

## The Last Wish

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Lazarus experienced the excitement that follows a lifetime of effort, and the certainty of long awaited success. His lifetime of buying, selling, and trading used items and antiques had gradually led him to the acquisition of ever more valuable and sought after possessions. Yet among them, he had steadily accumulated and studied those things that his instincts told him would lead to this day. Finally, as he drew upon the cobbled dungeon floor the pentagrams, trite gimmicks of the hack writers, yet essential even so, he knew with certainty that he would succeed.

Lazarus, who had taken his name from a crumbling and cherished tome in a shop in Prague, had also taken from the tome, carefully concealed, an essential page. The theft had represented the betrayal of a long friendship and he had never returned to that shop again. The trail that he had been following through that shop had begun in a little town in Germany's Bavarian Forest, many years earlier. It had led through museums, to ancient cemeteries, across frozen tundra, and, eventually, it had led to the dungeon with the cobbled floor. Lazarus could feel within the very air of the old place the potential for the evocation that he prepared.

How many dungeons in the world had cobbled floors? Probably not many. Yet that was one of the necessary ingredients. Nor would just any chalk do. The chalk that was used by Lazarus had been prepared in a way remembered in few places. The evocation could be accomplished in a cobbled dungeon, using certain chalk, prepared in a certain way, if one knew the proper words, and if the conditions were just right. Lazarus knew very well that evocation was only one of the requirements. When a Daemon is evoked, it must also be contained. Many men had successfully evoked Daemons. Often, they had left records of their methods. Few had survived their evocations. The method of containment was the puzzle that had led Lazarus on his lifelong search.

Lazarus had carefully constructed his containment chamber. The arrangement of it had cost him many months of effort. The chamber derived from a sphere of candles, each carefully supported so that no other material object intruded into the chamber. Making the candles burn perpendicular to their lengths, however they were oriented, was in itself a noteworthy accomplishment. The wax in the candles had been obtained at great price from an ancient crone in the town of FdÉrik, in Mauritania. She had also manufactured the candles, using a method that only she remembered. The chamber itself would consist of a delicate geodesic sphere of light formed by crystal prisms carefully positioned near each candle. The prisms had come from a place, and at a cost, that Lazarus had chosen to forget.

As the incantation progressed, the insubstantial chamber, a delicate web of candle beams, darkened into a seemingly substantial network of rigid members. All light but that of the hundreds of candles had been carefully excluded from the dungeon. As the chamber strengthened, the light from the candles seemed to diminish, but not in intensity. It seemed to pour into the crystal prisms, move into the structure of the chamber, and become solid. Lazarus droned the incantation, practiced silently for over 10 years, and spoken aloud for the first time, so far as he knew, in over a thousand years.

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Within the chamber, a light began to grow. It was a curious light, not what Lazarus had expected. It was of a color that he couldn't identify. With a sick shock, Lazarus realized that he had nearly been tricked by the Daemon before it was even evoked. The puzzle of the unnamed color had almost distracted him from the intricate poetry of the incantation, which must be recited perfectly. With barely a hesitation, Lazarus resumed, but he felt within himself at the hesitation a distant chuckle of anticipation which was not his own.

After thirty minutes of recitation, Lazarus had closed his eyes but the light from within the chamber was not of a type to be excluded by physical barriers. He saw it as clearly with his eyes closed. That realization caused him to consider whether he should stop the recitation and spend perhaps another 15 or 20 years of careful research before trying again. But, he had already studied for a lifetime and, anyway, he had no knowledge of how to safely stop the incantation before its proper end.

During the last 5 minutes of the recitation, Lazarus became extremely apprehensive. The Daemon, almost fully evoked, began to taunt him mercilessly. Only through the utmost of concentration did Lazarus complete the spell. At last, however, it was done.

With the invocation recited and the evocation complete, Lazarus could look at the Daemon. He did so briefly, and closed his eyes again. Closing his eyes didn't help, but he couldn't bring himself to open them, regardless of the image he saw with them closed. The Daemon laughed, and lunged against the chamber walls. Lazarus cringed. Had he not been paralyzed with fear, he might have bolted from the dungeon. However, such would have been the end of him. One stray beam of real light, and his chamber would be as if it had never been. However, the chamber held the Daemon, and Lazarus gradually calmed.

"Well," said the Daemon. "This is the best I have seen in many lifetimes of men!"

"Ehk — er, that is, I — " Lazarus found that he was having difficulty with his voice. It sounded thin and tinny. By comparison with the voice of the Daemon, it was.

"Speak to me, little man! You have disturbed me, now speak!"

"I, er, I want something," said Lazarus.

Huge laughter rolled through Lazarus' mind, and he wondered that his chamber held in place without a quiver. Then, he realized that the laughter was indeed in his mind. Gods! The Daemon was within him. Lazarus fought briefly for his soul, and realized again that the Daemon was trying to trick him. There was no one in his head.

Again, Lazarus said, "I want something."

The Daemon remained silent.

"Answer me," said Lazarus.

"Ask me a question," said the Daemon.

"Will you give me what I want?" asked Lazarus.

“I must,” said the Daemon.

Lazarus knew the statement to be true. He also knew that Daemons were as tricky as they were frightening.

“You know,” continued Lazarus, “that I don’t have to release you until I have my Wish.”

“And you know,” boomed the Daemon, “that I need grant but one.”

“I haven’t wished for anything yet!” said Lazarus hastily. “You’re not yet free to go!”

“Nor have I yet placed my Condition,” said the Daemon.

Lazarus had found mention of the Law of Conditions but, for all of his searching, he had never been able to discover what it was or how it worked. It was a flaw in his knowledge that he had chosen to risk.

“State your Condition,” commanded Lazarus.

“Compel me,” countered the Daemon.

“You have to do as I say,” insisted Lazarus.

“Is that your wish?” asked the Daemon.

“No!” shouted Lazarus. “No! That’s not my wish! Jesus Chris --”

“DON’T SAY THAT!” Boomed the Daemon with truly terrifying ferocity.

“Jeez — , I mean, it’s just an expression,” pleaded Lazarus. “I didn’t mean anything by it!”

“Just be careful. I don’t need to listen to obscenities. You have evoked me. Don’t call upon Those Powers now, even in jest.”

“O.K., just, that wasn’t my wish. I just want you to state your condition.”

“Recite the Invocation,” commanded the Daemon.

Lazarus waited and hoped for inspiration. He couldn’t think of anything to say. Nowhere in his years of study had he ever found an invocation for the Law of Conditions.

“Ahh, so it seems that men have lost the Invocation of Conditions. Well, this makes things more interesting.”

“How so?” asked Lazarus.

“Without the Invocation of Conditions, you cannot compel me to state my Condition. However, I can still make the Condition. You must state your Wish without knowing the Condition.”

“But how can I do that!?” objected Lazarus. “It could be anything!”

“Exactly so,” stated the Daemon. “There is a balance in all things. As you can make any Wish, I can make any Condition. If you would impose upon me a limit, you must accept upon yourself a limit. We can bargain.”

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“But how do we know what’s fair? What if you limit my Wish more than I limit your Condition?”

“Then you need not accept the limit. You may propose an alternate limit, for my consideration.”

“But what if you don’t like the alternate?”

“Then I need not accept it.”

“But how’ll we know what’s fair?”

“Who is to say? There are here only the two of us. There are none but us to decide what is fair. If we are both satisfied, then it is fair.”

“I just won’t let you go!” threatened Lazarus. “I’ll just keep you here in this chamber!”

“And I,” returned the Daemon, “will keep you here in this dungeon. If you attempt escape, your chamber will collapse. The candles have already been in use far longer than they would naturally burn. Give me but a single beam of starlight from yonder door, and I shall have you within my domain forever.”

Lazarus knew that the threat was accurate and true. It is in the nature of things that the hunter is often the servant of his victim. As he held captive the Daemon, so the Daemon held him.

“I suppose, then,” suggested Lazarus, “that we must make a deal. What limit would you place upon my wish?”

“That you could have again,” stated the Daemon, “anything that you have previously owned in your lifetime.”

“Aw, come on! That’s no good! I’ve been a poor man. Most of what I possessed I never owned. I used a lot of credit. I made deals. I traded.”

“You lie. It is given to me to know these things. You have owned much.”

“Alright, but I want more! If I was happy with what I already had, why would I be here?”

“Nevertheless, that is my limit. In return for that, you may place a limit upon my Condition.”

“May I have the Invocation of Conditions?”

“That is not a limit, and I would not give it anyway.”

“Then forget it!”

“I cannot.”

“Not literally, dammit, it’s just another expression!”

“The languages of men are strange, and they change so quickly!”

“Never mind. No! Wait! That’s just another expression. You’re still bound to do my wish!”

“Granted.”

“No!” screamed Lazarus, “that wasn’t a wish!”

“Just an expression,” chuckled the Daemon.

“Alright,” decided Lazarus. “I reject your limitation on my Wish.”

“Then I reject any limitation on my Condition.”

“Will you at least do me a favor?” asked Lazarus.

“Is this your Wish?” asked the Daemon.

“No. You’re not bound to do this favor. I ask it before the Wish.”

“Go ahead.”

“You can state your Condition, or not, as you choose?”

“Yes.”

“Will you at least tell me before you grant the Wish?”

“Yes, but only after you make the Wish.”

“O.K.”

“Once made,” warned the Daemon, “you have no power to recall the Wish. You must accept the Grant of your Wish, and my exercise of the Condition.”

Lazarus gulped. He couldn’t see any way out. “O.K.”

“Make your Wish.”

“I wish for all of the money in the world to be placed under my ownership, on this piece of property.”

“Define money,” demanded the Daemon.

“Aw, come on. You know what I mean. Bills, coins, gold, jewels, stuff like that.”

“Do you believe there’s enough room here for that much money?”

“Don’t put it here in the dungeon!” instructed Lazarus in exasperation. “Put it outside! It’s a large piece of property. It’s very isolated. It’s surrounded by mountains. My money’ll be safe up there. Just do it. That’s my wish.”

“And before I grant your Wish, I will grant your favor,” offered the Daemon.

“You’re an honorable Daemon,” admitted Lazarus.

“Men scarcely know the meaning of the word,” commented the Daemon dryly. “Only our profound honor ever allowed men to learn to evoke us. Nevertheless, here is my Condition. Whatever I give unto you, I shall give twice the same unto your worst enemy.”

Lazarus was quiet for a moment, puzzling over this. Then he said, “So I’ll get all the money in the world and then my worst enemy’ll get twice that. Well. So I’ll only be the second richest man in the world. Hmmm.”

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“I am, as you have observed, an honorable Daemon. I will now give freely what I need not give at all. I will give you one chance to cancel both the Wish and the Condition. I will go my way and you will go your way. That will be the end of it. Do you wish to do that?”

Lazarus could see no point in loosing what he had requested. He quickly refused the offer.

“So be it,” said the Daemon, and pronounced a word that had never before been spoken on Earth.

All of the money in the world appeared upon the property owned by Lazarus.

“You now own all the money in the world,” said the Daemon, “and now I will exercise my Condition.”

“Where’ll the new money come from?” interrupted Lazarus.

“From my Domain, wherein there is a limitless amount,” said the Daemon.

Then, an amount of money equal to twice the previous wealth of the entire world appeared around a little shop in Prague, where an old man had for years nursed a smoldering hatred, because of an essential page missing from a crumbling and cherished ancient book.

“Now — ” said the Daemon.

“Who got it?” asked Lazarus, and the Daemon told him.

“Ah, yes. So he still hates me. Well, I suppose I deserve it. At least now he has wealth,” said Lazarus.

“But,” said the Daemon, “he cannot keep it.”

“What?”

“You placed no limit of time or amount upon your Wish. I must yet give to you all of the money in the world.” The Daemon pronounced the word again.

The new money immediately appeared upon the property owned by Lazarus. There was a sound from above. The timbers of the dungeon groaned.

“Now,” continued the Daemon, “I will again exercise my Cond — ”

“Wait!” shouted Lazarus. “I’ll be buried under money!”

“You already are, little man,” said the Daemon with a smile, if such it could be called. “Like you, I placed no limit of time or amount upon my Condition. Whenever I give you money, I will give twice that same amount to your enemy. He now has even greater cause to hate you, because he knows of your wish. He witnesses the destruction around him. That much money is quite heavy. And now, I again exercise my Condition.”

An amount of money equal to six times that previously in the world appeared around the little shop in Prague.

“And now yet again,” intoned the Daemon, “that too, is yours.”

As the new money appeared upon the property owned by Lazarus, the timbers of the dungeon groaned more loudly.

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Within the dungeon, the Daemon lingered. He liked to stay and observe the results of his handiwork. This time, he had done quite a neat job of it. Lazarus had, of course, discovered that he was still trapped. His valley had long since been filled with money. Escape from the dungeon was impossible. The Daemon, again granting the Wish and exercising the Condition, seemed less formidable. It was even inclined to talk, during the minutes that remained before the overbearing weight should collapse the dungeon roof.

“Will you ever stop?” asked Lazarus, with a certain resignation.

“When you are dead,” said the Daemon.

“But still,” objected Lazarus, “there’s no limit on my wish. How can you ever stop?”

“You wished for all the money in the world to be placed under your ownership. Yet, dead men do not own money,” said the Daemon. “Those Other Powers, who obtain jurisdiction over you when you die, have decreed it so.”

“Ahhh. So you really can’t take it with you.”

“Not if you are of the race of men,” promised the Daemon. “For others, it might be different. I know not.”

“Then, what’ll happen to all of this money, after I’m dead?”

“All the new money will return to my domain, from which it is coming. All the original money will return to its previous owners. Indeed, so brief a time has passed beyond the influence of your spell, that few men will have noticed it’s absence.”

“What about the destruction in Prague?”

“Men have rebuilt after worse,” said the Daemon.

“I’ve a feeling you’ve done things like this before,” observed Lazarus.

“I have. Greed is the most easily manipulated of all man’s vices,” stated the Daemon. “And money has always been a hobby of mine.”

“I guess that you’ve had a lot of practice,” said Lazarus.

“Not as much as you’d expect,” said the Daemon. “I get called but seldom. Few know my name. However, you did. You should have been forewarned.”

“Yes,” said Lazarus, “but I thought that it was just a coincidence.”

“No. Only among humans are names repeated. Elsewhere, no two creatures are ever named the same. History may have misremembered me as a God rather than as a Daemon, but history remembered my name. I was there,” said the Daemon Dionysus, “and I remember King Midas as if it was yesterday.”

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