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Isla Marenwick

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«Издательские решения»

Marenwick I.

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Summoned a demon… but got a naked orc instead?!Dasha is your average girl from Moscow with a mountain of problems: she's just lost her job, her credit card is maxed out, and all she has to look forward to is a concert by her favorite band and complete financial ruin.Desperate, she decides to summon a demon. After all, she found a spellbook online. What could possibly go wrong?Well, instead of a demon, an orc appears in her living room.He's angry, confused, and completely naked!

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A naked mistake

Isla Marenwick

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Chapter 1. The Ritual and Other Mistakes

Dasha's apartment smelled of sage and desperation.

Not the sort of desperation that drove people to sell a kidney or rob a bank. No, this was ordinary Moscow desperation: "I'm going to get fired, I've just bought concert tickets, and I'm already three months late on my credit card payments."

Dasha sat on her living room floor surrounded by printouts from astrology forums, a sprig of dried wormwood, three black candles (actually gray, though the packaging promised "black wax, magic, mystery"), and a book. She had found the book by searching for "demonology practical guide." The seller, whose username was Dark_Witch_from_Gloomy_Kursk_87, had assured her that it was an exceptionally rare eighteenth-century tome. Unfortunately, the publisher's logo and a price of 349 rubles were clearly printed on the cover. For that price, Dasha had no doubt the book was genuinely ancient. Dating all the way back to, say, 2012.

"Eighteenth century. Sure," Dasha muttered, flipping through its dazzlingly white pages.

But she had no choice. Things at work had reached a critical point. The head of HR had hinted that Project Northern Lights was, of course, a disaster, but the damage could be contained if someone took the blame. That someone was Dasha. And taking responsibility meant getting fired.

Her apartment was rented, she had saved nothing for next month, and she was already deep in the red on her credit card. (Dasha couldn't understand how she could owe even more on money she had borrowed when borrowing already put her in the red. But math had never been her strong suit, so she abandoned the thought.) She had four thousand rubles in cash. Enough for a taxi to the bank.

And so, instead of sitting down to write a résumé, calling her friends, asking to borrow money, or at least owning up to her mistakes, Dasha decided to summon a demon.

Because a demon would be quick. A demon would be efficient. A demon would fix everything with a snap of his clawed fingers, accept her soul in installments, and really, what could possibly go wrong?

"Okay," she told herself, lighting the first candle. "You can do this. You've read stories about demons." Admittedly, they had been fantasy romances, but experience was experience. "You've watched Supernatural. You've even watched Constantine, and you kept your eyes open for almost all of it."

She flicked a lighter she'd bought at a tobacco kiosk. Fire licked the wick, filling the room with the smell of paraffin and mysterious chemical additives. The candles smelled as cheap as they looked. Dasha hoped the demon wouldn't take offense.

"Right. Here we go."

The instructions said to make a circle of salt at midnight and place an object representing your desire in the middle. Dasha wanted her boss to change her mind about firing her, Project Northern Lights to somehow wrap itself up with outstanding results, and the bank to forgive her debt. So she placed her employment record booklet and credit card in the circle, along with a pin from her favorite band's concert, a gift from her friend Lenka, for good measure.

"Symbolism," Dasha said with a nod. "I can feel this working already."

All she had was iodized salt from the nearest supermarket. Her hand shook with excitement and anticipation as she poured it into a circle. After all, it wasn't every day she met a demon, and she was curious to see what these guys were like. In fantasy romances, they were usually pretty hot. Her circle came out lopsided, but Dasha decided not to redo it. Maybe demons weren't too fussy about geometry.

Unable to find the proper incantation in the book — the text broke off midsentence after a chapter entitled "How to Tell an Imp from a Legion: Tips for Beginners" — Dasha made one up herself.

"Invoco te," she began, trying to sound as mysterious as possible. "O great and mighty demon…" She hesitated. "Actually, I've got work problems to sort out, so could you send me a demon who specializes in finance? With project-management experience. A sense of humor would be nice, but it's not essential. It'd just make it easier for us to get along!"

She raised her hand with the lit candle, and hot wax dripped onto the carpet beside her. The carpet belonged to her landlady, but Dasha decided that was a minor detail.

"Come to me, solve my problems, and in return I'll give you…" She faltered. The book said "give up your soul," but her soul seemed a rather steep price for a silly little project called Northern Lights. "I'll give you… three years off the end of my life. You know, when I'm old and won't miss them."

She realized she was haggling, but demons were probably used to that. Didn't the very word deal imply she was allowed to haggle over the terms and knock down the price?

The candles flickered. A draft, obviously. In this old building on the outskirts of Moscow, drafts were as much a part of the décor as the floral wallpaper and perpetually dripping faucet.

Dasha continued improvising:

"Lord of Shadows, Prince of the Underworld, Head of the Wish-Granting Department, hear me!"

At that moment she sneezed. Wormwood was powerful stuff. Then she coughed. Then her elbow caught one of the candles, sending it rolling across the floor and leaving a trail of wax like a pale snail. Well, at least it wasn't the carpet this time.

"Damn it," Dasha said, then caught herself. "Not a devil. I mean, I don't want a devil. I want someone a bit nicer and a little lower-ranking. Not too low-ranking, obviously — he still needs to handle my problems. Three years of my life is my absolute limit, I'm serious. No torment, torture, or other gothic nonsense. And please don't scare me too badly. I'm not actually that brave."

She blew at the candles.

And at that precise moment, the floor trembled beneath her.

Softly, rhythmically, as if someone had started an enormous motor somewhere below. The candles went out. The floor lamp, which Dasha had forgotten to switch off, stayed on, though, and there was still enough light to see the whole room. An odd smell filled the air. Dasha sniffed. Pine-scented shampoo?

Then the air in the middle of the pentagram thickened and shimmered, like heat rising from asphalt on a summer day, before tearing open with an unpleasant noise reminiscent of someone opening a can of stew.

Dasha squeezed her eyes shut.

When she opened them, an orc was sitting on her floor.

A naked orc.

Covered in soap suds. His only adornments were gold hoops in one ear.

He was enormous. His skin was green and covered with scars. Lower tusks protruded over his upper lip, and his eyes were red as glowing coals.

Bubbles frothed on his chest, slid down his stomach in clumps, and caught in the grooves between muscles Dasha could only stare at in disbelief. He looked nothing like a demon. Granted, Dasha had never seen one, but she was absolutely certain this was an orc.

The orc opened his mouth. His breath smelled minty, too, as if he'd brushed his teeth just before appearing in her living room.

"Where am I?" he growled in a voice that seemed to vibrate somewhere around her spine. "What evil power dragged me out of the bathhouse?"

Dasha wanted to say something intelligent, like "I'm sorry, there's been a misunderstanding," but what came out was:

"Oh! Aren't you a demon? You look like… well, you know, an orc from The Lord of the Rings. Only without the armor. And covered in suds."

The orc stirred, sending soap bubbles flying. His red eyes narrowed.

"What trickery is this?" he demanded, steel entering his voice. "Did you bring me here?"

"Well… technically, yes." Dasha shuffled backward, away from the salt circle. This orc was gigantic! It would be better if he didn't move at all, or he'd wreck the apartment and she'd never get her security deposit back. Not that she'd been counting on getting it anyway. "It's just that I was summoning a demon. You see, I've got problems at work and needed someone to fix them quickly. You don't look like a demon. You're green."

The orc stood up, and the chandelier rattled. The ceiling seemed to drop four inches. Naked, covered in foam, his eyes burning with hatred, he looked like a disaster come to life.

"I am Targitai, son of Brom, of the Northern Hunters clan," he growled, taking a step toward her. "A warrior long since retired from service. And right now I'm supposed to be in the bathhouse!"

"Your service was completed long ago? But you don't look old. I'd say you're about thirty." Dasha raised her hands in surrender as he advanced on her. "Sorry, I didn't mean to call you old! If you're younger, I apologize! I don't know anything about orcs. I was summoning a demon, but I must have read the instructions wrong!"

"Silence, evil spirit," the orc said.

His enormous, calloused hand closed around her throat.

Not tightly. Not painfully. It simply held her there. Dasha suddenly felt as though her body weighed nothing at all. He held her as easily as she might hold a kitten.

"Now," Targitai said slowly, his tusks flashing in the dim light, "you will tell me who you are, why you summoned me, and which spirits I must pray to so I don't kill you right here."

Dasha tried to answer, but only a bubbling sound emerged. Not because she was choking, but because of the hysterical laughter that always seized her at the worst possible moments.

"You think… I'm an evil… spirit? Ha! Sorry… I can't take a threat seriously… from a naked orc… You've got foam," she managed, "on your face. And not just your face."

She couldn't quite manage to laugh. After all, he was strangling her.

The orc blinked. With his free hand, he wiped a clump of soap suds off his cheek and stared at it as though it were evidence of his humiliation.

"This is not funny," he said, although some of the menace had left his voice. "Do people in your world not bathe?"

"Of course we do. I'm clean," she protested. There was a stain on her T-shirt, but otherwise she wasn't lying.

He gave her a skeptical once-over. His gaze lingered briefly on the words "Coffee Is Love" printed across her chest, then his grip loosened.

"Why can I understand your language when I don't recognize its letters?" he asked, finally releasing her altogether.

Her idiotic grin and trembling knees convinced him that Dasha posed no serious threat.

She drew a deep breath and blurted:

"Magic."

"What magic?" the orc demanded.

"Well, you can understand me because the magic ritual worked," she said thoughtfully. "I wanted to sort out the whole getting-fired problem. And my credit card. And become responsible without actually having to make an effort. So I performed a ritual, and instead of a demon, someone sent me you."

"Who sent me?"

Dasha was beginning to get annoyed. If she knew who had sent the orc, she wouldn't have bothered with the ritual. She would have gone straight to that problem-solver.

“How should I know?” she snapped. “You said you understand my language, so you should know what the word magic means.”

The orc gave her a long, heavy look. His red eyes seemed to scan her, seeing straight through her.

“You’re insane,” he concluded.

“Maybe,” Dasha agreed. “But you’re a naked orc in another world, and we don’t exactly have orcs running around here, so that puts you at my mercy.”

She flashed him a dazzling smile.

“I could just kill you,” the orc growled.

A shiver went through Dasha, but she asked quite calmly:

“Why?”

It was a fair question. Neither of them had the slightest idea how to send him back.

Chapter 2. The Wardrobe, the Curtains, and an Unexpected Knight

Targitai went still.

He stood in the middle of Dasha's living room, covered in soap suds that were slowly drying and flaking on his green skin. His red eyes roamed the room, taking in the shelves of detective novels, the potted ficus, and the television mounted on the wall.

"How…" His voice came out hoarse. "How is this even possible?"

Dasha looked up at him. Up close, the orc seemed even bigger. Broad shoulders, a powerful neck, arms as thick as her legs. Suds slid down his chest, revealing sharply defined muscles, and Dasha caught herself staring longer than the circumstances really justified.

The orc noticed where she was looking.

And Dasha saw it. Plain as day. Amid the fury, shock, and bewilderment on his green face, something new appeared.

Embarrassment.

He jerked his shoulder and tried to cover himself with one hand, but that hand was the size of a shovel and covered, at best, a third of what Dasha had already seen.

Oh, she'd seen it. She most certainly had.

Because even through the foam, and despite all that green skin, there was no missing the fact that nature had been generous to the son of the Northern Hunters clan. Dasha opened her mouth to say something clever like "Well, I always assumed orcs were like bodybuilders and everything was tiny down there; there goes that stereotype," but just then someone began hammering insistently on the front door.

"Dasha!" came a muffled voice. "I know you're home! Open up!"

Targitai instantly forgot his embarrassment. His body tensed, his muscles turned to stone, and his eyes narrowed.

"Who is that?" he growled.

"My neighbor!" Dasha whispered in horror. "The one downstairs, Uncle Vova! He's always complaining about me to my landlady!"

The knocking came again.

"You've got someone in there, haven't you? You were told not to bring men home! I heard a man's voice! And a crash! My chandelier is swinging!"

Dasha darted around the room like a fly trapped in a jar. An enormous naked orc was standing in the middle of her living room, and she desperately needed somewhere to put him.

"You have to hide!" she hissed, grabbing his wrist. His skin was hot and rough.

"I hide from no one," he growled, but Dasha was already dragging him along.

It was ridiculous. She was barely five foot three on tiptoe; he was nearly seven foot three of solid green muscle. She pulled on his arm, he resisted, and suds flew in every direction, leaving wet streaks across the floor. Dasha tripped over her own foot, pitched forward, and smacked her forehead against his shoulder blade.

"Sorry, sorry. God, you're hard as a rock," she muttered, peeling herself off him. Her face was level with his navel, and she hastily recoiled. Another second and her nose would have collided with the very thing she'd just been admiring.

"Woman," the orc said, his voice oddly husky. "What are you doing?"

"Hiding you!" Dasha pulled herself together and threw open the door of her old wardrobe. She'd never liked it. It took up far too much space and was absurdly deep. Today, however, it looked like salvation. There was just enough space inside to hide one very large orc.

“I am not getting in there,” Targitai declared.

The knocking resumed.

“Dasha, I’m calling the police if you don’t open this door right now!”

“Oh, yes, you are!” she hissed, shoving him in the chest.

Her shove didn’t move him a millimeter, but for some reason he obediently stepped inside on his own. Probably because the look Dasha gave him suggested that arguing would be hazardous to his health.

The wardrobe was cramped. Very cramped. Targitai squeezed his shoulders inside, his head pressed against the top shelf where Dasha kept her hats and mittens. He crouched, practically folded into thirds, knees pressed together, and still filled every inch. Her dresses hung directly in front of his face.

“Keep quiet,” Dasha whispered, sliding the door shut. “Please. For the love of everything holy. Don’t come out. I’ll be right back.”

She turned and went to answer the door, leaving wet, foamy footprints behind her and feeling her face burn.

I’ve just stuffed a naked orc into my wardrobe, she thought. That’s the strangest thing that’s ever happened in this apartment. And I’ve lived here for three years.

She opened the door.

Uncle Vova stood on the threshold, a man of about sixty in sweatpants and a stretched-out tank top. His face was red with indignation, and one hand was already raised to knock again.

“What’s all this racket?” he demanded, trying to peer past her. “All that stomping and shouting? What are you keeping in there, elephants?”

“Uncle Vova, I’m so sorry,” Dasha said with her most innocent smile. “I was just moving some furniture.”

“In the middle of the night?” the neighbor shrieked. “I’ve got a job interview in the morning, understand? And now I won’t get any sleep!”

In all the time she had lived there, Uncle Vova had never held a job. Dasha doubted he’d even make it to an interview if she hadn’t woken him up. Still, she wanted to defuse the situation, not make it worse. So she said:

“I’m terribly sorry.”

“Oh, she’s sorry!” Uncle Vova interrupted, jabbing a finger at her. “I know your type! Young people! No shame, no decency! God knows what you’re getting up to in there!”

Dasha opened her mouth to apologize again, but her neighbor was already on a roll.

“I’m calling the police,” he announced, pulling out his phone. “Let them sort it out. Maybe there’s a crime going on in there. Or worse — men!”

“Uncle Vova, surely there’s no need to involve the police!”

“Shut up!” he barked. “You’ve ruined my interview, you brainless idiot!”

The word idiot hung in the air.

Dasha pressed her lips together. She was used to it. Uncle Vova always spoke to her like that. Always. And she always endured it, because neighbors were neighbors, there was no one to complain to, and moving was expensive.

But at that moment, something changed behind her.

First, she felt heat, as if someone had turned a space heater to maximum.

Then came the creak of floorboards.

Then heavy, low breathing, right above her ear.

“Say that again,” a voice said.

A voice that sent a tremor through her entire body.

Dasha slowly turned her head. Targitai stood behind her, his red eyes fixed on Uncle Vova with an expression that would have made any sensible person’s knees buckle.

"What did you just say to this woman?" the orc growled.

Uncle Vova spluttered. His phone slipped out of his hand, struck the floor, and rolled away. His face went from red to white to gray, finally settling on the color of an old bedsheet.

"That's… that's…" he stammered, staring at the green giant. "What the hell is…?"

"I asked you" — Targitai stepped forward, moving Dasha aside, and Uncle Vova stumbled backward toward the stairwell railing — "who gave you the right to raise your voice to a defenseless woman?"

"Defenseless?" Dasha repeated wryly, but the orc ignored her.

"If I see you at this door again," Targitai continued, his voice dropping until it was even more frightening, "or hear that you've spoken one more rude word to her, I will come to you myself. And then we won't be talking."

Uncle Vova didn't wait to hear more.

He turned and ran.

For a man of his age and build, he moved astonishingly fast. His slippers slapped against the stairs, a door slammed somewhere below, and silence descended.

Dasha shut the door.

Rested her forehead against it.

Exhaled.

"Why did you come out?" she asked wearily. "I told you to stay quiet."

"He insulted you," the orc said simply, as though that explained everything.

Dasha turned toward him.

She wanted to say something like "I don't need protecting," or "You've ruined everything," or "Now he's definitely going to call the police, and uniformed officers will show up and see you, and I'll be arrested for possession of… what, exactly? An orc?"

But the words stuck in her throat.

Because she'd just noticed that the orc had fashioned himself a loincloth out of her curtain.

Targitai had wrapped the fabric awkwardly around his hips, and now he looked ridiculous. The sheer lace curtain hid almost nothing, especially in the light, which made the whole scene even more absurd.

He caught her looking and twitched one corner of his mouth.

"What?" he asked. "You said people in your world aren't allowed to walk around naked. I didn't want to violate your customs."

Dasha opened her mouth.

Closed it.

"My security deposit," she breathed. "I'm definitely never getting my security deposit back."

She had summoned a demon to solve her problems, only to get an orc who kept creating new ones. Something had to be done.

Chapter 3. The Commuter Train, the Sprinter, and the Dacha Mystery

The dacha village was asleep.

Or rather, it wasn't so much asleep as completely deserted. In summer, the place was usually noisy: lawn mowers on weekends, barbecues, barking dogs, and children shouting. But now it was the middle of the night, the middle of the week, and the beginning of September. Every house seemed utterly and permanently abandoned.

Only one window was lit.

Dasha reached the gate and pushed it. Unlocked. Lenka always left it that way. Dasha whispered:

"We're here."

Targitai stopped behind her. His breathing was steady; he wasn't even winded, despite having just covered a distance Dasha still couldn't believe.

While she rode the commuter train, he had run alongside it.

It had been the craziest journey of her life. Dasha had sat by the window, clutching her ticket in a sweaty hand, while a huge green shadow flashed through the darkness outside, between birch trees and power lines. Targitai had kept pace with the carriage, leaping over ditches and dodging trees, never falling behind once.

The ticket inspector hadn't noticed a thing. Naturally. No one expects a naked orc with a curtain over his shoulder to be running after their train. Fortunately, he had eventually returned the curtain to his hips.

Dasha climbed onto the porch and knocked.

There was a patter of footsteps inside, followed by a muttered "Who the hell is knocking at two in the morning?" and the clank of a lock.

The door opened.

Lenka stood there in a stretched-out T-shirt and shorts patterned with reindeer. Her red hair stuck out in every direction; one eye was narrowed, and the other was still closed.

"Dasha?" she mumbled, rubbing her eyes. "What time is it? Why are you here?"

"Len," Dasha said in the voice of someone who had lost the ability to be surprised by anything. "Just don't panic."

"My boss told me yesterday I'm not getting my bonus. Nothing can scare me anymore," Lenka declared.

Dasha stepped aside.

And Lenka saw Targitai.

He stood on the path in the moonlight. Green, enormous, wearing a loincloth made from a curtain, and looking like an orc prepared for any trouble except being stared at.

Lenka froze.

Very slowly, she turned from the orc to Dasha.

"Is that…" she began. Stopped. Swallowed. "Dash, what… is that?"

She was struggling to accept that the thing in front of her was alive.

"Len, this is Targitai."

"Targit… God, what a name. Is he from your office?"

"He's an orc," Dasha said. "I tried to summon a demon, but he showed up instead. He got yanked out of his bathhouse and transported into our world."

Lenka opened her mouth. Closed it. Looked up at the sky as if hoping for an answer, or at least an explanation of why this was happening to her at two in the morning.

"All right," she said at last. "Come in. Just wipe your feet. And… he should, too."

They went inside.

The dacha was a small wooden house that smelled of timber, old furniture, and dill. Lenka led them into the kitchen and turned on the light. At that moment, Targitai bumped his head on the chandelier. It swung, Lenka squealed, and Dasha rolled her eyes as if this were already routine.

“Be right back,” Lenka said, dashing into the bedroom. “I’ve got something.”

A minute later she returned with an armful of clothes: jeans, a plaid shirt, an old undershirt, and a pair of shorts.

“They’re my dad’s,” she explained, handing them to Targitai. “He used to be… well… big. Then Mom started threatening to divorce him, and he lost the weight in no time. The clothes were still there.”

Targitai took the clothes. Looked doubtfully at the jeans, then at his leg, then at the jeans again.

“These will not fit,” he said with murderous certainty.

“Try them,” Lenka snorted. “We haven’t got anything else. Unless you’d rather keep wearing the sheer curtain. But here’s a little secret” — her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper — “it doesn’t do much.”

The orc immediately retreated into the hallway. They could hear grunting, muttering, and curses directed at the clothing industry of Earth.

Five minutes later, he returned.

He was wearing the jeans. They were skin-tight; every movement made the seams crackle ominously. Too small at the waist, stretched across the thighs, and about four inches too short. Thankfully, the shirt was looser, though the buttons gaped across his chest, revealing a strip of green skin.

Lenka surveyed the results.

“They’ll do. Provided you don’t breathe or move,” she drawled.

“Nevertheless, I thank you, woman,” Targitai said solemnly.

Lenka and Dasha exchanged a glance and burst out laughing.

“What?” he frowned.

Dasha patted his back and beckoned him farther into the kitchen.

“Nothing. You’re just funny.”

“I am not funny.”

Lenka was already bustling about making tea. It was always easier to think things through around a kitchen table. They sat down. Lenka put the kettle on, set out cookies and three mugs, and poured the tea. Targitai sat on a stool that creaked piteously but heroically bore his weight.

“Right,” Lenka said, cupping her mug and looking at Dasha. “Start from the beginning. And don’t leave out the important bits. I know what you’re like when you tell a story.”

Dasha exhaled and began.

“Work’s a disaster. They’re threatening to fire me, I’m drowning in credit card debt, and I bought concert tickets before realizing that if I lose my job, I won’t even have time to resell them. Then I found a book online. About demonology. Bought it from a witch. Dark_Witch_from_Gloomy_Kursk_87.”

Lenka choked on her tea.

“Seriously? You bought a book from someone with that username?”

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