

**ONE
PAGE
RULES**



AGE OF FANTASY

A DAEMON'S BOND

*** SHORT STORY ***

AOF: SKIRMISH - A DAEMON'S BOND

They emerged from the Rift at dusk. They scrambled up piles of jagged rocks and into the nearby hills, their avian claws scraping against the stone. When they reached a half-collapsed temple, Quibblequill motioned for them to stop.

Following his instructions, the other Change daemons started clearing out the rubble. Quibblequill looked back towards the Rift as his squad worked. The gigantic chasm stretched before him like a wound, etched into the land as far as the eye could see. In the distance he could make out the faint shapes of winged daemons, venturing out or gliding back in.

He scratched his beak, wishing he too had wings. Maybe his God would reward him, elevate him from a lowly Warrior to a higher rank. Maybe this mission was it.

It was Quibblequill's idea. None of the higher ranking daemons had played any part in it. He had collected rumours from various sources, about a rogue Wizard taking over a small village on the edge of the old Human empire.

They were just whispers and hearsay, but there were enough of them to point to a specific area, enough to find a contact there. A Wizard on the rise meant scrolls, potions, books.

Knowledge, Quibblequill shivered at the thought.

Knowledge was what his God craved, anything to help preserve or restore His dwindling essence. Those who brought Him knowledge were rewarded. Quibblequill moved his shoulders, trying to imagine what wings felt like.

One of the other Warriors called out: they had cleared most of the rubble, revealing a shape like a large doorway etched into the back wall. This was a Voidgate, a magical portal.

This one would take them close to the village. And most importantly, it was a forgotten one. No guards, no surveillance.

On the ground, an arcane motif stretched around a small, empty nook. Quibblequill produced a gem and carefully placed it in the nook. A flash of light coursed through the runes, and suddenly the Voidgate opened. Past the doorway, silhouettes of pine trees loomed against the night sky.

A chilly breeze blew around the daemons.

Quibblequill led the way through the Voidgate, as the others followed behind him.

On the other side was a forest clearing and the moss-covered stone arch of the Voidgate standing on a couple of tiles. On the tiles, Quibblequill found a mirror image of the rune, with the same gem at its centre.

He pulled the gem out and the Voidgate shut. The arch was just an empty frame, it no longer led back to the Rift. The night was clear; the daemons looked carefully at the stars above.

The shape of the constellations confirmed they had reached the right place, hundreds of miles away. They all knew the plan. Without a word they crept into the woods, clawing their way through the undergrowth covering the forgotten trail.

Exiting the forest, they followed a dirt road that wound its way through low, grassy hills. The road was in poor condition, with muddy stretches and loose stones strewn about. They passed several abandoned farms, devoid of people and beasts, their thatched roofs beginning to cave from disrepair.

They reached a crossroads overlooked by a small watchtower. The Empire's banner was sun-bleached and torn to shreds, and the wild grass around the tower's base had not seen a scythe for years. A few bats flew away from a broken window as the daemons approached. Pale skin shimmering in the moonlight, a Human was waiting by the door.

The Human made the agreed-upon signal, interlocking her fingers in an intricate shape. Quibblequill walked up to her. She held his gaze but her jaw was clenched and sweat glimmered on her forehead.

"You... you're the daemons?"

Quibblequill chuckled with a crow-like screech, "What, do you take us for Goblins?"

"Forgive me! Of course not, it's just... you're the first daemons that I have actually seen..."

"Do not worry, Human. I am the one you spoke to through your spells, the one called Quibblequill. And you are Dvana?"

"Dvana, yes," She brushed a wisp of auburn hair back into her hood. "I can help you. I know a way into the Wizard's tower. But you must get rid of him! You have to promise."

"A Daemon's word is their bond," Quibblequill said. "As long as you can give us access to his library, the Wizard will be dealt with." He held out his hand and she shook it firmly.

Following their guide, the daemons trekked through fallow fields and unkempt hedges, steering clear of the paths and out of sight of the few watchtowers that were still manned. They reached a line of trees cresting a hill. They only heard the wind and the leaves rustling under their claws.

Quibblequill sidled up to Dvana.

He shot her a sideways glance. "Young and ambitious, are you? Can't wait for a promotion from your Guild? It's a bold move, bringing us in to free up the throne."

"It's not like that," she protested. "No one knows where the Wizard came from. He came in just as the Empire withdrew from the area, when the old Count died without any heir. There were Orc raids and plague and bad crops. He said he could make it stop."

"And," Quibblequill asked bemusedly, "Did he?"

"I suppose he did, but things aren't better. People disappear. No more travellers come in either. No one even sees him. Everyone's afraid," She stared at the ground, silent, as branches grazed her cowl.

"So, you would prefer to go back to the way things were before, with the Orc raids?"

"Well, my father was in the Wizarding Guild, he taught me a lot. I can serve the needs of my village far better than this outsider! I just need some help getting rid of him..."

"Ah, I see," Quibblequill replied with a smirk, "We're not so different then. I believe there are the Daemons in this realm have lost sight of their way, but I can remind them of our shared purpose. That is, if I can earn a name for myself and force them to hear me out."

The trees gave way to a grassy slope. In the plain below them, the dark shapes of slate roofs huddled around the walls circling a high tower.

AOF: SKIRMISH - A DAEMON'S BOND

Quibblequill could feel something dark and eerie as he looked at the tower. He was certain that powerful magical energies hid inside, waiting to be uncovered.

Beside him, Dvana stared somberly, her fists clenched.

The town was deadly silent, many windows were boarded up. Still, the daemons slipped from shadow to shadow as they followed Dvana towards the town centre.

She knew how to avoid the night watch.

They stopped in a narrow, dingy alley, barred by the tall shape of the fortified wall. Dvana rifled through a pile of refuse, pulling out a bundle of rope that she had stashed there.

She tied a noose and threw the rope towards a small metal bar that stuck out near the top of the wall. After a couple tries, she caught the bar and started climbing, followed by the daemons.

Reaching the top, Dvana quickly lowered the rope into the courtyard, then climbed down as silently as she could until she reached the muddy pavement.

She forced herself to focus on the plan. There was no sign of life in the courtyard; there rarely was. She led the daemons to the kitchens, a low building attached to the base of the tower.

It had been weeks since any food had been delivered to the tower, and she was betting that no one would be there. Acquiring the key had required some force, but that was the cost of progress, and servants were already disappearing left and right anyways.

The creak of the lock felt like a scream in the quiet courtyard. Dvana had to push on the door with her shoulder to open it, the swollen wood scraping against the stone floor. The crew entered in a cloud of dust.

The air had a mouldy, unpleasant smell. A couple of cured hams were gnawed to the bone, and the stockpile of fruits had turned into a miniature fungal forest. Disturbed in their feast, little creatures scurried back to their hiding places.

"So they really don't eat..." Dvana advanced cautiously, stepping over what used to be onions.

"I knew it," Quibblequill whispered excitedly. "A powerful Wizard from the Western Steppes? People missing? Barely eats? We are standing in a Necromancer's lair!"

Dvana swore. "That explains so much. Gods... is that why the cemetery was desecrated?"

"Necromancers love their raw materials," Quibblequill prudently peered behind a door and showed her stony steps that coiled along the wall, climbing up to the upper floor.

"Of course," Quibblequill smirked, "You can always kill them yourself, but that's an extra step. A cemetery has all the resources needed to make some Stitched."

"Has he really been creating abominations like that. right in the heart of our village?"

They tip-toed up the stairs. The daemon turned back towards her, his six eyes faintly glowing in the dark. "You said the library was on the third floor, right?"

"Yes, unless it's been moved. This would be the common room, the library above it and the bedroom up top."

Quibblequill drew a strange, circular bladed weapon. "Let's try to surprise them, shall we?"

The door wasn't locked. Dvana pushed it open, very slowly, careful not to make a sound. She could sense the excitement of the daemons massed behind her. She poked her head in.

The room reeked of death.

It was dark, lit up by candles haphazardly placed all around. Many hooks were mounted on the circular walls, with various metal instruments hanging from them. The old banquet tables and chairs had been converted into crude dissection tables.

There were piles of parchments and books with strange diagrams, showing organs, nerves and arcane equations. There were innumerable glass bottles and clay pots, poisons, potions and powders scattered over shelves and tables.

And, of course, there were bodies.

So many bodies, often cut in parts, stored in big wooden crates with salt or floating in barrels of revolting brine. Some of them lay on the tables, surrounded by candles. Bent over one table were hooded figures, each silently hunched over a corpse as they worked. As one of them moved, the light of a candle glimmered on the point of his needle.

The Stitched.

Horried understanding washed over Dvana as she saw them for the first time. She had heard rumours before of undead creatures, created from stitched together bodies, but she had hoped she might never see one...

She tried to move, but she was frozen in shock.

The Daemons were not. Staying low, they snuck their way between table legs and limbs stockpiles, amazingly silent. They burst out from the darkness, grabbing the hooded acolytes from behind and stabbing them repeatedly. Two of them collapsed with barely a sigh. The third one let out a gurgling cry before Quibblequill managed to put him down.

A bell started to ring.

Dvana and the Daemons rushed towards the stairs that led to the library, on the other side of the room. The Daemons were yelling and cackling with uncontrolled excitement.

As Dvana bumped into a table, the pieced-together abomination on it jerked upright, a cadaverous hand grabbing Dvana's wrist. She yelped in surprise and fumbled with the clasp of the dagger on her belt.

The Stitched tightened its grip, snapping its teeth inches from her face like a mad puppet. Quibblequill vaulted over another table and cut down the Stitched with a few strokes of his blades.

He dragged Dvana towards the stairs.

The room was in complete chaos, Daemons and Undead fighting each other, knocking over chairs, tables and candles. The alarm kept ringing. Something was burning. A couple of Daemons pushed the heaviest coffer against the entrance door, blocking access to outside reinforcements.

It was over as quickly as it erupted.

AOF: SKIRMISH - A DAEMON'S BOND

Two Daemon warriors were dead, and half a dozen of Stitched had been rendered back into separate parts. In the smoke-filled room, nothing moved except the flames. Behind the barricaded door, furious guards were trying to break through. Dvana and the daemons had already rushed up the library stairs.

Flanked by two of his frantic warriors, Quibblequill yelled out an incantation just as they hurled themselves at the door. A burst of magic splintered the wood and the three daemons exploded into the library, followed by Dvana and the others.

The room was filled with heavy wooden shelves loaded with books and scrolls. Dvana had never seen so many in one place. The accumulated knowledge seemed to drive the daemons into a fever, like men who have discovered a great pile of gold.

Quibblequill and his warriors were pacing across the room, grabbing books, yelling about their finds to each other. Dvana drew her dagger, wishing she knew more magic than she did.

"Quibblequill! The Necromancer!"

The Daemon seemed to snap back from his trance, "Right! Leave the books for now! Let's finish off the old bone-bag, he's probably hiding alone in his..."

A bolt of green lightning shot across the room, hitting a Daemon who wrinkled, withered and turned into mouldy dust in a few seconds. Descended from his chambers, the Necromancer wore a fur-lined cape. His face was hidden by a strange copper mask and his pale, wiry arms were covered in tattoos. He brandished an ornate staff, yelling orders while three armoured skeletons deployed around him, swords drawn.

Another bolt shot from his staff and Dvana ducked, barely dodging it. The Skeletons advanced, exchanging blows with the daemons. Quibblequill and his warriors were faster, but the undead were well armoured and shook off their blows.

The Necromancer's spell struck down another Daemon.

And Quibblequill was cornered.

A blow bounced off his pauldron but the strength of it knocked him to the ground. He looked up at the grimacing skull, knowing he was about to be returned to his God.

But something heavy struck the skeletal Guard's back.

The Daemon seized his chance and struck repeatedly at the enemy's knees then at his neck. Soon, the fearsome abomination was nothing but a pile of bones.

Quibblequill saw the object that hit the daemon. It was a large grimoire that Dvana had thrown from across the room.

Another Daemon was struck down, taking a Guard with him. The Necromancer's magic was too strong for them!

Quibblequill's mind was buzzing with fear and anger. He glanced at the runes across the pages of the book on the floor.

He knew this alphabet. He had an idea. Just because he was losing didn't mean someone else had to win.

"Read the spells! Any of them! Just do it!"

He threw the book at Dvana and he dove to avoid another lightning bolt, taking cover behind a bookshelf.

He heard the last of his warriors fall to a Skeleton's blade, and the raspy voice of the Necromancer began chanting a regenerative ritual.

He grabbed a book and started reading. He had no idea what it was. Behind another shelf, the human had caught on and she was also reading a page out loud, stumbling on some of the unfamiliar words in the text.

Sparks flew from random places as the two spells started to take effect and shadows of illusory objects writhed on the walls.

The Necromancer let out a furious cry when he realised what they were doing. He stopped his own incantation and sent another bolt in the direction of Quibblequill's voice.

The bookshelf shattered but the daemon had already snuck behind another one and was reading another page.

Quibblequill realised as he read the power of the spell, a conjuring spell. He felt the wrong shape and warp like rippling water, shifting into a place more familiar to his mind. It was almost like a dream, where the world around you shifted and bent according to your own mind.

The last Skeleton Guard found the Daemon and charged him, sword raised high. But it was too late; a thin, pink tendril snapped out of nowhere and grabbed the guard, dragging him out of sight.

Quibblequill continued reading the spell. He would not have been able to cast such a spell without the book before him, he felt the power of the tome as he chanted the spell. The floor had warped slowly to resemble a temple dedicated to his God, a place of power and protection for him, one where he held the advantage over the Necromancer.

The Necromancer wailed as something tore at him from the inside, tendrils emerging from him. One of these tendrils extended towards Quibblequill, as if to ensnare him. Quibblequill did not stop chanting, the tendrils, he could only hope was some manifestation of his spell.

Then, something hit him in the chest.

Dvana had pushed him to the ground, away from the Necromancer who was soon consumed by the strange tentacles emerging from within him. Quibblequill rose and let out a battle cry, drawing his blades to defend himself, when he heard a loud creak beneath him.

"We have to go!" Dvana's eyes were wide and bloodshot. Smoke was pouring in from the burning floor below; half the room was on fire and the other was filled with tentacles.

She helped him up and they scrambled up stairs, half transformed by Quibblequill's spell, towards the Necromancer's room.

"It's not like he's going to need it," Quibblequill thought with a grim satisfaction as he climbed the steps.

He peered into the room, changed to resemble a part of the temple though with some furniture still unchanged by the spell. Next to an old wooden table stood a beautiful, ornate lectern.

On the lectern was a book. He knew instantly that this was a rare find. One that his God would notice.

He climbed the last couple steps.

AOF: SKIRMISH - A DAEMON'S BOND

Dvana cried out. A tendril had caught her ankle. Quibblequill reached out, but the stairs collapsed before he could grab her.

"Help me!" She pleaded, surrounded by flames and writhing tentacles. Quibblequill thought quickly. The hole was expanding, and the flames had already weakened the tower...

The decision was more difficult than Quibblequill had expected it would be, but he knew what he had to do.

"The Necromancer's gone," Quibblequill looked her in the eye, "I have kept my promise."

"Don't you leave me here, you-"

"I have my own purpose to fulfill, I fear."

Quibblequill turned back, trying to ignore her screams. He rushed to the lectern and took the book. Affixed to the scaley leather of the cover, golden sigils hummed with magical power.

The stone window frame on the wall was tight, but the Daemon managed to squeeze through it. Villagers were screaming below. Behind him wooden beams snapped and the weight of the half-transformed tower began to buckle.

Thick black smoke emanating from the tower blocked his sight.

Perched on the ledge, with his precious book held tight against his chest, Quibblequill hesitated. Maybe he could still run back, grab the rope which they had climbed over with...

There was a blast.

Pure silence followed by an uncontrollable burst of energy as the spell came apart and the tower collapsed on itself

Quibblequill was launched back, falling rapidly through the smoke. He had landed hard on the ground. He lay there for a minute, barely conscious, as white-hot embers and stone fragments rained around him.

The first sense to come back was pain.

Everything hurt, and one of his arms was definitely broken. He could hear villagers screaming, but they were too busy dealing with the fire and the damages to pose a threat.

He struggled to his feet. Hobbling from shadow to shadow, he made his way up the wall and through the alleys, retracing the route which Dvana had followed to the tower

He had to hide a couple of times as people rushed towards the centre with barrels of water, and he overheard fragments of conversations. There was terror and hesitant hope in the villagers' voices. They didn't know if this was the end of the nightmare or if there was worse yet to come.

Quibblequill stopped after he reached the treeline. It was only a short walk back to the Voidgate now, and no one was chasing him. He looked at the village in the distance, the ruins of the tower still burning.

"I kept my promise," the Daemon whispered to himself, "The Necromancer is dead. Now, the villagers are free to do as they will. The rest is up to them."

Wearily, wounded and cradling the book in his one good arm, the daemon turned back and disappeared into the woods.

