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Natalie Yacobson



DEVIL'S CINEMA

Crypt of the Seven Angels

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**Devil's Cinema. Crypt
of the Seven Angels**

«Издательские решения»

Yacobson N.

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Daniel came to the shooting of the film in a gloomy city. There are myths about the deceased film star Athenais, whose films drove people crazy and led to mass deaths. Strange creatures invite Daniel to an abandoned cinema for a nightly screening of a forbidden film with Athenais. This session may open the gates of hell, but the young man doesn't care. After all, the image of Athenais completely captured his consciousness.

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Devil's Cinema Crypt of the Seven Angels

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A movie star from the hell

Summer, 2013, Blue Lotus Cinema

The film is about to begin. Most likely, it will shock the audience, suppress their will, deeply shake, completely deprive them of consideration. It would be nice to cancel the premiere before the film starts, but the audience has already gathered. The whole elite is here. All around there are stars, the press, even politicians. What he conceived is impracticable.

Mikhail looked around. Not only guards can interfere with him. The most dangerous thing here is people who are not armed to the teeth. His attention was drawn to marble statues in distant boxes. They glowed pale in the semi-darkness. The outline of the wings was somewhat reminiscent of movie posters. One statue is located near the screen. Its marble fingers were pressed to its lips in a sign of silence. The statue's smile seemed sinister. Is it just a play of light and shadow? And what are the only statues doing in the cinema? As if no one noticed them.

But the appearance of a young star attracted everyone. Atenais came, accompanied by grim-looking bodyguards. Her curly golden head stood out sharply from the crowd. She is the same as in the film, he noted with horror. As if she had just stepped off the screen, crossing the line of worlds: real and surreal.

Mikhail's attention was drawn to the living lotus in her hair. And where did she get it? In the local climate, lotuses do not grow. Where did he hear that the lotus is a sacred plant? And for whom is it sacred? For those strange creatures in the shadows above the screen?

"Do not do this!"

Who suddenly whispered in his ear? Mikhail turned around, expecting to see the stranger in the red hood, but he did not sit in the back rows as usual. There were only smartly dressed people around. While they are careless, but soon they will all become ill.

Athenais walked forward, oblivious to the admiring glances. So fragile, so tender. Who would have thought bad of her? Who saw the darkness in her eyes?

Mikhail looked at her almost with a shudder. I really don't want to hurt her. She is an ordinary girl with an angelic face and the grace of a model. Is this Atenais who, instead of ink, signs autographs with the blood of those who adore her? Or is it all the illusion of cinema?

He doubted, and yet he kept his hand on the gun in his pocket. He managed to carry the pistol past the security systems. He knew how to turn and not that. Nobody suspected him of anything. Besides the statues! They seemed to be watching him from afar with their marble eyes. Wiggle marble wings. They smile ominously.

There were exactly seven of them. Statues! Why does he think about them instead of the main goal? All attention should be focused on Athenais. She has already taken her place in the front row, straightened her silk dress and is waiting for the start of the session. Before the premiere it shouldn't be.

But the screen lit up. The credits have already gone. Probably, it only seemed to him that one of the marble statues suddenly moved. Athenais turned her head to find him unmistakably among the row of filled rows. The look in her eyes, as always, startled him. He kept expecting her to repeat what she had said before, nodding lightly at the angelic statues:

"Save me from them!"

But she said something else, clearly and clearly, so that everyone could hear:

"Save them all from me..."

Who did she mean? All the people in the cinema? All people around the world? It didn't matter anymore. He had the determination to finally pull the weapon out of his pocket. He was ready to carry

out his plans. It's a shame the movie has already started. When the show starts, everything in this place gets out of hand. People change, thoughts change... And nothing can be reversed.

A celebrity in the slums

Our days

“Look, this is he! Has he been to the devil’s theater before? How can you come to us and know nothing about the local attraction?”

The teenagers who had just taken his autograph were giggling behind their backs. It was so unusual that Daniel shuddered. The feeling that he signed their notebooks with his own blood only intensified. Daniel’s head rang with their laughter. What strange children are here! And what an unusual town itself! He would like to run away from here, as soon as he arrived here.

Only he will not be allowed to leave this town until the end of filming. The signed contract can no longer be terminated, but you can get out of the situation differently. When the situation has reached an impasse, there is only one way out. Daniel’s path lay in unsociable places, where almost every passer-by he met on the street pointed to him. Since there is so much talk about an abandoned cinema, it means that we must go there. It is there that you can implement your plan.

He had a razor blade in his pocket. This is quite enough to commit suicide. Daniel brushed strands of dyed blonde hair from his face. The cold wind ruffled them with incredible force. His face still looked as pretty as it did in the artfully retouched magazine covers. A rare case when the appearance of an actor is almost indistinguishable from his images replicated to the public. It is a pity that beauty has ceased to give him an advantage. Recently, the career has been going downhill.

Coming to a quiet town to shoot a horror movie was an act of desperation. Naturally, no one, except those close to him, knew about this yet. Articles in the press continued to carry a laudatory tone – all this is advertising paid for by the studio. In fact, he was pursued by an evil fate. Several recent films with him have flopped at the box office. The new film is his last chance.

And this chance is too flimsy. The location for the shooting was too unfortunate, the script leaves much to be desired, the director thinks more about how to make a star out of his own daughter than about how to make a good film. No one offered Daniel another job. From depression left to wash down even before filming began. But talking about a building that’s cursed distracted him from both the bottle and the preparation for filming.

Going for a walk before filming started was the only sober thought. Alone, no bodyguards. Why bodyguards for a star that no longer gives profit. If they kill him, then no one will give a damn. And once it was different.

Someone wisely said that all stars experience a moment of glory and a moment of fall. Daniel didn’t think he would ever fall under these statistics. When you are young, successful and even rich, then dark thoughts do not enter your head. They start to come later when you lose everything. Anyone who is on the verge of complete collapse thinks only of such a quiet place as an abandoned cinema in order to commit suicide there.

In such a place, no one will find him, no one will save him, no stranger will call an ambulance. Until his corpse is found, not a single day will pass. If they find it at all. In the district, the cinema is so notorious that even police patrols allegedly try to bypass it. More like a fiction! It’s good if such a cinema exists at all, and is not a fiction of local residents.

Daniel has heard similar stories from people who want to attract as many tourists as possible to certain areas. There were fairy tales about haunted houses, about damned ruins, and about cemeteries where evil spirits live. But he hadn’t heard about the damn cinema yet. This is really a really unconventional and purely modern invention. It does not breathe ashes of the Middle Ages and village fables about witchcraft.

“The cinema is a bad place. There, cinema technology was used as a means of causing harm to the audience,” the guide hired by the producers gave scant explanations. “There are a lot of things left in the building, including equipment that could be... hmm, a danger. In addition, the structure itself is dilapidated and, most likely, is about to collapse. It would have been demolished long ago if the government had no plans to open something like a museum there. But in any case, I do not advise you to go there. The risk of getting hurt is too high. Once upon a time such experiments were carried out there, which caused not only accidents, but also mass deaths. The place is creepy, old...”

In general, the guide dissuaded from going there as if he was an accomplice of a whole nest of criminals who are hiding there. He did not diversify his story with any ghost stories just because it is such a topic that attracts visitors. Although no one believes in ghosts, everyone becomes curious to look at the place in which they supposedly live.

But the local workers only talked about the curse of the old cinema. Apparently it was not that old. Yes, it was built a long time ago, but a few years ago it functioned. Daniel read about it in the local chronicle. The recordings were accompanied by beautiful photographs of the building more like an oriental palace than a cinema house. Now the road to it is overgrown with bushes.

Should you go there, sacrificing trendy jeans and a leather jacket? The branches have already scratched his temple. He hardly felt pain. Well, isn't it funny? He came to the shooting. He's a star, but the profits from past films have barely justified the cost of advertising. If there is no profit again, then you can put an end to his career. How to be here?

“Or maybe you'll sell your soul to the devil, if you want success so much that you don't regret anything for him?”

Who said that? A whispering voice came from the juniper bushes. He skinned his hands about them, pulling back the branches. There is no one behind them. The red flap and the flickering of a bright cape are just a play of sunset rays.

The Blue Lotus Cinema is almost lost in the thicket. Two sphinxes dozed at the entrance. And inside there are seven statues. No, he only imagined. The statues were far away. At home. Gone away in the days of the revolution. The great-grandfather's story about them was just the delirium of a dying man. He saw only an illusion, then and now.

And yet the feeling that the angelic statues were standing here and waiting specifically for him was very intrusive.

The doors to the cinema were not boarded up. He entered easily. Inside it was gloomy, dark and empty. What did he expect? That the sophisticated audience gathered here for the premiere?

Desolation should reign here. And also, according to the guide, it is dangerous here. The entire structure can collapse at any moment. He didn't care. Let it collapse, burying it under the rubble. At least he will die like the biblical Samson. He knew about this only because he once starred in his role. All of Daniel's literacy proceeded, alas, only from scripts, which had to be read as needed and which did not always correspond to the book information. So in an interview, he went wrong a couple of times, not taking into account the fact that in the Bible and in novels everything happened somewhat differently than the scriptwriters described. The awkward situation was then hushed up. And now all life was going downhill. This cannot be fixed with a set of cunning phrases that create a stellar image.

Is there a bar in the cinema? Daniel wanted to drink again. Of course, it is foolish to hope that a bottle is lying somewhere in an abandoned building. But what if?

– You didn't come to see the film?

Who is speaking? The voice is definitely female. And the laughter that follows him resembles a chorus of several voices. Daniel shuddered and began to blindly look around. There should be no one here. The cinema has long been abandoned. But this does not mean that someone could not enter here the same way he entered. Through an unlocked door. And why isn't the door locked? Probably someone hacked it. Have any teenagers decided to set up a hangout here? It is good to. They can borrow a can of beer for an autograph.

Instead of teenagers, he noticed the pale glow of the figures on the pedestals in the hall. Mannequins or statues? It was impossible to distinguish exactly in the dark. Figures hung over the floor as if ready to fly.

“Come to us!”

The voices were not calling from the hall. He noticed something shiny in the distance. Some balls were spinning like tops. They are probably suspended by fishing lines. There was a quiet knock with which checkers are usually moved around the board.

“No ticket needed! Join us for free... while for free.”

And again the murmuring laughter. Now there were exactly two voices. Both are female. Daniel went to the sounds and stumbled in the darkness at the edge of a round fountain, which is located right in the hall. Naturally, there was no water in it. It seems that it has not worked for a long time, but the stone lotus in its center for a moment seemed like a living plant, stretching its roots behind the guest.

In the hallway leading to the closed doors of the cinema halls, there was an artificial tree with red hearts on the branches instead of the usual leaves and flowers. They were bleeding. Is this some kind of effect? Daniel wanted to touch them with his hand, but a ringing female voice distracted him.

“Do you want to play?”

How had he not noticed a tiny vestibule and a beauty sitting on a curbstone at a miniature table before? The table was no larger than a barrel, on which a board and figures vaguely resembling chess were laid out.

The girl beckoned him to sit on an empty curbstone on the other side of the table from her, and Daniel obediently sat down. He even joined the game, although he did not fully understand how to play it and why he was actually doing it. The pieces on the board were spinning by themselves like tops. He barely followed them. The girl's old dress, clearly related to theatrical costumes, involuntarily admired, as did her intricate hairstyle.

Daniel thought it would be nice to introduce himself, but as soon as he opened his mouth, the girl outstripped him.

“I know who you are.”

Nevertheless, she did not ask him for an autograph, she did not even try to take a selfie.

“Who are you?” he was intrigued, and oddly enough, most of all he was attracted by the lack of any interest on her part in his star person.

“Call me Cordelia,” she said casually, almost singing. He had never heard such a strange melodious tone from anyone. It was as if some admiring creepy creatures crawled into her voice from the darkness. Probably all this is also an optical illusion. After all, cinema and cinemas are a world of illusion. Everything here is unnatural.

“Let's play!”

“But we are already playing.”

“Let's play charades. Only in unusual charades. I will assume, and you tell me what I assumed wrong, and at the end there will still be a surprise for both of us. This is what I think: you are a movie star, but no one knows that you are also a descendant of a damned family, you came to the Rosier estate and forgot about filming, sitting down to chess with a demon.”

“But you're not a demon. You are a winged beauty. Wings suit you. My film studio has not yet learned how to sew such costumes.”

But the claws did not fit her. She scratched the board with them. Once they are attached to such a graceful hand.

“Cordelia?”

“I'm not one of them. When I left, I was warned... but now I have a dark sister.”

Daniel did not understand the meaning of these phrases. Is she still playing charades? He noticed what looked like black wings behind Cordelia. What is it? Decoration? It seems that when a girl speaks, she reads the text of a role.

He concentrated his gaze on the game spread out on the table, and suddenly something spun in his head, like frames of an old black and white film. First, some creepy creatures crawl alongside, and then angels in the cinema. The reel is spinning somewhere nearby. The film is associated with falling. The feeling is as if he is falling. The footage flashes something about Dennitsa's fall... He almost went crazy, and Cordelia signaled him to be silent.

"This is an optical illusion! Don't look too closely at the board."

"Is it magic?" he hardly came to his senses, averting his eyes from the golden-white fields on the board. "And all these statues in the cinema. Sphinxes, a fountain... What is all this for?"

"Do you know that the lotus is a sacred plant?" Cordelia continued to play the game with either gold chips or balls already alone.

"What is this game called?"

"It's from the Ancient Egypt."

"I've never heard of such a thing."

"And what do you even know about the Ancient Egypt. You're an actor. You have never studied history."

In addition to those moments when he read the scripts of historical films, he wanted to explain it, but stopped short. Something told him that from such a confession the girl over him would laugh even louder. She loved to slander.

Her friend appeared suddenly, as from a hatch in the floor, and instead of a greeting she grinned so predatory that Daniel felt uneasy.

"Nefert," she introduced herself.

Whether her name is curious or is the name of the heroine she is preparing to play. The costume on the girl reminded of the royal fashions of the Ancient Egypt. Daniel often saw similar outfits with gilded inserts in wardrobe studios. But he had never noticed that an actress dressed like that looked like a kind of mythical character.

Not yet having time to join the game, Nefert, as it were, accidentally touched him with her hand and severely scratched him. Well, her nails! Rather claws. And, for sure, invoices. She must be hard with them. They are so long and sparkling that each one resembles a miniature braid. And she scratches just like a cat, while not even making any effort. She just ran her hand over his cheek, and blood was already flowing from the cheek. Daniel winced in pain.

"More like Bastet than Nefert," he joked.

"Oh," she raised her round eyebrows, lined with gold paint, in amazement. "And you know something about us."

This is a joke? Daniel wiped the blood off his cheek and thought about the reprimand he would receive when he returned to the shooting. Probably due to injury, the shooting will now be canceled altogether. It is unlikely that makeup will be able to hide such deep scratches. And he should look handsome in the frame. He was hired only for his appearance.

What is he just thinking about? After all, he came here only to succumb to suicide. And it was worth seeing here two predatory beauties and thoughts of suicide suddenly disappeared somewhere. Pleasant company had a much more salutary effect on him than long conversations with an understanding psychologist.

A strange game with golden tops, as it turns out, is meant for three. And at first it seemed to him that it was only for two or generally for one. When he entered, he could see Cordelia playing alone, unless there was a ghost with her.

"Are you sisters? Well, at least cousins?" he noticed that the friends are very similar, only their hair color is different. Nefert is a brunette, Cordelia is a brown-haired woman. And neither of them are wearing wigs. Although with the modern technique of dyeing hair and eyebrows, changing the color is easy.

"No one here is tied by ordinary kinship," Cordelia said. The spinning top spun under her fingers, exuding a swirl of golden sparkles. It was somewhat reminiscent of a miniature hurricane in the desert.

"And you'll probably barely wash off the coloring mousse, both of you will turn out to be blondes," Daniel joked.

"I was blonde," Cordelia admitted, "but since I got here, my hair has started to darken."

"So you painted them to get a role in some local project?"

She looked at him as if he were an idiot.

"Well, yes, to get the part," she reluctantly confirmed aloud, though her tone was clearly a mockery.

"And you, like everyone else, came to the seance?!"

"What seance? After all, the cinema has not functioned for a long time. Am I mistaken that the last time films were shown here years ago?" the guy looked surprised from one doll's face to another, but neither Cordelia nor Nefert was in no hurry to answer. And the game with the golden whirlwind and tops on the board continued to play by itself.

"They still show one film here, which the public finds interesting. This film is called by many a masterpiece of world cinema, but it is not intended to be shown to viewers with a low cultural level. Only a select few are invited to the sessions, who are able to understand the plot and appreciate the special effects.

"That is, local cinemas are officially closed, but in secret they belong to the local VIP zone. Is that what you want to tell me?"

Cordelia nodded slyly. She has eyelashes and facial features like a large china doll, he remarked to himself. Probably the makeup on the skin was applied very skillfully. The girl looks like a beating porcelain creature.

Get a better look at Nefert's makeup. He, too, must be something remarkable. But the second girl stubbornly kept in the shadows, standing behind Cordelia, who was sitting on the curbstone. The only thing that caught the eye were the glowing gold eyebrows and eyelashes, as well as the fancy shining details of the Egyptian costume. Nefert resembled the ghost of a queen, or at least a princess. Probably, she got such a role. Daniel would not be surprised if he also saw a sarcophagus here.

Although what kind of absurdity comes into his head? In cinemas, films are usually shown, not filmed. Well, except on rare occasions when the scripts involve scenes that take place in the cinema. At least that was the case in his practice. But it cannot be ruled out that someone is acting differently. Different countries or studios may have different filming techniques.

"So will you attend the session? Cordelia's singing voice pulled him out of his thoughts."

"Right now?"

"No, tomorrow night. For you, it will start only tomorrow."

"But it seems that it is already beginning," Daniel noticed how the doors of the cinema hall opened a little in the distance. A beam of light hit the red carpet in the hallway. It seems that the audience was gathering in the hall. He heard the hubbub of voices, but what they were talking about, he could not understand. Some weird shadows fell on the carpet. Guests either have very fancy tall hairstyles or hooves and horns! Unless it's all actors who have pulled away from filming for a test run. Although from afar it all sounds more like a sabbath than a peaceful viewing of a film.

"In the evening! Well! I will try to be free by this time. But what time is it?" – and what does he think about when making promises, because on the set he himself can be detained until late? What if someone who was not invited follows him? Do they even give tickets or invitations? He didn't notice the ticket booths in front of the entrance.

"Come closer to twelve," Cordelia shrugged her bare shoulders, and again it seemed to him that their matte skin cracked like broken china.

“That is, the exact start time is not yet known?” It was somewhat amazing. Usually all theaters and cinemas have a tight schedule. But everything is unusual here.

“We’re starting late,” Cordelia said again. Nefert preferred to be silent. “The later you come, the better. Moreover, not all high-ranking guests have the opportunity to visit us during the day.”

“I noticed that the clock at the entrance stopped.”

“Time limits us so much,” Cordelia sigh expressed such disdain and weariness. “But don’t worry. The clock will be repaired by tomorrow night. And they will go again. We just need to hurry up the watchmaker.”

Could it be the hunched creature that just slipped down the hallway. Daniel shivered. Cold washed over him.

“By the way, in this costume you look like a very attractive ancient vampire,” blushing slightly, he tried to compliment her. The ability to compliment was never his strong point, but the girl smiled indulgently.

“Not a vampire, but a very skilled seamstress,” she corrected in a whisper. Why whisper? Is it necessary to hide something from someone here?

“So you want to say that you are not playing a vampire, but a seamstress... in a lady’s dress?”

“I have a difficult role,” she replied bluntly. Daniel suddenly began to think that the whirlwinds of sparkles above the playing board were beginning to form into the outlines of screaming faces, making the game resemble a miniature hell of golden sand.

Some suspicious sounds were indeed heard from the already closed auditorium. It looks like sobbing and screaming. They were probably coming from the screen, he consoled himself. Cordelia was wary.

“It’s time for you to go. You cannot stay overnight in this place. It is forbidden.”

“Will they let me in here tomorrow without a ticket?”

“Ticket,” Cordelia frowned. “Maybe you also need a royal crown, plus you need it. Or a loop around the neck is better?”

Nefert made her hold her snide tongue, lightly scratching her shoulder with her claws. Cordelia didn’t bleed, but it squeaked, as if scratching a hard surface, not skin.

“This is for you!” Nefert placed an invitation on the table, edged with gold lettering. The letters on it were half black, half scarlet, but that line was erased as soon as the blood from Daniel’s cheek suddenly dripped onto the cardboard. Everything turned scarlet.

“I messed it up.”

“It’s just a formality,” Cordelia explained.

“That is, at the control it will be easily scanned.”

In response, there was only a playful laugh from both girls.

“Well then...” the young man hesitated, not wanting to leave.

“You have to go!”

He had to leave. The gloomy building suddenly became so pleasant, as if a living fabulous creature that swallowed it in its mouth and protected it from the cruelly world around, where struggle and competition are in progress. And here there is only peace and the feeling that the walls live and whisper something to him ingratiatingly.

“You are back, son of the Rosier family! You have returned to us!”

Who here could know the old name of his family? Having moved to Russia, his family changed their last name to the Rozanovs, and he, in turn, having found a way to foreign cinema, chose a sonorous pseudonym for himself. Nobody knew his old family name, but the cinema did. Or did he have delirium tremens after drinking?

In any case, he didn’t want to leave the cinema. After all, it is so dark, warm, cozy. A good place to fall asleep here forever, dreamless sleep and get rid of all earthly problems.

The impression of peace was interrupted by obsessed cries from the closed hall. He also heard bird cries, sounds of struggle and even gunshots. He turned around. The door swung open again for a moment, and monstrous shadows grappled behind it in battle. It must be reflections from the screen.

He walked away faster. Tomorrow he will watch the film himself. And for some reason they didn't let him in today? These are probably the rules here. Or was there not enough room for a beginner?

The hall was calm and empty. The fountain suddenly started working. The clock above the entrance began to tick. Someone hunched over seems to be hovering between the ceiling and them. In the semi-darkness it was definitely not possible to see.

“The descendant of Rosier has indeed returned!”

Daniel looked around the hall, trying to find out who said this. But there were only statues around. He bumped into one of them and almost hurt his forehead, but someone supported him in time. The question is who? There was no one living nearby. Only seven marble and somehow ominous angels gathered around.

Before leaving, Daniel turned on them and was taken aback, one of the angels, the one who stood closest to the exit, moved his wing, brought a marble finger to the same marble lips and made a sign to the young man to remain silent.

A tree from ashes

“Stain a tree with blood,
Let her into this world!”

So the children sang in a round dance. Probably, he only fancied in the light of the moon that they all had deathly pale faces, empty eyes and very sharp needle-like teeth under bloodless lips. And what kind of parents would let their children go out so late at night? Are they all from an orphanage, which eventually became impoverished? Will they start begging soon? But they only sang and looked like ghosts.

Daniel nevertheless ran his hand into the pocket of his jacket in search of the little things that were lying there, but he came across only a razor blade and injured his fingers. The pain burned. Despite the dulling sensations of the night's cold, the pain itself was razor sharp. He recalled inappropriately that as a child, he had been injured on the beach on broken glass a long time ago. It lay at the bottom. In the water, the wound did not even ache, but it was worth getting out on the shore, and the torment became intolerable. Likewise, after leaving the cinema, suddenly the desire to shine and suicide returned.

Enough! Not everything in life is lost yet. He still has a chance to fix everything, even the last one, but it must be used.

“Someone before you thought so too, so they called her, him, them... How can you call it?”

Some kid teasing him hiding behind the roadside trees? Daniel decided to check it, but did not find anyone in the thickets. The only children he noticed continued to dance very far away from him. Moreover, they played right on the highway. At any moment, a car can pass and run over them all? It doesn't matter that the highway running between the small towns is now deserted. What if a truck or a bus emerges from behind a bend? Even any cyclist or motorcyclist can cause irreparable damage to the guys if he runs into them at this late hour. He need to warn them, or better yet, drive them off the road. Daniel was about to shout at them, but the silhouettes of the children's round dance became more and more ghostly. It seemed that now they will dissolve in the light of the moon.

Better not to go to them. Suddenly they are all young patients from some lost in the wilderness of a psychiatric asylum. Maybe they even escaped from there. How else to explain such strange behavior, in such a dangerous place, and even at such a late time. And there is, as luck would have it, not a single adult who can explain anything to him. There is not even anyone who could give directions. If the charging on the smartphone had not ended, he would have called a taxi long ago. And so he had to wander along unfamiliar roads, in search of a way to the parking lot where he left his car. Most likely, he went in the wrong direction, because the surrounding places became more and more muffled. No hope of bumping into the settlement ahead. Hence, we must go in the opposite direction.

And it occurred to him to go to an abandoned cinema for the night looking, without a guide who knew the area and, in the end, even without a navigator. He would have happily hiked back now, but the back road was deserted. And the children's counting-book was still ringing in my ears. The chant sounded ominous.

“Stain a tree with blood,
Let me into this world!”

It was already a woman's voice, but it also somewhat resembled a child's. Some amazing spontaneity. She spoke of blood as something completely natural. It? Who exactly? He did not see anyone, although he looked around. And the voice sounded in his head. Is he hallucinating? There

was no need to go alone to such a questionable place. After all, Daniel had heard that people were going crazy after visiting that cinema, so now it was closed, but he still went in and saw the marble angel. The angel signaled him to be silent. Wasn't it all a hallucination? The two girls were definitely alive, and the invitation to the session, received from them, was still in his pocket, proving that he had not dreamed of meeting them. Flirting with beauties is normal, even in a strange place, but the statue that comes to life is more reminiscent of a nightmare.

Daniel looked to see if any vehicle would pass along the highway. Someone has to let him down in exchange for an autograph or for a generous payment. Only nobody was in a hurry.

And the darkness around was deepening. Together with the discharged smartphone, the flashlight, the navigator, the compass, and even the cellular connection went off. It would not be bad to call someone now and ask for help. Although the situation is funny. He is a grown man and suddenly he cannot find his way. This had never happened to him before. And now it was like the devil was leading him astray. And these strange voices from the thickets... He definitely heard voices! Not one, but many.

“Blood for the roots!”

“Blood for her!”

“Blood for the captives!”

“Blood for those who are imprisoned in the bark!”

“Your blood!”

These someone smelled his blood like predators! Why then do they have human voices? But he did not see faces. And nowhere were there even wandering lights about which there are terrible beliefs in the villages, supposedly they lure travelers into swamps or to a cliff.

So who is talking to him? He hasn't been drunk for a long time, so that he imagines it. The alcohol weathered away, but even in a drunken state, Daniel had no such illusions. In addition, unlike most movie stars, he never dabbled in drugs or suffered from severe mental disorders in his life. He even had a desire for suicide for quite objective reasons: career failure and debts! He still did not suffer from any painful visions.

The instinct of self-preservation prompted him to run away from here. But where? All around is an empty highway and dense thickets on its outskirts. By the way, a voice called from the thickets again. Surprised that this time he called by name. As if there was no acting nickname behind which the young man hid for many years, hiding the vicious secrets of his family. A voice clearly pronounced his real baptismal name.

“Daniel!”

The children's round dance had long since disappeared from sight, but the moonlight drew some bizarre signs on the road. Somebody said.

“You need to cut your veins near a tree or kill someone so that the blood sprinkles the roots. Lightning will flash, gates will open somewhere more beautiful than which you have never seen, and she will come. You want to kneel in front of her too, right? How is everything before you? Remember that we will all come after her. Just let us in!”

Daniel turned around, jerking to grab the one behind. The feeling was that some teenager stood on tiptoe and could hardly reach his ear to give delusional instructions. Sounds like a cruel joke! But where is the joker himself? Behind Daniel, of course, it was empty. And there is nowhere to hide, except thickets.

The voices were still calling him. Now from somewhere in the depths of the thickets. It is dangerous to go there. But he turned like a fool. You need to behave like a daredevil at least once in your life. This is reckless, you can fall into a trap or a trap set for hares. Daniel did not think about it because he noticed faces in the dark. A whole host of faces who grimaced, laughed, shouted, writhed in agony or hysteria. And all these faces were carved into the trunk of a huge age-old tree. The ash-colored bark did not need the beams of a flashlight, because it somehow flickered. Daniel could

see every detail. The inscriptions embossed on the bottom of the bark read: Memorial to the fall! Monument to the uprising! Monument to the fall! Tree of the fall! House of ashes! Ashes of Alais's army!

What does all this mean? Each inscription was located at a short distance from the other, but for some reason the feeling was created that they all mean the same thing.

The entire trunk along the perimeter was excised by faces, figures, the outlines of wings, which seemed to be about to burst from the bark and flap. Even the large bitches and branches were trimmed in the shape of heads and horned faces. Not a tree, but a whole museum in the forest. Can there be a student of a sculptor or woodcarver who practices away from people on the first material that comes across? Get someone genius enough to make fantasy figures for movies! His woodwork was truly epic.

Just what kind of tree is this? Elm? Beech? Ash? Or just a group of accreted secular trees? More like the latter. The tree was about the size of a large house. How long does it take to get around it from all sides?

"Just don't go around, otherwise you will join us ahead of time."

"Better use the blade. You've already started cutting yourself!"

"Finish what you started!"

"And she will come!"

Did the faces speak? There is no one besides them! But they are silent! Their lips never seemed to move. Daniel touched one of the faces with his fingers and gasped in pain. The impression was as if a wooden mouth, open either in a scream or in a throat, bit him. There was a smear of ash on my finger. Where is the ash on the bark? Was there a fire here? But nothing nearby burned down. All the trees around are intact, and the smell of burning is not felt. And there is ash. And there is a lot of it. It is worth touching a tree with your hand, and all the skin is in ashes. And the bark under the palm vibrates, as if the figures inside it move and are torn to freedom. They are all winged, clawed, horned, in a word, monstrous – as soon as they break free, they will sweep away the whole world.

Better to get out of here. Blood from his finger dripped onto the roots, and they vibrated in a strange way. Daniel got entangled in them, but it felt like they were gripping his feet. As he had not noticed before that the tree has such powerful roots, which, moreover, protrude from the soil and curl up in balls like thick snakes.

One leg got stuck in the roots so hard that it was not possible to free it without losing the boot. Daniel backed away, and whispers and rustling emanated from the bark, dotted with many faces and figures. It looks like the rustling of hundreds of wings. But definitely not wooden, but alive! One face of the winged creature at the top of the trunk was unusually attractive, but it also seemed to him the most sinister. An instant and wooden eyes flew open. His bark lips twisted into a smile.

He had enough impressions for tonight, Daniel decided, deftly stepping over the stirring roots. Their movements were sluggish.

"He shed too little blood!"

The young man himself plugged his ears so as not to hear the tempting voice and ran away, leaving the lost boot in his roots.

The boots were expensive. Well, let! They are not the last in his life. But life itself can be lost if you continue to hang out in such dubious places.

Some well-wisher, capable of taking him to the city, showed up only closer to morning. He did not recognize the celebrity he met, but he willingly talked about the boredom of local life, but as soon as he asked him about the ghost trees and children's mental hospitals nearby, the driver quickly tried to get Daniel out of his wretched SUV.

The guy got to the pavilion, where the shooting will begin today, half asleep and in only one surviving boot. His head was buzzing, he himself staggered slightly. Affected night wakefulness. They didn't even have makeup done. Why waste efforts in vain on someone who will soon faint.

“Go sleep it off! In the meantime, we will shoot scenes with Jane,” the director advised him. “But tomorrow, be kind, get in shape. You don’t want someone to replace you, do you?”

“This someone will have to travel here for a long time, and there is a risk that he will get lost on the way,” retorted Daniel.

“Not everyone drinks as much as you!”

“True, many people prefer to indulge in much more harmful drugs than just alcohol.”

The director had nothing to answer to this, so he pretended not to notice Daniel’s usual impudence and generally did not have free time to continue the argument.

Daniel glanced at the unfamiliar, but very famous woman who will play with him in pairs. It’s good if this pair relationship is not forced to save after filming. Jane looked predatory. He didn’t like her at once. But he had to pretend that he, too, admired her. A young woman with connections like hers was simply doomed to become a star. And it doesn’t matter how much money her patrons spent on bribing the press and critics. Daniel had heard about her for a long time and naturally imagined her to be very capricious. For some reason she, finding herself in this wilderness, did not express her indignation in any way. But she clearly wanted to flirt with him. As soon as he arrived, she winked at him. Daniel ignored this. A lot of unfamiliar employees were turning around on the set. Someone he knew, most of the people he saw for the first time. A lot of local people were hired as extras, who had never stood in front of the camera before to save money. Amateurs are ready to film just for thanks. Yesterday we had a casting all day. Daniel looked around the unknown faces. Which one is definitely local? Who can you talk to about that eerie tree?

It seems the guard at the exit, Kai, is like a local citizen. Daniel sat down next to him during the break, drink coffee and chat a little. One autograph, handshake, and friendship struck.

“Before, I only starred in action films: both modern and historical. Well, sometimes in dramas. This is the first horror film in my practice. I worry. I have never been in my life even in a house where rumored to be ghosts.”

“There is no such house in the whole city,” Kai admitted.

“But there is a tree. I heard. The tree to which sacrifices are allegedly made,” in fact, he could not say for sure. The voices that sounded in the dark could hardly be mistaken for city gossip, but the guard tensed.

“There was a tree,” he recalled. “A teenage boy committed suicide under that tree.”

“How?”

“It is important?” the guard was surprised.

“How?” Daniel insisted.

“I opened his veins.”

Blood stains the tree... Daniel raised his fingers to his temples. The head was bursting.

“Come to us!” voices from the tree sounded very close. But there are no thickets near the pavilion. Here, flower beds with rare flowers are almost invisible.

“And under that tree they killed a famous actor, a well-known sex symbol,” said the manager, who obviously went out to smoke and found the two of them talking. The guard immediately hurried back to his post, and Daniel looked lazily at the elderly man. He that thus prophesies the fate of today’s unlucky sex symbol. Or is he just joking? But the manager continued without irony.

“His adorers then took scores with their lives at the place of his death.”

“That is, under the same tree.”

“Well yes.”

“Why didn’t I know about it before I came to such a gloomy city?”

“Because you are never interested in anything.”

“And what was the name of that celebrity who died here such an inglorious death before me?”

“Who cares? You barely remember even those you are filming with in pairs. But friendship with them is your chance to create additional advertising for yourself.”

He was clearly hinting at Jane.

"You'd better tell me more about that tree," Daniel cleverly changed the subject.

The manager shrugged.

"Usually the trees on which someone hanged themselves are immediately cut down so that others do not have a desire to repeat it. An old belief! It is believed that such trees spread negative energy and inspire others with the same desire. But no one hung on that tree. People only cut the veins underneath. Blood flowed to the roots. The tree itself is stupid to blame for mass suicide. Simply, actresses and actors are often at odds with their own psyche. Yes, and their life is tense, today you are a star, and tomorrow your roles are given to others, how not to throw a tantrum and not attempt suicide. And there was only one fault on the tree: it was too close to the film studio and looked quite defiant, it looked very much like a set for a horror movie.

"Where is this tree?"

"Somewhere!" the manager suddenly laughed. "If it exists at all. In my opinion, these could be different trees, and everything else is a fiction of the local press. Losers will find a way to commit suicide. Try not to become one of them. And the tree – I personally think it's a myth.

"Not a myth," Daniel tensed. "I saw it."

The recognition cost him a lot, but the interlocutor was not at all impressed.

"Do not think about the trees of Lucifer, it is better to study the scenario about a nobleman who has just returned to his estate from the war and about a devil that he accidentally released. Have you already got used to your role?"

Daniel glanced briefly at the sheets of text that were thrown into his lap.

"What's wrong?"

He noticed a strange detail just now.

"According to the script, the hero's name is Rozovsky," Daniel read uncertainly. And from which he had not discovered it before. You need to carefully review everything in advance: both scripts and documents.

"So what? For a Russian, the surname is quite suitable."

But it was precisely this surname that his real family bore. Does this mean that the whole story is taken from the annals of his ancestors?

"We will not change the name of the hero," the director declared in an indisputable tone. "It is taken from a real nobleman who lived and died in those days."

"Killed?" Daniel didn't like it at once.

"But the story itself is fantastic."

"And what does not suit you?"

"Yes, so..." it was not in his habits to be cowardly in front of omens. What you play will repeat in life. He didn't really believe it. Nevertheless, I knew such actors who refuse some tragic roles, often to their detriment. But who told him that the ending of this scenario is tragic? By the way, he never finished reading the script.

Film about the golden creature

Daniel arrived much earlier than twelve. Although the invitation, as he recently considered, was designated precisely this time. His blood soaked into the cardboard, and the letters and numbers were visible again. The block letters had an unusual look with curls. What printer can this be printed on? Reminds of calligraphy of the last century. It's strange why Cordelia didn't say right away that the time of the session was still definite.

It was so dark at the entrance that Daniel had to turn on the flashlight in his smartphone to see the road. Some animals, remotely resembling bats and lizards, darted underfoot. The graceful figures of the sphinxes at the entrance gleamed gold even in the dark. How beautiful they are! Half lions, half women with crafty faces. Daniel wanted to touch them with his hand, but he noticed that a rat with a ripped throat was stuck between the pedestal and the claws of one of the sphinxes. The impression was as if the sphinx caught it and crushed it with his paw. The gilded claws were stained with blood.

It's just a dead pest! But Daniel for some reason immediately felt creepy and unpleasant. There was a dim light inside the theater itself. The fountain in the lobby was working. Near the lotus in its center, lights were turned on, and the streams of water were painted alternately in all the colors of the rainbow.

The angel statues were rearranged so that only one of them stood at the bottom of the steps leading to the cinema halls. The other six figures were placed right on the steps, at a great distance from each other. Each sculpture is one step higher than the previous one. It seemed that they flew up there on their own and deliberately avoided each other. Unusual decor! And everything is so luxurious. Truly a VIP zone! But why doesn't anyone at the entrance ask for an invitation? And why are there no other visitors here? Have they already entered the hall?

The absence of guards was also striking. Since the cinema is still functioning, it must be guarded so that, for example, a gang of hooligans does not break in here. Daniel even doubted that the invitation to the session was not a joke, because there were no attendants around at all. Only flocks of blue moths nested in the corners of the floor and ceiling. The rustle of their wings made his head ache. Apart from them, there is no one in the whole building.

Daniel stretched out his hand to the flock fluttering in the corner, and immediately felt painful bites to blood. Moths don't bite! This is against the rules of nature. And their wings definitely cannot be blue.

Cordelia came out of the hallway leading to the cinemas suddenly. Behind her evening gown was a long train, all made of blue butterflies. Silk? Yes, they are alive. They flutter. How did she sew them. Alive? Or it seems to him. He didn't drink today. I didn't want to fall asleep during the session, moreover, in such a strange place, far from the city. Who knows, suddenly he will be cut alive here himself, if he doze off and become vulnerable.

"Everyone here is vulnerable."

And again voices in his head. What's with him? Now he is no longer standing by the creepy tree, but the feeling is as if his hands are still in the ashes from the bark.

:Come on! Coming soon!" the girl did not even greet him and did not even throw a cursory glance at the invitation, which he nervously crumpled in his hands.

"They don't even guard the doors," Daniel complained.

"So what," she casually waved her hand, on which a scarab bracelet flashed. The adornment looked like a very ancient museum item.

"There is no fear of a terrorist attack, robbery, hooliganism?"

"There is nothing more to be afraid of!" Cordelia walked forward along the corridor without even turning around.

"I'm sorry what?"

“We have good security. Do not worry!”

“But I didn’t see anyone.”

“You have nothing. You came to watch a movie, not meet the guards.”

She was obviously teasing him, although how could she know that this morning he met the guard specifically in order to inquire about the local creepy sights.

“By the way, what’s the name of the film?”

“Didn’t you read the title on the invitation?”

The question shocked him. He was ashamed to admit that he did not understand the words that were printed there. From the sight of the letters either his head began to ache, or it seemed that these were not letters at all, but some obscure symbols and hieroglyphs. Indeed, he needs to drink less. His director is right.

Before entering the cinema, Daniel dropped his smartphone. How embarrassing! One movement, and the means of cellular communication with the world immediately shattered to smithereens. Now, even if they begin to kill him inside, he will not be able to call and warn anyone. Everything seems to be calculated in advance?! Daniel immediately dismissed the thought. No one is to blame that he did not get enough sleep that he had everything to fall out of hand. Some of his former agents liked to admonish him that the most important thing for a star is to get enough sleep in order to properly control his actions. Not having enough sleep, you look worse, and play badly, and you can blurt out something completely unnecessary to the public or journalists. And now, from fatigue, he controlled himself so badly that he could smash his head against the door lintel, and not just a smartphone.

“I’m not going further with you,” she said at the door. “There is no spare place left for me.”

“But there are plenty of places!” Daniel saw from the doorway that the whole hall was empty.

“There’s only one invitation for you,” Cordelia explained to the dull.

“And what does it change? The seats are all unoccupied, and there are five minutes left before the session, no more. Usually, in cinemas, no one is acting up, if a more convenient place is free, then the audience can easily change seats on it. Apart from special screenings, the auditorium is never completely occupied at movie shows. And here there are just no guards who will expose the free rider.” Why is Cordelia hugging so tight? Is she too proud to enter without a ticket?

“Anyone else coming?” Daniel asked after all. “Or I’m the only guest.”

“Take your seat and wait for the beginning,” she nodded dryly.

“Where is my place?” he didn’t even look at the invitation. Since Cordelia is here in charge of the controller, then let him conduct it herself. But she did not step into the hall. She just explained:

“In the very center!”

And that’s it! Her chic train of butterflies rustled behind the slammed doors. Daniel felt trapped as they closed. It looks like there will be no more spectators. The whole room is empty. The screen is blank. No one is around. Only the luxurious rows of chairs upholstered in purple velvet. The hall itself is good! It’s beautiful here, like at the royal court. The velvet is clearly real! The walls are gilded. The curtains at the entrance are also velvet. More like a sophisticated theater than a movie. But the blank screen in the center spoils the impression.

An animal slipped between the rows. He nearly fell as it ran over his leg.

He did not immediately notice the seven marble winged figures, which were scattered on the sides of the auditorium and one even at the stage. Did they come here themselves? Or are they just duplicates of the statues he saw at the entrance? It seems that there is nothing surprising in the fact that such eerie decorations are present here as well. It was more fitting for them to stand in a crypt or in a cemetery. Monuments on graves are most often decorated with such sculptures. Although here they may turn out to be just papier-mâché mannequins, light decor details. The appearance of marble is probably only an illusion. He wanted to get up and touch them to check it, but for some reason he did not dare. The beautiful white faces of the angels looked so sinister, especially when combined

with pointed ears and long claws on white fingers. And their smiles are too predatory. It seems that they see everything with their empty white eyes without pupils.

Daniel turned away from the figures. For some reason he immediately got sick of watching the film in their presence. This will not be a session, but hell. It feels like seven white pieces are watching him closely. And why are there exactly seven of them, as well as in front of the entrance? Does this number mean something?

He did glance at them again. The light had already started to go out. The figures at the end of the rows were indistinguishable, but the same mystical decorations suddenly appeared in the seats of the auditorium – winged statues sitting right in the chairs and made so skillfully that their hands lay flat on the armrests, and their wings surrounded the back of the chair. There were also exactly seven seated figures, and they were scattered throughout the hall at a decent distance from each other. Well, the decoration came out of them cool and mysterious, but why didn't he notice them when he entered? All the chairs a minute ago were empty. Or did the figures become visible only in the darkness? Did some kind of lighting turn on inside them? They are slightly phosphorescent. And if they had just been dragged into place, then why did he not hear any noise. He never went deep into his thoughts so that he did not notice anything around him. And now, Daniel noted that the light went out too suddenly. Usually in the cinema it is extinguished in stages, allowing the audience to get used to the semi-darkness, and then suddenly full darkness came at once. Only the figures in the chairs shone. Their presence was very uncomfortable. They are not alive, but the feeling was that they themselves flew here.

The instinct of self-preservation actively warned that they would now attack him. Someone walked through the rows. Daniel clearly heard footsteps and the grinding of metal on the floor, but turning around, he could not make out in the darkness even just a vague silhouette of the controller. But one of the angelic figures suddenly turned its head right at him. More precisely, he did not see how it turned its head, but before all the angels looked at the screen, and not in the direction of the chairs. And now, suddenly, one of the marble faces stared straight at him. The angel was sitting right in his row, only a dozen chairs away. Has he really sat here before? When Daniel took his place, the whole row was definitely empty. The feeling was that the next moment the marble fingers would touch the arm of his chair and squeeze his hand until he fainted.

Everything could be attributed to the 3D effect, but the film has not even started yet, and Daniel himself has no glasses. Or are there special ways to impress the viewer in this privileged area?

From somewhere behind there was the mechanical rustle of a spinning reel. A golden scarab was crawling across the screen. How did he get there? No, it's not real. Daniel looked more closely. In fact, the show has already begun. The screen lit up, as if some gates had opened from within. No commercials before the movie starts. Amazing! The credits went straight away. He had never seen a gold title before. And the letters are strange. He couldn't read them. Or double in his eyes? The scarab crawled between credits in every frame.

Someone touched Daniel on the shoulder. He did not turn, fearing to see that one of the statues was already standing right behind him. Better not to spoil your nerves once again. All the same, the doors of the hall are now closed, there is nowhere to run. Until the session is over, it is worth enjoying the film. However, instead of enjoyment, many questions arose. At the beginning something like "Lady of the Pharaohs" flashed in the credits. Strange, but still understandable. Probably, it was about some kind of goddess. But the next line, highlighted in especially large print "And his name is Dennitsa" evoked frightening associations. Dennitsa is one of the names of the devil, it seems, the one under which he gained fame in paradise. The name of the most beautiful angel! Bible! Daniel remembered some of it. But how are the biblical devil and Ancient Egypt connected? In those days, no one had ever heard of the Bible. Therefore, no one knew about the devil either.

Daniel was confused. The feeling of being inside the screen was strong and without the 3D effect. Rapidly flashing footage of ancient palaces mixed with some kind of horror, as if sucked

consciousness into a funnel. What if this feeling does not go away, but remains with him forever. Consciousness swept through the ancient Egyptian halls and pyramids, past bloody wars, witchcraft and the rituals of burying mummies, as if in search of something. Luxury mixed with horror, which only intensified the all-encompassing nightmare effect. It seems that this is not horror, and not a historical drama, and not an action movie, or a biblical story, but all together. And it all has a kind of crushing realism.

The film was about a golden creature that has conquered rulers since the beginning of time. It crept across the screen. Its claws were palpably close. Palaces, temples, pyramids remained behind it in the frame as a background. The time of action was in fact not only the Ancient Egypt, but all eternity, from the war in the heavens to the present day. But the main action, apart from numerous digressions to the twenty-fifth frame, was concentrated precisely on Egypt during the reign of Akhenaten. His commander Taor, who returned with a great victory, at the moment of honoring the hero noticed a beautiful winged creature whispering advice to the pharaoh, and fell in love with her. This creature was the biblical devil who ruled the local kings like puppets. This creature, contrary to biblical descriptions, had a girlish face and body. The creature was called Alais, and this name contained some kind of magical wording. Alais was cruel to the point of horror and sacrificed people to resurrect the army of demons from the desert sands. Taor was noble and inclined to self-sacrifice so much that he could be called a true Christian, although no one knew about Christianity at that time. And such a generous guy, ready to beg Pharaoh for forgiveness even for those who intended to kill him, fell in love with a creature performing bloody rituals. Love for Alais so overshadowed his brain that he was ready to give up all his own beliefs. But Alais, as it turned out, is not capable of loving anyone at all. The rejected young man, not finding a place for himself, wandered through the deserts and met the Archangel Michael himself, who put a dagger with two dragons on the hilt in his hand, capable of killing Alais.

What a special effect! It was even painful to look at Mikhail, so he shone, and the dragons on the dagger moved and hissed as if alive. And here is the only goodbye kiss in the tomb. Taor sacrificed himself only so that a monster would come to replace the angel. Everything fused from gold plates, clawed, multi-armed, like Kali, vaguely resembling a precious scarab.

The frames flashed like a top. Pyramids, mummification rites, a fallen army rising from the sands, deserts, rivers, palaces. And everywhere it is. Dazzling! Overshadowing the mind! Spooky! And beautiful.

It was already crawling across the stark darkness of the screen. It reached out with golden claws to Daniel's throat. It breathed heat and fire into his face. It was near. Already in the hall. Between his row of seats and the previous one. He was willing to swear it. He even had a chance to feel the touch of hot metal claws on his neck, to look into bleeding sand-colored eyes, sparkling from under a pile of thin gold plates twisted with bizarre symbols.

Is this a creature from hell or from Egypt? In any case, it is here and now he will die, as all the pharaohs who did not obey him died.

And suddenly the light came on. There was no golden monster around. And the film did not come out of his head. For some reason, the story of Taor and Alais felt like a cutting pain in his mind. Daniel was never sentimental, but now he involuntarily wondered: why did all the greatness of history end in tragedy? Why these two, as if created for each other, could not stay together.

Of course, he did not voice the question out loud, but someone's ringing voice boldly and mockingly answered him from the other end of the hall:

“Because she was the devil!”

Dead star

No one around. Even the figures of marble angels disappeared somewhere. One and all. Daniel looked around in vain for the speaker. Could someone bend over and hide behind the empty chairs? Is it worth walking through the rows and checking? The hall was quite large.

Daniel frowned, not knowing where to go now. I didn't want to leave at all. There was an unbearably strong desire to see the same film again. The story stirred up the blood, and the shots with alternation of luxury and horror did not go out of his head, almost driving him crazy. Daniel suddenly realized what exactly flashed in the frames, incredibly frightening. Rise of the angels and their overthrow. Fight winged, clawed and flaming creatures. Their transformation into monsters. Fall into the desert, burnt symbols in the sand. With the army of the devil, everything is clear, but there are many questions about Alais herself. If he is allowed to watch the film again, he will be able to understand everything, but who to turn to in order to ask for a repeat of the session and whether his request will be fulfilled.

Daniel sat motionless for ten minutes, waiting for someone else to talk to him, or at least that the exit doors would finally open, but neither one nor the other happened.

He was suddenly struck by burning jealousy for the actor who played Taor. This is handsome! A white-faced brunette with bright blue eyes. Doesn't look like an Egyptian at all. And he played above all praise. Daniel, even in his best works, could not compare with him. I wonder what his name is? For some reason, his name was not indicated in the credits. And he is one of the main performers. Daniel remembered about the stupid Hollywood style of marking the first old but famous actors in the credits, who play only small roles, bypassing the main characters who were played by newcomers. This often caused confusion for the audience. But here all the actors except a few were completely deleted from the credits. There was clearly only one name. Starring – ATENAIS.

So she's playing Alais? An actress who doesn't even have a last name? The name seemed vaguely familiar to him. It seems that not so long ago it was very famous. Daniel saw him often in newspaper reports. He was not particularly fond of other stars besides himself, but all newspapers and magazines trumpeted Atenais for a while. She was at the peak of popularity, and then the press suddenly fell silent. After the tragedy. Daniel stumbled upon the recollection of one article like a sharp blade. Atenais died in a terrorist attack several years ago.

The guy felt that he could not get up from the chair. These associations struck me like thunder from heaven. It seemed that there was nothing to live for. Atenais is not the lively and capricious actress with whom fate will one day bring him on the set. This beauty has been like a corpse for years. Only her mystical image lives on the screen. She herself is dead! Why hadn't he been so upset about her death earlier, when the news was fresh? Yes, simply because I did not watch a single film with her and did not know how beautiful she was.

They say love is like an arrow in the heart. He lived without receiving it, that is, without seeing the object of this very love, and when you see it, you understand that you cannot continue to live on. Everything is decided by one meeting, one glance, and life loses its meaning. Especially if you fell in love with a dead woman.

This is stupid. Daniel tossed his bleached strands of hair, and it fanned out over his shoulders. It is likely that if you wash off the makeup from Taor, he will be no more handsome than an ordinary guy. And it is even more likely that the early death of the actress gives the supernatural charm to the whole appearance of Alais. It was not for nothing that Edgar Poe sang the charm of the death of a young maiden, when death, as if by mistake, takes a girl too early. Those who died young and will never grow old acquire some kind of special appeal. And the impression left by the film is just the detrimental effect of an overdose of the twenty-fifth frame on the psyche.

And yet how painful! Head squeezed like a hoop.

Above the exit door, someone had just raised the curtain. The door itself is probably already open too. Daniel stood on bending legs. He sat motionless too long. How long did the movie go? An hour and a half, two hours? It seemed like an eternity. It is worth leaving the cinema, and he will find himself in the new millennium, and the golden creature will be waiting for him there.

The floor swayed underfoot like the deck of a ship. It only seems so, because the legs hardly obey. The cinema doesn't seem to want to let him go.

Something stirred behind the curtain at the exit. It seems like a wing. Someone raised a finger to his lips, urging him to be silent. How beautiful this face is, and how cold it blows. It's like drawing on top of the frame. Is this a poster or another statue? Daniel pulled the curtain with all his might and saw her – the star of the film.

To say that he was dumbfounded was to say nothing. The girl was the same. With or without makeup, but the look of Alais from the movie. The picture from the screen came to life. He had never experienced anything like this, although he quite often met women in his life, whom he had previously watched only in films or on TV. He had such a job, and he already knew how much the actresses live different from their ideal looks in the films.

Only the beauty standing next to the pharaoh in the film actually turned out to be even more beautiful. Pale, slender, graceful. The golden curls and eyelashes seemed to be natural, not dyed, no matter how unusual it may sound. What country breeds girls with such an unusual hair color and the grace of a fallen archangel?

“Did you play the main role in the film?” His heart beat like a bird in a cage.

The movie star is here! He didn't even ask when the movie was filmed. Let even millennia ago. Get her autograph. For the first time in his entire biography, he would have asked for a painting, not from him. But where to get a notebook, a pen. The smartphone crashed at the entrance. You can't take a selfie with it. It's worth a try though. She dived into the shadows. Well, okay! He still wanted more from her than an autograph.

“Alais!” he did not even think that he called her after her heroine. It's even good! It can be considered an achievement when an actress is called by the name of her character. This means that she performed the role perfectly. Another thing is the stars, who are known only by their promoted name and only thanks to advertising campaigns. She is no match for them.

“Don't disappear!” he himself held the curtain that had slipped on the door with his hand, but the girl was already standing by the armchairs. The hall immediately became somehow dark, and the darkness behind her seemed to fold into two large black wings.

“You look like a jewel from an ancient treasury, thanks to the color of your hair,” Daniel never said such poetic words to anyone, but now poetry was closest to reality. All this is not a movie illusion. He saw golden scarabs adorning her shoulders and arms. A blush like ruby dust painted on her cheeks. Curls of hair like red snakes. Truly, it looks like a jewel that came to life and fled from the royal treasury.

“Looked – you will go blind!” a whisper came from the topmost row. There, on the back of a chair, is a winged animal. It hardly speaks well.

“Did you come for the next session?”

“I'm here all the time,” her voice rang out for the first time, and reminded the clink of gold coins falling to the floor. “And you are late.”

“At this time, everyone is already asleep.”

“Not everyone, someone comes here in search of adventure, and we delight them with films that are ready to satisfy the most demanding taste. Be that as it may, people get what they are looking for. But the entry price is sometimes too high for them.”

"It's not surprising if each session is designed for just one viewer. In such a huge hall," he defiantly looked around. The animal from the upper row disappeared somewhere. "Do they show old films here?"

"Sometimes even the ancients."

"I've never heard of such. A museum piece, a palace, a crypt may be ancient, but not a film."

"You should get used to the local vocabulary if you want to watch something else from our film program."

"I did not mean anything bad or judgmental. It's just that in the places where I visited the cinema, even last year's films are no longer in the box office."

"Updates are regularly made here too."

What did she mean? As in the already shot and edited film that goes to the cinema, you can make updates. Or was she talking about something else? In any case, the phrase sounded mysterious.

"The world is changing, the frames of films too. Nothing stands still, except for the cinema building itself."

"By the way about the cinema. Why is it officially considered closed? I heard there was some kind of tragedy? Something like a terrorist attack during an old premiere..."

She somehow became sad, looked away. Fans of golden eyelashes fell on her cheeks. Eyelashes are definitely not false, but how long they are. And the scarabs on her skin, as if alive. Are they moving?

"You need to live for today."

Did she say that or did he just hear it?

"I'm sorry if I disturbed any bad memories," Daniel apologized hastily.

"I have no memories. Everything was filmed a long time ago, like a film." She nodded at the long-extinguished screen, on which nothing else was crawling.

Daniel scanned the rows of empty chairs. The feeling was as before, as if the golden monster was still in the hall, crawling between the rows and was about to cling to its legs.

"Truth, lies, hidden truths... Everything is not important until you capture it in the frame. People are interested in sights, not memories, and we give them more than they want. In a similar way, the desires of the public were fulfilled in the amphitheaters of Ancient Rome, only the audience there was not touched."

"It's hard to understand you."

"But it's nice to look at me," she stepped towards him, and he was so frightened of what that he backed away, stumbled over one of the corner chairs and nearly fell. Looking up at Alais was the same as looking at a deity. She was all glowing, and the darkness behind her was forming into two patterned wings.

Something seemed to be crawling between the seats. Daniel heard claws scraping on the floor, he even saw suspicious claw scratches on the carpet. This is definitely not a cat scratch. Moreover, not five, but six claws were imprinted. There are no animals with six claws on their paws. Or has he just not heard of such?

His first agent liked to say that all actors are extremely dumb, but Daniel persisted in thinking of himself as an educated guy. And even if he managed to unlearn at the university only one course before he received a dubious offer to act in film, for which he dropped out. But he has a wide outlook, he traveled a lot, moving from one shoot to another, he managed to see a lot. But he had never seen anything like it. The cinema is unique. Maybe that's why they spread a rumor about it that it was abandoned so that people would not besiege it in droves in the hope of peeping at the local miracles even through the keyhole.

This is good! Thanks to the rumor about the tragedy and the dilapidation of the building, he sat alone at the session, like a king. And if everyone had access here, word of mouth would work in a matter of days, and all tickets would be sold out a year in advance. Young people love thrills,

and the cinema provides them in abundance. After it, you do not need to visit any fear rooms or attractions. The impressions from one session will last for a lifetime. Daniel himself did not know where to go after watching the film, except for the nearest tree on which to hang himself. If he met Alais in person, he could commit any extreme.

The extinguished screen indicated that the golden era of the film was already over, and there would be no continuation. But the star of the film stood by. Thanks to her presence, even someone's heavy claws, scratching the floor here and there, did not cause much fear.

"Who are you?" it was probably stupid to ask, but the silence strained. "Athenais? This name is shown in the credits."

"Athenais," she repeated the name as if she had heard for the first time and twisted her face in displeasure.

"Well, yes, you are an actress. Probably, Athenais is just your nickname."

"I'm not an actress!"

Her harsh objection burned like mercury. So, the act of terrorism was not invented in order to scare away annoying viewers from the plebeians from the elite cinema? And then it turns out that Atenais really died, and does not stand in front of him. But even her clothes are almost the same as in the film. Only now, in a strange Egyptian costume, details of something modern appeared. He just now saw that under a sophisticated top with stones and chains, he was wearing the most ordinary newfangled low-waisted jeans. Notice the piercing on the flat stomach and the scarab ring threaded into the navel. Involuntarily he glanced at her. Everything went well with her. And she's definitely not dead. Her skin is pale and slightly phosphorescent, but not rotting.

Why does this feeling that she left the screen, having just crossed the line of two worlds, offscreen and real, does not leave him? And the cinema itself is like a portal between these two worlds.

"Alais!" he called her the name of the heroine from the film, without even thinking about the consequences. What if she gets offended? After all, the beauty at the end of the film was beheaded by Taor. Daniel has long ago noticed that for many people, even unbelievers, there is a certain set of beliefs and will accept. Not everyone is happy when he is compared, for example, with the executed Marie Antoinette, even if she was a queen during her lifetime.

"Okay, you can call me that," the girl responded vividly. "I also give you permission to come here in the future whenever you want. You haven't seen much here yet."

"There are sessions here not only at midnight?"

"There's a lot going on here. And you can see even more."

"That is, there are many such unusual films shown in the cinema?"

She nodded.

"There must be variety."

"But I thought that nothing better could be done. It was just a masterpiece. It is impossible to repeat it."

"You're wrong."

"In any case, I was only given an invitation for today."

"It's just a souvenir," Alais attached to his invitation either a pin or a hard sticker in the shape of a scarab.

So is the scarab a symbol of the cinema or is it a sacred blue lotus? Daniel did not dare to ask directly about it. You never know how you can offend a stranger. Many people he worked with were nervous about some topics that most people find funny or completely harmless. Everyone has their own phase shift, developed in the course of difficult family relationships or hard work. And according to Alais it was clear that she was especially sensitive to some local traditions known only to her.

"My permission is enough to always let you in here."

It's good if she didn't exaggerate her importance. It is unlikely that such a young fragile girl is capable of running everything here. Unless she is the owner's daughter.

“And I hope that’s enough to make you feel safe here.”

The guards in front of the entrance would have increased the sense of security much more, but, of course, he did not tell her about it. Why be rude to a girl who charmed you so much. You can go to hell for such a beauty. He even feared that he would hardly leave this place, as it would turn out that the whole cinema was just a fantastic dream. And there will be no repetition of such a dream.

The exit door suddenly flung open by itself, and the beauty easily stepped into the auditorium, overcoming several steep steps at once.

“Alais!” he still called to her before leaving. “You’re not dead after all.”

She was not even offended by such unhealthy curiosity. She just shrugged her shoulders casually.

“As you see!”

Casual viewers

Old newspaper headlines turned alarmingly black on the glowing screen. It was worth buying a new smartphone and reconnecting the Internet to see it. Missing People, No Corpses Found, Tragedy in the Blue Lotus, Victims of a Terrorist Attack or the Devil?, “The terrorist attack brought a hell of a fire”, “The dead take revenge.”

All of the articles retold the same story in slightly different ways, in which too many details remained unclear. Basically, journalists only made assumptions based on a few known facts. The cinema was seized on the night of the premiere, one of those present was armed and resisted, somehow their actions provoked a fire. Athenais certainly died among the first victims. According to reports for the summer of 2013, the entire cinema burned down, but in the fall of the same year, people who entered it out of curiosity began to disappear in its building. Where then did the building come from if it burned down? Several months are definitely not enough to rebuild it. The cinema itself could not be reborn from the ashes and grow in the same place like a tree.

A tree? Daniel tensed at the memory of a hellish trunk with faces and ashes. Is it possible? Was it that tree?

For such thoughts, they may be considered insane, and, of course, he does stupidly, wasting time looking for information instead of studying the script. So tomorrow he will not be able to work again, because again he will not get enough sleep, and in the end they will really decide to replace him with someone else. He should focus on pressing problems, and not look for a clue to what happened many years ago. But Athenais was so hooked on him that he could not think of anything else. Why hadn't he noticed her before when she was still alive? Surely, her face flashed in all the glossy magazines and news bulletins. Judging by the abundance of information about her in the press of those years, she was overly popular, and he did not even see her. And if he saw it, he would certainly join those fans who began to die en masse after her death. This is not surprising! She possessed the gift of strongly influencing the psyche, frames from her film penetrated into consciousness and continued to spin there by themselves, even when the screen was already extinguished.

A golden creature, Egypt, ceremonies with blood and demons, a winged beauty behind the throne of the pharaoh, a bloody sickle in her hands... All this contained some special symbolism. The frames were etched into the memory and, together with admiration, caused fear.

Was this movie scheduled to be shown at the premiere where Athenais was killed? Probably, after that tragedy, the film never got into wide distribution, because otherwise most of the world would have gone crazy from watching. Probably because of this, some knowledgeable group of people undertook the act of terrorism. The film was planned as a secret weapon capable of penetrating viewers' psyche and depriving them of their will to live, the ability to think. Daniel still felt himself there, in the halls of the Ancient Egypt. The reality is almost completely erased after viewing. Alais seemed to be standing next to him and knocking into his mind.

“Let me in this world!”

And next to her, a dazzling golden monster crawled across the dark screen, multi-armed, like the Indian Kali, and even more dangerous than a sharp razor.

After the tragedy, people began to disappear in the cinema. At first, those who carried out the examination disappeared. Police officers, detectives, investigators, forensic scientists, even the sheriff – all disappeared into nowhere or became victims of accidents. Trees collapsed on some inquisitive professionals or passers-by, some were crushed by debris, and most were hit by such a terrible hurricane that they were thrown with their heads right on the pavement and smashed their skulls. The elements were so raging in that place, and the disappearances of people became so frequent and mysterious that all investigative commissions were eventually recalled. If one of them, of course, survived.

Moreover, it was not clear in the press reports whether the investigation was carried out in a still-preserved building, or there were only ruins. Information and conclusions, as well as descriptions of what was happening, often contradicted each other. If the journalists knew everything, then one could say that they are deliberately hiding the facts.

Daniel had already read dozens of articles, and his idea of the tragedy was still very vague. One thing was clear – everyone who came to the premiere died. There were about a few thousand people. Such a calculation is quite reasonable, given the huge auditorium he saw. If we add to the victims the guards and the terrorists who attacked, then the purely victims increase. He did not even count the dead investigators. Apparently, there were quite a few of them.

Then the suicide victims began. They were all fans who could not survive without Atenais. Well, then the disappearance of people in the “Blue Lotus” area has become countless. True, the bodies of the disappeared were never found.

Even assuming that not all of the missing people are dead, the conclusion is that the Blue Lotus is too dangerous a place to visit. But Daniel was going to go there anyway. What has he got to lose?

The hotel where he was given a room was not very comfortable. And the room could not be called spacious. But it had a good TV with an antenna that picked up all the channels. Only after the session in “Blue Lotus” did all the films and TV programs seem completely unworthy of attention. Daniel unplugged the TV and threw the remote control somewhere. It is a pity that even if the screen is broken, the film about Egypt will not return. The film with him remained there, inside an abandoned cinema.

Daniel wanted to go there again. But he just left there.

In the middle of the night, he dreamed that the disconnected TV turned on by itself, and something was crawling across the screen. The Egyptian film is on again. The frames are spinning. A reel on a tripod is somewhere nearby, and someone in a red hood is turning the lever with its claws. Alais sits in a chair in the corner of the room, legs crossed casually. Instead of a dog, she has some kind of hellish creature on her habits. She says something about filming now. Daniel notices that his bed is covered in blood, and the golden creature, instead of a screen, is already crawling over it, pressing his body into the bloody sheets.

And the movie is coming to an end! No, this dream is coming to an end. He wakes up screaming.

In the morning everything was quiet in the studio. The caretaker explained to him that everyone had gone to shoot the crowd scenes in the city. Daniel's presence was not required. All these scenes were with Jane.

“I heard that for filming they fenced off the old part of the city, where historical buildings are still preserved,” Daniel tried to start a conversation with the caretaker. “I remember it surprised me. The town is so tiny, the population is so small, there are forests and sparse highways around. And in such a wilderness, such rare historical monuments were suddenly discovered that for their sake it was worth coming here to photograph them in a film. Does your city really have so many values?”

The caretaker, of course, did not know about the arrival of the group in the wilderness, solely due to the low budget and the presence of old streets in the city, which can be cheaply rented for a day or two, so he kindly nodded.

“There are many interesting things.”

Often moving from filming to filming, Daniel drew attention to the fact that all the indigenous people of even the most unassuming settlements love it when their hometown begins to be praised. Especially praise was received from tourists. And the film crew, who came here only for two and a half months, could only be compared with tourists. Some of the staff actually intended to take a short stroll around town, visiting local bars first and catching a glimpse of the sights. This attitude is already similar to travel plans. Daniel himself was considering a much narrower range of visits. He was only interested in one place. But he was not going to be considered a madman, asking exclusively

about the Devil's Cinema. By the way, why did the locals call it the Devil's Cinema, because its real name is "Blue Lotus". And what does the devil have to do with it? Nothing demonic was used in the design of the building. In addition to angels, there are only scarabs, a fountain with a lotus, sphinxes, a barely noticeable script of hieroglyphs on the walls in the hall, and many other mysterious symbols of the Ancient Egypt. What is the connection between the devil and the Ancient Egypt? Daniel felt that the desire to justify everything drove him into a trap. Indeed, in the film about the Ancient Egypt, which he saw there, the devil was equated with the patron saint and lord of the local pharaohs. And this devil names a seductive girlish look.

"And his name is Dennitsa" – read the title of the film, crushing all the established ideas of mankind about the world, history, religion and even love. But why does the title say "him" and not "her", because it is more about her. Alais!

Was the girl he met after the session real, or was he just dreaming? And who is she? A dead star that rises from death only on the territory of the cinema, where did she die? Or a star who just faked her death for some reason? What if Alais is a different girl? Or is it just a dream?

"I heard that you have something like a haunted house here," Daniel began carefully approaching the topic.

"No, definitely not at home," objected the talkative caretaker.

"Then, probably, the building of some closed organization where ghosts allegedly live? Factory? Factory? Or maybe a theater?"

Daniel, as if by chance, nudged the interlocutor so that he himself raised the necessary topic.

"Yes, there is one such cinema," the caretaker finally admitted. "But it is located outside the city, and there are no excursions."

"Why not?"

"It's not all pretend there," the inspector hesitated, choosing his words. "Not like places where tourists are attracted by fictional ghost stories."

"What is it like?"

"Well, people disappear there."

"Maybe there was a gang of smugglers, criminals, and, after all, terrorists who had a weapons store there." It was easy to assume all this after he himself had not found anything of the kind there. "I heard something about a terrorist attack that took place there."

"Terrorist attack?" There was doubt in the voice of the inspector, as if he had not read about it in the newspapers. "Rather, a mass madness. People went there to watch films, and then did not return. And those who returned pulled others along with them."

"And they disappeared together."

"No, I meant..."

"What does it mean: to drag others along with you?"

"Well, there are many different strange cases in the city."

"What, for example?"

"Those who began to behave strangely, as if infecting others with madness, and now instead of one potential suicide, a whole gang leaves them. Suicide is preceded by an attack on the police, acts of vandalism, some kind of rituals with black magic. I myself have seen the symbols that teenagers drew in blood on walls and roads."

"Where have we stopped?!"

"Don't be alarmed! All this was and ended several years ago. Since then, the city has been almost calm, apart from rare repetitions of the past. It's safe to walk everywhere, but it's best not to go to the old cinema."

"It's not that old," Daniel almost let slip that he was there and nothing bad happened to him. Nobody even tried to attack him. Well, unless the film watched there hit hard in the head, suspiciously

resembling the effect of a drug, after which a withdrawal occurs. He wanted to look at something like that again with just one eye. But for this he need to go to the "Blue Lotus" again.

"By the way, have many people disappeared there lately?"

The caretaker tried to remember everyone, even bent his fingers.

"Some couple, an old film fan, various young hooligans and many teenagers – lovers of scary films. Even the police patrol disappeared there once, and no trace. No car, no radio. And last year a whole senior class disappeared there. The brave guys went to celebrate the end of school there. Moreover, neither the students nor the teachers returned.

"And someone was looking for them?"

"Of course! Someone is looking for all the missing, but they have not yet managed to find at least one."

"Everyone was eaten by the cinema? Does he swallow people like a monster?"

"Do not laugh! Local people believe that some technical force of the future dwells there. Something cosmic or demonic. Young people in the city can even beat you up. If you start to insist that there is nothing like that in the cinema, and it is just an old building. Young townspeople are looking for legends there. By the way, it is young people who are drawn there the most."

"Is it permissible that they become casual spectators, for example, at some night show, which is not widely announced. And only those who enter the cinema at the call of curiosity get on it."

"Ruled out! Films have not been shown there for a long time. The last premiere was in 2013. It all ended there. A fire started in the building. All is lost."

"Sorry, I'm bothering you like a real detective," Daniel was making calculations in his brain. Not everything they say is true. The sessions are going on there. But even if we assume that spectators who accidentally wander into the cinema disappear on them, how? Are they being carried away directly from the session by some cosmic forces? Is a certain funnel opening between dimensions that sucks people in without returning? Or more simply: some sectarians or maniacs hiding in the cinema grab and kill everyone who wanders there? Then why did none of this happen to him? He was in the Blue Lotus and came back. No one even bit or scratched him.

"I would like to know where they all disappear," Daniel expressed his desire aloud.

"Just don't go there, otherwise you will also disappear like everyone else."

Daniel was definitely not going to follow this good advice. He crumpled his invitation in his pocket. Did he have it, and did other casual spectators come to the cinema without him? Or some demonic creature roamed the city and handed out tickets to them.

Does hell have a queen

Filming began as if delirious. He was impatient to break free to once again go to the abandoned cinema. Well, or almost abandoned. During the morning, Daniel managed to ask many people and, according to the generally accepted version, the cinema, it turns out, was closed and boarded up a long time ago, and, of course, no films were shown there.

He knew something else, but prudently kept silent. In addition, while working, it is better to concentrate on revealing your character, and not on dreams about how he will spend his leisure time. The agent who convinced him to play this role disappeared somewhere. If he had been here, Daniel would have fought with him already. It was necessary to read the script in advance and much more carefully. A horror movie is not an action movie. Here, in addition to harsh phrases and shootings, you need to discuss too complex topics and think about too contradictory things. You will have to learn long monologues, even memorize poetic lines and play a former war hero, who does not yet know who he is in the plans of otherworldly forces. The plot itself touched something painful in Daniel's mind. As if this was not a horror movie plot at all, but a metaphor for something that had already happened to him in his life. Or about to happen.

"Do you even like it?" The director patted him on the shoulder. The cameras were already preparing for shooting. For some reason, the view of the cameras immediately reminded of the rustle of a spinning reel in the devil's cinema and Alais's voice.

"Well, yes, interesting," Daniel responded bleakly. It is a pity that you do not always have the opportunity to express aloud the opinion that you have in your head.

The name "Queen of Hell" would not hurt to change, if it was not intended to advertise the actress who plays the main role. The script was trivial. It was rewritten many times, but this did not give it originality. Nonsense in the spirit of Anna Rice, Tom Holland, Sheridan le Fanu and a whole list of authors who worked in the genres of historical mysticism. A handsome Russian aristocrat who has just returned from the war for Serbia finds in his father's estate, who has died in a strange way, an ancient box with an incredibly large ruby on the lid. Of course, some creepy-looking strangers, including a gypsy fortuneteller, warn not to open it. And, of course, in his dreams a delightful woman begins to appear to him, who convinces him to open this box. With great difficulty, he finds a way to break the lock (by the way, for this he has to make a bloody sacrifice). Daniel's hero accidentally kills a maidservant who was innocent, her blood dripping onto the ritual circle. The ruby ignites with a bloody light, the box opens and the ashes of the ancient fairy queen Medea Shai burst out of it. Once she was burned, now she is alive again, just formed from a column of ash, beautiful, thirsty for blood like a vampire and harboring such anger at the whole world that from her steps the earth begins to ignite, buildings collapse, prints of burning feet streak the pavement. Thanks to the release of Medea Shai from the box, the First World War begins, then the revolution. People are dying, and Daniel's hero must stop her, but this is almost impossible, because he has already managed to fall in love with her. The scenes of seduction both in dreams and in reality promised to be spectacular. The blood-red lips of Medea Shaya will press against his lips in the frame, bloody wine will pour, the beauty will convince him that she alone is more important to him than the whole world. One should forget the duty to the king, to the fatherland, to the family (after all, she brought his father and many ancestors to the grave, even being in captivity she was very strong and appeared to the members of the chosen family through dreams). Of course, all eternity she waited for him, the main character of the film. But what if she's lying? Her tongue is like a snake when kissing, during love scenes she inflicts wounds on him with claws, and fire worms start in these wounds.

Daniel never finished reading the script. Probably, the ending will be rewritten more than once in search of something more impressive. The film has only one chance at the box office. You need

to impress the audience. And he has only one last chance to succeed. Or oblivion awaits him. Like an old abandoned movie theater.

Ideally, the film should have been shot in St. Petersburg, but it's much cheaper in the wilderness. Then the scenes will be combined.

Jane, even if she is the mistress of the chiefs a hundred times, does not look at all in the role of Medea Shai. Too vulgar. The queen of hell must have dignity, grace, become... The queen of hell must be Alais.

Daniel closed his eyes dreamily, imagining how he would act in tandem with her. If she becomes his partner on the set, then he will definitely insist on the fatal ending. Let the whole world collapse, let him perish, and she herself will rule hell on the earth left after the revolution. After all, it is impossible to fight it.

Jane is not fit for such an exalted role. Could a woman who stood naked in front of the camera and surrendered herself to everyone behind the scenes play the queen? This is probably why the films suffer losses at the box office. Prostitutes are not suitable for the role of noble persons, the falsity is noticeable to the sensitive public.

Although not for him to judge. Who is he himself? In order to get the first role, he had to give way to many in almost everything. This is the world. Without connections and without money, you can't get anywhere for one talent, unless people need you for some completely unrelated to professional goals.

Unlike modern actresses, Alais looked like a creature that never slept with anyone. This is probably why she behaved with such royal dignity. What if it's just a game, just more skillful than everyone else? She can just pretend. Daniel immediately dismissed the thought. It's incredible to have the talent to play like that. And yet, if he were a producer, he would have spent any money to invite her to the role.

"Do you want to give your soul for success?" voices from the abandoned cinema sounded in his head again.

Such a question could be asked to someone who has not yet had success in life. But Daniel has already experienced his peak of success. When you fall from the top of Olympus, not even the devil can help you climb back. And in general, all these tales about how to sell a soul, it is better to tell starlets and extras from the crowd. Some of them may still buy into dubious promises. And Daniel already knew the cost of the way up. More often than not, it is worth the body, not the soul.

"But your family thought the opposite."

What did he know about the family? And what demon speaks to him through his mind? Is it possible to pour alcohol into the voice of a demon?

But besides the demon, there was also Cordelia. She played charades and said that she knew about the Rosier family. In Russia, they changed their surname to Rozanovs. She also said that Daniel could have come here to find his relatives' estate. He knew nothing about the estate. Even if it existed somewhere nearby, it was destroyed during the revolution. Even in troubled times, the first thing they do is begin to destroy the houses of those about whom the notorious sorcerers and warlocks are in the neighborhood.

The Rosier family has surpassed this glory. You could move to different countries and change your surname as many times as you like, but at any time and in any territory the same story was still repeated. The family began to be associated with the devil.

Daniel was not affected by all these family problems. He was born in an era when the ancient curse and dependence on the ancestral line were already considered ridiculous. Try to tell someone in modern Russia, long gone through the revolution, that you are a descendant of a princely family. They'll just laugh at you and that's it. There were simply no aristocrats left in the country, and if they did, it was more profitable for them to keep quiet about their origin. Daniel only benefited from

this. Indeed, along with the memory of belonging to the nobility or princely families, the memory of ancestral curses was erased.

Until now, Daniel considered all curses to be fairy tales. He was not cursed. He just happened to go through the stages in life through which all the actors go. First, the peak of success, then gradual oblivion. True, he has not yet been completely forgotten, and he still has not had such strong competitors as to be afraid of them. But attention to his films suddenly began to wane. This means that without the next strong work, he will simply fly out of the rating of world stars.

Athenais probably didn't have such problems. Or did she die before she showed the weakness of her talent? How amazing that she died at the height of her genius. And the film, capable of shaking everyone, never made it to the world distribution. Or the screening for Daniel was preliminary, and the film will eventually be launched in cinemas around the world to make the audience crazy.

How cleverly thought out! There is no psychiatric syndrome in the film, nor any other violations that you can find fault with in order to ban it for wide distribution. However, viewers will be 100% victims. A strong impression arises already when he left the auditorium. You feel that you cannot get out of the world that you saw on the screen.

"Do you want your next film to be the same? Then you will be unmatched again, descendant of Rosier."

Again voices in my head! Daniel closed his eyes. How to drive them out of consciousness? Voices had lingered on him since he was near the cinema, and now they teased him in every way.

This time they were definitely lying to him. It is no longer possible to shoot something like that film about Egypt. There is something devilish, irresistible in that film, something that you can't jump higher. You can just bruise your forehead trying to repeat it.

"Alais can do anything," several voices whispered at once, more like fantasies.

These fantasies need to be distracted. Daniel couldn't concentrate on studying the script. Thoughts constantly returned to Athenais, from which one charred corpse should have remained in reality. And on the screen, a living and impressive demon remained from her.

Is it easy to cross the line between cinema and the real world? Or is that something only crazy people can do?

Now he'd better think about the scenes with Medea Shai and the director's growing daughter Eugenia, who will presumably play a young lady who falls in love with the main character, tries to snatch him from the Queen of Hell and naturally sacrifices her life. Unless the scenes with Eugenia are deleted from the script altogether for lack of funds. But it's up to the producers to decide.

Usually Daniel thought only about his own role, but now he was suddenly very intrigued by the Queen of Hell. Who is she? Where did it come from? There is something serpentine and angelic in it at the same time, as if the writers decided to combine a cobra and a black angel into one. Does she look like Alais? And what would happen to the audience if the dead star suddenly resurrected even for a short while to play this role, and then go back to hell.

"Someone before you already had such thoughts," whispered again the annoying disembodied voice. "There was a man who called the demon to play a role, and then drive him back. And do you know how it all ended?"

He did not know and did not want to know where these voices were coming from. Even if they are generated by his consciousness, He did not want to discuss this problem with a psychologist. Psychologists exist only to help sort out family problems or get out of depression caused by career breakdowns. You only need to fight demons yourself – this was the motto of all the ancestors of Daniel. But why did he decide that these voices were demonic? Demons have a place near cemeteries, churches, crypts and abandoned chapels, but not at the filming.

Daniel himself did not notice how he fell asleep for the script. For the first time in his life, he dreamed of something pleasant: Jane was replaced by Alais in the role of Medea Shai. Only Alais

didn't play. She performed magic tricks without any special effects. Everything was going well, until some terrible creatures began to crawl out of the darkness behind her.

"I'm not alone," Alais said to Daniel as if apologetically. "I never come alone. What's a queen without an army?"

Someone in a purple robe

What if dreams are brighter than reality? Visit a doctor? Taking antidepressants? When you want to go back to the world of dreams, and there is only everyday routine around, you begin to feel like a dog on a leash. Who would have thought that such emotions are experienced by a movie star? In fact, Daniel considered his occupation to be similar to working on an assembly line: you need to play the same scene until the director announces that there is enough for today. In the process of shooting, there is absolutely no romance that the audience will see in the finished and edited film.

“Probably, that is why they take money from the public, but you get it, on the contrary,” the manager once mockingly explained to him. “Work is work. We all adapt.”

However, the film about the Ancient Egypt seemed to have been filmed in one moment. It was impossible to imagine Alais posing dejectedly in front of the camera and playing the same scene madly. In the film, everything happened so naturally, as if he had not been filmed at all, and he created himself.

“Do I even understand my thoughts myself?” Daniel asked himself, looking in the mirror at the hotel. What do you mean, the film made itself? How is this possible? This is the same as saying: the cinema has rebuilt itself. It was naturally rebuilt by people. But for what purpose? So that this film goes on forever, completely fooling the audience's brains. Were there any other films in the repertoire? You need to crawl in the bins of the cinema, look for posters. Daniel is already used to going to the “Blue Lotus” for free and whenever he pleases. The manager's words that they take money for watching films completely lost their reality. The cinema itself seemed somehow unreal. A pretentious building with sphinxes and a fountain immediately attracted the eye even in the impenetrable thickets. The hieroglyphs, drawn in bas-reliefs on the facade, sparkled even from afar. Completely European columns and pediments were combined with fabulous arabesques, as if taken from Arabian fairy tales. The building stood like a reminder of the witch's gingerbread house, which Hans and Gretel fell into. Only here not only children were expected.

Daniel heard on the radio that a group of teenagers disappeared again in the cinema area yesterday. The guys were noisily celebrating something in the beer town and arguing about where to have fun at night: at the nearest cemetery or at the devil's cinema. It was better to choose a cemetery. From there they could return if drunk they had not killed each other. And from the cinema, judging by the news, no one returned.

Are there people who have been there and survived? As he drove through the town, Daniel watched the groups of young people on the streets. They behaved strangely, like sectarians. Something about their manner was alarming. Many were dressed like Goths. Someone had a suspicious, manic look in their eyes. Halloween is still a long way off, but Daniel saw the teenagers draw with markers some symbols on the walls and asphalt, suspiciously similar to pentagrams. He nearly hit such a child who was drawing something like a hieroglyph with chalk on the road. It's good that he managed to slow down in time. However, instead of being scared, the child suddenly raised his head and hissed at him.

“Never mind! They are preparing to celebrate All Saints' Eve,” said a policeman who was patrolling the streets all alone and for some reason trying to stay as far away from children as possible. He touched the visor of his cap and was like that, but the hieroglyph remained on the asphalt. Another teenager had already drawn the same hieroglyph with red paint on the wall, and no one was fined for it. Everyone is crazy here. Daniel more and more asserted in the conjecture that the town was located next to some kind of hospital, patients from which, for some reason, in groups choose to walk without the supervision of nurses or orderlies. Moreover, adults behaved normally, but children and adolescents were strange. Nothing, the hospital could well be a nursery.

He drove along the narrow roads of the city and everywhere noticed the same situation. Young people huddled at the corners in small, silent companies. They didn't talk, they didn't make noise. They all looked gloomy. Most of the girls. Sometimes even the guys were letting their eyes black red in the manner of the Egyptians. Combined with European-looking faces, it looked a little scary. Although, who knows, suddenly a particularly fashionable eyeliner is being advertised here, which he has never heard of. Daniel himself was far from the world of fashion, although he was occasionally invited to various advertisements for men's perfumes, sprays and shaving creams. But that was over a year ago, when he still hadn't flopped with the latest films. Fashion houses have a strict rule: they invite either very famous actors or those who were supported by influential patrons to the actions. Recently, Daniel has been on his own, so he was stubbornly unlucky.

He drew attention to several antique Goths crowd. Evgenia would have liked them. She loved everything related to the Victorian style and on the set she enthusiastically tried on black corsets and blouses with lace frills. From her, Daniel learned that besides the antique ones, that is, imitating the old Goths, there are more modern post-punk Goths dressing in the style of the eighties, as well as wamp-goths, steampunk-goths, cyber-goths and even jeep-goths depicting gypsies. Only for business people, as the curious Evgenia explained, the style of corporate goths is more suitable in order to combine gloomy paraphernalia with a dress code. Daniel was confused in the names, went over in his mind everything that Evgenia had told, but he could not remember a single kind of Goths, which, while maintaining the image of punks, seem inseparably connected with the Ancient Egypt.

A creature in a red robe walked among the teenagers and distributed something to them. It looks like invitation cards. In the movie theaters? At such a distance, Daniel could not see exactly, and you can't drive closer. You can easily bump into a wall. All he saw was gnarled hands with rough black skin and black nails sticking out from under the luxurious red fabric. Under the hood was an animal muzzle that looked more like a bulldog, but this creature had a human body, tall and densely built. He could very well be a boxer who was mutilated by breaking his jaw, hence the resemblance to a bulldog. And the black color of the skin... Yes, there are not many blacks, mulattoes, Africans and African Americans who can be found today anywhere in the world. Now there is no slavery, and they are free to travel everywhere, but for some reason this creature seemed to him a slave. Although there was no collar and shackles, they were replaced by a luxurious robe, but it seemed that its wearer was both bound and fettered, and must serve someone for the rest of his days. Until the end of eternity itself.

How much imagination can run at the sight of something too fanciful. Whoever handed out the tickets looked like an exotic bird in the crowd, a red cardinal or a red peacock. He looked important and mysterious. Daniel looked at him as much as he could until he had to turn around the bend.

It was already deserted here. Where did a passer-by suddenly come from, who rushed right under the wheels? This is the same subject in red robes and a disfigured face. Daniel hit the brakes sharply, but it was too late. An ugly black face slammed into the car's windshield. And nothing can be turned back. Glazed eyes gazed at the driver from the black muzzle. His bloody tongue stuck to the glass like a red snake. He twitched in convulsions, as if separate from the corpse of the creature. Daniel was sure he had knocked a passer-by to death. Now what? Will the police believe him that this person himself jumped out onto the carriageway right under the wheels? What will happen to the filming of the film when it is detained? The young man closed his eyes to mutter a short prayer. Not that he was a believer, just an out of the ordinary situation. Sticking in trouble, even all terry atheists suddenly begin to remember God. He also remembered. But as soon as he opened his eyes, the glass in front of him was not stained with blood. The corpse disappeared. Daniel even got out of the car to check if the crushed one was lying around in the puddles. There was no body. Only somewhere around the corner flashed the hem of a red robe.

How can a downed passer-by suddenly jump up and run like a sports champion? Probably, he dozed off at the wheel and it just seemed to him? True, before he did not think anything and under no circumstances. The visions began with a visit to this city, or rather to a cinema outside the city limits.

It was reckless to go there again. In addition, Daniel knew that soon he would have to leave the car and walk, because the roads leading to the cinema were overgrown so that you could not drive along them.

And somewhere between the thickets there is that eerie tree, with the figures of angels and demons carved into it.

“Memorial to the fall!”

The phrase sounded clear in his head. What does it mean? He drove onto the main road outside the city, and barely having driven about fifteen minutes, he immediately ran into a wall of boxwood, honeysuckle and some shrub, whose name he did not even know.

All! Then you have to go on foot. He almost left the keys in the ignition, and when leaving the car, he found that there were some scratches on the hood. It looks like a wild animal traced it with its claws.

Only there were no animals around, not even squirrels in the trees. Probably no one lives here except ghosts. For some reason, Daniel again remembered the ash tree and the ghostly children who had taken a round dance on the highway. Sometimes it still seemed that their figures were flickering in the thickets, but they are not denser than the fog that is about to disperse.

One quite tangible creature in front of the cinema nevertheless showed up – some beggar in dirty rags and clearly crippled. He walked with a limp on both legs. Beggars are much more common on the porch in front of churches than at the entrances to cinema, theaters or clubs. But here, apparently, everything is different. Daniel had some cash with him, he called out to the tramp, but he hurriedly trotted around the corner of the building and disappeared into the thickets.

The cinema itself was still free to enter. The luxurious doors with a metal openwork sheathing and stained glass inserts remained unlocked. Was there a lock on them at all? Daniel noticed only a small ring embedded in the nostrils of the head of some mythical bird, like a griffin. The head itself replaced the doorknobs. And such a magnificent building was still going to be demolished, according to rumors. Daniel did not believe there was danger inside. The structure gave the impression of being solid and completely new. It didn't even need repairs. When he entered, he first noticed the ligature of golden hieroglyphs that adorned the walls and outside. Reliefs and bas-reliefs stretched everywhere here: in the walls, around the stucco molding, on the capitals of the columns, pediments and plinths. Mostly they belonged to the era of the Ancient Egypt, but there were also later periods.

There was no one in the lobby and spacious foyer. Cordelia and Nefert no longer played in the narrow vestibule. The corridors were empty. Only some suspicious black animal, almost the size of a man, suddenly jumped out from somewhere, bumped into Daniel and hissed fiercely, but he didn't scratch or bite. The guy sighed with relief when it bounced around the corner and did not appear again.

Alais sat in an empty cinema and tossed gold coins. They rained down on her palm and seemed to be singing, not ringing. None fell to the floor. This is real gold. Neither fake nor low purity. Bright yellow gold, as from an ancient treasury.

She either did not notice Daniel, or she pretended not to notice. Tossing coins was like a game to her. The round yellow discs glowed like miniature suns and moons. Their brilliance fell in glare on her face.

What dexterous hands she has. Even jugglers don't throw balls as quickly as she does small coins. Obviously, he jinxed her, because one coin was still missed. She rolled with clink between the seats and then down the steps that divided the rows. Daniel bent down, hoping to catch it, because it almost reached his feet, but that was not the case. Someone's black claws poked out from under the seat and grabbed the coin first. It was as if it had never happened. And claws too.

“Alais!” Daniel called her before he noticed that there was no one in the auditorium. Where did the girl go? He looked around helplessly.

Everything is empty. Wherever you look, there are only rows of empty chairs. Where did the rain of gold coins in the hands of Alais go? Was it a dream?

Oddly enough, he again came on time. The light began to fade slowly. This time in stages, not in an instant. At first it became a little darker, then it was semi-dark, and a second before the light went out, Daniel again noticed a vague silhouette in the corner of the auditorium. Before he could see it, the rows of chairs had already sunk into darkness. The credits flashed across the screen. The same film began that had impressed even before the madness a few days ago. “And his name is Dennitsa.” This time, the credits were interspersed with an eerie creature made entirely of gold that crawled across the screen like a cuttlefish, and it seemed that it was about to crawl right into the audience. The first time it was also present in the film, but there was no feeling that it was as real as the chairs and walls around. It seemed that it was nearby, its numerous hands reaching out to the spectator's throat. And now it is no longer in the frame, the same film is going on about the commander Taor, who returned from the war, where he fought not with people, but with evil spirits. He bows before the throne of Pharaoh, looks up and suddenly sees that the queen of evil is already here, rules Egypt and whispers her decrees to the king.

Not that he didn't want to watch the movie again, but he felt a little uneasy. The film showed that there are fatal lines of fate in life, and they twist into such a tight ball that it can no longer be unwound.

As planned. Destiny? Taor and Alais. He just won his first big victory, she just experienced the first and grandiose defeat in the fight against heaven and now takes revenge, taking possession of the earth. Two heroes are like two poles. They must become great enemies to each other. But the film is built so that the viewer watched and thought: what kind of lovers they could be!

They were supposed to stay together. Why didn't the screenwriter bring them together? To shock the audience with an unexpected spooky ending? Nothing affects the psyche worse than a bad ending.

“You just see yourself as Taor. And you don't want to do what he did.”

Daniel turned around. The radiation from the screen was enough to see that all the rows behind him were completely empty. There was no one to turn to him with words. So maybe it was the voice of his reason. He really wanted to see himself in the role of Taor. A very winning role! How many prestigious awards could one get by playing it. Someone told Daniel long ago that the actor is famous for his successful role in a well-directed film. But this role already belonged to another. Daniel envied both the unique appearance of his opponent and his ability to adequately stand in front of the camera.

Where in the modern world can you find a guy with such a strikingly beautiful face and athletic body. No amount of sports and exercise equipment helped Daniel to develop his figure in such a way. Only scenes with Alais distracted him from contemplating Taor. She played with symbols of royal power and lured the high priest into the net.

“Show me one pure soul in the universe, and then I will not destroy the whole world,” she promised, she promised, believing that such a soul cannot be found. The owner of such a soul, of course, turned out to be Taor.

And then there was a conspiracy in the palace. Alais executed the courtier and priests and bathed in their blood. In the frame, her naked body was almost visible, with wings growing directly from the shoulder blades in the back. How unexpected it is that when you look at the film for the second time, you begin to notice a lot of things in it that you hadn't seen before. For example, Daniel noticed that the snake bracelet on Alais's forearm is alive and crawls up and down her arm, and her golden curls move and curl like living snakes.

Someone distracted him from watching. Another spectator entered the hall? Or has he been here before? Someone moved smoothly between the chairs, and the hem of a long robe slid along the floor behind him. The quiet but monotonous steps began to annoy. Daniel looked around. The

silhouette in a bright red cape contrasted sharply with the darkness, as if the cape were illuminated from within with electricity. This cape was sewn from blood and fire.

Daniel had already seen this scarlet hood and wide old-fashioned sleeves somewhere. Is this the very same person who handed out tickets to teenagers. What is he doing at the cinema? He probably works here and sometimes goes outside to give out invitations. Nice way to lure the audience into watching, but this is kind of the VIP zone. It is not customary to admit everyone here.

Someone in a scarlet robe sensed that Daniel was looking at him and raised his bulldog face. Daniel shuddered and hastily turned away. It's good that they are separated by dozens of rows, otherwise one could be frightened.

Self-consolation turned out to be premature. A moment and someone in red was already nearby, just in the back row. How swift he could move if he wanted to. Is he? Or is it? Daniel noticed black hands touching the back of the chair next to him. They looked more like the paws of an outlandish beast.

The creature touched his shoulder with its talons, the edge of the red sleeve nearly burning. It seemed like a fabric like silk, but it turned out to be tougher than sandpaper.

"What do you feel?"

The question was eerily sudden. Although the creature had a soft, slightly hissing voice, the thought burned through the mind that it could speak at all.

"Let go!"

Daniel lunged, but his claws were harder than metal.

"What do you feel?" It repeated as a refrain. His breath burned his ear like fire. "You look at her and feel that she belongs only to you. To the only living spectator here. Because she's already dead. The dead may have admirers, but they cannot have lovers who own them. For this reason, many distraught fans dream of killing living stars in order to take possession of them completely. The body dies, but the picture in the frames lives forever. You buy a ticket or a video disc, and you completely get rid of jealousy. After all, the video is all that remains of it. And she's yours. Not real, so reproduced in electronics. And who needs a mortal body?"

The voice of the creature stirred a painful memory: rain, limousine, premiere, shot, belated reaction of the bodyguards. Daniel nearly died that evening. Some nutcase who allegedly came up for an autograph shot him. And the guards couldn't help. And the marble statues in front of the red carpet... It could only seem.

"To kill a star means to take possession of it forever. Lucky you. You are in love with an already dead woman. No one will embrace her before your eyes. No one will hurt you."

"And the film that is on..." There on the screen in the final scene Taor tried to kiss her, but ran into an angelic inaccessibility.

"The one that starred in it no longer walks on earth among people, no longer lives, therefore, watching the film, you can assume that she belongs only to you. After all, it only exists on the screen. In front of you. You look at it and you know that it is as much your property as the rolling tape or disc you bought in the store. She will not make you jealous by coming to the next premiere. She remained only inside the film. There she can no longer harm herself or others.

"Did you kill her?"

In response, only a dull, mocking laugh. Hard, sharp claws gripped Daniel's hair and pulled his head back. He nearly hit the back of his head against the back of the chair. He had to look into the eyes of the creature that was standing behind. The madman's eyes were terrifying, bestial.

"Everyone's safe since she only lived in the film. Or is it not? While the body of Atenais rots many meters underground, her cast in the frames lives by itself and harasses all of us. Look! You don't get the feeling that she is much more alive on the screen than everyone who comes here."

Yes! Oddly enough, he had such a feeling. Daniel caught himself thinking that in some ways the creature is still right. Ono speaks like a distraught fan, ready at any moment to get a knife and

stab his diva. For him, worshiping her is the same as immediately building a kind of Taj Mahal for her. It pronounces modern words, but they breathe some kind of antiquity, like from Persia or India of pre-Christian times, and it seems that it came from there. His strong black claws clenched more and more on Daniel's shoulder, gradually getting closer to his throat. Another moment, and they will begin to choke him.

"What you need?" the guy begged.

"What do you need?" the strangler responded with a dull echo, already clutching his throat. "Why did you come here?"

"The first time to commit suicide," Daniel admitted honestly. Now his already past desire can fatally come true if nothing is done. It is a pity that the murderer attacked him belatedly, and not before he got sick of dying. "But the second time I came here to..."

"Find out how she died."

"Sort of," Daniel croaked. He was gasping for breath, dense claws began to choke him, while only lightly pressing on his throat, but the air was suddenly not enough.

At this point, the final murder scene was taking place in the film. But instead of a beautiful angel head rolling across the floor, this time he saw a dazzling golden monster. At first, he crawled only in the corner of the screen, then the image scale increased. Suddenly entering the frame, the creature suddenly expanded to fill the entire screen. Its claws scraped with a heartbreaking sound and it seemed that they were about to emerge from the film. Probably, Daniel only thought that their edges slipped over the edge of the screen.

It's time to get out of here, flashed through his head. Someone in red behind him just loosened his grip. Probably, he, too, stared at the creature ready to crawl into the auditorium. The illusion that the movie was about to end and it would burst in here was so real that it became scary. But someone from behind was not afraid, he just seemed to be waiting for this creature. A chuckle was heard behind. It was as if fire breathed in the face from the screen. The creature's eyes looked into the auditorium. They were bright emerald green against the golden bones of the face. Then they began to sparkle with all the colors of the rainbow, like a kaleidoscope. Looking at them is like getting hit hard on the head. The look seemed to shock. Daniel quickly wriggled out of the black claws and rushed to the exit from the auditorium. Something crawled behind him, and so on to the very doors, until he bumped into the marble back of an angel standing there. Amazingly, the angel really turned out to be marble. Not a mannequin, not a papier-mâché doll, but a heavy massive statue, like in a cemetery. It is strange how Daniel did not bump into it at the entrance, because it stood almost right next to the doors.

As soon as he left the threshold, it turned out that no one was chasing him. Maybe someone in a red robe was just a joker or an unemployed actor who wandered around the cinema, trying to show his talent at least here. The claws could be false. It is a pity that they left a rather deep mark on the neck.

Daniel looked for Alais, but she was nowhere to be seen. He came here partly because he really wanted to see her again.

Only Cordelia was here today. She laid out cool paraphernalia for the upcoming Halloween on a table in the vestibule: severed fingers and ears, and a set of bloodied needles of various sizes. It all looked pretty realistic. Daniel wonder if she's going to sew such ridiculous decorations to her dress. Or will she trade them right here before the horror movie starts, when more of the audience comes? Is there ever a lot of people here? Every time he came, everything was empty.

"You seem to be from the same family," she said unexpectedly. "You and the statues."

She meant, of course, the angels.

"You are very similar in faces. If you, too, were made of marble, then you would not be distinguished."

But he was alive. Daniel felt embarrassed that he was compared to statues that would be more decent to stand on graves or in a crypt than here in a cinema.

“All of you, Rosier, are twins.”

“My family has a different surname.”

“But of course not the pseudonym under which you went to act in films.”

“Not that one,” he admitted honestly. “How do you know about the Rosier family. Few people remember these legends now.”

“There used to be one of their estates nearby.” Cordelia threaded a large needle with a thread of such a rich scarlet hue that it could not be distinguished from a blood vein.

– Seriously? I didn’t know. There are two places where ghosts live.

“And why did you decide that ghosts live here?”

“Many people talk about this in the city.” Well, not quite so. There were rumors that the movie theater was cursed, but for Daniel, there was not much of a difference between cursed places and haunted houses. Probably because he has never visited either one or the other.

“Rumors often distort the truth.”

“And you...”

“I’m just sewing,” she retorted, not letting him finish the thought. And he just wanted to ask if she knows about something that is not rumors, but the truth. It would be interesting to know the truth about this cinema. Why is it still open, although officially everyone considers it closed for a long time? Why is there bad news about him? Why was it nicknamed the Devil’s Cinema? Does the name have some mystical overtones or is it just a metaphor related to the terrorist attack that once took place here? What is devilish about this place besides the horror films that are shown here?

Cordelia was just starting to sew red thread through one of the ghastly things that looked like severed flesh. It seemed that blood was oozing from the toys along with the thread. Interesting! Will they host a private Halloween party here? And will many VIP-persons be invited to it at once, and not just one? But Cordelia didn’t hear any questions as she began humming as she sewed. Realizing that nothing could be achieved from her, Daniel turned and walked towards the exit.

“Daniel,” she called out to him, using his real name, not a movie pseudonym.

“Yes?”

“You’d better stay close to the statues and away from Alais.”

He was definitely not going to follow this advice. If not today, then tomorrow he will definitely find her here. You just need to go to the Devil’s Cinema more often.

Filming

All footage from Jane burned out. It seems that this should not have happened. In the evening, a fire broke out unexpectedly. While Daniel sat in the Blue Lotus session, his filming partner and several co-workers tried to escape the fire. There were people killed, someone was severely burned. Nobody knew exactly what happened. It was assumed that pyrotechnics broke out. There was probably some problem with it.

It is fortunate that the scenes with Daniel's participation were not touched by the fire. The cameras and most of the equipment also survived. It seems that the fire broke out only in order to take away Jane herself and her labors, invested in the film. According to Daniel, the damage was minor. Although the actress was famous, she was not at all suitable for the role of a dark fairy.

Daniel watched people scurrying around, and a picture persistently climbed into his head: someone in a red robe was picking the film with his claws, and the film was burning from his touch.

"It's strange that no one had the idea to use fire extinguishers," scraps of conversations and the howl of sirens of the already departing police and ambulance cars reached Daniel. If he had come here an hour earlier, he himself could have become a victim.

"The fire started and went out by itself," the director slapped him on the shoulder. "Well, isn't it amazing.

"What will happen to the film now?"

"We will continue to work with you, but we have problems with the main performer."

"Is it true that all the episodes filmed with her can no longer be restored?"

"We'll have to cut these scenes from the film."

"But they were the most spectacular of all that was planned."

"There is no way to re-shoot anyway."

There was only one burn left from the charred films. The smell was disgusting.

"How is Jane herself?"

"She was placed in the city hospital. The doctors there are not brilliant professionals. They cannot say anything for sure after a preliminary examination. And even an approximate diagnosis cannot be knocked out of them."

"I didn't notice that there is a hospital in the city."

"Not surprising. The building is tiny. A couple of dozen patients can fit there at most. What is this wilderness? And what a loser Jane is. You have to be a complete fool to go where everything is on fire."

"And what exactly happened to her here. I still do not understand: does she have fractures, or did she receive severe burns?"

"We need another star. More fortunate."

And he went to look for her. To an abandoned cinema.

At night the Blue Lotus was always open. Yes, what's there. It was open around the clock. Nobody knew about it. Except those chosen ones who were invited here. Take that freak in purple robes who walked around town and handed out invitations to teenagers. He chose them according to some special principle. Only those who were dressed like a goth, for example.

Daniel remembered there was a threat. This one in red robes can still attack him if he is lurking here in the cinema. Although all that happened could be a simple joke. Funny. In a horror session, different tricks are probably permissible in order to get more fear. Here is someone in red and tried. I wonder who he really was.

At night, Alais was found easily. A small buffet is located behind the lobby. There are still popcorn stalls, drink counters, sugar skull counters, and empty round tables. There was not a soul

around. And the beauty was doing some tricks with fire. Orange streams curled between her palms, flew from her lips. Everything that happened seemed more like a 3D effect than a reality.

"You didn't get into the fire?" instead of greeting, Alais looked at him with a grin. "I'm happy for you."

"How do you know about the fire?" the question left his lips before he remembered the mass media, which, of course, should be available here as well. Surely, there is a TV or Alais herself is hiding an iPhone in her jeans pocket. She could see the summary of today's news. They always appear on the Internet before the paper editions can report.

"Fires are beautiful, but destructive," she said. "I love the way fire looks, but it burns you."

"Who, us?" Daniel did not understand. And Alais simply didn't answer. Orange highlights played in the air in front of her face, turning into pillars of fire.

"What about Jane?" involuntarily burst out from him, although how could she know. She doesn't even know Jane, unless she watched films with her.

"Let's just say she was kissed by an angel... with stone lips."

Are these charades again? He felt cold and somehow unpleasant, as if a flock of ice ants had run through his body. Breath even caught for a moment. What does it mean when a statue kisses you? You can suffocate. It is possible to get fractures of all bones in the body under the pressure of stone hands. But is it possible to burn from the breath of the statue? Do statues breathe fire like Alais?

About such pyrotechnics, which allows you to create the effect of fiery sighs, he had not even heard. But in this old, long-boarded up cinema, they have stepped far beyond modern technological progress. Alais breathed out fire like a beautiful dragon. And she deftly controlled this fire, because it did not burn anything except what she liked to burn. Ordinary fire-eaters cannot do that. And no smoker can do this. Although smoke and fire are different things.

"You wanted to ask me about something?" the beauty behaved so dispassionately, as if breathing out fire, like a dragon, was something quite natural for her. "Didn't I warn your first request?"

"Which request? I didn't ask for anything."

"Not aloud," Alais just looked at him with piercing sparkling eyes, but inside everything shrank. He preferred to reflect on the fact that her eyes were like gems shimmering with all the colors of the rainbow than that he wanted to get rid of Jane. But Alais saw right through him.

"I like to fulfill wishes. Naturally not as simple as can be performed with human hands. Where people are powerless, I interfere. But your conscience is clear, you didn't make a wish about yourself and didn't express it out loud, you just really wanted to. When you really want something, it can come true."

"Do you really believe that?" That if you really want something, then it will happen.

Instead of answering, another fiery sigh and a slight laugh in time with the hissing of fire. Daniel stumbled back. He was afraid that now his face would burn. But Alais was not aiming at him. She didn't burn anything at all, she just played. Even the low headliners did not look sooty. Not to mention the walls or tables, over which the fire just hovered.

"Is there a cinema or a circus?"

"How do you like it better?"

"I suspect that under the sweat there is a whole menagerie of lions, leopards, panthers and other predatory animals."

"Have you already heard the noise under the floor of the cinema?" She slyly narrowed her eyes and laughed.

No, he did not hear anything under the sweat, but in the cinema there was always something scraping and grinding. So the beasts, if they were present, had to be invisible.

"I remember there were excellent circus arenas in Rome, where Christians were sacrificed to lions. Those were good times. Bloody, spectacular, somewhat grandiose."

“Do you remember? So you watched a movie about it?”

And again, in response, laughter and a light stream of fire. Daniel felt the heat of the flame on his face, but it did not burn, only warmed.

“We have films about the Ancient Rome, and about the Ancient Persia, about India, about Atlantis, about the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah, as well as about the Templars and about the French Revolution, and all with the participation of that angel who attracted you just like before you led crowds of spectators to...

She hesitated.

“For what?”

“Never mind. There are many films here. So you can come here every night. Probably, one day you will find showing something new for you. But for which film will be shown exactly on schedule, I can not vouch, this is in charge of the projectionist.”

Was it the creature in the red robe that scared him? Daniel shivered unpleasantly, as if feeling the touch of black claws again. It is better not to look around and not to look for traces of a disgusting-looking creature.

“And the films are stored on reels, or digital cinema projectors are already installed here, or even some more modern and sophisticated technology than I know. Some new cinema equipment and stereos are not being tested here?”

“How did you decide?”

“The effect is too stunning. I've never experienced anything like this before.”

“You just went to films only with your own participation and only because agents and managers forced you to attend premieres.”

How did she know? Alais did not see the contracts he signed, but spoke about the clauses of the contract with greater knowledge than the lawyer who viewed them.

“But I loved watching different films before I started filming myself.” Daniel tried to smooth out the awkwardness.

“And I like to create works of art myself more than to view what others have created.”

“And what art do you do?”

“Why are you so curious?”

“I just thought...” He was embarrassed to even say it out loud. What he dreamed of became too desirable. “We will have tests soon.”

“And you thought that I would stoop to act in films. With common people? Defile in front of the camera, probably even undress in front of the camera, as is usually done only on the panel, grimace like a monkey and obey the director's commands?”

“I don't know which royal family you are from, but my family was also ancient and noble, but I have sunk to that.”

“You wanted to become famous, to become a star. You can be understood. In addition, your noble family has long ago thrown their fortune into the wind. Ruin and want lead people to do many things that you would not do in the days of wealth and prosperity.”

She spoke like this, she has whole cellars here bursting with gold bars. Her wicked words touched him to the quick, but he did not pretend that he was offended.

“Have you never dreamed of becoming a star? In adolescence, for example, almost everyone dreams of this.”

“I'm already a star!” She proclaimed calmly. “For everyone who sees me. And I don't have to do films for guys like you to faint when I show up.”

In this she was one hundred percent right. As soon as he saw her, he seemed to be burned. Even fire cannot burn as much as painful admiration for some object.

Well, Alais knew how to assess herself objectively without pluses and without minuses. If she gives the same assessment to all other people, then her business should flourish, and no partners or businessmen will do it. Although why did he decide that the cinema is her business center? It is unlikely that she owns it or is the organizer of events here. She just lives here until someone kicks her out. Probably, the cinema belongs to her parents or some relatives, who allow her and her company to gather here until the building is used for other purposes. Naturally, all this will end as soon as Alais is sent to study at some prestigious university, as is customary in wealthy families. It is unlikely to go to an ordinary college, most likely to a university, institute, academy, or generally a closed privileged boarding school. In any case, he will not see her again. The thought sank painfully at the thought.

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