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The Devil's Apprentice

The Great Devil War I

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The Great Devil War Vol. 1

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CHAPTER 1

The Condemned of the Week

Philip heard him. His steps sounded like whispers in the silent basement, his fingers cracking in anticipation. Philip even thought he heard the smile spreading across Sam's lips.

Scrunching up behind the large metal cabinet where the janitor kept all his tools, Philip glanced cautiously around the corner. His heart leaped into his throat when the shadow on the wall suddenly reared its head. It seemed unnaturally huge. Demon-like. Maybe it was only the strange light playing tricks, but didn't it seem as though the shadow had horns?

"Where are youuuu?" crooned the shadow cheerfully. "Come out, come out wherever you are!"

Philip made himself as small as possible. He felt the sweat dribbling down his back. It was hot as an oven in here. Or perhaps it just felt that way because he was trapped in the school's basement with Sam.

They called him Devil Sam. You could write thick volumes about the cruel, spine-chilling things he'd done. If the devil was a boy, he would be Sam. His victims weren't just random students he got hold of on the playground, or whom he'd met in the empty hallways whenever he skipped class. No, Devil Sam—a ninth grader, two classes ahead of Philip—was far more refined than that.

Each week he chose a new victim, fresh meat, whom he terrorized until the final bell on Friday. If you had the dubious distinction of being the Condemned of the Week, then all you

could do was try to blend into the wallpaper and hope that you survived. Eventually Sam's dragon eyes would turn toward some other kid, and you'd be okay. For a while, anyway.

This week Philip had been the chosen one. Up until now he'd gotten off relatively lightly. Sam had forced him to eat a few mouthfuls of sand, he'd tied him to one of the showerheads in the girl's locker room, and he'd forced him to go hungry for an entire day by stealing his lunch and snack money. Oh, and Sam had also peed in his pencil case. Twice.

Still, these were minor things compared to what Sam had done to some of the other kids.

But it wasn't the weekend yet. There was still an hour of Friday left, Philip was still the Condemned of the Week, and right now he sat scrunched up behind the cabinet in the basement staring at the enormous shadow on the wall. It almost seemed as though the shadow had been painted on. He could see it sniffing and listening like a wild animal on the prowl, and Philip thought that if the smell of his cold sweat didn't give him away, then his thumping heart would. It roared like a steam engine.

He should be sitting in math class right now, his hand raised, ready to tell Mr. Johnson, their math teacher, that he had already completed some exercises that hadn't been assigned yet, and that he hoped that was okay.

So how did he wind up down here? In the company of a boy who would have made even the lions in the old Colosseum flee for their lives with a whimper?

It was Mike's fault.

Mike had forgotten his gym clothes in the locker room, and he'd asked Mr. Johnson if he could go retrieve them. And could Philip tag along with him? It would only take a minute.

At that point there had been a lot of confusion in the classroom, because a couple of the students had fought during recess, and one had gotten hurt; four complained that they'd forgotten to do their homework, which caused three others to bark that *they* had done theirs. With an irritated wave of his hand, Mr. Johnson gave Mike and Philip permission to leave the classroom.

"Son of a…!" Mike shouted when they entered the boy's locker room. Someone had rummaged in his gym bag, and his clothes had been scattered across the floor. "Why can't people keep their hands to themselves?"

They gathered Mike's clothes, but when Mike checked his things, he discovered that his towel was missing.

"Do you mind seeing if the idiots threw it down the stairwell?" he'd asked, pointing at the door beside the gym. It led down to the boiler room, and it stood ajar.

Philip had gone ten steps down the stairwell when the door suddenly slammed shut. The hollow thud was followed by the sound of a lock clicking.

"Mike?" Philip clutched the doorknob, but the door wouldn't budge an inch. "Mike, this isn't funny!"

"I'm sorry, Philip," Mike said. "But he told me to do it. Otherwise it would be my turn next week." This was followed by the sound of footsteps quickly fading in the distance.

"Mike! Mike, come back!"

His cries curled down the stairwell, like desperate prayers from another world. Philip turned toward the gray shadows.

The entrance to the schoolyard was all the way at the far end of the basement, but if he could find the courage to get moving instead of standing here like some wuss, he might be able to reach it before Sam found him.

He plunged down the long stairwell at a crazy pace and sped across the basement. The entire time he expected Sam to come leaping out of the shadows, grinning his diabolic grin. But nothing happened, and a little farther on he saw the exit. He'd made it!

Almost…

Because when Philip tried to open the doors, they didn't budge an inch, either. Something was blocking them on the other side. That left only the broad staircase, the one that led up to the ninth-grade classrooms.

Behind him—a creaking sound. Followed by footfalls. Then a familiar voice sang: "Where are youuuu? Come out, come out wherever you are!"

Now he sat here. Trapped. Boxed into a corner. There was nothing for him to do but hope for the best. Which—when Devil Sam was involved—was bad enough.

"You're so quiet!" Sam chirped before shifting his voice into a darker growl: "I'll see to that real fast."

And suddenly, like a demon rising from the darkest depths of Hell, Sam stood before Philip.

"Hello there," Sam smiled, revealing his nicotine-yellow teeth. His dark hair, gleaming with gel, was curled into two crescent-shaped horns. He removed his backpack and set it on the floor. It clinked ominously. As if the bag were full of knives instead of books.

"Some teachers say I never do my homework. But I do. Like this assignment I'm writing for history class that I thought you could help me with. You know, a little research and what-not." Sam opened his backpack and pulled out something that resembled some sort of barbecue fork. "It's about torturers

in the Middle Ages. Let me tell you something, little Philip, those guys could make people confess to anything."

Sam pulled more stuff from his bag. A meat hammer, a cigar cutter, a few fishing hooks, a pair of pliers, and a battery-powered immersion blender. The sight of each object made Philip's head spin. The floor beneath his feet seemed to shift.

"Philip, of the seventh grade," Sam said, squinching his face into grim, almost ceremonial knots. "You're accused of consorting with the Devil. How do you plead?"

Philip stared at the immersion blender and swallowed a lump the size of the cabinet he'd hidden behind.

"That's correct," he whispered, nodding feverishly. "I've consorted with the Devil."

For a moment Sam seemed almost disappointed. It wasn't the answer he'd expected, and Philip felt a glimmer of hope. Then Sam's lips parted in a devious smirk.

"Philip, Philip, Philip," he said, "they punished people even if they confessed."

Grinning, Sam reached for him, and Philip could do nothing but close his eyes and pray it would be over with quickly. And that his parents would buy some nice flowers for his gravesite.

But someone must have heard his prayers, because suddenly a loud voice shook the basement with such force that Philip nearly fainted: "What the hell? Are you out bullying again?"

Philip opened his eyes and saw Sam being yanked backward by a dirty fist clutching his neck.

The school's janitor was as big as a dragon and just as frightening to look at. He suffered from some kind of disease that made his skin look scaly and reptilian. Back when Philip was in Pre-K he'd been certain that one day he'd see fire spew-

ing from the man's dark mouth. But the janitor didn't just look like a dragon, he was strong like one, too, and he was one of the only adults at school who dared stand up to Sam.

"Let me go!" Sam howled, punching wildly at the janitor's tree-trunk of an arm. The janitor let go, but only to seize one of Sam's ears instead. In his other hand he held something Philip at first believed was a whip, until on closer inspection he realized it was a rolled-up cord.

"*Owwww! That hurts!*"

"Of course it does," the janitor replied, smiling at Philip. "I'm just helping you do a little research for your history assignment. Aren't you gonna thank me?"

"I'll make sure your fat—" With a painful yowling Sam broke off in mid-sentence, as the janitor gave him another hard tug on his ear. "*Thank you! Thank you!*"

"That's better. Let's go to the principal's office and tell him what a good student you've been today." The janitor dragged away Sam, who made strange hops to avoid having his ear torn right off.

"You're not off the hook!" wailed Sam, so that the words echoed in the basement. "You're still the Condemned of the Week! Do you hear me? You're not off the hook!"

"You better believe you're not off *my* hook," the janitor said, and judging by Sam's howling, gave his ear an extra hard twist. Philip remained seated within the dark shadow of the cab- inet, his knees pulled up under his chin. He didn't leave until the final bell rang and he heard his boisterous schoolmates rushing home for the weekend.

CHAPTER 2

A Good Deed

The classroom was empty when Philip returned. The chairs were stacked, and the tables cleaned. Only Philip's seat stood out.

He gathered his books. On the chalkboard Mr. Johnson had written the homework assignment, and though Philip had already completed it, he still noted the page number in his black notebook.

As he put on his jacket, he glanced at Mike's spot. The chair sat at an angle, and a pencil and a broken ruler lay under- neath the table. Mike had clearly rushed home.

Other kids in Philip's situation would probably be angry with Mike and hope that he contracted the nastiest disease. Maybe they would plot some elaborate revenge involving rope, train tracks, and a train schedule—or maybe they would try turning him in to the police, because there had to be some law against that kind of backstabbing.

But Philip wasn't angry with Mike. In fact, he wasn't even upset. Mike had only done it because Sam had forced him to. That it affected Philip was unfortunate, of course, but it really wasn't Mike's fault. Besides, nothing had happened, and although it had been close, Philip had exited the cellar in one piece.

"What the heck, Philip, you're still here?"

Mr. Johnson, their math teacher, walked into the class- room. His hair was tousled, his pants and shirtsleeves stained

with chalk dust. He looked like someone searching for something important. "Where on earth did I put it?"

"Yes, I…" Philip went quiet, observing Mr. Johnson, whose eyes darted around the room looking for whatever he was missing.

He didn't even notice I was gone, Philip thought. *The entire math class came and went, and he didn't even notice my seat was empty*.

"Oh, there it is!" Mr. Johnson said, rushing to the windowsill. He picked up his coffee mug between the terrarium and the large cactus and breathed a sigh of relief. "Losing your mug is like losing a leg." He walked toward the door. "Have a good weekend, Philip, okay?"

"Likewise," Philip replied. In a half-hour, he thought, Mr. Johnson wouldn't remember running into him.

Philip went to the terrarium and peered through the filthy glass. From the shadows between the green leaves the spider's black eyes stared at him.

* * *

Philip was riding along the bike path through the park, when his eyes caught something that he didn't notice at first. Not until three seconds and one hundred feet later did it occur to him just what he'd seen.

He turned around and rode back. And he hadn't been mistaken. Up there, almost all the way up on top of the beech tree, sat a black cat.

Philip got off his bike and strode to the tree. The cat didn't seem to understand how it had gotten up there, and why the earth was so far down.

"Are you stuck?" he asked, and the cat's sea-green eyes turned

toward him. The branch it was sitting on swayed in the breeze, and its claws dug deeper into the bark. It wasn't at all happy to be in this situation. Maybe a dog had chased it up there.

"You cats never learn, do you? Dogs can't climb trees. You only need to go six feet up the trunk to be safe. Why do you always scramble all the way up? Come on down, little kitty! Come on down!" He extended his arm and wiggled his fingers as if he were carrying food. "Here, kitty, kitty, kitty."

The cat meowed as if to say that wasn't enough. Philip understood the logic in that. A man caught on the fourth floor of a burning building wouldn't come down either just because the firemen asked him to.

"Stay calm," Philip said, tossing his backpack on the ground. He spit in his hands, clutched the lowest branch, and swung up into the tree. "I'll get you down. Just stay where you are."

Halfway up the tree Philip paused a moment to enjoy the sights. There were no other trees nearby, so he had a good view of the park and the city. He could see the library, the school, the water tower, and tiny people walking on the sidewalk, each with their own places to go and things to do. The idea of him sitting up here observing them, without them know- ing it, made him feel powerful. Almost as though he could sit up there and direct their lives from afar. As if the entire city belonged to him.

Above him the cat meowed to remind him that he didn't have all day.

"Okay, okay, I'm coming." Philip continued up. Suddenly one of his feet slipped, and only pure reflex kept him from falling down.

"Whoa!" he gasped, staring at the ground below. "That was close."

The cat meowed again.

"Okay, okay! Be patient. I could've died." He clambered higher, until the cat was right above him.

Philip reached up, and the cat retreated a bit.

"That's the wrong way. You need to help me here if we're going to do this. C'mon. I won't hurt you. I'm here to help you."

For a moment it appeared as though the cat didn't trust him. Then it began to move slowly closer.

"That's it. Just like that."

Philip leaned as far forward as he could without losing his balance and scooped up the cat. His fingers sank into its velvet-soft fur, and he lifted it from the branch.

Carefully, with just one hand free, he began his descent. With his other hand he held the cat, whose black fur smelled weird. Almost charred.

No, not charred, he corrected himself. *It smells like sulfur. Like a struck match.*

After climbing several feet down, he let go of the cat and let it climb the rest of the way itself. Like a black shadow it leapt from branch to branch, until at last it hopped to the ground and began licking its fur.

Philip landed with a *thump!* beside it.

"Well, what have you got to say for yourself?" he asked, brushing himself off.

"Thanks for helping me out," the cat replied, then quickly disappeared into the lush bushes of the park.

CHAPTER 3

In Search of the Cat

At first Philip biked around and around, searching the park. Then the streets surrounding the park. Then the streets surrounding the streets surrounding the park.

No luck. The cat had simply vanished, and all Philip got out of his exhaustive search were sore thighs and beads of sweat on his forehead.

Thanks for helping me out.

The words spun round and round in his head, sending cool shivers down his back. The cat had spoken. He'd heard it himself. He'd *seen* it himself. Seen its lips—or whatever they were called on a cat—shape the five small words.

Thanks for helping me out.

Then it had disappeared.

Had he imagined it?

No, he hadn't. He'd even *seen* the cat speak.

But cats can't talk, Philip.

He knew that. But that was why he was roving around the city looking for it. To ask it just what was going on.

Where is it then, Philip? You should be able to find a talking cat, right? Why don't you just call out to it? Maybe it'll answ…

Philip jammed on the brakes so hard that his wheels carved two black snakes into the bike path, and the mocking voice in his head fell silent.

On the other side of the road, in the shadow of a tall weeping willow, sat the cat. Its coal-black pelt blended with

the tree's shadow, and its green eyes were sharply defined and clear. They almost looked like holes boring through to another world. The cat was looking directly at Philip.

A red stoplight kept Philip from crossing the street. There were no cars, but Philip never crossed on a red light.

"Don't run away," he whispered, drumming impatiently on his handlebars. "Don't run away."

Finally the light changed, and Philip biked onto the street, toward the cat waiting on the other side. He furrowed his brow when he realized something.

It's not even looking at me, he thought. *It's looking at something behind me.*

At this instant a strong shove on his back knocked him off balance. His hands jerked the handlebars to the left, and he hurtled out into the middle of the crosswalk.

"I told you that you wouldn't get away!" Sam howled, gloating. "I told y—"

His triumphant shouts were abruptly squelched by the sound of screeching rubber, and Philip felt everything moving suddenly very fast and very slow at the same time.

He lifted his head, and that movement alone seemed to last hours.

He saw the black car barreling right at him.

He saw the elderly man behind the steering wheel.

He saw the object dangling from the man's necklace. Watched it swing back and forth. Back and forth. Like a pendulum in an old clock.

And he saw that the clock was about to stop.

Then the car slammed into him, and in the darkness that consumed everything, he saw the cat. Waiting for him. On the other side.