful emptiness.

Perhaps even the most terrifying demon has its own, personal form of sorrow, a sorrow over the fact that, in the end, everything turns to dust. And this sorrow only pushed him toward new destructions, to new acts of vandalism against reality.

Suddenly, a light breeze, fresh as if after rain, brushed against his cheek. The demon shuddered at this touch, for such a thing had never happened before.

Along the blurred banks of a river that seemed to appear from nowhere, one could guess that the water parted before the lord of the dark world. His selfishness slightly receded, but his chest was overflowing with joy at the fact that nature and the elements were still subject to him, as in those times when he ruled over them absolutely.

The closer Ruvars got to Anna, the more his thoughts wandered. A few meters from the vacuum speckled with dust, strange metamorphoses were happening: they thickened into shapeless dark spots, contracted into tiny spheres the size of walnuts, stretched into barely visible threads. Lightning, like spears, pierced Ruvars' body, unmistakably making it clear that Anna's space resisted his intrusion.

It wasn't that he felt pain – the demonic protection shielded him from unbearable suffering – but the tingling caused slight irritation, which made Ruvars flinch.

The youngest of the brothers valued his freedom above all else and did not want to part with it, nor did he want to lose Anna. The demon was being torn apart. Without Anna, he felt like he was crumbling from the inside, and the desire to get her back grew with each passing hour, gaining frenzied strength.

He was subject to strange forces, alien to both darkness and light. His human mind thought differently than when he was

a demon. Ruvars understood that these changes were for the better, as they gave him a sense of purpose. He felt that his existence would end when Anna finally disappeared from his life. But he pushed these thoughts away, for he had grand plans for the girl; he was not going to give her up to his soul-hungry brothers.

A few steps away from the place where Anna's dust motes swirled in a chaotic dance, Ruvars saw a strange aura, like the glow of a bright beam. He wanted to quicken his pace, but something held him back, preventing him from approaching the girl. Then he cast off his human guise and returned to his devilish form.

The glow intensified so much that the heat of the underworld seemed like a faint spark. Ruvars imagined that he was not the master of hell, but the Master of the Void, still as powerful and almighty as ever. His face remained stern, but the scorching heat brought him back to reality, where he realized that unknown forces were keeping him away from Anna. Ruvars hoped that he could be useful, to fulfill all her wishes and whims...

He wanted to be a true friend to her, caring and honest, but right now that was impossible...

Anna remained unattainable for him, distant, existing outside the world of good and evil. She couldn't imagine how much Ruvars was suffering because, instead of him, she had been the one to suffer.

The celestial body, resembling the sun, shone dimmer than usual. The icy wind from the east grew stronger with each gust,

instilling fear in all living things near Ruvars and his “friend” within the vacuum sphere.

Grains of sand swirled as if driven by a hurricane, scattering with immense force in all directions. It was impossible to keep track of them; their movements were strange and unusual. As Ruvars approached Anna, the sand grains seemed to panic, darting around their “home” – Anna. His presence was something frightening, terrifying to them. How else could one explain their chaotic running, their frantic dashes from side to side, and their continuous movement along a path dictated by an invisible force?

Ruvars was torn by confusion. He least of all wanted to disturb the girl, whose gaze; he felt, could watch him from afar.

The vacuum, seeming strange and ominous, was split in two. One half was black, like a starless night, the other white, like bone. With each passing day, its color shifted to the opposite, and the blackness deepened as Anna’s life force waned in her struggle against the shadows of the underworld.

She was partially surrendered to the power of the Ruvars brothers, where her zest for life had almost dried up. Only a small spark of indomitable will lingered within her, giving hope for salvation if Ruvars decided on a desperate step and returned her with the help of the Root of the Sun’s.

As if in a fleeting dream, Anna wandered down a corridor woven from thick fog, where her steps were slow and uncertain. Dry leaves, freshly fallen from the trees, rustled under her feet.

Sometimes, finding herself in a ghostly forest where dense thickets intertwined and the trees whispered strange voices, Anna vaguely recognized the place. She drove away thoughts of oblivion and the possibility that her return might not happen...

Her heart ached for the days when she had joyfully lived among close and beloved people. The longing for a past that could not be reclaimed or relived tormented her. Thoughts of Ruvars – the being who had helped her become what she was now – kept surfacing in the girl’s mind again and again.

Although she could not be called a “living” person, every particle of her broken body felt that she could return to life only through a miracle. She awaited this miracle like the dawn of a new beginning, like the first star in the night sky that would show her a new path.

In secret, Anna dreamed of Anastasia’s return. She had embraced her like a mother and, with all her heart and the purity of her soul, nurtured in her the noble feelings inherent in aristocracy. She understood that the refined manners she had learned from Lion were connected to Anastasia. At this thought, Anna shuddered, and tears streamed down her cheeks. She felt that she had lost a close person in the figure of her lady, a woman who had loved her like a daughter.

Suddenly, her thoughts were interrupted by someone’s concern over the vacuum. She heard the beating of a heart and a swarm of thoughts that she could barely grasp. In that very moment, Anna realized: it was Ruvars.

A trembling voice, full of questions she could not answer, wounded her, causing unbearable pain. Every sound the demon made resonated in her with scorching torment. Anna shouted at the top of her lungs that she could hear him, but he was distant, like an impenetrable mountain peak. She could not help someone who was so far away, even though only a few meters separated them...

The young demon hid from the pain in silence. He tried to seem cold and distant, but it was in vain. After all, now he was human!

– Ruvars! – Anna cried out with such fury and pain that her servants shook their heads, as if they had heard her desperate plea.

He turned toward Anna. The yearning in his chest made the half-demon look around for a familiar voice, but he saw no one and turned away.

“I’m going to lose my mind soon, living like this is impossible!” – Ruvars thought.

Anna screamed again at the top of her lungs, and this time the young demon’s heart seemed to stop. The girl was calling him for help!

The cobras twirled their heads again, as if dancing, showing their displeasure. Their peace had never been disturbed so often!

They were looking for their master, but the Master of the Void was nowhere to be found. He stood with his head down, examining unfamiliar tracks under his feet. Ruvars seemed

to dissolve, disappearing from the sight of his former servants.

He thought about how wonderful it would be to have his former demonic power! How quickly he could find Mark and how cruelly he would punish him for betrayal, sending him to the underworld for the highest judgment. But his full demonic might had faded over time, and having been reborn, he began to realize the tragedy of the situation, why and for whom he had become ordinary!

Ruvars knew that the girl was calling him, that she needed his help, for her strength was running out! She couldn't control it in a vacuum, and hope for salvation was fading with every second.

Anna and Ruvars were equally afraid of being left alone on opposite sides of the worlds! She didn't want to fall under the control of his brothers, and he did not want to remain alone in her world! Therefore, the search for the Root of the Sun's, the source of supreme energy for Anna, had to succeed. He believed in it with all his demonic heart!

Ruvars was one step away from discovering Anna's secret, from appearing to her and pulling her out of the captivity of the unknown. Neither of them could have imagined that their separation would last so long. Anna dreamt of Ruvars, of his transformation, and of the blessings he brought to people, while Ruvars was certain that Anna deserved to live in luxury befitting the Queen of Fire. But for now...

Two kindred hearts, thinking and feeling the world alike, were separated! A demon in the guise of an angel or an angel in the

guise of a demon – neither is true! And if Anna had inherited a part of his devilish power, his strength had not waned; on the contrary, he felt it surging within him. He knew that soon he would have to rid himself of the excess energy at all costs, in order to somehow tame his unquenchable power and wrath.

Chapter 3.

An unexpected dialogue

Ruvars lived in captivity of silent dialogues with Anna. He questioned, argued, shared thoughts about Azazel and Sardo... about Mark's betrayal, which had fractured their communication, and about Lion, whose life Anna had once illuminated with a bright, unforgettable light. The younger of the brothers did not know why he was having a conversation about him in particular, but deep down he felt that it was necessary for both him and, possibly, her.

Ruvars understood the chasm that indifference could lead to – the indifference of someone who seemed to be the center of the universe. After all, at one time he himself had shown such indifference toward the girl who was ready to do anything for him. And now he seemed to himself like that very indifferent demon, escaped from the depths of the underworld, which, for now, was passively doing nothing...

The girl, however, despite everything, kept faith in her moment, in her destiny. And it would certainly come, when her presence became vital for the world she was still detached from, even without acknowledging that the arrow of betrayal, shot by Mark, had split her life into “before” and “after”. And yet, so many plans, so many hopes lay ahead...

For a long time, Anna remained in a state of fragile uncertainty, in a quiet haven between worlds. She could not have imagined that the process of purification, that cruel lesson which Mark, Lion's chief assistant in magic, had decided to teach her, would turn out to be so prolonged.

But Mark had to reveal his true face. Without this, the story would have taken a completely different path...

Lion also realized what a terrible, possibly irreparable mistake the little squirrel had made. For such monstrous transgressions, he mercilessly eradicated any being, whether living or dwelling in other worlds. He eradicated without a trace, erasing them from the memory of the Ruvars brothers, erasing them from the very fabric of the universe, whether it be a world of light or darkness...

Mark, in turn, did not expect such a tragic fate for Anna. After all, his true target was Ruvars. He did not anticipate that Anna would fall under the power of demonic forces he could not overcome.

Doubts tormented the little squirrel. After all, he had made a mistake that neither Azazel nor Lion would ever forgive. He desperately longed to fix what had been done and accept the punishment he deserved...

Mark was afraid to ask Lion for help, afraid of his wrath. He also dared not turn to Azazel, knowing that she was under the vigilant protection and control of Sardo. Only one option remained – to surrender to Ruvar's mercy and accept any

judgment he decreed, for he was the wisest demon of the underworld.

Mark did not hope for mercy. He only wanted to find a way out of the quagmire he had gotten himself into. To become a helper, a savior for Anna, as it seemed to him, for both girls. Mark lived with the hope that soon he would be able to atone for his guilt. He was overwhelmed by a burning desire to talk to Anna, to explain how deeply he was entangled. The emotional pain from realizing what he had done and the trials ahead gave him no rest. And he vowed to himself to get the girl back, even at the cost of his own life.

He reasoned not like a man, but like a being as heartless and cruel as the brothers with whom he had once sworn to have nothing more to do. But as it turned out, those were only emotions and empty words.

Now the situation was different. Mark had to bring clarity to what was happening, where his involvement was extremely necessary. The desire to be useful again was so great that he immediately set out to search for the younger of the brothers.

“He should be sought near the basement, where Lion once hid with his ‘retinue’. This cunning demon often retreats to that area, indulging in memories of the first time he ever helped a human!” – thought Mark, smirking at himself, surprised.

He froze, struck by his own thoughts. The fear of having to descend into the demons’ lair gripped his body with sticky sweat. After all, he could be exiled immediately, losing the

chance to help Anna and regain the trust of his master, with whom he still maintained a connection! Mark worried that searching for the crucial information about Ruvars and his whereabouts would take too much time, and how many creatures would continue to pursue him after seeking help from the younger brother?!

Twilight fell. The sky became overcast with ragged scraps of clouds, and a strange haze, like smoke from a fire, enveloped the little squirrel and the area around him.

At that moment, Mark was ready for anything, ready to see anyone, but not... Azazel with Sardo, along with Joe and Ruvars. He stared at their faces as if ghosts of his childhood or nightmares from the past had appeared before him. He looked at them as though they were something monstrous and unreal. Mark couldn't understand how they had found him in a place where even Lion couldn't locate him!

Astonishment showed on his face. He took a step back, but immediately realized his mistake and stepped forward again.

Before him stood a true she – devil in the form of Azazel. The girl had changed beyond recognition. Her facial features had sharpened, becoming more severe and frightening. The cold indifference in her gaze pierced Mark.

– Welcome to my home! I'm sure you'll like it here! – Mark replied, narrowing his eyes slightly.

Now all his thoughts were focused on Ruvars. Mark understood what it was like to become a hermit, to live in the

shadows, unaware of the wonders happening beyond the small world you had fully immersed yourself in. After all, that is exactly what Ruvars was like now!

– I know what this pathetic creature is thinking right now, – Azazel said, her voice filled with malice.

Her words cut like a knife. Mark flinched at each word, understanding their meaning, and she was right. He had always been a good friend to Azazel and a loyal servant in Lion's house. But he had never been able to become something more because he was afraid! Afraid of his destiny, afraid of making a mistake, and afraid of drowning in his feelings for her...

This fear, like a sinister shadow, haunted him with every step, preventing him from revealing his feelings to her and binding his aspirations with chains of doubt. He lived in a golden cage of his own limitations, admiring the world through the bars instead of flinging the door open and entering her heart as its sole master.

He knew that if he just reached out his hand, fate itself would fall at his feet, strewn with possibilities. But that hand remained motionless, gripped by the fear of imminent failure.

In the end, he stayed on the threshold of her heart, never daring to cross the line. His life turned into a quiet harbor, filled with regrets over unfulfilled dreams, over unspoken feelings. He became a ghost of his own indecisiveness, wandering through the labyrinths of missed opportunities. And all because he was afraid Azazel. She was a light to him, a kindred soul. Once, a strong bond of attachment had connected them, but after the squirrel's

inexplicable act, the girl drifted away, cutting off everything that hindered her from moving forward. And even though Mark wasn't around, Sardo fulfilled her whims, for to him she was more than just the Dark Minister.

In those distant times, Mark's only solace was his work. Without it, his world seemed empty and lifeless. Neither Azazel nor the shadows of the past tormented his soul like the commanding voice of Lion sending him on yet another mission full of dangers and intrigues. Mark was a virtuoso of transformations, a genius of disguise. Any role assigned to him became reality, thanks to which Lion kept a hand on controlling events: he knew everything about the enemies, their cunning plans, and, of course, about Sania and Herman, whose lives neither squirrel nor Lion valued in the slightest.

When the news of the tragedy that had befallen Anna reached Lion, Mark seemed to vanish into thin air. He avoided meeting his master, anticipating the wrath that would descend upon him. It was unbearable for squirrel to imagine the storm of emotions he had stirred in Lion's heart and how cruelly he could be punished. A shadow of oblivion hung over him, and the fear of the inevitable confrontation paralyzed his will. He never had Ivan's strength, but deep down he harbored hope for understanding, understanding that he didn't want this for Anna!

Mark believed that his steps toward reconciliation with Lion and Ruvars would bring only good. He was ready to accept the blow of fate, knowing that his demise would resonate with pain

in the hearts of those who valued him, who wished him well. Mark was loved by many, and this love gave him strength.

Life often delivers cruel surprises, and if Mark deserved punishment, it was only from Anna, from the one who trusted him unconditionally and, alas, later regretted it. He was merely a chance guest in her life, not a support, even though he considered himself a friend. Therefore, he did not dare to ask her for trust, let alone forgiveness.

Anna was furious; she was destroying everything around her as if possessed. Oblivion had not touched her from within; it only accelerated the whirlwind raging in her soul, where two powerful forces collided: the power inherited from her blood ancestors and the power granted by Ruvars.

She desperately tried to break free from the prison of the void, to find a way out of the situation into which Mark had pushed her. It was he who pushed her to act, to realize that the powers she possessed could work for her and with her. After all, before that, she only destroyed herself.

– You are human, and it is natural for you to be weak, Anna... Allow yourself this weakness, let go of the resentment towards your parents, towards Azazel, towards everyone... Speak out, even if only to yourself! Have a healthy dialogue with yourself! – Mark once told her.

The little squirrel seemed to foresee her future and knew that his words would eventually turn out to be true.

At the moment when Anna began her transformation,

ascending from a lower being to a higher one, her consciousness became unique. Even Ruvars could not fathom its depths. If he, as a demon, had limitless powers, Anna did not rush to use all her resources. She dreamed of peace, which was still so far away...

Stefan, always open and honest, suddenly saw clearly. He looked into Mark's eyes and saw remorse there. The half – demon was surprised by this foolishness but, on the other hand, was impressed by his “living” act. Being trapped in the jaws of death while being certain of salvation – this was beyond comprehension! But Joe had no doubts: he saw Mark's essence and was struck by his recklessness.

At the sight of the little squirrel, Ruvars transformed. His muscles grew like a boat filling with streams of rain. His arms, legs, body – everything turned crimson – orange. Two enormous wings sprouted from his back, ending in sharp claws, just like those of his other brothers.

His green eyes lost their friendliness. Ruvars was consumed by hatred for his cursed enemy. He had never felt anything like this before!

– How is it possible that, after being reincarnated, Ruvars feels human and demonic emotions at the same time, so deeply and painfully? – Azazel suddenly asked the Demon of Darkness.

Sardo felt the rage emanating from his brother. They had always been different, but after reincarnation their bond had grown stronger; they felt each other more acutely.

– My beautiful one, – growled Sardo, – even if he has

gained a heart instead of a stone, his power hasn't disappeared anywhere! He's still the same demon from the underworld, and I do not wish for your friend to experience his strength firsthand!

At that moment, Azazel felt that nothing could save Mark anymore, but Ruvars once again exceeded all expectations.

– Why are you hiding, you coward?! – roared Ruvars, his face twisted in a grimace of rage.

His eyes filled with a clump of terrible, relentless energy. Like an erupting volcano, he could not contain his emotions, and with each repetition of the question, his face became more terrifying. Ruvars had lost control over himself. After all, he could immerse himself in the state of a demon, which, in essence, he was. But he was desperately afraid to awaken the power he had restrained for Anna. The desire to be the best friend for her, to save her from the oppressive decay of time, tormented his already chaotic thoughts.

– I will ask the question one last time, although you will probably prefer not to hear it: why are you hiding?! – Ruvars thundered again, and the claws on his wings turned crimson.

– I apologize to everyone present, but it was you who came to me! – Mark began his speech.

His hands were trembling as if from a chill. He understood that his world could collapse in an instant, but he decided to resort to trickery. He acted persistently and directly, for joking with Ruvars was dangerous!

– Forgive me, Azazel, for not giving you enough time, for you

deserve more, a better friend! Joe, I apologize for the fact that, preserving your humanity, you did not abandon me in a difficult moment! – the little squirrel spoke, not waiting for an answer to the previous question.

A silence fell. Joe bowed his head in acknowledgment, proud, like a hawk soaring in the sky. He was genuinely pleased to hear words of gratitude.

– And I especially want to apologize to Ruvars, to the demon I was so angry with that I didn't understand what I was doing! After all, Azazel was distancing herself from me, and it was unbearable for me to realize that I was losing her. But I understood that she had been lost long ago, I just hadn't seen it, hadn't noticed. I was turning a blind eye to the fact that her sorrow was caused not by me, but by Sardo, and that oppressed me even more! – Mark explained.

Sardo's face twisted noticeably in surprise, because he hadn't expected such a speech from Mark, and instead of replying, he just sneeringly chuckled.

Mark's speech touched Azazel to the very depths of her soul. Two barely noticeable beads of tears sparkled in the corners of her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. Azazel understood that Mark was exactly the one her mother had once told her about. The woman, who asked not to keep a bird in a cage, but, seeing Mark soaring high above so freely and independently, let him go, for he craved freedom! Azazel could not imagine her life without Sardo, but Mark had once been necessary to her as

well... After all, she had grown up under his guidance, directions, and advice...

The girl did not show particular emotions toward Mark, but she had always seen in him something noble and worthy. She dreamed of the wall between them falling, but it did not happen, for she herself was the reason for that wall.

– I would like to speak with Ruvars! Please leave us alone! – Mark said, staring intently at Azazel.

The girl was puzzled by his words and slightly embarrassed. Silently lowering her eyes, she turned away and hurried after Joe, who was moving away inexplicably quickly.

Sardo had been strange from the very beginning of their meeting. He was clearly nervous and didn't understand why he should talk to Mark and give a chance to that traitor! But recalling that he himself had once been so abandoned by Azazel, his anger gave way to a smirk.

– You seem upset about something, I can see that! – Azazel suddenly asked Joe.

The half – demon wasn't expecting a question from the girl, especially at such an inconvenient moment. He had no desire at all to talk about how Anna had been tormenting his mind for a long time, and he certainly didn't want to be a burden in front of Ruvars.

– Not at all! – Joe replied, smiling a little.

– You look worried! – Azazel persisted, as if deliberately trying to pry into his innermost thoughts.

But Stefan didn't listen to her. He wasn't interested in Azazel's words. His thoughts were elsewhere, on the one who was now in a state of separation.

Chapter 4.

Mark's guilt

– I know that I have caused you the worst pain in the world, because a girl, a friend, more precious to me than anyone else, could die because of me! – Mark suddenly exclaimed.

His eyes were staring off into the distance. He wasn't thinking about whether Ruvars would forgive him, nor did he wish for the demon to stoop to such a thing, but he would be grateful if Anna returned and everything fell back into place.

Mark pondered for a long time whether he should try to talk to Ruvars about Anna, but the fear of being rejected and cast into the abyss of hell threw him into turmoil. He dreamed of becoming invisible, disappearing into the flow of life where there was neither Azazel, not Anna, not Ruvars.

– Why are you here, traitor? – Ruvars said, his voice full of obvious fury.

His gaze scorched Mark, and his face changed instantly. No one knew what to expect from a demon in the flesh, but Sardo and Stefan felt a shiver from afar, guessing what their brother was capable of.

Mark felt his body softening, like cotton, and Ruvars was to blame. He was gradually draining Mark's strength, turning him into a helpless and flabby creature, incapable of existing alone,

shaping him into something amorphous and formless.

Ruvars and Mark had never been enemies, but they couldn't be called friends either. Two unpredictable beings were connected by delicate threads, intertwined in their fates, and each of them had to play their role in the other's life. Ruvars and Mark clashed again at a crossroads, where a serious choice stood before them: between good and evil, life and death...

For a moment, a thought crept into the demon's mind that perhaps the wizard had found a way to return Anna faster than they could find the Sun Root, and he was right. Mark had a different proposal, possibly less advantageous for both of them, but more effective for Anna.

In a strange place where a semblance of the sun was always smoldering, an ominous gloom prevailed. The pyramids in the distance, usually radiating warmth, light, and energy, now gaped with icy indifference. Ruvars preferred to speak on territory where he felt at least some support, although he understood that he didn't particularly need help.

The silent chill of the pyramids, penetrating to the bone, tormented Mark's soul, impatient to rid himself of the oppressive burden of regrets. He felt like a spoiled child, unable to manage the chaotic swarm of thoughts scattered like seeds in his head, which had grown unbearably heavy, astonishing even the demon.

– I didn't settle with you after the last battle, and I still owe you! – Mark blurted out, with the force of a dam bursting.

– You owe me more than your miserable life! – growled

Ruvars, and his eyes flared again with emerald fire, sparks of rage dancing within.

Mark knew that Ruvars could turn him to smoke in an instant, scatter him to ashes, or transform him into something that could never be found. He was terrified by the demon's unrestrained energy, his sheer force, but most of all, he feared that piercing gaze that froze him with icy cold.

– Do you wish to offer something of substance?! – Ruvars hissed.

Mark's tongue felt as if it had frozen to the roof of his mouth. He couldn't move, but he had to answer, for Ruvars was waiting.

– I... I have a proposal that could save Anna without you're the Root of the Sun. And who knows if you could even find it, for it only grows in the Former Lands, where the master is your half – brother! – Mark exhaled and gave a crooked smile.

Ruvars frowned, trying to understand what kind of proposal could come from Mark and how he knew about the Root of the Sun, which grows only in the Former Lands. This news made the demon wary, for only a few were aware of it.

– How do you know about the Root of the Sun and the Former Lands?! – Ruvars asked with blatant surprise.

Mark only smirked in response and, glancing around, noticed that all three of Ruvars' travelers were lost in their own thoughts. Wishing to prove his usefulness, he decided to speak plainly, without deceit.

– Promise me that if my proposal doesn't please you, I'll go

to the Former Lands with you! – Mark demanded.

The demon was stunned by the unexpected help from a creature he didn't even consider his enemy, and raising an eyebrow, he replied disdainfully:

– But if anything goes wrong, I'll throw you into the abyss of hell, to my brothers, who will enact a terrible judgment upon you, which you undoubtedly deserve!

Mark nodded in agreement. He knew he had an ace up his sleeve that only Anna and Azazel knew about. The thought clearly gave him confidence in his words and actions.

– I'm waiting for your offer! Speak quickly, or you'll end up in eternal torment. I will ask my brothers to provi... – Ruvars didn't get to finish.

– My life in exchange for Anna's life. If all the powers of our circle perform the Chalice of Bafo ritual, she will return... But you should know that Anna may come back different! – Mark interrupted him.

Ruvars seemed to come to from the deafening shout of his name. His eyes darted around, searching for meaning in Mark's strange statement.

– You don't understand, White Light mage, what you're talking about, do you? – Ruvars asked doubtfully, not realizing how well the little squirrel was controlling the situation.

– I understand perfectly well what I'm saying. We can get together in a matter of minutes, and Anna will be there. But the choice is yours! – cut in Mark.

– What do you want from me, villain, for me to become your debtor? – Ruvars would not calm down.

Mark could not understand the demon's true motives. In his opinion, this was the best chance to get Anna back quickly and without significant harm to her health. No one could promise that she would return as she was, but she would come back alive. But would Ruvars agree?

– You are a madman if you think I will let you enter Anna's space and free her from the bonds of the shifting trap! – Ruvars shouted so loudly that Azazel involuntarily covered her ears.

At that very moment, the sky darkened with nightmarish visions. A vast wasteland, resembling a mirror, opened up high above. Along the edges of this eerie expanse, as if linked by a single chain, sat previously unknown creatures, spewing a strange slime that resembled liquid resin. No one knew what dripped from their mouths, but everyone felt that it was all ill-omened. The goo, thick and black, burned through the earth, leaving smoldering craters in its wake. Just one inhalation would sear the throat, and the eyes would sting.

The creatures moved slowly, clumsily, like toys controlled by some unknown force. Their limbs, long and thin in disproportion, buckled under the weight of their bodies. Their skin, if it could be called that, resembled old, cracked stone covered with lichen. No eyes were visible, only gaping voids in which sparks sometimes flickered, like embers in ash.

Ruvars looked up in amazement. Fear held Azazel and Joe

captive, while Sardo and Mark exchanged worried glances and seemed rooted to the ground, immobilized by the number of creatures above.

– Who or what are they? I’ve never encountered such marvels! – Joe asked the equally shocked Azazel.

– They are eerily beautiful, as if they’ve come back from the very depths of hell. And if I’m not mistaken, these are Likki! – Ruvars growled.

There were so many of them that at first, the eyes couldn’t capture the shapes, which resembled wolf – like faces. Within moments, they would change into human faces – sullen and stern, as if forced by some power to sit in their places

– What’s happening to them? Why are they changing faces? – Azazel asked fearfully.

– Or faces? – Mark clarified.

They exchanged glances. Mark seemed to be reading Azazel’s thoughts – he knew her that well.

– I dare say it’s because of Anna. She’s human, and her essence still belongs to her. And, as I understand it, when the Likki stop changing, it will become clear what’s going on with Anna – either she’s disappeared, or she’s fighting for her existence! – Joe explained.

Everyone fell silent. The oppressive quiet was broken only by Sardo, who didn’t understand the meaning of his half – brother’s last words.

– It’s simple, Sardo, – Joe responded. – The Likki will show

us the truth: has Anna fallen into darkness, turning into a she – devil, or is there still a spark of humanity in her!

The Demon of Darkness was puzzled by his answer, and a genuine concern for the girl stirred in his heart. She held not just power, but something greater than his brother's mere demonic strength. She carried within her a force unknown to anyone until now: a fusion of light and dark powers, an unprecedented and incomprehensible weapon against... yet against whom Sardo could not even guess!

Sardo pierced Ruvars with a gaze, catching the raging fury in his eyes. He barely held back from intervening in his torment, but the memory of his own suffering, once endured because of this girl, made him step back, allowing his younger brother to deal with his feelings on his own.

– You won't go to him? – Azazel's voice suddenly sounded.

– No. I think he needs to think it over himself and come to terms with the idea that Anna might take our mother's place, – replied Sardo with a smile.

– But she's my friend too, Sardo! After all, this transformation could completely change her! And if she ascends your mother's throne, I will also turn into something horrible! – protested Azazel.

Sardo smiled faintly. His face, after the judgment of the ancestors, seemed softened, more pleasant, and even human.

– Azazel, you shouldn't measure yourself by her! Just because she is your friend doesn't mean your paths have to coincide. Her

fate is now beyond even Ruvars' control. Your friend is turning into a monster in the guise of a devil, and if you follow her, I'll have to put on the mask of my lost dark essence again and become the Demon of Darkness, – Sardo warned.

Azazel fell silent, pondering his words. Should she spend the rest of her life in human form if there is a chance to gain immortality?

– What do you mean? I don't understand you, Sardo, explain! – Azazel pleaded.

– I'm talking about the fact that I'll have to pull you out again, and then myself, from the abyss into which my brothers – and only – plunge me, – Sardo replied.

Azazel barely smiled. Deep down, she was rejoicing, having heard the words she had been waiting for so long.

Sardo was also pleased with himself. Finally, he had found true happiness, and in Azazel's face – real life.

– I'm beginning to understand myself, Azazel. Before, I only cared about my family and my circle. I was surrounded by strange beings who dreamed of seeing me strong and useful, as I once was, – he said, lowering his eyes.

Azazel was surprised by his words. Just a few weeks ago, he had been happy to have gained a mortal body and a human heart, to be able to live among people, to change for himself and others, to be useful to the human world in some way!

– Sardo, I don't quite understand you! You wanted so much to become mortal, to feel the beating of a heart, to change for

yourself and others, to avoid causing trouble, and to feel the lightness of walking in the wind! Did something happen because you decided to change yourself? – exclaimed Azazel, upset and bewildered.

The Demon of Darkness himself did not understand what was happening to him. One part of him craved goodness, but the other, dark part, could not come to terms with change. Inside him raged a struggle between those opposing forces he had inherited and acquired thanks to Azazel.

– We’ll leave this conversation for later. Right now, there are more important matters than our arguments and reflections, – Sardo cut in.

Azazel wanted to object, to point out his mistake, but she felt that the Demon of Darkness was not in the mood for conversation, and, resigned, fell silent.

– I just want to help so that this doesn’t have consequences for all of us! No one knows what awaits us in the Former Lands, whether we’ll come back alive, whether we’ll even get a part of the Sun Root, and whether Anna will destroy us all after her ‘return’! – Mark continued.

Ruvars raised his eyebrows and frowned. He understood that Mark was right, but his selfish attachment to the girl didn’t allow him to let this matter be decided for him.

Azazel sensed insincerity in Mark’s words and didn’t trust his help. It seemed to her that he would betray them again. She gave a bitter smile. After all, trust is a fragile thing, and Mark had

already crushed it to dust once.

– I think we need to face the truth. Anna is waiting for Ruvars, not you, and I suppose her protection won't let your spirit into her world, – Azazel cut in.

Ruvars was pleased with her answer. He had never liked Azazel, but in this difficult situation, he was glad that at least someone was on his side.

– No, and that's my final answer! In any case, I'm against this move! – Ruvars suddenly exclaimed.

Sardo and Stefan remained silent, considering every possibility that Mark might take, since bringing the Chalice of Bafo into the mortal world was risky.

– What kind of punishment awaits us from the ancestors? – Joe mentally asked Ruvars.

– The Chalice of Bafo is the lesser of two evils, since it's not under the control of my brothers. The main thing is – Nestor won't agree! – Ruvars replied, nervously releasing sulfurous steam from his nostrils.

Some time passed before Mark dared to ask about the answer that had been troubling the brothers.

– What's going on? Tell us, mortals, what are you talking about? – Mark asked.

The younger of the brothers exchanged a glance with Joe and sighed. His sigh was full of hopelessness, especially when it came to Nestor and Anna.

– Ruvars says that Nestor won't help for a certain reason, –

Joe replied.

Mark smiled and reached out his hand to Joe, hoping he would accept his help and not become as sullen as Ruvars.

Joe shook the outstretched hand and declared loudly:

– I trust him. He will help Anna, and I think it's necessary to give him a chance to make things right!

Azazel opened her eyes in surprise but remained silent. Sardo stood, looking up at the Likki, which multiplied like malevolent entities, and in their mirrored reflection almost touched the ground.

– We need to deal with the Likki! They are advancing on us, which means they need us for something, or they want to take something from us! We must find out their motives! – Sardo said sharply.

Ruvars missed Anna so intensely that he thought he caught a faint scent of her hair carried by the wind. He greedily inhaled the air, dreaming of how her presence would instantly send the Likki fleeing.

Sardo noticed a shadow of change on his brother's face, but understanding that the looming Likki threat was far more serious, he did not ask him about it. The brown – eyed demon's heart longed to put an end to the nightmare that had gripped the environment they were in at that moment, and in an instant, Sardo took decisive action to resolve the sinister problem.

Chapter 5.

The Likki and their leader

– Form a circle! – Sardo suddenly commanded, watching as the Likki descended upon them like a silent and relentless avalanche.

The three creatures instantly took their places, as if obeying an invisible conductor. In their eyes was the closeness of beings, a connection that united them despite the difference in blood and purpose.

Around them, as if by the wave of a magic wand, a ring of fire rose, devouring the darkness. In an instant, the brothers transformed into monsters whose bodies blazed with furious flames. Their appearance was terrifying, yet the color of their eyes and the amulets around their necks remained unchanged. Another brother, with his own amulet, joined the ominous siblings, and this brother was Stefan.

His amulet, resembling the number “30” with a small curl, was crafted in the spirit of the “Om” symbol, representing the spiritual path to self-knowledge. The simplicity and elegance of the amulet reflected the essence of its owner. The amulet, like Joe’s eyes, emitted a soft lilac light whenever he sought to help, perform a good deed, or protect against an enemy. The brothers understood that Joe, the half – human, possessed more kindness

than all of them combined, and they found his presence difficult to bear. But to deal with Likki and their army, raw strength, drive, and rage – found in each of them and their talismans – were required.

Azazel was surprised by Likki's appearance. Although she had seen things far more terrible than these "faces", the girl felt her roots, once deeply grounded, become shallow and fragile. She felt herself losing connection with Anna and growing increasingly attached to Sardo and his family. And although the Demon of Darkness never broke the family covenants (except for becoming a half – human), family always remained his top priority.

Sardo had no intention of being polite with Azazel or saying words he might regret later, but he decided to tell her something anyway.

– Soon you will become part of my family, you need to get used to it! – he said suddenly.

Azazel was taken aback by Sardo's sharp tone. It wasn't a suggestion, but rather a statement.

– You're offering me something I don't need, I'm still too young for your family! – she objected.

– Does my family not make you happy? – he asked.

– I don't know anyone in your family! Your family isn't just your brothers, it's also your parents! – Azazel shot back.

An awkward silence followed, after which Sardo softened. He knew the seed for further conversation had already been planted.

– Very well, then. It means you'll be preparing to meet and get to know them! – he replied sharply.

– I think we'll have time for that conversation later. Right now, we need to save Anna! – Azazel cut in.

Sardo smiled at his beautiful friend, for in that moment she seemed even more mysterious and radiant to him.

Everyone remained in the same positions as a minute before, except for Azazel. She felt the presence of immense forces around her and didn't know what to do. She was being tossed from side to side, and like a bird with clipped wings, she didn't know how to direct her boundless energy.

– Hold on tight, Azazel, now you'll see something greater than the infernal court! – Joe shouted, letting out a strange laugh that Sardo didn't like at all.

Moments later, the surroundings where this strange gathering of creatures and half-humans had assembled fell into oppressive silence. It was so quiet that the beating of hearts could be heard, and every beat could be counted.

Azazel had forgotten the purpose of her stay in this cursed place. Sardo was sure he had not arrived here by accident, while Joe was determined to pull Anna out of the captivity of time.

Meanwhile, Ruvars, without taking his eyes off him, watched Mark frozen in place. It seemed the little squirrel was preparing for a decisive leap, wanting to make his final move, but here too Ruvars misjudged.

– I believe Mark needs to stay and make a choice... The fate

of many depends on his decision, including Anna, who might one day return if we are quick, and for her return I will continue to fight! – Ruvars suddenly declared.

The silence dissipated, and a rumble, like distant thunder, woke Azazel, Sardo, and Joe from their sleep.

– I ask everyone to remain in their places and not take chaotic actions. Something extraordinary is happening right now, a strange event that should free us from Likki. But if we are careless, disaster is inevitable! – Ruvars announced.

The space around the villains, sitting in their bizarre mirror, began to distort. Their mad dance was not just entertainment – the monsters drew destructive power from it, and there were more and more of them!

The Likki loomed over them like ominous asperatus clouds, full of rage. Their wolfish faces had long ceased to take on a human form, and their menacing fangs gave them a repulsive, grim appearance.

– Sanavar! Sanavar! – the Likki shouted as they saw their leader.

Sanavar stepped forward. His crooked legs resembled the wheels of an old cart. He moved like a komodo dragon emerging from an ambush, waiting for prey. His strange gaze wandered across the vast mirrored space above, and it seemed as if this height might collapse at any moment – for there was nothing permanent in this dark place!

The Likki became lively. They greeted their leader as if

witnessing a miracle, something that happened rarely and only under extraordinary circumstances. Sanavar was unique in that he could lead huge, multi-million hordes of strange creatures into a battle that could be their last!

– Get up, you lazy creatures! Our time has come to rule this world! – roared Sanavar.

The Likki instantly sprang to their feet and, jumping either from joy or in anticipation of conquests, surged as a single mass toward Sanavar. He watched with a satisfied smirk as the entities transformed into human bodies with the more terrifying features of wolfish faces. Their torsos seemed ghostly, like mist; they whispered strange words, and their legs grew fur like true predators. They walked on two legs, not like beasts but like half-humans, and their ritual dance became a key part of worshipping Sanavar. The viscous slime disappeared from their jaws, giving way to the bloodthirsty snarl that never left their constantly open mouths.

– We are with you, oh great and mighty Sanavar! We have come to take what is ours in this world, but there is no spirit left here to turn to! – rang a voice, echoing like a chorus from above.

The Likki began to click their teeth, as if trying to tear each other apart or gnaw through the very air... Strange creatures, tearing themselves from the depths of their bodies, dissolved into the air, painting nightmarish pictures of their thoughts.

Sanavar made unusual sounds, resembling a call to an undeclared battle between the Likki and a quintet of entities that

had emerged from the underworld and Lion's house.

– I wish to speak with the leader among you! Let him step forward! – Sanavar said in a bass voice.

There was neither malice nor benevolence in his eyes... Sanavar seemed the embodiment of absolute calm and even kindness, for he had no intention of “shedding tears” over his two-faced servants, who might cease to exist! And though they were neither human nor animal, there was something in them between a being and a creature!

Ruvars stepped forward and looked around. He saw the grotesque faces twisted into smirks, unbecoming of the Likki. The half – humans, half-wolves did not seem as terrifying as Sanavar had imagined them. Ruvars saw in them mere puppies compared to the monsters dwelling in “his” house.

– I have little time, and I am here not because I wish to see you, but because you appeared uninvited, and with threats as well! And whatever you decide about us, I hope we part ways peacefully and, most importantly, quickly! – said Ruvars.

Sanavar raised something resembling eyebrows, giving him a childlike expression, and, opening his eyes wide, said:

– Greetings to you, Ruvars, green – eyed demon of the underworld or a former demon?!

It was unpleasant for Ruvars to hear words that touched his essence, possibly still dark, not yet fully turned to the side of light.

– You and your pack have no chance for honors. You need

to leave this abode immediately, forever! – Ruvars cut him off.

Sanavar paled at the demon's words. He found it strange that, despite the demon's power, many times greater than his own, Ruvars did not want to converse with either him or his pack. His fear of being destroyed instantly grew with every word the demon spoke.

Suddenly, the sky seemed to burst into light from a sunbeam reflected off Likki's mirror high above. A vast number of wolf – faced creatures, standing one behind another as if in an unbroken chain, began to dissolve. Their multiplication threatened Sanavar with heavy losses. The fog, spreading over the height at incredible speed, instantly transformed the area into an invisible battlefield. The Likki merged into a single massive blot, an army ready to wipe the proud five and all living things around from the face of the earth.

Ruvars, watching the events in amazement, was annoyed that he would once again have to fight the creatures that had appeared out of nowhere. Joe, on the other hand, was waiting for his moment to prove himself as the eldest son of the chief of the underworld – after all, such an opportunity was rare. Mark, sensing the seriousness of the situation, could not take his eyes off Ruvars, who was also thinking about the inevitable battle! Sardo and Azazel hoped that everything would be resolved without them and with minimal losses, but as the story would later show, someone would still not survive.

– Ungues expande et in proelium vade!¹ – suddenly, Sanavar shouted.

Wolf faces, like a mirage, crumbled to dust, following the grotesque bodies, dissolving into the air in an instant. Sanavar, mesmerized, watched this strange transformation, where his former notions of the Likki shattered like broken glass.

He bent down, scooped up a handful of ash left from their burned bodies, and held an unwarranted hope from their disappearance. Half – human, half – beast, Sanavar could not understand: would they rise again for battle, or was their defeat final?

The Likki warrior looked around in bewilderment, like a predator that had lost the trail of its prey. His eyes searched in vain for signs of life from those who had so recently sat on the mirrored surface. The wolf – faced ones were nowhere to be seen.

At that very moment, a dreadful melody of a trumpet pierced the air from afar, so alien, so otherworldly, that the fearless five involuntarily shuddered. Each asked themselves: where does this ominous call come from, unlike any they had heard before?

Then the chief of the Likki realized that this was not the end. Soon, not a single creature would be allowed to walk on this patch of land if it tried to obstruct his army. He knew that something great, something terrible, was about to happen...

Climbing the high mountain, blinded by the first rays of dawn,

¹ Spread your claws and go into battle (lat)

Sanavar felt an incredible weight, a nervous tremor, or perhaps a fatal premonition. The appearance of Ruvars had begun earlier than he had expected. The Likki warrior did not want to ruin the carefully laid plan. His servants were already forming an army capable of destroying the youngest of the brothers, his companions, and the Dark Minister. The head of the wolf tribe rejoiced – the forces gathered by the Likki would be enough to make the green-eyed demon perish forever. No one knew what drove Sanavar and his team in their hatred toward Ruvars, but the desire to erase him from the memory of beings was even stronger than the fear of his brothers.

Chapter 6.

The futile uprising

– Cowardly jackals, where have you gone when it's time to fight! – Sanavar growled.

Indignation boiled within Sanavar like poison, corrupting him from the inside because of their long absence.

Ruvars spread his wings, feeling the wind play through his feathers. He noticed how those who had followed Sanavar disappeared into the shadows, realizing that the root of the war was not in him, but in their leader, perhaps as cowardly as his minions.

The demon swooped toward the “warrior” with lightning speed, giving him no time to grasp the essence of the forthcoming exchange.

– Where is your pack of cowardly, bloodthirsty dogs?! – the younger demon demanded, his voice forceful.

Ruvars' question caught Sanavar off guard. It seemed as though he had been caught at the scene of a crime he hadn't committed, as if all the sins of the underworld were being forced onto his shoulders... Rage began to boil within him even more.

– They'll be here soon! – the “woeful – warrior” snapped.

Ruvars gave him a sly, fox – like smile, letting the leader of the Likki know that victory would remain with the “guardians”

of the underworld.

– I am waiting for battle, and you hide like cowards, without even starting the fight! – Ruvars retorted with a smirk.

– My warriors were not afraid! They fight for truth, for justice that you stole from me, stole from us! – Sanavar blurted out.

Ruvars raised his eyebrows in surprise. He couldn't remember when he had caused any harm to Sanavar and his pack. His thoughts swirled, finding no way out, as at that moment, he had been thinking about something completely different.

– They will return, and very soon! And then your kingdom will come to an end! This battle will be the last thing you see in your worthless existence! – Sanavar shouted, inflamed with anger.

The booming laughter of the demon made everyone present, including the Dark Minister, turn toward him.

– Something is clearly happening with them... – Azazel whispered.

The Dark Minister and Sardo exchanged anxious glances. In their eyes, a mutual danger could be seen, coming from both sides of the conflict. After all, Sanavar also partially possessed a power capable of destroying an opponent in an instant or seriously interfering with their plans.

– When did your brother manage to get close to the leader of the Likki? – Azazel asked Sardo, who was quickly moving away from her.

– What's he thinking? What is he so happy about? – Sardo wondered to himself.

Joe watched the lively conversation of Ruvars with worry, noticing his strange joy, as if victory was already in his hands.

Ruvars came so close to Sanavar that he held his breath, afraid to meet his gaze. The desire to disappear became unbearable. He did not understand why his target had suddenly changed direction and almost suffered defeat.

At that moment, the leader of the Likki saw the demon's eyes up close and stopped breathing for a moment. The demon immediately grabbed his hairy hand and silently began squeezing it harder and harder, hoping to extract at least some clear answer from him.

– If you don't disappear right now, then... – Ruvars interrupted the silence and abruptly fell silent.

A terrifying hum sounded. The roar of the impending disaster could be heard far beyond the realm where demons and humans lived.

– I told you, my warriors would return! – Sanavar said with a crooked smile.

A massive avalanche of Likki surged toward the group, wanting to teach them one last lesson. The countless army, like a reborn tribe, burst out of the mirror world. Azazel and Sardo looked at them as if they were ghosts. Joe sighed sadly, and Ruvars spread his wings, ready for battle, but when he looked around, he didn't see Mark.

– Another coward has disappeared, just like Likki! Do you think he will show up before I send him to my brothers?! –

Ruvars asked Sanavar.

Azazel also looked around. Mark was nowhere to be seen. She tried to hear his thoughts, to feel his presence anywhere, but it was futile.

– The only place he could be in this case is in the abyss... – Azazel said and gasped.

– What happened? – Sardo asked, worried.

Azazel began to cry quietly. She understood why Mark was so eager to help. His plan was obvious, but only to the two of them.

– He's with your brothers! He's there! – Azazel said through tears.

– How? How do you know? – Sardo asked.

Azazel remained silent, knowing that Babkar Seney was the very sage.

– I know, I'm sure that he went down to them for help for us! – she said.

Sardo was stunned. Joe's expression also changed, realizing that this news could not be shared with Ruvars.

– Are you sure Mark went to get help? – Joe hadn't finished his question when a bright, blinding glow appeared above their heads.

In the blink of an eye, the entire space was filled with light. The dark tones of the area where the battle was supposed to take place shimmered with sparkling colors. Ruvars grimaced, unable to understand where such a bright light could have come from.

Moments later, before them appeared the brothers who had

remained in service in the underworld: Nestor, Alan, Khacher, and Alber with talismans burning on their chests in the color of their eyes. A little further away, an old man moved slowly, and although his figure could not be clearly seen, Azazel recognized Babkar Seney in him.

Ruvars looked at Joe in surprise, then at Sardo. He wanted to read their minds, to understand why his brothers had come to a world where there was no place for them in the daylight.

The question hung in the air, unspoken, yet no less palpable. Why were they here? Fear slid down his spine like a whip. He knew what these four were capable of. Each of them was the embodiment of sin, a weapon in the hands of darkness. A storm was approaching, where darkness thickened, ready to consume everything around.

Nestor stepped forward first, casting a disdainful glance over those gathered and offering them an unusual, deliberate bow. This gesture was alien to his nature. How could a powerful demon of the underworld compromise his pride before a younger brother he considered a traitor to the family? And yet, his behavior hinted at a promise of good intentions, as if the second eldest brother had arrived with peace.

His amulet, shaped like a swarm of bees above his head, symbolized his power and supremacy over creatures of the dark. And it was not merely an ornament, but a symbol forged from stardust and the whispers of forgotten gods. Each bee in the swarm pulsed with light, reflecting the glimmers of ancient

knowledge contained within his mind.

– I wish to help you and return to my duties, to my home, as soon as possible... So let us proceed to fulfill the promise made to a friend, without unnecessary words or reproaches! – Nestor said firmly.

The three remaining brothers bowed silently in response. They immersed the brothers who had strayed from family service into a state close to catatonia.

Ruvars descended on his black wings, joining the brothers. Now there were seven and a half of them – embodiments of the seven centers of the dark and light worlds, standing before each other for the first time in millennia! The moment was both majestic and dangerous, especially for a creature like Likki.

Ruvars noticed in the hands of the old man walking behind Nestor the Chalice of Bafo. Rage surged within him, but Nestor stopped him with a gesture.

– That’s Babkar Seney, my teacher and mentor! He means no harm, believe me... I entrust my very existence to him, and the Chalice of Bafo as well! – the second oldest brother said with conviction.

But Ruvars was blinded by rage at the sage. He had never seen him before, and the touch of a mortal on the Chalice of Bafo seemed to him an unthinkable act.

– How could our ancestors give you the Chalice of Bafo, and into the hands of this feeble old man, barely standing on his feet?! – Ruvars angrily asked.

The brothers remained silent. They knew that arguing with Nestor was useless; otherwise, none of them would have come to help their younger brother.

Alber could barely contain himself at the sight of furious Ruvars and the enormous number of Likki above his head. His talisman, shaped like a rectangle with a horizontal line inside and arrows, symbolized his straightforwardness and lazy way of life. Nevertheless, at that moment, laziness was a luxury he could not afford, since the task of saving his family was of paramount importance.

Alan also understood that if Nestor perceived the words of the younger brother as a sign of disrespect, he would immediately vanish into the abyss of existence, and he hurried to resolve the impending conflict. His talisman, shaped like a gray Sun, though not a source of warmth, easily harmonized with nature and all the elements in his universe, signaling his calmness and composure.

Meanwhile, Khacher was already preparing to step forward to deliver a parting word to his brothers and the creatures with wolf – like faces, but he inexplicably took a step back. His talisman, black, shaped like a double eye within a triangle with a circle inside, reflected his secrecy and distrust of those around him, and it also glimmered in the tone of his eyes. A barely noticeable grimace flickered across his face, hinting at inner turmoil. His black clothes, absorbing the light, made him resemble a shadow gliding through the space where he stood as if rooted to the spot.

– I have decided, and that’s why we are here! But if your will is different, we can return to the depths of our home! – Nestor cut in.

Ruvars wanted to punish the traitor in the form of his brother, but the rising roar of Likki drowned out the demon’s fury.

As if sensing impending danger, the brothers formed an unusual formation, symbolizing the seven parts of the world. Standing back to back, they did not notice how brightly their talismans shone, drawing in more and more energy and power.

The Likki advanced like a rushing stream of water, carrying destruction in its wake.

– Move, lazy inhuman creatures! Hurry to erase these beings from the face of the earth and her too! – commanded Sanavar, pointing at Azazel.

Sardo noticed that Azazel was staring into the distance, as if seeing something inaccessible to others. She did not move and did not hear the words addressed to her.

Sardo’s amulet, in the shape of a circle, Triskell, a triangle with twisted ends, radiated a brown or dark tan color, matching the tone of his eyes, and glowed every time its essence fed on someone’s negative energies, reflecting his selfishness and arrogance.

But this time, the energy devourer did not become the entity it was half meant to be. It simply turned away from the girl and began... to contemplate. Contrary to its usual instincts, it did not absorb the surrounding world like a sponge. It plunged inward,

into the abyss of its own sensations, lost in the chaos of insatiable hunger.

As if by agreement, the brothers simultaneously turned clockwise, uttering unknown words, as if repeating an ancient ritual. One by one, they passed the Chalice of Bafo, starting with Joe and moving down the hierarchy to the youngest. But Likki did not diminish! When the Chalice of Bafo ended up in Ruvars' hands, everything froze!

His amulet, shaped like a thirteen – pointed star, was the most powerful energy tool in his hands, representing the names of each of the fallen and surviving ancestors in his war with Anna. It did not shine as brightly as it should have, for no new ancestors had appeared to replace the ones who had vanished... Therefore, the glow of his amulet was not the deep green sprinkled with diamond-like sparkles that it was meant to be. Ruvars thought about this, and it made him uneasy that he could not even protect himself...

All those present, except for Ruvars, stood frozen in silence, as if immersed in a strange dream, completing the ritual through stillness.

– Ruvars! – he heard a familiar voice.

The youngest of the brothers turned sharply. His heart pounded wildly at the sight of Anna before him.

– Anna?! How... how are you here? – Ruvars murmured, stammering.

– I am not here, I am there! – Anna replied, and as if parting

a veil with her hands, she pointed to the grains of sand.

– But I see you, hear your voice, and feel your presence! –
Ruvars insisted.

Anna lowered her gaze and picked up a flower from the ground with seven petals, each corresponding to the eye color of one of the brothers. In her hands, they flared into a bright flame, demonstrating her power, even while being outside of real space-time.

– I'm not in the same 'form' as before, and I could hurt you! –
she said quietly.

– You can't hurt a demon, it's impossible! – he replied, feeling irritation boiling inside him.

Anna reached out her hand. She knew the demon would suffer, but she wanted him to see for himself the truth of her words, spoken for his own good.

Ruvars reached out his hand in response, unafraid of the consequences. He wanted, no matter what, to feel the warmth of the familiar being, even if it was unreal at that moment.

Chapter 7.

Babkar Seney through the eyes of Mark

The sparks that erupted from the contact between the human and the half – demon were of unimaginable scale, beyond anything conceivable in either world! Ruvars felt her power – a mighty and inexhaustible energy that stirred his entire being! Thrown several dozen meters back by the surge of contact with Anna, the demon landed on his feet, and his gaze, directed at Anna, radiated warmth and tenderness.

– Anna, explains how you ended up here, right now, when my world is once again plunging into darkness? And most importantly, how did you manage to do it? – Ruvars asked.

Anna didn't want to mention another of Mark's entities, but she didn't want to lie either. Gathering her strength for an honest answer, she calmly said:

– Your brothers and Babkar Seney. They performed the ritual with the Chalice of Bafo, and now I'm here! They came to restore their strength thanks to you and your other brothers!

– So, Nestor knew about you and decided to help? – Ruvars asked in surprise.

– Exactly, because Babkar Seney knows his business! – the girl smiled.

– But how is that possible? What power does he have over my brothers, demons of the underworld? Who is he? – Ruvars insisted.

Anna hesitated, the words of truth stuck in her throat, but before her stood a being woven from semi-human flesh and unyielding will, ready to sacrifice itself and many lives for her return...

– It's Mark, in his latest incarnation. He helped me back then to snatch you from the grasping claws of your ancestors, and he's helping us now, freeing me from the icy prison of my vacuum, even if only briefly! Mark realized his mistake, and I believe he deserves forgiveness! – Anna said.

The demon was stunned by her words. Could it be that Mark changes his forms so easily, like a living instrument – but in whose hands?

– The main thing, I beg you, do not destroy him! Promise me this! – the girl pleaded.

At that very moment, the world around shimmered with new, troubling colors. Likki, Sanavar, Azazel, the brothers, even the sage – all were changing, revealing their true essences. The veil of illusions fell, and the place that had seemed ordinary before turned into a battlefield between worlds, between humans and the spawn of darkness.

Azazel, seeing Anna, rushed toward her as if she were the last hope, the only ray of light in the darkness. In her tearful eyes was reflected boundless love for the human who had become like

family.

But just as Azazel was only a few steps from Anna, Ruvars blocked her path. He did not know what drove him, but his intuition told him that Anna would have done the same.

Azazel froze, gazing at the face of the younger brother with a mute question.

– How could you do this? This is unacceptable! – she burst out, and hurt resonated in her voice.

Ruvars wanted to respond, but Anna beat him to it, knowing that Azazel would hear her voice.

– Everything was done correctly, my Azazel, otherwise you would have suffered, and very much so! – Anna replied with a slight smile.

Azazel shifted her gaze from Ruvars to her friend and realized that this story was far from over.

– I trust you, Anna, but please, don't do that again! – Azazel said, casting a fleeting glance at the younger of the brothers.

Ruvars and Anna exchanged looks. Sadness and foreboding were written in their eyes. Two souls, possibly connected by more than just one life, understood that trials were merely steps on the path to something greater. They accepted their flaws, fought with the shadow of the past inherited from their ancestors. Despite everything, the girl and the demon were one, and this bond was inscribed in the book of their shared destiny.

Only now, when the Likki and their leader had approached a dangerous distance, did anyone think of them. Their numbers

instilled fear in the hearts of the inhabitants of the land and the underworld, an endless army, eager to imprison the brothers forever in a spatial prison, growing with every passing second. But Anna, it seemed, did not notice this. Her confidence was unwavering, and she knew that the Likki were just another trial, some kind of manifestation of power, but whose?

– I advise you to leave this world and the space of those you have come for! – Anna warned calmly.

Ruvars smirked. He knew that there would be no battle. The demon believed that Anna alone was enough to cast them back into their unknown, alien lair.

Sanavar stepped forward, but Anna, noticing the movement, abruptly stopped him. Her gaze was filled with such force that anyone who dared to disobey would vanish forever.

– Oh, you'd better listen to her! I've heard a warning like that before! – Ruvars remarked cheerfully.

Anna smiled, while the others were bewildered, not understanding what he was talking about.

– We won't move from here until we get what we came for! – Sanavar said sharply.

In response to their leader's words, the Likki let out a deafening howl. They adored him, hanging on every word.

At that moment, a small group of wolf-faced beings stepped forward. It seemed they were ready to surrender to Anna and her allies, understanding that their end was near. The leader of them, Zumo, was certain that the girl would show him mercy and accept

him as a friend, but their friendship was still a long way off.

– We want to be useful to you because Sanavar is cruel to the Likki and shows us no respect! We are like pawns in his game, and no one cares! We are warriors and unaccustomed to defeat, but not in this case! – Zumo declared.

Sanavar was stunned and enraged. He couldn't understand what had driven Zumo and three other half – humans to betrayal. It was unpleasant for him to hear such a statement from the commander of his strongest army.

– So you've shown your true nature, wolf-faced! – Sanavar growled and moved toward him.

Ruvars anticipated an interesting outcome and began rubbing his hands in anticipation of something exciting. Everyone froze, waiting for the climax of the tense conversation between Sanavar and his commander.

Both moved toward each other at such speed that it seemed they would annihilate each other in an instant. But the moment Sanavar raised his hand to strike, Anna stood between them.

– Anna, you ruined the whole show, it could have told us so much! – Ruvars exclaimed with frustration.

– I am not a coward, and I fear none of you! Even if a rain of fire falls upon my head, I will fight to the end, but not for him and not under his command! – Zumo declared, pointing at his opponent.

– I suggest you retreat, or no one will even notice your disappearance! I will grind you to dust, and you will become

slaves to these masters! – Anna replied, pointing at the brothers.

– Retreat?! How dare you tell me where to retreat and where to advance?! – Sanavar muttered, rising into the air, surrounded by dust and sand.

– That would be better for all of you, otherwise... – Anna didn't have time to finish.

– Another soul is ready to journey into your world! – Ruvars laughed, staring Nestor in the eyes.

Sanavar blazed in the sky like a shard of a star, tracing a fiery streak. His silhouette only briefly touched the gloom before vanishing into a chorus of astonished cries and Likki's death rattles. He disappeared like a drop in a sea of flames, into the furnace of the underworld.

But the silence that fell after the deafening roar was deceptive. It only emphasized the scale of the tragedy, namely the gaping void left by his departure. Ears were ringing, reflections of the dying flames danced before the eyes, but the most terrifying thing was the realization of the irrevocability of what had happened. And Likki understood that.

Who was he? A hero, a villain, a madman? It didn't matter. Now he was just ash, a particle of scorching earth, no more than a memory fading in the whirl of time. His story, never fully told, was cut short, like a thread severed by the merciless blade of fate. And only one question remained, echoing in the silence: who's next? Who will dare to challenge the flames, knowing that only oblivion in that very furnace awaits them?

A question without an answer, like life itself, full of hopes and disappointments, victories and defeats, love and hatred. And all of this for what? For a moment of glory, for the illusory hope of immortality?

– Sanavar, Sanavar! – the half – people screamed for their leader and master.

– You can forget about that filth; it's gone! – Babkar Seney cut in.

At that very moment, Anna flickered like a sunbeam caught in the air and began to melt. She cast a fleeting glance at Azazel, then at Mark, and at everyone else who was near her.

The Likki dissolved into the night one by one, like tiny insects, scorched by the blazing flames of the fire. From the west, a gusty wind burst in, tearing through the space with furious blasts, as if reminding that this story could have had a different ending.

– Anna, are you leaving us?! – Ruvars exclaimed bitterly
– I can't stay, I'm still there... I haven't returned to you yet... – the girl replied sadly.

– I will help you, I swear on my life, I will bring you back forever! – Ruvars exclaimed, clenching his fist.

She approached him and, as if in a dream, raised her hand to his cheek. The girl took a deep breath, and her palm, soft and warm, touched the demon's face.

Enchanted by this gesture, he in turn touched her hand. His heart thudded so violently, it felt like it wanted to burst out of his chest, as if counting its final moments.

– I will always be near, here... – Anna whispered, pointing to his heart.

Ruvars froze. He wanted to preserve the warmth of her touch forever, to carry it through millennia, knowing that such a moment might never happen again.

– The Root of the Sun is just the first step on my path to return. You have a sage – listen to him! – said Anna, and she dissolved into the air.

Following her, Likki disappeared as well. They turned into nothing, like snow under the hot sun. One by one, the beings vanished into oblivion, from which there is no return.

Azazel drooped again, while the brothers whispered among themselves...

– She still managed to stand against such power, and all alone?! – Alan replied to his brothers in astonishment.

Ruvars kept his eyes fixed on the sage, who was also watching him from beneath his brow. Rage bubbled within the demon, threatening to turn him into a monster, but he restrained himself, knowing that Anna would not have liked it.

– So, sage, the floor is yours. We're listening! – Ruvars commanded, turning crimson with anger.

Babkar Seney became flustered. He didn't want to reveal his true nature to his brothers, but knowing that Ruvars already knew the truth, he decided to resort to cunning. He chose to give him the right to choose, in order to avoid a responsibility that would cost dearly in the future!

– We can go down to your abode and continue searching for a way to bring Anna back, or the honorable Joe can lead us to his circle, where, with the permission of the great Samael, we can obtain the Root of the Sun, – Mark replied, appearing as a sage.

– Not we, but I! – Ruvars couldn't contain his anger, and the earth trembled at his words.

– Of course, you. After all, only you are allowed to be chosen beside Anna. Another being will not be able to tame her and... – Babkar Seney tried to continue.

– Enough words and empty chatter! Enough smoke and mirrors! And don't even think about tricking me, I know who you really are! – Ruvars cut him off, looking at the considerably sweat-soaked sage.

Ruvars flapped his wings and vanished into a haze of strange smoke that had never been here before. He flew, lost in memories of Anna. No one else mattered, only the girl and her fleeting touch.

– Oh, Anna! If only I could see you one more time! – Ruvars repeated with a voice full of longing.

He landed on a huge rock that loomed like the tongue of a monstrous beast and looked at his hand. Closing his eyes, the demon involuntarily sighed, recalling her touch. Like a dying bird, Anna begged to be saved from oblivion. But for now, Ruvars was powerless. Possessing such authority and strength, he understood he was unworthy of her, and only thoughts of Anna were a healing balm for him.

“You will come back, Anna. I promise you, even if I have to go back myself!” – Ruvars whispered to himself.

A dead silence hung over the area where the younger of the brothers, the one who knew no mercy, was located. On the horizon, all that remained of the once chanting Likki was a shimmering mirror, casting metallic reflections. Ruvars was already about to leave, but something made him move closer. He slowly spread his wings and leisurely flew up to the enormous mirror that resembled the sun.

Peering into it, he saw four men in strange clothes, who posed no threat at all.

– You... What are you doing here? – Ruvars asked Zumo, who turned at the sound of flapping wings.

– Oh, master! We stayed here because that girl turned us into mortals! We didn't disappear along with Likki, but got stuck between worlds! Now we can't see a way out of this cursed item! – Zumo replied.

Ruvars extended his hand to him. The man stepped out of the mirror and greedily inhaled the air. It was as if he woke up from a bad dream, seeing how beautiful the world around him was, and most importantly – he could breathe here!

– Sanavar kept saying that the air is dangerous for us! – Zumo suddenly said.

– Dangerous? But did he explain exactly how? – Ruvars asked.

– No. He said the air is mixed with poison, which is not suitable for us, half – wolves! – Zumo replied.

Ruvars was silent for a while, and then extended his hand to him again. He felt the other's strength and read his thoughts, realizing that Zumo was not just a survivor, but a true warrior who could be useful on the journey to Anna.

– How are you feeling? Is the air suitable for you and your friends? – asked Ruvars, nodding in their direction.

Zumo burst out laughing, but the laughter immediately turned into a relentless cough. Could it be that everything he had been told about the outside worlds was just a lie to keep the Likki in eternal fear?

– I am entirely at your disposal, as are my comrades... You can count on us! – Zumo replied with unwavering confidence.

Ruvars was struck by his sincerity. A demon, accustomed to seeing only brute strength in beast-like creatures, now saw before him a being free from the bonds of deception.

“Could freedom really transform one's essence like this?” – the demon asked himself, then answered them:

– You are free! And I don't need help; I can handle it myself, after all, am I not a demon? – Ruvars snapped.

– A demon with a human heart? – Zumo said in surprise.

Ruvars didn't like this question, but he knew he had to insist on his point. Dangers lay ahead, and he didn't want Zumo and his friends to suffer because of him.

– You can disappear, go back to my brothers! They hold trials for beings like you! – Ruvars said harshly.

Zumo laughed again. His laughter was so sincere and carefree

that Ruvars realized – this warrior feared nothing.

– I have been the commander of the Likki for many centuries; I am not afraid of the underworld! – Zumo replied with irony.

Ruvars paused. Why now, when he was himself drowned in anger and cruelty, did this person, one of the Likki, decide to help him? The demon desperately struggled with his inner conflicts, trying to find answers worthy of his status as a lord of darkness.

– How did you realize that I have a heart? – Ruvars suddenly asked.

– I can feel it. And your hands are human! Our previous masters didn't allow us to feel warmth, but now I can sense the blood flowing in you. But you will remain who you are; you will no longer serve your family! Now you are a human, Master of the Void, the master of the girl who saved us, and I am ready to help her, even at the cost of my own life. And my words are not empty promises! – Zumo replied firmly.

The words of commander Likki struck Ruvars right in the heart. It was as if he had awakened from a centuries-long sleep. The demon wanted to thank Zumo for opening his eyes. Through his breath, he passed a fragment of his strength, wisdom, and cunning to him. The warrior, hardened in battles, was now endowed not only with the physical power of dark matter but also with craftiness. Noticing the transformation of his friend, the trio loudly celebrated his change.

Zumo looked at his comrades as if they were the most

loyal friends and servants. He knew that his next step needed to strengthen their friendship, leaving no room for disagreements.

Turning away from his friends to speak with Ruvars, he asked him to share part of his power with them. Ruvars agreed immediately. They stood facing each other, illuminated only by the faint light of the dying semblance of the sun above, their faces scarred and marked by long years of battles, showing a mix of wonder and awe. Each of them, hardened by countless battles, had witnessed many miracles, but Zumo's request, spoken in a quiet and confident voice, caught them off guard.

Without a word, Ruvars extended his hands, and in his palms, a soft white light flickered. It was as if he were weaving threads of energy, shaping them into invisible bonds connecting him to each warrior. The feeling of warmth and strength that surged through their bodies was indescribable. They felt their muscles grow stronger, their senses sharpen, and their minds filled with clarity. It was not just an increase in physical strength; it was a touch of the very source of life itself.

The warriors received the gifts with awe, as an initiation into a new, higher rank. They understood that this was not merely a gift, but a tremendous responsibility. The power given by Ruvars obliged them to be even more vigilant, even braver, and devoted to the common cause. And they swore to justify the trust placed in them by protecting him and the girl until their last breath. A new spark of hope ignited in their hearts, and they were

ready for the trials ahead like never before.

All four, after exchanging meaningful glances, looked at Ruvars. They made a unanimous decision to go all the way. After all, unity is not only mutual attraction in the course of interaction, but also the ability to save the girl from the captivity of oblivion, to prove to oneself that it is possible to rise from any state, head held high, without bowing to anyone.

Chapter 8.

Zumo's return to life

Ruvars was pleased to see that his actions brought smiles, that his existence in Anna's world caused no harm to anyone. Now he was helping more than taking, and that suited him. The struggle between good and evil was increasingly leaning toward the light and honest, rather than the dark and calculating. Ruvars was becoming human, and it was changing his inner world.

– Today we must be in my world, but it will be difficult for you to get there. I will leave you here with my brothers and Azazel, but I will definitely come back for you, I promise! – and he suddenly fell silent.

He wanted to talk about his plans related to Anna but said something completely different:

– Our journey will begin soon. Get ready, because someone will have to stay in the world of my family. And if anyone still has doubts, now is the time to speak up!

All four exchanged glances. Their eyes were fixed ahead; they did not look back.

Zumo was glad that his existence had not ended with Likki's disappearance, that he remained useful to Ruvars on his journey to Anna. Zumo's fearless friends were also pleased, since such an opportunity does not come often.

Suddenly, Ruvars disappeared. Joe vanished right after him. The valiant four stood next to Babkar Seney and Azazel, looking around, feeling the approach of something powerful.

Within minutes, a lion's roar and a bear's growl could be heard from a low hill. All of this was accompanied by the eruption of bright orange flames, carried by a serpentine dragon with long whiskers.

– We were just missing him! – exclaimed Azazel.

The four lined up, ready to take the hit, but upon seeing the monster's enormous size, they stepped back. And it wasn't out of fear, but because Zumo had read the thoughts of his new master – this creature was his “pet”.

– Is this the Triiter? – Zumo immediately asked.

Azazel looked closely into the commander's eyes, hoping to get an answer.

– How do you know his name? – she asked, slightly changing her expression.

Everyone was waiting for a response from Zumo, but he decided to remain silent, for not all words need to be spoken aloud.

– Don't be angry, miss, but I didn't know either! – Zumo fibbed.

Sometimes Zumo felt Ruvars' thoughts so clearly, as if they were echoing in his own mind, sensing his torment and anxiety over the fleeing girl, the agonizing longing for freedom from familial ties, the long-awaited touch of the earth. Ruvars

unleashed a whole torrent of emotions on him, up to searing rage, but the true depth of his feelings for Anna the demon kept sealed under a great secret. He feared to frighten away the fragile, almost unreal happiness trembling in his hands like a butterfly.

Intrusive thoughts about the girl prevented him from focusing on the plan for her liberation. Ruvars could not make himself move forward, destroy the wall he had so long built around his feelings. He wanted to act immediately, but the fear of making a fatal mistake that would forever distance Anna paralyzed him. After long torment, Ruvars made a decision – to move forward without waiting for mistakes from his countless enemies.

The experience he had gained as the master of one of the circles of the underworld gave him at least some measure of support. The demon could not shake the thought that Anna might be reborn as Agrat, the second goddess of death after her mother, and it tormented his entire being.

– What if Anna becomes cold and distant toward me and all living things? – he aloud voiced his most terrible question, and a fury rose within him with relentless force.

He imagined her sitting on a throne, watching over the endless stream of souls that had only a few hours left to exist, and this vision sent shivers through him.

A silence fell over the area where Zumo and his friends were, as well as Azazel, Babkar Seney, and Triiter (the brothers had also disappeared), deafening and all – encompassing, comparable only to the stillness of the heavens, where the loudest

sound is considered to be the song of angels. In the distance, hurried conversations could be heard from Likki who had appeared from nowhere, as if in a rush they had forgotten their rags, and then, grabbing their tattered garments, disappeared into the air again...

A sense of unseen danger hung in the air. Everyone present felt someone's invisible presence, something alien and hostile. Neither Triiter nor the enemy hordes in their most terrifying form could compare to this threat looming over the fearless warriors. The past receded, giving way to a disturbing premonition. Their intuition told them that this feeling had not appeared by chance.

At some point, each of them turned inward and felt their vulnerability, the power of their fears – the most dangerous chains for living beings striving toward their goal. Everyone carries a fear of something or someone unknown, but not everyone is ready to admit it to themselves.

The same happened to our heroes, rushing forward but looking back, not in search of a physical threat, but in an attempt to see in the mirror of the soul that hidden fear, that unrealized fear of themselves, their desires, and aspirations.

– I am destined to return to my ancestors! – Ruvars suddenly said, appearing out of nowhere once again.

Around them, a whirlwind of falling souls rose, spinning in a mad vortex, as if greeting his departure into the world of the ancestors.

– My ancestors set a condition, and by fulfilling it, they will

help free Anna from captivity. As for me, if it is my fate to return, then I will return! So, Azazel, be with Anna when she returns; she will need help! – the demon looked her straight in the eyes.

Azazel could see how seriously Ruvars took his words and actions, how honest he was with himself and with others. The girl had witnessed many changes, but she had never seen such a transformation in a demon.

In the blink of an eye, Ruvars' brothers appeared, as if invited to an unknown celebration for no one. They stood motionless, like giants studying those present.

Immediately, Ruvars bowed to Azazel, and, surveying those around him, prepared to flap his wings, but suddenly he felt a light breeze. He caught a familiar scent, the smell of the one who lived in his heart day and night. He inhaled it deeply, unable to get enough of it.

– Anna! – he whispered, and flapped his wings, ready to fly at the call of that scent, but suddenly he felt a touch on his shoulder.

– Stop, doesn't rush. Haste is a bad advisor, – he heard a soft voice.

Ruvars slowly turned and saw a spectral figure beside him. He faced it and reached out his hand.

– Hasn't your past experience taught you that I am dangerous to you? – the girl said quietly, smiling faintly.

– Let me touch you, – he said.

– You might get hurt! I don't want to cause you pain! – the girl said, stepping back.

– I am not afraid of pain, neither physical nor any other! – the demon replied firmly.

Anna absorbed all the power into herself, not revealing it to others. She saw Mark, lost in his thoughts, Azazel, looking sadly into the void and not noticing her, and the rest of those present, who also saw nothing.

– Apart from you, no one else can see me, not even Babkar Seney and your brothers! Only you can see me! – Anna asked in astonishment.

– That’s right, only I can see you! – the demon confirmed with a smile.

Everything around grew so quiet that the stars in the twilight sky chimed like billions of crystal bells. The demon understood that around him reigned chaos, unimaginable and sorrowful.

– But your brothers are just as strong as you... Why don’t they see me?! – the girl asked, puzzled.

– They are strong, but not like you and me. We have a special destiny and a special bond. We feel each other, and it doesn’t pass us by... We are meant to go through life together, and for that, I am returning to the source to bring you back! – Ruvars replied.

– No. There is no way back! You shouldn’t do this, and you won’t! – the girl answered sharply.

Ruvars shuddered at her words as if he were tasting a forbidden fruit. The demon was sure he was doing the right thing, but Anna awakened old feelings in him – doubt and uncertainty.

– But Anna, I have to rescue you from... – Ruvars didn't finish.

– You don't owe me anything, but listen to my advice – don't go back there. There is no return from there, – the girl's voice sounded sad and commanding.

– But there's no other way, Anna! The Root of the Sun can't be obtained otherwise, – Ruvars replied sadly.

– There is always a way, and you'll find it soon! – she smiled in response.

At that moment, Triiter, like a loyal dog, rushed to his master. The creature lowered its three heads and, seemingly happy about the meeting, pressed against Ruvars' hand.

– Triiter, buddy! I'm so glad to see you! – the demon replied.

Triiter glanced toward Anna, at the pale glow, at the energy she radiated, and snorted.

– You see her too? – the demon asked.

Triiter shook his heads in agreement, stamped his many feet, and turned back to Ruvars.

– Thank you, my friend, for protecting her for us! You've never let me down! – Ruvars said again, warmly.

Triiter shook his heads again, as if in an endless loop. He enjoyed his master's praise and lay down at his feet, pouring a stream of boundless love, loyalty, and energy onto Ruvars.

The demon felt that there was a being next to him created in his likeness, for he himself was of the same kind.

Anna, slowly levitating, floated up to Triiter and gently

stroked his heads, expressing her endless gratitude. She knew that one day Triiter would become something more than just a three – headed creature, and the thought made her smile involuntarily.

The beast made a sound more like a purr than a menacing roar, as if sinking into a brief bliss.

At that moment, Azazel, having come to, also saw Anna and immediately rushed toward them.

– Anna! – she shouted at the top of her lungs.

Triiter and Ruvars turned around. The beast assumed a menacing appearance, but Azazel was not afraid, knowing that help would always come to her.

– Triiter, don't scare her! She's our friend and won't harm us. Be as kind to her as you are to me! – Anna replied to her faithful friend.

The monster bowed in agreement and stepped back. Azazel was able to come closer and, as if enchanted by what was happening, didn't notice where Anna had gone.

– Where is she?! – she asked the demon and his fierce creature.

– You won't see her until she wants to! I think you'll need to wait a little, – Ruvars replied.

– Wait? Wait again?! – Azazel said through her tears.

– Exactly. Patience is the greatest of human virtues! – the demon answered calmly.

Triiter approached Azazel. Ruvars and Anna watched silently.

The creature recognized a friend in the girl and, understanding her grief, decided to comfort her. The monster lowered its heads to her feet, and the serpent-shaped dragon purred a melody similar to human singing and began to soothe her.

At that moment, Anna's silhouette appeared for a brief instant, and Azazel saw her friend.

Anna! How beautiful you are! – she breathed.

Ruvars was astonished to witness what was happening. Anna smiled and, looking into the distance where her brothers stood, along with Zumo and friends and Mark in the guise of Babkar Seney.

– My time has come! I must finally leave! – the girl said calmly.

Triiter howled like a beast that had broken free, while Ruvars sank into deep silence.

– So soon? Why now of all times? – the demon asked sadly.

– You'll find out soon enough, but only if you listen to me! – Anna replied, and then she disappeared.

Ruvars seemed to fall into worry. He looked around, called for Anna, but it was all in vain. The girl vanished into the sands of time, turning into dust once more, while the demon wandered like a madman in search of her and in search of answers to questions related to the Root of the Sun.

– We need to create a council of those elders who still remember the past. I ask you, Nestor, take care of this! – Ruvars asked his brother.

Nestor was surprised by his request. He nodded in agreement and rose on his halo downward.

He didn't understand why Ruvars wanted to convene a council that had neither the knowledge nor the means to obtain or provide him with the Root of the Sun. After all, the family knew where to search for it and whom to ask, yet Nestor could not refuse to help his brother.

Meanwhile, Zumo and his friends headed to Ruvars and informed him that an age – old battle had begun with the ancestors who were against him. They explained that the entire brotherhood of elders, not just some of them, had learned about the transfer of power to Anna and were planning to destroy their descendant.

Hearing this, Ruvars seemed to immerse himself in the past, convincing himself that he should have negotiated differently or overthrown all his ancestors, one by one.

– You've worked well, friends! Now it's our turn to take steps toward a peaceful or hostile resolution regarding my family! – Ruvars suddenly replied to them.

Zumo perked up. He had long awaited retribution for those who torment and betray their own, preventing Ruvars from freeing Anna. The ancestors feared her return... They knew she would turn their remnants into angels!

In the area where these events were taking place, strange changes began happening again. Fire and black rain once again colored the landscapes around them. The ground trembled,

foreboding nothing good, while the sky, like the canvas of a mad artist, filled with crimson streaks. The air, once clean and fresh, was now saturated with the smell of sulfur and smoldering embers, causing nausea and dizziness.

– Ruvars, this cannot go on any longer! You cannot annihilate your own people for the sake of a girl you barely know! – all present suddenly heard a stern voice say.

Ruvars turned around. Everyone turned to see, except for Azazel and Babkar Seney.

Slowly, one by one, the brothers got down on one knee. They did not expect to see their father. Samael, without hesitation, unleashed his reproaches on each of his sons.

– Father, why are you here?! – the youngest of the brothers could only say.

– I am trying to open your eyes! Don't you understand that a single soul is not worth the suffering of our entire lineage? To us, she is nobody! – Samael snapped, his voice sounding like a thunderclap.

– Perhaps so, to you she is nobody, but to me, she is everything! – Ruvars interrupted his father.

– How dare you contradict me? – Samael growled, a flash of rage in his eyes.

– I am not contradicting, father, – Ruvars replied calmly, trying to contain his anger, – I just want...

– Be quiet! I don't need your deceitful excuses! You're deceiving yourself and trying to deceive us! – Samael cut off his

son, not letting him speak.

– I'm not finished! I just wanted to emphasize that Anna means the world to me! – the younger brother concluded and turned away.

Chapter 9.

Seeking advice from Agrat

Ruvars confession stunned Samael, and everyone else present as well. Azazel and Mark were no less surprised by this sudden assertiveness towards their father. They knew about the special bond between Ruvars and Anna, but no one expected him to dare openly confront Samael.

Ruvars himself was struck by his own words! The fierce defense of someone who had very recently held not even a fleeting place in his life had become someone who now meant everything to him. His heart, armored by years of service and duty, suddenly softened, revealing a vulnerability he hadn't even suspected himself. He felt the words, as if not spoken by him, weave an invisible shield around her fragile figure, standing before him like a vision.

He didn't know what exactly made him act this way. Perhaps it was that spark of life he saw in her eyes, despite all the trials she had endured; perhaps it was the sense of injustice that flared up at seeing her being broken; or perhaps it was simply a sudden, uncontrollable wave of humanity that washed over his petrified heart.

In any case, he had no regrets about a single word he had spoken. He was ready to repeat them again and again if necessary

to protect her from those who wished her harm. He understood that this choice would have serious consequences, that he might jeopardize his position, even his life, but at that moment nothing mattered except her safety and well – being. He was ready to fight for her as he once fought for his ideals, because now she had become his ideal.

The only glimmer of light in all this was that the young demon liked the idea of an existing plan to bring the girl back. He was burning with the desire to be needed by Anna, despite the will of all the forces trying to keep her captive in oblivion.

Ruvars was full of determination. Unlike his father, who feared the “fall” of the younger son, Samael unequivocally opposed Anna’s return. The youngest of the brothers, however, was ready to wait for her forever.

– I’ve decided, father, and even the combined will of our ancestors won’t stop me from bringing Anna back! – Ruvars spoke again, looking at his father.

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