

Dmitrii Emets



TANYA GROTTER

and the Magic Double Bass



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The Magic Double Bass**

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The black sorceress Plague-del-Cake, whose name they dread even to utter aloud, climbing to power, destroys the brilliant magicians one by one. Among her victims is the remarkable white magician Leopold Grotter. His daughter Tanya, by some unknown means, manages to avoid death, but on the tip of her nose, a mysterious birthmark remains for life... Plague-del-Cake mysteriously disappears, and Tanya Grotter turns out to be abandoned to the family of businessman Durnev, her distant relative... She lives with this extremely unpleasant family until the age of ten, and then finds herself in the unique world of the Tibidox School of Magic...

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Дмитрий Емец

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Prologue

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Chapter 1

A Baby in a Case

On a bright autumnal morning when everything in the world appeared harshly vivid and disgracefully happy and the foliage on the trees shone as if it was doused with golden tinsel, a stooping tall person in a grey coat came out of the entrance of a multi-storey building on Rublev Road.

His name was Herman Durnev, the director of the firm Second-Hand Socks and the father of a year-old daughter Pipa (short for Penelope).

Stopping under the eaves of the entrance, Durnev looked around disapprovingly. The sun, whose roundish face was as flat as a pancake, indulged itself on the neighbouring roof as if being lazy and considering whether it would be worthwhile for it to rise further or to come down as is. On a pile of leaves not far from the entrance a woman in an orange overall was half lying and looking into an open hatch. Her profile was regular, Greek outlines, and the copper-red hair puffed out so that they made one involuntarily think of snakes. In the hatch someone was rumbling and messing around boisterously. The haughty sparrows were pecking something on the asphalt, briskly, like rubber balls, jumping away from passers-by.

From the windows and cellars, from squares and empty parks, from the crowns of trees and the sky with wisps of clouds hanging, from cats' eyes and ladies' handbags, from the exhaust pipes of automobiles, from price lists at the stores, and the still sunburnt noses of summer residents – from everywhere, rubbing carrot yellow palms, the quite young, recently born October looked out.

But all this beauty was of no concern whatever to Herman Durnev. Weather, and in general nature, only interested him enough for determining whether or not to take an umbrella with him or whether it was time to put snow tires with spikes on the car.

He looked at his watch and reached for a small box with homeopathic medicine.

“What a cad this sun is! One, two... And you can't even spit on it... At least it generally dies out... Really, on such a day who can be in the mood for work? Five, six... Sooner or later I'll really have an ulcer... Or already have... Seven...” he muttered, counting off little beads and placing them under his tongue.

When the little beads had dissolved, Durnev started to think better and said to himself, “Well now, now I'll indeed live until dinner if I don't get blood poisoning from the new corn plaster.”

Certainly, Durnev also did not suspect that he was being observed. A large disgusting-looking bird: gloomy, dishevelled, with a long scruffy neck on which there were almost no feathers, was observing him from the eaves of the entrance. The bird held in its beak a photograph cut out from a magazine and was looking at it... yes, it was the same – Herman Durnev, taken together with his wife Ninel and daughter Pipa at the International Suspenders Exhibition in the All-Russia Exhibition Centre.

Occasionally the bird lowered the photograph onto a metal sheet and started to compare meticulously the present Durnev with the photograph. At the same time, disgusting greenish lumps of mucus dripped from the beak onto the photograph.

It is possible to imagine how surprised Durnev would be if he were to casually raise his head and take a look at who was sitting on the eaves of the entrance. However, Herman Nikitich was not among those who pay attention to birds, if, it goes without saying, it was not a cooked chicken lying before him on a plate. Moreover, at the given moment the dodgy mind of the head of the firm Second-Hand Socks was occupied with the solution of a question: how to get custom clearance for two railroad cars of used handkerchiefs under the guise of goods for children.

Durnev walked down from the porch and, with obvious pleasure stepping several times on the charmingly bright yellow leaves, turned on his heel. Having done this, already completely indifferently

he passed many other leaves and sat down in the new black car. The car started to purr and was off. The bird with the naked neck gravely broke away from the eaves and flew after the car, clearly not intending to lose sight of it.

* * *

The woman sitting on the lawn, whom Durnev in passing thought of as a repair person, followed the bird with a penetrating glance and muttered to herself under her breath, “I would like to know what Lifeless Griffin is doing here. The last time I met him was when they got the Titanic down into the water. Don’t remember what happened with the steamship there but for sure there was some trouble.”

She threw up her hand, on her middle finger was a sparkling ring, and she whispered quietly, “*Sparkis frontis!*”

At the same moment, a green spark escaped from the ring and singed one of the bird’s wings. Losing feathers, Lifeless Griffin collapsed onto the asphalt like a rock, crowed something hoarsely and, taking off again, threw itself behind the nearest house.

The mysterious person blew on the glowing ring.

“I hate these living corpses. They cannot be killed a second time. Indeed better to deal simply with evil spirits,” she muttered.

Meanwhile, in the hatch, something came down with a terrible crash. Water splashed.

“A-a-choo!” it was heard from the hatch so deafeningly that the cover even jumped up.

Having forgotten about the bird, the repair person – if, of course, this was a repair person – leaned anxiously over the hatch, “Professor, you will catch cold! I beg you, at least put on a scarf!”

“Medusa, don’t be ridiculous! A scarf won’t help divers!” a voice immediately responded.

But this did not calm the woman a bit.

“I swear by the Hair of The Ancient One, it’s really too much! Only imagine, the very academician of White magic, the head of the Tibidox School of Magic, Sardanapal Chernomorov is forced to remove the simplest spells of the evil spirits! Where, please permit me to ask, are our junior magicians, where are the assistants?” she asked, pressing her lips tightly.

The rumbling in the hatch stopped. To the surface rose a small rosy chubby person dressed in an orange overall, from which water was trickling down... No, please excuse me, not an overall but a robe. It could seem like an overall only to a not very keen observer and even then only at first glance. Precisely the same orange robe was also on his companion.

“A-a-choo! Medusa! All this, right, this nonsense, is not worthwhile to trouble anyone! A-a-choo! Without practice, in two years I would become a helpless office magician. Are there any among us lazy people who can even turn into a pig without the ring? To say nothing of the highest disciplines, such as theoretical magic, levitation, protection from hexes, or the production of talismans.”

Having cited this, in his opinion, deadly reason, the academician Sardanapal stood on tiptoes and cheerfully looked around. His right moustache was green and the left yellow. But the strangest thing was that the moustaches were never in a state of rest for a second. They either coiled like two live ropes, or were interlaced, or aimed to entwine the temples of the eyeglasses and pull them off from the chubby person’s nose. True, it was not so simple to do this, since the glasses were kept on clearly not so much by the temples, having come loose a long time ago, as by a special spell.

As far as the beard of the academician was concerned, its colour was generally not determined, since it first appeared then disappeared. For sure, it was possible to say only one thing – the beard was phenomenally long, so long that it was necessary to wind it repeatedly around the body and to hide the ends in a pocket.

Noticing finally that his robe was soaked, the head of the school of magic muttered, “*Firstus drumus!*”

Steam came off the clothing and a few minutes later, it was completely dry again.

“Ah, what a wonderful fall day!” Sardanapal exclaimed, turning to his companion. “It’s like that day they chopped off my head for the first time! Don’t you agree, Medusa?”

The instructor of studies of evil spirits, the associate professor Medusa Gorgonova, grimaced and ran her fingers along her neck.

“Ugh! It’s only possible to wait for dirty tricks from moronoids... They also chopped off my head. Unrestrained type in winged sandals, staring into his own shield. Then I was a badly brought up witch with nightmarish habits, and only you, Professor, would re-educate me,” she said.

The moustaches of Sardanapal trembled with pleasure.

“Do stop, how many times can one be thanked! A real trifle it was to stick on your head! For that, it wasn’t even necessary to resort to serious magic, a simple and plain spinning spell was quite sufficient. Well, and that you renounced your previous habits – honour and praise to you! My credit was... ahem... of the minimum... ahem...”

“How can you say so?!” Medusa exclaimed. “I changed travellers into sculptures! Anyone who looked at me instantly became stone!”

“Nonsense, don’t think of that! You were a very young girl, having complexes because of pimples, and here you bewitched those poor devils who saw you by chance. Frankly speaking, I understand you very well: these ancient Greeks poked their noses into everywhere. You even took yourself out of their sight further to the island, and they nevertheless gadded about close by, swinging their swords. All that was demanded of me was to cure you of pimples. And what a beauty you have become! Even Koshchei the Deathless constantly blushes when he comes flying into Tibidox on the skeleton of his faithful horse...”

“Bad old man! Forty kilograms of silver-plated bones, gold crock, amber teeth – and all this in armour from Paco Grabanne!” Medusa frowned.

“But you’ll not argue that he has fallen in love with you!”

Associate professor Gorgonova blushed embarrassingly. The red spots flaring up suddenly in different places on her cheeks resembled something like cherries.

“Sardanapal! I beg you!” she exclaimed reproachfully.

The moustaches of the academician of white magic trembled guiltily.

“Cursed malice! After I accidentally drank an infusion with harpy venom, in no way can I get rid of it. I’ve tried the liver of dragon, and half a glass of green spirit with a drop of basilisk bile in the morning and before bed – nothing helps!” he complained.

“Don’t apologize, I’m not offended. I simply don’t like it when they utter that name around me...” Medusa softened. “Better tell me this: did you really drag me here from Tibidox itself only to remove the spell of this utterly useless hatch, which pulls in keys and coins of passers-by? Only don’t be sly. We’ve already known each other for three thousand years...”

Sardanapal reproachfully looked at his companion and blew his nose into a gigantic star-covered hanky, which had suddenly appeared mysteriously in his hand. The stars on the hanky winked and formed themselves into whimsical constellations; moreover, the constellation Ara attempted with meteorites to get rid of the constellation Sagittarius.

“Medusa, you’re arguing like a sorceress. Put yourself in the place of a normal person. Keys aren’t trash. A person deprived of keys has a real chance of spending the night on a bench and catching a head cold... Like me, for example.”

“Your head cold is from your not putting on a scarf when we flew over the ocean... And the needs of moronoids disturb me very little. In their world, there are fully enchanted hatches, turnstiles gone hog wild, and cellars slamming shut by itself. Evil spirits don’t sit on their hands. We’ll hardly leave and they’ll again put a spell on this hatch. And we’ll not be able to do anything about it.”

Seeing that his companion was starting to get angry, Academician Sardanapal lightly blew on the hanky, and it melted in his palm, having changed into a dark-blue washcloth beforehand.

“Excuse me, Medusa. Recently I suspect that someone has also put a spell on my sense of humour. Not excluding that the Tadzhik genies put an evil eye on it, I forbade them to arrange dust storms... Mm... Did you see the man, who recently came out of the entrance?”

“I did. But how did you manage? I must say that you were underground!”

Sardanapal smiled mysteriously, “Oh, if I want to see something, a few metres of asphalt cannot hinder me. What do you think of him?”

“Extremely unpleasant character... Br-r... Even among moronoids you usually expect better.”

“Now, now, Medusa, don’t be so harsh. At least out of respect for the memory of Leopold Grotter.”

“**LEOPOLD GROTTOR?** He knew him?” Medusa exclaimed dumbfounded.

Sardanapal nodded.

“More than that. He’s his relative. And even sufficiently close – in all the nephew of his grandmother’s second cousin. Of course, for moronoids this type is related only through Adam, but you and I know the formula of magic-kinship of Astrocaucus the Paranoid!”

“He is a relative of Grotter! So this is why we...”

“Shh!” the academician suddenly brought a finger to his lips, ordering Medusa to keep quiet. Both his moustaches at once sprang up and pointed at the sewage hatch.

Nodding, Medusa noiselessly stole up to the hatch and, squatting down, abruptly pushed her hand through it. At the same second, a nasty screech was heard from the well.

“There it is! I got it! Hey, stop!” the instructor of studies of evil spirits shouted.

When the hand of Medusa again showed itself on the surface, her fingers firmly clutched the ear of a little lady with a bumpy violet nose and green hair. The feet of the hissing lady were very curious – flat and rather resembling flippers. The prisoner hissed, spat, clicked her triangular teeth, and attempted to kick Gorgonova first with the right flipper, then with the left, and then with both alternately.

“*Killga for revenga! And tellgi someone to let gogi! Setgi upon bitingi! Fiegi on yougi! And fiegi on yougi!*” she screamed furiously.

“How do you like that – a *kikimora*! Curious little example, sufficiently large...” Chernomorov commented, examining with interest the game caught by Medusa.

“Again an evil spirit!” Medusa winced with disgust. “Now and then I begin to doubt that She-Who-Is-No-More actually disappeared. That someone sent Lifeless Griffin, and now here is this fright... Hey, don’t you twitch!”

“*A-a-a! She scarega! Scumgi let gogi! Gogi my own businessgi! You needgi ripgi megi pantgi! Fiegi on yougi!*” the *kikimora* squealed, not giving up the attempts to kick Medusa with her flippers. It was necessary for Medusa to hold her at a distance with an outstretched arm, which was not simple since the *kikimora* was sufficiently well fed.

“Stop wailing! Who sent you? Speak!” Medusa demanded severely.

“*No saygi nothingi! Stupidga witchga! Now peckgu you throughgu! Playgu in your coffingu!*” the *kikimora* squealed angrily, trying to accompany her words with aimed spittle.

Gorgonova gave the *kikimora* a quick glance with her penetrating eyes.

“Try!” she said threateningly.

“*You veryga need mega!*” the sly *kikimora* instantly changed her mind and mournfully started to whisper that she was an unlucky orphan and that everyone could insult her, an orphan.

“Aha, you insult yourself, orphan!” Sardanapal hummed and hawed. The academician pretended that he wanted to bring a finger to the mouth of the *kikimora*, and her sharp triangular teeth clicked right away, exactly like a trap. If Sardanapal did not jerk back his hand, he would have one finger less.

“She’ll not tell anything. I know this kind. And it’s clear that she didn’t roam here going about her own business. Maybe we’ll preserve her in alcohol for the museum so that no one would make

a slip of the tongue?” the instructor of studies of evil spirits proposed, energetically shaking the *kikimora* by the ear.

“A-a-a-a-a! Don’t wantga be in alcoholga! Will keepga quietga! Will be the quietest hushga!” the *kikimora* began to bawl shrilly.

“Not worth it, Medusa. It’s completely not necessary to put her in a jar. I’ll make it so that she’ll forget everything.” With a dexterity difficult to expect from a clumsy phlegmatic person with a round belly, Sardanapal seized the *kikimora* by a flipper and, blowing into her ear, uttered in an undertone, “*Scleroticus marasmoticus! Fillissimo moronissimo!*”

After this, he cold-bloodedly unclenched his fingers, dropping the spy onto the grass. For a while, the green lady crazily shook her head, clearly in great confusion. She looked at Sardanapal and Medusa dully and without curiosity. Making several staggering steps on the lawn, the *kikimora* gathered her senses slightly, snorted contemptuously and, having reached the hatch in a waddle, jumped in there like a toy soldier. From the hatch a small fountain of water splashed out, several bad words were heard, and everything quieted down.

“She swam away,” said Sardanapal, indicating the direction with his green moustache.

“All these evil spirits are terribly boring. It’s about time to put a spell on them so that they wouldn’t butt in on the moronoids. One day they’ll upset the balance of power and then it’ll be bad for us all.” Medusa anxiously clicked her tongue.

Sardanapal dismissed it lightly, “Nonsense, Medusa. You exaggerate, as always. The evil spirits are a confused force, sprung from chaos and partially preserved from the times of paganism. Yes, there are many evil spirits, dozens of times more than us magicians – white and black, but they were never in a state of agreement among themselves. How often I remember, the evil spirits were always defying bans, playing dirty tricks on the moronoids, and upsetting the balance. But as long as the Hair of The Ancient One is whole and the Gates are standing, our world is in danger from nothing. Even from the direction of the black magicians, whom we’ll in no way smoke out of Tibidox.”

“And what about She-Who-Is-No-More?”

“I agree, she was unique, who knew how to organize the evil spirits and to set them on us. Moreover, she almost managed to force us magicians to hand over our positions to her. If not for Leopold Grotter and his newborn daughter...”

“Not only Grotter. You never feared her, Professor! Even when she was in power!”

Sardanapal bashfully turned pink, “Oh, certainly! I’m always ready to utter in everybody’s hearing her true name – Plague-del-Cake! You see? Plague-del-Cake! And nothing terrible happens!”

The loud voice of the academician did not yet have time to stand still in the shifting labyrinth of high-rises when the glass of the terrace on the third floor spurted out splinters and a gleaming iron, whipping with the cord, flew out from there. Cutting the air with a whistle, it rushed along precisely to Sardanapal’s head. Picking up the hems of his robe, the academician quickly jumped aside and muttered something. In that same moment the iron turned into vapour.

“Did you see that? She-Who-Is-No-More wanted to kill you!” Medusa exclaimed fearfully.

“Nonsense. There is already no Auntie Plague... Simply one of the old spells snapping into action. She scattered thousands of them everywhere.” Sardanapal smiled and stepped on the escaped plug trying to coil around his leg with its cord.

Medusa flinched from loathing. In her thin hand by some mysterious means appeared a lorgnette, with which she examined parts of the destroyed iron.

“What an abomination! The next nasty invention of the moronoids... We’re leaving! There’s nothing more for us to do here.”

Chernomorov shook his head, “And here’s where you’re mistaken. The time has come to carry out the most unpleasant and difficult part of our mission. I started to talk about this but we were interrupted. We must... however painful this is for us... leave Tanya to the man whom you just saw.”

Medusa Gorgonova recoiled. Her copper-red hair, even without being tousled, rose suddenly on end and started to hiss. A casual person not knowing what Medusa was connected with long ago in her past would swear that he just saw a ball of entwined snakes.

“WHAT?! Did I hear right? You want to give the daughter of Leopold Grotter to this pitiful moronoid? The girl who, in some unknown manner, survived a struggle with She-Who-Is-No-More? The girl, after a meeting with whom She-Who-Is-No-More vanished?”

Detecting the angry notes in Medusa’s voice, the academician hurriedly turned away in order not to look her in the eyes by accident. To remove ancient magic is possible, but it has side effects.

“Medusa, we don’t have another way out,” he said softly. “We simply cannot act otherwise. I swear by the Hair of The Ancient One, I would sooner let my moustaches be shaved off and my beard be cut than to give the daughter of Grotter to this moronoid, but... we must, we are simply obligated to do this for the good of the entire Tibidox.”

“But why?” Medusa exclaimed. “Why?”

The greatest of the magicians sunk down to the pile of leaves and stretched out his legs, which were in faded old-fashioned stockings. The last time he was in the human world was during the time of Catherine II and now, trying to dress fashionably, he missed the minor details.

“I’ll describe to you how everything was that night. You remember three days ago when everything happened, a terrible thunderstorm broke out...”

“...clearly of magical origin. We don’t even know exactly who sent it,” added Medusa.

“Precisely. On that night through the window of the main tower of Tibidox, where, as you know, my alchemic laboratory is, a wet trembling little cupid in red suspenders flew directly to me...” reported Sardanapal.

His moustaches immediately formed into two hearts. They liked to slightly spite their host. Hiding a smile, the associate professor Gorgonova licked her lips.

“A cupid? To you? But indeed a cupid is amour, and amour...”

The moustaches rose up in offence. The right one even attempted to smack Medusa on the nose but could not reach her.

“I don’t need to explain who these cupids are,” Sardanapal pronounced dryly. “I’ll not confuse them with harpies or house spirits or members of the dragonball team of Tibidox. And it’ll be known to you, the purpose of his visit was far from romantic. In our dull century, they more often declare their love by telephone. The arrows of amour already break through to no one anymore – the skin has become painfully thick, now the wretched cupids have to be occupied with mail delivery. And shouldn’t they earn nectar and ambrosia for themselves somehow? So here, the little cupid squeezed his wet suspenders off and handed me a letter from Leopold Grotter.”

“The last letter of Grotter!” Medusa exclaimed. Her irony instantly evaporated. “But you never told anyone...”

The moustaches of Sardanapal swept with the speed of windshield wipers, showing that this was top secret.

“Certainly no one. And you’ll soon understand why. Only those I absolutely trust should know the truth. I sent the little cupid to warm up in a Russian bath – I confess, I’m even glad that the cyclopes built it in our basement (although sometimes the steam undoubtedly starts with a jerk), and I immediately began to read the letter. It was very laconic: Grotter informed that after many failures he had succeeded in finally obtaining the Talisman of Four Elements.”

Medusa’s pupils narrowed. She looked uneasily around the hatch, checking whether a curious bumpy face climbed out of it.

“Most likely I’ve lost my mind,” she muttered dizzily. “The Talisman of Four Elements, comprising the forces of fire, air, earth, and water! A Talisman giving enormous power to whoever wears it... Perhaps, the one who wields the Talisman could defy the very... She-Who...”

“Yes, Plague-del-Cake,” Sardanapal courageously specified, involuntarily glancing upward: whether an iron would yet whistle. “Grotter wrote: in order to get the Talisman, he used one hundred forty-seven different components, among which, as I assume, carnelian and mouse tears absolutely had to be present... Well, but the secret of all the rest he took with himself to the grave...”

“And his Talisman? You have it?” Medusa asked excitedly.

“The Talisman had vanished. It disappeared in the most improbable way. But you have not listened to the end... Hardly waiting for the end of the thunderstorm, I sat on the jet sofa and flew to Leopold Grotter.”

“You flew on the jet sofa?”

Chernomorov was embarrassed. Nevertheless, one can hardly say very.

“Yes, I understand what you want to say: someone among the students, especially from the “black,” could see and make a laughing stock of me. I’ll say: academician, laureate of the award of Magic Suspenders, head of the legendary Tibidox flying on a tattered sofa with plucked chicken wings... A sofa, from which copper springs stick out... It was already late, and no one saw me... And how? Would someone really look out the window, having heard nothing but a little rumble... Mm... I even almost ran into the stained-glass panel of the Hall of Two Elements, but if the glass also crumbled, then through the course of time... Nevertheless it was seven hundred years old...”

“A nightmare! And I thought that the stained-glass panel was fractured by lightning!” Medusa thought.

“At first I wanted to use a flying carpet, but to set out on a carpet in this dampness would be a waste: moth would damage it. Besides, the jet sofa is almost one-and-a-half times faster... Well, and I don’t speak of boot-runners at all. Since, as they were hexed, their accuracy of landing is almost twenty *versts*... Oh, of course, I could take a mop with propeller or a flying vacuum, but you know full well that they are uncomfortable. One’s back becomes numb during long flights on them, and the absence of baggage carrier interferes with taking even the smallest load with you.”

The instructor of studies of evil spirits sighed very quietly. For a long time, those in Tibidox were already used to Academician Sardanapal’s eccentricities. He could very well, mixing up the epochs, appear at work in a Roman toga or set someone’s ear wax on fire by mistake, after confusing it with a grey chemical. And what about that case with the guest from Bald Mountain, when the academician sent him on a three-month sleep, having accidentally read to him the hibernation spell for gophers instead of the salutatory speech? But whatever you may say, nevertheless he was the greatest magician since The Ancient One.

“Are you listening to me, Medusa? In my opinion you were distracted!” The academician reproachfully glanced at his companion, and she, worrying, understood too late that she forgot to protect her thoughts with a guard spell.

When you deal with a powerful magician, never overlook any small detail.

“So, I flew to Leopold,” continued Sardanapal. “The wind was favourable, so that I was on the road for no more than three hours. Before reaching the place, I detected a great number of evil spirits swarming around his house. They were behaving very strangely – muttering something, panting, walking in circles, and were generally somewhat dejected. Noticing me, the evil spirits dispersed in countable minutes. You know these essences: first many of them, then suddenly, at one go, none...”

“And no one even attempted an attack?” Medusa was astonished.

“Absolutely not. I did not believe my own eyes. Only Plague-del-Cake could assemble so many evil spirits in one place, and she would indeed not miss a chance to settle a score with me. Here’s the riddle – only very recently the evil spirits were ready to tear us into shreds, but now it’s as if we don’t exist for them... Busy with their own little squabbles.”

“And then you surmised that She-Who-Is-No-More vanished?”

“Well, I haven’t quite surmised yet, but I’m already pondering. I approached the house of Leopold, knocked – no sound in answer. Then I pushed the door, and it opened. It didn’t even open

but simply fell from a single touch. In the house everything was turned upside down. Internal walls had collapsed, handrails were charred, only chips left from the furniture. Likely someone endowed with immense magical power uttered a spell of total annihilation. I rushed into the laboratory. It suffered most of all. Even the granite boulder that served Leopold as a table for experiments crumbled into powder, I hardly touched it...” the voice of Sardanapal trembled. “Grotter and his wife Sophia... there was already no help for them. Even I could not help, although, as you know, Medusa, I slightly understand magic. But here’s a miracle – in the middle of the laboratory, on the floor dented by the spell, among the crumbled plaster lay a case for a double bass, and in it – a tiny little girl, their daughter... We knew the Grotters well, Medusa, they were people of skill, magicians of superior material. Magic and music were what they lived for. They didn’t even have a baby carriage for the child, managed entirely with a case for the double bass. Afraid that the girl was also dead, I leaned over the case, and – oh, a miracle! – she was sleeping serenely, and gripped in her palm was a silver scorpion of Plague-del-Cake...”

Medusa straightened abruptly. Her copper-red hair again hissed like snakes.

“How? That same scorpion-killer which She-Who-Is-No-More sent to sting her victims when she wanted to take pleasure in their tortures?”

“Yes. But it couldn’t injure the girl, although on the tip of her nose I noticed two red spots. Likely, the scorpion stung her directly on the birthmark. Even a light bite was usually sufficient to kill an adult magician... But she, this baby, simply crushed it. A year-old girl, not even awake, dealt with the silver scorpion.”

“However, it’s incredible that she survived. But if the scorpion got rid of its venom? Or was it used earlier?” Gorgonova asked with distrust.

“No, there was enough venom. And Plague-del-Cake didn’t keep old scorpions. But even if we forget about the scorpion, another thing remains: the spell of complete annihilation – this terrible white flash which burns out everything all around – also couldn’t harm Tanya. Indeed this form of magic is not among those directed selectively. It destroys everyone and everything that happened to be close by, with the exception of the one who cast it.”

Tears rolled down Medusa’s cheeks and fell onto the pile of maple leaves. The leaves began to smoke. The first unknown folk narrator calling female tears hot was likely acquainted with a sorceress.

“The unlucky Grotters! But what about the Talisman of Four Elements?” Medusa sobbed.

“I was never able to find it,” said Sardanapal. “It was not near Leopold nor his wife Sophia nor the child... It was nowhere in the house. Most likely, it was destroyed by the spell together with all the rest of Grotter’s inventions. True, at first I suspected that Plague-del-Cake took it, but, if this were so, we would already have known about it. No, it actually disappeared, and the strange behaviour of the evil spirits – a better confirmation of that. I don’t know what happened in the house of the Grotters, but this tiny little girl did what no single magician could... She stopped She-Who-Is-No-More...”

Only now detecting the burning leaves under her feet, Medusa uttered a short spell accompanied by a sign, which her magic ring traced directly in the air. The fire went out. For a little while, the sign traced by Medusa hung in the air, weakly wavering. Gorgonova angrily wiped it off with her palm.

“But why do you want to give the girl up to Durnev? Why send her to the moronoid world? Why can’t we bring her up in Tibidox?” she asked with vexation.

“Medusa, have you forgotten what place Tibidox is? You should indeed know, but there’s absolutely nothing for a child to do there. Only imagine to yourself, Tibidox – and suddenly a child?

“And if Eyeless Horror comes to the surface? Or, let us say, Dumpling Maker let go of his Coffin Lid, and it, like last time, lying in wait for students lingering on the dark stairs? And the cyclopes, getting violent each full moon? And Ripper, whom, by the way, you wrongfully dragged out of the scorching cave in the Earth’s core, where he was incarcerated.”

“He promised that he would drop all his habits and would be our porter. You yourself know that it’s complicated to rely on the cyclopes. These dimwits have heads like sieves,” Medusa said, justifying herself. “And later... well, you yourself know what happened later...”

“Precisely... The invisible Ripper walks along the corridors of Tibidox, howls, croaks, and does what suits him, and even we cannot catch him because he can be reflected only in the Mirror of Fate, but he doesn’t show his nose there!” Sardanapal shouted angrily. “And you want me to let the daughter of Grotter into Tibidox?”

“But I can cast guard spells! The most powerful guard spells, which neither Ripper nor Death nor Wooden Hag nor Eyeless Horror will trespass. And the empty Wheelchair and the flying Coffin Lid – they are indeed a trifle altogether. They are only capable of causing harm to a novice not knowing the rebuff spell...” Medusa said with contempt.

“And a newborn girl, in your opinion, is capable of uttering it?”

“No, she isn’t capable. But, Sardanapal, we can, after all, bathe her in the Deflecting Bath, and then...”

The academician of white magic interrupted her:

“Yes, I agree. We can. Coffin Lid – it’s nothing. Wheelchair – also nothing. Freezing Traps and Statue-Crushers also, perhaps, nonsense. But Nameless Cellar? And is the Vanishing Floor also a trifle? We, up to now, still don’t know what became of those two bums who managed to make their way there. And in conclusion, what will you say about the Sinister Gates?”

Medusa shuddered.

“You’re right, Sardanapal,” she said, crushed. “I forgot about Nameless Cellar and Sinister Gates... But she’s the daughter of Grotter! A girl who managed to survive a meeting with She-Who-Is-No-More and to endure...”

The academician interrupted her, “We don’t know how she managed it, but we know what this cost Leopold and Sophia. And to subject the girl to danger again... Besides this...” here Sardanapal made a long pause, “there is still one more reason... Extremely important, for which Tanya in no way can be found in Tibidox. In any case, she must not appear there for as long as possible...”

“What reason?!” Medusa exclaimed hotly. Sardanapal looked at her reproachfully.

“For the time being I cannot tell you, although I trust you more than anybody. It’s that same reason why Grotter didn’t remain to live in Tibidox, but took Sophia and the child away into such wilderness, where, besides swamp brownies, werewolves, and evil spirits, you’ll meet no one else. And it’s Grotter – with his capital education, excellent manners, and habit of making music daily. Understand, Medusa?”

The associate professor Gorgonova nodded despondently, realizing that the reason that drove Grotter into the wilderness and forced him to forsake Tibidox in the bloom of his career had to be very weighty.

“So, it’s decided... Tonight we’ll return here with the child and abandon her to Herman Durnev and his wife. The sight of a poor orphan cannot but touch their hearts... Let them bring her up together with their own daughter. Girls of the same age will be merrier together. We’re going, Medusa. It’s time! A-a-a-choo!” The academician suddenly sneezed so deafeningly that all the constellations were blown off his hanky at once, and the phone booth standing by the house tumbled with a crash to one side.

“I said you’d catch a cold!” Medusa said reproachfully.

“Nonsense!” Sardanapal was angry. “Stop keeping an eye on my health! He who had his head chopped off three times cannot be afraid of a common head cold... Choo!”

The academician of white magic wrapped himself tighter in his orange robe and, decisively treading on his beard, made his way past the houses to the small square. His restless moustaches were making a signal in time to the steps: one-two, one-two. Medusa picked her way after him.

Many passers-by filling the street in that hour and hurrying on their own affairs paid them very little attention. And what should even draw their curiosity when they only saw a shaggy mongrel and barely at a distance a thin elegant borzoi with a long snout? For the experienced magicians it constituted no difficulty to cook up a couple of deflecting spells.

Having taken about thirty steps, the academician Sardanapal awkwardly jumped up, clicked his knees in the air and, growling out a spell, dissolved in the air. Medusa in contrast to her teacher did not possess the ability of instantaneous disappearances from the human world. She reached the square and extracted from the bushes a kid's rocking horse painted with *Khokhloma* designs. Having checked that all twelve talismans, without which the rocking horse simply would not take off, were in place, she clambered up onto it with difficulty and, soaring up steeply, disappeared among the clouds.

It was curious that even on the ridiculous kiddie rocker the associate professor Gorgonova contrived to appear majestic and to look ahead like a hawk. Somewhere along the way she ran into Lifeless Griffin; the wretch would have to pay. However, it was already dead, so there was nothing for it to lose.

The sun started to yawn lazily and climbed up from the roof. The unusual day continued.

* * *

Herman Durnev had one hundred and seventeen bad moods. If it is possible to describe the first mood as slightly bad, then the last, the hundred-and-seventeenth, amounted to a good force-eight storm. The head of the firm Second-Hand Socks returned home that day precisely in this hundred-and-seventeenth bad mood. On the road it constantly seemed to him that other cars were moving too slowly, and he began to hit the horn continually with his palm.

At the same time it twice seemed to him that the sound of the horn was too quiet, and then, sticking his head out the window of the car, he roared, "Hey, what are you dragging? Move it, move! You want me to come out and beat you up? You want to give a sick person a stroke?"

Durnev, it goes without saying, considered himself the sick person.

The basic reason Herman Nikitich's mood was so abruptly spoilt was the sensation that some strange and mysterious forces were pursuing him and making fun of him. Everything began from that same morning when he just set off for work. Even along the way something started to rumble violently in the baggage carrier of the car, rumbling so that the car even jumped, but when he went out to look, it turned out there was nothing in there. When Durnev got back behind the wheel, he discovered that his own portrait from a magazine was stuck to the windshield of the automobile. Moreover, it appeared as if the wind dropped onto the glass a page soaked in a puddle...

The director was so anxious that when he ripped off his picture, his fingers were shaking and he accidentally tore part of his head, together with the ear, from the photograph. Seeing in this a bad omen for himself, Herman Nikitich immediately swallowed thirty Relief tablets and washed them down with a bottle of valerian tincture.

When he nevertheless got to the office, he discovered that the wastebasket in his office was turned upside down, and all the garbage from it was unceremoniously shaken out onto the carpet. And not simply shaken out but also steeped in something stinky. The furious Durnev immediately fired the cleaning woman, though she swore that she did not even drop into his office.

Having opened the safe in order to get the press, he beheld there a pale fungus on a thin leg, which, when Herman Nikitich stretched out his hand to it, spread on the papers a sticky slime that could not be wiped off. After this incident, Durnev collapsed into the armchair and sat in it for a long time, sweating and counting off small fractions with his teeth.

"Twenty five... twenty six... I'm not nervous at all... Why are you staring at me? Get back to work! Really, didn't I ask you to get for me the price on old toothbrushes?" he began to yell at an employee timidly looking in.

The unlucky employee slid into his own tiny little office, which smelled of moth-eaten sweaters and worn jeans, and, collapsing onto the chair, nearly died of fright.

No need to explain that toward the evening Durnev had had quite a drop too much.

“Pour me anything to drink... Now you’ll see, soon something bad will happen!” he groaned as soon as he found himself at home.

In contrast to the office literally choked up from floor to ceiling with cut-price junk and worn out things, everything was completely new in Durnev’s home.

Herman Nikitich’s wife – Ninel – was as fat as her husband was thin. When she slept, her wrinkled cheeks spread all over the pillow, and her body, covered with a blanket, resembled a snowy mountain from which it was possible to ski down.

“Ah, Hermanchik, you imagine all sorts of things! Don’t be so upset! You’re completely green like the fir on New Year! Let me kiss you on the cheek!” Ninel cooed with a juicy bass, reassuringly patting her husband on the frail back with a hand adorned with rings.

“Phew! Drop this tenderness!” Herman Nikitich growled. However, his bad mood dispersed a little, jumping from hundred-and-seventeenth to sixty-sixth, and later even to fiftieth.

After supper, Durnev cheered up so much that he had the desire to spend time with his year-old daughter Penelope, or Pipa as she was tenderly called by her parents, who inherited from mama the moving eyebrows and figure of a porter, and from papa eyes bunched together, protruding ears, and sparse whitish hair. Of course, the Durnevs doted on her and considered their Pipa the first beauty in the world.

The heiress of the Durnev family was sitting in the playpen and concentrating on breaking a doll. Three beheaded dolls were already scattered about on the floor, and their heads were mounted on parts of rattles decorating the playpen.

“What a smart little girl! She will be a director like her papa!” Durnev was touched.

He leaned over the playpen and made an attempt to kiss Pipa on the top of her head. The daughter grasped papa by the hair with her right hand, and with the plastic shovel clutched in her left hand she started to saw papa’s neck, clearly intending to do with him the same as she had done with the dolls.

“Darling! Wonderful child!” Papa panted.

He freed his hair with difficulty and, just in case, moved further away from the playpen where he could not be reached or spat on. Pipa forcefully threw the shovel after him, but it only fell into the vase on the TV, and immediately, with the greatest readiness, scattered splinters.

“Oh, what a strong girlie we have! What good aim!” Ninel squealed enthusiastically.

“Careful... She’s taking off her boots!” Durnev warned, covering his head with his hands, just in case, to dodge these sufficiently heavy projectiles.

At this moment, there was suddenly a ringing in the apartment. The bell, usually squeaking spitefully, now issued a loud, almost triumphant trill. Durnev and his spouse shuddered at once.

“Are you expecting someone, mousie?” Ninel asked.

“No, no one. You?”

“Me neither...” Ninel answered and, following Herman, made her way to the door.

Pipa threw her boots after them, but the laces got tied up around her hand, and the boots, recoiling, struck her on the nose. Pipa began to wail like a steamer siren.

Meanwhile, Herman looked into the peephole. No one was visible, although the bell, not stopping for a second, continued to demand persistently that they open the door.

“Hey, who’s there? I warn you: I don’t like these jokes!” Durnev bellowed and, armed with a hammer, looked onto the landing. Suddenly his face became like that of an old lady who, by mistake, instead of a poodle stroked a crocodile from the Nile.

In front of the door, barely finding room in the narrow landing, lay an enormous case for a double bass. The case was exceptionally old, trimmed on the outside with very thick rough leather,

something simultaneously resembling scales. If Herman Nikitich were a little more learned or had the habit, for example, of leafing through books, he would easily understand that artists always depict such things as dragon skin. Furthermore, to the bulging handle of the double bass case was riveted a small copper tag; half-obliterated letters on it read:

...ilver ...truments wizard Theo...: drums, ...ble basses etc.

But Durnev had not the least desire to examine either the case or especially the tag on it. He only saw that a large and extremely suspicious object was tossed up to him on the threshold and the one who tossed it up most likely was running away now.

Shedding his sneakers, Herman Nikitich clumsily jumped over the case and, darting out to the stairs, began to yell into the resonant void:

“Hey you there! Hey! Take away your suspicious thingamajig, or I’ll call the police! No good throwing me a bomb!”

No one answered his cry. Only for a moment, it seemed to Durnev, pushing his head through between the rails, that a shadow flickered several floors below. Then the external door slammed and everything was quiet. The director of the firm Second-Hand Socks considered that the old foxes, having tossed the mysterious thingamajig up to him, had run out.

Screaming out yet a couple more threats, Herman Nikitich dragged his feet back. The case was in its previous place. Walking a few steps toward it, Durnev squatted down and propped up his head with his palms.

“Ninel, Ninel, come here – see what was tossed up to us!” he called mournfully.

From the apartment the fat-cheeked head of his spouse looked around. Ninel clutched a T-Fal frying pan in her hand, grabbed for the same purpose as her husband arming himself with a hammer.

“Look, a case!” she was astonished.

“Don’t take it into your head to touch it! For sure it’s a bomb!” Herman Nikitich yelled.

At that moment, a strange sound came from the case. The Durnevs decided that it was the ticking of a clock mechanism.

“Now it’ll go off with a jerk! Down!” the head of the firm Second-Hand Socks started to shout and quickly began to crawl away. His spouse flopped onto the linoleum, covering her head with the T-Fal frying pan.

But the expected explosion did not follow. Instead, the weeping of a demanding child was heard from the case. Exchanging dumbfounded glances, Durnev and his spouse crawled up to the case. The old lock clicked, the cover was thrown back...

“Ah-ha! Do you see? It’s a child!” Ninel exclaimed, her forehead bumping into her husband.

“A bomb would be better!” Herman Nikitich groaned.

In the case, on a carefully stretched out red blanket, lay a little girl with curly hair. On the tip of her nose was a small buckwheat grain, the birthmark. The baby just woke up and now she was crying loudly from hunger, energetically drumming on the double bass case with her hands and feet. Ninel winced with disgust, “No, I’ll not take her into our home! What if she has some infection? Even infectious for sure! Look at this suspicious spot on the nose! And I’ll be shaking with loathing if she turns up in the same bed with Pipa. But we also can’t abandon her here. The neighbours will gather...”

“Oh, it goes without saying, we won’t abandon her! We’re humane people! We’ll turn the girl in to the orphanage! There she’ll learn to paint fences, sweep the streets, and a hundred other remarkable professions!” Durnev said cheerfully.

Having gathered the sneakers scattered on the landing, he already started to drag his feet to the telephone when suddenly his wife exclaimed, “Look, mousie, here’s a letter! Here it is, attached to the child’s wrist! And don’t you swing your hands, little frog, all the same I’ll take it away!”

Leaning down, Ninel freed the envelope with disgust. In it was inserted a photograph, after glancing at which Herman Nikitich was covered with beads of sweat. In the photograph were two

boys – one whitish, emaciated, with a sour and evil face, and the other pensive and sad, with a large nose and red ringlets of hair.

“Oh, no!” Durnev groaned. “It’s Lenchik Grotter, my grandmother’s second cousin’s nephew. Here, look: I’m trying to whack him on the forehead with a truck, and he’s staring into his own devil’s telescope! It was not without reason that today presented itself as such a bad day. Is this little girl really his daughter? If so, we’ll have to take her in or my political career will come to an end. You know, Ninel, I want to be a candidate for deputy...”

Hearing that the girl would remain with them, his wife swelled up with anger so that she was hardly accommodated on the landing.

“You NEVER told me about LENCHIK GROTTTER!” she yelled angrily.

Durnev started to cough in embarrassment.

“Well, he’s not Lenchik at all but Leopold... My grandmother called him Lenchik... Oh, that one was a real rogue, not grandmother of course, but this Grotter! We fiercely hated each other in childhood. Fought every time we met. More precisely, it’s I who beat him up, and he stayed more in the corners or turned the pages of his idiotic books. He was eternally busy with some nonsense: either puttering around with hedgehogs or learning to talk in cat’s language, and they held him up to me as an example! And what do you think? At ten, he drove his first motorcycle, and at twelve, robbed a bank! Here, trust a goody-goody after this!”

“A twelve-year-old boy robbed the bank?” his spouse could not believe her ears.

“Without efforts. He carried this out with the help of a computer, not even leaving the house, but they traced him. When the police arrived, he simply disappeared. Everyone thought that he was in the room, forced open the door, but no one was there. They searched for him, but also didn’t find him. Even thought that he had perished. I of all people was most pleased, because you know where this idiot transferred all the stolen money? To a fund for helping stray dogs!!! Not to me, his second cousin, but to some mongrels...”

Durnev flushed with indignation. It seemed that steam just about came out of his nostrils and ears.

“Well, okay, he disappeared and vanished,” he continued, calming down somewhat. “And now listen further. Fifteen years passed, and I received from this character a New Year postcard with an idiotic stamp depicting a winged monster. I read it, flung it onto a chair, and it immediately got lost somewhere before I had time to look at the return address. And now here’s this baby! Interesting, but for what reason did Grotter abandon his own offspring to me?”

“Look, there’s even a newspaper clipping!” Ninel exclaimed, guessing again to glance into the envelope.

TRAGEDY IN THE MOUNTAINS

A year does not pass that avalanches would not take away new lives.

This time their victims were the archaeologists Sophia and Leopold Grotter, exploring the tombs of prehistoric animals in the Tien Shan Mountains. An enormous snow avalanche literally headed right for their tent, which they had the imprudence to pitch on the dangerous part of the slope. The bodies of the courageous archaeologists were never discovered. Sophia and Leopold left a daughter, Tatiana, whom now, apparently, will be handed over to relatives.

It is known that not long before the tragedy the Grotters succeeded in finding the excellently preserved remains of a sabre-tooth tiger.

“Unlucky tiger! Found to be connected with them! Had no luck even after death!” Durnev exclaimed with feeling.

It was the only regret that Herman Nikitich expressed, learning about the demise of his second cousin. The girl lying in the double bass case piped down while they were reading the note, but afterward began to cry twice as loudly.

“You see how she spills as if she understands something!” Durnev hesitated. “I bet when she grows up they’ll put her in prison! Only for the sake of admiring this spectacle, we’ll register ourselves officially as her guardians! Feed her, Ninel! There’s an expired *kefir* left in the refrigerator. It’s just the same as throwing it out.”

So Herman Durnev and his wife Ninel became Uncle Herman and Aunt Ninel. Under these pompous names, they, in their time, went into the reference publication *A Thousand of the Most Unpleasant Moronoids*.

Chapter 2

The Gold Sword

Tanya Grotter awoke at dawn from the cold. There was ice on her thin blanket, and the same icy crust, only slightly thinner, stiffened on the pillow. For a while, Tanya was still lying, hoping to hide under the damp blanket, but it was useless – it became even colder and more disgusting. Then Tanya threw off the blanket and hurriedly leaped up, dreaming of diving quickly into the apartment, into warmth.

She pulled the door once, twice, a third time, but it did not yield. Getting up on tiptoes, Tanya discovered that the lower latch was pushed shut. Pipa was up to her old tricks again. The last time she locked Tanya on the sunroom-balcony in the beginning of spring, Tanya caught a cold and spent a month and a half in the hospital with pneumonia. However, the time in the hospital was indeed not so bad, though they gave her a needle daily and even put her on an IV. There, in any case, she was in a warm place and no one nagged her thirty times a day. And now here again...

Tanya started to knock on the glass, but the Durneys were sleeping soundly in the next room. Only a barrel of gunpowder exploding in the kitchen could wake them. As far as Pipa was concerned, although her bed was right next to it, she only giggled and made disgusting faces at Tanya. However, no faces, even the most disgusting, were as repulsive as her own horse face (inheritance from papa Herman) with round fish eyes (gift from mama Ninel) blinking on it.

“Hey you, fright, open now!” Tanya shouted to Pipa.

“Dream on! Sit there and freeze. All the same some day they’ll put you in prison, just like your daddy... And it’s disgusting to me: I don’t want you wandering around the apartment. You will steal anything,” snorted Pipa.

She reached from the drawer of the table a photograph in a frame and, flopping back down onto the bed, began to study it. Tanya did not know who was in this photograph because Pipa always locked it and never even casually turned the frame around. For sure Tanya knew only that Pipa was in love to distraction with whoever was in this photograph, moreover she was so in love that she stared at him no less than an hour a day.

“Come on, come! Show him your pimples!” Tanya shouted to her.

Pipa started to breathe heavily and furiously.

“Come on, come on! Only make sure you don’t stop breathing!” shivering from cold, Tanya again shouted.

Having given this advice, she fumbled around the balcony with her eyes, estimating whether there was anything to hurl at Pipa. And if there was nothing to throw, then perhaps at least a suitable rope in order, after making a loop, to lower it from the window and hook the latch.

The Durneys never told Tanya the truth about her parents. It gave them pleasure to incite the girl with stories about her papa being in prison, and her mama, begging at a station, dead. Uncle Herman and Aunt Ninel allegedly took in the same Tanya from pity. “And it’s clear that we made a mistake! You turned out to be as big a rascal as your daddy was!” Uncle Herman added obligingly.

And it was a blatant lie – Tanya was not a rascal, although she knew how to stand up for herself. Small, quick, smart, with tiny curls, she managed to be everywhere at once. Her sharp tongue cut like a razor.

“You have to be on your guard with this one!” Ninel sometimes declared, being the kind who could easily bite off someone’s hand to the elbow and still say that it is not tasty. In reality, Tanya was completely harmless, simply with the Durneys humiliating her every second, there was no other way to survive.

From the middle of spring to the middle of fall, the Durnevs forced Tanya to sleep on the glazed sunroom-balcony, and only when it became quite cold would she be allowed to lie down in the furthest and darkest room of the Durnev apartment. In that room were normally the vacuum, a stepladder, and a malicious dachshund by the name of One-And-A-Half Kilometres. This old bowlegged sausage hated the girl as much as the Durnevs did, and, fawning before its masters, was eternally hanging at her heels.

Ten years had gone by from that day when Herman and his spouse discovered the double bass case on their landing. It was again fall, but no longer bright and cheerful as then, but gloomy and rainy. There was night frost, and in the mornings icicles hung on the glazed balcony. Exactly the same ice was formed on both the girl's thin mattress and her blanket. Possibly, the Durnevs would allow Tanya again to lie down in the room if it was not being redecorated recently.

"Just imagining this slovenly creature lying on the new bed and touching our new wallpaper with her fingers simply fills me with annoyance," Aunt Ninel declared.

"Yes, pity that we threw out the old sofa... But, she'll probably be able to sleep on the floor, on her mattress," Uncle Herman said generously when he happened to be in a good mood. However, this occurred extremely rarely, because he had only one good mood and, as is known, one hundred and seventeen bad ones... That Uncle Herman had become deputy several years ago and even headed the committee "Loving Aid to Children and Invalids" changed him very little. He, perhaps, became even nastier. Moreover, here were new elections at hand! Uncle Herman was walking around all the time gloomy and anxious and, only when going out onto the street, would he with loathing, like pulling on old and not very clean socks, stretch on himself a smile. From constant preoccupation, he was more wizened. Even stray dogs tucked in their tails and wailed mournfully when Uncle Herman passed by.

And having failed to find anything on the balcony that would allow her to reach up to the latch, Tanya became slightly melancholy. She did not intend to beg Pipa to open it in order not to give her additional pleasure.

"Well, no matter, *chuchundra*! You'll again discover five redundant mistakes in your next homework assignments!" she thought vindictively.

Tanya wrapped herself in the blanket, pressed her forehead against the glass, and began to look at the courtyard. Below, cars, small like beetles, were parked. The roofs of the garage-cockleshell glistened like silver. The sleepy yard-keeper, to spite everyone still sleeping, was rattling the cover of the waste bin.

"If only I could fly! I would open the window, spread my arms, and fly far, far away from here, hundreds, thousands of kilometres, to where my papa is! And if I would have wings, well, like that sheet, for example..." Tanya thought sadly.

Under her eyes the big red sheet, trembling on a broken branch of the maple, unexpectedly tore away, soared up the entire three floors, and was pasted to the glass directly opposite her face. While the girl was pondering how it could happen that the sheet flew up instead of down, the latch loudly clanged like the lock of a rifle.

Turning around, Tanya saw Aunt Ninel in a nightgown. Wiping her eyes, Aunt looked at her with disgust. In the past ten years, she had grown three times as stout and could now travel only in the service elevator. In order that she could squeeze into the kitchen, it was necessary to enlarge the door.

"Why are you hanging around here?" Aunt Ninel asked with suspicion.

"And why not? Your Pipa locked me in," Tanya was bewildered. With the Durnevs she eternally felt guilty. Probably, they were aiming at this, day after day, year after year, poisoning her existence.

"Don't you dare lie, thankless trash!" Aunt Ninel snapped, as if she did not just open the latch. "What's this with 'your Pipa'? And this after the cousin gave you her beloved pencil case as a birthday present?"

Tanya wanted to say that the pencil case was old, and all the pens either smeared or did not write at all, but she decided that it would be better to keep quiet. Especially as Pipa purposely cut the pencil case up with a blade the next day.

“Why do you keep quiet? You think it’s pleasant for me to talk with you? March into the kitchen to sort out the buckwheat! You love to eat – love also to prepare!” Aunt was angry.

Slipping past her, Tanya went to the Durnev’s kitchen with gleaming tiles glazed sky-blue and, having poured buckwheat out onto the table, began to sift the dark grains. To tell the truth, the buckwheat was sufficiently clean, but Uncle Herman and Aunt Ninel were crazy about ecologically clean food, extra-pure water, and other similar whims. Of filters alone, they had a whole seven pieces in the kitchen.

True, the Durnevs nevertheless forced Tanya to drink from under the faucet in order not to pay for filter cartridges for her. However, Tanya also returned the favour, periodically pouring water from the toilet tank into the teapot for them.

Unwillingly sorting the buckwheat, the girl occasionally raised her head and looked sideways at her reflection in the large nickel-plated extension above the stove. The extension was new like the kitchen, and everything was reflected in it as in a mirror, only not flat but convex.

Either the extension flattered or Tanya actually looked considerably better than Pipa. Well-built, mischievous, sharp-eyed... Here only the small birthmark on the tip of the nose gave her either a mysterious or devil-may-care look.

How many long minutes, especially in first and second grade when they teased her terribly and hurt her feelings because of this birthmark, the girl examined it in the mirror! And the longer she examined it, the more often it came to her head that she never saw similar birthmarks on anyone. Her birthmark sometimes changed colour, becoming either pink and imperceptible or almost black. It could decrease and increase in size. Every time that Tanya got sick or not long before some big trouble the birthmark began to pulsate and would even be very hot as if it were being seared with a hot nail. And finally, right beside the birthmark it was possible to make out a scar consisting of two tiny dots. And are these not bites perhaps, and if so, from what? Maybe even the birthmark itself sprung from a bite?

Aunt Ninel looked into the kitchen. Her unwieldy hulk hung above the girl like a reinforced concrete plate.

“Why are you dawdling? Have you sorted out the buckwheat? Cook for us from this pile, and you can prepare for yourself something from these little black dots. And don’t be embarrassed. If you need bread, take the leftover from guests. The mould on it can be cut off easily.”

For breakfast, besides *kasha*, the Durnevs ate red caviar and sandwiches with sturgeon. Tanya despondently sat on a stool next to the dog dish and chewed dry bread almost like rock. Moreover, when she started to move, the dachshund One-And-A-Half Kilometres growled and hung onto her sneakers with its teeth.

“Don’t you dare tease the dog!” Aunt Ninel screamed, and a contented Pipa unnoticeably stirred with her feet under the table, trying to anger the dachshund still more.

Unexpectedly from the frail chest of Uncle Herman, stirring the tea with a spoon, a heart-rending sigh was forced out.

“Please, don’t shout! My head aches terribly. I had an awful dream,” he asked pleadingly.

He had hardly uttered this when Aunt Ninel and Pipa instantly became quiet, and even One-And-A-Half Kilometres, this evil rheumatic pug stopped growling. The fact is that Uncle Herman NEVER IN HIS LIFE dreamt. In any case, in the past he did not talk about them.

“What did you see, *pampushka*?” Aunt Ninel sometimes called her husband *pampushka*, though it would be more correct to call him “skeletoshka.”

There and then, having altered “pampushka” into “skeletoshka” for herself, Tanya began to smile quietly and immediately looked around in fear. No, no one noticed, everyone was staring in amazement at the dreamer Uncle Herman.

Durnev looked fearfully sideways at the window.

“I dreamt of an old woman,” he said in a half whisper. “A terrible old woman who was sent to us in a cardboard box. An old woman with red eyes and disgusting slobbery jaw. She stretched out her arms... her arms were SEPARATE, not attached to the body... she gripped me by the neck with her bony fingers and demanded...”

“Mommy! What?” Pipa gave a squeak, dropping from her mouth the piece of sturgeon falling precisely onto the dachshund’s nose.

“She said: ‘Give me what she’s hiding!’”

“Give what?”

“Where am I to know that from? I don’t even know who this ‘she’ is!” Uncle Herman snapped. He wanted to add something else, but suddenly Pipa screamed deafeningly, “Eek! This fool nearly toppled the table! I’m scalded by tea!!!”

Both the older Durnevs at once turned and stared at Tanya. Pipa continued to squeal detestably, wailing that she must urgently be in the hospital and that she could not feel her legs. Tanya sat as in a fog, not understanding what happened and why everyone was looking at her. And then she suddenly perceived that she was squeezing the table-top with her hands. So this is why Pipa was squealing – she, Tanya, for some reason gripped the table and, abruptly pulling it, scalded her with tea!

Aunt Ninel turned around furiously. The stool under her – one of the new, recently purchased stools – cracked deafeningly.

“Don’t you infuriate me, I wouldn’t want to break it! Now march to get dressed and get to school!!” she yelled at Tanya.

The girl got up and, not understanding why her head was spinning, went into the room. She just now understood that everything happened at that moment when Uncle Herman mentioned the yellow old woman and her words, “Give me what she’s hiding!”

* * *

Tanya was sent off to school alone. Pipa was making use of the situation in order to dump everything on the burn and remained at home to watch TV.

“Mama! Papa! Because of this painful attack, I can’t go to the test! Now I’ll have precisely a three for this term! It’s thanks to her, this idiot! I get bad marks because of her!” she howled, although Tanya knew perfectly well that Pipa viewed tests as death in white slippers. Moreover the tea was indeed not quite so hot, and if the puffed up daughter of Uncle Herman and Aunt Ninel got burned, then only in her imagination.

But the most annoying thing was that both Uncle Herman and Aunt Ninel believed every word of their girlie.

“Oh, Pipa, well what can I do with this criminal? You know meanwhile we cannot send her to the orphanage, and they don’t take anyone into the colony until they are fourteen!” Aunt Ninel lamented, when Tanya, dressed in an absurd crimson-grey jacket, on which instead of buttons there was some eyesore – either rosettes or bulbs, stood in the corridor.

“Nonsense,” Tanya could not contain herself. “If she’ll have a three, then only because she has more twos than pimples in her diary. Have you ever seen a person who wrote ‘vegetable’ not only with a soft sign but also in two words?”

“Don’t you dare speak out! And how, in your opinion, is it written, without a soft sign perhaps? That’s it, I have no more strength! Either some dirty deadbeat made an appointment with me, pretending to be invalids only on the grounds that they have no arms and legs, or this little monster...”

I can't take anymore, I'm leaving..." Uncle Herman groaned and, pressing his temples with his hands, set off for the office.

Aunt Ninel moved up to Tanya, leaned toward her and, with hatred burning in her small eyes sunk into thick cheeks, started to hiss like a snake, "You'll pay for this! You'll pay! Now I'll definitely chuck your idiotic double bass case from the house!"

It seemed to Tanya that they precisely jabbed her with a red-hot knitting needle. Aunt Ninel knew how to find her weakest point. Indeed it would be better she called her a dimwit or a degenerate a hundred times – she was already used to this, but to throw out the case...

"Just try to touch it!" Tanya shouted. The old double bass case, lying in a cabinet on the glazed balcony, was the only thing in the house of the Durneys that utterly and completely belonged to her. It is complicated to say why Uncle Herman and Aunt Ninel did not chuck it before now. And another strange thing – why they never told Tanya about how this case turned up in their apartment and who, crying from hunger, lay in it.

"Indeed I'll decide this, my dear! Have no doubt: today your case will be in the gutter! And now march to school!" Aunt Ninel snorted with satisfaction.

Pipa, looming behind mama's back, triumphantly stuck out her long tongue the colour of undercooked liver sausage. Multicoloured spots began to jump before Tanya's eyes. In order not to fall, she leaned against the lintel. The face of Aunt Ninel seemed to her sculpted from fat.

"If... if you throw it out, I'll leave home! I'll live where it's convenient, at the station, in the woods! You hear? You hear?" she yelled.

Aunt Ninel was lost for an instant. She did not suspect that Tanya could fly into such a rage. Usually the girl suffered everything silently. Moreover, it came to the mind of Uncle Herman's wife that if the girl would live at the station, the reporters would sniff this out and it would prevent further advancement of her spouse as deputy of the committee "Loving Aid to Children and Invalids." And if one considers the elections in two months, a scandal is especially not needed.

"I'm very frightened... And you'll live in the gutter if nothing else! Nevertheless, I'll chuck the case, if not today, then tomorrow. There's no need for such a fright to be in our apartment," Aunt Ninel barked already not so furiously, more simply not to surrender immediately her position, and, turning heavily on her thick heels, made her way to the kitchen.

Tanya picked up her bag with textbooks – a nightmarishly tight bag on which was depicted a goggle-eyed doll and which more suited first grade, and went out onto the landing.

Waiting for the elevator, she heard how Pipa was squealing hysterically and Aunt Ninel, making excuses, prattled to her, "Well what can I do? Now we definitely mustn't have a scandal. You know papa will have elections soon! He's so worried, so nervous, and here these petitioners still constantly drag themselves along to him on appointment! Indeed isn't it enough for them that yearly papa sacrifices two tons of expired canned food in favour of the poor, not counting old clothing? Well no matter, very soon we'll discard all the dirty rubbish of this beggar, you'll see!"

On the way and even afterwards, in the school itself, Tanya was constantly wondering whether she would see her case again. Aunt Ninel found an excellent way to spoil her entire day. And even a set of other days too.

* * *

Arriving at school, Tanya soon realized that Pipa was absent from the test for nothing. For nothing because they cancelled the test, and instead of it arranged an excursion to the Armoury, which should have been on the following Thursday.

After the first class, a terrible bustle broke out. A red bus with the sign "EXCURSION" drove into the schoolyard and began to signal. The class teacher Irina Vladimirovna was frantically swinging her arms – if these were not arms but wings, she would certainly take off – and shouting, "Children,

are you listening to me? The test has been cancelled! Everyone who has paid get into the bus! The rest go to help the cleaning woman wash the stairs from the first to the fifth floor!”

Tanya sighed, sensing that this applied to her. The Durnevs paid only for Pipa. They never paid anything for Tanya – neither gifts for New Year, nor theatres, nothing. Even for school breakfasts or tickets, Uncle Herman always handed out the money with the greatest reluctance, and that was only because if he refused, it would immediately attract someone’s attention. As far as pocket money was concerned, it was not even worth mentioning. The only money that Tanya held in her hands in her entire life was a five-rouble coin she somehow found in winter, frozen in a puddle. She was so bewildered that she did not know how to spend it. The coin lay in her pocket for a long time, but later Aunt Ninel found it and stated that Tanya stole it from Pipa. By the way, for each five they paid Pipa fifty roubles, and forty for a four. However, more often Pipa got by with thirty roubles.

While her classmates got into the bus, Tanya continued to stand beside in embarrassment, estimating, whether she would be made to carry a rag along the steps or it would be possible to at least ask to bring water. She had already turned around in order to leave, but Irina Vladimirovna overtook her and, anxiously bobbing on the spot – she generally behaved exactly like a hen, clucked, “Grotter! Tatiana! Why are you not on the bus? You need a special invitation?”

“I don’t particularly want to... I can’t stand these museums,” Tanya said, trying not to look at her.

Irina Vladimirovna again bounced.

“Untrue, Grotter! You simply know that they didn’t pay for you! But they paid for Penelope. All the same, money will be wasted. March into the bus and don’t make me nervous!”

Not believing in such luck, Tanya quickly got into the bus. Of course, in three years the Durnevs will reproach her that the unfortunate Pipa, scalded by boiling water, was lying almost in a coma and not taken to the Armoury because of her, and so they will find something to sting her. But for the time being it is possible to sit in the bus, look out the window at the houses floating past, and be glad. And later there will still be the excursion and the same long road back to the school. A whole day of happiness! And everything that will happen later, and all matters, is possible to discard simply from the head.

Tanya found for herself a pretty good place by the window, where next to her sat sullen and silent Genka Bulonov, from whom it was not worthwhile to wait for any dirty tricks, and nestled her forehead close to the glass. Swaying with difficulty, the bus left the schoolyard.

Grey damp houses gleamed. The signboards of stores began to sparkle. Trees dazzling with vividness spread like multicoloured card packs. Traffic lights winked. Dirty puddles scattered merry drops in the air. Passers-by looked around at the bus, and it seemed to Tanya that each was looking precisely at her and thinking, “It’s carrying her, here she’ll go to the Armoury, but I have all kinds of boring business!”

When they passed along their district, several times large advertising panels flashed. Uncle Herman looked pink and merry from the billboards. ***The best deputy — your deputy!*** The inscription under his photograph said.

Uncle Herman really looked quite good on the billboards.

Only Tanya alone, perhaps Pipa and Aunt Ninel as well, knew how many hours the photographer wasted with Uncle Herman and how much cotton wool he told him to put under his cheeks so that Uncle Herman would look a little less like a vampire.

But now even the physiognomy of “the best deputy” seen everywhere could not poison Tanya’s happiness. She is going to the museum! For the first time in her life, something pleasant has come her way! It is indeed as if they have muddled up something in the sky and the horn of abundance, always spilling on Pipa, has spilled on her by mistake.

"You... this..." someone's hoarse voice was heard beside her. Tanya turned around in wonder. Likely Bulonov uttered it, and she had completely forgotten about his existence. And that he generally knows how to talk.

"What's with you, Bouillon?"

"Nothing..." Bulonov growled and again was immersed in silence. He had such a contented look as if he already knew the future of ten days ahead.

"If nothing, then hold your tongue! Got carried away here!" Tanya snorted and, instantly forgetting her neighbour, was again occupied with what was happening beyond the window.

And something interesting was actually taking place there. Suddenly a large Russian borzoi insisted on accompanying the bus and for a long time was running next to it. Still it startled the girl why this nice dog went for a walk without its owner. It was also strange that this borzoi was tearing along not in the manner of a normal dog, with confused barking attempting to grab hold of a wheel with its teeth. It was speeding along intelligently, all this time without turning its watchful eyes away from Tanya. It was even possible to think that the borzoi was perturbed by something and was attempting to communicate something to her.

Suddenly Genka Bulonov yawned with such a dreadful click of his jaws that half the bus turned to him. Tanya was also distracted for an instant, and when she again looked out the window, the Russian borzoi had already disappeared. There, where the bus had recently pulled up to the traffic light, stood a skinny red-haired woman with the dishevelled red hair moving so threateningly, as if... no, certainly these were not snakes. The skinny woman, it seemed, without special interest looked sideways at the bus and, turning, walked away. Her strange long raincoat was bespattered by mud in the same places as the fur of the borzoi rushing along the puddles. Tanya even leaped up, but the bus was already moving. An instant, and in the glass again flickered only grey houses, telephone booths, and transparent bus stops.

Several minutes passed before Tanya finally discarded this story from her head.

Yes, today was definitely a special day, resembling very little the previous three thousand two hundred and eighty-five days past since that evening when a worn double bass case appeared on the landing of a multi-storey house on Rublev Road...

The children were arranged in pairs in front of the entrance into the Armoury. Doing a recount of everyone, Irina Vladimirovna almost fainted from the responsibility. The potbellied gym teacher Prikhodkin, sent on the excursion as a second escort, behaved in a more even-tempered way: counted no one and only blinked despondently. Likely, he would doze with great pleasure in the bus.

"We're visiting the museum in pairs! All exhibits we touch only with our eyes! With eyes, I said! Remember, everything is under surveillance! Just try to break a display case or stick chewing gum onto the tsar's throne!" Irina Vladimirovna squeaked threateningly.

Genka Bulonov immediately came to life. It was evident that the idea of using chewing gum attracted him by its novelty.

When her turn arrived to hand over her jacket to the cloakroom, Tanya, as always, sensed awkwardness. Under the jacket, she had a dreadful jean shirt with a frayed collar, which was befitting perhaps to be tossed thievishly into the garbage bin at three in the morning. Although the Durnevs were rich, they always dressed the girl very badly – in the most worn and dirty junk, which Uncle Herman's firm dealt in. And Aunt Ninel always picked such footwear, either too small for Tanya or big to such an extent that she had to shuffle with the soles on the floor so that her feet would not slip.

Not surprising then that, seeing Tanya in these rags, even Aunt Ninel, as dry and tactless as an African rhino, now and then experienced some kind of pang of conscience and began to tell all the teachers indiscriminately, "Yes, I agree, we don't dress her very well. However, she'll rip everything all the same! But what do you want from the daughter of a thief and an alcoholic? My husband and I accomplished unpardonable stupidity taking her in, and now we bear the cross."

The classmates, dressed much better, contemptuously looked askance at Grotter.

“Here’s an eyesore... She dressed herself up so that now they’ll give her a kopeck... Disgraces everyone!” they grimaced.

Tanya had not one friend among them, and if one even appeared temporarily, Pipa and all her toadies began to ridicule her right away. Therefore not one friend remained next to Tanya for a long time. A week would not pass when she would side with Tanya’s persecutors and gloatingly ridiculed her birthmark from the opposite corner of the class. And Tanya understood her perfectly: it was necessary to curry favours with Pipa, making amends for her friendship...

Accompanied by the small round-shouldered guide, who looked so decrepit as if he was much older than all local exhibits, they passed several halls. Tanya listened at first with interest, but gradually her interest disappeared because the guide was speaking approximately one and the same words, “Eh-eh-eh... Before you a signet ring, presented by Catherine II to Count Orlov... Selling this ring, it was possible to purchase 10,000 pea-sa-nts... And this is the diadem, presented to the tsarina by Prince Potemkin... It would be possible to acquire 15,000 pea-sa-nts with it.”

The guide uttered all these numbers so indulgently and ordinarily as if off-duty, he was only occupied with trading peasants, on the sly bartering them with exhibits from his museum.

They were already in the sixth or seventh hall when suddenly something compelled Tanya to stop. At the same time, it was as if something light and weightless stirred in her chest.

Under the convex armoured glass, a gold sword lay on a high pedestal illuminated by several high-power lights. Its wide blade serrated a little along the edges was covered with intricate characters. All around there were so many pleasing priceless weapons, but for some reason they did not stick in her mind, yet here was this sword... It was possible to think that once she already held it... Some delirium... Uncle Herman never even bought her a plastic sabre, but here a gold sword... And he would sooner eat his necktie than imagine such a thing to himself. Nevertheless, it stubbornly continued to seem to Tanya that this sword was known to her.

A little more and Tanya would find the answer, in her consciousness a tiny little gold spark already began to appear, but here someone carelessly removed it from the display case.

Beside it loomed the guide, automatically repeating like an old record some text cut into the memory.

“Before us a sword found in the tomb of a Scythian leader. You will focus your attention on the signs covering its blade. They are interesting in that they have no analogy to any written languages known to us... They defy deciphering, so that most likely it is simply a design with which the master decorated the sword during its casting.”

“And how many peasants can be bought with it?” Pavlik Yazvochkin, the chief wit of the class, interrupted.

The guide looked sideways first at the sword, and then at the wit. It seemed he was evaluating them with his eyes, precisely an old man and a loan shark.

“How many pea-sa-nts, I don’t know. But a couple thousand of such as you, it is indeed possible...” he said sadly. “Now let us move on to the next exhibit... You see the two-*pood* ring from the golden gates, which, according to the legend, fell down on the crown of Julius Caesar the minute he triumphantly entered Rome as the head of his legions...”

The entire class following the guide spilled over to the adjacent display case. Only Tanya remained near the sword. Involuntarily, not realizing what she was doing, the girl stretched out her hand in order to touch the sword. Of course, her fingers hit on the armoured glass. Immediately a bell began to jingle, and in only a second the huge supervisor, resembling a gorilla rented from the zoo and on which were stretched haphazardly a skirt and a tight wig, clutched Tanya by the sleeve.

“Didn’t they tell you: don’t touch anything! Here I’ll call security now... Where’s the teacher?” she yelled louder than the siren.

“Please don’t pay any attention! She’s with us, a character, a fool! Her papa is a convict,” Lena Mumrikova barged in, emaciated, a girl cast in unhealthy green, the chief among Pipa’s toadies.

“Shut up, green toad!” Tanya exclaimed, not recognizing her own voice.

She terribly wanted to attach Mumrikova’s nose to the glass so that the surveillance would snap to action once more, but it was not possible to do this because the supervisor continued to hold her tight.

Fortunately, instead of Irina Vladimirovna, who for sure would tell tales to the Durnevs, gym teacher Prikhodkin, falling over, approached them.

“You’re what? Her teacher?” the supervisor asked mistrustfully.

“Aha! It’s my teacher! Beloved, from the very first class,” Tanya immediately confirmed.

“And you keep quiet!” the supervisor bellowed. “I’m asking the man: are you the teacher?”

“Yes...” confirmed Prikhodkin.

“Eh-eh, if so...” the supervisor stupidly fixed her eyes on the stomach of the gym teacher. It was enormous, as if Prikhodkin swallowed a ball, and involuntarily inspired respect. “Then here’s what we’ll do: please hold this, your teenybopper, and don’t let go! Don’t dare let her touch anything!” she decided.

“I’m already taking her away.”

The huge fingers of Prikhodkin closed like a steel handcuff on the wrist of the girl. He dragged her like a kid after himself along the halls for a while, but then for some reason he needed his hand. He unclenched his fingers and released Tanya. She hurriedly ran off several steps and turned, checking whether he would remember about her. But the gym teacher only absent-mindedly fumbled with his fingers somewhere below as if vaguely recollecting that he was holding something, and began to stomp after the class.

Then he paused for a moment and – possibly, it only seemed to Tanya – in a friendly way winked at her. Tanya was grateful to this scattered-brained stout person. Furthermore, she recalled that in his classes Prikhodkin always treated her rather well and called her “Baby Grotter” as a joke: “If you would all run the hundred-metre like Baby Grotter!” Or: “Today we have the long jump. Baby Grotter will show us how it should be done...”

They passed more halls and, according to the internal placement of the museum having traced a semicircle, they again found themselves not far from the exit. Here the guide whispered something to the teacher, looked sourly at the children, and left.

“Attention! Everyone look at me! Now you can wander along the halls independently. We’re meeting here in ten minutes! And remember what I said: don’t touch anything, don’t grab, and don’t mark! Mumrikova, don’t you dare throw candy wrappers into the Chinese vase! It was not made for that five hundred years ago!” Irina Vladimirovna shouted.

The classmates wandered off in the Armoury, but the majority dashed into the gift shop to buy souvenirs and postcards. Tanya, willingly separating from the class, again set off for the hall where the sword was. After all, she wanted to look at it again, if the supervisor would not drive her away.

Unexpectedly, the birthmark on Tanya’s nose started to hurt, as if someone was scorching it with a match. Such a thing had never happened before. Grimacing, Tanya rushed to the nearest mirror in a heavy ancient frame. The birthmark seemed to her especially ugly at this moment, like a lump of buckwheat porridge sticking to the tip of her nose. How she hated it at this moment!

“Get off from my nose! I tell you – there!” she shouted to the birthmark.

Suddenly a terrible howl was heard, eardrums could burst from it. It seemed all the sirens in the Armoury simultaneously snapped into action. Lights began to blink. Running into the hall, Tanya saw that there was an enormous gap in the glass of the display case, the sword had disappeared, and the supervisor so like a gorilla was lying in a formless heap on the floor. At that moment when Tanya entered, the narrow little pane on the lattice window of the museum slammed shut. However, the hall, even without that, was full of noise.

Tanya froze fearfully. The stamping of many feet was already heard in the corridors. Remembering that they would find her here, the girl wanted to run out fast but she was too late. Into

the hall ran the guards, the guide, workers of the museum, Prikhodkin and Irina Vladimirovna, and a good half of the class.

Rushing to the broken display case, they froze wonder-struck. Others attempted to switch off the siren and bring the supervisor round.

“Stolen! What was in this case?” someone shouted.

“The gold sword!” the round-shouldered guide said with infinite despondency in his voice. “And what do you think: for forty years already I’ve been tormented by the premonition that this would happen one day. About seventeen years ago *I* even shared my considerations with the now deceased director.”

“It’s that same sword that Grotter touched! She was the very first here!” Lena Mumrikova began to bawl suddenly.

“It wasn’t me!” Tanya shouted, but almost no one was listening to her. And even if they did, they did not believe her.

A ring of people surrounded Tanya, staring at her. No one walked up close to her, as if she was a leper. At this moment, the supervisor opened her eyes slightly. On seeing Tanya, she groaned, “Again this girl!” and fainted again.

Tanya sensed that she was blushing, moreover she was not simply blushing but had become crimson, exactly like a tomato. She attempted to justify herself, but no one was listening to her.

“Excellent! I don’t believe my eyes! Grotter swiped the gold sword!” Genka Bulonov exclaimed, almost choking from such enthusiasm and sticking chewing gum on the throne.

“It wasn’t me!” Tanya shouted.

“Shut up! There was no one else in the hall! Search her!” Lena Mumrikova shouted.

Tanya, sweaty and bewildered, moved back, flying with her back against Irina Vladimirovna.

“Grotter! Tatiana! What horror! What disgrace! How could you?” she clucked.

“Really, will no one stand up for me?” Tanya thought with horror, but then as if through a fog she heard the voice of the gym teacher Prikhodkin, “I’ll not allow her to be searched! She was with me all the time! And how could she knock down this hippo?” he said in a bass voice, nodding at the supervisor lying on the floor, who again began to raise her head.

“Oh-oh-oh... The hippo himself... I’m dying...” she groaned and carefully, in order not to hurt the back of her head, fainted anew.

Squeezing through the crowd, a mean confident person approached Tanya.

“Lieutenant Colonel Chuchundrikov. Security service,” he introduced himself. “Come with me!”

Tanya dejectedly trudged right behind, sensing how behind her the amazed and simultaneously enraptured classmates were dragging themselves along like a split herd. How do you like that – a demure Grotter and suddenly she did such a thing!

They turned to the right, once again to the right, and descended the short stairs going down. The mean person brought Tanya to the high plastic arch.

“Go through the detector!” he ordered.

Tanya, shrugging her shoulders, took a step through the arch. She knew that she had nothing. An instant – and the detector literally began to shake from ringing. The eyebrows of the mean little fellow predatorily went up.

“Take out keys and all metallic objects,” he ordered.

Tanya fearfully took out keys and again took a step into the arch. The detector again began to shake.

“Well, that’s it, Grotter, the end for you! The sky in a cell, friends in stripes! You will run errands for someone for apple cores and toothpaste tubes!” Mumrikova shouted.

“Quiet!” Prikhodkin ordered her. “This machine is most likely defective... Here I’ll go through now... There, it’s quiet! What a skunk! Really she could... no, I don’t believe it!”

“So... now we’ll find out... Come here! Not to me! To this screen!” The mean person dragged Tanya to the low screen, and he went up to the monitor. The girl heard as he muttered, “Hm... as if there is no sword... There is nothing... But why then does it ring? Some stupidity... Well and she didn’t swallow the sword...”

“May I leave?” Tanya asked.

“Yes,” Lieutenant Colonel Chuchundrikov allowed. Picking up the handset of the internal telephone, he shouted into it, “Did they rewind the film? Well who’s there? The girl?” They answered him something.

“You’re sure? Absolutely?”

Continuing to hold the handset in his hand, the mean person looked darkly at Tanya, then at the teacher.

It seemed to Tanya that her heart fell from a high, very high altitude. And it broke into smithereens. Her back got soaked, her palm were covered with sweat. Lieutenant Colonel stubbornly kept quiet. The girl blinked and, already standing with tightly closed eyes, heard the words. “It means this. Your student here has nothing to do with it. You can take her away. At the moment of the theft the tracking camera did not lock in on her.”

Lena Mumrikova squealed from disappointment.

“Well, here you see! But what was on the film?” Prikhodkin exclaimed. The nose of the tiny Lieutenant Colonel hardly reached the button on his stomach.

“None of your business,” the Lieutenant Colonel answered.

“How is it not my business? She’s my student!” Prikhodkin was angry.

“I don’t have the right to reveal anything. The investigation isn’t finished. I’ll ask you to clear the museum!”

However, when they left the hall a minute later, it seemed to Tanya, slightly delayed because her legs felt like cotton wool, that he said to his assistant in an undertone, “Either you’ll explain to me what it was on the film or I won’t envy you. And I won’t envy myself.”

Chapter 3

The Mysterious Double Bass and Lisper the Rabbit

“You eat the noodles from the day before yesterday. They’re sticking together a little, but you can warm them up. Only don’t take it into your head to set fire to the apartment – it’ll happen with you,” Aunt Ninel said sullenly.

“Thankie!” Tanya blurted out mockingly. “Interesting, why doesn’t Pipa eat them? Afraid the noodles will wind around her teeth? Or crawl from her ears? It would be quite lovely with her hairdo.”

“Hold your tongue! Or you’ll be left without breakfast!” Aunt Ninel bellowed.

Considering that even day-before-yesterday noodles were better than nothing, Tanya grabbed a fork.

Three and half days had passed since the incident in the museum. The first day was altogether a nightmare, because, when Tanya returned home, they already knew everything there. It turned out that Irina Vladimirovna and Lenka Mumrikova phoned almost simultaneously and, chattering, each excitedly reported her own version. What these versions were, Tanya did not know exactly, but the Durnevs went completely berserk. Likely, they decided that she stole the sword, and even if she did not, then it did not happen without her participation.

“I said that you’d end up in prison!” Uncle Herman, stomping his feet, began to yell. Then he gripped his side and collapsed onto the chair. “My heart is breaking! When I found out about this, I ate nine instead of seven balls of homeopathic medicine!” he squealed. “If I die now, it’ll be on your conscience! What a stain on my deputy career!”

“Herman! The heart’s not there!” Aunt Ninel whispered.

Pipa poked her head into the kitchen.

“She specially plotted everything! She scalded me, and went on the excursion...” she squeaked.

For someone scalded to death by tea she was looking pretty good, except that she was covered with humongous pimples the size of half a fist. But it was due to her gorging on too many sweets...

“Shut your mouth!” not being able to control herself, Tanya shouted at Pipa. Her nerves were on edge, she had lived through too much today. It seemed to her that a fine string was stretched inside her and any minute now it would break.

“Why do you talk to your cousin like that? And you, Pipa, go! What else can you pick up from this criminal!” Aunt Ninel said, pursing her lips.

“Fleas! Let her roll to her daddy!” Pipa quickly added.

Tanya jumped. Suddenly the door of the refrigerator, next to which Pipa was standing, flung open and hit her nose, and it was so swift that she did not have time to avoid it. The daughter of Uncle Herman squealed and grabbed her nose, instantly swelling to the size of a large plum. Tanya stared at her own hands in amazement. How strange! She indeed only thought about this as the door instantly opened itself. Unbelievable!

Aunt Ninel and Uncle Herman stared fixedly at Tanya, but she was standing too far from the door to be accused of anything. Pipa, wailing unpleasantly, was rolling on the floor.

“My nose is broken! Call emergency! I need plastic surgery urgently!” she howled, panicking.

Aunt Ninel by force removed the palms with which the daughter blocked up her face, and looked at her nose.

“Calm down! The bones are intact, but here you definitely need lotion... And you, trash, march lively to your balcony and stay out of my sight!”

Tanya left for the balcony and there, on the wide windowsill, wrapping herself up in the blanket, began to solve math problems. Everything that took place today seemed to her absolutely unreal. For

this very reason, Tanya decided not to think about this now but to put off the thoughts for later, as late as possible.

After some time Pipa entered the room and, having stuck her tongue out at Tanya behind the glass, sat at her own desk. Tanya, with regret, discovered that the nose survived. It was covered with a bandage.

“My compliments! Plaster suits you very well. You became more attractive exactly with three pimples, which it hides!” Tanya said loudly.

Pipa pretended that she heard nothing. To pretend to be a deaf mute was quite her habit. Moreover, whatever you may say, she was in her room and Tanya out on the balcony!

Not paying Tanya any attention, Pipa took from her neck the lace with the key, opened the box and, reaching for the photograph, stared at it with melting eyes. Listening, Tanya distinguished the words the daughter of Uncle Herman muttered, “Oh! If you knew how hard it is for me to stand this fool! Pity that they cannot take her into a colony until she’s fourteen. Imagine how she managed to be original in the museum... She scalded me with boiling hot water, and herself...”

“Ha! Telling the portrait about me! It seems the hit from the door proved to be too strong for our brain even limping slightly without that,” Tanya thought and began to solve the examples.

In about five minutes, Pipa stopped talking as to a child and, pressing the portrait to her chest, loudly exclaimed, “Oh G.P.! Oh dear G.P.!”

Tanya even dropped the pen. This was the first occasion with her around that Pipa named the mysterious dandy depicted in the portrait. Who is this G.P.? There was definitely no one with such initials among her acquaintances and classmates. There was, true, Genka Bulonov, but he was G.B., not G.P. Moreover, to fall in love with Bulonov... Even such a thing could not be expected of Pipa. So, it was necessary to search for someone else.

“What does G.P. stand for? Goga Pupsikov? Gunya Pepets?” Tanya began to guess, but immediately recalled suddenly that she had more important matters than to think about this nonsense. What matters to her about some Grisha Ponchikov, with whom the best deputy’s muddle-headed daughter has fallen in love? Were there not enough strange events in recent days for which there is no explanation? Durnev’s dream... The refrigerator door... The sheet stuck to the glass... The Russian borzoi... The vanished gold sword...

The longer Tanya reflected on all this, the tighter the knot of questions. Well fine, the sheet was brought by the wind and stuck to the glass because it was wet. The refrigerator door could open itself, or, say, Uncle Herman brushed against it with his elbow when in terror he clutched at his heart, estimating whether to feign a heart attack. The borzoi... hm... the borzoi... Well, let us say, it was tagging along the bus because it was lost and Tanya looked like its mistress. Why think about the dog? Well, and how about the sword? Why did it disappear several minutes after the girl looked at it and what were the words of the security chief referring to: “Either you’ll explain to me what was on the film or I won’t envy you.”

What was captured on the film? Is it this disgusting monster that appeared to Uncle Herman in a dream? For some reason each time Tanya thought about the old woman, her head began to spin in a terrifying way.

* * *

Tanya returned from school earlier than usual on Thursday during the day. Senior students moving the new piano accidentally lowered it onto the foot of the fussing music teacher. They cancelled music and let the entire class go immediately after the third period.

Opening the door with the key, Tanya understood suddenly that she was completely alone.

Uncle Herman was in session in his committee, where the extremely important question was being discussed, about the delivery of all kinds of marked down downhill skis (Uncle Herman just

acquired a batch with plenty of them) to all pensioners older than a hundred. Aunt Ninel went out in the car to the supermarket, and Pipa together with Lenka Mumrikova and half a dozen of the other leeches set off for Russian Bistro. Tanya knew that Pipa, as usual, would start by buying everyone ice cream and crepes with chocolate, and for these the clingfishes would fawningly look her in the mouth and laugh at each of her jokes.

After that incident in the museum many classmates ceased to notice Tanya altogether or whispered behind her back, only Genka Bulonov alone continuously stared at her in all the classes, and during recesses constantly loomed before her eyes, emitting dreadful sounds – either yawns or sighs. It was likely that the poor fellow, how to call it, had fallen head over heels in love. In any case, Tanya thought so for the time being. Once when there was no one else near, Bulonov approached her from the side, coughed, and shyly hailed her, “Grotter!”

“What’s with you, Bouillon?”

Genka looked around timidly, and then mysteriously whispered in her ear, “Let’s rob a bank! I’ve dreamt about this for a long time!”

“What?” Not believing her own ears, Tanya stared at Bouillon. So here, it appears that this silent lump nurtured some kind of plan, he could not even throw a ball in gym such that, bouncing off anything, it would not deal a blow to his forehead.

Bouillon impatiently waited for an answer.

“We’ll rob, we’ll rob! The main thing, you don’t be nervous. Eat your soup well. Gather strength,” Tanya calmed him.

Genka swallowed nervously, continuing to devour her humbly with his eyes. He had the look of a hungry mongrel waiting for a slice of meat to be thrown to it.

“And what’s there for me to do?” he asked.

“Fall on deaf ears! Do you have a cap with slits for eyes?”

Bouillon shook his head.

“No cap?” Tanya pressed. “Too bad! And no pistol?”

“I-e-a-e... Not at present.”

“With what do you intend to rob the bank, a teapot? Go there quick, Bouillon. Now when you’ve acquired it – then come!”

Recalling now what a stupid face Bulonov had, Tanya smiled and quickly threw down her jacket. Who knows how long she will be alone, without the Durneys. Not a minute to lose if she wants to replenish her stock.

She took out of the refrigerator a couple of yogurts, sawed off with a knife a decent piece of sausage, and slipped an orange into her pocket. Interesting, will Aunt Ninel notice? Hardly. The refrigerator has so much produce in it that it is bursting at the seams, and today she will bring more in the car. Besides produce, Aunt Ninel for sure will purchase two dozen magazines on fitness and aerobics, and also any thick book like *How to drop forty kilograms in ten days*. As far back as Tanya remembered, Aunt Ninel dreamt her entire life about losing weight, but for some reason only Uncle Herman grew thin. Nothing helped Aunt Ninel, although twice a week she arranged for herself half-hour starvations.

One-And-A-Half Kilometres from under the table grumbled with hatred at Tanya. If it would be able to, it would certainly rat on her. Not able to control herself, the girl stomped it with her foot and shouted, “Ho-o!” The old pepper-shaker almost choked from indignation on its own bark, but growling, it went to the dish to lap up water.

“Drink and don’t gurgle, or that tail will fall off!” Tanya advised it.

Having destroyed in the kitchen all traces of her stay, she, chewing a piece of red fish on the way, left for Pipa’s room, from the floor to ceiling crammed with soft toys. Just lions alone Pipa had seven, not counting bears, cats, gnomes, and giraffes. The soft toys were given to her by Uncle Herman’s numerous business partners, who did not have enough imagination to present as gifts something more

worthwhile. If they only knew that Pipa kicked their toys with her feet, ran over them with a bicycle, and occasionally even gutted them with a penknife. It would seem with such an attitude she could give something to Tanya as presents, but that would never even enter Pipa's head.

Carefully stepping over the photo albums (fifty pimpled faces of Pipa in each) and the computer game disks scattered on the floor, Tanya picked her way to the balcony. She knew perfectly well that were she to move any disk a centimetre or to flip a page of one of Pipa's magazines, that one would go into terrible hysterics and, rolling on the floor, would yell that Tanya ransacked her things. And indeed Pipa had a practised eye – each evening she spent an hour measuring with a thread the distance from one toy to another or sticking secret hairsprings in the table drawers.

Tanya opened the door of the wooden cabinet on the balcony and took out the double bass case. The girl always liked this moment: the case slid out with a low creak, as if it grumbled good-naturedly, greeting her.

“Hello, old creak!” Tanya said to it.

It was very pleasant to touch – warm, leathery, rough. It was never cold even in winter and Tanya always warmed her hands against it. Earlier, when Pipa mortally insulted her, or Aunt Ninel, not thinking twice, gave her a box on the ear, Tanya would hide inside the case, lay curled up there, swallowing her tears. And the case protected her. Or only it seemed to her that it did. When Tanya was five, Aunt Ninel attempted to drag her out from the case in order to punish her for an accidentally broken cup. Unexpectedly the cover suddenly without rhyme or reason slammed shut and pinched her hand so that Aunt Ninel for two weeks had it in a sling. Yet she never decided to throw the case out, although she threatened to hundreds of times.

Tanya opened the small ancient lock and, lifting the cover, slipped her hand into the case. Her fingers usually glided behind the facing into that small and only hiding-place where she hid her diary – not the one for school, accessible to all the teachers and Uncle Herman, poking his nose everywhere, but the personal one to which she entrusted all secrets and sorrows.

Suddenly the girl yelled and jerked back her hand. Instead of the diary, her palm stumbled onto something sticky and slimy. Tanya, with difficulty, found in this filth her notebook, looking like as if someone chewed it up. The entire satin support for the double bass was damaged in exactly the same manner. Throwing open the other half of the cabinet, Tanya saw that her entire meagre possession appeared no better at all – slippery and slobbery, they were not hanging but literally flowing from the hangers.

Tanya's stomach tightened. Fearing that she would throw up, she slammed the cabinet shut. In the first instant, she decided that Pipa played this dirty trick on her, but even the pimpled daughter of Uncle Herman, with all her hatred for Tanya, would not begin to chew up her things. At the most, she would cut them with a razor, squeeze out half a tube of toothpaste into a pocket, or smear ketchup on the clothing. Her resourcefulness was on no account sufficient for anything more. Most likely, her pitiful brain would tie itself up in a wet knot.

“Who did this? Who?” Tanya groaned.

Her eyes pinched. A lump rose in her throat. It was her dear diary, to which she confided the deepest of her secrets, the only thing, not counting the double bass case, which belonged to her personally!

“If I find the one who did this, I'll hit him!” Tanya shouted in fury.

Suddenly someone in the cabinet started to snigger nastily. Here the sound was as if someone was scraping one sheet of sandpaper on another. The girl jerked her head up, and immediately an icky stinky lump of paper fell down onto her forehead, she vaguely guessed it to be the last pages of her diary.

“H-ho! She'll hit me, h-ho! Hit me, hit, h-ho! No one yet never hit Agukh!”

Onto Tanya's shoulder jumped a small gross creature with a fat body covered with stiff greasy hair. It had a tiny head with a wrinkled forehead, short curved legs with strong toes, a long, naked,

pinkish tail like a rat's, and long arms deprived of elbows bending in all directions. When the creature, sniggering abominably, threw open its enormous mouth full of small teeth, the lower part of its head remained on the spot, the upper part – with the nose, the forehead, up to the crown covered with mould – settled back as on a hinge. There were disgusting yellowish horns on the creature's crown: the right one growing straight, and the left, small and undeveloped, bent slightly forward and to the side.

Seizing Tanya's shoulder, it forcefully pushed itself away from her and, with its head shattering a window into smithereens, was thrown into Pipa's room. Leaving on the parquet slippery and dirty tracks, the creature scrambled onto the Durnevs' daughter's desk and in the blink of an eye drooled all over the entire mountain of magazines and textbooks, simultaneously biting off the heads of dolls in the expensive collection.

"It'll be ba-ad for you, ba-ad!" it hissed, insolently looking at Tanya with eyes discharging pus. "Better give me what you're hiding, or you'll di-e in terrible cramps! You'll become a dead Lifeless Griffin!"

"I don't understand what you want!"

"Don't want to give it? H-ho!" The vile mouth opened with a crack like a dry nut, biting the phone receiver. "Don't wa-nt to? Go figure!"

"Give what?" the girl shouted, almost crying from loathing and horror.

"You li-e that you don't kno-ow! You know everything, Grotter!" Agukh became furious.

Its thin hand stretched to the monitor of Pipa's computer on which she put all of her 300 game disks. The monitor was thin, liquid-crystal – a gift from Aunt Ninel to Pipa for managing to get a four in botany for the year. Pipa presented this as her greatest achievement, although in reality the botany teacher placed the marks by posing the question: starfish – is this a plant? Those who answered "no" got a "five" and everyone else – a "four."

"Don't! Don't touch the monitor!" Tanya shouted in horror, imagining what Pipa would do if it were broken.

"Afra-id? So there you go! H-ho! Let them hang or quarter you for this! They'll peel off the skin, cook you in red-hot lead!" the freak sniggered vilely.

Grabbing the monitor by the cord, it dragged it to the edge of the table and pushed it downward. Something inside the monitor exploded faintly.

"H-ho! Agukh punished you! So it will be with all Grotters! If you knew how Leopold implored the mistress not to kill you! Pitiful cow-ward!"

Immediately on hearing the name of her father, Tanya recoiled in amazement.

"Not true, my papa is alive!" she shouted.

"Cow-ward! Cow-ward! Cow-ward! He and his wife Sophia, stupid hen, all feared the mistress!"

A red veil of anger obscured Tanya's eyes. She could not endure when someone spoke thus about her parents – especially this vile, slippery creature with a rat-tail and puny horns.

"Well, get away from here, runt!" she shouted and, grabbing the pot of cactus from the windowsill, threw it with all her might at the disgusting creation. The pot got it right in the stomach, knocking it off the table, and in the next moment, the needles of the upset cactus stuck directly to its soft face.

Squealing hideously, the squirt threw himself under the bed and, leaning out from there, yelled angrily, "*Nightmares ravings ex!* I curse you! No one treated Agukh this way! You don't know what disaster you've brought on yourself! Remember: you don't gi-ve – you di-e! You'll di-e in ter-rible pain! Mistress said so!" Threatening Tanya with a fist, the horned object slipped into the corridor and disappeared.

Tanya got hold of a rag. The tracks left by the creature did not rub off, and with the attempt to clean them they only ate even deeper into the parquet and the polishing.

Imagining how the Durneys would behave when they returned, Tanya dejectedly lowered herself onto Pipa's bed. Pipa, it goes without saying, will kick up a fuss if she sees her here, and... and she will simply do it, with barely a glance into the room. There is nothing to lose.

Tanya's cheeks were burning. Who was that vile runt? What did he know about her parents, and he knew something – there is no doubt about it. To what mistress was he referring? What was he searching for in the empty apartment? Why did he nibble the diary? One thing could be said precisely – the freak appeared not of his own free will. Someone who was very definitely incited, someone thinking that Tanya could be hiding something in her case, sent him. Moreover, what he was searching for was a hundred times more valuable than the contents of Uncle Herman's safe, the antique porcelain of Aunt Ninel, and all the junk of Pipa, together.

Despite that everything was extremely dirty and nothing good to be expected, Tanya involuntarily smiled and knocked with a bent finger on her forehead.

“Beep-beep, roof, beep-beep!” she said.

What, have they all gone crazy? And who is she, after all, such that around her all this devilry is created? Does she really have any belongings besides what is hidden in the double bass case and some filthy rags?

True, this case is clearly very ancient, perhaps a little less ancient than the gold sword from the museum, which disappeared soon after she pressed against the glass with admiration, discerning the mysterious signs on the blade. Especially memorized by her was the seemingly imprint of a bird foot on wet sand. It still seemed to her that she saw something similar once before... And even not only saw it, but also... touched it.

Tanya hardly thought about this “touched” when in a flash before her eyes arose the small tarnished plate which she had always squeezed with two fingers – the thumb and the forefinger – and afterward pulled to herself. She remembered! It is the clasp of her case!

Tanya dashed to the balcony and, getting down on her knees, turned the double bass case onto the side toward her. Here are the deep folds of the warm leather, and here is the clasp with exactly the same symbol – three fine lines taking off upwards and one down.

And then – Tanya herself did not know what compelled her to act so, she carefully traced with the little finger all four lines and, placing the finger in the small hollow in the centre, turned it exactly a half-turn. She waited a minute, two... Nothing happened. The same dull fall day, the same roofs of neighbouring houses. Sensing terrible disappointment, Tanya made these movements again – only now, tracing the outlines of the bird track, she began from the centre claw... Again nothing... But what if we first touch lightly the hollow, and then move a finger lightly along all four lines of the track? No, it is useless.

With each minute, Tanya was seized by stronger despondency. Why did she decide that something unusual must take place? Well, a plate is a plate. Must imagine less and know her place. After all, it is time to think about what she will say to Uncle Herman and Aunt Ninel when they discover the chaos in the apartment.

“Ah you! I don't want you, and don't need you!” Tanya exclaimed and, with disappointment, slammed shut the cover of the case, smacking a nail on the lock.

She did not have time to sense the light pain in her nail and even hardly heard the sound of a smack as something elusive flashed by in the air. Most of all it resembled a gold vortex suddenly bursting into the open window of the balcony. Irrepressible and swift, the vortex playfully tore away all the papers from the place, overturned flower pots, tore up notebooks, and then, after descending directly to the centre of the case, assumed the form of an ancient double bass with four strings – gold, silver, copper, and iron. The case fitted the instrument so ideally that it left no doubts – this was *its* case.

Next to the double bass lay a small bow that was almost two times shorter than the instrument.

Tanya's heart was beating four times quicker. Not daring to touch the instrument, she stared at it wildly. Then, gathering her courage, Tanya carefully stretched out her hand in order to take the bow, but it, not waiting, jumped by itself into her palm. A small birch bark certificate was stuffed between the bow and its strings. Unrolling it, Tanya with difficulty deciphered the ancient letters with flourish:

The magic double bass of Theophilus Grotter

REMINDER TO USER

This magic double bass was created by the famous magician Theophilus Grotter in the middle of the XVII century and was used by him both for flights to the Bald Mountain and for fine magic. Deck boards from Noah's Ark are used as material, and inside the hollow of the neck is accommodated the Rope of the Seventeen Hanged Men, snapping every time it had to execute an innocent man.

The double bass makes it possible to accomplish practically all magic actions connected with transformation, telepathy, levitation, telekinesis, invocation, banishment of evil spirits, and removal of curses. However, its main function is high-speed flight.

WARNING

1. Do not sit on the double bass until you have mastered all of its magic functions and learned the flight incantations in the one hundred and twelve volumes of White Magic edited by Cain Frogman and Judah Toadstoolenko (published by Tower, Babylon, 7000 B.C.).

2. For repairs of the double bass on no account use spare parts from diving vacuums, mops with vertical takeoff, teeth-shattering helicopters, vanishing mortars, or juicer- vampires.

3. In the case of transportation of the double bass on a dragon, it is necessary to take all measures of fire-prevention: in particular, transport the instrument strictly in the fireproof case, protected by not less than a dozen fire-quenching spells. During the time of transportation, the said dragon should have on a flame-extinguishing muzzle.

4. Do not lose the bow! Without it, you will lose the ability to control the double bass.

5. Do not allow overstretching or breaking of strings — this can lead to unpredictable consequences.

6. We remind you that this double bass is an instrument of exceptional White magic! In the case of its use for purposes and needs of Black magic, the instrument can lose magic powers.

7. Do not fight with the double bass, do not hit evil spirits with the bow, avoid collisions with solid objects! Violation of the given rules can lead to cracks in the instrument and liberation of the powerful curse contained in the Rope of the Seventeen Hanged Men.

8. Maintain special caution during flights. Do not accelerate above the speed of sound! Do not rise to heights of more than ten thousand metres. This can lead to icing of the strings and fall of the instrument, as happened with the magician Lycurgus Behind-The-Navelenn and his flying guitar.

9. Leaving the double bass in suspicious places, especially in places of mass inhabiting of evil spirits (neglected cemeteries, swamps, forests hit by storms, deserts), do not forget to protect it with the antitheft spell.

These instructions are printed in the printing house of Koshchei the Immortal. Address: Bald Mountain, Drowned Man Avenue, Grave 7. To enter pull the tail of the dead cat.

Tanya dropped the birch bark. In her eyes brown and red spots were spinning in a mad waltz – leaves, pens, sarcastic faces of evil spirits. Afraid of falling, she gripped the cabinet with her hand, and it answered her with an unfriendly squeak. She was stupefied, frightened, enraptured all at the same time.

Now she was absolutely certain that somewhere nearby, separated from her only by a thin wall, existed another world – a world full of riddles and secrets, the world of magic. And she, Tanya Grotter, orphan, in some manner was connected intimately to this world. The strings of the magic double bass began to hum conciliatorily.

“Oh, mama! Someone from my ancestors was a magician who made this instrument! And I, then, also... No, it can't be,” thought Tanya.

She caught her breath, tears rolled down her cheeks. Swallowing them, Tanya stroked the resonant side of the double bass with a hand. She could hardly believe that it existed in reality, and was afraid that it would now take off and disappear just as the gifts dreamt by her on New Year's Eve always disappeared. The Durnevs never gave her anything, except that Uncle Herman once gave her half a kilo of rock toffee reeking of fish, and Pipa added an old broom from herself, which, however, she very soon got solidly on the nose. Well, and it was some screech then! They locked Tanya in the bathroom for the whole day with the light off.

But now it was not for Tanya to remember old insults.

There were really magicians among her ancestors! Indeed, until now, a day did not pass that the Durnevs would not call her the daughter of a criminal! It turns out it was all a lie to the last word! Tanya did not have time to take all this in when suddenly a frail voice squeaky with malice was heard beside her, "Ah-ha! Here's where you are, trash! And what does all this mean?!"

Tanya turned around in fright. For a moment, it seemed to her that she would now see that same short-legged dwarf who spoiled everything. But this turned out to be not the dwarf but something much worse...

* * *

By the doors, pale blue from fury, resembling a vampire recently out of a grave, stood Uncle Herman. Tanya missed the moment when he entered the room. If his voters would see Uncle Herman now, they would indeed not assume that this face distorted with malice belonged to the best deputy, the friend of children and invalids, the unselfish donor of old socks and expired canned food only just this year.

"Who arranged this pogrom? I ask!" Uncle Herman spoke hoarsely. "What happened in our apartment? I ask! Either you, vile girl, will describe everything, or I don't know what I don't ask... That is, what I'll do! I'll count to five..."

"I don't know. There was some sticky dwarf here... By the way, his name is Agukh, if you're interested," Tanya exclaimed fearfully. She had never seen Uncle Herman in this enraged state before. Steam almost came out of his ears. It even seemed to Tanya that she noticed the not very pleasant odour of melting earwax.

"Two..." Durnev said in an icy voice, according to his trouble-making nature skipping the "one."

"It's true, I'm not playing tricks... I returned from school, and this dwarf... That is, I want to say, this freak..."

"Three... Don't you dare lie to me! From where did you take this enormous guitar or what's this disgrace? Whom did you steal it from?"

"It's not a guitar, it..."

"I'm not going to stand these tricks! Even my angelic patience would come to an end! Tomorrow you'll find yourself in the orphanage, and then in the juvenile offenders' camp... Four..."

Tanya pressed the double bass to herself. She was horrified, but, even in spite of the terror, for some reason she giggled foolishly. She suddenly thought how amusing it would be if Uncle Herman said, "Four by a string... Four by a thread." This smile completely drove Durnev out of his wits.

"AH, SO! Five!" Uncle Herman began to roar and took a step forward.

Before Tanya had time to consider what he intended to do, a slap burnt her cheek. Tanya yelled not so much from pain as from humiliation. Earlier Uncle Herman never hit her, only hissed, insulted, and locked her in the bathroom or on the balcony. It was as if a rotten egg emptied out inside her.

And Uncle Herman, having gone completely mad, already brought a hand up for a new blow. Dodging him, Tanya protected herself with the double bass. Durnev's blow arrived on the instrument. Apparently, the magic double bass was not accustomed to this treatment. The strings began to drone

indignantly, softly, as if they were warning Uncle Herman not to do anything stupid. Not paying it any attention, Durnev with fury caught hold of the neck and began to pull the double bass away from Tanya.

“Well, hand it over lively! I’ll tell someone! I’ll give it to the police – let you explain whom you stole it from, thief! Where’s the phone? But, you even broke the phone!”

Tanya clutched the double bass with all her strength and did not let go, although Uncle Herman was considerably stronger and jerked her together with the instrument from side to side, hitting her back against the cabinet and the frame of the balcony.

Accidentally the girl’s hand found itself on one of the pins regulating the tension of the strings. At this instant, Durnev abruptly pulled the double bass to himself, and Tanya turned the pin. The stretched string began to drone softly and in a bass. For a moment, it seemed to Tanya that she went deaf. The glass in the frames began to tremble in a threatening way. Losing her balance, Tanya and the instrument fell together on her back.

Suddenly Uncle Herman, who was hanging over her, froze. The features of his face somehow softened, became kinder, and acquired an idiotic expression. His pupils for a while confusedly turned in their eye-sockets, and then purposefully settled down crosswise on the bridge of the nose. The upper lip curled upward, baring the sufficiently long front teeth.

Finally, being bored of roaming wildly along the sides, Uncle Herman’s eyes stared fixedly on Tanya – first the right and then the left. Uncle Herman bounced on the spot with wonder and giggled foolishly.

“Hee-hee! What a thmooth day!” he said in a thin squeaky voice.

Tanya went “oh” in fright. She said “oh” again in a second, because Uncle Herman suddenly leaned over and sniffed the double bass, and even, it seemed, tried it lightly with his teeth.

“Girlie, what are you doing here? Gathewing flowerth? Let’t get acquainted: I’m Lithper the Wabbit!” he squeaked.

Tanya muttered something, but Uncle Herman did not listen to her. He was already jumping around the room, his hand drawn in, exactly like the paws of a rabbit. Deftly jumping directly from the carpet onto Pipa’s desk, Uncle Herman brought it down. From the desk he somersaulted onto the bed, overturned bookshelves, tore off the door of the dresser, and then, getting down on all fours, started to gnaw the legs of the chairs. After swallowing several pieces of polishing, Uncle Herman capriciously grimaced. The dachshund One-And-A-Half Kilometres, bursting into seething senile barking, hung onto his pant leg. At another time Durnev would shed tears of tender emotion that the dog was playing with him, now he kicked the dachshund with his foot so that One-And-A-Half Kilometres rolled with a howl into the corridor.

“We, wabbitth, have terwibly thtwong hind pawth! We can kick marvellouthly with them!” he bragged to Tanya, gnawing the broken off leg of a chair. “Phew, thith unthavouwy thtump! I can’t thtand thith plathtic bark! My teeth will ache from it! Don’t you have carwotth or cabbage?”

Not answering, Tanya continued to stare at him in amazement. The rabbit obviously did not like it. His whitish eyebrows gathered on his narrow forehead.

“What, can’t you hear, girlie? Don’t underthtand wabbit thpeech? Carwotth, I thay, no?” he lisped.

“Yes... In the kitchen... In the vegetable box...” Tanya muttered.

“Thankth, girlie! You think I’m thtupid, think I didn’t know you? I know much!” Uncle Herman said with a conspiratorial look and skipped off, shaking the floor with his very strong size forty-seven soles. “Hey, deviouth! Don’t detheive me! You’re Little Wed Widing Hood!” he shouted, threatening her with a finger as he left.

Not a minute had passed as the characteristic sound came from the kitchen: Durnev, the very same self-styled Lisper the Rabbit, likely discovered “carrotth” and now hurried to gobble them

together with the bag. In any case, to the crunch of chewing carrot was added periodically the rustling of packaging.

Tanya carefully got out from under the double bass, examining it with a mixture of horror and admiration. She never doubted for a minute that precisely it was mixed up in the sudden temporary insanity of Uncle Herman. Indeed, at that moment when she turned the pin for tuning the strings, Durnev also imagined himself as Lisper the Rabbit.

Recalling the warning on the birch bark, Tanya in a hurry weakened the tension of the string and checked whether cracks appeared in the neck. No, the double bass, fortunately, did not suffer, if one doesn't count the small scratch left by Uncle Herman's nails.

A key began to grind in the doors. Considering that this could be either Pipa or Aunt Ninel, Tanya quickly hid the double bass in the case and started to move it into the cabinet. Booming leaps already rolled along the apartment – it was Lisper the Rabbit jumping to meet his relatives.

And when, a minute later, the terrible dual howl of Aunt Ninel and Pipa was heard in the corridor, Tanya surmised that he met them.

“You're not Little Wed Widing Hood! You're the Fat Bwoad, and you're her daughter! Don't touch me! I'll kick! I have thtwong hind pawth!” Uncle Herman squealed deafeningly, fleeing from them around the entire apartment...

Chapter 4

Forgeli Botchli?

“*Twang!*” Tanya pressed the third string from the edge closer against the middle of the neck and it hummed. The sound hardly dissipated as a round thick-necked head in a copper helmet appeared on the balcony. It was the size of a considerable cauldron and it rotated its pupils menacingly. The look on the head was openly predatory. The bent nose was once dented by someone’s fist, and a long scar stood out on the cheek...

“*Forgeli botchli?*” it growled, when its pupils, having stopped revolving, settled on the girl.

“Not forgeli not botchli... A mistake...” Tanya muttered, attempting to hide behind the double bass.

The head smirked, baring ground-off yellow teeth, each of which was the size of a good fist. Furthermore, it became noticeable that something terribly similar to the sole of boots got stuck between the two front teeth.

“What is ‘not forgeli,’ specifically?” the head asked hoarsely. “Where’s the magic response? What, did they not warn you that I could tear apart whoever uses magic objects illegally? Beatings in alleyways, and all such.”

“No, they didn’t,” Tanya quickly blurted out, considering that this was her only justification.

“And I’ll not believe it for life! And if they didn’t warn you, it means you’re not a witch but one of the moronoids!”

“Yes, I’m a witch... That is, I... Please wait, I’ll explain everything...”

Tanya moved back in fright and, hoping that the head would disappear, in a hurry passed the bow along the adjacent string.

“*T-wang!*” the string hummed intensely. No, the head did not disappear, instead beside it immediately appeared another, even more murderous than the first, decorated with a downy sergeant-major moustaches.

“Where are the evil spirits? *Blabbli gabbli intertwineli?*” it asked with a voice that grated on the hearing like sandpaper.

Tanya went “Oh,” experiencing a burning desire to show up a hundred kilometres away from here or, at the worst, to simply fall under the floor.

“*Blabbli gabbli intertwineli?*” the head repeated impatiently.

“Hello, Usynya!” the head that appeared on the balcony earlier barked. “I think the time has come to gobble up someone. Someone who summons us without knowing the simplest magic response...”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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