**For Value Received**

Lawrence Watt-Evans

A cloud of dust arose as Nathan carefully opened the ancient book. He trembled with fear and anticipation as he turned the crumbling pages, searching for the spell he wanted.

He had spent long years in careful study before determining exactly which book of the thousands of grimoires and arcana held the genuine formulae for summoning the Devil, but at last he had that one nameless, blasphemous volume in his unsteady hands.

This was the moment of decision — did he really want to do this? Did he want to give up his soul to an eternity of Hell in exchange for earthly pleasures?

Yes, he decided, he did. All those years of being pushed around, of watching the big bastards around him enjoying life while he had nothing but pain — he wanted some payback. He wanted to be healthy. He wanted to be rich enough that his size and looks didn’t matter. He wanted to live long enough to see his tormentors buried. He didn’t particularly want to hurt anyone — just to gloat over them a little.

And as for losing his soul, while he’d always been a loser, he hadn’t exactly been an angel; the chances were good he’d be damned anyway, in the end. He turned his attention to the page and read through the detailed instructions — written, he knew, in the blood of murdered virgins by an insane monk of the seventh century. He pored over them, memorizing every warning, every hint, as well as the ritual itself.

At last, when he was sure he hadn’t missed anything important, Nathan removed his clothes, drew the elaborate diagram in chalk on the floor of his rented room, lit the seven black candles at the appropriate points, and recited the long, almost unpronounceable incantation while performing the unmentionable rites the book described.

At first it seemed that the results were all that he might have asked for. The temperature in the room dropped to well below freezing, but before he had seen more than a single breath emerge white and frosty it soared to sauna heat; the thin twists of smoke from the candles thickened to a swirling funnel cloud that filled the chalk diagram from floor to ceiling; the room grew dim, and eerie laughter echoed uncannily from the walls. A towering, misshapen form appeared amid the smoke, standing in the center of the pentagram.

Nathan stared.

The apparition stood nine feet tall, and was covered with matted red-brown hair; a pair of nasty-looking horns scraped the ceiling, and its eyes glowed golden. It was vaguely human, vaguely goatlike in form; it stood on two crooked legs, and spoke in tones that made Nathan think of steam engines at full throttle.

“See my secretary,” it said.

Then it vanished, much more abruptly than it had appeared, and was instantly replaced by an attractive young blonde, standing nude in the pentagram, her hair tied back in a bun, wire-frame glasses on her nose, a pad and pencil in her hands.

“May I help you?” she asked.

Nathan stared, at least as disconcerted by this second apparition as he had been by the first, but in response to an impatient glare he finally stammered out, “I was trying to summon the devil.”

She nodded briskly. “Yes, you have the correct formula, though it’s one we don’t use much any more, but I’m afraid Lucifer is a very busy entity, and you don’t seem to have an appointment; just what was it you wished to speak to him about?”

“I... I wanted to sell my soul, like in the stories, and be rich and famous and live for centuries...”

“Oh, you want Sales,” she said. “Could you hold, please?”

Then she was gone, and Nathan stared at the empty pentagram. The candles were still burning, the smoke still swirling, and she had said to hold, so he stood, staring foolishly, uncomfortably aware that he was naked himself.

This was not how he had pictured it. This wasn’t like anything from the old stories; this was more like his everyday life, wading through red tape and spending hours on hold. This was what he had hoped to get away from by selling his soul — he wanted to be rich and powerful enough that no one would ever dare put him on hold.

He was tired of being small and scared and sick, tired of being pushed around, tired of growing old, and he’d been desperate enough to try anything.

Well, if this worked, it would be worth one more runaround.

A man appeared in the pentagram, a tall man in a pinstripe suit; he smiled a huge, toothy smile, and Nathan thought the teeth looked more numerous and more pointed than human teeth ought to.

But then, who said he was human?

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting,” the apparition said. “How may I help you?”

“I wanted to sell my soul,” Nathan said, a little more confidently this time.

“Ah, yes.” He nodded sagely. “Lilith mentioned that, I think. Well, you’ve come to the right place; that’s my business. We can give you the best deal you’ll find anywhere.” He smiled again, and even essayed a small laugh. Nathan managed a rather sickly grin in return; if anyone else were in the business of buying souls, Nathan didn’t suppose he’d be dealing with these... people?

Whatever they were, they had a reputation for swindling their clients; he needed to be very careful.

“I want a long life,” he began, “a hundred years or more of perfect health, and vast wealth, and all the women I want...”

The salesman, his smile replaced by a somber expression, held up a hand; Nathan stopped.

“Mr., ah...”

“Nathan Runkel.”

“Thank you. Mr. Runkel, while we do want to keep our customers happy for as long as they live...” He paused significantly and flashed another quick grin. “While we do want to please our customers, I say, we’re running a business, not a television giveaway show. Unless there’s something very unusual about this soul you’re offering, I doubt very much that we’ll be able to meet those terms.”

“Um... I thought a human soul was supposed to be infinitely precious...”

The salesman smirked. “Really, Mr. Runkel — take a look at the world around you.”

Nathan had done plenty of that over the past forty years; he didn’t have to ask what the salesman meant.

He should have expected this, he told himself bitterly.

“All right,” he said, “What can I get for my soul, then?”

The salesman pursed his lips thoughtfully. “Well, I don’t know exactly, offhand; you see, we don’t really pay for your soul exactly, it’s really more in the nature of a mortgage, a guarantee that we’ll wind up with possession of it upon your eventual, um... termination. So the value of that guarantee of title depends not only on the intrinsic strength and worth of the soul in question, but also upon how much equity we may already hold in it, and how long we’ll have to wait for delivery. Quite frankly, our equity in most souls is already fairly extensive — every time you benefit from any of our services, we acquire additional shares. Hardly anyone bothers to deal direct any more, yet our income is at almost unprecedented heights.”

Nathan blinked. This did not sound good at all. “All right,” he said again. “So how much... um... how much is the remaining equity in my soul worth, then?”

“Well, I’m afraid I’m not familiar with your particular case, Mr. Runkel — you’re not one of my regular clients. But if you could hold on a moment, I’ll connect you to Accounting.”

Before Nathan could protest, the salesman had vanished.

The wait was quite brief this time; Nathan had hardly had time to start cursing when a troll appeared, stooped, ugly, and holding a huge, old-fashioned ledger. It wore a flowered vest and a filthy beard that dragged on the floor.

“Name?” it demanded.

“Nathan Runkel,” Nathan answered.

The troll muttered, dropped the ledger with a crash, then squatted and hauled the massive volume open. It pulled a pair of pince-nez from its vest pocket, perched them on its gigantic nose, and began turning pages.

Nathan stood, waiting apprehensively.

Maybe he would settle for living to ninety or so, and just being rich enough that he never had to work again, and maybe a small harem.

“Any relation to the Grossmeyer-Runyons?” the troll demanded.

“I don’t think so,” Nathan replied, jarred out of his hopeful calculations.

“Too bad.”

Another moment passed in near-silence, the only sounds the rustle of turning pages and the creak of floorboards as the troll shifted its weight.

“Runkel,” the troll muttered. “Silly sort of name.” It paused, studying a page, and asked, “Ever live in Zimbabwe?”

“No.”

“Too bad.” A lumpy finger ran down a page. “Nathan Runkel, you say?”

“That’s right.”

“Middle name?”

“Barnaby.”

The troll glowered at him. “You might have said so earlier.” It flipped back several pages, then asked, “Born?”

“July twentieth...”

“’Yes’ will do.” It jabbed a finger at the page. “Got it. Did you want record to date, net value, or prospectus?”

“Uh... net value, I guess.”

“In what?”

“Um... dollars?”

“What kind of dollars?”

“U.S.”

The troll muttered to itself for a moment, then announced, “Seventy-eight dollars and eleven cents.”

Nathan’s mouth fell open. “Is that all?”

“Yep.” The troll grinned horribly. “You want it in anything else? Lifespan, personal favors, what-have-you?”

That sounded promising. “Lifespan?” Nathan asked.

“Seventeen hours, thirteen minutes — we can triple that if you’re comatose.”

“What good is that?” Nathan asked bitterly.

The troll shrugged. “Day might come when you’ll appreciate living an extra seventeen hours,” it said.

“What about women?” Nathan asked hopelessly.

The troll considered that. “Well,” it said, “We can arrange for an under-age girl of ordinary looks to develop a crush on you for three weeks, or get you a one-night stand with a slightly-drunk housewife.”

“Don’t bother,” Nathan said in disgust. “Is that really all my soul’s worth?”

“It’s a tough world,” the troll said with a shrug. “And hey, you’ve got no complaint; lots of folks out there we wouldn’t pay more than about ten bucks.”

“I can believe that,” Nathan said. “You mean like some of those bastards I work with.”

The troll nodded. “The ones who aren’t already working for us,” it said.

Nathan blinked.

“Working for you?” he said.

“Well, sure,” said the troll. “The money’s never in the production end, you know; it’s always the middlemen who get rich.”

“Middlemen?”

“Sure. The people who drive other people to Hell.” The troll shrugged. “A lot of them are volunteers, working for nothing, but we have plenty on staff, too — at thirty percent commission you can do all right.”

“Thirty percent.” Nathan stared, thinking.

All those bastards who had abused him over the years, driven him to anger and despair — some of them got paid for it. They got money, and longer lives, and women...

No wonder it was always the brutes who got the girls. No wonder nice guys finished last.

“That everything?” the troll asked. “You want me to give you back to Sales?”

“No,” Nathan said slowly. He chewed his lip, then asked, “These people who work for you — is there any kind of training program or anything?”

“Sure.” The troll waited.

“All right, then,” Nathan said, “give me Personnel.”

*end*