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The Die of Death

The Great Devil War II

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The Great Devil War Vol. 2

© *Kenneth Bøgh Andersen, Copenhagen, Denmark 2007*

1st English Edition, 2018

Cover illustration by Per Jørgensen

Cover design by Peter Stoltze

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ISBN: 9788763861632

CHAPTER 1

A Good Start

"Philip."

Startled, Philip sat up straight in his chair at the sound of the whispered voice, accidentally knocking the math book from his desk. It fell to the floor with a loud thump. Mr. Johnson, their math teacher, glanced at him. Philip mumbled an apology and quickly picked up his book.

Satina? he thought, noticing how his heart started racing. *Satina, is that you*?

No response. But once again he heard the same whisper: "Philip!"

Then he realized the voice wasn't inside his head at all. Someone behind him was calling his name. He turned and saw Sabrina trying to catch his attention. She pointed at Nick, who sat in the back of the classroom. Philip couldn't help but feel a sting of disappointment. For a moment he'd thought… It had really sounded like her…

Nick waved his eraser and gestured at Philip to catch it. A second later, the eraser landed in Philip's right hand. During the past six months, Philip had become better at many things. Strangely enough, catching was one of them.

"What was that?" Mr. Johnson looked at Philip.

"Nothing," he said, showing the math teacher what was in his hand. "I just needed to borrow an eraser."

"Hmm," Mr. Johnson grunted, irritated. "Next time ask your neighbor instead of disturbing the entire class. But now

that you've got our attention, why don't you tell us the answer to the next problem."

Philip tried to smile innocently. "I'm sorry, but I didn't do my homework."

Mr. Johnson raised an eyebrow. "Again, Philip? That's the second time this month. That's twice more than all last year and the year before that combined. Not a good start to eighth grade, I would say. What's the excuse this time?"

"I forgot." It was a lie, and that was another one of the things that Philip had become better at—lying. He knew that he had math homework last night, but Vernon had stopped by to ask if he wanted to hang out. Philip's mother was in bed with a migraine and she told him it was okay if he had done his homework. Of course he had, Philip replied.

Mr. Johnson gave another "hmm" and continued on to the next student. When Philip was certain that Mr. Johnson wasn't looking, he unrolled the small, crumpled-up note jammed in the hole of the eraser. He read:

Stealing pears after school—you in?

One of the other things that had changed. Just six months ago Philip never would have considered saying yes to such a suggestion. He wouldn't even have been asked. Back then if a note landed on his desk it would have read something like: "Did the teacher's pet remember to bring an apple today?" or "What's it like kissing Mr. Johnson's butt?"

But six months ago was a long time ago. Before Philip's little trip to Hell. There, Lucifer—the Devil himself—had tried to teach him how to be evil. A lot had changed since then, and

the formerly well-behaved Philip Engel had, during summer, slowly begun to make friends.

Philip brought a hand up to his forehead and rubbed the two small bumps that had once been—in another time, and another life—horns. That was all that remained of the devil Lucifer had managed to bring out in him.

He took a pencil from his case. Then he hesitated as he listened for directions from a familiar voice in his head, but it didn't speak up. Philip was on his own.

I'm in, he wrote on the slip of paper. He shoved it into the hole and threw the eraser back to Nick when Mr. Johnson was looking the other way.

* * *

"What? You asked Philip?" The voice, thick with indignation, came from inside the classroom. It was lunch break, and Philip—who was on his way back from the bathroom—stopped behind the door. Listened.

Martin was talking. He had once been Philip's only friend in class, but their friendship ended abruptly one day in fifth grade when they played soccer at Philip's house. Martin accidentally kicked the leather ball through the kitchen window and begged Philip to make up a story about some older boys having done it. But Philip didn't lie, he would never do that, and Martin had hated his guts ever since. His resentment toward Philip wasn't lessened by the fact that others in the class had begun asking Philip to partner with them, or if he wanted to hang out after school.

"Yes," Nick replied. "What of it?"

"What of it? It's Philip, for God's sake! Mommy's little angel! Why would you want him tagging along?!"

"C'mon, Martin." Vernon's voice. "Philip has changed. He's not that… that—" for a moment he struggled to find the right word, "*nauseating* anymore. And besides, he's really good at climbing trees."

"He's a little snitch, that's what he is!"

Nick laughed. "Are you still mad about that kitchen window? Wasn't that like in fifth grade?"

"It doesn't matter when it was. He *tattled*, Nick. He *tattled*!"

That wasn't quite right. Philip didn't tattle. He just told the truth when his mother asked.

"And he's gonna tattle again," Martin went on. "That's probably why he agreed to go. So he can walk up to the door and knock when you're all standing there with your hands full of pears!"

A shiver ran down Philip's spine as he recalled how he'd actually done something similar in Hell. He had interrupted two devil-boys in the middle of an apple heist. Aziel and Flux. It was a rough start to his time in the darkness, nearly costing him his afterlife when Aziel exacted his revenge by chaining him to some of the condemned.

"No, he won't," Vernon said, obviously tired of listening to Martin's objections. "Why would he do that?"

"You're not even listening, are you? Because he's still mommy's little angel! And if the little angel is coming, I'm not."

"Okay, fine. That's up to you," Nick said.

Philip could almost picture Martin's stunned face. "What?"

"I said it's up to you. We've invited Philip, and he said yes, so he's coming. Whether you come or not."

"Fine!" Martin snarled. "But don't tell me I didn't warn you!"

Out in the hallway Philip struggled to restrain his laughter. Mr. Johnson might think it was a bad start to the eighth grade, but for Philip, it couldn't have been better.

CHAPTER 2

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

When school was over, the four boys left the classroom and strolled to the bike shed. Martin was silent, but several times Philip caught him glancing in his direction. Was it just his imagination, or was Martin smiling?

Yes and no. There was most definitely a smile, but it wasn't on Martin's lips; it was in his eyes. A small dark glint, invisible to the untrained eye. But Philip was trained by the Devil himself, and he had seen that glint many times before. Including in his own eyes near the end of his apprenticeship, when they had been black as ink. Martin was smiling to himself, and it was a poisonous smile.

But why?

The answer was found in the bike shed.

Philip's tires were flat.

"Son of a—" Nick glanced around at the other bikes to see if any of them had been tampered with. They hadn't. "And both tires, too."

Martin said nothing, but Philip saw the smile in his eyes slowly migrate to his lips as he unlocked his bike.

"Man," Vernon said, shaking his head. "Who could have done it?"

"Yeah, who?" Philip repeated, turning toward Martin.

"What?" Martin clenched his teeth. "Why are you looking at me?"

"Why do you think?"

"Why do you think?" Martin aped. He set his bike aside. "What are you trying to say, Philip? That I did it? Do you think I was the one who let the air out of your tires?"

"No, I don't *think* so. I *know* so."

Martin's face hardened, and his foul temper flashed. But so did something else. A feeling Philip knew all too well: fear. Martin was afraid. Not of Philip but that Philip had proof. "How?"

"Is it true, Martin?" Nick asked, and Philip could tell that he was already half-convinced. "Did you do it?"

"Are you serious? No, it wasn't me! It's just something he says to make you…"

"Show us your hands, then," Philip interrupted.

"What?" Martin glowered at him, confused, and immediately lowered his arms, hiding his hands behind his back. "Why?"

"Show us your hands. I think you forgot to wash them." This wasn't just something Philip suspected. It was something he knew—though he had no idea *how* he knew. His smile widened as Martin's face paled. "I think they're dirty from messing with my tires."

"Do as he says, Martin," Vernon said. "Show us your hands."

"I'm not going to show you my hands! I'm telling you I didn't do it!"

"You didn't go to the bathroom last class," Philip said. "You came here to let the air out of my tires. Why? Because you're mad that I was asked to come along. Did you know that anger is one of the seven deadly sins?"

"What are you talking about—deadly sins? Is that supposed to be a threat? Are you threatening me, Philip? Are you? Are you?" Martin threw down his backpack and stomped closer to Philip. His hands were clenched.

Philip shook his head. "Nope, I'm just telling you that anger is a deadly sin, and that sinners are punished in Hell."

Martin blinked at the harsh words, and his clenched hands relaxed slightly.

"But maybe you'll get off easier if you confess," Philip continued.

"I'm not *confessing* anything." Martin stepped right up to Philip and shoved his chest. It wasn't a hard shove, just a provocation. "And don't you threaten me!"

Nick and Vernon asked him to stop, but Martin ignored them. His eyes gleamed with anger. "Are you listening to me, you little snitch? Don't you threaten me!" He shoved Philip again, a little harder this time.

Philip did nothing.

"C'mon! C'mon, you wimp! You think I let the air out of your tires. What are you gonna do about it? Huh? What're you gonna do?" Another shove. And another. And another. Still Philip did nothing. "Oh, yeah, that's right. I know what you'll do. You'll hurry home and tell mommy. No, wait, sorry, I forgot. The teacher's little pet *can't* hurry home, 'cause his tires are flat."

Martin kept shoving Philip, provoking him to push back and start the fight that Martin wanted. But Philip restrained himself. He wasn't a fighter. Even though, deep down, he felt the urge to punch Martin in his big, fat, ugly face. All it would take was a word. Just a single word.

Where are you, Satina? he thought.

Suddenly a familiar figure appeared behind Martin. Like a ghost it approached soundlessly from the shadows of the bike shed, and out of the corner of his eye Philip saw Nick and Vernon's faces turn pale. They backed up and bumped into a row of parked bikes.

Martin didn't notice. He just kept on shoving Philip's chest.

"I would stop now if I were you," Philip said softly.

"Or what?" Martin gave him another shove. "Or I'll go to Hell?"

"Exactly," said the figure behind him.

Martin wheeled around and stared into Devil Sam's smiling face. The older boy from tenth grade grabbed Martin's collar and pulled him so close that their noses nearly touched. "Well, hello there!"

Martin couldn't hold back a frightened whimper, and he tried to twist free of Sam's grasp. But it was pointless, and everyone knew it. In Devil Sam's claws you were nothing but a worm on a hook.

The curly-haired boy in the black leather jacket looked at Philip. "You okay?"

He nodded. "I'm okay."

"Of c-course h-he is," Martin stammered, his pale skin glistening with sweat. "I d-didn't do anything…"

"Shut your pie hole!" Sam said. "I saw what you did, my little condemned. No one messes with my good friend Philip and gets away with it. Understand? No one!"

My good friend Philip. Even to Philip the words sounded wrong. He still hadn't grown accustomed to Devil Sam calling

him his friend. But that's what Sam had called him ever since that spring day when he'd been responsible for Philip being hit by a car. After that, the big bully was transformed. At least toward "his good friend Philip," whom he'd taken under his protective wings. On the playground and in the school hallways, the demon from tenth grade still continued to provoke fear and terror in students, as well as the teachers.

"Don't hurt me," Martin begged, clasping his hands as if in prayer. "Please let go of me."

"Let go of you?" Sam repeated in a cheerful voice that made him sound extra scary. "Of course, I'll let go of you. But first we have to go to the creek. Then I'll let go of you. A few times even. Unless you can't swim, of course. Then it'll just be once."

"But it was just a joke!" Martin squirmed again. "I wasn't serious! Philip, tell him that it was just a joke. C'mon. Tell him!"

Maybe he should have. It could have saved Martin from several dunkings in the creek, and worse. But on the other hand… According to Martin, Philip was a little angel. And little angels didn't lie, did they?

Martin's woeful begging became a shrill echo as Sam hauled him out of the bike shed and toward his punishment.

CHAPTER 3

Near Death

"You were right, Philip," Nick said when the three boys left the school, dragging their bikes. "I saw his hands when Sam hauled him off. They were dirty."

"I can't believe he let the air out of your tires." Vernon shook his head. "I know you two aren't best friends, but still… That's low."

Nick agreed. "I never thought I'd say this, but you were lucky Sam showed up when he did. Even though I almost crapped my pants."

"Almost?" Vernon waved a hand in front of his nose. "Give it a rest. We can smell it."

Nick laughed and gave him a punch. "What about yourself? I saw you jump a mil— Hey, Philip, *watch out!*"

Philip felt a hand grab his shoulder, and he was yanked back, hard. There was a loud honk, and a car roared past so close that a gust of wind ruffled his hair. The side mirror grazed the zipper of his jacket, and it clacked loudly.

Philip glimpsed the driver's clenched fist through the rear window, right before the car vanished down the street.

"Jeez, that was close! Are you okay?" Vernon asked, worried.

A moment passed before Philip could respond. His heart was in his throat, blocking his speech. *One* more step… Just *one* more step, and he would've walked right in front of that car.

"I'm okay," he sighed. "Nothing happened."

"Well, watch where you're going next time," Nick said. "We don't want to carry you home to your mother in a coffin."

"A coffin?" Grinning, Vernon shook his head. "If that car had hit you, you would've fit in a jam jar. You would've been squashed."

"This is how you do it, Philip. It's not so hard." Nick glanced from side to side down the street. "First you look to the right. Then to the left. And if no cars are coming, *then* you cross. Didn't you learn that at Boy Scouts?"

"Shut up." Philip smiled.

They crossed the street, and Nick and Vernon revived their conversation about Martin, wondering if Sam had tossed him into the creek by now. Just like before, Philip was only half listening. His thoughts had already circled back to what he was thinking about before he'd nearly been hit by the car.

Satina.

He hadn't heard from her for a long time. Or rather—heard her *voice*. Satina wasn't a human, she was a tempter—a devil who enticed people to commit evil acts. She and Philip couldn't talk face to face. Whenever Satina visited him, she was no more than a thought in his head. An alluring thought that tried to bait him into doing things he wasn't supposed to do. Today she'd had several obvious opportunities. If she'd gotten involved in the bike shed incident, Philip was certain that he would have given in and bonked Martin on the head. But Satina hadn't made a peep all day. Not even when the note about stealing pears had landed on his desk. But for that he hadn't needed her, of course—Philip had agreed to come anyway.

In the beginning, after he'd returned from Hell, Satina had been around a lot, and sometimes Philip had succumbed to her tempting words. Like that time when Martin had been really annoying, and she'd convinced Philip to put the big spider from the classroom terrarium in Martin's pencil case. When Martin reached in to get a pencil and the spider crawled onto his hand, he screamed like a baby.

But Philip didn't do everything Satina urged him to do. Far from it. He didn't really have it in him to act like that. Maybe that's why she hadn't contacted him for so long. Because he rarely listened to her.

A clip-clopping noise interrupted Philip's thinking, and he glanced up. Something was standing farther down the street, and Philip stopped dead in his tracks. His throat constricted in a gasp.

There, right in front of them, less than a 100 feet away, was something out of a nightmare. Most of all it resembled a deformed horse. It had only three legs and was thin as an old cadaver. The creature's pale-yellow hide was stretched so tautly over its bony body that it was nearly translucent, and its gray mane fluttered like a tattered spiderweb in the late-summer breeze. The monster stared directly at Philip. Then it began to approach.

Too frightened to speak, Philip grabbed Nick, who was walking beside him.

"Ouch! Let go, Philip! That hurts! What are you doing?"

Philip pointed at the snorting three-legged horse-monster that was drawing closer. Even at a distance he could see its eyes deep in its misshapen skull. They were red as blood.

"Look!" Philip whispered in a trembling voice.

"Look at what?" Vernon asked, glancing in the direction Philip was pointing. "What's wrong?"

Philip stared in alarm at Vernon and Nick. "Don't you see it?"

"What are you talking about? The horse?"

"Yes!"

Nick frowned. "What about it?"

"What do you mean? Can't you see that it's…" Philip turned toward the terrifying beast again, and his voice fell apart.

The monstrosity was gone. Before them stood an ordinary brown horse with a black mane. A little girl wearing a riding helmet and boots sat on its back. She gave the reins a jerk, trying to make the animal obey her command. The horse snorted once, and then did as the girl wished and turned right, disappearing down the narrow path that led behind the big houses.

"What's going on, Philip? You look like you've seen a ghost." Nick laughed. "I've never heard of anyone being afraid of horses."

"I… I'm not. I just thought… It looked as if…" He shook his head, uncomprehending. Was his mind playing tricks on him? But it had seemed so real. "I… It surprised me, that's all. I'm just not used to seeing horses around town, that's all."

"We're not exactly *in town* anymore," said Vernon, nodding in the direction the horse and the girl had gone. "The riding school's right behind those houses. Didn't you know?"

Philip opened his mouth to respond, but didn't get that far. Something streaked past his head, and a loud crash made his heart skip a beat.

Glancing down, he discovered that the sidewalk in front

of him had vanished beneath a pile of dirt, flowers, and shards of pottery.

"Holy crap!" Vernon whispered. A single shard poked up from the pile of dirt like a coarsely carved headstone. Speaking extra slowly as if to emphasize every word, he said, "That. Was. Freakin'. Lucky."

"If that had hit you, Philip…"

Philip looked up. They were standing in front of the last apartment building, where the suburbs began. In one of the fourth-floor windows, a gray cat sat watching them. It must have knocked over the potted plant. Just another twenty inches, and it would've landed right on Philip's head.

Vernon leaned forward and picked up one of the shards. The one that looked like a headstone.

"Stupid cat!" he shouted, throwing the shard at it. The shard hit the window frame, and the cat disappeared.

"Well, we better get going before it returns with the TV and throws it at us," Nick said. "I'm hungry for pears."

"I don't know if I want to walk with you anymore, Philip," Vernon said. "First the car, now this. It's like there's a black cloud hanging over you."

"Didn't you just say I was lucky?" Philip said.

"Exactly. Which means next time it'll be one of us taking the hit."

They went on talking about what had happened, a conversation that developed into a rather vivid description of what might have happened to Philip if the potted plant had hit him. Vernon was certain that Philip's head would've been flattened between his shoulders, while Nick was absolutely convinced that his brains would've sprayed out of his ears.

Soon the boys reached the first house. Just above the finely trimmed hedge were juicy green pears among the tree leaves.

"Some of the best in the city," Nick said as they parked their bikes. "But they're high up, and the man who lives here is as angry as an old goat, so you've got to keep an eye out. We can get through the hedge over there. One to climb, two to stand guard." He held out a bag. "Who wants to go for the tree?"

You would've been proud of me, Satina, Philip thought, snatching the bag. "I'll do it."

There was a small gap in the hedge where it met the neighbor's picket fence, and the three boys snuck into the yard. Nick and Vernon stayed near the gap, while Philip tiptoed over to the pear tree. It was a long way up to the first branch, but after a few attempts he finally got hold of it. He hoisted himself up and braced his legs against the trunk to get the rest of the way up. Then he was set.

Nick was right; they weren't easy to reach, those pears, high up and far out on the branches. Philip kept climbing and then moved cautiously onto one of the branches. Thick and solid, the branch could easily support his weight. He plucked the pears close by and filled the bag. But there was room for more. He crawled a little farther and reached for the outermost pears, could almost reach them. Just a little farther.

A brisk wind blew. It parted the leaves around him; the sky appeared and…

… and there above the rooftops he saw the horse. It was riding on air, riding straight toward him, galloping on its three slender legs, yellow and hideous as a disease. The monster neighed, and it was a terrible sound. Like a scream of both

horror and pain. The creature's red eyes glowed and Philip, who was filled with a corrosive terror, opened his mouth to screa—

At that very moment his foot slipped. He lost his bal- ance and tumbled sideways over the branch. His bag of pears slipped from his hand and fell through the air. He waved his arms and at the last instant grabbed the branch, clinging to it. Below him was a loud crash.

He looked up at the sky again, expecting to see the horrible creature racing toward him. But there was nothing. Only a vast cloud that, with a little imagination, might resemble a three-legged animal.

But he had seen it so *clearly!* He'd even heard it neigh. Or had he imagined that, too?

Philip looked down. The branch he'd crawled onto extended over the top of a greenhouse. The bag of pears had gone right through the roof, shattering the glass into thousands of pieces.

I could have died, he thought, staring down at the shards and the pears, splattered across the flagstone floor. The car and the potted plant flashed through his mind. *Again. What's going on*?

This was the third time he'd felt death's cold breath on his neck. Maybe he should just forget all this and go home before… before something else happened.

Up in the sky the cloud gently floated away. It only looked like a cloud now.

A cry of warning interrupted his thoughts. "Philip! Philip, get down! He's coming! He's coming!"