ШНыр

Дмитрий Емец

No Way Out at the Entrance

«Емец Д. А.»

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Что бы вы сказали, если бы узнали, что завтра вам сделают предложение, от которого вы можете и захотите отказаться, но не откажетесь?.. Вам придется жертвовать собой и своими интересами, молчать в тряпочку, тренироваться, вступать в схватки, терпеть неудобства, но вы на все согласитесь. Просто так, без денег... Всего лишь за возможность нырнуть в нетронутый новый мир – двушку – и прикоснуться к мощному артефакту из этого мира. А еще за возможность спасти чью-то жизнь. В прямом или переносном смысле – не важно. Важно, что помощь будет реальной. Ведь именно для этого и существует Школа ныряльщиков. Думаете, такое никогда не произойдет? Когда на плечо вам сядет золотая пчела, вы посмотрите в глаза Пегаса и станете «небесным ныряльщиком», ваша жизнь изменится!

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Dmitrii Emets
NO WAY OUT
AT THE ENTRANCE

Дмитрий Александрович Емец

No Way Out at the Entrance

Серия «HDive», книга 2

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No Way Out at the Entrance:

Аннотация

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Содержание

Chapter 1 7
Chapter 2 15
Chapter 3 22
Chapter 4 26
Chapter 5 32
Chapter 6 43
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 45

Dmitrii Emets
No Way Out at the Entrance

One should put together with the greatest effort a reserve of strands, since onagers, [1] ballistae, and other missile weapons are of no use, if they cannot be drawn with ropes or strands. The hair from the manes and tails of horses is also very well suited to ballistae.

There is no doubt that women's hair is also very good for similar types of machinery; that has been proven by experience at the moment of the plight of Rome. When the Capitol was besieged, as a result of constant and long use the missile machines deteriorated, but there was not a reserve of strands, then Roman matrons cut off their hair and gave it to their husbands in battle; the machines were repaired, and the enemy attack repelled.

Vegetius [2]

[1] An onager was a siege engine of the Roman Empire, basically an ancient military catapult for throwing stones.

[2] Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus, commonly known as Vegetius, was a writer of the Roman Empire. One of his two surviving works is *Epitoma rei militaris* or *De Re Militari*, a Roman military treatise.

Chapter 1
The D Route Minibus

Four brothers go to the oldest.
"How do you do, Tommy Thumb!" they say.
"Hello, Peter Pointer,
Toby Tall,
Ruby Ring,
And Baby Small!"
Finger game

Rina was sitting on a bollard swinging her legs and waiting. The subway next to her was spitting out people. Rina counted nine hundred people. Among them five hundred and ten were women. Leaving the five-hundred-and-eleventh woman uncounted, Rina jumped off the bollard and went to buy ice cream. She had enough money for either one good ice cream or to two so-so ones. After wavering for a while, she asked for two. "Who said that they're bad? They're underrated!" she said to herself and relaxed.

A drunk tumbled out of the rear door of a stopped car. He started to shove his passport under her nose and said that there was no kid in it. This did not surprise Rina too much: she always got into some mess.

Instead of quickly walking away, she took the passport and shook it. Not even one smallest kid fell out of the passport. "True!" she said. "No kid! Well, doesn't matter: when you do, come quickly for teaching tips!" The drunk was offended and started to grab her sleeve.

Rina ran to the stern guard, who had risked his life catching an old hag illegally selling mushrooms on a string, and slipped him the passport. "Here, I found a document! Will you please have a look whose?" she asked and dived behind the pavilion.

Thirty minutes left for her to wait. In any case, so Kuzepych said. When she saw that nine people had gathered at the appointed place, she should press the *centaur*. Once. And that was all.

* * *

"Co*ol*! Third generation Muscovite and was never on Planernaya!" Sashka realized, after walking up to the city. He always pronounced his favourite "cool" with a stress at the end. Something bright flew high above the buildings. At first Sashka thought it was a ball, but looking closely he figured out that it was an ordinary plastic bag. It was flying by itself and was not bothered at all that under it was twenty floors of emptiness.

Sashka took a step to the post and looked around with interest. Amusing region. Cramped, toy-like. The buildings come right up to the subway shelter. One can go out to the balcony and stare at the crowd. At night, when you are lying in silence, you listen as the floor shudders and trains rush past somewhere under you. Sashka focused to determine where he was now. Before him stretched an asphalt area with islands, where buses and minibuses docked. As always there were many of them at subway stations.

"Please, do you know where the Route D minibus is?" he asked a woman in a red windbreaker. The woman was playing with a child. She absent-mindedly lifted her eyes and part of the tenderness addressed to the child accidentally splashed onto Sashka. Almost immediately on the face that came to the tenderness waned, fell somewhere inside, and Sashka was sorry that he had torn a person away from a pleasant occupation. "Don't know!" the woman said and again dived into her child as into a pond.

“Excuse me, please? Route D minibus?” Sashka turned to a stooping back emerging from behind the post. The back wobbled, and Sashka realized that he had missed the mark with the respect. A person of his age was looking at him. True, in order to determine this, Sashka had to lift up his head infinitely. The fellow was not simply two metres tall but somewhere close to two-ten. Narrow-shouldered, long-armed. The teeth were big. Two front ones like a beaver’s. The eyes were green, mocking. The arms dangled like ropes while walking, and the chin was making “snap-snap,” right-left. On the stranger’s forehead Sashka saw a long abrasion, badly overgrown, exiting under the hair.

“Didn’t fit into the elevator. Moscow is a town of dwarfs,” tracking his look, lanky explained talkatively. “And I'm powerless to help on the subject of the minibus. I’m searching for it myself! ”

Sashka continued to roam along the area. No one knew about the route D minibus. Sashka reached the last asphalt island and was prepared to return to the subway, when he suddenly saw a sheet with the bold letter “D” on the post. After surveying the queue, Sashka was convinced that they would completely fit into one vehicle.

Turning, his knapsack hit the fellow standing in front of him. That one looked around, gave Sashka the once-over, and not so much spat but hissed at the asphalt. Sashka thought that they call such a fellow “a lad” or “a young lad.” Not tall, thickset, in a turtleneck. He was moving unhurriedly, ingratiatingly, like a cat.

“Makar!” He put out a hand, solid as a stump, to Sashka. Just in case Sashka pressed it strongly, expecting his hand would be in a vice now, and was mistaken, because “the young lad” did not even bother to close his fingers. It was nonsense. On one hand, for some reason they wanted to get acquainted with you. On the other hand, they treated your hand like a dead fish. The voice of “the young lad” was appropriate. Cracked. With a little twang.

“How are you? Not bad?” he asked without the least embarrassment. Makar talked slowly. From word to word it was possible to stretch a rope and dry towels. When people talk this way, it is hard on the brain. A desire emerged in Sashka to describe to Makar his entire life from the moment of birth, in order to see at what place he would fall asleep. But he restrained himself and answered briefly that he had never felt better.

“Eh, real never?” Makar clearly attempted to back Sashka into a corner, posing questions, which could not be answered properly. And Sashka did not answer at all. He was no longer looking at Makar but at a girl who grabbed her purse every time someone’s cell phone rang. To her, a melody did not play any special role.

Makar was not pleased that someone could be distracted from contact with him. He took Sashka’s button and began to twist it off. “Local?” he asked sullenly. Sashka shook off his hand. Such impudence surprised Makar. “You know anyone here?”

“Aunt Claude from the flower kiosk!” Sashka unmistakably sensed that Makar would not fight. Such types like to work on empty chatter, looking for the collocutor’s weakness. They prefer to take an automatic casing from their pocket and twirl it in their fingers. Or to open and close a switchblade. Or to work such a thing into their speech that it would be clear to all with whom they are dealing.

“Eh, bold?” Makar finally caught on.

“You guessed it.”

“Ah-h! Well, got it! Come on: take care, brother!” Makar again for some reason put his hand out to Sashka, who, remembering the last time, simply touched it with two fingers and turned away. Sashka understood that the “take care!” was not a threat but simply a last attempt to spoil his mood.

A white minibus appeared out of nowhere. In the lower left corner of the glass on the driver’s side was a sheet of paper with the same letter “D” as on the post. Sashka was experienced in riding minibuses and did not sit down right behind the driver. Too much trouble: someone is always getting out, changing seats. He wanted to hide in the corner and look out the window, watching how

Moscow steamed by the sun slowly wound around the wheels of the minibus. After flopping down onto the second single seat, Sashka placed his knapsack on his knees. A trembling reverberated in his shoulder: the door was slammed shut. The minibus started to signal a turn. It squeezed into the flow of cars.

No one noticed how the smiling girl with freckles in the last row of seats as if by chance pulled up her sleeve and, after touching the beaming centaur, said in a whisper, "Full load!" Without waiting for an answer, she put the sleeve back in place and leaned back onto the seat.

Looking from the tall minibus at the compact cars passing them, Sashka observed closely those sitting inside and thought with amazement: so many people and all different. Not a single person is repeated, everyone is distinguished by something. Each has his own look, his own unique turn of tiny events, and all this inimitably stamped in the thoughts, the fates, the feelings. For several seconds Sashka's head began to spin. "Again!" he thought. Memory diligently unwound the tangle.

Yellow tank top, green trunks, black helmet, red nose, blue gloves. Sashka mockingly watched as his opponent rushed to the ring, using the thumb of the glove to drive the mouth guard hurriedly into his mouth.

"Dudnik, Bychkov! Two for two![3] *Lively! Dudnik, special invitation?" The coach's name was Paul Paulych. He consisted of experience, paunch, and a whistle. Roughly in this order. Although there were days when the whistle advanced into first place and experience and the spare tire trailed behind.*

Sashka (the very same Dudnik) ducked under the ropes and climbed into the ring. He did this very lazily. He showed that it offended him that they sicked a newbie on him, an oldbie, third year there. Bychkov was already shifting his feet in the ring. One felt that he was nervous. Certainly. First battle. Bychkov had attended the section for all of four months, skipped rope and diligently worked out in front of the mirror double jabs, bobs, delivery of a right punch, and other basics. On the whole, a typical piece of meat, though powerful, certainly.

"Ready? Go!" After tapping gloves with Bychkov, Sashka began to dance around lazily. Open, only the right glove was raised somewhere at the level of the chest. Bychkov, on the contrary, was keeping down. He kept his gloves by his nose, and the chin almost squeezed into his chest. He kept down, and then – wham-wham – a double hit. He learned the ropes hitting the bag. But one can be a champ with the bag all the time: it does not hit back.

"Bychkov, don't lean forward! More active! The feet! Show this clown! Bolder!" Paul Paulych began to yell. Sashka resented clown and, being offended, began to wriggle even more. He was completely open and only took some jabs with the glove, and just either broke off at a distance or let a hit pass over the ear. He had decided to himself that the entire fight would go this way. Clown, so clown!

Bychkov was huffing and puffing and, having grown bolder, worked like a hammerer. On the rare occasion when he pressed too hard, Sashka stabbed with his left. At the end of the first two-minute Bychkov was entirely soaked. The grinning mouth guard was making a hoarse sound. He pushed it back with a glove. Sashka was even sympathetic. When you are gasping for air, the mouth guard seems like terrible trash. Like something so bloody-rubbery and sweet-tasting.

"Ten more seconds! More active!" Paul Paulych bellowed. Sashka, long waiting for this moment, lowered his right hand and now stretched out only with the body, occasionally moving the shoulder up. Simutaneously he was counting the remaining seconds and thinking about any outside things. The Russian dictation tomorrow… Must get something for Father for his birthday, but he has not decided on the price… Seven… Eight… Nine…

Sashka counted ten, then eleven, then twelve, and, surprised that the fight had not been stopped, looked over at Paul Paulych. That one was talking with someone who had put his head

[3] Two rounds, two minutes each.

through into the hall. Realizing that the fight was over, Sashka completely forgot about Bychkov and remembered only when the first of two hits cut into his cheekbone. Sashka was thrown back. He, protecting himself, jerked up his hands, but managed only to scratch the bottom of Bychkov's right glove just enough to direct it to his own chin. The words "go, lights out!" became a reality not only for girls with the name Sveta. [4]

After some time the smell of ammonium chloride broke through to Sashka in the dark room. You do not want to, but you come to. Simply out of disgust.

"What a clown! Wriggled, eh? Leave now! Rest for two weeks!" Coach said without sympathy. Sashka looked at him and smiled. Thoughts in him were very few and everything was kind of strange. And people seemed to him surprised: this was probably because he had "slowed down" a little. Somewhere on the horizon loomed Bychkov – confused, feeling sorry for him, and simultaneously being proud of himself. He still did not know that in the next training session he would be paired with one of the stricter guys so that it would be made distinctly clear to him that you do not hit someone who had turned away or knock out the dazed. [5] *Paul Paulych spat out the whistle, with which he had called up to himself two older fellows in order to send them into the deserted ring.*

Out on the street Sashka sat on a tire for a long time, examining the thick poplar trunks. They were sawn off, waste oil was poured under them, but all the time shoots were sprouting and sprouting. Along the edge of the poplar, the bark of which was stripped off for the most part such that it turned out white almost like human skin, flowed a stream of ants. Occasionally first one, then another turned slightly to the side and tried to crawl into a deep crack in the poplar trunk. It moved its whiskers and stepped back.

Sashka attempted to glance into the crack but saw only a head with two large eyes and moving whiskers. He drummed on the trunk with his nails and a large golden bee suddenly crept out of the crack. It fearlessly passed through the stream of ants and, after flying so closely that its wings touched his cheek, disappeared. Sashka plodded to the road. His head was clear and it only slightly resembled a rumbling bucket. Although, of course, with any attempt even to look around, Sashka would begin to sway.

His head was spinning no longer. Sashka as usual pulled back the upper pocket of the camouflage jacket and, considering whom to give the money to, glanced all around. "I'll be darned! Everybody here is about fifteen! Well, maximum sixteen!" he thought. Not so often you meet your contemporaries in this quantity. Sashka even looked around in order to ascertain that those behind also fit in this range. Improbable, but they did!

Sashka came up with the option that they had finished classes somewhere or, let us suppose, everyone here except him were classmates going somewhere together. But no. No one in the minibus knew anyone else. Otherwise, they would not drop curious glances at each other. There would also not be careful, waiting tension.

Immediately behind Sashka sat a girl, the same one that grabbed her cell phone when someone else's rang. Small, frail, with a thin neck, which could be encompassed with two fingers. How the head could be held up on such a flower stalk was incomprehensible but it was solidly supported. The face was rather sharp, clever, agitated. Thick eyebrows, lips nibbled at. The hair was not simply cut short but ultra short – to one joint of the little finger. Bulging, obstinate forehead. She wanted to be first in everything for sure. Wrote letters to politicians, directors, and singers. Ready to sweat her guts out like an electric broom for twenty-five hours a day.

In the next row by the window was a skinny fellow in a blue suit and tie, a cream shirt. Brushed, well-pressed. Amazing, all these trappings looked organic on him. One had the feeling

[4] A play on words in Russian: the Russian word for light is *svet* while *Sveta* is a girl's name.

[5] In boxing training, there is no necessity for a knockout if the opponent is dazed.

that he was always in a suit and not just once a year on occasion. It was stuffy here in the minibus but he was like an idol. Not a drop of sweat on his face, the collar was completely done up, and even the tie was not loosened. He was sitting and moving alarmingly away from his neighbour who was dropping powder from donuts onto her knees and at the same time onto his as well.

The neighbour was his complete opposite. Large, plump but not fat, with a chest like a sofa. From her face fluttered absolute, unaffected calm. Whether "the suit" moved away from her or not bothered her little. Most likely, the girl did not even turn her head in order to find out if someone was sitting beside her. She was in a contemplative half-sleep all the time. She was dressed in a spacious hand-knitted top. Any crumbs would fall through such a top and cat fur would not be visible on it. Her hair was long like a mermaid's and carelessly braided. And she did not have such hair because she let it grow specially, but simply did not prevent the hair from doing what it thought fit. If you want to get into the life of such a girl, do not attempt to flicker before her eyes. This is too tiresome for her. Simply come and settle down beside her. Possibly, in a year or two she will discover that some stranger is sitting near her in the kitchen, and finally it will come home to her where her pancakes have been disappearing to.

To the right of "sleeping beauty" was a young fellow in a bright T-shirt rhythmically twitching his head. Small, hook-nosed, continuously moving his feet restlessly even while sitting. Teeth uneven, crowding each other. Over the left eye was a black plastic patch tied with two fabric strips. Sashka was pondering for some time whether he actually did not have an eye or this was the final stroke of a romantic portrait. Sashka was still at a loss why on earth the young fellow was twitching when he noticed the small headphone.

Suddenly the young fellow in the tee turned to his neighbour and loudly (immediately evident that music was roaring in his ears) uttered, "A bet on your phone number, your name's Lena!" The calm girl looked thoughtfully at him.

It seemed to her one-eyed neighbour that there would not be an answer. He managed to take off and put on the headset four times when he finally heard, "Should be: a bet on your phone number, your name ISN'T Lena!"

One-eyed was happy. There was contact! "A bet on your phone number, your name isn't Lena!" he obediently repeated.

"You lose. I'm Lena!" the girl sympathized and continued indifferently to sprinkle powder from donuts onto the knees of the neighbour on her left.

Sashka almost slipped down under the seat. He saw that one-eyed had made a guess for the first time in his life and was confused now, not knowing how to move on further.

"Serious, Lena? Or are you pulling my leg?"

"Leave me alone, eh?" the girl dully requested.

"How 'bout showing some document?"

"Fat chance!"

"Here I can show mine! I don't mind!" one-eyed proposed and with the motion of a conjurer extracted two passes and a calling card. "Don't look here! I turned out like a dork here!" he imparted and showed precisely this photo with pleasure. Sashka noticed that on the photo one-eyed was presented with two eyes. And even saw the name: Cyril.

Across the seat from Sashka a girl in a black tank top breathed on the glass and drew gallows. On her neck were two army dog tags tied together, in standard military style. On her face were delicate pink pimples. "Interesting, does she know that you need a second dog tag for hanging on the left big toe of the dead body?" Sashka gauged. Sensing that she was being looked at, the girl with the dog tags stopped sketching and turned around interrogatively. Sashka hurried to put a wooden expression on his face.

Staring, he disturbed not only the girl with the dog tags but also the big-forehead person with the flower-stalk neck. She jerked up her face with annoyance, at the same time covering the cell

phone screen with her palm. Sashka perceived that he was to her a kind of additional seat of the minibus.

"For one!" Sashka heard and did not understand how he found himself with money in his hands. She did not ask, even did not demand, but would give a target designation. Since you are staring and not busy with anything, do something useful.

"Also for one!" The girl with the death dog tags woke up.

"Interesting, why to me? Could give to Makar. Or only to him at night in the park and together with a purse?" Sashka was being mentally malicious. The precisionist in the suit also charged Sashka to pay for the fare and immediately demanded change. His bill was so smooth, as if he kept it in a dictionary all night. The girl with the donuts could not be bothered and, not even making an attempt to count, poured out a handful of change into Sashka's hand.

While Sashka was sorting out the money, someone gave him a friendly nudge in the shoulder. The fellow sitting diagonally grinned at him like an old friend. This turned out to be that same fellow with the abrasion. "Hello!" said Sashka.

"Hello to you too! I said that I would go search! You nodded and bolted!" the fellow said reproachfully and added, "Danny!" Leaning towards Sashka, Danny pushed him with a sharp knee and simultaneously scratched his cheekbone with the forehead. Not a person but a walking injury for the surrounding people.

"Noticed?" he whispered.

"That everyone is of the same age?" guessed Sashka.

"Well, that's not too bad!" Danny dismissed it. "More: we don't stop at traffic lights. One. No one gets on or off along the way. Two. Several times people raised a hand but we didn't even stop, although lots of free seats."

"Strange," agreed Sashka. "Usually they take everybody."

"Hey, you two! Stop whispering! Can't move?" the bossy girl impatiently tugged at Sashka's sleeve. Her voice sounded fearless. It was felt that she not only spoke the plain truth but also brandished it like a shaft. Sashka discovered in his own hand a bundle of money and, remembering that it was time to get rid of it, passed it forward.

"Hey! Pass it on!" he hailed and shook the shoulder of the person sitting directly in front of him. The person turned around. Out of surprise, Sashka jerked his hand back. He thought it was a guy there but "hey!" turned out to be a girl.

The beauty of the girl was so obvious that even a catty sharp-tongued old hag would not call it into question. True, she would feel obligated to add that there are signs of dystrophy from the long legs and there cannot be a brain in such a pretty head. However, there is no getting away from envy: you cannot climb up to the fence at least to spit on one who sits on it.

Noticing what impression she had made on Sashka, the corner of the girl's mouth twitched and this spoiled seventy percent of the impression. Roosters are not the only smug ones. Simply one can more readily forgive hens.

"May I ask an improper question? What camouflage is this? English? Bundeswehr?"[6] she asked. Sashka answered that for the time being the camouflage was Russian. Three more improper questions were posed to him in the next forty seconds: "Why the hanky on the neck?" (Co*ol.*) "Why a smell of burning from him?" (A fire.) "What does Sashka want to express with his military pants?" (Simply comfortable.)

It turned out Sashka was not the only one who saw the beauty. The young fellow with the patch on his eye also gave her the once-over. "A bet on your phone number, your name's… eh-eh… Natasha!" he plunged in, not wasting time on display of fantasy. His calm neighbour raised her eyebrows and with defiance shook the crumbs off her skirt onto his knees.

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[6] Bundeswehr is the Federal Defence Force of Germany.

"Nevertheless, well done!" Sashka mentally approved. "He has no fear of a snub. He flies through life as a woodpecker. Knocks, doesn't open, flies further." Sashka himself was unable to be this way. For Sashka the world was too detailed, and the people too. He could not talk in phrases prepared ahead of time. He vaguely caught that for each person there exists special words, which reach him like a key and unlock his soul. But he did not know these words. Therefore, when he talked to a girl, he would carry on with the usual stock nonsense. What music she likes, what sites she visits, and so on.

The beauty looked dully at Cyril. Likely he scored even less points than Sashka. Still, Sashka was passable. Light-brown hair, grey eyes, an open face. "So what's your name?" Cyril repeated.

"Don't remember," the beauty answered with defiance.

"What? Really they didn't write it down in the passport?" Cyril was amazed. "Cool!"

The girl gave in. "Oh, fine. I'm Lara! Anything else?"

"Yea, smile!" Lara smiled, obediently and tiredly.

"Got a bite!" Sashka praised.

Vlad Ganich – the name of the precisionist in the suit – suddenly got up with a pressed knee on the seat and glanced back with suspicion at the last row. "Ah-h! Well then, yes!" he mysteriously drawled and sat down.

Sashka also half-rose in order to figure out what had attracted Ganich's attention. He looked behind the high back hiding this spot from him earlier and lost his way in simple feelings and words, like a baby among table legs. The beauty Lara was instantly forgotten and simply faded into the background.

In the last row by the window sat a girl. Her face was cheerful like a person waiting for a gift of life, although also catching some bumps. Many small freckles added character to the skin. There were even freckles on the earlobes. The short, slightly pulled-up nose was similar to a sparrow's beak. It seemed that the nose was not quite right at first – absurd, as if it had strayed from another's face and got stuck. Only later you feel that there cannot be another nose here. After sculpting this girl from clay, life looked over its work, remained contented, as a last stroke merrily flicked the nose with its forefinger, and whispered, "Well, why are you standing? Go! Breathe! Live!"

"What are you?" Sashka foolishly asked, trying to comprehend how he could have missed her. Then he understood: the high back had been blocking the girl.

"Me? A person!"

"Pardon?"

"A person by the name of Rina!" a mocking answer followed.

"And what are you doing here?"

Rina slammed shut her book. She was reading a textbook on horse breeding. Sashka made out something on her wrist like a massive leather shield going into her sleeve. "Riding the bus!" she said capaciously.

Someone pulled out the money from Sashka's fingers. "Give it here!" Makar again. Of course, "brotello" had long since changed seat and had settled himself next to Lara. Interesting, did he find out if the girl is local? Did he advise her to take care?

Makar leaped up with a knee on the seat and, jumping together with the rushing minibus, called out to the driver, "Hey, man! Hello! Are we taking the money?" No answer. The driver did not even attempt to stretch out a hand. They saw only a blue sport jacket with the collar raised high and a baseball cap.

"Hello, garage! Deaf?" Makar began to yell quite insolently. He obviously considered that to humble someone in the girl's eyes was an additional way to earn points.

"Now the driver will stop, and he'll fly out like a cork, given a send-off with tender strokes of the crowbar!" Sashka gauged and was mistaken. No one even turned to Makar. For such as he,

this was a challenge. Yet, the great person fidgeted on the seat with his precious knee, dog-eared the money in his sweaty palm, and was ignored.

"I'm left with the money! Did you all see, people? We ride for free!" Makar announced for everyone to hear.

"He's simply deaf! Someone, shake him!" the bossy girl with the flower-stalk neck demanded. She had just been introduced to the fan of gallows and army dog tags, and Sashka heard how she presented herself, "Freda." Interesting, is that her real name? It does happen that a person disagrees with his own name and runs around his whole life as someone obscure.

Sashka put down his knapsack, jumped over to the empty seat next to Makar, and tried to touch the driver's shoulder. Specifically, he tried, because the minibus made a sharp turn, passing a bus. Sashka, not holding his ground, tipped back, and in an incredible way pulled the driver off with himself.

He yelled, expecting a crash; the minibus continued to rush along. A second later he realized that he only had the blue sport jacket in his hands. Having decided that he had torn it off the driver's shoulders, he leaped up and saw that there was no one at the wheel. Only a baseball cap was dangling in the air. Now, when Sashka had the jacket, it could not be kept secret that there was nothing under it.

Chapter 2
Coming from Nowhere to Going Nowhere

In any good the keyword is "regularity." Irregular good is evil, which decides to amuse itself.

A warlock will discuss global laws on the eradication of hunger on a universal scale, but a hdiver will simply silently hand someone an apple or a pie and move on.

The stronger one loves, the more one forbids. If you for sure want to destroy the one you love, allow him everything.

Two ways lead to wisdom: grief or voluntary self-restraint, i.e., in general the same grief, only conscious. If you do not choose the second path, the first one chooses you.

Better to take less but carry it all the way than to take a lot and drop some halfway.

The power of a person is manifested in how well he will be able to restrain himself.

Yara's summary.
From Kavaleria's introductory lecture

Freda melancholically contemplated the empty driver seat. "But where??? What did you do with the driver?" she asked in the voice of a person who did not get the joke.

Sashka sensed that she thought him guilty. "Here! Catch!" He threw her the jacket by the sleeve. Freda in horror pushed it away immediately with both hands. The jacket fell. Now, when it was exposed, it did not pretend to be alive anymore.

"No! You did something to him!!! Aagh!" Freda closed her eyes and gave a short shriek, giving a signal to universal panic.

Lara began to squeal in the same second, demonstrating excellent vocal training. Makar in a businesslike manner advised her to cut it out. At the same time he leaned heavily with his stomach on the back of the seat, touching the mirror with his forehead. Incredulously, as if suspecting an invisible man, he ran his hand all over. "Wow, damn! Really no driver! Anyone knows how to drive?"

Showing that it was managing quite well by itself, the minibus dashingly dived between two trailers and went onto the outer lane. The clipped truck groaned like an offended bull.

"Me!" Sashka, recently in his grandpa's Niva[7] demolishing the neighbouring fence at the cottage, said.

"Well, so get busy!" Makar encouraged him.

Sashka wanted to climb over, but Freda caught hold of him, "Only try to touch it! I understand! We're moving by computer control!"

Danny looked doubtfully at the pressed-down seat, the jingling door. He saw a kefir carton and a crumpled magazine. "By satellite!" he said skeptically, observing how the minibus honked angrily at a dog that had jumped out onto the road and made a dashing turn, dousing it with dirty water from a puddle. "Wow! The satellite surmised biological activity and set a course correction, taking into account the direction for splashing the liquid!"

Sashka tried to free himself, but doing this without being rude was impossible. Freda was hanging onto him like a tick. Not letting go for dear life for sure. At the same time, Sashka would

[7] The original Lada Niva was the first Russian/Soviet built off-road vehicle. The present Chevrolet Niva is a mini SUV.

not say that she panicked. She was simply such a person. Not a single action could be executed in her presence without her approval.

"What if it's a show? Put us on some kind of stage and unnoticeably shoot our reaction? And broadcast live? Huh?" Freda put forward a different option.

After hearing that they could be filming her, Lara instantly settled down and fixed her hair. "Can I ask an improper question? Who is the studio decoy here?"

"Me! Really not obvious?" Cyril stated but backtracked on discovering how people were instantly staring at him. "Really! No need to kill me! I've already gone to seed! What show, people? Do you see at least one camera?"

"What if it's hidden?" the precisionist in the suit proposed in a businesslike manner.

Cyril twirled a finger by his temple. "In this heap of junk? Even if they shove some web cam here, it'll show like the eyes of a dead cockroach! Won't work for TV!" he said with knowledge of the matter.

Lara tapped her knee with the phone. "I understand nothing! Should be all sticks here!" she complained.

Freda looked at her with an incinerating look. "Sticks are in the forest," she said and, after letting go of Sashka, sat down.

The minibus finally broke away beyond the limits of the Ring Road and dashed between colourful new constructions. The region here was spacious, new, and the roads wide, free. The minibus swiftly made a turn. As Sashka was not being careful, he butted the glass with his forehead.

"We'll not get out of here! We're doomed!" the girl with the death dog tags uttered quietly.

"Don't be a killjoy!" Freda pounced on her.

"Dog tags" shrugged her shoulders and with a long nail traced a final crossbeam on the gallows. "I'm not! I know!"

Even Rina was starting to be spooked. She was sorry that she had given Kuzepych the promise to keep quiet. But even if she had not, what would she say? "We're going to HDive!" "Where, where?" "HDive! It's this guildhall of divers, where they fly on horses through a dead world to get markers from *Duoka*!"

The minibus turned into a long straight road and it stopped rocking. Passing ahead of Sashka, Danny quickly half-rose. "Miss! May I ask you as an enormous favour to remove your skull?" he turned to Lara.

"Where?"

She was at a loss and immediately received the comprehensive answer, "Not strictly perpendicular to the back, but in such a way that the level of the crown would turn out to be below the level of the upper section of the seat!"

"Huh?"

"Off with the head!!!" Danny simplified to the extreme and unexpectedly deftly, making use of his beanpole frame, immediately tumbled over two seats on his stomach. The endless legs flickered. Escaping from them, Lara with a squeak bent down. It finally dawned on her why the level of the crown had to be lower than the back of the seat. The soles knocked on the back of the seat and Danny already emerged on the other side. He slid into the driver seat, grabbed the wheel, and slammed on the brake. Sashka watched as the pedal pressed down.

"Stop, my beautiful! Whooa!" Danny ordered. The minibus began to brake at the horse word, but it kicked up and continued to fly forward. Danny hung onto the wheel and attempted to switch over to the outermost lane. The wheel obeyed but this again in no way affected the behaviour of the minibus.

"Try braking with the clutch!" Sashka advised. Danny looked mildly around at him as if asking: do you think I do not know? He pressed on the clutch and, switching over serially, began

lowering gears. When he reached the first, the minibus zipped out onto the oncoming lane and, after fearlessly cutting the flow, turned into a perpendicular street.

"This is useless, gentlemen! I quit!" Danny announced melodramatically and climbed back into the cabin. He sat down there like an idol and arranged his hands with palms up on his knees. Something that in no way could be grasped stirred in his memory. Something important, elusive.

Cigarette butts were floating in a glass jar a third full of water. Through the paint-spattered glass – cracked, with a whistling draft living in the crack – the Moscow courtyard well-defined by paint looked stingy to Danny. A golden bee was sitting in a sunny spot and cleaning its wings with its legs. Danny blew on it. The bee took off and, angrily hitting against the glass, bounced like a ball to the edge of the frame.

"I said: we'll all die!" the girl in the black tank top said with deep satisfaction. Frost dripped from her voice.

Cyril touched the dog tags with a finger. "Listen, sunshine!"

"I hate sunshine!" Dog tags" cut him off.

"And don't you be mad! Canna ask somethin'?"

"NO!"

"Were you ever smothered by a pillow earlier? Eh, sunshine?"

The girl pushed his hand away. "What are you, stupid? I'm not sunshine! I'm Alice, idiot!"

It was not possible to offend Cyril. "Idiot!" he said, turning to himself. "Get acquainted! This is Alice, who has never been smothered by a pillow!"

"Ass!"

"And who actively learns the names of animals!" Cyril looked around triumphantly.

Alice turned away, lapsing into silence. Cyril clearly considered himself the victor; however, Sashka doubted this. A guy must not fight with a girl on the same level and with her weapon: the tongue. They deliberately exist in different dimensions. Well, what does an eagle brag to a dolphin? That it knows how to fly? But a dolphin knows how to swim. Cyril behaved like the bearded philosophy professor, who, after putting on a skirt, set off for the earthen bench and said, rubbing his hands, "Well, grannies, hold on! Now I can argue with all of you!!!"

"I'll try to jump out! Since the phones don't connect here, perhaps they will outside!" Sashka shouted and tugged at the door. Asphalt with small puddles gleamed. Sashka stepped back. He did not imagine that they would be going so fast. Freda, with the idea of recording everything, directed the round eye of the cell phone at Sashka.

"Don't!" Rina shouted, unable to control herself.

"Why not? Must! Jump! What are you waiting for?" Freda demanded impatiently.

Sashka estimated the distance to the lawn. Grass is tempting, of course, but you could miss the mark and splatter all over the tall barrier. Asphalt would be better. He put his head out. The wind cut his cheek. It hit his eyes, blinded him for an instant. "When it's thirty kilometres, shout!" he ordered Danny.

Danny rolled over on his stomach to the driver seat and stared at the speedometer. "Ninety! Damn! Why no traffic jams? Aha! Traffic light soon! Maybe it'll brake slightly at least… Yes! Going down! Seventy! Sixty!"

"Jump!" Makar pushed Sashka slightly from behind.

"Tough guy first!" Sashka turned and grabbed his turtleneck. He was so fed up with Makar that he was actually capable of throwing him off the minibus.

"Let go of me!" Makar ordered quietly.

"But why?"

Makar slapped his own pocket with a threat. "Bluff!" thought Sashka. "He puts his hand in the pocket and will fly from the minibus together with me!"

“Forty!” shouted Danny. “Thirty-five!” Sashka pushed Makar away and returned to the door. The speed no longer seemed so great. He will run several metres and then roll. The main thing is that no driver behind decides to pass them on the right.

“Come on!” Danny yelled. Sashka rushed forcefully into the opening and… here something incomprehensible happened. An elastic force caught him and threw him back like a kitten. Sashka realized that he was sitting on the floor of the minibus, clutching Makar’s leg like a lifesaver.

“Full protection, pity! Even if you yank the wheels off, you’ll end up on the bottom!” Rina recalled Kuzepych’s words.

Freda tore herself away from the cell phone screen. “Shot it!” she shouted excitedly. “You were separated from the minibus for about half a metre and then it pulled you back! Did you feel anything?”

“The joy of flight!” Sashka answered in annoyance. The minibus again picked up speed.

“Let’s lean out and yell! Someone will hear for sure! Only better from the other side! More cars there!” Cyril in the heat of the moment wanted to hit the glass with his fist, but Makar held him back.

“No, why? Must take care of the hands!” Makar said peacefully. Leaning over, he pulled out a fire extinguisher from under the seat and competently knocked with one end on the glass four times. The glass was covered with a tangle of cracks, but it held. Makar, not embarrassed, continued to peck persistently. On the tenth blow, the glass collapsed, after hanging onto the rubber retaining it.

“And now we yell! All together! With feeling!” Makar ordered the girls. He himself did not begin to yell. He did not want to compete.

The girls shouted, waving their arms. Lara, whom Sashka was holding by her legs, finally leaned out of the window up to her waist and found herself by the open window on the side of a car unhurriedly passing them. Sashka was convinced that the driver did not see such girls often, but he did not even turn his head.

“Drove past like a robot! Could at least move a little!” Lara said with annoyance, when Sashka and Cyril pulled her back into the minibus.

“You’re too noisy for him. He likes quiet dames with slippers in their teeth!” Cyril butted in.

“Okay, gophers! Don’t want to notice in a friendly way, notice in a bad way!” Makar warned with a threat. Before anyone had time to understand what this “bad way” was, Makar had already rested a foot against the back of the seat and kicked it off. Sashka had never seen anyone stripped down a minibus with this composure.

Makar leaned out the window. The seat back hit the windshield of the Toyota moving in the adjacent lane and flew away to the curb. A crack appeared on the glass. The driver twisted the wheel. Sashka, very near, saw a puzzled fat face and trembling cheeks.

Sashka could not control himself. He leaned out, yelled, and waved the hanky torn from his neck. He was convinced that it would be impossible not to notice him. He could even describe the ballpoint pen sticking out of the stout person’s pocket. Someone pulled his sleeve. Pushed him down into a seat. Danny.

“Calm down! He doesn’t see us! And you calm down! Put the extinguisher back!” Danny took the fire extinguisher from Makar, who intended on finally finishing the Toyota with it.

“He even twitched!” Sashka said dejectedly.

“He twitched because he heard a bang!” explained Danny. “We don’t exist for him.”

“And those people who tried to stop the minibus at the stops? They were doing what, waving their hands at a void?” Sashka had his doubts.

“I suspect that they see the minibus itself. But us and what we throw, no!” Danny followed with his eyes the fire extinguisher, which the agitated hands of Makar nevertheless flung out of the minibus. “Sit down and place your paws on your knees!” he peacefully advised Makar.

“I understand why it’s route D minibus! D for devious!” Alice said suddenly.

Danny snorted with suspicion. It is rare to meet mystics taller than two metres. Otherworldly things usually do not stray into a head placed so high. This is a height of practical things. “Well, ‘devious’, so ‘devious’! Gentlemen! Let’s stop running and howling, and try to figure this out! Has anyone been on the route D minibus before?” Silence. “Then something must exist that ties all of us together. If we understand this, then let’s also understand why we’re gathered here. Let’s determine what we have in common.”

“Besides me, everyone here is a freak,” Alice muttered under her breath.

“Age,” Freda voted. “Who here is older than sixteen, raise your hand.”

Cyril immediately jerked up his hand. “You’re all small fry!!! I’m seventeen!” he stated.

“Cyril! Well-a show that pass again!” Lena asked softly.

“Certainly!” Cyril’s hand eagerly dived into one pocket, then another, and a third. The search was carried out with exceptional determination, but the pass did not appear. Lena waited mockingly.

Danny lost patience first. “Fine, age!” he nodded. “But age is too obvious. There are 300 thousands like us in Moscow.”

“Why so quick about Moscow? What if I’m not from Moscow? Who’s also not from Moscow?” Freda was offended. There turned out to be many “non-Muscovites.” Lena was even from Kiev.

“Fine. It means not only Moscow,” yielded Danny. “For that matter I’m from Novosibirsk. A year ago we dragged ourselves here and now we regularly feel sorry… Let’s think a bit more! Appearance, height, sports training, psych profile, gender sign, all different for us. Useless to search for similarities here.”

“Gender what?” Makar frowned. Sashka noticed that the term “psych profile” also seemed suspicious to him, but he did not risk asking about it.

“You’re a dude or a dame,” Rina explained from the last row. Makar squinted at her, checking if she was serious, and made an understanding face.

“Let’s analyze further. Any geniuses among us?” Danny continued to find out. Cyril again put up his hand.

“Cyril, precious! Lower your paw and continue to search for the pass!” Lena asked with southern softness in her voice.

“Any others besides Cyril,?” Besides Cyril and the modestly blushing Danny, there turned out to be no other candidates. Danny played with the crease on his forehead. “Of course, it would be tempting to acknowledge that if we’re not geniuses, then at least talented in our own way,” he with melancholy raised his eyes and immediately lowered them, “nevertheless I fear that this is the deciding factor here.”

“But wha did you look at me? You, beanpole!” Makar exploded.

“I didn’t look at you!”

“Did too! You eyeballed me and started to talk all sorts of nonsense! Are you hinting that I’m stupid?”

Sashka felt that the showdown could stretch on for a long time. Bad enough that they were travelling from Moscow at one-and-a-half kilometres a minute. “He didn’t look at you. He looked at me!” he said and caught Danny’s grateful glance.

“I looked at him,” confirmed Danny.

Forced to be satisfied with the answer, Makar made a disapproving sound into the broken window. “In sync? This long leader cramps and you bring him a stool? OK! Take care of yourself, guys!”

Freda was tired of filming. She lowered her hand with the phone. “Let’s take it from another side!” she stated. “How did we turn up in the route D minibus at all? Each specifically? Here, you?” she poked Lara.

It turned out Lara was going to try out as a model in a summer collection ad. “I was given a piece of paper in the subway! For screen tests!”

“Rush along on a piece of paper handed out at the subway… In the city, alone! Heavens!” Lena delivered tunefully.

“Do you want to say something?” Lara raised her eyebrows.

“I said, ‘Heavens!’”

The suited precisionist Vlad Ganich was on his way to collect a monitor and speakers from a guy who had phoned him last night. Vlad did not get who he was. Some friend of a friend.

“I immediately sensed that you’re a fan of freebies!” stated Makar. Vlad with indignation straightened his tie.

Cyril informed them that he found himself by chance in the route D minibus. He liked someone and, out of natural shyness, was too timid to approach the person on the street. However, when they asked him whom he liked precisely, Cyril began to beat around the bush. It was clear that he was choosing between a pie in the sky and a bird in the hand.

“Well, everything is clear with this… Will lie to the last! And what are you doing here? Hey you, boy!” Freda fearlessly poked Makar. Makar choked. The last time a female inspector had called him “boy” was in matters of minors.

By chance dropping his line of vision onto Makar’s wrist, Sashka saw three small round bluish scars on the outside of the palm. Clearly tracks of cigarette butts put out against the skin. “Who did this to you?” asked Sashka.

Makar looked at his hand. He clenched and unclenched his fist. The bluish burns were filled with blood and became violet. “None of your business!” he said sharply and, after hiding his hand behind his back, moved to the window.

“He did it himself,” Cyril whispered to Sashka.

“Why himself?”

“Side by side and regular. If it were someone else, he would fidget. Likely, he punished himself for something. Who knows!” Cyril said cautiously.

Freda herself was going to find out about the new humanities-theatrical college, which she by chance had heard about on the radio. Moreover, she had heard it in such a way that she understood neither the name nor the precise address, but only to get on the route D minibus from the Planernaya subway station. And on the whole, it turned out Freda flew into Moscow only the day before yesterday, settled at her coach’s former wife’s, and after a day and a half, had time to go around to seven institutes and three universities.

“On the whole, everything here is vague. Nothing in common,” Danny summed up.

The minibus kept going for a long time. Calm Kievan Lena even managed to snooze, moreover, of the two nearby shoulders, on Vlad Ganich’s. It was unrealistic to sleep on Cyril’s shoulder, because every three seconds he leaped up to meet someone. Vlad did not shake off Lena’s head, but it was noticeable that he was suffering and perceived her as a contaminated object threatening his suit.

Makar leaned out the window with distrust. “Just in case! Seems we’re driving up!” he reported.

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The minibus slowed down. They had turned from the highway long ago. Monotonous concrete fences occasionally with graffiti stretched out. Reaching the end of the last one, Route D unwillingly rolled onto a broken unpaved road. To the right was a field. To the left was a colourful show of Moscow groves of different sizes, often small birches and maples covered with caps turning yellow and almost supported by nothing. The minibus went along slowly, swaying on the way.

After about fifteen minutes, it stopped at some gates. The gates opened. They again set off, drove for about twenty metres, and finally stopped.

Sashka pulled the door and carefully got out. He took a step, expecting the elastic force to catch him and throw him back into the minibus. The bus was standing on an asphalt area surrounded by lilac bushes. Before them was an ordinary two-storey building. Two structures and a gallery connecting them. Low stairs, wide porch, and black double doors. Next to them was a blue doorplate, on which crawled cockroaches of indistinguishable letters.

"What's written there? Can anyone see?" asked Sashka.

"It says HDive," someone beside him answered. Sashka turned. Standing next to him was the person by the name of Rina, squinting in the sun.

"You can see the letters from here? What eyesight!"

"Well no, I can't. I read them earlier," she admitted with a sigh.

"How?"

"Well, on the whole, I came from here. I was ordered to meet, accompany, and explain nothing. That kind of thing," Rina shrugged her shoulders slightly, and Sashka understood that she did not particularly like this task. Sashka belatedly realized that she sat more quietly than everybody in the minibus and did not panic.

"So it's you who dragged us here? I'll strangle you!" Makar began to yell and rushed at Rina.

Sashka caught him in a chokehold and discovered at the same time that everyone had already got out of the minibus. "Stop!" he ordered and asked Rina, "What next? Where are we going now?"

Rina looked first at the sun, and then at her phone, checking if the sun was slower than the clock on her phone. "Well, come on! They're waiting for us!" she said and, having turned around, made her way to HDive. Exchanging glances, the rest followed her.

"Only not me! I'm not going!" Freda said and, after passing everyone, went first.

Alice stepped with pleasure on the heads of the yellow flowers shooting out between the flagstones. If somewhere there were no flowers, she specially made a zigzag in order to crush some flowers elsewhere. "If this decoy also counts, then ten of us," she stated.

"Well, so wha?" Makar was puzzled.

"No wha!" Alice mimicked and tinkled the death dog tags with a challenge.

END OF AUGUST – BEGINNING OF SEPTEMBER

Chapter 3
Three Wishes

It is very difficult to love one who is near. It is simple to love one who is far. Let us assume I love the writer Chekhov but we live together in one place; how he laughs, gurgles with tea, or drops a wet spoon on a polished surface would irritate me. That is, until I learn to tolerate someone near, there is no point in saying that I love someone.
From the diary of a non-returning hdiver

The chubby middle-aged person waiting for Guy on board the Gomorrah was so cheerful and efficient that Guy, dressed in a stretched sweater and canvas pants, momentarily wanted to confine himself in a pinstriped suit and be shaved. "Oh, Guy!" he said, leaping up. "No, no! I know that you're monstrously busy! Several minutes for me will be enough!"

Guy, not looking, sat down. He knew that Nekalaev would manage to move a chair. Moreover, not only for him but also for the stout Till. Thirty paces from the elevator, five steps, and Till was already gasping for breath.

"Your call surprised me," said Guy. "And the foolish mysteriousness irritates me. Why did you decide that I'm sure to buy from you what you're offering? And, by the way, what is it exactly?"

The cheerful person started to smile soothingly and lifted his hands, showing that all the answers would be given in their time. Then he took out a hard rectangular business card and tapped the table with it.

"I'm… hmm… a little of everything. Broker? Antique dealer? Bibliophile? Now and then the most interesting people die. Writers, artists, academicians. The heirs remain. Quite often not particularly competent."

"I find this hard to believe," Guy remarked absent-mindedly. "They cannot but know what their ancestor killed his whole life for."

Chubby began to nod hurriedly. "Goes without saying! It's well known to them that there's quite a lot in grandpa's and father's library. But that's all they know! Almost no one suspects that 95 percent of collected works in luxurious bindings have very little value, but some tiny unpretentious little book is priceless. The first limited edition Akhmatova[8] collection with her autograph, or a well-preserved bundle of *Satyricon*,[9] or something similar. I politely buy dozens of beautiful books, paying three times their value for them, and out of courtesy I take the tiny booklet in an overall pile of all sorts of unnecessary things."

"In other words, your task is to find this five percent and get it for nothing, after leaving the rest to the fool of an heir?" Till, wheezing, spelt it out. The round face of his collocutor strayed somewhere between the sun and a pancake.

"Each business has its special quirks. Can't teach them. Can only learn them. In the spring, a decrepit old lady on Ostozhenka passed away, the widow of an artist of battle scenes. Her niece couldn't wait to get rid of the junk. She was simply happy when I bought from her two trunks of all sorts of old stuff."

"Soiled palettes? Drying tubes of paint?" Guy asked.

The cheerful person started to laugh with exaggerated energy. He had a habit of overstating the worth of mediocre jokes like that of book collections. "Not quite. The artist drew historical

[8] Anna Akhmatova (1889-1966), pen name of Anna Andreevna Gorenko, one of the most acclaimed modernist poets of the Silver Age.

[9] *Satyricon* was a Russian weekly satirical magazine (1908-14).

paintings, and for that, reliable historical things were necessary. Weapons, cloth, goblets. The entire second trunk turned out to be crammed with ancient horse harness. Bridles, belts, stirrups, adornment."

"Do you want a bridle?" Guy asked Till.

Till shook his head and started to crumble bread with his thick fingers. "I now rarely sit behind the wheel. Gotten old, clumsy," he complained.

These jokes did not fool the cheerful person. Once such people have heard you out up to this point, they will listen some more. Then they will pay, there is no getting away from it.

"The lid of the trunk interested me most of all. It was suspiciously heavy. I tapped it and found a secret compartment, which even the owners themselves clearly didn't know about. An hourglass in a copper case lay there." After mentioning the hourglass, the antique dealer stopped talking and quickly looked at Guy. "A very interesting hourglass. That and something else belonged to some first-hdiver Mityai Zheltoglazyi," he sweetly added.

Guy stopped cleaning his nails with a corner of the business card and looked attentively for the first time at his collocutor. "What do you know about hdivers, Sergey Ilich?" he asked sharply.

Pancake-face grinned and stroked the napkin lying in front of him as if stroking a dead rabbit. "A little. You see, the hourglass was wrapped with a scrap of skin. On the skin was text. Very brief, but I examined it… For example, I understood that hdivers would hardly pay me. But you here are a different story."

"What, me personally?" Guy doubted.

Sergey Ilich lowered his eyes so shyly that one wanted to give him some money. "No, of course not. I spent three months in order to come to you. Several times the thought flickered in me that there exist neither hdivers nor warlocks. So many centuries have gone by. I despaired, and here's a piece of luck! I discovered on the Net the description of a strange anomaly – an enormous column of water on the Moscow River. Someone shot it with his cell phone. Immense! Such could only be done by a hdiver marker, the description of which was on the reverse side of the skin. And you yourself know only who could drop it… hee-hee… So I came to Gomorrah. The rest is a technical matter."

"Not bad!" Guy showed approval. "I see you've done some good work. Can I have a look at the hourglass and the skin?"

The antique dealer looked cautiously at Till. Till was calmly chewing a piece of dill, which was hanging from the right corner of his mouth as from a horse's mouth. "They're at my place. No, no, it goes without saying, not with me! First we agree on a price!"

"What will the price be?" asked Guy.

"High. Transactions of this grade happen once in a lifetime," the antique dealer said firmly. "I'll ask three things, quite normal."

"What are these three things?"

"Money. Health. And I want to know always what threatens me!"

Guy drew a circle with a wet finger on the polishing. "Why the last one? With money and health?" he asked.

The cheerful person looked tritely downcast. "I don't like to move blindly! You can see that my work is also tricky. I'm always meeting people I don't know. All or nothing. That's my motto."

"Great," Guy approved. "Are you sure that I'm capable of supplying you all this?"

"Sure, I could demand even more. Three wishes is quite modest, taking into account that the sand in the hourglass has almost trickled through."

Guy stopped examining the chin of his collocutor and looked him in the eyes for the first time. "Sand? Do you mean to say it has been flowing all this time? All these decades?"

"Yes," touching the napkin, Sergey Ilyich confirmed. "It's a strange hourglass. The sand runs only in one direction. And very slowly. One grain of sand a day at dawn. Must admit, I tried to

cheat. Turned the hourglass over. And then the grain of sand – I swear! – fell *from the bottom to the top*!" Sergey Ilyich looked sharply at Guy, checking what impression his words would make.

"You're observant. Difficult to notice one grain of sand a day. You probably have a lot of free time," Guy acknowledged.

"I used a web cam and examined slowly at high magnification."

Guy stretched, getting up. Overtaking the waiter, Nekalaev dashed to move aside the chair. The antique dealer also jumped. "Well, fine, my dear!" said Guy after a long pause. "We'll fulfil your wishes if the hourglass actually belongs to… what did you call him?"

"Mityai Zheltoglazyi," smiling with understanding, the antique dealer prompted. "When will you be ready?"

"I'm always ready," said Guy, listening to something going on inside him. "At least health and the knowledge of the future I'm ready to give you now. As for the money… possibly we'll have to make a couple of calls!" He looked at Till.

Looking sombrely, Till promised that he would find the money even without Dolbushin. From his small personal reserve. "And we still haven't settled our misunderstanding with Albert," he acknowledged.

"Soon?"

"Yes, perhaps I'll manage in an hour. You need so much," Till said complacently. "Bring the hourglass!"

Sergey Ilyich anxiously turned pink. He thought for several seconds, knitted his brows, and made a decision. "I'm quick! I had the feeling that everything would be decided today."

"So the thing is with you?" Guy was surprised.

"No, no, not at all! A friend is waiting for me not far from here," he acknowledged.

Guy smiled. "Ingvar! The money!" Guy reminded Till, who got up reluctantly and began to get down tottering. He returned quickly. The berserkers accompanying him unloaded from the trunk an enormous TV box glued together with Scotch tape.

Their recent guest emerged from the parking lot simultaneously with Till. Apparently, he had been watching from the bushes. His boots were wet. He was holding in his hands a briefcase stained with soil.

"Saw your friend?" Guy asked with irony. "Let's have a look!"

The antique dealer nervously looked sideways at the box. "This is ridiculous! You're a serious person. Of course you won't cheat me!" he said, having convinced himself, and handed the briefcase to Guy.

Guy wiped with his sleeve the soil from the lock. He took out a bulky, thick hourglass with a copper stand. The sand inside the hourglass was bluish. "No doubt. The work is truly *his*," Guy acknowledged in an undertone. "Look, Ingvar! What do the numbers 300 and 1 mean?"

Till took the hourglass from Guy, looked at it, and poked at the stand with a rigid finger. "I don't know about the numbers. Doesn't this clay idol remind you of anyone?" he asked, wheezing.

Sergey Ilyich gave a cough, drawing attention to himself. Guy turned to him. "It seems you said something about some skin!" he reminded him. The antique dealer hurriedly shoved a hand into the briefcase and with readiness handed Guy a ripped leather rag covered with writing. The other half was missing.

"This is all? I hope you don't have the other half? And then it'll surface in a month for an additional three wishes," Guy asked severely. The antique dealer hastily shook his head. He held before himself the briefcase, clutching it with both hands.

"Ah yes! The wishes!" Guy recalled and with disgust nudged the box with his foot to the antique dealer. Then he stretched out his hands and simultaneously touched the right and left temple of his guest. Sergey Ilyich took a sip of air. For a moment, it even seemed to him that Guy's hands

met inside his head. At the same time, the fingers of one hand were icy while those of the other were almost white hot.

"Well, that's it!" Guy said tiredly, taking away his hands. "Ingvar! As usual!"

With great care Nekalaev and Till took the trader by the arms and led him onto the gangway for Gomorrah. A well-fed berserker solemnly carried the enormous box behind them. His wide face like a samovar panted with importance.

Sergey Ilyich took a dozen steps and, coming to his senses, stopped. "Why there? Perhaps I came from there?" he asked suspiciously. Nekalaev let go of his arm and courteously moved aside, yielding his place to the sturdy fellow with the neck of a bull.

The water babbled. Sergey Ilyich sat and laughed hysterically. Guy did not cheat. He actually obtained all that he wanted. The open box stood by his feet. Occasionally he took out a bundle, took off the seal, and tossed it up. Money flew away like a fan. They fell into the water and floated on it. The cough torturing him since winter had disappeared somewhere. He felt in himself such health as he had never felt for twenty years. And, most importantly, with his new gift, the antique dealer knew what would happen to him. He knew so precisely and unmistakably that he even did not jump up to beat on the thick door tightly pressed into the partition.

It was useless even to shout. No one would hear. He was in a ship's hold lower than the Moscow River. Above it were two more empty decks. The pump outside hummed monotonically. The tight cabin deprived of windows in the hold of Gomorrah slowly filled up with water…

In the same minute two decks above, foreheads touching, Till and Guy were examining the parchment cut slantwise:

Its demise is clever
Only true to the
Mysterious verd
On golden wings to it wi
Given three hundred
And that same time
When day has
Will break the jug an
Will open hissing
Traitor on
In that the lie
Truth

Guy again picked up the hourglass. He began to look closely. Earlier it seemed to him that all the sand had trickled through. Now he made out bluish grains of sand sticking to the upper flask. How much? Two dozens? Less? It was not simple to count them.

"Mityai Zheltoglazyi disappeared three centuries ago. He didn't return from a dive. Before the dive, he wrote a little poem, made the hourglass, and drew Gorshenya on them. Purpose?" he asked. Till, starting to snuffle, tugged at his wild boar head on a short choker chain. "A real watchdog!" thought Guy.

Chapter 4
At Volokolamskaya Station

Between Shchukinskaya and Tushinskaya stations, passengers following the Krasnopresnenskii radius can see Volokolamskaya Station in the window of the subway car.

This station was intended for the residents of a housing estate on the Tushino airfield site but was never constructed. Exit to the surface and any external decorations are absent at the station, only several lamps illuminate the deserted platform and two rows of pillars.

It is a station of standard design, with pillars, shallow placement. [10]
Subway reference site

Only subconscious suicides, tunnel explorers, and hdivers risk riding between subway cars. A young person belonging at once to all three groups jumped at the last second between the last and next-to-last subway car of a train starting at Tushinskaya Station. He was twenty percent suicide, sixty percent tunnel explorer, and hundred percent hdiver. Although today he had replaced the hdiver jacket with a hoodie.

The train caterpillar slowly pushed its way into the tunnel. It crawled lazily at first, but after getting excited, began to twitch its sides, desiring to scratch them against the thick wires sheathed in rubber. Each jerk could turn out to be the last for the person in the sweatshirt. The foothold was poor and there was even nothing really for the hands to hold onto properly. Soon he would have to touch his *clms*, and how to hang on then was incomprehensible.

Light cut through the windows of the subway car. He saw how the yellow quadrangle, shaking, slid along the sheathing. All of a metre separated him from the people in the car, daydreaming, reading, listening to music, texting. Interesting, will someone hear his scream if he flies under the wheels? He began to feel sorry that he had gotten involved in all this when the caterpillar slowed down. The rumble of the train spread and ceased to deafen. The light from the windows no longer reflected off the walls but stumbled against vertical white pillars appearing out of nowhere.

A light flickered for a second between the third or fourth pillar. Someone switched on and immediately switched off a lamp. This served as the signal for the young person in the sweatshirt. He pulled up his sleeve using his teeth, gauged the distance, and, after seizing the lion on the blazing *clms*, pushed off with a foot from the unreliable foothold. He was flying a second later into the darkness and only at the moment before landing recalled that today he did not have the jacket to cushion the shocks. Protecting his head, he fell flat as a rag. No rolling across, no somersault. No sense in ending up with a piece of railing in his back for the sake of a beautiful landing. Better to wipe the flagstones with his belly. Let the dear city become somewhat cleaner.

Lying on his stomach, the hdiver turned his head. The caterpillar wagged farewell and, after giving an electrical buzz, was hidden in the tunnel. The youth leaned on scraped palms and got up. He was standing in a preserved unfinished underground station without escalators and exits to the outside. Iron flakes of a large city were lying all around.

“Hey! I’m here!” he hailed hesitantly. “And we’re here!” the answer was quite near. The young person turned around, stretching his lips into a smile without any eagerness like stretching wet socks. A ray of someone’s flashlight struck him in the face. He tried to screen himself but he

[10] The distinctive characteristic of a shallow placement subway station in Moscow is its depth underground – just below the frost line.

was not allowed to bring his hand to his face. In the next second, he was pinned in such a way that it seemed to him as if he was pressed in a vise. The light continued to hit him in the face. He more guessed than saw the three large figures.

Rough hands thoroughly felt his jacket pockets, underarms, and back, and slapped around the pant legs to his shin. After cutting the laces, they quickly and expertly unfastened the *clms*. They removed keys, cell phone, and a penknife, the existence of which even he himself hardly remembered, with a blade the length of a little finger. “It’s dull,” the young person said timidly. They advised him to keep his mouth shut.

One of those holding him was moustached, nervous, and rough. The other was round-faced, with thick eyebrows, and outwardly good-natured. Simply a shaven Grandfather Frost[11] who had decided to take a break from the beard till winter.

“A schnepper? An attack marker?” asked Grandfather Frost.

“Yep, a hundred,” the youth answered carelessly and got the back of a hand on his lips. Strangely enough, precisely from Grandfather Frost. His face was compassionate at the same time, like a man who was forced to carry out his task.

“Of course he has nothing,” the one going through his pant legs answered.

“Good boy! Move!” The powerful figures closed in and half-led half-carried him somewhere. Stepping, the young person in the sweatshirt thought that if he tucked in his feet, no one would notice.

Unexpectedly the berserker walking behind issued a short exclamation and directed the ray of the flashlight near his feet. A heavy bee got out of the hdiver’s pant leg and crawled in a businesslike manner along the floor of the platform. The bee crawled and shone like a newly forged nail.

The berserker struck it with a heel. The bee was flattened under the heel but immediately straightened itself. The berserker struck it a second time, a third. In the end, he was already turning his heel screwing the obstinate insect into the concrete. When the bee should have become one moist pulp, he lifted his boot from the floor. The bee, alive and unharmed, was sitting and cleaning itself, moving its antennae and bending its wings with its legs. It displayed no hostility to the person who had jumped on it recently.

The berserker squatted down and started to singe the bee’s antennae with a cigarette lighter. “Tenacious trash! Look, jerks away!” he said triumphantly.

“Don’t touch it!” the youth in the sweatshirt rushed and again got the back of a hand. It hurt more this time because the hit came with the signet ring.

“Leave the insect alone!” moustached said, frowning. “You won’t do anything to it this way! It’ll perish by itself as mine once did.” The youth in the sweatshirt quickly looked at him and lowered his eyes. The bee took off and, after landing on his hood, trustingly crawled under the collar. He with melancholy felt how heavy it was, as if cast.

They started to come across lamps more often in the centre of the platform. The berserker who had trampled on the bee switched off his flashlight. A chair with the back to them was already very visible even without the light. Antique, with decadent curved legs. It would look much more appropriate in the out-of-town palace of a palm-tree dictator but not here in a deserted Moscow subway station. Guy was sitting in the chair, elbows on the back. His security did not form the usual chain but a spacious quadrangle.

Occasionally someone with a flashlight gave a sign into the depths of the station and he was answered in the same way, with the brief winking of a flashlight. Moreover, each time the flash was from a new place. “Eight teams of four here!” the youth in the sweatshirt estimated.

[11] Grandfather Frost is the Slavic equivalent of Santa Claus, bringing gifts to children at New Year's Eve parties and New Year celebrations.

They led him to the chair. The cloth of the back was brighter than Guy's face and the youth continually shifted his gaze involuntarily to it. Of Guy, he saw only sharp elbows and a soft face lowered a little. Guy waited.

"The bees became agitated. They're swarming, flying everywhere. Sometimes you're simply wrapped in a cloud – they're everywhere," the youth said indecisively.

"It means, already soon," Guy commented indifferently.

"Within the next few days," the youth began to nod in a hurry.

Guy, gnawing his fingers, listened to him. "If that's all, you've wasted my time! The bees always fly for novices in September. It wasn't worthwhile to drag me to Volokolamskaya for this."

One of the guards, dark-complexioned with a fresh pink scar on the cheekbone, raised his arbalest. The berserkers holding the fellow in the sweatshirt moved aside. They did not want to be splattered.

The youth began to fret. "DON'T! I forgot! Four bees departed!"

Guy stopped the arbalesters with a look. "To whom? Managed to trace?" he asked quickly.

"Seems so to me," the youth began.

"I need names, not hallucinations!" Guy cut him off.

The youth froze. To betray straight away was difficult. He wanted to do it piece by piece, choosing the least disloyal of them. But there was no turning back. After lingering, the youth squatted down, unlaced a boot, and took out from the top of the boot a folded sheet of notepaper.

"Pity it's only four, but also good!" muttered Guy. "Where did you get this?"

"Kavaleria's office. I copied while she searched for books on horse breeding," the hdiver said dejectedly.

Guy narrowed his eyes. "But why didn't you say so immediately? Ah yes! Always it, the unquelled inner voice!" The youth turned away.

"Now about something else. Did you do what I asked?" Guy asked insinuatingly.

"Sweatshirt" began to nod in a hurry. "I tried! At night with a crowbar I tore the roof off the beehive and tried to steal the queen bee. It was difficult because Gorshenya was stomping beside me. It tried to hamper me. It mumbled, muttered, pushed me away, shielded the beehive! I was risking my life!"

Guy yawned. "You were risking nothing. Gorshenya swallows only those it likes. It's absolutely harmless to others! Did you do everything I ordered?"

"Yes. I fumigated the bees with that gunk you gave me so that they wouldn't protect the queen. I almost puked!"

Guy frowned. "Now-now, young man! Choose your words more carefully! What gunk can there be in the hair of a witch buried alive exactly ninety-nine years and nine months ago? Well, possibly Beldo mixed it in too much hydrogen sulphide. But he wanted it better!"

"Please forgive me!"

"To forgive is not my department. The bees did not protect it?"

The youth shook his head. "No. But I couldn't take the queen! Radiance surrounds it. I touched it and it burnt my hand. I was barely able to discard the crowbar. It melted."

Guy was saddened. "This is bad. Although I assumed something similar… So, my dear, today you came with empty hands. Didn't reach the queen bee. You can only steal up a few steps to the marker in the Green Labyrinth… On the whole, either you'll make me happy with something special right away or you'll be left without a reward."

The youth was frightened. "In June… or at the end May… a newbie appeared in the guild. Without a bee!" the youth blurted out and looked pleadingly at him.

"This is interesting," Guy generously admitted. "And who's the newbie? Got a name?"

"Rina… She brought a hyeon!"

The corner of Guy's mouth trembled. "Good start! Can't bring a bee, bring a hyeon… Where did she get it?"

"They say an adult hyeon whelped right by the fence of HDive, and the warlo… oh…" the youth stopped short, after feeling how the hands of those holding him hardened. The word "warlock" is exclusively hdiver. It was necessary to find another urgently as a replacement, but his thoughts got tangled up from fear.

"The courageous rider of the hyeon. This is what you wanted to say?" Guy prompted with understanding. "He was obligated to either shoot the young or take it with him. But not to discard it… Arnaud, tell Till! Let him sort it out."

The secretary made a note. An ideal secretary. Obliging, forgetting nothing, surprised by nothing. Ordered to kiss, he will kiss. Ordered to cut the throat, he will cut the throat. Ordered to kiss and cut the throat as well, he will do even this, moreover without a reminder and in the time indicated. Smoothed-over forelocks, a timely smile. He was a person surprising even for Guy, who was a good judge of scoundrels.

Once, not being able to resist and having taken the marker at his first dive, Arnaud cut heaven off himself, and so successfully that not even a scar remained. Now everything outside of the scope of his own body, his safety, comfort, and pleasures, was for Arnaud nonexistent. To obtain the maximum happiness, including happiness from juggling the fates of others, and to become clay. But he considered this period non-essential.

Where is Queen Cleopatra now? Did her beautiful body not become brick in some Egyptian cow shed? Is the French king Louis not eaten by worms, pecked by a bird, eaten by a fox, into which flies lay their larvae? On the whole, live in style, and your fly will come flying after you… Only one thing did not give Arnaud peace – *Duoka*. Why is this world empty? For whom?

"Bring the berserker's head?" Arnaud clarified.

"Why?"

"Well, what do you mean why? Till for sure will propose it."

"Work situation. Let Till sort it out himself," Guy made a face.

"It's still not grown, a pup. But lets itself be held. True, only by the owner. The others, no," the young person in the sweatshirt continued ingratiatingly.

Guy frowned. "You yourself saw this? That it allows being held? Without a muzzle? Without something attached to the neck? Without electric shock?"

"Haven't seen it myself. Our people described it. Unable to bring the hyeon onto the grounds of HDive. They hide it somewhere."

"Who are **they**?"

"Rina, Athanasius, Ul, well and all the others with them," the hdiver instantly responded.

Guy winked at him with a deathly pale eye, in which the reflection of a lamp was floating like the moon in a puddle. "Others with them? Broadly said. So, you're not with them?" he said merrily.

"Well, they trust me, but I…" the youth began uneasily.

"I don't care about your 'I'. Kill her!" Guy interrupted.

The fellow in the sweatshirt was uneasy. "Who? Rina?" he asked, startled.

"For the time being, the hyeon," Guy politely set him straight. "Find it and finish it off! I advise you to hurry. It's approximately three months old. That's the age when a hyeon usually takes wing. This one's growing without a mother; therefore, possibly, it'll take wing a little later. But all the same must hurry."

The youth moved his eyes frantically. He did not intend to go so far. "Why? Perhaps I'll simply find a place, and you'll… well on the whole… take it away? Let it serve you," he began to babble.

"It's of no use to us. A hyeon that trusts someone is a freak. And freaks must be destroyed. Do you agree with me?" Guy's voice tinkled slightly.

“Y-yes,” hurrying, the youth said.

“Let him go!” ordered Guy. The hands holding the hdiver unclenched.

The berserker looking like Grandfather Frost mockingly straightened his sweatshirt. “Don’t forget to clean up! And here, you’ll have to find a new lace for your trinket,” he said, returning the *clms*.

“One more thing!” recalled Guy. “About the hmm-m… Gorshenya. You said it interfered with you at the beehive. What does it generally do in the Labyrinth?”

“Don’t know. It often hangs around there. Especially if the moon is out,” said the hdiver.

“And when there’s no moon?”

“When there’s no moon it goes off to the park and disappears there till morning.”

“Strange,” Guy drawled. “Why go to the shady park on moonless nights, where you’ll see little even with the moon? If it wants to frighten or catch someone, enough to stand up by the path, which leads to the stable.” “Sweatshirt” looked at him with surprise, not understanding how the geography of HDive was so well known to him.

“Follow Gorshenya! Where it goes, why!” ordered Guy. “I want to know what it does each second of a moonless night. And try this with the bees!” He, not looking, stretched out his hand and immediately the attentive secretary put in his hand a small glass jar. Something similar to milk separated by water was splashing about inside. “Grease the roof of the beehive with this. Well, and other places where the bees rest. Only a thin layer. And use gloves. The poison is very dangerous,” said Guy.

The youth stretched out his hand and, having touched Guy’s dry finger for a moment, fearfully took the jar. “Bees are immortal. What have our novices not done with their bees!” he warned almost joyfully.

The corner of Guy’s mouth sagged with annoyance. “Bees are constantly cleaning their queen. When this passes to it through their legs, it will become barren and perish. There won’t be new bees, sooner or later there won’t be HDive.” The youth shuddered and straightened up. It seemed for a second that he would now fling the jar at Guy, but then he stooped and hid it in his pocket.

“What are you waiting for? Move!” ordered Guy. The youth did not leave. Even when they grabbed his shoulder and nudged slightly, he remained on the spot. Pressing the *clms* against his chest, he was looking around with uneasiness at Guy. “Well, what’s the matter?” Guy asked impatiently but with secret teasing encouragement in his voice.

“You promised!” the youth said anxiously.

“Ah, well yes… So be it!” Guy stretched lazily and, making his face a rubber mask, with a bitten nail touched the youth’s forehead.

The young fellow in the sweatshirt shuddered. A wave of pleasure passed throughout his body. He tried to hide it but his face gave him away. His mouth smiled weakly. His eyelids grew heavy. Droplets of sweat came out on his forehead. When Guy took his finger away from the forehead, the youth did not even notice. Then, losing his balance, he took a step and bumped his tummy into the chair. The berserkers guffawed with understanding.

“Only don’t abuse it!” advised Guy.

“I can stop any time!” the youth said obstinately.

“I know you can,” Guy agreed willingly, lovingly shaking down the shoulders of his dusty sweatshirt. “But all the same don’t spend it all immediately. I’m begging you!”

The youth pulled his collar with a finger and, having nonchalantly pushed aside a berserker in his way, went to the edge of the platform. He was stepping lightly, getting up on his toes, and felt an unaccustomed ease in his body. He wanted to push off and fly, but here was the trouble – a low ceiling.

At the edge of the platform, the youth felt something rolling in the sleeve of his sweatshirt and scratching his skin. He pulled up the sleeve. A dead bee with folded wings fell out. He leaned over it. Then he straightened. Something buzzed in the tunnel, approaching. The youth in the sweatshirt looked around. A yellow cyclopean eye was hitting his face. The young man burst out laughing, slipped the unlaced *clms* onto his arm, took a run and, after jumping directly towards the eye, teleported the moment before collision with the train.

Guy and his secretary Arnaud exchanged glances. “If our young friend knows about the hyeon, it means so does Kaleria. And she hasn’t interfered. Thereby, she sets up the whole situation…” Guy said slowly.

“One hyeon is no big deal. Won’t even leave descendents,” Arnaud remarked.

Guy clicked his tongue. “The trend is important. I don’t want hdivers to have tame hyeons.”

The secretary nodded and made a note in the notebook, where there was a note about today’s meeting. “Useful fellow,” he said.

Guy massaged heavy eyelids. “Must warn him to give up diving. For the time being he’ll be able to enter the grounds of HDive, since he hasn’t appropriated markers, but already can’t dive,” Guy answered in a preoccupied manner.

“But if we come to an agreement with the elbes so that they don’t touch him…?”

“What do elbes have to do with it? The matter is *Duoka*. It won’t accept him. Besides, he devours such doses of psyose that the crazy house will be waiting for him in half a year. But in this half year we must extract from him as much as possible.”

Guy smoothed out the notebook page:

Makar Goroshko Tukhachevsky Street, #, Apt. 9

Daniel Kuznetsov B. Cherkizovo Street, #, Apt. 155

Alice Fedina Sobolevsky Proezd, #, Apt. 99

Alexander Dudnik Vernadsky Ave, #, Apt. 301

“Telling handwriting! A lot of curlicues on the ‘M’, but the end of words are broken up, and the ‘y’ has a flabby tail. The fellow shows off but not enough confidence,” he remarked.

A pencil scratched twisting, nasty, curved outlines in the notebook. Only Arnaud knew how to decipher his own signs. “Dispose of them ourselves or saddle Till with them?” the secretary asked quietly.

“Dispose?” Guy was surprised. “Forgotten Krunya’s prophecy? Sooner or later these ten will deliver into our world the most powerful marker.” The shadow from a swaying lamp lost its way in the folds of his face. The face sucked in gloom like a sponge soaks up water.

A train swept past through the eternal night of Volokolamskaya. Light lived inside its cars. Darkness rushed toothlessly to it from the corners but could not swallow it and, champing, crawled away into the tunnels.

Chapter 5
Purely Voluntary with a Minimum of Violence

A king had a daughter Princess Sombra [12] *and another Princess Braya. The king promised one half of his kingdom to the one who would make Sombra laugh, and the other half to the one who would quiet Braya down.*
Ul's fairy tale

Fall in HDive – especially in the Green Labyrinth and all around – the colours were always in full swing, so diversely and dauntingly bright that one had to squint. But colours began to kick up a fuss only in October. It was the fifth of September at present, and fall had just started to unscrew with its teeth the lids of tubes of oil paint. For Ul and Yara this was the happiest time. It was not like the previous terrible year, when it seemed to Ul that life had ended. They took off from HDive on any free evening and roamed around Moscow.

"Let's conquer the world!" Ul once proposed. Yara thought and agreed. She adored large-scale villainies. "World, you're conquered!" she said in a whisper, so that the next table would not hear. Quietly and peacefully in a small subbasement cafe, they finished celebrating the capture of the world.

Having the appropriate questioning look on his face, the fat waiter approached with a plate. He fancied that they had hailed him.

"You won, but it's not about that. Keep the change!" Ul generously told him.

The waiter blinked. "What change? Only sixteen roubles from you!" he said.

The next day Ul and Yara taught Rina how to fall from a horse. They tied a cord to her belt and yanked her off while chasing Icarus in a circle. Right after the fall, Yara had to overtake Icarus and jump onto the horse's back while on the run.

"Don't grab the stump! Soft fall, don't resist!" Ul howled.

Rina was all covered in mud. Sand crunched in her mouth. Jacket, pants, and boots were all the same colour – grey. So was Icarus' foaming back. Rina slid down. Ten falls. Twenty. Twenty five. "Not enough!" shouted Rina. "Not enough! Again!" Yara began to worry and looked questioningly at Ul. She did not remember such energy in any novice.

Finally, either Ul overdid it or Icarus, running smoothly till now, pulled too zealously. After drawing an arc, Rina fell into the puddle and could not get up. "You're sadists!" she shouted in a ringing voice.

"We're hdivers. Get up!" Ul again pulled the cord.

Rina burst into quick, short tears, like rain with the sun. Yara took the cord away from Ul and went to Rina. To console. To change tears into laughter. Over the summer, Yara and Rina had become very close. Each saw in the other her own solution, her missing part: Rina, explosive, boyish, quick to flare up but simmer down at the same instant, and Yara, calm, slightly cool emotionally, very consistent.

Rina was still lying in the puddle. "Great!" she said in a suspiciously cheerful and clear voice, turning over onto her back. She slapped the puddle. "'We're hdivers.' Great! Super!"

"What's super?" Yara did not understand.

"The principle itself. Simplification of truth to its essence, without any disguising coquetry! Well, can say that it's to writing like processing coffee in letters. Or to fighting, that this one fella

[12] *The Unsmiling Princess* is a well-known Slavic fairy tale about a princess who does not find anything to smile about or laugh at, so her father promises that whoever can make his daughter smile will be able to marry her.

beats another on the head using his extremities, until by chance he gets to the switch… We're hdivers! Ha! Hdivers!" She scooped mud from the puddle and began to dribble it onto her forehead.

"You're getting hysterical!" Yara quietly warned her.

"And you only just noticed?"

Someone whistled like a robber, with two fingers. Vityara appeared by the stable. "Ul, Yara! To Kavaleria!"

"Why?"

"You said it, dude! I have no idea… I was sent for the senior hdivers."

Gaining strength with the *lion*, Yara pulled Rina like a carrot out of the puddle. "We'll be there soon. You're okay? You'll take Icarus in?"

"Aha." Rina caught up with Icarus and sprung stomach first onto its back. She rode along this way – head on one side, feet on the other – slapping the horse's rump. Gentle Icarus, they could get away with such things with it.

Ul and Yara had already rushed to Kavaleria.

* * *

The office of the director of HDive somewhat resembled Beldo's apartment. Not by the presence of sofas swallowing like quicksand and chatty skulls, but by the rigidity of the clearly defined zones. A tub with a dwarf pine tree, a seedling Kavaleria brought back from *Duoka*, divided the office into two clear poles.

The garden bloomed in the south. The seedlings spread over multi-tier glass stands: violet leaves in little glass jars, young boxwood, newborn eucalyptus, and yellow roses. Between them lay shovels, pruning shears, watering cans of different sizes, and other miniature equipment. Countless china figurines of ducklings, kittens, and human children were also crowded there.

The northern part of Kavaleria's office began from the palm tree. Even an ordinary pencil had the right to be here, only based on necessity. The minute this necessity disappeared, the pencil also vanished into thin air together with it. If a chance violet strayed into here, Kavaleria would personally send it a steel ball from a schnepper. She had no time for violets here, because now, in the northern part of the office, Kavaleria was raging. Detecting the approach of dangerous minutes in the barely noticeable vibration of her voice, clever Octavius tucked in its tail in advance and hid behind the bushy liana.

"May we?" Appearing in Kavaleria's office, Athanasius, Ul, and Yara, as experienced hdivers, first of all found out in what part of the office its mistress was. It turned out to be in the business section. Octavius hid behind the tub, solely the tail was spied outside. Kuzepych was sitting at Kavaleria's. His eyebrows like brushes were moving angrily. He was like a boatswain flying into a rage. After exchanging a couple of words with Kavaleria, Kuzepych left.

"Someone wrecked the beehive at night. Boards scattered, honeycombs trampled. Now Kuzepych is knocking everything together anew. But honeycombs, it goes without saying, are beyond his abilities," said Kavaleria, not looking at anyone.

"And the bees?" Ul began to fret.

"The bees didn't suffer," Kavaleria interrupted. "Nevertheless, the beehive is destroyed. Nowhere for them to live and nothing to eat. That the bees are golden doesn't mean that they feed on diamonds."

Octavius began to growl agreement behind the tub. "Don't echo, emperor!" Kavaleria told it. The emperor subsided.

"Kuzepych is sure that it's Gorshenya. Its tracks were around the beehive. One can see that it was trampling there all night… And as ill luck would have it, the bees only recently began to depart

for novices! Now they're worked up, angry, and it's also incomprehensible how it'll be. Possible they'll gather much fewer than the usual four teams of five."

"You think that Gorshenya…" Yara began.

"I think nothing!" Kavaleria dryly cut her off. "Gorshenya has been in HDive for three centuries. It chases lovers, creates the necessary extreme sports for the novices, and prevents them from trampling the flowers! In general, Gorshenya is Gorshenya. It's the symbol of HDive. No other like it."

"What do we do now with Gorshenya?"

Kavaleria began to snuffle. "For the time being… I emphasize, for the time being… nothing. But if it continues to go on doing such things, we'll have to part company with it."

Athanasius became agitated. "Has Gorshenya explained anything?"

"I killed an entire hour in conversation with it," said Kavaleria with annoyance. "Babbles something incomprehensible, 'Walked, walked, touched, touched! Belly hungry does not eat!' Likely we should be grateful that it didn't guzzle the hive! A bow to the ground to him!" Kavaleria said with irritation and, after opening the upper drawer of the desk, handed an envelope to Athanasius. "Hold this! You're the best of all to take care of this. Here's the name of the girl chosen by the golden bee. She left yesterday, before all these events. Find her and establish the circumstances… Ul and Yara, you get busy with the beehive! Help Kuzepych! I don't worry about the hive itself; the honeycombs trouble me. Also protection. If Gorshenya comes again at night, where is the guarantee that it won't ruin the new one too?"

"And if…" Ul began.

"Let's do without the 'if'! You're not a spartan!" Kavaleria cut him short. "Set up a spatial trap by the beehive! Only don't get carried away. I still haven't forgotten how Kuzepych was left high and dry for a week on the island in the White Sea."

"Rodion set it up then," Ul gave it away. "I was only in charge. But then he himself asked to protect the cases of condensed milk." Yara grabbed his sleeve and pulled him to the door.

Athanasius turned the envelope in his hands, an ordinary envelope with the hydroelectric power plant on the printed stamp. And not sealed. "What to do with the new girl?" asked Athanasius.

"As usual. Purely voluntary with a minimum of violence. And especially don't get tangled in a lie: you yourself know, any lie will echo when you pass *the swamp*," answered Kavaleria.

Octavius began to growl behind the tub, made a timid sudden move, and tried to attack the leaving Athanasius with a nip at his heel.

* * *

Athanasius carried out Kaleria Valerevna's commission the very same day. He had to dash off to the university for this, about which he was only glad. Trips to the city did not happen to him particularly frequently, not counting the evenings when he arranged fake meetings with the cryptographer from Honduras.

Moscow was humming in a businesslike manner, like the hive of the golden bees. The cars recently gathered from the spaciousness of cottage country bellowed restlessly and, interfering with each other, crawled along the gas station. Everyone was hurrying somewhere, everyone's eyes were clustered together. Even babies in strollers looked surly. Only the sun tried to cheer everyone up, but did not manage and was sad, wiping the damp-looking clouds.

Officials sat quietly on the Internet. The prisoners of offices smiled appropriately at their bosses and chose a country for the next two-week vacation. Schoolboys had their eyes on the new teachers, groped their weak sides, and mentally composed a list of tasks, which would not need to be done, and topics, which would not need to be studied. The same spirit reigned also at the

university. The euphoria of beginning-of-school-year meetings had already died down, and now the students, spitting out marble aggregate, gnawed on the foundation of science.

Athanasius went out of the first humanities building of Moscow State University and stopped at the front entrance, not recognizing Moscow. It turned out that while he was walking, outside had time to have a downpour. The most surprising was that it was already not raining now. The sky had cleared. The horizon had teethed with precise rectangles of high-rises. It seemed the capital was smiling with that uncertain, freshly washed smile, the kind that appears on the face of a person just finished crying.

Along the asphalt flowed streams of water, in low places reaching halfway up the shin. The storm drains became seething pools. A stalled car stood in a pit. Water reached midway up its headlights. Other cars carefully travelled around it, scrambling onto the curb. Exactly like a herd going around a cow killed by lightning.

Athanasius continually met victims of the rain. Umbrellas, damaged by the downpour, did not save them. Many, despairing, went around barefoot, after throwing over the shoulder shoes with laces tied together.

After picking a long skirt up above her knees, a girl with a bag on her head walked towards Athanasius. The handles of the bag were dashingly tucked behind her ears. He moved aside, passing her, raised his head, and was immediately hailed. Athanasius looked around. He recognized the geometrical half-circle eyebrows and wheaten hair. It was Gulia. She grabbed his sleeve and, twittering, dragged him through the puddles. The sensation emerged in Athanasius that they had parted not three months ago but only yesterday.

“Where did you come from?” asked Gulia, trying to shove his head into the bag with hers.

Athanasius resisted, partly from dignity, partly because the rain had stopped. “From the university!” he said.

“You study here?”

“No.”

“And rightly so!” approved Gulia. “Suspicious place! Here friends speak well of each other. It’s unnatural.”

In the middle of the road full of cars splashing water, it came into Gulia’s head to stop and, arms akimbo, pose the question, “Where did you disappear to then? I waited for your call!”

Knowing that he would not be believed nevertheless, Athanasius craftily lied with the truth. “Was injured. Lying in the clinic. Supovna cursed me ninety-two times. Fed me regularly as much as… That’s because I never finished eating. Dealt her a blow.”

“Everything is clear, reindeer!” said Gulia in the magnanimous voice of a person willing to be taken in.

A car swept past. A canopy of water appeared above it. Athanasius hurriedly shut his mouth and eyes. It was already useless to cover the rest.

“Jerk!” Gulia yelled, jumping like a sparrow. “A natural jerk! Look where you’re going! People are walking here!”

Athanasius carefully grabbed Gulia with both arms and moved her onto the grass. But even on the grass Gulia continued to jump and threaten the cars. Her howls were laughable and silly. Like that of a child who beats the table for hitting him with a corner.

She finally calmed down. “I thought about you,” said Gulia, not making an acknowledgement but simply informatively.

Athanasius began to feel uneasy. He was not used to someone thinking about him. “How is your bear doing? Is it still so green?” he asked in a hurry.

They agreed to meet the next day. This time without excuses.

"I'll bring a friend. And you'll also bring one of yours!" ordered Gulia. "I've now adapted myself to finding in supermarkets bottles with winning codes! Felt one yesterday, but a woman already had it in her cart."

"And your friend is also…" Athanasius carefully asked.

"Also what?"

Athanasius hesitated. His tongue was not in a hurry to utter "incubator for elbes." "Well, does she possess abilities?"

Gulia looked around suspiciously at the elderly man with a professorial beard, who squatted across the street and examined an apple floating in the puddle. "Nina can find any object," she said.

"She finds treasures?"

"Well, if she sees the one who buried it. Also any lost inanimate object… She's unhappy. Introduce her to someone!"

Athanasius hesitated. "In order to make two unhappy at once? Certainly!"

"And your friend has abilities?"

"Only one. He ties construction nails into little bows," answered Athanasius. He imagined that he would bring Max with him.

* * *

Athanasius showed up quickly in HDive. There were terribly long lines for the buses to the outlying regions and it seemed to Athanasius a good reason for teleportation. After turning up on the concrete area outside the gates, Athanasius wanted to take a step but realized that, having missed the mark by a centimetre, his soles were stuck. There was no chance of removing the shoes and nothing else to do. He had to take them off and go barefoot into HDive, leaving the boots sticking out in front of the bumper of Kuzepych's bus.

Athanasius approached Max in the evening, when that one was busy with an important practical matter: pick out from the tangled mess a pair of socks of more or less similar colour. There were six washers for the entire HDive. They were all in the room next to the shower and, since there were many people in HDive, things were always mixed up. What they had not tried. Basins signed with markers, labels on things, ribbons sewn on, and allowing only several people to wash at the same time – nothing helped.

Max stated at first that he did not care. He was not going anywhere. Then he said that, so be it, he would go for the company, although he knew ahead of time that the girl would turn out to be this woofer.

"Why is that?"

"Law of the j-jungle! Pretty g-girls always have dogs as friends. Is your G-Gulia pretty?" he asked.

Athanasius wisely kept quiet. He would not rush to call Gulia "his." It seemed to him that love at first sight is a TV cliché. It was totally different with Yara. Virus love is outside of the rules. Moreover, he had already recovered.

Max pulled a sock onto his enormous foot and wriggled his toes. "Forbidden to meet with w-warlocks!" he said.

"Nothing in the HDive charter says so. I checked. Besides, they're not warlocks!" Athanasius stood up for them. It was unpleasant for him that Gulia was called this.

"Then what?"

"Well… eh-eh… simply going astray a little."

Max neighed. "And what will y-you give me, if I g-go?" he asked.

Athanasius punched him in the back and hurt his own fist. Max liked this. He adored it when they hurt themselves against him. But Max liked to pretend to be a dull bodybuilder more. Moreover, he pretended with such perseverance that increasingly he was actually becoming one.

"Okay, I'll go for free. Only t-take this! I…I'll not talk with your woofer. And if she tries to come near me, I'll un… un…unscrew her head!"

"Of course, not a problem!" Athanasius hurriedly agreed.

Max's subsequent behaviour surprised him. The giant, allegedly not attaching any special importance to the meeting, began nervously to choose a pair of jeans and fling out turtlenecks from the dresser.

"This will k-kill me! And this is s-small!" he swore and again declared that he was not going anywhere, because there was nothing for him to wear and could in no way go in the hdiver jacket. Athanasius wanted to propose his own sweater to Max but understood that for such a moose it would only be fit to be carried in the pocket as a talisman.

Max kicked the dresser and dejectedly sat down on the floor. "I hate S-Supovna! She fattened me so that now I can't get into anything!"

"What's the difference to you? You're going for the company," Athanasius consoled him.

"I don't want them to th…think that I'm a d…dolt!" Max declared.

Finally, he succeeded in finding decent clothing and calmed down. True, not for long, because he was concerned about what to do with his hair. Max did not have hair lying on top. He did not want to comb straight back. One obstinate strand always fell down with a comb-over to the left, while one to the right would show an unfortunate pimple.

Athanasius wisely kept away. The best way to enrage someone is to start to calm him down. The words "Calm down!" have a clearly expressed psychopathic effect. However, it was useless to explain to Max that he would look seven times better if he would not stare or try to walk with tense muscles.

Ul was lying around on the hammock and watching Max blowing hot and cold. "Take an example from me! The last time I looked into the mirror was when I helped drag it along the stairs!" he bragged.

"It's b…because you're an i…invalid!"

"I'm not an invalid! I'm a user of my own appearance!" Ul objected.

"Then clean up your own m-mess, loser of your own appearance! I'm stumbling all over!" Max bellowed and, after pulling the rope, catapulted Ul from the hammock.

Ul cackled. He was a slob not even squared but to some degree off the chart. So, if an object of his fell, he would not try to pick it up but simply began to consider that where it fell would be its new place. "I wouldn't dream of it! I can live both in cleanliness and in a den. But you only in cleanliness. It means I'm the more advanced model of man."

Here Ul belittled Max slightly. By and large, Max was also a slob, just that he was convinced that outside spreaders prevented him from living in tidiness.

Max made preparations till four in the morning and so tired all the inhabitants of the attic that Ul left to sleep in the stable and the quick-tempered Rodion began to throw heavy objects at Max. Sometimes he even got a hit.

* * *

The meeting was set at Belorusskaya at six in the evening, in the centre hall. Here at the place, Athanasius stopped and belatedly recalled that there are altogether two Belorusskaya.[13] However, Gulia answered rather strangely in the text message.

[13] Both the Koltsevaya (Ring) Line and Zamoskvoretskaya (the other side of the Moscow River) Line have a Belorusskaya

What station are we meeting at : Koltsevaya or Radialnaya? Athanasius hurriedly texted and obtained an answer in the style, ***Hee-hee! Green bear kisses you!***

I am serious!

Hee-hee! It too!

Athanasius tortured the phone with one hand, and caught the fleeing Max with the other. Along the way Max managed to change his mind three times, and at the very last moment Athanasius almost had to pull the emergency stop, because Max tried to remain in the subway car.

They arrived at six oh one. There were no girls. They ran off to Koltsevaya, but they were not there either. Athanasius argued at length about which centre hall. Max psyched out. He stood and cursed Gulia's friend. Athanasius was a hundred times sorry that he had gotten Max involved. Although who else to bring? Ul has Yara, and useless to ask Rodion.

A beautiful woman emerged from the passageway and began to shout into her phone, "The weather here is disgusting! No sun! The tap in the shower is broken!" There was triumph in her voice that she could not be made happy again.

"I bet she was talking to her husband. Her voice has a domestic intonation!" said Athanasius, when the woman had left.

"Ah! Would kill all of them broads! Indeed, where does the sun come from in the subway?" answered Max.

Probably, in order not to let Max kill all women, a puny policeman with a big stick approached him and checked his documents. Two minutes later, another policeman without a baton also approached and checked the documents. Again they turned out to be in order. Athanasius hoped that someone would also look at his passport but no one was interested. He was even offended that he appeared so exemplary.

Athanasius again wanted to go down to Koltsevaya but was afraid that while he ran about, Max would skip off. He started to phone. The first time the line was out of range, and the second time Gulia picked it up but only the rumble of a train was heard.

Gulia and friend phoned back about fifteen minutes later, but from the city, not from Belorusskaya. It turned out they were sitting in a little cafe at Mayakovskaya[14] and had no intention of going down to the subway. After speculating a little about the working principles of a girl's brain and even about its location, they went to Mayakovskaya.

"Oh, I live not particularly f-far from here! Can drop in at mine later!" Max came to life.

"With the girls?"

Max was even frightened, "What, are you m-mocking me? You don't kn-know my mama! And g-grandma," he added after twenty seconds. "And a-aunt," he said as well a minute later.

This might sound funny, but the big guy Max grew up in strictly female surroundings. Papa, once available, did not last longer than the mother-in-law's first bout of greediness, the aunt's first spring aggravation, and the first timid attempt to explain to grandmother that a latch is structurally provided in the john.

Max lived in the centre of Moscow, in a seven-storied building, with ceilings so high that in childhood he lured friends into the apartment and proposed to spit to the ceiling. Over the years there turned out only one, not so much a spitting but jumping comrade, and the saliva, with a good mix of chocolate, was still visible about six years later.

The apartment was old, poorly planned, with bricked-up doors leading nowhere, and a huge built-in closet, in which one could spend the night if necessary. True, to do this one had to sort out

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(Belarus) Station, with a passageway linking them. This is where passengers transfer from one line to the other. The station on the Zamoskvoretskaya is called Belorusskaya-Radialnaya (Radial).

[14] The Mayakovskaya Station is one of the most famous subway stations in the world. Opened in 1938, it was the world's first deep column station and its Art Deco design won the Grand Prix at the 1939 International Exhibition in New York.

the mess of hundreds of jars of preserves so ancient that no one resolved to try or lifted a hand to throw them out.

The windows looked out onto the Garden Ring. When cerebral laziness attacked Max (and for some strange reason it always coincided with the need to get something ready), he would sit on the windowsill and watch as the cars crawled along the Ring.

Cars were always crawling along it and it worried small Max whether they could end sometimes. In the middle of the night, woken up by the roar of motorcycles, he would approach a window barefoot and check if there were cars. Convinced that they were still moving and, meaning they did not end, reassured, he would lie down in bed.

The little cafe turned out to be in the courtyard. "The place's o-out of the way. Am…ambush!" Max stated confidently.

"Why?"

"Simpler to ar…arrange it in a cafe! You have the schnepper?" It turned out that Athanasius did not have his schnepper. Only his *clms*, and even that was in the knapsack.

"Let's do this! I'll drop in and if I don't appear in sixty seconds, run to save me!" Athanasius said and pushed the door.

When he came out ten minutes later, Max, huffing and puffing, was breaking off an iron rod from the fence. "Why so l-long?"

"They're right at the entrance. Chatting!" Athanasius, embarrassed, started to justify himself.

Gulia and Nina were sitting at the second table from the door. Max was presented by Athanasius as "my friend Maximilian." He himself did not know why he blurted out "Maximilian." When he was nervous, his tongue accomplished unthinkable tricks.

"Athanasius showed us in the window how you broke the fence! It was so amusing! Nina even thought that your turtleneck would burst!" Gulia chirped.

On this remark "the friend Maximilian" sorted out which was which girl, and began to examine Nina unnoticeably. To his amazement, she turned out to be not bad. The horse lover Max would describe the colour of her hair as "rose grey" blond.

Athanasius was also surprised. Yesterday, when Gulia said that Nina was unhappy, he imagined to himself a rather skinny girl, whom they would support under the elbow. The "rose grey" blonde turned out to be rosy, excellently proportioned, but somewhat in the style of "Why did you lose my bow?"

The lost-bow style was manifested in that she batted her eyelashes, pouted her lips, and constantly uttered, "Why did you drag me here? And coffee without cognac here? You just watch, I'll kick up a fuss. You'll have to answer for everything!"

She liked the strong Max. Soon she began to throw little bread balls at him, nudged him with an elbow, and repeated, "You have terrible eyes! I'm certain you're a terrible person!" The "terrible person" listened and was delighted. He reminded Athanasius of a large dog, which no one ever patted, but now suddenly they decided to be nice to.

The cafe was comfortable, with cheerful figures on the walls and the ceiling. An amusing family sat at the first table. The father was chewing with such caricature importance, as if eating up the chocolate cake was doing an enormous favour to the cake, the institution, and to humanity as a whole. The son huddled up to the mother and was an exact copy of her.

"A child looks like the one who loves him," Athanasius summed it up and began to gauge whether this was so. This was his internal game. He brought forth a thesis, and then chose arguments "for" and "against."

"Hey!" Gulia hailed him. "You've been stirring the tea for ten minutes already! Maybe you'll stop?"

Athanasius came to. "Don't pay any attention! I have a fit of contentment!" he explained.

Gulia had a short argument with the waiter that she would guess all the numbers of his student card and they would not have to pay for coffee. “It’s nothing!” Gulia said modestly. “But then I lose things all the time! Here Nina just finds things!”

Athanasius unnoticeably sent two roubles through a hole in his pocket into his boots and proposed to Nina to say where they were. She found them, slightly screwing up her face like a math professor whose multiplication table was being checked.

Max thought for a long time what to ask, then recalled that in school they stole his phys ed form from the locker room, and asked who needed it. The rose-grey blonde smiled coquettishly. Her face was unbelievably flexible and expressive, with dimples. These pits, like shots from mortar, appeared at a new place every time.

“No one. They simply dropped it out the window. But here the little soldier in the crack behind the heater, this is interesting. Do you remember, you cried all night?” It turned out Max remembered. He also began to stutter then, although they had a popular story in the family that the neighbour’s dog frightened him.

Then they went to stroll around the centre. Max, timid at first and holding Nina fearfully like a doorknob in a public sanitary facility, gradually grew bolder and proposed to show her how to break the sentry’s neck correctly so that he would not let out a squeak.

“Look, I’m squeaking! Squeak-squeak-squeak!” Nina immediately gave voice. A happy Max grabbed her by the neck.

Gulia and Athanasius were walking behind, not too close so that the violent pair would not bump into them.

“Why did you say that she’s unhappy? I think she’s cheerful,” asked Athanasius.

“They all abandoned her. Mlada – this is our acquaintance – says that she has an aura of celibacy and can only wash it off with elephant blood!” said Gulia in complete seriousness. She pronounced with awe the name of Beldo’s servant.

“With what blood?”

“You mock in vain. We even went to the zoo, but really, how do you get to an elephant?”

Athanasius mumbled something.

Nina was talking animatedly about something, whereas Max was largely limited to gestures. Not wanting to stutter once more, he substituted words with movements of the head. He had the richest mimicry. He knew how to pucker his forehead in twenty ways. As for his nose – like the tuber of a jolly tractor driver – in general it skilfully conveyed expressions of every kind. It became a harmonica, fidgeted, or merrily breathed heavily and noisily.

At the end of Tverskaya, the hdivers had a charge marker under one of the numerous memorial boards. Athanasius recalled it when fifty steps away Nina suddenly sprained her ankle and Gulia in the same second dashed onto the road. He had noticed earlier that the concept of roadway did not exist for her.

Athanasius caught her a second before she was smeared on the side of a van sweeping past. Cars squealed with their brakes. Max and Nina, having pulled off her shoes, rushed from behind. The traffic cop, this herdsman of cars, with his stomach sticking out, stood in his booth. When they crossed the road, he whistled angrily but did not try to catch them. Pedestrians, even clearly mad, were small game to him.

“Well, and where were you rushing to?” Athanasius asked on the other side of Tverskaya.

Gulia thought for a bit, obviously trying to figure out why. “I forgot to buy napkins… Yes, napkins!” she said uncertainly.

Athanasius was surprised by the speed of reaction of the newborn ele. About five seconds later Gulia was finally convinced that she needed napkins and it was for them that she hardly remained on the sidewalk.

After mending Nina's heel, they strolled for about another two hours and before parting they started to negotiate another date.

"Let's meet F-Friday!" said Max.

Nina and Gulia exchanged glances. "We can't on Friday."

"Why?"

They did not get a clear answer. The girls hesitated. Nevertheless, Athanasius knew how to sum up from the scraps of answers that on Friday the warlocks were up to something. And it would be in the psychology school at Bolotnaya Square, on the next admission day.

They said goodbye at the subway. Nina offered her cheek to Max and outlined the place with a long nail. "I hope you don't intend to kiss me? It's so disgusting!" she prompted.

Max smooched her with athletic honesty, holding her head with his hands. Athanasius waited for some time to see whether Nina's skull would crunch, but Nina turned out to be durable.

"Well now! Not enough that this terrible person meanly dragged me to a date! He even attacked me!" Nina was outraged, taking out a mirror in order to check the damage inflicted on her face.

While Athanasius was pondering whether he was obligated to kiss Gulia for the reason that Max kissed Nina and whether this would be plagiarism, Gulia got up on tiptoe – the difference in their height was large – and kissed Athanasius on the eyebrow. "Till we meet!"

Max neighed so abominably that Athanasius again gave him a fist. The train approached. They hopped into a car.

"Well, how do you like her?" Athanasius asked in the tunnel.

Max looked suspiciously at him. He, like that lady on the phone, did not like to admit being happy. Dissatisfaction, if you examine it, is universal currency, with which everything can be purchased, if we bargain long enough. "Who?"

"You know who."

"N-not bad. Okay," answered Max.

"For some reason it seems to me that this is for a long time," said Athanasius. "Well, with Gulia. Not that intuition… Simply the more confused a situation, the more real it is, perhaps." Max understood nothing and chuckled. The train slowed down, stopped, and again set off. "Now I'll not calm down until I nail her ele. I know myself…" said Athanasius.

"Watch you don't n-nail her together with it!" Max advised quietly. They were silent again. Max swayed peacefully, holding onto the handrail. Athanasius was bouncing like a sparrow.

"Did you understand everything?" he yelled into Max's ear.

"Yes," Max winced. "What did I un-understand?"

"Think!"

Max thought till the next station. "Ah! That my Nina, most likely, is from Beldo's fort but not from D-Dolbushin's? She's a pr-practical student," he stuttered.

"Oho!" thought Athanasius. "My Nina! He labelled her quickly! And several hours ago called her a dog."

"I'm not on about that," he said. "The warlocks are having a new recruitment! Would be nice to see how all this progress with them? Eh?"

* * *

Athanasius met Ul in HDive. Ul was standing with his schnepper similar to a double-barrel and aiming at a food can from fifteen steps away. He shot. The can remained standing. "Here I'm thinking about female whims. When it seems to someone that more time is spent with a horse and all that…" he said.

"Is it true?" asked Athanasius.

"It's not about that. What forces them to behave like that at all? Maybe, a woman is capricious because it's important for her to check if a man will stand the whims of a possible child? Some kind of test?"

"There are girls who aren't capricious," Athanasius said carelessly.

Ul again took a shot. "Who? Your telegrapher from Honduras? Holy! Dang! I suppose they learn to sleep on nails, eat with the head down, and open tanks with a finger."

"They learned," said Athanasius.

"What learned?"

"She perished," Athanasius lowered his eyes. "Didn't make contact. In the mountains, where there was the hidden transmitter, they found the safety pin from a grenade trampled into the ground."

Ul grabbed his hand. "And you kept quiet?"

"I was joking. She's alive. Sits at home. Bought a cookbook," said Athanasius half-heartedly.

Ul pushed him away. "Some jokes!!! You're simply a blockhead!"

"Aha," admitted Athanasius. "I know."

The can, which Ul aimed at, fell by itself.

Athanasius found Kaleria Valerevna in the teachers' room, long and narrow. There was an argument: whether Kuzepych blocked up part of the corridor or it was stretched as a result of an unsuccessful dance of the shamans, who wanted to crush the teaching staff of HDive with the walls but did not manage and only stretched out the room.

Kavaleria was standing by the board with the timetable and considering how to make four instructors out of one free one in order to fill all the "windows."

"Nothing pans out! People will again hang around with nothing to do! Looks like you have to be busy with the novices," she complained.

"With the novices? Really the bees…?"

Kavaleria's plait bobbed like a fishing float. "The last departed today. The bees calmed down, it means fall recruitment is finished. This fall we will recruit nine. Plus 'beeless' Rina."

"You hand them over to Kuzepych. He knows how to keep everyone busy," advised Athanasius.

Kavaleria smiled. "Well, what can I do for you?"

Athanasius told her, supplying the details. In his version, they met with the girls exclusively in the interests of HDive. "Certainly, can blast an attack marker, but there won't just be some warlocks. Pity the 'incubators'," he finished.

For a long time Kavaleria twirled the pencil in her fingers. "Risk must be justified. Unjustified risk is folly. For the time being, I see no justification for the risk. We can lose a man, but what will we get in exchange?"

"Well… we'll see how it's there and what."

"And see what? Walls?"

"Not… Well, warlocks at least…" Athanasius was lost.

"And you haven't seen them before? Or do you think that the heads of the forts will share their plans with a crowd of people assembled from all over Moscow?" Kavaleria asked mockingly.

Yielding, Athanasius let air out through lips elongated like a small tube. "So, you're against it?"

"I need to think."

Chapter 6
Boys to the Left, Girls to the Right!

*Nice to meet you. My name is Philomena Ms Ann pacco, I saw you today in profile (www.***.ru) and become interested in you, please, send me email to my email address for me to give you my beautiful pictures and tell you more about me. I will wait for your email today, (please remember that distance and/or skin colour nor language doesn, T matter, but love does) Philomena Ann*
Hunting letter of an elbe

Vlad Ganich stopped by the porch, quickly looked around at Rina gone off in front and outlined with his eyes a semicircle through the lilac bushes. “Why are we following her? If we slip away? Through the fence and…” he, proposed. Cyril wanted to say something maliciously on the theme of cleanliness of the suit, but Vlad had already gotten a move on through the lawn and tore quickly like a young moose through the thick lilac.

“He shouldn’t have! If we’re to get the hell out of here, then all together! He’ll climb over, and the girls will slow down! Have to let them go first!” Sashka condemned him, after noticing how a slightly opened window on the second floor wobbled.

Vlad reached the iron fence. No thorns, no sharp peaks, a very convenient fence. Stepping on the embellishments, he scrambled up in a second and jumped. Sashka heard a crack, and yet a second later Vlad came out of the lilac from this side. The lilac indignantly shook its leaves. Vlad shook his head like a stunned heifer and again persistently climbed the fence. Sashka decided that Vlad had gotten away. Anything can happen when a man is under heavy strain.

Vlad again scrambled along the fence, for some reason stood up on his feet, and only then jumped. This time Sashka definitely saw that Vlad jumped off onto THAT side, but again turned out to be on THIS side. Only this time he did not fall down into the lilac but flew through it. Vlad did not dare to jump a third time and, limping, returned to the others. Sashka raised his head. The window on the second floor was closed.

Rina was standing next to Sashka and sympathetically watched Vlad. “Keep in mind, I got really badly scratched by this lilac. It seems, I think, the leaves…” she said and began to climb the stairs.

Makar overtook her, ran up to the plaque and the white cockroach letters finally formed into the inscription “**Guildhall of Divers.**” “And whatsa here? They teach diving?” he asked, trying to beak off the plaque.

“Drowning!” Cyril joked.

“H-h-hands! Both!” someone ordered in a resounding voice. Makar and Cyril fidgeted in a startled way. “P-ut in the po-o-ockets! Don’t touch the inventory!” the voice finished cheerfully. The door was open. A thickset fellow in a jacket of rough skin examined them with interest. He looked to be twenty-twenty-five years old. The worldly Makar began to worry. He had gotten it in the neck most often precisely from this age range.

“I’m Ul! Can be Oleg. All questions afterwards! For the present, if anyone gets anything into his head, digest three things. **First**: this isn’t a school of witchcraft and other magic. Whoever maintains the opposite, I’ll cast a spell on him! This is neither school nor institute nor college at all, but simply the modest and only one of its kind HDive. **Second**: from this moment on you’re divided into teams of fives. For convenience in tasks, duty, and patrol. One team: Makar, Sashka, Alice, Danny, Rina! The other: Cyril, Lena, Vlad, Lara, Freda… And **third**: no one keeps you here by force.”

Burning with indignation, Freda jerked up her hand.
“Well?” Ul generously allowed her.
“And the fence??? If no one keeps us by force, why couldn’t Vlad climb over?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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