

DMITRII EMETS

FLAMY The DRAGONET



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Masha's toys woke up the young dragon Flamy, lost and asleep in a trunk. He lived with Masha, her cat, and the toys until reunited with his mother. Later, he invited Masha and company to visit Fairyland, terrorized by the Miseries. Can Flamy and Masha fulfil the ancient prophecy of a girl and a young dragon freeing Fairyland?

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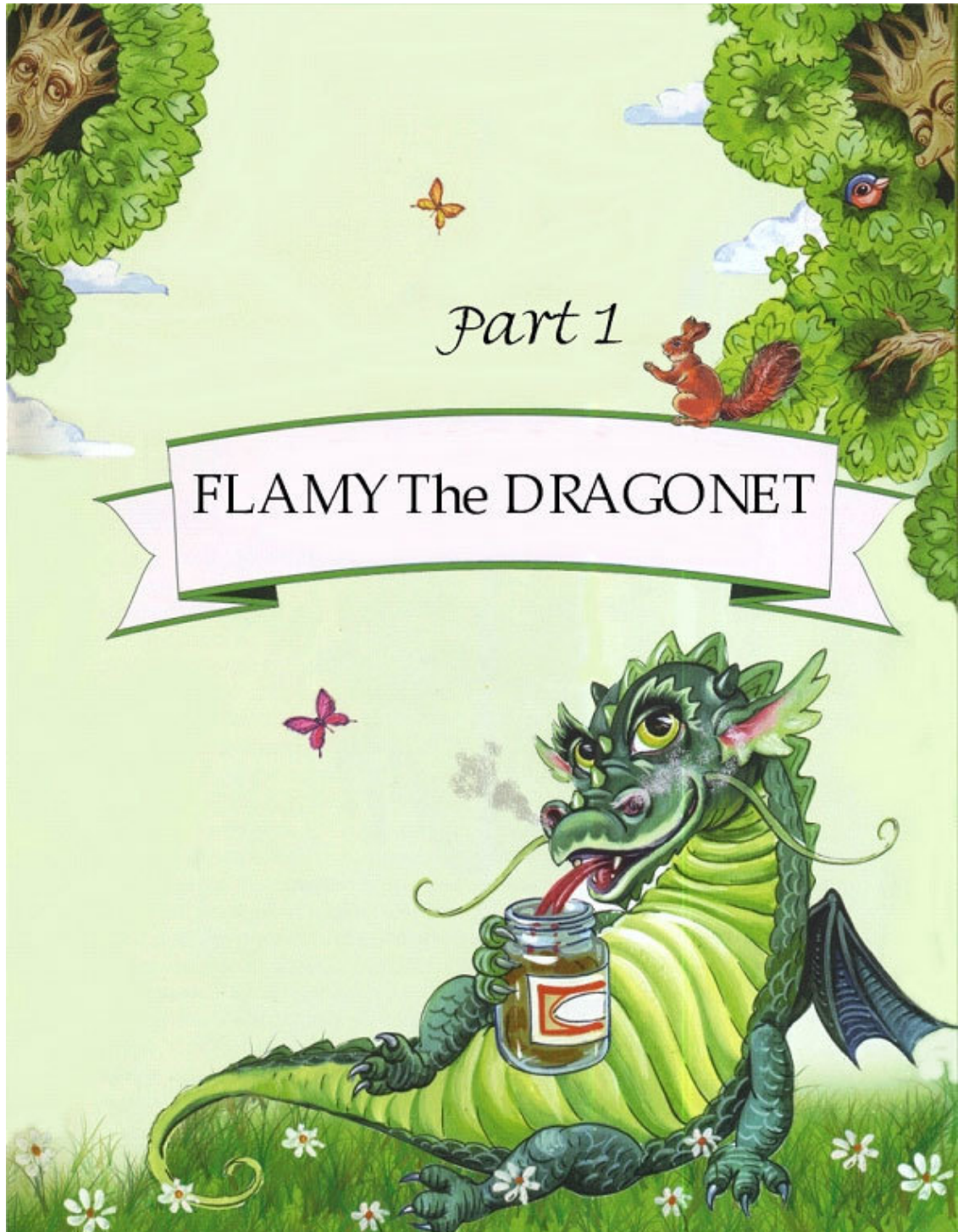
Flamy the Dragonet

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Part One Flamy the Dragonet





Chapter One

The Bunnies' Birthday

Late in the evening, when Masha was already asleep, the plush bunnies Sineus and Truvor¹ were celebrating their first birthday in a box under her bed. The bunnies were twins, and if it were not for a spot of watercolour on Sineus' ear and black threads sewn on Truvor's tail, it would not be possible to tell them apart.

The cat Muffin, the doll Olga, and the red-haired baby boy doll Pookar were the bunnies' guests.

¹ According to the 12th century Primary Chronicle, the history of Kievan Rus' from c. 850 to 1110, Sineus and Truvor were brothers of Rurik, the founder of the Rurik Dynasty that ruled Kievan Rus' until the 17th century.



Olga was not a slender Barbie, but a respectable Russian doll with strong arms and legs and big blue eyes. When she was turned upside down, she got scared and cried, “Ma-ma!” There is nothing surprising about that. If you, dear reader, were turned upside down, you would also begin to call for mama or even a policeman. Olga did everything in the world correctly. She would always say “thank you” and “please” and only occasionally mixed them up. “Thank give me candy!” or “Please you for lunch!” came out of Olga then.

The bunnies' other guest, the red-haired baby boy doll Pookar, belonged to the type that always walks around with undone laces, scraped knees, and a black eye. His red hair was tousled, his turned-up nose looked at the world with two cheerful holes, and freckles were scattered across his cheek.



Pookar was dressed in a denim jacket with a lot of pockets: two at the bottom, two on top, and one at the back. Masha, the seven-year-old girl in whose room the toys lived, made him the jacket. It had many pockets, but there is only one Pookar and he could never remember where he put things.

The bunnies Sineus and Truvor were fidgeting on their stools. “When will Birthday come? Why hasn’t he?”

“He’s probably delayed in school,” Pookar decided.

“What is school?” The bunnies were curious.

“Well... er... how to tell you, doll? School is a place where there are many girls, and they pounce on you and squeeze you all the time. I went there with Masha,” Pookar bragged.

The cat Muffin shivered. “Brr! They squeeze! I can’t stand it. They smudge your fur and then you have to lick it clean!”

“But I liked it! Squeezes are nicer than baths. Besides, baths are simply a waste of the gift of time because you get dirty later all the same,” Pookar stated.

“Phew, what a slob you are!” The doll Olga wrinkled her nose.

Pookar was offended. “You’re a slob! Now I’ll hit you on the forehead!” he said.

“Not nice to hit girls!” the cat Muffin reminded him.

“So it’s not nice!” Pookar agreed. “But fun!”

Olga threatened Pookar with an impressive fist. “Just let him try! I’m a big doll, but he’s a mere undersized baby doll, almost a tumbler!”

The quarrel could easily have turned into a fight, but then the bunnies intervened. “Aren’t you ashamed? Today’s our birthday!” they said and, looking at each other, sulked again. Sineus and Truvor did everything synchronously.

Pookar and Olga turned red and made peace for some time. In fact, they were good friends, and that they squabbled – so who does not squabble? Just that Pookar’s character was mean, and Olga, I must say, was no sweetheart either.

“You promised that Birthday will come to us today... But he’s still not here! Turns out you tricked us!” the bunnies said and began to sniffle a bit.

If you look at it, they had a good reason for this. And it is true what nonsense had occurred: the guests argued and almost came to blows, the table was not set, and Birthday was still not there. The only thing left to do was cry.

Pookar simple-mindedly decided to console them. “Follow the example quietly, rabbit hats! Feet together, ears apart! And all smile promptly! Whoever cries, retrains at the pet shop to become a porpoise!” he said.

Sineus and Truvor, always taking everything literally, started to tremble just in case, and were ready to hide under their stools.

“Stop it, Pookar! And you get out, come on! Birthday comes when everybody sits down at the table and begins to drink tea. It’s always so,” the cat Muffin calmed the bunnies.

Sineus and Truvor quieted down and obediently wiped each other’s wet nose. The doll Olga put the kettle on and pulled out candies. The bunnies attacked the chocolate at once and smudged themselves all the way up to their ears.

Pookar looked at the candy with squeamish thoughtfulness. He had tucked away a whole jar of jam even before dinner. “I don’t want any!” he stated.

“Nobody’s offering them to you,” Olga remarked casually.

“Is that so, doll? Then I’ll take it just to spite you!” Pookar said and started to stuff candies into his pockets.

In the meantime, the kettle was boiling.

“Tea’s ready. Who will pour it?” Olga asked.

The bunnies roused themselves happily. They were filled with responsibility.

“We will! We will!” they shouted and toppled the kettle onto Olga’s knees. Fortunately, dolls are less afraid of boiling water than people.

“We poured tea! Just as you asked!” Sineus and Truvor boasted.

Olga looked with horror at the wet hem of her dress. “You don’t pour it there, fool...eh-eh... little fools!”

“Oh! We have no tea! Birthday won’t come now. Sorry, Olga! We’re so unhappy!” The bunnies started to cry.

The cat Muffin slapped their paws encouragingly. “Nonsense! We can boil more water. Pookar and I will get water from the aquarium!”

The aquarium, which the cat loved to contemplate thoughtfully, stood on Masha’s desk. Here Pookar could not restrain himself and proposed to boil the entire aquarium instead of getting the water with the kettle.

“The fishes! What will happen to them?” Olga asked fearfully.

Pookar shrugged. “Nothing will happen to them. Muffin will eat the fishes. Well-made tea with fish is her favourite dish.”



Muffin pondered seriously. “It wouldn’t be bad, of course, but Masha would be upset. She likes the fishes. Besides, if I were to eat them now, then my hope of eating them later will disappear,” she said uncertainly.

“Well, best enemy of the dog, you convinced me! We won’t boil the aquarium. Just take a little bit of water. The fishes won’t be worse off. Let’s go, cat!” Pookar agreed easily, heading to the table.

His compliance alarmed Olga. “No! I’ll go with you. Otherwise, you’ll play some mean trick without me!” she said with suspicion.

“Eh, no! We’ll manage somehow! Roaming at night isn’t something for a girl. Besides, you have big feet and you stomp. And watch you don’t eat all the candy; I know you, send us off as you have your eyes on them,” said Pookar.

Olga flared up and pounced on him. “Oh, you bad baby doll! Some day you’ll bug me and I’ll rip all your ears off! Then let Masha sew them back on!”

Pookar spat sullenly. “With threads?” he said.

“With threads.”

“The ears?”

“The ears.”

Pookar looked at her for a long time and then shook his head. “Phooey, doll, what sickly fantasies you have!” he said.

Then Pookar climbed onto the cat, and Muffin crept out stealthily from under the bed.

* * *

You, of course, notice how terrible a room becomes at night. The most familiar things look sinister. A shirt on the back of a chair flutters and resembles a person, who came in for no known reason, found a seat, and sits and looks at you for some reason. The light outside the window casting sinister shadows on the walls? The rustling in the closet?

Muffin and Pookar were also afraid at first and they immediately wanted to turn back. However, after watching closely, they saw that the room looked calm and sleepy. On the bed, curled up under a blanket, Masha was sleeping and having good dreams. The fishes were sleeping in the aquarium on the table. The flowers were sleeping in the pots on the windowsill. Life is indeed not so terrible if you examine it.

The cat Muffin leaped onto the desk with the grace of a truck transporting scrap metal. She was a domestic cat and consequently rather clumsy. Still, it was good that no one woke up.

Once on the desk, Pookar climbed down from the cat, picked up the kettle, and began to get water from the aquarium. He also accidentally scooped up a couple of fish and had to put them back.

“Push their way in here, how brash! No shame, no conscience! Just like me!” Pookar grumbled. One would think that he did not come to the fishes with a kettle, but they to him.

The cat Muffin jumped down from the desk, managing not to spill the water, and they were both in the box with the toys a minute later. Everybody sat at the table and started to have tea with cake. Olga had made the cake on the play stove earlier during the day, but hid it so that Pookar would not find it. Muffin did not have cake, in order to keep her figure. She declared that one needed to be careful with cakes, and that one of the cats she knew had put on so much weight that she got stuck in the doorway.

The centre of the cake with a single candle because the bunnies were only a year old, went to Sineus and Truvor. They swelled up like a balloon and blew out the candle for luck. Everyone pulled the bunnies’ ears and gave them gifts. The cat Muffin gave them carrots, Pookar a fat book of Russian fairy tales. Olga had made for the bunnies warm knitted hats with openings for the ears.

Then everyone was again busy with the cake. It turned out to be surprisingly tasty.

“I approve, doll! This time you’ve clearly managed something edible by accident,” Pookar praised Olga. “Only you dumped too many calories in there.”

“No calories there! Only flour, sugar, eggs, and nothing more,” Olga took offence.

“Wait a minute! Let’s find out... You say that there are no calories but I feel that there are. It means they squeezed in there on the sly when you turned away.”

Sineus and Truvor started to tremble. “Oh! We’re scared!”

“Admit it, Pookar! You just made up those calories!” Olga was mad. She could not stand it when they questioned her culinary skill.

Pookar narrowed his eyes. “Made it up?! What is Masha’s mama struggling with, then? What is it she’s scared of like fire?”

“She’s scared of calories. What else if not calories!” Muffin stopped washing for a moment.

Pookar stared triumphantly at Olga and bent over the cake. “Listen, bunnies! Work them big ears. Something’s scratching in there. It’s all of them, calories! They’re going to war!”

The doll Olga blinked her blue eyes. “Oh! What will happen to us now?”

“That’s just it,” Pookar threw up his hands. “Well, so be it, I’ll save you from the evil of calories. They don’t scare courageous me. I’ll eat the whole cake by myself.”

Pookar was already stretching his hands to the cake, but Muffin said, “Don’t believe him, little fools! He tricked you. Calories aren’t dangerous for slim little kids, but Masha’s mama can do perfectly well without them. Otherwise, soon only the handkerchiefs from her whole wardrobe will fit her.”

Chapter Two

A Big Trip Around a Small Apartment

Pookar loved to discover new corners of the apartment, the ones which none of the toys had wandered to earlier. He was not one that could sit in one place for three days or even three minutes. He had to be constantly running somewhere, arranging something, exploring something. In short, this was the most restless baby boy doll in the world.

One spring morning, when Masha had gone to school and her parents to work, the doll Olga was teaching the bunnies Sineus and Truvor the alphabet. Olga herself already knew the alphabet and could write all of the letters except W.

"This is the letter A," Olga showed them. "It looks like A... Understand? This is the letter U, it looks like U." Olga was a born teacher.

"And the letter D looks like D?" the bunnies asked.

"I think so," the doll answered after some hesitation. "Say what you like, but education doesn't pass you by without a trace."

The lid of a box moved aside and Pookar appeared in full field dress. He was dressed in a sheepskin coat buttoned up to the chin and on his head was a pot. He was holding a bottle-opener in his hands, in case he met jars of jam along the way.

"Hello, hello!" he shouted to the bunnies.

"Hi, Pookar! Where are you going?" the bunnies responded.

"I'm going on a hike. I'm thinking of exploring a couple of new continents and finding out along the way where these greedy people hide their candies."

"How interesting! We're coming with you," Sineus and Truvor exclaimed.

"But we're learning the alphabet," Olga objected.

"Great discoveries won't wait while you learn some letters. No time to lose. Humanity suffers!" Pookar declared. He had a determined look. The pot on his head looked like a knight's helmet. The hero was so eager towards a feat. Even Olga was fascinated, let alone the bunnies!

They decided to set off on the journey without delay and all together. If great discoveries could not wait, then the discoverer could even less so. Pookar was consumed with impatience, shifting from foot to foot and itching for adventures.

As for Olga, despite being seized by all the excitement, she managed to make a couple of dozen sandwiches for the road. Olga was a smart girl doll and knew that brave heroes needed nourishing food.

Then the friends took to the field. Pookar, with the bottle-opener in hand, stepped in front. Behind him hopped the bunnies. The doll Olga brought up the rear, loaded with a backpack of sandwiches.

It is possible to find quite a few new things everywhere if the search is done well. Even in the usual three-room apartment with a separate washroom, glassed-in balcony, kitchen, and closet, miracles sometimes happen. Anyone who has ever done general cleanup at least once in life learns this. From somewhere out of non-existence crop up things that seemed to have been lost long ago: old shirts with change in the pockets, books without covers, combs, all kinds of knick-knacks, and much, much more.



“Hey, Pookar!” Olga shouted, catching up with him and tugging his sleeve. “What are we discovering this time? We’ve likely climbed over all the rooms.”

“The closet? I don’t know what more is in it: secrets or jars of jam! Those and others are just waiting to be discovered!” Pookar yelled excitedly. He started waving his hands and brushed against Sineus’ nose with the bottle-opener.

After waiting until the bunny had stopped whining, Pookar motioned everyone to come closer. “A terrible secret is even connected with this closet!” he whispered, looking around mysteriously. Sineus and Truvor squirmed with curiosity.

“Someone is living in the closet! I heard sighs and a cough. Probably some distant relative, locked up in the closet and forgotten. And she barricaded herself and waits to pounce on somebody!”

“M-maybe we won’t go there?” The bunnies were trembling.

Olga looked sideways at Pookar with distrust. “You made it all up, Pookar! You’re a known dreamer and liar!”

Pookar sulked. “Well, doll... time will tell. Someday I’ll be famous and you’ll be ashamed that you underestimated me.”

It was dark in the hallway. Only a few rays of light shone through the cracks. Dust danced in the air. It first flew to the ceiling, then, sticking together in light white flakes, settled on the floor. It seemed like it was snowing.

“A-a-a-ahchoo!!” One of the bunnies sneezed, seemingly Truvor. The explorers gave a start and sat down in surprise.

Pookar put a finger to his lips. “S-shhh! The storage relative will hear us!” The bunnies nodded obediently, and even Olga, opening her mouth to object to Pookar, for some reason kept quiet.

Sneaking along the hallway, the brave travellers reached the closet. No sound reached them from there.

“We’ll explore!” Pookar whispered, pressing his ear to the door. “The relative must be hiding... And then – HUM! – she’ll attack!” Pookar showed precisely how wild uncontrolled relatives rush. It looked so promising that Sineus and Truvor clung to each other and started crying.

“Somehow I hear nothing! She must be lurking so quietly that she isn’t even breathing! We know these tricks! What a sly one! Let’s scare her away!” Pookar suggested.

On Pookar’s signal, everyone started to yell as they could. “Awooo!” Olga howled. “Oho-ho-ho!” the bunnies shouted softly, hoping in the depths of their souls that there was no trace of any relative in the closet. “Hoo-hoo-hoo!” Pookar made a deep scary sound. “Hoo-hoo-hoo!”

Nothing happened, only dust whirled around in the corners. Pookar got up on his toes and reached for the doorknob. The door creaked. The toys went inside. The bunnies hung on firmly to the doll Olga’s dress and pulled with all their strength, they were so scared.

“Don’t get under foot, little cowards! There’s absolutely nothing to be afraid of,” Olga straightened them out.

It was dark in the small room. It smelled of old things and mothballs. Glass jars of jam gleamed on the upper shelves. Pookar switched on a flashlight. The ray picked out the frightened bunnies and Olga’s white apron from the darkness.

Sineus took a step to the side and bumped his foot painfully. “Mama! Something’s here!” he squeaked.

Fumbling with the flashlight, Pookar found a big wooden trunk. It looked very old. It was unclear how the trunk could come to be in a city apartment on the ninth floor.

“Wow!” Pookar was delighted. “Well, a trunk! How did it manage to hide from me for so long?”

Olga carefully passed a hand over the lid of the trunk, accented with copper. “This is great-grandma’s trunk. Masha told me. It was brought from the village and never opened. The key was lost.”

“Gosh! Where’s my beloved bottle-opener? Want to bet I can break open this mysterious box in a jiffy?” Pookar was filled with enthusiasm.

“You always want to break everything!” Olga threw up her hands.

It was impossible to stop Pookar. He took a run, picked up the bottle-opener, and made up his mind with a running start to bash the lock of the trunk. The bunnies hid behind the doll Olga and peeped out from beneath her skirt. The moment Pookar hit the lock with the opener, someone sneezed in the trunk so that the lid jumped. Pookar dropped the bottle-opener. Olga and the bunnies sat down on the floor in surprise.

“Someone’s in the trunk! L-let’s r-run!” the bunnies whispered.

“Probably just a m-moth sneezed from the mothballs,” Pookar surmised.

“Ahchoo!” the sneeze repeated itself. The friends froze.

“As I said, a relative’s in there! Let’s smoke her out!” Pookar whispered.

“Don’t! Let’s go! We’re scared! We want to go home!” Sineus and Truvor in a panic grabbed Pookar’s sleeve.

Olga sighed. She wavered to come to some decision. “All the same, it’s probably better to find her. It’s somewhat uncomfortable living in the same apartment and still not being acquainted,” she decided.

The doll approached the trunk and softly knocked on it. “Excuse me, please, but we know that you’re inside. Could you look out for a minute and not frighten us?” Someone stirred in the trunk.

“Shy!” whispered Olga. “Probably a very shy relative... Listen, you can’t spend all your time in the closet! Do you want to live in the room with us?”

“What’s with you? Our place is already so crowded. There’s barely enough room for us, and you’re inviting someone! What if she agrees?” Pookar hissed at her.

The lid of the trunk creaked and rose up a little. Big yellow eyes glowed through the crack. The bunnies trembled and tried to escape, but they bumped into each other and sprawled on the floor. Pookar and Olga were also scared, but curiosity was stronger.

“Hello! How do you do? Who are you and where did you come from?” A bass buzzed from the trunk.

“And who are you?” Pookar and Olga asked.

“I’m Flamy! I live here.”

“I’m Pookar... This is Olga... And this is Sineus and Truvor. They’re bunnies and big cowards.”

“I see, I see... All bunnies are cowards...” The new friend climbed out of the trunk.

Pookar shone the flashlight on him and gasped in surprise: a green scaly head on a short neck, awkward legs spread out, small wings, and a flexible tail with notches. He was the size of a medium-sized dog.

“I don’t understand... what are you, a crocodile?” Pookar asked with a puzzled look.

“What crocodile? A dragon!!! A real one!” Olga exclaimed.



Chapter Three

The Dragonet Flamy

“Yes, I’m a dragon, a dragon... Don’t shine a light on me, it hurts the eyes.” Flamy testily confirmed, squinting.

“We didn’t know that dragons actually exist! We thought they’re fiction,” Olga was amazed.

“You yourself are fiction! Can say that about everyone. About you in the first place,” Flamy was indignant.

Pookar, with an apologetic smile, touched Flamy’s shiny scales with a finger. “Wow! Not fake! I thought you were stuffed. Good that we found you after all!”

Flamy irritably lashed himself on the side with his tail. “You didn’t find me at all because I wasn’t lost. I was sleeping in the trunk.”

“How long have you been sleeping here?” Olga asked.

“Not long. About ninety or a hundred years. Don’t remember exactly, I don’t have a calendar.”

“Oho-ho!” the bunnies were surprised. “That’s a very, very long time! You’re probably old?”

“I’m not old at all. I’m still young. I lost Mama. I cried a little bit, then got tired and went to sleep in the trunk. You haven’t seen my mama, by any chance?”

“What’s she like, your mama?”

“So very pretty! Like me, only bigger...”

“No, we haven’t met her. We’ve only seen dragons in pictures, how Dobrynya Nikitich² defeated them,” Pookar declared.

“It’s all not true. He never defeated us. Grandpa told me this. Dobrynya came, saw Grandpa, scratched his head, apologized, and left.”

“Then where have all the dragons gone? Why don’t we meet them anywhere now?” Pookar tried to find out. He was standing closer to Flamy than the others were and examining him with suspicion.

“We hid. We hid a hundred years ago. Dragons can become invisible or change into different objects, but only when they’re already full-grown,” Flamy explained.

“But you can’t?”

“No, I can’t. I’m still young.”

“Nothing young about you! A hundred years!” Olga sniffed scornfully.

“Not my fault that we dragons take an awfully long time to grow up... I’m somewhat hungry. I haven’t eaten in a hundred years, and now I can eat anything,” Flamy said.

Sineus and Truvor started to tremble. “An-anything? Oh, mama!”

“We brought sandwiches. Would you like a sandwich, Flamy?” Olga asked.

“I would. But what is it?”

Olga laughed. She thought that everybody knew what a sandwich was. She pulled them out of the backpack and handed one to Flamy. The dragonet instantly swallowed it together with the wrapper. His face assumed a puzzled expression. “It seems that we don’t eat this rustling thing!”

“You haven’t tried unwrapping?” Pookar asked.

“Tasteless all the same.”

It was decided they would take the hungry dragon to the fridge in the kitchen. Flamy first squinted from the daylight, but soon grew accustomed and started to look around with interest. “Where are we? Whose burrow is this?”

“This is the hallway. It begins at the front door and ends at the kitchen,” the bunnies explained.

² Dobrynya Nikitich is one of the most popular heroes of the Kievan Rus era, a warrior who completes many feats in epic poems, one of which describes his triumph over the dragon.

“Good thinking! Won’t get lost. Just go down the hall and sooner or later you get to the kitchen,” Flamy said gladly. He took a running start, flapped his wings, took off with difficulty, and opened the kitchen door with his head.

“See, this is the fridge,” the bunnies said. Usually everything was explained to them. Now they enjoyed feeling clever.

Flamy stretched his neck, grabbed the handle with his teeth, and the door clicked. The night before Masha and Mama went to the store and bought food for the entire week. What was not there! Milk, cheese, sausage, ham, oranges, a pot of diet soup for Mama, and a bottle of liqueur, which Papa drinks “for digestion.”

Flamy studied all this for a while and then asked, “Where’s the food? There are only some boxes and jars here!”

“The food is inside. First, wash your hands!” Olga ordered. She had not known Flamy for very long but was already giving him orders.

“Hands?” the dragon was surprised. “I have no hands! I only have feet, and a whole four of them!”

Olga pondered. “Well, okay! Wash your feet!” she said.

“What nonsense! Where is it seen that people wash their feet before meals? Maybe you’ll even say ears?” Pookar was outraged.

“It would be a good idea for some people to wash their ears, Pookar!” Olga said maliciously. Pookar stuck his tongue out at her.

“I want to eat! I want to eat!” Flamy grumbled.

Olga went to the refrigerator. “Soup?”

Flamy carefully licked the soup and shook his head.

“A chop, then? You should like chops.”

The dragon took a bite and grimaced. “No, I don’t want chops.”

In the next three minutes, it was revealed that Flamy ate neither bread, potatoes, sausage, nor hot dogs. However, Pookar liked most of all that Flamy did not like jam.

“Wait, I’ll see what else I can find!” Olga said and went to the kitchen cupboard.

Pookar took advantage of her absence and decided to play a prank. “I know what dragons like. Try mustard, Flamy! It’s very tasty! You just have to swallow a lot quickly.”

“Don’t, don’t!” the bunnies wanted to shout but did not have time.

The hungry dragonet instantly licked all the mustard out of the jar. However, instead of jumping to the ceiling, as Pookar expected, Flamy licked his lips contentedly and let out a jet of flame from his nose.

“Wow! I couldn’t do it earlier. Yummy! Perhaps, I’d be able to have some more!” he exclaimed.

“Why does it smell burnt in here? Did you light a match? I’ll give it to you!” Olga asked the bunnies severely when she returned.

“Not us! It’s Flamy! Pookar fed him mustard and he breathed fire right away! Flamy also didn’t know that he can.”

“Yeah! It’s me! Isn’t it great?” Flamy boasted.

Olga saw an empty mustard jar and started to advance menacingly toward Pookar. He instantly hid behind Flamy.

“You don’t understand, doll! He liked it. All dragons eat mustard.”

“It’s true, it’s true! And even red pepper in pods. Because we breathe fire,” Flamy confirmed.

“You’re lucky, Pookaroid, or else I’d give you a licking as mustard dessert!” Olga stopped chasing Pookar.

Realizing this, Pookar looked out bravely from behind the dragon. “Well, assuming it’s still unknown who would beat up whom,” he declared.

Flamy and his new friends moved from the kitchen to the room and played indoor Olympic games. The bunnies Sineus and Truvor excelled in jumping. They could easily jump over Flamy. Pookar did not jump so well but somersaulted remarkably. His round body was created ideally for somersaults. Flamy flew around the kitchen like an awkward, heavy bee and almost broke the lamp.

The doll Olga was afraid of staining her new dress and just clapped her hands and laughed, watching the others having fun. She suddenly remembered that Mama and Papa would soon return from work. The adults would scold Masha for scattering the toys, so they had to tidy up the room.

Flamy hesitated a little and asked, “Can I live with you in the room? It’s boring alone in the closet!”

Pookar and Olga looked at each other and agreed. “Of course, you can. Only be careful. Nobody must see you,” said Olga.

“Why?” Flamy asked.

“Because!” Pookar interrupted. “If they see you, they’ll take you away to the zoo, detain you with your head in a test tube and study you. People – they’re like that.”

“Are we telling Masha about Flamy?” the bunnies asked together.

Pookar shook his head. “Not yet. Though big in appearance, she’s but a girl, and you can expect anything from them.”

The doll Olga did not like any attack on girls. “But we can’t tell a lie! It’s not good to lie,” she objected.

“Who’s lying? To lie is to say something that isn’t. But when you don’t talk about what is, it’s a CON-SPI-RA-CY.”

“Then it’s clear. It’s quite another matter. Then we won’t tell anyone,” the bunnies promised. They liked difficult words more than they understood their meaning.

“Hurray!” Flamy shouted. “I’ll live in the room! When someone comes, I’ll hide. Right?”

“Uh-huh,” Pookar assured him.

Chapter Four

About What Every Little Dragonet Can Do

In the evening on the green carpet in front of the dollhouse, Olga gathered all the toys to celebrate the resettlement of the dragonet Flamy to the room. Olga was bustling about in the kitchen. Sineus and Truvor were helpers; they carried spoons, forks, bowls of jam, cookies and pickles, cans of fish for the cat Muffin, and jars of mustard for Flamy.

Meanwhile, Muffin was teaching Flamy good manners. She found him funny but a little uncouth, and immediately got busy with his education.

“How do you walk? You stomp like a rhino! Should walk like this... Feet move softly and carefully!” Muffin strolled gracefully along the rug.

“Ne-uh. If I walk like that, then what about my fearsome dragon huff? All dragons huff. They can’t do it differently,” Flamy grumbled.

“You’re as stubborn as a rhino!” Rhino was the only wild beast known to Muffin. She once saw a picture of it in a children’s book and remembered it very well. Since then, it had become her source of negative examples for life. “Walk like a rhino,” “stupid like a rhino,” “drink milk like a rhino,” the cat repeated incessantly.

“It’s unclear why this Moscow cat is obsessed with the rhino. Muffy, watch you don’t marry a rhino! You would!” Pookar once remarked and immediately got one on the forehead for it. The cat Muffin’s foot might be soft, but it was painful.

At that moment, Pookar was writing a poem, which he intended on reading at the festive dinner. The poem was awfully stubborn and did not want to be written. Pookar was chewing on a pencil and suffering.

“Give me a rhyme for the word ‘ground’!” He nudged Olga in the side.

“Leave me alone. Don’t you see I’m busy?” The doll was spreading jam on bread.

“No, you’re not... I am. Spreading jam on bread is nothing like creating verses.”

“Then create them in silence. Or else you’ll be left without sandwiches,” the doll Olga talked back.

When the preparations were finished, everyone was invited to the table. The bunnies sat on small stools with carved legs, Olga sat on an armchair, Pookar climbed onto the cat’s back, and Flamy placed his heavy head on the edge of the table.

Everyone glanced around the table, wondering where to begin. The dragonet looked fondly at the jar of mustard. Sineus and Truvor shyly treated each other to carrots. The cat Muffin dreamily sniffed the can of fish as if smelling a rose.

“Please wait! I’ve finished the poem!” Pookar shouted suddenly.

He struck a pose, stretched out his right arm, cleared his throat, ran his fingers through his messy red hair, and began to wail in anguish,

*“Cats walked along the ground,
Their legs moving,
Cockroaches were all around,
In manna kasha bathing.”*

The toys clapped their hands. “Not bad! Not bad at all. A good poem. Well done!”

Pookar looked down modestly. “I dedicate my quatrain to the dragonet Flamy.”

Flamy was moved. “Really? Very nice of you. Would you read it once more, as I wasn’t listening the first time. I didn’t know that the poem was dedicated to me,” he admitted.

“Then why did you praise me?” Pookar asked sullenly. “Okay, listen!”

*“Cats walked along the ground,
Their legs moving,
Cockroaches were all around,
In manna kasha bathing.”*

Pookar repeated the quatrain three more times, and each time it seemed to him all the more successful. “I read and I weep! I can’t even believe that I wrote it,” he said.

Pookar’s poem was to everyone’s liking. Muffin liked that Pookar mentioned cats. The bunnies liked that everything rhymed and, most importantly, no one was eaten or killed. Olga alone was dissatisfied with the cockroaches. It seemed to her unhygienic.

“Let’s eat! No need to put it off! Long live cabbage and carrot pies!” the bunnies shouted.

“What a wonderful day! Today I woke up, today a great poem was dedicated to me, and I’ve found friends!” Flamy exclaimed, dipping his long forked tongue into the mustard.

“We’re also glad that we found you and you’ve become our friend!” Olga assured him.

“And we’re even more glad that you don’t eat jam,” Pookar added, licking the spoon.

The meal was barely over and the dishes put away when everyone heard a key in the lock and voices in the hallway.

“It’s the people! Hide, quick!” they shouted to Flamy. He darted around the room, searching for somewhere to hide. He was fussing so that he knocked over a chair and made a lot of noise.

“What fell in the room?” Mama asked in the hallway.

“The cat probably broke something again. I’ll take a look,” Papa replied.

The door handle started to turn. The bunnies clung to each other in fright and closed their eyes. Olga stayed still and pretended to be an ordinary doll in a white lace dress with a little pocket on the apron and a big blue bow. A doll that said “Ma-ma!” when she was turned upside down. However, before the door opened, Pookar all the same pulled the blanket from the bed and threw it on Flamy at least to hide the dragon somehow.

Papa came into the room and looked around. “It looks like the cat. She jumped on the back of a chair and knocked it over!” he said.

“Meow! Meow!” Muffin rubbed against his leg. In the presence of people Muffin uttered only “meow!” because she was certain that far from everyone was worthy of acquaintance with a talking cat.

Mama came into the room. She immediately noticed the blanket on the floor. It even seemed to her that something was moving under it. “Oh! There’s something there!” she exclaimed.

Pookar half opened one eye and saw the blanket lift a little at the edge. He closed his eyes, imagining what would happen now. Shouts, surprise, fright, and then someone would come from the zoo and take Flamy away. “There’s no one there! Just the blanket lying about... It only seemed so to you,” Pookar heard.

“But I saw! There was something there!”

“You’re tired from work, my dear. Time to take a vacation or, perhaps... quit it altogether, this work...”

“Yes, but you know...” the voices began to move away.

Mama and Papa went out, continuing their adult, uninteresting conversation. The toys breathed a sigh of relief.

“The danger’s over! But where’s Flamy? Where did he go?”

Pookar and the bunnies went around the room, looking through all the cracks. Flamy had seemingly vanished into thin air. Pookar even rummaged in his pockets just in case and Olga looked into the teacups. Flamy was nowhere.

“What if we dreamt him up?” Sineus suggested.

“Exactly! Otherwise, where would he have gone to?” Truvor agreed.

Olga and Pookar only made a helpless gesture. They could not understand anything. Ringing laughter was unexpectedly heard from above. The toys raised their heads and saw nothing. Just a most ordinary ceiling. But what was that? Where did the other chandelier come from? Were there really two? In fact, there were two chandeliers, like twins, on the ceiling.

“Hello, hello! You don’t recognize me?” the second chandelier said cheerfully. It tumbled onto the floor but did not break; instead, it turned into a beaming dragon.

“I didn’t know that I can do all these tricks. Only where didn’t you search! Even in your pockets! Ha-ha! Thought you dreamt me up?”

“But how did you do that?”

“I transformed!” Flamy uttered with difficulty through his laughter. “Became invisible and then changed. Listen, if I can, it means I’m already grown! I grew while sleeping in the trunk.”

“Crazy! I would like that!” Pookar said enviously.

“Pookar, you don’t have such talent and don’t try,” Olga laughed.

Chapter Five

A Very Difficult Old Geezer

Masha's parents often went visiting on weekends and she stayed home alone. They considered her old enough to occupy herself independently one night a week. However, everyone knows how boring a long, long night is when there is no one else around, all homework is done, and all cartoon recordings have already been watched eighty times. Of course, you could read a book, but who is going to read when no one sees this and praises you?

One such Saturday Masha was sitting in the armchair and petting Muffin. The cat was purring sleepily. Masha was bored and did not know what she could occupy herself with. She almost started to cry from idleness, when she suddenly heard scurrying under the bed and Pookar (who do you think?) ran out from under there. Olga, her head covered with a dishcloth, was pursuing him.

"Bad Pookar! Why did you add laundry detergent to my kasha? I've been spewing soap bubbles for an hour already!" Olga shouted.

Here Olga and Pookar noticed Masha and froze.

"You, you're real! You can talk!" Masha exclaimed, beside herself with amazement. Then she paused in indecision. She did not know what to do: get angry that the toys did not reveal the secret to her sooner or be pleased that now she would always have someone to play with.

"Hello, Masha! How's it going, how're you growing?" Pookar shouted.

"Never met anyone in my life who could say so much nonsense in one minute! Oh!" Olga released a soap bubble.

Masha squatted down beside the arguing toys. "You're funny. Now I can always play with you!"

"That's for sure. And even right now. We'll go ride the elevator! Up and down, up and down," Pookar suggested.

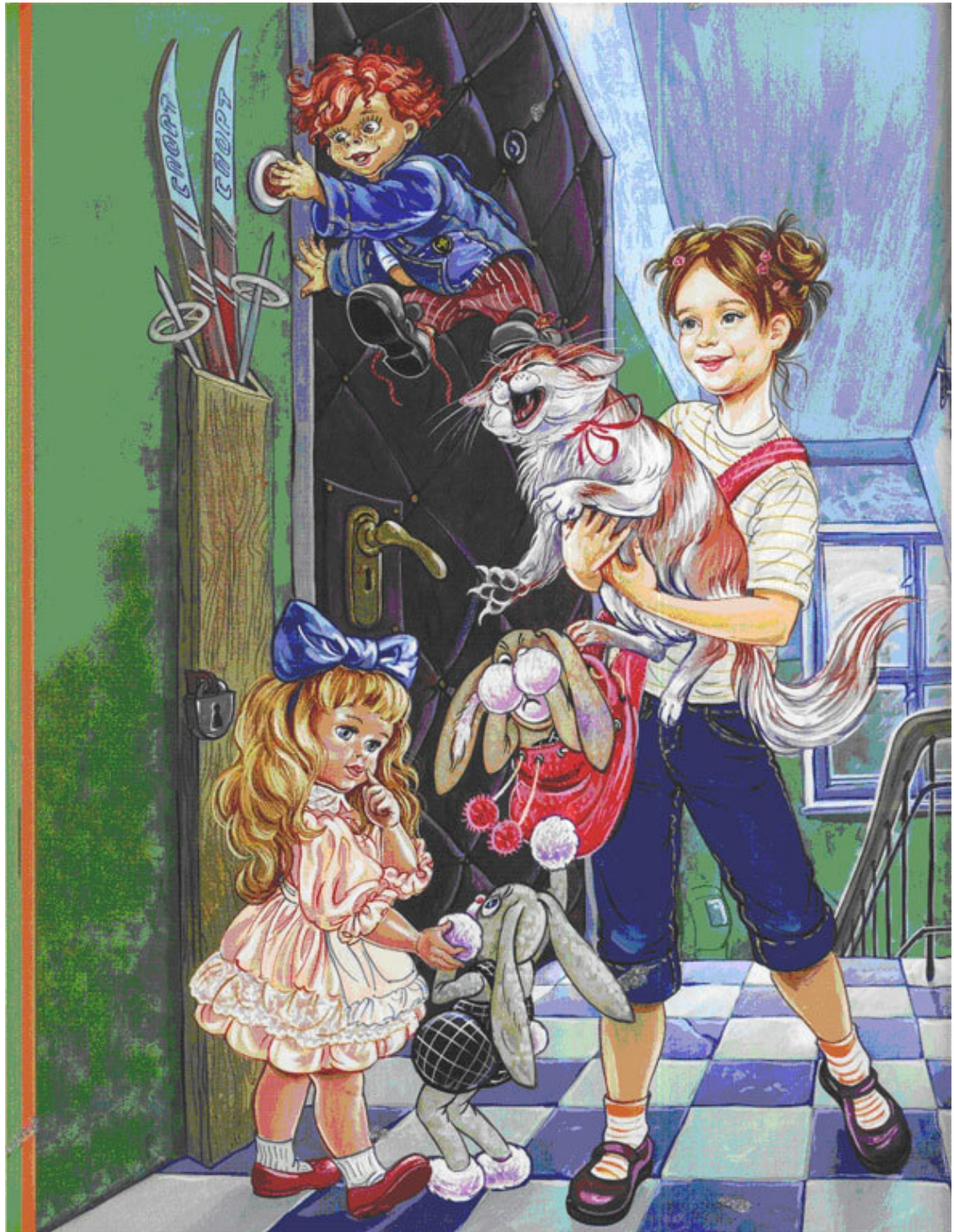
Masha had her doubts. "I don't know. They left the apartment to me. They said that I should look after the cat and not open the door to anyone."

"Poor excuses! If you don't want to play with us, then say so. You won't be opening the door to anyone. How could you if you're riding the elevator?"

"And the cat? How will I look after the cat?"

"We'll bring the cat along. Enrich your distasteful life with new impressions!" Pookar declared.

Masha, the doll Olga, and Pookar left the apartment and summoned the elevator. Draping over Masha's arm was the cat Muffin, who wished to keep her own scholarship secret and said only "meow!" and "sh-sh!"



Masha and the toys just rode the elevator at first, but they soon got bored and started to frolic. Pookar came up with ringing all the doorbells in a row and as soon as steps were heard in the hallway, springing into the elevator and riding off. They played this game for quite a long time. It was fun. When a door was opened and someone stuck his head out, the pranksters were already laughing in the elevator.

“What if someone finds out what we are doing here?” Masha asked.

Pookar contemptuously brushed this aside with his chubby hand. “Fiddlesticks-theatrics! Would the residents in indoor slippers chase us down the stairs?” He, however, did not take into account that in the world there was Pirozhkov.

Pookar jumped out of the elevator on the eighth floor and, after leaping atop the back of the cat Muffin, persistently rang several times at a metal door. In this apartment lived Peter Petrovich Pirozhkov. He was a terribly difficult old geezer. Masha only had to make a little bit of noise in her room, or the cat Muffin to drop some plate, and he would begin to bang on the heater. Pirozhkov banged long and hard, and then ran to complain to Masha's parents that they would not let him rest "for time honestly earned."

"What have you done! This is Pirozhkov's apartment! Now he'll catch us!" Masha was frightened.

"Have no fear. It'll all be done on the sly, no cry," Pookar calmed her.

The bell rang and Pirozhkov darted to the peephole. The peephole was Peter Petrovich's favourite surveillance station. Even when they were not ringing his apartment but the neighbour's, he would then spy on who and why. However, now he saw nothing through the peephole and realized that whoever was hiding behind the door was small. On running to the door and opening it, Pirozhkov managed to see someone's legs running into the elevator, which quickly went up.

"Nasty neighbourhood kids being naughty. Well, I'll fix them! I'll be on the watch, catch them, and then take them to their parents!" Pirozhkov decided. He quickly ran up the stairs, catching up with the elevator. "Now I'll show you! You'll remember me until your discharge from the hospital, you little brats!" Pirozhkov shouted.

Masha was horrified and looked at Pookar reproachfully. Masha was a cautious girl and wished that they had not started all this.

However, Pookar did not seem in the least worried. "The game's just beginning! Now we'll have a race of old men in slippers in the opposite direction! On your mark! Get set! Go!" he said. He pressed the "Stop" button and sent the elevator down.

"How do you know what buttons to push?" Olga was surprised.

"I operate by scientific poke and prod. Press all the buttons in a row. Maybe some will work," Pookar explained. He stopped the elevator on the eighth floor and started to ring Pirozhkov's doorbell continuously.

Meanwhile, Pirozhkov, craftily lurking on the last floor, was waiting for the kids to get closer. He heard the doorbell of his apartment and realized that he had been taken in. Besides, he remembered that he had forgotten to close the door and did not even bring the key with him.

Pirozhkov rushed down the stairs, shouting, "Now I'll show you! You and your parents will be evicted, mark my words!"

While Pookar was ringing Pirozhkov's doorbell, the elevator left. The pranksters quickly looked around to see where they could hide. A footfall along the stairs was approaching. It seemed that Pirozhkov was about to drop onto their heads. At the last minute Masha, Muffin, Pookar, and Olga managed to climb down a few steps and hid behind the garbage chute.

Pirozhkov, breathing hard, came running onto the landing and looked around. "Where did they go? I'll find out who it is!" He hurried to his apartment to look out the window, waiting for the pranksters to go out the entrance.

Masha sighed with relief. "Phew, got away with it! Almost got caught! I won't play this stupid game anymore!"

Pookar nodded agreement. "Fine, we won't play this! We'll play stretch."

Before Masha could stop the up-to-mischief Pookar, he instantly pulled out of the garbage chute a piece of thick rope and firmly tied it to the handles of the two opposite doors – Pirozhkov's apartment and the one across the landing. Both doors opened in, so when one started to pull in, the other door would slam shut.

"Now the fun begins!" Pookar exclaimed and rang both doorbells.

It is necessary to say that in the opposite apartment lived a saleslady of the supermarket dairy department by the name of Avdokhina. This was a wiry moustached female with a shrill voice, who

could scream so loudly that even Pirozhkov was afraid of her. Avdokhina and Pirozhkov argued all the time and often spied on each other through the peepholes. They were so similar that they could not get along.

When Avdokhina heard the doorbell, she went to the door and abruptly pulled the handle towards herself. Shortly before that, she had heard Pirozhkov's indignant voice on the stairs and now decided that he had come to swear. However, the door did not budge. The rope was hindering it.

"Is that so!" Avdokhina shouted and leaned hard on the handle. But she succeeded in opening the door only a very little. With this, she slammed shut the door of Pirozhkov, who was also trying to look out on to the landing.

"Aha, got caught! Holding the door on the outside! Now they won't have time to escape!" Pirozhkov crowed. He dug his heels in the threshold and began to pull towards himself. Avdokhina felt the tension on the other side and, not to be outdone, leaned all her weight onto the door.

A game of tug of war had begun! Pookar stood in the middle between the neighbouring doors, too short to be seen through the peephole, and watched the scene with interest. Pirozhkov or Avdokhina had to pull with all their might so the door would open a little, but only a little because the rope was short.

"Well, keep it up! Now I have you!" Pirozhkov shouted loudly.

Avdokhina heard this cry and decided that her neighbour was the one who would not let her out of the apartment. "Oh, you scarecrow! Completely lost your mind! Now I'll get you!" she shouted.

Pirozhkov recognized Avdokhina's voice and blamed her for everything. He even vaguely suspected that it was Avdokhina who rode the elevator and teased him. "Now I'll crush you, hooligan! Even a grown woman! Let go of the door now. I'll tear you to pieces!" Pirozhkov yelled in a voice hoarse from indignation.

Pookar looked at Masha and quietly asked how she liked the new game. Masha shook her head and threatened him with a finger. However, she was glad that they were able to play a trick on Pirozhkov, who was always annoying her parents.

"Let go of the door immediately! I order you!" Pirozhkov yelled.

"Let go yourself!" Avdokhina screamed.

Attracted by the noise, the occupants of the other apartments started to look out. It was time to stop the game. Taking advantage of a short respite of both Avdokhina and Pirozhkov, who were quite exhausted from their exertion, Pookar untied the rope from the door handles, and together with Masha, the cat, and the doll Olga darted away to their own apartment.

There the little imps put their ears to the door and listened. It so happened that Avdokhina and Pirozhkov pulled the door at the same time, counting on a sudden charge to capture the opponent by surprise. They jumped out onto the landing and collided face to face. Each decided that he had caught the other at the scene of the crime.

What happened next, Masha did not manage to find out, because Mama and Papa had returned from visiting. She did not want her parents to find out that she had gone out of the apartment in their absence. All the same, they would not believe that it was not her but Pookar who had started everything. Parents do not understand a lot of things, and it is a pity. They were also children once.

Chapter Six

A Good Fairy Tale for the Bunnies

The bunnies Sineus and Truvor never went to bed without a fairy tale. Every night before bedtime Masha or the doll Olga would tell them the familiar stories of Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, or Puss in Boots. However, Masha was not home that evening; she had gone to spend the night with Grandma and had taken the doll Olga with her. The bunnies complained and did not want to go to bed without a fairy tale. In the end, Pookar, who was fond of sitting in silence in the evening, got tired of their whining.

“That’s it! I’ve had enough! You’ll have a fairy tale! Lie in bed and close your eyes!”

Pookar put his hands behind his back and began to pace the room. The bunnies quietly lay in their mitten beds and waited for the fairy tale promised by Pookar.

“What does that silly doll usually stuff your head with?”

“Once upon a time there was a miller and he had three sons. He left the oldest the mill, the middle one the donkey, and the youngest a cat in boots...” the bunnies babbled. They knew all the stories by heart, but for some strange reason they could not tell the tales by themselves.

Pookar laughed. “What cat? In boots? What they don’t do to mess with kids’ heads! I once tried to put boots on Muffin, thought that she would scratch less, and what happened? Muffy almost pulled all the stuffing out of me! No, not on your life! Today I’ll tell you another story.”

The bunnies perked up. Pookar started, “An old man like our Pirozhkov had a lot of dust in his apartment. The dust lay on the floor, on the sofas, and even in the closed drawers of the table. One morning the old man got up and saw in the dust tracks of little feet wearing shoes with tiny studs. The tracks led into the kitchen to the sugar bowl. It was as if ten little people had gone there in the night.

“In the evening the old man put ten pieces of candy on the kitchen table. Nine were normal, but one was poisoned. The candies disappeared in the night. The next morning only the tracks of nine pairs of small shoes led to the sugar bowl... Bunnies, eyes closed, I said!

“The old man put out another piece of poisoned candy. The day passed and there were fewer tracks. He poisoned another piece of candy, and another, and another. So time after time he poisoned the candy, until one day he saw only one track. A row of tracks crossed the dust sadly and led to the window. Nobody came to the sugar bowl anymore.”

Pookar finished the tale, yawned, and looked at the bunnies, certain that they were already asleep. Nothing of the kind. The bunnies were quietly trembling in their mitten beds.

“Te-te...”

“What te-te...? Watch out, or I’ll spank you!”

“Tell us Cinderella, Pookar!” the bunnies timidly asked.

Pookar grimaced. “Well, fine. Remind me.”

“Once upon a time there was Cinderella. The stepmother and her two daughters forced Cinderella to work a lot and did not let her go to the ball at the palace. In the palace lived a prince...” the bunnies prompted.

“Then Cinderella, like our Muffy, wanted to get married. Right?” Pookar interrupted.

“Yes. How do you know?” The bunnies were surprised.

“Always one and the same! Well, listen to the sequel. Cinderella got tired of them taking her for a fool and preventing her from having a good time. She whacked the stepmother on the forehead with the glass slipper. The slipper, naturally, went to pieces. Then Cinderella locked the sisters in the basement and ran to the ball herself. There she quickly married the prince and arranged her own business.”

“What business?” The bunnies were surprised.

“It’s clear what. With the prince. That was the kind of person she was, this Cinderella of yours!” Pookar yawned and looked at Sineus and Truvor in the hope that they, too, were inclined to sleep.

It was not so, however. The bunnies were whimpering softly in their mittens but were not going to sleep. “Olga didn’t tell it this way! Ah-h!”

Pookar became extremely annoyed and jumped up and down on the spot. “Well, what else do you want? You want that I tell you about vampires or Blue Beard?”

“Olga didn’t tell us about them! Ah-h!”

“I’m tired of your Olga and your fairy tales! I’m asking for the last time: will you sleep or not? I’ll give you three minutes! Already two! If you don’t fall asleep, I’ll call Freddy with the saw!³ And he’ll cut you up into pieces!” Pookar threatened.

You can imagine what started here. Pookar had never heard such a loud squeal. Usually Sineus and Truvor would only whine a little bit, but now, what a storm! Pookar nearly went deaf. He darted around the room, not knowing what to do. Lucky for him, Muffin, awakened by the loud crying, came in and calmed the bunnies. At the same time, the cat expressed to Pookar everything she thought of him and even a lot more that she did not. It turned out that, on the whole, the cat did not have a very high opinion of him.

Pookar held his head with his hands. “You meowed out my soul, nasty Muffy! Not on your life! Next time, you tell the fairy tale! This Cinderella of yours is a pain in the neck!”

³ This refers to Freddy Krueger from *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and Jason Voorhees from the *Friday the 13th* series.

Chapter Seven

The Cat Muffin Falls In Love

The cat Muffin lived according to an exact schedule. She slept during the day and played with Masha in the evening – jumped into Masha's arms, snuggled up to Masha, rubbed against Masha's legs, or graciously amused herself with newspaper crumpled into a ball. She pretended to believe that it was a mouse. There were only two games Muffin could not stand: she did not like it when her tail was pulled or when she was harnessed to a cart. In these cases, Muffin bristled up and began to hiss, and once scratched the disgusting boy Peter, who tried to suck Muffin into the vacuum cleaner.

However, on waking up one morning, Olga found the cat in a strange mood. Muffin was rolling on the floor and heartrendingly bawling some special raucous meow.

"What's with you? Hurt yourself? A headache? Sprained your foot?" Olga asked sympathetically.

Muffin lifted her head and looked at her blearily. "Oh, it's you! Good that you came, although, in fact, you could also not have come."

"Why?" Olga was surprised. "You yourself invited me yesterday! You were so cheerful. What happened? You caught a cold? I warned you not to lie in the draught."

Muffin sighed. "What cold? Can you keep a secret?"

"I can. I can do a lot of things: sew, wash, cook dinner, clean the apartment..." the doll honestly started to itemize, bending her fingers.

"Yes, yes! Well, I'll tell you anyway! I've fallen in love," the cat purred despondently.

"You don't say! With whom?" Olga was pleased for Muffin.

"One of the cats. You don't know him," Muffin said.

"And who's he, this cat?"

"No one... Nothing special..."

"Nothing at all?"

"Absolutely. That's not the point. I love him."

Olga shook her curls. "I don't understand! My head's all muddled!"

"No wonder. You have nothing there. Some holes for the hair," Muffin snorted.

Olga was not offended. She was too curious to find out the details of Muffin's love. Why these details were necessary to her, she did not know, but they were somehow important for the one-and-a-half-year-old doll with blue eyes like all dolls.

"Where did you meet this cat? You're home all the time," Olga asked.

Muffin turned over onto her stomach, placed her head on her front paws, and heaved a really deep sigh. "I saw him in the window. He was on a nearby roof serenading."

"Doing what?"

"Singing serenades. Songs."



“And he sang well?”

“Couldn’t be worse. Very poorly,” Muffin admitted.

“And you fell in love? You heard this no-need-salt⁴ and fell in love?” The doll Olga became all the more interested.

“Have to fall in love with someone. Indeed, it’s spring,” the cat remarked dejectedly.

“And what’s he like, your cat? Good-looking?”

“Nothing of the kind! An ordinary cat of no pedigree. Most likely lives in a dumpster and feeds on fish tails,” Muffin shuddered.

“What did you see in him?”

“I saw nothing in him. NU-THING! I just fell in love! You, doll, are totally stupid!” the cat shouted. Muffin leaped up and began to pace anxiously around the room. She sniffed, jumped up onto the chairs, started to roll on the floor, and scratched the sofa with her claws.

The tidy Olga did not like this love. It was too restless for her taste. “Why are you suffering? Is it really not possible to love quietly? Curl up by the heater and love!” she advised.

⁴ This refers to a 2008 short Russian poem about love that starts with *No need salt/No need water/Give me love/...*

“I’m suffering. You really don’t understand that I’m suffering? I just can’t find a place for myself!”

“Can’t you fall in love with someone else? Why him? Because he sang no-need-salt?”

“You don’t understand!” the cat shook her head. “He has nothing to do with it. Even if it wasn’t him on the roof or he wasn’t serenading, I’d still fall in love. It’s spring after all, understand?”

Olga straightened her bow. “Vaguely. It turns out that I should fall in love with Pookar only because now it’s spring?”

Muffin swished her tail. “What are you talking about? You’re too young. And your Pookar is just an immature baby doll. Love, it’s only for adults. Sometimes you simply want to fall in love and you do. So? It’s nothing!”

Then the cat’s face became dreamy again, and Muffin, meowing, began to roll on the floor. “The funny thing is…” she said and stopped rolling. “The funny thing is that this will all pass. I know exactly what will happen. After two or three days. This has happened to me several times before.”

The doll Olga listened carefully to Muffin, thought a little, and smoothed her pinafore. A dreamy and hesitant expression suddenly appeared on her calm face. “Know what… Only don’t laugh! Can I also fall in love with him?” Olga suddenly blurted out.

Muffin, from surprise, even calmed down temporarily. “With whom?”

“Your cat.”

“Why?”

“Don’t ask. Just say, yes or no?” Olga demanded, turned red, and puffed up like a balloon.

Muffin paused, looked at the doll, smiled, and purred, “You have to go and do the same? Well, your problem… Fall in love as you please!”

* * *

In the evening Muffin and the doll Olga sat on the windowsill and watched the sun setting behind the multi-storied building. Panting was heard. This was Pookar scrambling along the curtains.

“Aha! Now I’ve found you! Hi, Catmuffy! Hi, Olga! What are you doing here?” he shouted merrily.

Olga turned around. “Ah, it’s only you, Pookar! We’re looking out the window. If you want, you can stay. Only, please, don’t make any noise.”

“What haven’t I seen out this window? A thousand million times I look out it… There!” Pookar slid like a wheel, throwing his short legs up high. Olga and Muffin did not pay him any special attention, and Pookar, having calmed down, also began to look out the window.

“Oho!” he suddenly yelled. “I know what you’re staring at! There, that guy is washing his car again. Here’s a fool! The whole day he can’t stop and washes, washes all the time… You’d think that he has fallen in love with the car! Let’s throw a flower pot at him. It’ll be fun!”

“In love with a car! How original!” the cat Muffin, who only heard this from Pookar’s long tirade, sighed.

“Much more original! A common pig!” the doll Olga said.

“You understand nothing again! Nothing at all,” Muffin waved her off.

“Why?”

“It’s not important with whom you love. You can fall in love with anyone or even anything. The object has no significance! What’s important is the state! Love comes not because someone suitable actually appeared beside you, but because it can’t not come. It comes not from outside but inside,” Muffin said.

“How smart you are, Muffy! You’re so smart; no wonder you’re not married!” Pookar breathed out enthusiastically. The cat hissed angrily.

“Steady, Muffin! Hush, Pookar! Let’s just look at the sun!” said Olga.

Pookar and the cat obeyed and also began to admire the sunset.

Chapter Eight

Pookar and His Anti-Guest Defence

The doll Olga lived in a little house on the windowsill between the flowerpots. Having a good imagination, one could tell everyone that one has a house with a garden in the mountains. Silver cones sparkled on the railing of the porch. The little house had a small room, a kitchen, and an attic, and was beautifully painted in watercolour.

Pookar lived in an old size-46 boot. It was always as messy in the boot as in his pockets. Things lay in a pile, and Pookar himself usually sat on the very top of the pile to welcome guests.

A large cardboard cookie box served as the home for the bunnies, with windows and doors cut out with scissors. Sineus and Truvor painted the inside with markers and coloured pencils. The bunnies, as you remember, slept in mittens. They were often afraid at night, and the mittens had to be washed in the morning and hung out to dry on the desk lamp. “It smells like a nursery school,” Pookar wrinkled his nose. Apart from the mittens, the bunnies had a table and chairs of empty thread spools in the box. There was also a small mirror, into which the doll Olga loved to look when she visited.

One morning, after waking up in the mitten beds, the bunnies breakfasted on carrot salad, washed down with carrot juice, and decided to go visiting. They took off to Pookar’s.

Pookar was already awake and building something. “Aha!” he said when he saw Sineus and Truvor. “You’re just what I need. I’m building anti-guest traps. Here, hold this rope!”

Pookar hung a large pillow over the door and, satisfied, looked at his own work. “A nice trap! Works as it should! A guest will think it’s the bell, he’ll pull, and the pillow will fall on his head... Boom!”

“Won’t the guest be hurt? It’s probably not nice to throw pillows at those who come to visit you,” the bunnies asked with unease.

“Well, too bad! It’s called E-TI-QUETTE. All of Europe is now busy with only this,” Pookar exclaimed.

“Oh! It must be awfully scary to live in this Europe!”

“On the contrary, it’s fun. The host of a home initially kicks a visitor downstairs or pours shampoo into his tea, and then politely apologizes for any inconvenience. The visitor says, ‘Doesn’t matter, don’t worry! Please come to my place tomorrow for a mug of poison.’”

Pookar whirled around the room. He pulled the rope, suspended balls and pillows, hid crackers under seats, and filled water pistols with water. Then he sat down on the doorstep and started to wait patiently.

Finally, the bolder of the two twins, Truvor, ventured to ask, “P-Pookar, but P-Pookar, who are we waiting for?”

Pookar turned his red head to him. “Guests, who else? Why else would I build the traps?”

“But no one will come. Today Olga has this...general cleaning. The cat Muffin is sleeping, and it’s better not to touch her. Otherwise, she decides, half-awake, that you’re a mouse. She hasn’t seen real mice.”

At that moment, a scream and the sound of a fall were heard somewhere close. Pookar darted off from the spot. “What’s that? Who crashed there?”

They ran around a pile of stuff and saw the doll Olga, sitting in a puddle and strewn with feathers from a pillow.



“Where did you come from? You have general cleaning today!” Pookar asked suspiciously.

“I already finished... Now I stumbled over something and this happened!” Olga started to cry.

“I see,” said Pookar. “Never mind, and relax. Nothing terrible has happened... Just a little etiquette. By the way, where did this puddle come from? It wasn’t here earlier.”

“This isn’t a puddle. It’s apple jelly,” Olga uttered through her tears.

“Apple jelly? My favourite apple jelly?” A perplexed expression appeared on Pookar’s face.

“You’ve been asking for a long time, so I made some.”

Pookar stamped his foot. “Oh! Why didn’t you warn me that you would bring jelly? Why? Always intrigues, forever hiding everything from me! What, Olga, you couldn’t carry it more carefully? Who asked you to fall?”

“I’ve always walked here. I don’t know how it happened.”

“It was probably your anti-guest trap snapping into action. You see, Pookar, the rope’s tight!” the bunnies Sineus and Truvor explained happily.

Pookar made threatening eyes at them, but it was already too late.

“A trap for guests?” Olga repeated slowly. “What kind of trap, nasty doll?”

“Just a little trap. Nothing serious. Not even a trap, but nothing. Just a string, so short...”

Pookar stammered, backing away.

“Oh, you bad Pookar! Now I’ll show you!” Olga shouted.

She started to chase Pookar, who took to his heels in fear on his short legs, making excuses on the run, “I didn’t want... It was just a string! Ouch! Not on the back! Better on the head, it’s soft!”

“Here’s to you and apple jelly!” Pookar often repeated afterwards. “And all because of this ETIQUETTE. That I would ever trust good manners!”

Chapter Nine

Invaders from a Shoebox

Masha had a cousin Peter, who was already ten. Peter lived with his mama and papa in the city of Tula, but sometimes came to Moscow for a visit. Peter was mean. He pulled Masha's hair, shot her with a water pistol, and teased her with unpleasant words like crybaby, dummy, runt, and others. It cannot be said that Masha loved Peter and looked forward to his arrival.

This time, Peter brought with him a large box tied up with a string. It would seem that a box was a box, nothing special, but the strange thing was that Peter let nobody look in it. It all started with this box. This is what happened.

"What a nasty one, this Peter! Yesterday he wanted to put me in a pot, and when I scratched him, he ran to complain to Mama. He's not only a meanie, but also a tattletale," the cat Muffin complained one day.

Pookar nodded. "I also don't like Peter. Last time he almost tore my arm off. He wanted to check whether it's sewn on firmly. Isn't that stupid?"

The dragonet Flamy was rushing about the room, unsuccessfully trying to catch up with his own tail. "Doesn't work! Keeps the box under his paws all the time. I wonder what Peter has hiding in there. What do you think, Pookar?" he asked.

Pookar declared that he was getting hungry and could not think on an empty stomach. "Let's go visit Olga! Just in time for dinner," he said.

"It's awkward somehow... We can't dine at hers every day! We were there yesterday," Flamy hesitated.

"And the day before, and the day before that," the cat Muffin added.

"We have to go all the more to not break tradition!" Pookar continued to entice. He did not want to go alone, afraid that Olga would chase him away. "Imagine what a pleasant surprise it'll be for Olga. She's probably sitting at the table now and thinking, 'What am I to do with this jar of mustard?' She thinks, 'Let me throw this out, as Flamy won't be coming today.' Then she looks at the can of fish and thinks, 'Will Muffin come visit today? If not, then I'm throwing out everything.'"

The cat Muffin licked her lips.

On Flamy's face was reflected the intense effort of thought. "Pookar, do you think that Olga still has mustard left? And she's actually going to throw it out?"

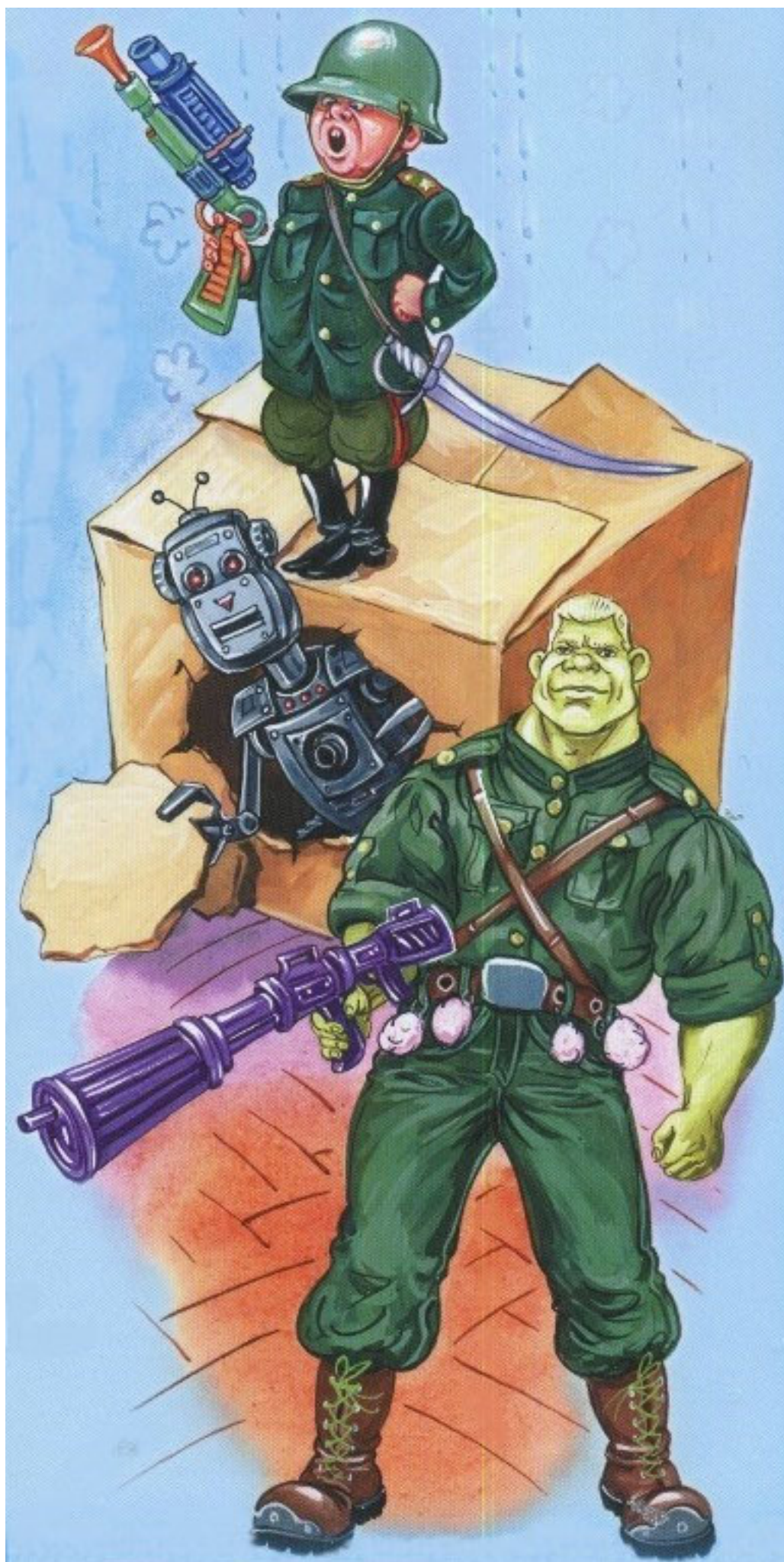
"Of course. Just yesterday, I heard her say, 'A full cupboard of this mustard! Should throw them all out, all the same no one eats them,'" Pookar said with inspiration. He was not lying at all. His head was simply arranged so that he believed everything he said.

"Why, she has forgotten about me! Let's go, quick. We may still have time!" Flamy was scared.

The cat Muffin thoughtfully rubbed her face with a paw. "Of course, Pookar, you exaggerated a lot... You can't do without that in order not to talk nonsense... But, on the other hand, Olga may in fact throw out the cans of fish. She's so absent-minded sometimes."

Pookar climbed onto Muffin's back, Flamy worked his wings, and they went to Olga's home.

No one noticed that the lid of the mysterious box had moved aside. At first, a head in a shiny helmet poked out, turned around a bit, and disappeared. Whispering was heard from the box. Someone said, "One! Two! Three!" and a large opening instantly appeared in one of the walls, as if someone had sawed through from inside the box.



Three soldiers, bought as a gift for Peter on his birthday, got out of the opening and looked around. They had been hiding in the box for a few days, waiting for the opportune moment to carry out a sortie and find out whether there was something in the room they could invade.

“Gorilla, have the toys left?” one of the soldiers whispered, looking around. This was a rotund, chubby man in a general’s uniform, appeared very warlike. A polished helmet gleamed on his head.

“Yes, Commander! No, Commander! Don’t know, Commander!” Gorilla said distinctly.

“Shut up, klutz!”

“But you yourself asked if they’ve left. Here I said...”

“Enough!!! Silence!!!”

“As you wish, Commander...” Gorilla was offended. Gorilla was a soldier of enormous size and very strong. He held in his hands a multi-barrel machine gun that fired thumbtacks. A few bombs of chewing gum hung from his belt. Gorilla’s head was small and he was strictly advised against thinking too much.

“Grabber, where are they? Where did these stupid dolls go? Go and have a look!” General ordered.

Grabber was a robot, metallic and shiny. Claws like those of a crab served as his hands. The right claw was in the form of a pair of pliers for grabbing and the left like a pair of scissors for cutting. It was precisely the robot, with his claw-scissors, that had cut a hole in the box, through which the soldiers had climbed out. A gun barrel that fired stickies with a terrible force stuck out of Grabber’s iron stomach. A key jutted out of the robot’s back. It was necessary to wind it every hour, otherwise the robot would switch off.

“I can’t, Commander! I’m not programmed to go and have a look. I’m only programmed to grab!” the robot reported.

“You’re not soldiers, but klutzes! Have to do everything myself. Can’t entrust anything to anyone!” General stamped his feet.

Grabber and Gorilla looked at each other.

“General, why did we get out of the box?” Gorilla asked and scratched his head.

“To conquer all indiscriminately, blockhead! First, we’ll take over this room and these dollhouses will be ours. We’ll build a base here and then attack the ice-cream kiosk. Kids love ice cream very much. We’ll force them to throw away all the toys. Instead of old toys, different kinds of teddy bears, dolls, and bunnies, let them buy pistols and Tommy guns!”

“Good thinking, General! We would never have thought of that!” Gorilla was thunderstruck.

“That’s why I’m the commander and not you!”

“General, the toys have come out of the house. They’ll be here in five minutes. I see two dolls and two midgets with big ears,” Grabber suddenly reported.

“Those are rabbits, you stupid piece of iron! Everybody ready for ambush! When they come closer, we’ll capture them,” General whispered.

Gorilla and Grabber hid in a box and General behind a leg of the bed.

“I hid well, right, Commander?” Gorilla yelled from his hiding place.

“Shut up, klutz! They’re already close!” General threatened Gorilla with a fist.

The doll Olga was glad to have guests. As Pookar predicted, she had something to treat each of them. Pookar got a whole pot of apple jelly and a plum cake. There was canned fish for Muffin. Olga had stored up a jar of wonderful, very strong mustard for Flamy. Anybody’s eyes would have crawled to their forehead with such mustard, but it suited Flamy’s taste. He even started to snuffle with pleasure. Muffin and Flamy were promptly stuffed and they started to feel drowsy.

“One shouldn’t go for a stroll after lunch! Self-respecting animals sleep after lunch!” Muffin purred, yawning.

“That’s it! And after waking up, we can dine immediately. We’ll grow!” Flamy agreed. He was a rare sleepyhead. After all, he had already slept in the trunk for a hundred years. Muffin and Flamy instantly fell asleep, huddled close to each other.

“You clearly overfed them, Olga! It seems that only I haven’t finished eating!” Pookar remarked. Having said this, he unnoticeably undid his belt and moved it to the last hole.

Olga took the rabbits by the paws and took them for a walk. Pookar lazily dragged himself along behind them, his hands in his pockets. Making small talk, the friends were gradually getting closer to where Grabber, Gorilla, and General were hiding.

When the toys got close enough, General jumped out from behind the leg of the bed and fired a water pistol at Olga. “Hooray! Catch them! No one gets away! Catch them all!”

Gorilla jumped out of the box, confusedly firing the machine gun and yelling, “Stwike! Stwike!” When Gorilla got excited, all the sounds got mixed up in his mouth and he stopped articulating “r.” Grabber was running amuck working his tracks, snapping his claws, and speeding towards the bunnies. “Hold it there, rabbit hats!” he rattled.

At first, victory was on the side of the soldiers. The doll Olga screamed and almost fainted when General splattered her lace apron with a water pistol. Gorilla threw one of the sticky bombs and Truvor’s feet instantly stuck to the floor. In response, Pookar gave General such a push that he fell and became entangled in his sabre, “Help! Untangle me, quick!” General yelled. Grabber, who had almost caught Sineus with his own claws, dropped him and ran to help General.

At that moment, Gorilla seized Pookar and raised him high above his head. “Wow, what a sharp little fatty! Won’t get away from me!” Gorilla boomed.

Grabber, forgetting about the bunnies, clicked his claws and advanced on Olga. The doll pushed the robot away and said angrily, “Don’t touch me! We’re scarcely acquainted. Your hands are cold!”

Olga accidentally touched the key on Grabber’s back and started to turn it the wrong way. Something clicked in the robot and his tracks started spinning at different speeds, so that the robot started to travel in circles. Olga had discovered by chance Grabber’s most vulnerable spot. “Damage of working mechanism! Breakdown! Breakdown! Breakdown!” Grabber repeated mechanically.

Pookar was also lucky. When Gorilla lifted him above his own head, a hammer, which Pookar used to crack nuts, fell out of his pocket and almost cracked Gorilla’s forehead. From the other pockets poured pieces of iron, jars, and beetles in matchboxes. All this rained down on Gorilla’s head. “Help! Can’t fight this way!” Gorilla squealed.

A beetle crawled out of a matchbox and bit Gorilla on an ear, and another fell right under his bulletproof vest and began to crawl around there. “I’m ticklish! Ew-w-w-w! T-take this p-pest away!” Gorilla started to jump on the spot and dropped Pookar.

General fired the water pistol at the bunnies and Olga but could not hit them at all, as his helmet was constantly sliding down over his eyes. “Stop! Let’s aim! I have a little water left! Catch them quickly, my brave soldiers! Where are you going, boneheads?”

However, Gorilla had already fled, dragging the machine gun. Grabber rolled behind him, jingling his iron interior. General thought for a bit and ran after his soldiers. “Retreat! Hoorah! Hoorah! Retreat!” he shouted. General realized that under conditions of general panic, an order to retreat would be the most correct. Later, he could tell his soldiers that it had been planned this way from the very beginning.

Pookar got up from the floor. “Great, we thrashed them! Now they won’t bother us for a long time! Only it’s unclear where they came from. They didn’t fall from the sky!”

Olga frowned and almost cried, seeing her dress stained and the blue bow missing. “Pookar, won’t you help me find my bow?”

Pookar looked around. “Aha, here it is! Look, Olga, the box was cut! What could this mean, huh?”

Olga looked at the box with a hole on the side cut by Grabber’s claws. “The soldiers probably climbed out of the box. Peter himself is mean and he has pushy toys. Look how they soiled my dress! What do I look like now?”

“You look fine!” Pookar comforted her. This did not console Olga.

“Where are the bunnies? Where did they go?”

“We’re here!” Sineus and Truvor looked out from a half-opened desk drawer. They were trembling a little and clinging to each other.

“Well, you yellow-bellies! You don’t have to be afraid. The soldiers have run away!” said Pookar.

Gorilla looked out from under the bookcase at the other end of the room and shouted, “General ordered me to tell you that we’ll show you yet! We retreated on purpose!”

“Just try! We’ll beat you again! Take your stupid Peter and get out of here!” Pookar cupped his hands so that his voice sounded louder.

Gorilla threatened him with a fist and disappeared behind the bookcase.

Chapter Ten

Acquaintance with Scholarchkin

When the toys returned to Olga's home after the battle with the soldiers, Flamy and Muffin were still asleep. Muffin, according to her mood in general, could sleep all day, waking up only in cases of extreme necessity. Now, the cat was probably dreaming that she was clambering along a tall tree, because she was moving her paws and turning her head in her sleep. Flamy occasionally snored, releasing a small fountain of flame and smoke.

Muffin and Flamy were sleeping soundly. No matter how they were shaken or shouted at, it was all in vain. Finally, a lucky thought came into Olga's head to clink the lid of a pot above their ears. It worked. Immediately the sleepyheads woke up and began to look around. Olga and Pookar described how they had fought with the soldiers.

"How many were there?" Flamy asked.

"Three..." Pookar, not very strong in arithmetic, counted on his fingers just in case.

"Then it wasn't Dobrynya Nikitich," Flamy sighed with relief.

"Who's this Dobrynya Nikitich?" Pookar asked. "A soldier?"

"I already told you about him! Not a soldier, but a hero."

"I saw Dobrynya Nikitich in a picture. He's on a horse and has a sword," the doll Olga said.

"Precisely... Then one of us ate the horse and left the sword. As I remember now, it was such a huge sword," said Flamy.



“How big? How many kilometres-metres-centimetres-millimetres?” someone’s thin little voice asked suddenly.

Flamy looked around. “Who said that? Did you, Pookar?” he was surprised.

“Neuh-uh, not me,” Pookar said.

“I did. How many kilometres-metres-centimetres-millimetres was the sword?” the same little voice repeated impatiently.

Everyone saw a stranger in large glasses on a snub nose and a funny red cap standing in the doorway of the dollhouse. The stranger had on a green velvet jacket and black shoes with white laces. He was holding a small briefcase in his hands.

“Who are you?” Olga was astonished.

“Please excuse me!” the guest pronounced stiffly. “I forgot to introduce myself. I’m the gnome Scholarchkin, physicist-chemist-mathematician.”

“Are you from the same box as the soldiers?” the doll Olga asked suspiciously.

“No. I had the honour of arriving here in Masha’s schoolbag. Earlier, I lived in the school, but now I’ve decided to leave there. I can’t watch how catastrophically the level of education has fallen,” the gnome said.

Pookar opened his mouth to make a spiteful remark, but Muffin gave him a slight smack with her paw. She was a serious cat and loved to talk about clever subjects.

“I utterly agree with you. A disgrace, simply a disgrace! It was all different in our time. The current generation just doesn’t know what they’re missing,” she meowed, turning to Scholarchkin. The two-year-old cat Muffin never studied anywhere but considered herself terribly highly experienced and grown-up. No one convinced her to the contrary, because Muffin, when angry, immediately began to scratch and bite.

“You have the right views, respectable one! I fully agree with you. May I ask, with whom do I have the honour of talking?” the gnome asked.

“Muffin... That is, Martha,” embarrassed, the cat introduced herself.

“And I’m Flamy!” said the dragonet.

“FLAmy or FlaMY? How should you be correctly struck?” the gnome asked with an air of importance.

The dragon was offended. “No need to strike me. I can surrender!” he growled.

“That’s not what I wanted to say. I’m asking, where is the stress in your name?”

“He’s FLAmy! The stress is on ‘fla’!” clever Olga said. She alone understood what the gnome had in mind.

“I’m Pookar... Olga... He’s Sineus... This is Truvor... That’s the twin hiding behind Olga... Don’t pay any attention, he’s shy...” the friends were introduced.

“Very, very nice... But let’s return to our conversation. So how many metres-kilometres-centimetres was Dobrynya Nikitich’s sword?” the gnome pulled out an abacus from the briefcase and clicked the beads.

Flamy thought for a bit. “I don’t know exactly how many kilothese there were. But it was like this!” He instantly transformed into a sword, big and heavy. It was immediately clear that this was a real sword for a hero. Everybody gasped. They, of course, already knew earlier that Flamy knew how to transform, but when a sword suddenly appeared instead of Flamy, it was impossible not to gasp.

“Curiouser and curiouser! Scientifiker and scientifiker... A curious specimen!” Scholarchkin approved.

The gnome measured the sword with a measuring tape. “Two centimetres three metres five kilometres! To a T,” he said. After clicking the abacus, he took out a small notebook in an emerald binding and recorded the dimensions of the powerful sword.

All the toys, mouths open, watched as the gnome wrote carefully with a red pencil in his little notebook. “Ah! What a poetic look he has... Pity he isn’t a cat...” The cat Muffin was carried away.

Scholarchkin closed the notebook, hid it in the briefcase together with the abacus, and stretched happily. “You have a nice place here! Cosy. Much better than a school desk. I think I’ll stay.”

“Stay, of course. But why did you leave the school? It always seemed to me that it’s nice there,” Olga asked.

“It’s not bad,” Scholarchkin agreed with authority. “But indeed very noisy. Earlier, I suggested the correct answers to those who got twos and they fed me sandwiches. I knew the multiplication table by heart! Imagine! Now, for some reason, I’ve started to forget everything. Three times three is ten. Five times seven is forty-seven. It’s like this every time! Time for a vacation!”

“Where will you live?” Pookar was worried. He liked Scholarchkin, but he did not like the idea at all of that one settling in the boot with him.

“I have a room to spare in the attic. Scholarchkin will be comfortable there. Only have to sweep it,” Olga took the gnome by the hand and led him to see his new home.

Chapter Eleven

The Mysterious Abduction of the Bunny Truvor

The gnome Scholarchkin settled in the attic of the doll Olga's home. There was no bed, and a small comfortable hammock had to be hung up. The school gnome liked the new room very much. Scholarchkin lay in the hammock all day and made notes in his notebook. In the evening, he told stories, in which it was impossible to believe. So, the gnome claimed that water in a kettle becomes hot when the little things – MOLECULES – in it begin to run quickly.

"That can't be! These molecules would start to run free. What are they, trained?" Pookar argued.

"I myself have seen them under a microscope! The molecules are small and live in the water like fish. While the water is cold, they swim by themselves quietly, as in a pool, but when the water starts to boil, they dart here and there very quickly," said the gnome.

"For sure. The poor things! You would dart about this way too if they scalded you with boiling water," Olga shook her head.

"Hiss-hiss! What are they, these molecules? What do they look like?" Flamy was interested.

Scholarchkin thought for a little bit, rubbed his forehead, and said uncertainly, "Molecules, they're like insects, only very small."

Pookar looked maliciously at Olga. "Bugs and roaches? Doll, you've been fighting with roaches but don't know that they're swimming in your tea and washing your feet. Watch you don't choke on some bugs."

Pookar's words worked. Olga's face became tearful; she waved her hands and ran out of the room. "Got into a bad mood. Now she'll sulk for an hour! Does she really have to be so stupid?" Pookar shrugged.

After their defeat, Gorilla, General, and Grabber appeared no more, and they were gradually forgotten. It was even believed that the soldiers had moved to another room, but it was not so, and the opportunity to make sure of it soon introduced itself. Unpleasant things began to happen in the room. A piece of twine, on which Pookar usually hung his socks out to dry, disappeared. At first, no one paid the disappearance any attention because Pookar was always a scatterbrain. However, when Olga's favourite pot with white polka dots vanished, the toys gathered together and started to think.

Pookar assumed a serious look. "Tsk-tsk, the case is clear! We can't manage without a sleuth here. I'll be Sherlock Holmes, and you, Sineus, will be Dr. Watson. Do you understand, Sineus?" he said.

"Yes," the bunny whispered, dropping his eyes and timidly fidgeting with a foot.

"Who's this Sherlock Holmes?" asked Flamy.

"Sherlock Holmes is a great researcher, and Dr. Watson is his assistant."

Pookar pulled the deerstalker to his eyes and strolled around the room. "Watson, do you have any ideas?"

"Nada," the bunny babbled, barely audibly.

"So, it's clear," Pookar said meaningfully. "No one has any ideas? Then I'll start." The great detective turned around and closed his eyes. "One, two, three, four, five, I'll go search! Look out, pot thief! The great Holmes goes on the warpath!"

"Better tell me where's the pot? Is it you who stole it?" Olga hurried him, watching out for Pookar's tricks without any special acknowledgement.

"First conclusion." Pookar straightened the deerstalker. "If there's no pot, then it means someone took it, because pots don't walk by themselves. Second conclusion: the one who took it

was probably very hungry, because only a very hungry creature can eat the sour kasha that Olga cooks.”

“What did you say? My kasha is sour? If it’s sour, who asked you to gobble it up?” Olga was offended.

“I eat the kasha out of sympathy,” said Pookar.

“Here, I’ll show you sympathy! Are you actually going to find the pot or just chitchat?” Olga flew into a rage.

“I’m going to. I’ll find it in no time at all. But first, let’s find out if the pot was lost at all. Perhaps you hid it somewhere so as not to cook dinner? Ah-h, mama!” Fleeing from Olga, Pookar quickly hid behind the cat Muffin and from there bravely stuck his tongue out at Olga.

It was not known how far the fighting would have gone but at that moment Flamy suddenly shouted, “Look! There’s our pot running!” Everyone looked around and saw that the pot was quickly crawling along the floor to the other side of the room. It was crawling by itself, completely inexplicably.

“Quick! We still have time to catch it!” Pookar shouted.

“A scientific sensation! A self-moving pot!” The gnome Scholarchkin was delighted.

Everybody except the frightened bunnies, who remained in the house, rushed after the pot. Flamy flew ahead. Muffin rushed behind him with soft bounds, Scholarchkin clinging to her tail. Pookar barely kept pace behind the cat. Olga, holding her skirt, ran last.

“Of course, milk boiled over at my place. But this, a pot running off, this has never happened to me!” Olga muttered under her breath.

Meanwhile the pot was crawling quietly by itself along the floor, sometimes stopping as if teasing its pursuers. From the outside, one would think that it was just going for a walk. Very soon, the friends overtook it. Flamy grabbed the handle with his teeth and held it until the others arrived. The cat Muffin arched her back and hissed. The pot did not stir anymore and did not try to crawl away.

“It’s not running by itself; someone was dragging it with a rope,” said Scholarchkin, walking around the pot and looking at it through a magnifying glass.

“This is my sock string that disappeared!” Pookar yelled suddenly.

The friends all looked at each other. They understood nothing.

“It’s probably the soldiers. But why did they have to drag the pot by a rope?” said Olga.

“Quite mysterious. A secret, shrouded in mystery... Look, Sineus is running to us!”

Stumbling, Sineus ran up to the toys. He was so agitated that he could not utter a word but only waved his paws. Olga had to take him into her arms and hold him tight.

“He’s shaking like a jackhammer!” Pookar said in amazement.

Only after five minutes did Sineus manage to utter, “Truvor... The soldiers stole Truvor! They also wanted me, but I hid!”

“It can’t be!”

“They waited until you ran after the pot and stole Truvor! They thought up everything on purpose! It’s all that tubby, whose helmet slides down over his eyes!”

Chapter Twelve

Flamy Saves Truvor

General stood beside a map in his headquarters behind the bookcase and thoughtfully traced with a finger on the map, pretending to think. The map was drawn on a scrap of wrapping paper and portrayed the room from above. Gorilla had drawn the map and it turned out to be extremely confusing. It was dusty behind the bookcase. Gorilla was constantly sneezing so loudly that everything around shook.

“Can you sneeze any louder, bird brain?” General shouted at him.

“Yes, I can,” Gorilla growled. “Achoo!” It was such a powerful sneeze that the map was torn off from the wall. The helmet flew off General’s head and smacked against the wall. Bang!

“Klutz! You’ll give us away! Why don’t you put in some work with your head for a change?” General stamped his feet.

“Yes, Commander! As you say! Bang!” Gorilla rammed his forehead into the wall and smiled contentedly.

“I’ll shoot you, idiot!” General pulled out his pistol.

“Neuh-uh, don’t shoot!” Gorilla shook his head.

“Why?”

“Gee! Your water was all gone there.”

The kidnapped bunny Truvor was sleeping on a chair in front of General. Since he was a little bunny, he was used to sleeping during the day. Gorilla’s terrible sneeze had woken Truvor. The bunny woke up and began to tremble. General saw that Truvor had opened his eyes and was overjoyed.

“Finally! We’ve been waiting for two hours for you to wake up! Tell me the military secret!”

“I don’t know any secret,” Truvor muttered.

General pouted. It seemed a little longer and he would start to cry. “So boring! If you don’t know, then think. Come up with something!” he ordered.

“I would love to, but I’m still little and I can’t,” Truvor whimpered.

“Fine!” General got angry. “If you don’t want to meet us half-way, then don’t... Then we’ll torture you! Gorilla, proceed!”

“Proceed with what?”

“Torture, half-wit!!!”

Gorilla scratched the back of his head, walked hesitantly to Truvor and made a savage face. “Humph! Now I’ll eat you! How I love eating little bunnies!”

Truvor raised his sleepy face and saw Gorilla’s silly face. He stopped crying, looked for some time in bewilderment at the grimacing Gorilla, and suddenly burst out laughing! Among all the toys, Truvor was the one that laughed the easiest.

“Stop! Come here, Gorilla! I’ll explain to you how to torture!” General was furious. He was so mad and turned so red that his helmet became red-hot.

Gorilla obediently went to General and they began to whisper. Then Gorilla rolled up his sleeves and approached the bunny. His arms were huge, hairy, and terrifying. “Tell me the secret or I’ll torture you by tickling!” he said and began to tickle the bunny.

Meanwhile, the bunny’s friends were thinking of how to rescue him and chase the soldiers away from the room.

“Just so you don’t poke your nose into them, they have these nasty pistols that fire burrs and paint. They instantly stain from head to toe,” said Olga.

“Do you want me to smoke them out from there?” Flamy released a jet of flame from his nostrils.

The cat Muffin fanned the smoke away with a paw, “Forget it! You’ll set something on fire!”

Sineus pleadingly touched the school gnome with a hot paw. “Think of something, Scholarchkin! You’re so smart! Think a bit and you’ll definitely come up with something!”

Scholarchkin frowned and began to walk around the room. He was not accustomed to thinking in a different way except on his feet. He had to walk. Olga even woke up at night sometimes because a restless Scholarchkin walked in the attic above her head.

Flamy and Muffin watched Scholarchkin tensely. Their heads turned, following him right-left, right-left. Several minutes passed this way. Then the gnome suddenly jumped and shouted, “I have an idea!”

An hour later General, Gorilla, and Grabber were playing hide-and-seek. It was the only game they knew. Perhaps if they had known more games, the desire to fight would have disappeared by itself. The soldiers left the bunny Truvor at the headquarters behind the bookcase. After plenty of tickling, the heartily laughing Truvor had fallen asleep and was snoring quietly in the chair. He knew no military secrets and the soldiers had lost all interest in him.

The game of hide-and-seek had only just begun. The robot Grabber was “it.” He stood, eyes closed, and counted to five. The robot was the only one of all the soldiers who could be “it” honestly, without peeking. Grabber’s voice was raspy because he had not been oiled for a long time.

“One, two, three, three, three, three, three...” Grabber rattled on.

“Jammed again!” General said angrily, climbing out from under an old newspaper. He ran to the robot and turned the key in the back. Then he quickly crawled under the newspaper, trying not to rustle the pages.

“Three... three... four... five... Here I come!” Grabber counted and opened his eyes.

Two light bulbs served as his eyes. When the robot closed his eyes, the bulbs turned off. Now the bulbs lit up. Grabber looked all around attentively. Nobody! The robot turned his tracks on to the quietest speed and went seeking.

“Hi, I’m here!” The robot suddenly heard a loud unfamiliar voice behind his back. Grabber whipped around and clicked his claws, but saw no one, only an old red ball lying on the floor. Grabber’s eyes glowed so brightly in perplexity that the bulbs almost burnt out. When he turned back, the red ball was gone.

Grabber found Gorilla soon enough. He was hiding in the body of a wheel-less toy truck, which had been lying about behind the bookcase for a few months. The giant quickly tired of being in the truck. He started to putter and sigh loudly. The truck was shaking completely and almost broke apart.

Gorilla and Grabber forgot about General, found a big tennis ball, and began to throw it. General, lurking under the newspaper, was glad at first that no one found him, and then became a little bored, but near the end almost howled from idleness. He suddenly realized that no one was looking for him and got out from under the newspaper. He was immediately knocked over by the ball, which Grabber threw with force.

“Halfwit!!! You should be looking for me!” General yelled.

“Excuse me, Commander! But you always get mad when I find you. Today you were hiding under the newspaper. You rustled and the helmet peeked out,” the robot growled.

General stamped his foot, sulked, and grumbled that they were all blockheads and it was not clear at all why he played with them. “Let’s go to headquarters! We’ll plan some mean trick for those toys!” a dissatisfied General grumbled.

When the soldiers reached headquarters, Gorilla’s foot suddenly hit against a round object. “I have found a new ball! Orange!” Gorilla was overjoyed, lifting his leg.

“Wow! What a huge orange! How did we miss it earlier? Don’t you dare kick it! It’s very tasty!” General grabbed the orange.

“My orange! I found it!” Gorilla growled.

“I recognized it! Without me, you would think it’s a ball!” General went for his pistol but remembered that it was not charged.

“I found it!” Gorilla advanced threateningly on General.

“Very well, I’ll share with you! The orange is big, enough for two,” General recollected suddenly. He hoped that Gorilla would forget about the orange and he could eat it by himself.

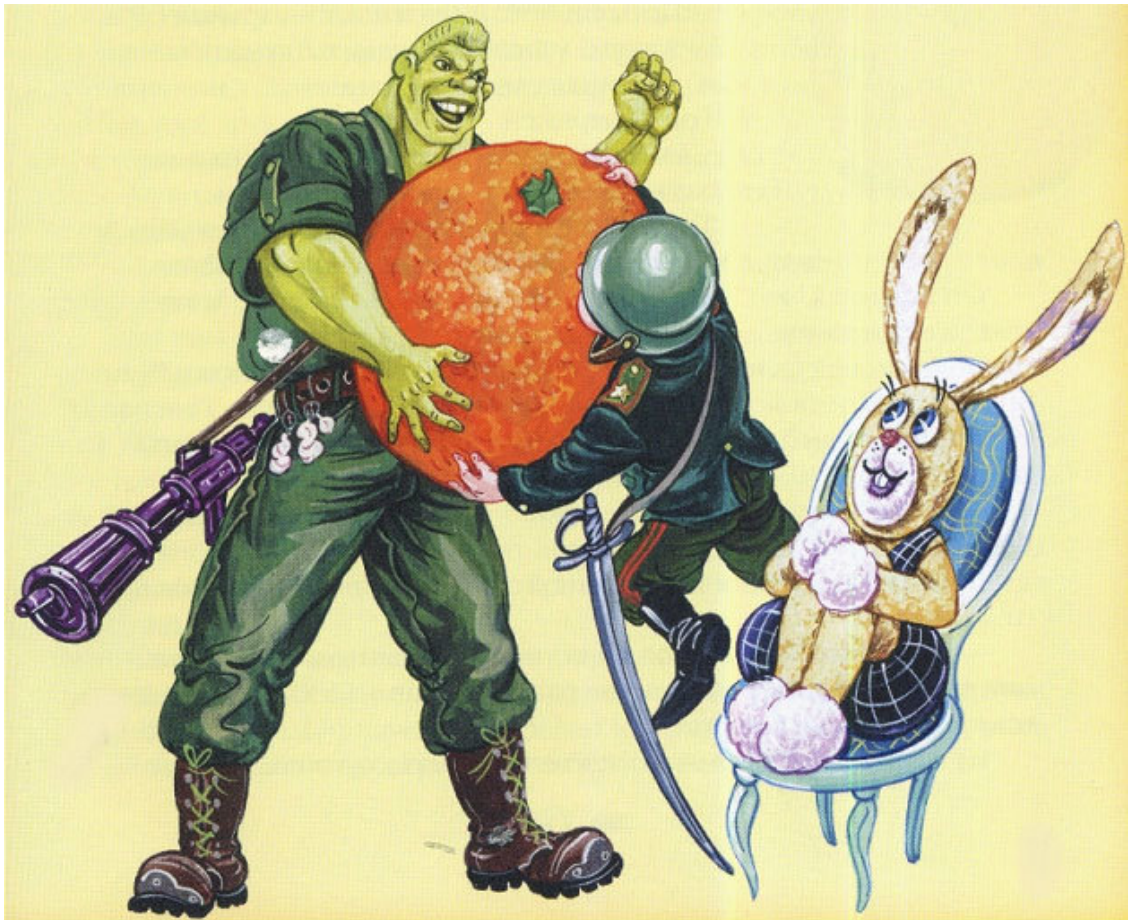
After entering their little house made of newspapers, the soldiers put the orange on the table and stared suspiciously at each other. General smiled unnaturally. Gorilla’s eyes shone with undisguised greed.

“D-don’t y-you want to wash your hands?” General asked as casually as possible.

“No, I don’t! I never wash them!” Gorilla kept his eyes on the orange.

“Bad! Oranges can only be eaten with washed hands! Otherwise, they explode. You won’t have time to open your mouth and – Bam! – it blows you up like a soft-boiled egg!” General lied.

Suspicion started to stir on Gorilla’s stupid face. “Then let’s wash hands together! Let the orange lie here for the time being!” he said.



Leaving Grabber on guard, General and Gorilla got out from behind the bookcase and rinsed their hands in a small puddle. The neighbours above left traces of water all over the floor, constantly flooding Masha’s room, and the puddle never dried. After washing, the soldiers rushed to the orange.

“Keep the peel for me!” General was crafty.

“No, for me! Me! Me!” Gorilla argued.

“Well, as you want... I’ll let you have the peel! All right, I’ll take the flesh,” General yielded.

He decided to cheat the simple-minded Gorilla, and he would have succeeded, but when they returned to headquarters, they found that... the ORANGE had disappeared!!!

“Where is it? What have you done with it?” The soldiers pounced on Grabber.

“No one came into the room! No one went near the orange. Only the two of you!” the robot rattled.

Knowing that Grabber could not lie, General and Gorilla stared at each other with suspicion.

“It’s you! You took it!” General lost his temper.

“No, you! Give me my orange quickly!” Gorilla began to shake General like a kitten.

General’s teeth started chattering. “A d-d-dis-s-grac-c-ce! L-let go r-right now! I’m your co-commander!”

Grabber moved around the two and clicked his claws. He did not know whose side to take.

Suddenly laughter rang out above the soldiers’ heads. “Ha-ha! Hiss-hiss! Ha-ha! Ha-ha!”

The soldiers instantly stopped fighting and looked up. Nobody!

“Ha-ha! What fools! Ha-ha!”

It was worthwhile to see the soldiers’ faces at that moment. The helmet flew off General and his mouth opened by itself! Gorilla became red and again stopped articulating “r,” “Help! Spook! Tewible wobber!”

Grabber’s tracks started to turn in different directions. The light bulbs flashed brightly. He fired a sticky at random from the gun barrel at his stomach. The sticky flew away into space and was seen no more.

“What fun! Oh, I can’t, funny!” A cheerful voice rang out near the ceiling.

All of a sudden, one more General, similar to the former, like a twin brother, appeared beside Gorilla. “Hiss-hiss! Klutz! Grab that General! He’s an impostor! Iron, forward!” General growled.

“I’m real! Hands off! Not me, grab him!” The real General was scared.

The two Generals ran around headquarters and got entangled once and for all. Gorilla’s mouth fell open and he could not move. Grabber rushed from one General to the other, clicked his claws, and repeated, “Conflicting data! Conflicting data!”

Then one of the two Generals disappeared and a twin Gorilla appeared instead. “Guard! Substitute! Wun for your life!” the twin shouted.

“Mama! I’m scared!” the real Gorilla yelled and ran right through the wall out of the headquarters made of newspapers. Grabber rolled out after him.

A scared General raced behind. He held his helmet and yelled, “Wait, where are you going? It’s not according to regulations! I should be the first to retreat!”

No sooner had the soldiers run out when a terrible crash was heard. It was Pookar’s anti-guest traps snapping into action. While Flamy was distracting General, Gorilla, and Grabber, Pookar and Olga stretched ropes and built anti-guest traps.

A ripped-open pillow fell on Gorilla. He immediately had a fit of sneezing, clucked incoherently like a harassed chicken, and fired the machine gun until the thumbtacks ran out. Grabber was tangled in the ropes and dangling in the air, turning his tracks. General found himself in an empty jam jar. The jar had been placed sideways, and General had barely run into it when the lid was closed. “Boo-boo! Boo-boo-boo-boo!” came from the jar.

Then the friends freed the bunny Truvor. Sineus and Truvor were so pleased that they were back together that they even started crying. They naturally wiped their tear-stained faces on the doll Olga’s apron.

“Well? You need this!” Olga said severely to the soldiers.

“We won’t do it again! Please forgive us!” Gorilla whimpered, wiping his nose with his huge fist.

“Boo-boo-boo-boo! Boo-boo-boo-boo!” rang out from the jar.

“General says that he’ll try to reform,” Scholarchkin translated.

Flamy flew out of the newspaper house, extremely satisfied. “How did I have them? ‘Bang!’ with the tail. And he, ‘Mama!’ How that one jumps, but the piece of iron, that one generally... How he falls! Hiss-hiss! And this one in the helmet, when he sees me, thinks that it’s him! Great! And I to him, ‘There! Here I am for you!’ And he, ‘Ah-h!’” Although Flamy’s story was incoherent, he had success with the audience. The cat Muffin even asked with an “encore!” for a repeat giving more attention to details.

“What shall we do with the soldiers? Perhaps let them go?” the doll Olga interrupted Flamy.

“Let’s tickle them! Let them tell their military secrets! I like that a lot!” the bunny suggested timidly.

“Mama! I’m afraid of tickling! I’m not playing this way!” Gorilla howled. He hopped away on one leg with tremendous speed, dragging the pillow with him. The second leg was caught in the pillowcase. Grabber ran after him, rumbling his iron interior. Behind them, looking back, ran General. “You forgot me! The boss should retreat first!” he yelled.

“Lost your helmet! Which way?” the friends shouted after him.

After a few days, Peter left for Tula and took the box with the soldiers with him.

Chapter Thirteen

The Picnic on the Roof

For a long time Pookar, Olga, and Scholarchkin could not decide whether to tell Masha about Flamy. However, it all happened by itself.

“Hiss-hiss! I can’t hide my whole life. After all, she isn’t Dobrynya Nikitich. Why shouldn’t we meet? I think my mama wouldn’t mind,” Flamy said.

“But you could become invisible,” the doll Olga proposed cautiously.

“It’s boring to be invisible all the time! Everyone looks at you like at an empty spot. Pity!” Flamy was upset.

“Well, then go, meet, once you’ve made up your mind! You’ll die from uncertainty!” said Pookar.

When Masha was home, Flamy got out of the cabinet, where he was hiding. He walked over to the girl and nudged her with his head.

“Don’t bother me, Muffin! Can’t you see that I’m busy?” Masha said, thinking that it was the cat. However, she still looked down and saw a green dragonet with yellow eyes and small wings on his back.

Flamy looked fondly at the girl and uttered, “Hi! I’m Flamy!”

“And I’m Masha,” the slightly bewildered girl said.

“Phew,” Flamy sighed in relief, “now we’ve met! Now we can chat about some polite topic. Do you have mustard?”

“Mustard? In the fridge, probably,” Masha said, surprised.

“Will you let me take it?”

“Yes, of course. Do you want me to bring it?”

“Don’t worry. I ate it all yesterday,” Flamy bragged.

“Why ask then?”

“Just because. To keep conversation going,” Flamy spun around on the spot, trying like a cat to catch his tail. Only his tail was green and thin with notches. “I can never catch it! An absolutely unpredictable tail. No matter how I try, it always manages to slip away at the last moment,” he complained.

Masha hesitantly touched the shiny scales on Flamy’s back. She could not believe that her conversational partner existed in reality.

“Do you like me? You can pet me!” Flamy gave her permission.

“You’ve already met? Then let’s play!” Pookar shouted, leaning out of his boot-home.

“What are we going to play?”

“Nothing! We’re going for a walk on the roof,” Pookar jumped out of the boot. He was in his usual field outfit: a pot on his head and a bottle-opener in his hands.

“I don’t know. Of course, I’ve almost done my homework, but...” Masha said doubtfully.

“No ‘buts’... Great adventures don’t wait!” Pookar was indignant.

Masha agreed to take a walk on the roof with the condition that none of the toys would go up to the edge. “It’s dangerous!” she said. Muffin also started to make up her mind. The roof was the place the cat always longed to be. There she could casually meet her beloved cat. Hoping for that, Muffin washed with a paw and made herself pretty.

By a lucky chance, the hatch to the roof turned out not to be locked. The roof was flat, enclosed by handrails along the edges. There was a light breeze. Flamy immediately began to fly and Pookar ran.

Muffin quietly looked around and, realizing there were no cats, got upset. “Didn’t much want to!” she murmured to herself under her breath.

Masha walked around the roof a little bit, at first carefully, then more boldly. She even risked looking down, holding the handrail tightly. Somewhere far away cars, looking like toys, were going by.

“Look what I can do!” Flamy yelled and deftly looped in the air. He became so twisted that for a moment his head and tail almost touched. Masha even caught her breath. She was afraid that Flamy would fall, though she was afraid in vain. Flamy descended onto the roof next to the girl.

“Never do that again! It’s even scary to look at,” Masha requested. Flamy stuck out his long forked tongue. He always did this when he was satisfied.

Pookar looked around in search of new entertainment. His eyes caught the TV antenna. It was a thin metal tube, from which iron feelers came out on both sides. “What an outstanding swing! Now we’ll have fun!” he shouted and rushed to the antenna.

Pookar and Flamy caught hold of the opposite ends of an antenna element and started rocking. They squealed with delight and each time took off even higher.

“Come to us!” they shouted to Masha.

“Now no one can watch TV all over the building! You’re shaking the antenna!” Masha threw up her hands.

“Nonsense! What fool would be watching TV during the day!” Pookar dismissed it and rocked even harder.

However, just at that moment, Pirozhkov and Avdokhina turned on the TV to watch the news. Neither Pirozhkov’s nor Avdokhina’s TV was working. The screen only flickered.

“Probably something with the antenna! Have to take a look!” Pirozhkov thought and ran out of the apartment. He certainly would have caught the pranksters, but Muffin heard him pounding up the stairs. The cat quickly slapped Masha with a paw, forcing her to listen.

“Here they come! Hide, quick!”

Pookar and Flamy jumped down from the antenna and started to rush about the roof.



“Quick, behind the vent!” Masha, who had already managed to hide, called them.

Pookar and Flamy dived for it. At that moment, the omnipresent Pirozhkov appeared on the roof and looked around suspiciously. He looked for a second at the vent, and it seemed to Masha, who was peering out from there, that Pirozhkov noticed her. However, she was lucky. Pirozhkov turned away and walked over to the antenna, still continuing to shake.

“Strange! No wind, but the antenna is shaking. I don’t understand!”

Pirozhkov reached out and held back the antenna. At that very moment, Avdokhina appeared on the roof. She had also decided to come up and see what was happening. The first one Avdokhina saw was Pirozhkov, doing some tricks with the antenna.

Avdokhina already had a low opinion of Pirozhkov earlier. After the recent incident with the doors, this opinion did not improve. Now, Pirozhkov had taken it into his head to shake the antenna. Avdokhina thought that he had gone nuts. “He’ll even drop from the roof, wacko!” she thought and, having decided not to curse, quickly hid behind a vent pipe – fortunately not the one where Masha and Flamy were, but another. Hiding behind the vent, Avdokhina accidentally stepped on a piece of rusty iron.

Pirozhkov heard a noise and, turning, saw Avdokhina dive behind the vent. He thought that she had been shaking the antenna to annoy him and then hid. Since Avdokhina rode the elevator and held the door to his apartment, Pirozhkov considered that she was capable of any dirty trick. Now he would tell her everything he thought of her! Pirozhkov rushed to Avdokhina.

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