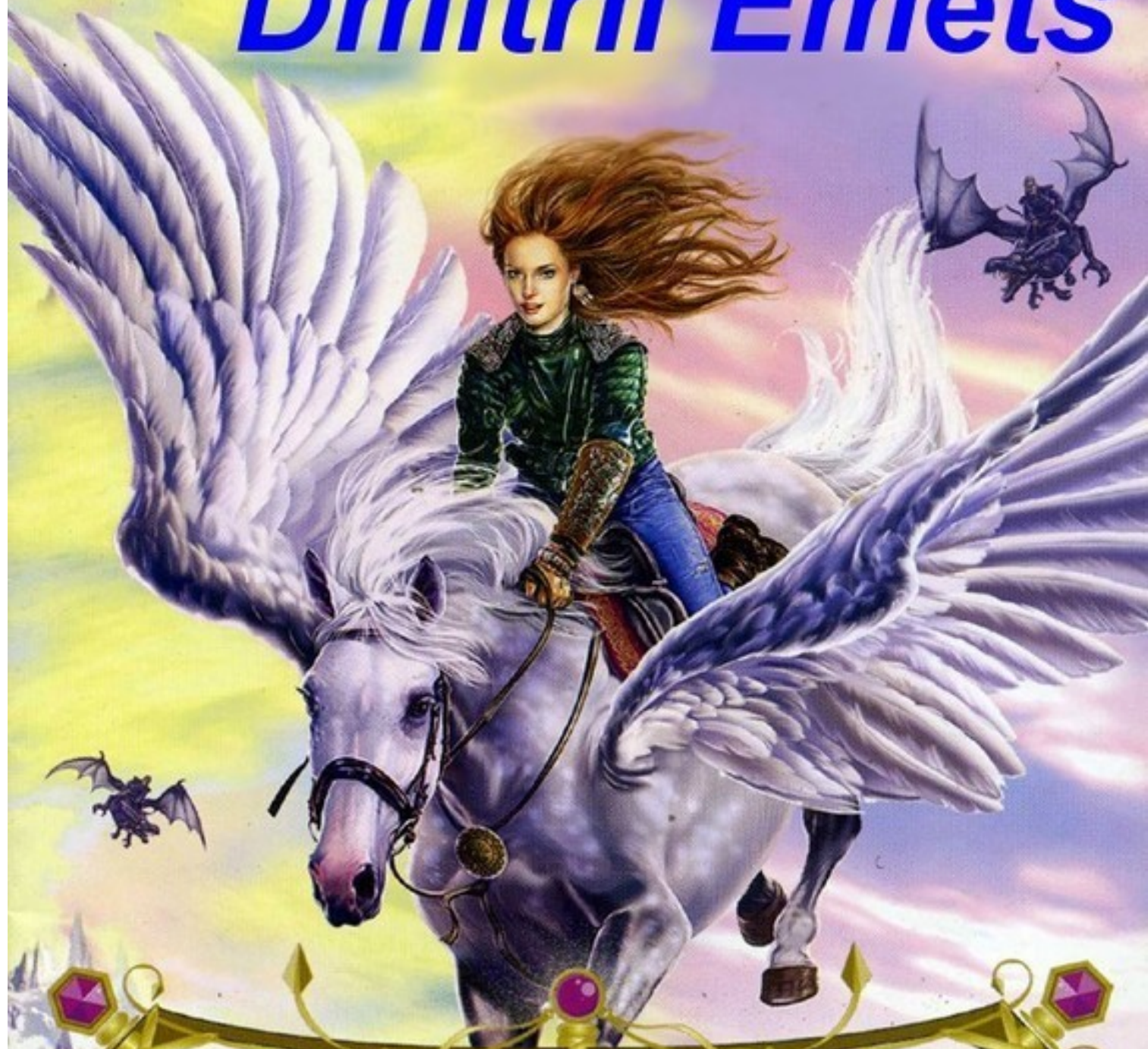


Dmitrii Emets



HDive

*Pegasus , Lion
and Centaur*

HDive

Dmitrii Emets

Pegasus, Lion, and Centaur

«Емец Д. А.»

2010

Emets D.

Pegasus, Lion, and Centaur / D. Emets — «Емец Д. А.»,
2010 — (HDive)

HDive – this is not a name, not a last name, not a nickname. HDive – this is the guildhall, where hdivers gather and which can be found on the map in the neighbourhood of Moscow. Outwardly this building is the most ordinary and every hundred years it is demolished and rebuilt in order not to draw attention. Hdivers do not need popularity; in fact the bulk of HDive is not even above ground. Hdivers are not magicians, although their abilities far exceed any human understanding. If something significant or inexplicable happens somewhere in the world, it means the matter is not managed without hdivers. It is impossible for an outsider to enter the grounds of HDive. Anyone who has betrayed the Charter of HDive just once also can never return. Hdivers are not by birth. No supernatural talent or affinity with magicians is necessary. The golden bees choose hdivers and the only beehive is in HDive. No one, not even the hdivers themselves, knows whom a bee will choose next and, most importantly, why.

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Дмитрий Емец

Pegasus, Lion, and Centaur

ANNOTATION

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CHARTER OF HDIVE

When you hurt, do not pose as a suffering hero. You need to either cry out or put up with it. You can give everything to others, but nothing to yourself. Because you are a hdiver!

You will rip a pillow with your teeth, hit your fist against a wall, but you will smile at people. Because you are a hdiver!

Any dive is paid by the victim.

The smaller the victim and the less aptitude for sacrifice, the less chance a diver can extract a marker. The sacrifice cannot be more than a person can bear.

A repeat dive is impossible for one who has used a marker for himself.

A non-diving hdiver or one who gives up diving can remain in HDive, but not one who uses a marker for oneself.

The hardest dive is always the first. A hdiver is always tested by maximum pain with the first marker.

Not a single person, definitively firmly convinced of evil and its values, or perceiving himself as clearly good, can penetrate the grounds of HDive. We did not decide this. It is simply so, it was, and it will be.

New hdivers are not chosen by people but by golden bees, whose only beehive is in HDive. We do not know why the bees chose precisely you, because once in exactly the same manner they chose us. Although in some cases we can surmise. But surmising does not mean knowing.

It is impossible to crush a golden bee accidentally, but one can betray it. In this case it dies.

Chapter 1

Work – the Best Pill for the Love Virus

The principle of any advance: reach its absolute ceiling and make one sm-a-all step forward.

From the diary of a non-returning hdiver

On the fifth of December, snow began to fall heavily in Moscow. Earlier it was falling with selective timidity: on the roofs of cars, park benches, garages, and transformers. Now the snow got seriously down to work and fell so densely, as if somewhere in the sky hyeons – winged half-hyena-half-lions – simultaneously emptied out ten thousand pillows. Large snowflakes did not flutter, but solid like middle-aged hens, each sitting in its own place.

Movements stopped. Traffic lights winked independently, conducting a white symphony. There was nowhere to go. Roads had disappeared. Automobiles, waving the windshield wipers, turned into snowdrifts in the blink of an eye. As it often happens, in the herd of cars there turned out to be a hysteric, repeatedly pressing on the horn and honking long and angrily: it was incomprehensible what he was demanding and from whom.

On the construction site searchlights from below hit the crane, and three pillars of light, piercing snowfall and closing in, showed its absolute infinity.

When the snowfall began, two young men and a girl were standing in an area near the subway flooded by electric light and laughing at the mysterious inscription “**Chickn meat in pita.**” These were Ul, his girl Yara, wide-mouthed and smiling, and his best friend Athanasius.

Ul was standing, thumbs in his pockets. His favourite pose. Medium build, not muscular, but as if hewn from an oak stump. Nearly twenty years old, short scar on the upper lip (the result of an attack by a bicycle chain let go in Max Gorky Park), Russian blood with a touch of Kalmyk, two hundred and forty-two roubles in the pocket, wide shoulders, and size forty-three boots. Here is everything about our hero. Get acquainted, reader!

Athanasius is half a head taller and half a year younger. They often call those like him good-looking. Lean, with narrow shoulders, and long legs like a foal. His hair is flaxen as a German prince’s, whose kingdom is so small that now and then he has to dart off his throne and catch the chickens so that they do not cross the border.

Athanasius was laughing, but he was feeling sick at heart. He regretted coming into the city at all today. As a rule, Athanasius avoids Yara; but today everything was going against his will. Together they reached the city, together they sat in the subway. The station was the terminus and it is impossible to pretend that you have to go in the other direction. While they were travelling, Athanasius looked at his double in the window of the train. On the face of the double crawled infinite wires braided in black, and written on the chest: “**Places for women with children and for the handicapped.**”

Athanasius tried not to listen to what Ul and Yara were talking about, but the more he tried, the sharper his hearing became. They were arguing complete nonsense, nevertheless Athanasius felt like scum, eavesdropping by a crack. To him, each of their words seemed significant, containing secret tenderness concealed from everybody.

Once in a while one of them remembered Athanasius, turned to him and asked him a question. Athanasius answered with unnecessary attention, although he also knew that the question was posed in order not to exclude him from contact. You know, if the three of us are together, then we three should talk together and not otherwise. Athanasius did everything that a self-respecting third wheel should: he smiled, joked in return, but felt that it was tearing him apart. He wanted to yell and yank the emergency brake. Let everyone fall on one another, then he would feel better for a moment.

The consciousness of Athanasius hastily searched for a loophole. Suddenly he recalled that he should buy a cover for the lens. For two years the camera – a reliable thirty-year-old Zenith, which he placed above any digital camera – had lived excellently without a cover, but now Athanasius suddenly realized that this was fundamentally wrong. One must take care of technology. He jumped out at Pushkin Station and the other two jumped out after him. Probably, they reacted to the closing doors. “We didn’t want to lose you!” Ul declared.

Athanasius almost growled. Ul was so radiant with camaraderie that Athanasius knew if he would stumble now and fly in front of the train, then Ul, not missing a beat, would rush after him and try to drag him away. And Athanasius felt wretched because of this. True, he had not yet become a traitor, but it seemed to him that falling in love with Yara, he had stabbed their friendship in the back. One must never be unfaithful or betray even in jest. This is more dangerous than getting up on a stool, putting a noose around one’s neck, and then asking someone to kick out the stool and run to the kitchen for a chair because it is more comfortable to stand on a chair.

Before Ul and Yara got together, Athanasius treated her casually. If he liked her, then no more than three or four other girls. In his internal list, Yara was not even on top. Then Ul, with a determination normal for him, not wavering and not comparing, chose Yara for himself, to love “till death do us part.” And Yara somehow immediately felt this and reciprocated, although Ul never uttered ardent speeches. And then for the first time the inexpressible inner truth, which needs no words, breathed on Athanasius – smart, sensible, respecting himself, his own eloquence, and his own mind. If it, this truth, exists, then every girl will feel it.

At first, Athanasius, in the capacity of the best friend, was critical of Yara. He was not pleased that Ul dragged her everywhere with him, but she would go and keep quiet as a timid mouse, which would transform into a cat at any minute. This was still that period, when she was the third wheel. Then, although nothing had changed outwardly, and Ul still rushed to him every time so joyfully, Athanasius began to feel that he was gradually becoming a part of the scenery.

Then everything picked up and Athanasius got stuck like a wasp in jam. At the same time, as an attentive man and not missing a chance to introspect, he vaguely sensed that his love was not real, i.e., born independently, but viral – emerged from a feeling of competition. It is very complicated for love to grow. It is like creating a new influenza virus from nothing, when all around everyone is healthy. Yet, it is possible to catch the love of others after a sneeze.

But while love was in many respects viral, he was unlucky for real. Moreover, he was doubly unlucky because together with a girl who loved not him, he could lose a friend. “If Ul only knew...” thought Athanasius gloomily. “And what would he do if he knew? Would he throw Yara in a bag into the sea for the sake of our friendship?”

Yara, not yet thrown into the sea, displayed enormous activity. She dragged poor Athanasius through tonnes of stores and found a lid after all that would fit the diameter of the lens. After forcing Athanasius to be glad of it to the max, the happy couple pulled him into a cafe, where he drank coffee and from melancholy chewed the rim of the paper cup.

Then they proposed to Athanasius to stroll along the boulevards, and he agreed, although the pleasure for a walk in winter along the boulevards is two percent from average. With his toe Athanasius kicked a cap from a plastic bottle and, his eyes following the jumping red point with a white belly, he berated himself. Where did he go wrong? Perhaps he and Ul paced their friendship too fast? When you reach white heat too soon, then it is difficult to maintain it. However, never sell a friendship short. It does not forgive. For two hours, Athanasius trailed along beside them, sometimes ahead, sometimes behind.

“So I told her parents, ‘She’s absolutely undeveloped, although a beauty! Nearly twenty, and still spends the evenings gluing her brain to garbage on TV!’ Her papa, the secret service colonel, said to me, ‘First you get married, and then re-educate!’ he said, waving his hands.”

“Let’s go to her right now! We’ll dash off somewhere as a foursome!” UI cheerful proposed. Athanasius became silent for a second. “Easily!” He took out his phone, but the next moment with regret took it away from his ear. “Ah, forgot! Can’t today! She has classes,” he said. “She always has classes. Either the Institute, or the University, or some academies,” remarked UI. “What do you want! Well, maybe, although these will be the last. Then we’ll meet,” Athanasius expressed hope.

Here he was being sly, because he knew that his girl’s classes would continue forever. Or at least until the girl herself appeared in nature. For the time being, there existed only a name (Victoria), a last name (prudently not revealed), an apartment on Bolshaya Nikitskaya, important parents, and a photograph of a stunning beauty. Victoria came to his head somehow accidentally, surfaced from parts cut from non-existence, and now the entire HDive knew that somewhere in the city Athanasius has a girl, who was ready to walk to Siberia for his sake and was only waiting for the moment when the well-known firm would release its new line of winter footwear. At times Athanasius felt that he was beginning to be inconsistent in the details, and, suddenly remembering, started to reason out the circumstances of the break-up with Victoria. A tragic death? Fatal treason? Departure to Honduras of the intelligence officer papa with the cryptographer daughter and sniper wife?

Meanwhile the happy beloved of the cryptographer from Honduras was strolling pensively behind his friend’s girl and trying to convince himself that he did not like her legs. And generally he was glad that she was almost always in camouflage pants, which automatically transform every girl into a combat comrade.

All through the fall, during any free hour, UI and Yara wandered along the Moscow River and, looking at the water taxis with pop music thundering, called them music boxes. Somehow, UI shot apple cores at them. As the third core in succession struck against the side, the water taxi discharged dark and smelly diesel exhaust at the same time. “Yay! I beaned it!” UI began to shout, and for a long time they ran after it until, tired, they fell onto the grass.

It was cold. Wet leaves stuck to their backs. “Dragons” escaped from their mouths on forceful exhalations. They lay on the lawn and imagined the sea of those quiet off-season Crimean towns, where at eight in the evening life stops, already inconvenient to phone, and only timid bicycle thieves dart along the narrow stone courtyards, reeking of the long-standing presence of cats.

This imaginary sea was better than the real one, because it was born of their love. In their Moscow sea rusty teeth of old moorings jutted out of the foamy water. Waves ran along the jagged steps of the embankment. At night, the searchlight burnt on the old customs quarantine pier. Well-fed seagulls, like chickens, were sauntering along the parapet. Insolent sparrows somersaulted in the surf, where small flies swarmed above the rotting algae and a dolphin tail cut by a screw stuck out.

Then Yara became Yara. In all documents and registers, it goes without saying, it remained “Yaroslava” as before. “Yara” was like the mark of UI’s property. Economizing the sounds of his own speech, UI eternally shortened everything, beginning with himself. It would seem that the name “Oleg” was too long. Why not make himself UI?

UI hardly talked about love. When it is there, it is not necessary to speak of it. Perhaps he blurted out something in the style of: “tell this to our grandson!” But then he adored life-asserting stories. Well, for example, one fellow went into the drugstore for a thermometer. On the way back two guys attacked him. He began to struggle and during the fight it turned out that the thermometer was shoved into the mouth of one guy and was broken there. “Precisely with all the mercury! Get it?” Yara did. “But how did it get shoved into his mouth?” “Anything can happen in a fight. Maybe, there weren’t any teeth. Maybe, even somehow... And there’re much dumber incidents!” UI said, and Yara believed that so it was.

The dumber the incident, the closer to the truth. On the contrary, the more romantic, the further from the truth. Not without reason the experienced librarians most often placed books about princes on white horses in the division: “developing literature about animals.”

Occasionally they went to Yara's sister, who had a son a bit over two. The sister would instantly flutter off somewhere and Yara would serve her duty as an aunt. "Once upon a time there lived a mousey-scouty and a froggy-crocy!" she said solemnly. The diathetic chubby little boy did not care for fairy tales. He immediately lost focus and began to throw a potato. "Come, let's listen! To whom is the most beautiful girl in the world telling a story about mousey-scouty and froggy-crocy?" Ul said in a dismal voice. The child froze. The mouth began to pull down dangerously. "And hoppy-bunny!" Yara continued to coo. "And money-bunny!" Ul made a correction. "In short, this entire brotherhood lived in a certain kingdom – a certain state, namely at the Savelovskaya subway station, not far from the computer market, and fed on talking cockroaches with no musical ear."

So flowed the days of this exquisite fall. At times, a silly mood came over the formerly serious, almost stern Yara. "Will you do everything for me? And will you let me touch your eye with my hand?" she asked slyly. Ul was happy and was secretly afraid of his own happiness, understanding that he was absurd in happiness like an enamoured pit bull.

* * *

In that walk before the snowfall, everything was wildly hilarious to Yara and Ul. Goofy people were strolling along comical streets and with an intense look doing amusing things: shopping, answering the phone, looking fearfully at the sky, and pulling up their collars. Nearby a freezing woman with a handcart was stomping and selling snakes for cleaning clogged drains. Established couples politely hissed at each other or squabbled in tired voices.

And here suddenly snow came pouring down and everything was hidden somewhere. The square, the subway, the "chickn meat" in pita, and the woman with the handcart. Only car horns, short lost rays of headlights, and the two of them. And at that minute, when the whole world was only made of snow, Ul kissed Yara. After the kiss, he rubbed his own nose against hers. Yara liked this. They stood and rubbed noses like horses. And snow tried to get between their noses.

"Well, I'm going!" Athanasius' voice reached them through the snowy shroud. "Where to?" Athanasius wanted to say that he was leaving altogether, but instead growled, "To buy water!" and went away to the kiosk. Ul heard an annoyed exclamation: either someone bumped into him or he against someone.

"He's strange today! Something's eating him. He's probably jealous," said Yara seriously. "Of whom?" Ul was puzzled. "Of you. Yesterday you were his, but today mine." Ul was inclined to consider that he was his own man. "Perhaps because of the dive? I can't stand being the guide. If anything happens, I'll never forgive myself," he proposed.

"Who's he going to guide?" Yara asked, and with a movement showing ownership swept snow from Ul's shoulder. "Dennis." "Athanasius can't be a guide. He has to be completely calm. In this state he won't be able to make his way through the *swamp*!" Yara said decisively. Ul looked at her for a long time, then nodded. Better to teleport alive into the meat grinder at the sausage plant than to get stuck in the *swamp*. Certainly, Athanasius would brag, but must not let him. Yara was right.

"I'll guide Dennis myself!" Ul proposed. Yara clicked her tongue. "You can't. You have a different speed of passage." It was useless for Ul to object. Passage depends neither on age nor on sex. An iron and a feather bed will not sink with the same speed even if they are of equal weights. "Who then?" Ul asked perplexedly. "Athanasius shouldn't. Me neither. Kavaleria generally plunges like a needle. Maybe we'll ask Max or Rodion?" "No need to ask anyone," said Yara. "I'll be the guide." Ul was worried. "You've never been a guide! It's not the same as diving yourself! I'm against it." "Have to start some time. I'll have a talk with Kavaleria, and you with Athanasius. Okay?" Yara said pleadingly.

Ul threw back his head, opened his mouth and began to catch snowflakes. Yara imagined that a snowdrift was growing in his stomach. "Say it!" she demanded. "That I agree? I don't agree!" "Well,

say it!” Ul swallowed some snow. “Don’t interfere! Don’t you see: the man is feeding.” “Please!” “Well, fine: I say it,” he yielded unwillingly. “Satisfied?”

“No. Say also that you love me!” Ul frowned. “Don’t blackmail!” “Say it!” Yara insisted. He stopped catching snowflakes. His face was wet. Only the snowflakes on his eyebrows did not melt. “I don’t know how to say it! My tongue is frozen.” “Don’t weasel out! Repeat: ‘I love you’” “You love me.” “OLEG!” Yara tried to strangle him but his neck was too muscular. With her pitiful vain attempts, she only delivered pleasure to Ul. Ul always uttered the words “I love” under the greatest pressure, asserting that the less often you utter them, the more they are worth.

“And why did you hide roses all over town and stealthily plant the coordinates? I found one rose in an old pigeon loft on Savelovskaya, another on the garret of a two-storey house on Polianka! Answer!” Ul leaned over and scooped up some snow. “Didn’t find it at Voikovskaya? I thought so.” “Confessed! Aha!” “Not aha. I simply saw how he put it there,” Ul extricated himself. “Who?” “An unknown in a black mask. I pursued him, drove him into a corner, but he drank acid. Only smoking laces remained,”

Ul quickly looked at Yara’s indignant face and suddenly proposed, “Fine. Come, I’ll shout this at the top of my lungs!” Before Yara could stop him, he jumped on a box and, holding onto a post, shouted through the snow, “Humanity, hey! This is my girl! Here she is, in the green cap! She’s not visible because she’s hiding behind the post!” “I’m not!” Yara was outraged and, making use of the fact that he was standing on one leg, pulled him by the ankle.

Ul flew sideways. In the air, he dodged like a cat, rolled over and jumped. It could seem to someone that he had broken all his bones. But only if the person does not know what a hdiver and such a hdiver jacket are capable of. “Must think first! It’s asphalt after all!” he was indignant. “I’d visit you in the hospital. Would bring rolled oats and oatmeal!” Yara encouraged him. “Wait!” Ul quickly asked. “Do you actually consider that rolled oats and oatmeal are different things? Some good mother I picked for my poor children!” “Wh-at???” Yara was mad. “What children?”

Athanasius approached with the mineral water. The water was icy, and snow had settled on top of the bottle. “Anybody want any?” he asked with hope. No one wanted any. Then Athanasius, feeling unhappy, gulped down the water, and his gums immediately froze.

On recalling something, Ul unbuttoned his sleeve and looked anxiously at the laced-up leather buckler on his left arm. Similar to a medieval vambrace and continued from the wrist to the elbow, the buckler was decorated with small cast figures. A bird with a female head; a suspiciously short-legged centaur; a goggle-eyed lady with a forked fish tail; a lion resembling a chubby sneering cat. Someone who has never seen a live lion could imagine one like this, but then would beat off the goggle-eyed fish-tailed lady with a harpoon. The figures were interwoven and, alternating with grape clusters, formed a guard plate rigidly fixed on rough skin. The only surprising thing was the difference in the colour of the metal. The goggle-eyed lady was dim, but the sneering lion, the centaur, and the bird blazed, as if they were cast a minute ago.



“Why has the mermaid faded? Ah, yes! We stole the herring from the hypermarket and released it into the Moscow River!” Ul recollected. “A mirror carp! Your idea, by the way!” Yara corrected him. After seeing how it opened its mouth in the aquarium, Ul assumed that it was shouting, “Oooh! Bro, I’m in ambush!” He touched the mermaid, and there was one less fish in the hypermarket but one more in the Moscow River. Ul blew snow away from Yara’s cheek. “Well, let’s go, snow grandma, to charge the *clms*!”¹ he said pertly. “And you’re snow grandpa!” Yara snapped.

They quickly went to the underpass. A large shaggy dog emerged from somewhere, ran after them, and started to bark at them furiously. Ul stopped and the dog stopped. “HOLY! Dang! So what’s next? No way, huh?” Ul was interested. The dog also did not know what was next. Its life’s plans disintegrated. It was confused, but could not stop barking immediately and, after several loud yelps, leisurely retreated. Athanasius attempted to treat the dog with water, but it only sniffed the neck in passing.

The underpass was full of people. Many were standing on the stairs and apprehensively stuck their heads out. “Has it stopped? It hasn’t stopped?” they asked every second. It was funny to Yara: they were sitting in a pit dug under the road, pushing and getting angry that they could not force their way to their multi-apartment burrows. Ul stepped in front like an icebreaker, breaking through the crowd with his wide shoulders. “Please allow us through!” he politely asked. Athanasius settled behind Ul and used the path opened up by him. Yara had a different tactic – where Ul was squeezing through, she glided like a snake.

Nearer to the centre of the underpass, Ul was inexplicably filled with politeness and began to make way for the counter-flow. To do this he had to press against the wall lined with a greyish tile. Ul got hold of the tile with his sleeve and proceeded further. Several seconds later Athanasius turned up in the same place of the underpass. He did not begin to complicate matters especially: tossed the bottle from his left hand to the right, touched the wall, and quickly proceeded forward. After touching the tile as Ul and Athanasius did, Yara felt a tingling in her wrist and light heat rising from her fingers to the elbow. Having ascertained that the *clms* was charged, she wanted to tear her hand away immediately, but here the crowd caught her and she delayed slightly.

On the street, a little girl of about eight flew over to Yara. She bounced off like a ball, but immediately hopped back and stared inquisitively at Yara’s sleeve. The sleeve was shining as if engulfed in fire. “The snow!” said the little girl. The snow falling on Yara’s sleeve up to the elbow instantly disappeared. On the other parts of her coat, it was lying like firm white cereal grains. Yara in a hurry hid her arm behind her back. The obstinate little girl kept stomping beside her and did not intend to leave. A returning Ul saved Yara from the girl. Approaching from behind, he patted the curious child on the back of her head. “Did you see the maniac? Come, I’ll show you!” he proposed

¹ *Clms* (c.l.m.s.) is pronounced “clams”.

in a nice voice. The child sped away in short spurts, frequently glancing back and whimpering. “Am I really not some gadget? Scared the child!” Ul stated smugly.

He took Athanasius aside and told him about tomorrow’s dive. Athanasius became pigheaded, especially when he found out who would be guide instead of him. Usually reasonable, here he simply showed asinine stubbornness. “Holy, dang!!!!” said Ul, grabbing him by the neck like a bear. “Now you listen to me! You’re not in shape. You’ll get stuck and ruin the newbie too! I have a girl and a friend! And I need you both!”

The subway station emerged unexpectedly. It had the external appearance of a red letter S on the side of the passage. Beside it stood a frozen old lady in a downy shawl, already almost transformed into a snowdrift, and who was selling violets sprouting in mayo jars. There were four. Yara purchased all from her, in order to keep Ul’s hands busy and deprive him of the possibility of hugging her in the subway. True, Ul got himself out of it and loaded Athanasius down with the violets. “All the same for you!” he said.

On top of the escalator, they launched beer bottles. Yara was pondering something and her face was temporarily in stillness. The green ski cap did not suit her. Her face seemed boyish, rather rude. Athanasius thought that she was plain and started to cultivate this thought in every way. Like any person fighting the love virus, he had in his heart a special box, where Yara’s shortcomings were carefully gathered. When love heated up, he would usually blow on some of her deficiencies like on coal, until it began to seem unbearable. Approximately, at the middle of the escalator, Athanasius finally conquered love and complacently drew himself up, perceiving himself free. However, here Yara revived, started to talk, smiled. Athanasius, confident that nothing would break him already, haughtily looked at her and... he wanted to howl.

The railroad car was the new type, trimmed with white plastic. Without the delightful corners for standing by the door. Because of the violets, there was no way Athanasius could hang on. He was swaying from side to side and Ul caught him by the collar. “You see how lucky you are that I’m beside you?” he asked, and then suddenly shouted to the entire car, “Hey, people! I’m happy! This is my friend, and this is my girl!” The superstitious Yara tugged at his sleeve. “Shh! Keep quiet! You’ll frighten off happiness!” It would be better if she had kept quiet. Ul immediately wanted to be contradictory. “Hey! Happiness! Hello!” he began to yell.

“Cuc-koo! I’m leaving already!” a person passing by commented in an intoxicated voice. His back was striped like a zebra with clearly marked steps. The railroad car started and like a sluggish caterpillar crawled into the tunnel.

Chapter 2

The Wings of a Friend

When a man does not deny himself pleasures but gets too many of them, he becomes accustomed to them and ceases to feel anything. He needs increasingly more ingenious and artificial pleasures, and everything ends with inevitable degradation. But if pleasures, on the contrary, are limited by degrees, then each day everything will be new. Real. Even just a drop of water, the sun, or a five-minute rest on a hike will make you incredibly happy.

From the diary of a non-returning hdiver

At five in the morning Ul got up to guide Yara. He climbed up, then again descended and, taking a shortcut, went through the gallery. His steps resounded far along the long empty corridors of HDive. In the dining room there was not a soul – not even the angry old lady Supovna, who, unceasingly grumbling and complaining that no one helped her, allowed no one to approach within ten metres of the stove. However, even without Supovna in person, her presence was felt. The infallible remedy for sleep stood on the centre table: three mugs of strong tea, pickles, and a plate with heavily salted black bread. One mug was empty.

“It means Dennis is already in the stable,” said Yara, appearing soon after Ul. She was eternally late, but late in a civilized manner: about five minutes. Ul nodded and salted a pickle. “I love everything salted!” he said to himself. “Although what can one think about the man who salts pickles? Lacking some mineral!” Sitting in the semi-darkness, Yara bit off black bread in large mouthfuls, sipped her tea, and examined a thick stack of photographs, small and hard as playing cards. The photographs were taken in part with a hidden camera, in part with the help of a telescopic lens.

“This is only in the last week. What do a system administrator, a gym teacher, a theatre lighting technician, a student, a boiler room attendant, and a deaf fellow, a former musician, have in common?” she asked, hiding the photographs from Ul. “The same as the elderly astrologer, the gloomy unsociable person with an umbrella, and the respected-by-law criminal with fingers like sausages. But earlier we didn’t deal with these. It means they’re recruiting new warlocks. Expanding the reserves of the forts,” Ul instantly answered. Yara stopped chewing. “What? You knew?” “It was simple to guess. Athanasius took the picture of the lighting guy. Then showed me the scratch on his jacket. He maintains: they fired at him from a schnepper,”² said Ul.

“I wish they were vampires,” Yara sighed. “In your dreams. If they were vampires, the problem would be solved in a week with the strength of forty-fifty people. Or could appeal to the Vends.³ But they aren’t vampires, and there’s nothing more to say,” Ul cut her off.

He went out first and stopped on the porch to wait for Yara. Suddenly huge hands grabbed him and lifted him up off the floor. Ul was dangling with his head down and contemplating the wide-mouthed essence in an unbuttoned sheepskin coat. By the porch, a giant of three-and-a-half meters in height was standing unsteadily. This was a living attraction, an incident, animated by one of the founding fathers of HDive. In the daytime it hid in the Green Labyrinth, at night it trampled around HDive. Several times girls that had disappeared were found in its stomach, once even Kuzepych himself.

“I am Gorshenya, clay head, hungry belly! I’ll eat you!” the giant informed him. He pronounced the words slowly and thoughtfully. “You’ll choke! Let me run up and jump!” proposed Ul. Gorshenya chewed on this thought for a while and then unclenched its hands. Ul’s head stuck in a snowdrift.

² A pistol crossbow.

³ “Vend” is an abbreviation and will be explained in Chapter 6.

Gorshenya took a step back and trustingly opened its enormous mouth. Four hundred years in a row it had fallen for one and the same trick.

The snow thawed in the night and shaped well. Ul rolled a snowball and threw it into Gorshenya's mouth. When Gorshenya was standing with mouth open it saw nothing, because the two amber buttons, which served as its eyes, were thrown back together with the upper half of the head. Gorshenya slammed shut its mouth. "Perhaps I did not eat you?" "You ate my brother. And you're not supposed to eat two brothers in one day." said Ul. Gorshenya was saddened.

Yara came out onto the porch. Gorshenya stretched its hand out to her, but Ul slapped it on the fingers. "She doesn't taste good," he whispered, "but she has a tasty sister. She went that a way!" Gorshenya, waddling, limped off to search for the sister. "Poor dear! It believes everything," Ul leniently said. "We're the poor ones, believing nothing," remarked Yara. "They say it buried treasure somewhere, and now it's guarding it," recalled Ul. The body warmed in the night was lazy. Ul generously scooped up snow and, snorting, washed himself. Melted water flowed down his collar. After understanding that whining would only make it worse, his body put up with it and agreed to be cheerful.

The scattering of stars drew a path to Moscow. From here, the vicinities of Moscow, the city was not discernible, but on a clear day it was possible to climb up the high pine tree and, from the "robber's lookout" hammered together from boards, see a bright flat spot. That was Moscow. The path was covered. It could only be surmised by the lantern posts and the long snowdrifts, from which projected the humps of park benches. In the huge hdiver jacket, Yara seemed deceptively plump. Ul teasingly called her Winnie the Pooh. Staying on the main path, they reached the place where old oaks outlined a proper oval shape. Yara extracted a boot from the snowdrift and... placed it already on green grass.

Edged with stones, slender straight cypresses stretched to the sky. A climbing rose weaved itself around the iron arches. The lower part of its stem was the thickness of a kid's hand. Stripping the petals, the wind carried them beyond the invisible boundary and dropped them onto the snow. It seemed to Ul that the snow was stained by blood, but to Yara the snow had been kissed. Yara looked around. The boundary of snow and grass was designated very clearly. Two distant oaks dozed in the snow, but a third, finding itself inside the boundary, did not even know that winter was somewhere beside it.

This oak was Yara's favourite. She embraced the warm tree and pressed her cheek to it. Ul had noticed long ago how much skin and hands could tell Yara. Now she caressed the bark. Felt it not only with her palms, but also the back of her hand, her nails, and her wrists. She took in the tree with all its bends with the greediness of the blind, gaining a new sense instead of sight. Somehow she acknowledged to Ul that she would want to scratch her hand down to the nerves so that the sensations would intensify. "It happens," said Ul.

Now he was standing beside her, chewing on a blade of grass and admiring Yara like a technician admiring a female humanist who does not remember what an integral is but willingly discusses the historical fates of peoples. The difference between Yara and Ul was approximately the same as that between a two-handed sword and a nervous foil. He respected her mind and sensitivity; she respected his determination and the ability to grasp the essence of anything without being distracted by details.

"You want to hide the newest tank from the female spy, place a nest with chickens on its motor," remarked Ul. Practical things interested Ul greatly. He knew that somewhere here the most powerful marker was hidden from the day of the founding of HDive. This was what warmed the earth thoroughly and gave trees the life force. Now Ul for the umpteenth time gauged where the marker was hidden and what would be its size. Its power was colossal. Not a single one of those markers that Ul himself extracted could melt snow for more than five-six steps.

In front of Ul, creaking slightly from time to time, a huge pine tree, similar to a sail and with a flat top, was swinging from the wind. Among its roots was a blue beehive, along the roof of which lazily crept morning bees yet not thoroughly warmed by the sun. From the pine tree began the extensive Green Labyrinth – a carefully pruned mix of acacia, laurel, juniper, and boxwood. In the centre of the Labyrinth was the fountain – an enormous split stone with a whimsical crack, along which water flowed.

All around chrysanthemums grew wildly. Yara usually fell on her knees and felt the flowers with impatient fingers. Ul, though, was amused by the names. “How many rounds of hookah must one smoke in order to name chrysanthemums ‘Ping pong pink’? And ‘A spring dawn on the dam of essence’?” he was interested. Yara would visit the chrysanthemums even now, but this was impossible. After going around the Labyrinth, they crossed one more invisible boundary and again snow began to creak under their feet.

* * *

Dennis was waiting for them by the winged-horse stable. He sat on the planted-in tire and reproachfully froze. Frail, his face was pale. His nose was similar to a radish. He looked a year or two younger than his sixteen years of age. His hdiver jacket was zipped all the way to the top. His eyes were like that of a hamster: like beads. His right shoulder was lower than the left.

“He’s nervous!” said Ul. “And you weren’t nervous before your first dive?” “Four hundred times more... Well, I lied: three hundred and ninety-nine!” Ul corrected himself. Yara laughed. It is a miracle what a person can now and then fit into some infinitesimal thing: a short phrase, an action, a look. Here Yara also by mysterious means fit into her two-second laughter: energy, spontaneity, affection without coyness. “I remember how you swaggered into the dining room after your first dive. Turned up at breakfast in the jacket. Everybody’s jacket was new but yours was chafed. And so mysterious! Simply a super hdiver!” she said, still splashing her delightful laughter. “I was pretending,” Ul explained, embarrassed. “I scratched the jacket with a brick. Later I really got it from Kuzepych.”

After seeing Yara and Ul, Dennis jumped from the tire. He moved like a lizard. Quick fits and jerks. “Why Delta for me? It’s unfair! I’m best in the subgroup. I held my ground in flight on Caesar!” he shouted. “Flight is a different matter. For the first dive a steady horse is better,” Yara patiently explained. Dennis outright called Delta a stool. “Now that’s wonderful. You won’t fall off a stool,” Yara praised and, having left Dennis in the company of Ul and Delta, dived into the stable.

Everybody’s mama Delta was bored. It shifted from foot to foot and snorted into the snowdrift. An elderly, somewhat short-legged mare, ash-grey, “mousy” coloured, with a black stripe on the back and a thick tail to the ground. Wing feathers the size of a human arm. The feathers themselves were brownish with dark ends. There were no foals beside it, and there was nobody for Delta “to cherish,” according to Ul’s expression.

After noticing Ul, Delta made off in a business-like manner towards him to beg. “You’ll manage without! I’m a cruel and greedy animal hater!” warned Ul. It did not move away. Ul’s action now and then did not match his words. Moreover, it was well-known to clever Delta that the pockets of his jacket were never empty. After feeding it half a rusk, Ul appraisingly shook the saddle and loosened the girths a little. The saddle was slight, stretched forward. The front pommel was turned down, girding the muscular bases of the wings in those parts where the feathers had not yet begun.

Ul approached Dennis and in a friendly way slapped him on the shoulder. “Checked the pockets? Combs, ball-point pens, cosmetic fillings on the teeth?” Dennis shook his head. “Well, look, otherwise will think of something,” promised Ul.

“More briefing. First of all, understandably, is your ride. When you’ve gained height, you take the horse into the dive. It happens, a novice is nervous, pulls on the rein, and attempts to turn it around. You’ll only confuse the horse with this. At the moment before the dive, the speed is such that

it can no longer take off. But if it foolishly stretches them out, all its bones will turn into corkscrews. In short, you panic, you'll destroy yourself and the horse.”

“Dispersion?” Dennis prompted. Ul clicked his tongue. “Nuh-uh! Way off base, as the saying goes... Dispersion is when the horse crosses over but you don't. Usually this happens when a hdiver doesn't trust the horse. Then the horse disappears and the hdiver is pressed into the asphalt.” Dennis turned pale and Ul was sorry that he said too much. “In short, trust Delta. It has already been diving for ten years. The main thing, you don't interfere with it: it'll do everything itself,” he said in haste. Dennis looked with doubt at Delta, which, after dropping its lower lip, was begging for another rusk.

“Next, the crossing! Here everything is so instant that you don't have time to be aware of anything. A hundredth of a second and you're in *the swamp*. This is the most unpleasant phase. What's the main principle of passing *the swamp*?” “The principle of the three little monkeys,” Dennis' answer was learnt by heart. “Correct. ‘Hear nothing, see nothing, and say nothing.’ The most important rules, the first two. Don't listen to anything excessive, keep eyes closed or look at the horse's mane.”

“But if...” Dennis began carefully. “No ‘ifs’!” Ul cut him off. “Can never believe anything in *the swamp*, however plausible it may seem. I personally knew an outstanding fellow who, after *the swamp*, tried to wave my head off with the trowel.” Dennis cautiously looked at Ul's head. It was on the spot. “Why?” “It seemed to him that I stole his head and replaced it with mine. Here he decided to put things right,” Ul willingly explained.

“And why am I not diving with Athanasius?” Dennis asked suddenly. Ul tensed up, because the fellow who attempted to change heads with him was Athanasius. And now Ul was considering: whether Dennis surmised something or this was an accidental shot. “Yaroslava is an experienced hdiver. She has more than a hundred dives,” Ul said, accentuated with his on-duty voice, and removed a straw stuck on Dennis' shoulder. “Well, break a leg! Pass *the swamp*, and in *Duoka* your guide will show you everything.”

* * *

Yara went along the stable. In the semi-darkness a snorting was heard, a friendly puffing. Icarus was playing with a plastic bottle. Ficus was chewing something. Münnich, a calm old gelding with a white-yellow stripe on its head, was licking the grid. Its tongue was frozen to the metal, and Münnich was surprised by the new sensation.

But here was also Eric, a powerful, broad-chested stallion, so high in the withers that once Yara was scared of it. Yara slid attentive fingers along Eric's wings, beginning from the base and ending with the feathers. She had to ascertain that everything was in order. It happened that the horses got frightened at night, began to thrash about in the tight stalls, and incurred injuries. Eric watchfully squinted and pressed down its ears. Winged horses do not love having their wings touched. “So, I can't touch you but it's okay for you to roll around?” Yara asked, pulling out hay stuck between the feathers.

Yesterday Eric was taken out till snowfall and now, having stuck its snout out of the stable and scared by the prickly whiteness everywhere, it snorted, started, and attempted to take off. Its wings were the shade of straw. Each was about four metres. Huge, of oppressively perfect shape. Yara held it with difficulty. She let it study and smell the snow, and little by little Eric calmed down.

Dennis was fighting with Delta, persuading it to straighten its wings. Otherwise he could not sit down on the horse. Sly Delta was being obstinate. The stable was just fine for it.

“The mission!” Ul reminded them in an undertone. Yara, having completely forgotten about this, looked gratefully at him and touched Dennis' *clms* with her own. Bluish smoky letters flowed out into the air. After waiting until they faded, Yara scattered them with a hand. “A three-month-old girl's heart is developing incorrectly. The operation is today. Chances are small. Need a marker. The girl's name is Lyuba,” she said.

Dennis loosened Delta's cheek strap. "This isn't a training legend?" "Training jump to *Duoka*?" Ul evaded the question, and Dennis, confused, began to pull the strap again. "And if we get a marker, the operation will still take place?" he asked after a time. "Most likely. But then who knows? A marker creates development..." Yara said honestly.

She took Eric's left wing aside and jumped into the saddle. Eric itself had already raised the right wing, saving it from a foot. The steadiness, with which Yara, timid and shy in everyday things, steered a horse, always amazed Ul. It seemed that an entirely different person was sitting in the saddle. She sat down, tossed back her hair, and became a hdiver. Here and now precisely this transformation took place in front of his eyes. "Eric first, Delta behind!" Yara shouted to Dennis. Ul hemmed, appreciating how craftily she said this. Not "After me!" but "Eric first." Female management has its special features.

Ul walked beside her and led Eric. There were yellowish circles under his eyes. "You promised yesterday that you would sleep!" Yara with reproach reminded him. "Well, somehow..." Ul said guilty, and it was not clear what formidable Somehow prevented him from lying down. "Go lie down now." Ul looked at the snow, expressing by the look that it was impossible to lie down right here and now. "Can't. I'll hang around the stable and wait for you. Aza's foot must be looked at. Bunt kicked her. HOLY! Dang! Call themselves gentlemen! Really kicked a mare? Although Bunt, of course, knows nothing on the subject." "Who's dearer to you: Aza or me?" Yara asked jealously.

Ul looked cautiously at Dennis. That one was sitting like a statue on Delta. Occasionally, he jerked his hand and with such energy seized the red nose as if he wanted to tear it off. "Last night our people saw warlocks... You'll take this?" Ul thrust his hand inside his jacket and pulled out a small crossbow with a pistol handle: a schnepper. Yara shook her head. "I rely on Eric," she said, in order not to say something else. A single-shot crossbow is not all-powerful.

* * *

Yara and Dennis walked the horses in a circle and then two more in a light trot. Only then did Yara permit Eric to get into a gallop. It was only waiting for this. It rushed, out of mischievousness dashed off to the fence, flapped its wings dangerously, and took off from the ground. Yara heard a quiet hit: kicked with a hoof after all, snake! Already in the sky she turned in the saddle in order to see Ul. A small, beloved point next to the brick quadrangle of the stable.

Delta attempted to be sly and slowed down, but Dennis raised his voice at it, pushed it on with his legs, and made it take off. Having swung the lazy mare around – it was striving unnoticeably to turn in the direction of the stable – he sent it after Eric. Eric wanted to gain height sharply, but for the time being Yara held it back, forcing it to do this gradually. It would be spent, it would be covered with sweat, but its strength must last a long time.

The horse's back under her shook slightly. The sensations of flight and gallop were different. She could distinguish them even with eyes closed. Yara bent down to the horse's neck. When the wings were flapping and, slowly scooping up air, swept back, she saw a sparse forest. Further were warehouses and a large field connected to the highway by a winding road.

Yara muffled her face with a scarf. The head wind burned her cheekbones, brought tears to her eyes. Yara knew that a little longer and she would feel like a piece of ice, which was set crookedly on the horse. Everything would fuse into a frozen mass: thoughts, happiness, love for Ul, and even fear. Only the desire for warmth would remain. Dennis overtook and flew beside her. Delta's "mousy" fur began to turn white, covered with hoar frost. The hair below the snout iced up, as if the old mare had grown a rare white beard.

The sky in the east was crimson-striped like a treacherously killed zebra. Yara kept the course directly to these stripes, anxiously examining them. Suddenly something changed in the sky, and above them hung a large cloud, dazzling-white on the edges and rather soiled in the centre. Wisps

separated from the cloud. Imagine a cat hidden inside ripping it up with its paws. Yara looked down and estimated. Still low. Must get higher for the dive. She waved to Dennis and directed Eric into the cloud. About ten seconds later it shot up out of the other side. Now the cloud was lying below, more like a loose pile of snow. Above, as far as the eyes could see, more clouds were drifting. One overhead, fiery, resembling a hippopotamus, swallowed the sun and slowly digested it.

Dennis appeared only after a minute. He pointed at Delta with indignation and threatened it with the whip. The mare had a devious look. Yara understood: Delta pretended that the cloud scared it, using this as a pretext in order to return. Its tricks were well known to Yara. In her time she also started with Delta.

Knowing how much energy a horse needed to gain altitude, Yara let Eric fly to the south, keeping it along the dark edge of the lower cloud. The sky here had no clear boundaries. A large cloud dropped off like a mountain. At the base of the mountain smaller clouds were joined by limp beards. From where the sun's rays got tangled in the beards, four points, like hay in the horse's wings, suddenly appeared. With each second the points became larger. Soon Yara distinguished dense, leathery wings exactly like that of a dragon. These were hyeons. Tiny figures pressed onto their backs. "Hell! Trouble!" thought Yara.

At this moment four winged points broke apart into two teams of two. One team stayed circling below, the other dived for the cloud. "*Look! Warlocks!*" she shouted to Dennis, pulling down the scarf. He started to toss about and began to jerk the rein, confusing Delta. "Don't! We have the advantage up high! They can't gain height fast! Will be more dangerous on the way back!"

Yara did not pack much power into this second shout, knowing that the wind would nevertheless carry away three quarters of it. After ascertaining that Dennis no longer tried to turn Delta around, she gathered her fingers into a duck beak and poked downward. This was the signal to dive.

She hardly touched its neck with the reins and Eric responded. It leaned forward, pointed its snout to the ground and, accelerating, flapped its wings vigorously several times. After the fifth or sixth stroke it folded up its wings; however, because of Yara and the saddle it could not do this as in the stable. It turned out that it held her with the base of its wings at their widest part. Yara found herself between two shields protecting her all the way to her chest. Now and then it came to her mind that only this makes it possible to dive. Just have to understand: either by chance or deep thought-out regularity.

The horse gained speed. Gravitational force drew it to the ground. Yara leaned down, trying to take cover behind the horse's neck. The wind was whistling keener and shriller all the time. The free end of the scarf whipped the back of her head painfully.

Yara attempted to look around in order to determine where Dennis was now. He turned out to be unexpectedly close. Frightened but not panicking. He seized Delta's mane so as not to pull the reins. Also a variant. His face was white-red with clearly marked spots. The eyebrows were like two iced caterpillars. His ski cap had been torn away. The hair was standing on end like white peaks. "It means I also have the same eyebrows! That's why it's so painful to pucker up! Clever Delta! Didn't lag behind Eric!" Two different thoughts collided in Yara's consciousness.

Making use of the fact that Yara carelessly turned her body and removed it from under the protection of the wings, the wind hit her chest and cheek, almost knocking her off the saddle. Yara clung to the front pommel, perceiving herself not simply as a pitiful teapot but also a grotesque samovar. Likely trivial, but she lost several valuable seconds. When Yara again saw the ground, it was abruptly close. The silvery box of a trailer crawled on the grey loops of the highway. Yara understood that Eric could no longer lift up with its wings: the speed was too great. But Eric also did not intend to do so.

For a brief moment next to her flickered a dark side in stripes, a flat snout with protruding lower jaw, and closely planted eyes. The person pressed himself so close to the hyeon that they seemed like a two-headed essence. Yara understood that she had run into one of those two warlocks that dived

for the cloud. The rider did not manage to turn the hyeon around: the speed of a taking-off hyeon was too incomparable to that of a winged horse almost going into a dive. Understanding this very well, the warlock on the off chance jerked up a hand with the dim half-moon of a crossbow. Eric twitched from the pain. Its elongated neck oozed a long ribbon of blood, as if the horse had been cut by a razor. "He thought that he couldn't hit me and fired at the horse so that we would crash together," Yara determined.

The horse rushed towards the ground, acquiring impossible strength with each instant. It was impossible to look at its wings. They did not become white or radiant, but they were blinding all the same and stinging the eyes, becoming too bright for them.

As Eric was transforming, everything around it paled. The hills, the pine trees, the highway were covered by a haze, watered down. At the same time Yara realized that the world remained the same as it was: completely substantial and not spectral. Simply Eric no longer belonged to this world, in which it was nevertheless a guest, although it was old and born here. Repeatedly Yara and other hdivers tried to describe the crossing to novices, but words were insufficient to explain how it was possible to become more real than reality itself despite that it would remain unchanged also.

Yara looked askance at her own hands. This was the dispersion test well-known to hdivers. Next to Eric's mane the hands seemed flat, cardboard-like. Much less real than Eric. Because of this annoying attack of the wind Yara had remained a part of her own world, whereas the horse no longer belonged to it. In a second or two Eric would pierce right through her world, and Yara, if she were unable to merge with it, would be stuck somewhere between the highway and a brush of pine trees on the small hill.

Yara acted instinctively. After realizing that it would be hopeless if left behind, she leaned down and clung to Eric's neck as tightly as she could. Her cheek was buried in the stiff brush of mane. "Don't leave me behind! All the same I won't let go of you!" she whispered soundlessly, knowing that even if Eric heard, it would not be in words nevertheless.

And it did not leave her behind. It closed up base and changed the incline, after wrapping Yara up with its wings like dense sails. Time stopped. The small hill, no more than fifty metres away from Yara, blurred, as if water was splashed from a jar onto fresh watercolour. It did not make room, did not disappear, remained where it was, but Eric and Yara pierced it like a soap bubble, which closed up after them. Yara felt the tension of her own world sliding down along the horse's wings shielding her. She took a risk and again looked around. Her world slowly floated back, screened off by invisible glass. Somewhere there the trailer was moving and birches grew. Ul also remained there. "Thank you!" Yara whispered. It became clear to her that at the last minute Eric dragged her, the perpetual latecomer, through to become the same as it.

But in front something messy, the colour of meat scum, was already moving up to Yara. A disgusting formless mass. It was impossible to pass over it or fly around it, only right through it. There was neither sky nor earth nor constellations here, only this mass. Swiftly revolving in the centre, it was lying motionless along the edges and forming a quiet little stagnant mass. Most of all it very much resembled dirty water with food scraps pulled into the drain with a squelch. And there, in this terrible centre, everything was boiling and seething.

Something flickered on Yara's left hand side. After a hard look, she understood that this was Delta. Dropping behind a little bit in the dive, the mare quickly caught up. Yara did not immediately realize whether Dennis was on its back and experienced several unpleasant seconds. "But indeed he dived! Didn't break up! Now if only he doesn't start panicking in *the swamp!*" she decided.

Yara was shaken in the saddle. A wing, pulling back, touched her shoulder. Eric accelerated. Instead of flying into the calm and outwardly safe foam, it, after extending the snout, rushed straight into the revolving centre of "the sink." Delta followed it. The spiral of the drain now thickened and calmed down, now coiled up into a thread, and then began to toss her from side to side. Yara knew,

according to her own experience, that this was more terrible for a novice than falling together with the horse's folded wings and waiting to hit the ground.

Before throwing itself into the seething volcano, Eric folded its wings. The wind plucked Yara off the saddle. The scum on her hdiver jacket broke off, hung on it, and ran off as if alive. Yara lost orientation for several seconds and thought only of one thing – not to lose the stirrup, not to let go of the rein.

Sensing that the hurricane was losing strength, Yara hurriedly sucked in air. She sucked in fiercely till it hurt in her chest, knowing that soon any breath would be a luxury. And indeed: Yara breathed out already in *the swamp*.

As in “the drain,” everything here was the colour of meat scum. A compressed, disgusting, still space supporting neither hope nor happiness nor motion. A world locked in itself and starting to reek as a nestling dead in an egg. Yara breathed out slowly, in small portions, with regret, trying to keep from pulling in what substituted as air here. The air in *the swamp* was inconceivably musty. It stuck to the cheeks like slush. It crawled into the nostrils and stung the eyes. The filthy toilet in a station would seem in comparison like the dream of an epicure. But all the same it was necessary to breathe. Yara opened her mouth and felt how she pulled into herself all this trash together with the air. Recently Yara had been hit by the wind. Here the wind was absent altogether. She flew and pushed with her tongue the prickly scarf climbing into her mouth.

Eric no longer kept its wings folded. It was flying but incredibly slowly. The wing feathers began to break off from the stress. It seemed it was forcing its way through glue. Each stroke of the wings moved them forward, but monstrously slowly. It seemed to Yara that they were not flying but crawling. Without a winged horse she could not cover even a centimetre here, though she would be raking up the sticky air with her palms over the centuries.

Eric and Delta made their way along a narrow tunnel. It was drilled by the hurricane and had clear sticky walls, which sucked in everything but let nothing out. Yara was amazed by the wisdom compelling the horses to rush to the centre of the hurricane. It would be unrealistic to fly through the quagmire in all the other places. Here the hurricane opened a breach.

Something brightened hazily in front, although it was a dense, sucking darkness to the right and left. Yara stubbornly tried to look only at the horse's mane, knowing that it was mortally dangerous to avert her eyes from it. She understood the melancholy of those who once got stuck in *the swamp*. To sit eternally in the sticky scum, which held on such that you would be unable to blink or stir a finger. And all this time guessing at the something close by, something completely different – bright, real, flamboyant.

In the dense darkness drifted sluggish grey shadows, similar to clay-covered dwarfs with googly eyes. These were elbes. The shadows were shifting and approaching the walls of the tunnel. When the dwarfs touched the walls, they fired off something not unlike gossamers. A piece of gossamer touched Yara's jacket and immediately burst.

Yara felt the short probing twinges almost continuously and surmised that there were lots more elbes than she was capable of discerning in those two-three seconds that she had the courage to look. At the moment of the touch of prickly little gossamers Yara experienced sometimes a wolf hunger, annoyance, greediness, sometimes sluggish sleepiness and indifference. But again and again Eric's wings traced a semicircle and tore up the gossamer.

After ascertaining that their attacks were futile, the elbes changed tactics. They upped the stakes. Now instead of hunger and melancholy they proposed pleasures of the most different kinds to Yara. All this time they were probing Yara, attempting to find a flaw in her. So, you do not want to put your arms up to your elbows in the gold coins of an Indian rajah or stroke the fur of a tame tiger? How about running with cheetahs or standing under the rainbow jet of a waterfall? Shashlik with hot mulled wine? Again no? Maybe, sinorita prefers furs, a long car and a taciturn chauffeur, who will slowly transport her along the streets at night to the sound of cocaine jazz?

The imageries were so distinct, so visible that Yara no longer distinguished them from reality. She could scarcely determine where she was in reality – under the waterfall, at a noisy eastern market, or in the thick *swamp* shaking like a jellied dish. Dreams, hardening, were transformed into reality. She wanted to doze off, to relax, and to give herself up to their lulling power.

Say “yes,” little one! My little, beloved, warm little one!

Say “yes,” essence!

Say “yes,” trash!

Yara knew: all these juiced up imageries, which they stuffed her consciousness with, were nothing to the elbes themselves. Elbes were cold as ice. They did not sleep and did not grieve. Their enjoyment was in another realm, which was impossible for her to comprehend. Gold, food, romance had no greater value to them than a fat worm moving on a hook did to a fisherman.

Yara knew that if she would be friendly now and give internal agreement, it would be impossible to break the fetters later. She would be stuck here and would remain forever in *the swamp*. It had happened many times that hdivers, even the most experienced and hardened, indifferent to pain and easily putting off hunger, jumped off the saddle, after becoming prisoners of a cherished mirage. And they would hardly find their mountain streams, their smile of a beauty, or fantastic cities there, in the thick fumes of *the swamp*.

Wanting to warm herself with something warm and important, Yara began to think about Ul, but suddenly realized that she completely did not love him. A boor, a brute, a barbarian! Hid flowers in attics and she chased after them only to get dirty all over in pigeon crap! If he would at least be a handsome man, but his teeth are uneven, his legs short! Neither apartment nor distinct future. And even counts each kopeck in a cafe! Minor little offences crawled like agile cockroaches along all the cracks in her mind.

Yara understood that Ul never needed her. He simply wanted a girl, any who would agree to endure his tricks. The other girls do not give a hoot about him of course, and likely, the whole HDive is laughing at her! If Ul would turn out to be here now, Yara would pounce on him as a cat would, begin to scratch and bite. She wanted to turn the horse around in order to sort it out finally with this freak. The hatred was so strong that Yara even saw black spots with her open eyes. She no longer kept her eyes closed. Why? Damn *the swamp*! Her chief enemy is Ul!!!

Eric started to neigh sorrowfully. She did not hear its neigh, but guessed it from the impatient movement of the head and the snout covered with a cap of foam by the nostrils. After a second, the horse began to heel over and tip sideways. They were no longer advancing but hovering over one spot. Something that could not be broken off caught Eric’s right wing. The left wing was convulsively scooping up the sticky air. Yara saw that the horse would now overturn, and she herself would hit against the wall of the tunnel. The grey dwarfs also considered this and, pressing against each other, they quickly crawled together into one place.

Not understanding what was happening to Eric and why he was falling, Yara lowered her eyes and saw how above her boots, a gossamer, thickened into a fat white root, had quickly entered her leg. Small beads rolled along the gossamer from an elbe to Yara. At the moment when the beads touched her leg, she experienced new jabs of hatred towards Ul. True, now it was technically complicated to hate. Her knees slid along the saddle, the left stirrup was dangling, the saddle girth loosened, and any minute now the saddle itself must turn out to be under the horse’s belly. Good that the bent front pommel held on behind the base of the wings.

“I... love... Ul. It’s... all... the elbe!” Yara thought, forcing her way through the quagmire of hatred. The next bead could not infiltrate under the skin. It rolled away and collided with the one following. The gossamer swelled, could not maintain the tension and broke. Its strength turned out to be deceptive. Eric scooped the thick stinky air with the freed wing. The elastic bones bent. The stallion neighed from the pain and, wing feathers almost broken, straightened itself. Yara managed to reach the muscular base of its wing and returned to the saddle. “Relaxed! Believed that I can do

anything! Called myself a guide!” Yara berated herself. Delta had long since passed ahead and Yara even could not imagine approximately where and when she would meet up with Dennis.

Eric gained speed slowly, with effort. For the first twenty-thirty strokes it barely advanced. Now and then it needed several jolts with the wings in order to remain simply on the spot. Then it jerked its head and briefly neighed reproachfully. Yara touched its back. It was slick and sweaty. The fur shone like it was greased with fat. It was not possible to stop in *the swamp*. It mattered not that Eric was an enormous, strong stallion, it would get stuck here forever.

Everything blunted in Yara: her love for Ul, pity for the horse, uneasiness about the tiny girl. She remembered only one thing: never let new roots enter her, because this would be death. The hatred for Ul had drained her spirit. She even did not feel the jabs. She dully looked at the mane and tried not to open her eyes.

Yara did not know how much time had passed here. Time in *the swamp* flew according to its own laws. With the utmost internal concentration on a good horse it would be possible to cross *the swamp* in ten minutes. Possible in half-an-hour, an hour, and also possible not to break through at all. The number of divers stuck in *the swamp* was in the dozens and hundreds. More often it was not even known whether a diver got stuck on the way there or was intercepted on the way back. And intercepted by whom. The elves? The warlocks? Maybe his horse broke a wing, he flew off the saddle or, listening to the whisperings of *the swamp*, he was unable to break the gossamer and is still languishing somewhere in the sucking gloom, where a lie is like the truth and where you believe in hatred more than love. Twice in the history of HDive it happened that a diver, solidly convinced that he had spent no more than twenty-four hours in *the swamp*, dived back into the human world after several decades.

Now Yara was also not thinking about this. She chased all thoughts away without exception, including the most innocent, knowing with what ease *the swamp* would distort, substitute, and secretly connect them, using any thought as a bridge to itself.

Suddenly Yara felt a light push. An unknown elastic force touched her entire body at one go and then parted, after recognizing and letting her through. She felt heat warming her face frozen in the dive. Something showed pink beyond the closed eyelids. She pulled back the scarf and then even tore it off completely. The dull stench had disappeared. Yara opened her eyes. Eric was flying above the ground easily, without the least effort. The remains of *the swamp* melted on its sides sunken from fatigue. Above ground and not in the narrow tunnel in *the swamp*.

It was much brighter here; however, the light seemed pale, as if predawn. A forest was discernible below. Beyond the forest began a field with a sluggish and frequently looping creek. “DUOKA!” exclaimed Yara, although this was only its beginning.

Something burned her forehead. This was a big melted plastic hairpin, which Yara had forgotten about. Yara quickly got rid of the soft mass sticking to her fingers, until it no longer spread over her head. This was what Ul warned Dennis about. Here, on *Duoka*, nothing secondary or derived could exist. No synthetics or polymers. Only skin, cotton, iron. Everybody remembered the story of the new girl, who attempted unnoticed to use plastic girths. Crossing *the swamp* on her return she had to break through without a saddle, after tying herself to the horse’s neck. Yara recalled how often she got caught by this and wondered that she did not become more careful. Several successful dives and you automatically become arrogant. You stop checking pockets, thinking about hairpins, and boldly open your eyes in *the swamp*. The only way to regain the sense of reality is to get it on the forehead.

The further Eric flew, the brighter it became. If earlier Yara only discerned a forest below, now she distinguished separate trees. If in her first minutes here *Duoka* was almost colourless, dark, and only somewhat outlined, now, with each new stroke of Eric’s wings, it became more detailed. An invisible hand unhurriedly threw paint on the trees and generously poured out sounds and smells from a warm palm.

Yara's forehead was covered with sweat. She wiped it with the back of a hand and thought that today everything began somewhat early. The delay in *the swamp* had affected her. She had swallowed too much filth there.

Eric listened and took off more to the left. Yara trusted it, although it seemed to her that they were not flying there. Soon, after taking a good look, she distinguished on the meadow a spot, which turned out to be Delta grazing. She saw Dennis only when Eric had descended beside him. He was lying in the shadow of the bushes, in his unbuttoned hdiver jacket, and seemed barely alive. His face was soaked and streaked. Yara had never seen people sweating in stripes. Sections of the skin were red, white, red, white. And all with clear boundaries. Only the nose had no boundaries and jutted out like the usual pierced radish.

Dennis was pulling air in slowly, and breathing out just as carefully. "It's always so at first. Suffer. Soon it'll be easier," said Yara. Dennis opened his eyes and attempted to smile. "I saw how Eric got stuck... But didn't notice you at all. It seemed the saddle was empty. I pulled the rein, fat chance! It didn't listen! And later I clung to the mane altogether, such nonsense crawled into my head. That I was always a burden to mother, and sister stole money from the piggy bank. And I was thinking: where have they disappeared to? Then I understood I was only in *the swamp*." This did not surprise Yara. *The swamp* was the eternal place of such insights.

"Did you try to stop Delta in *the swamp*???" she asked again. "Of course! You're my guide. I thought: it must be so. But the cursed stool wouldn't obey! It misinterpreted me!" Continuing to lie on his back, Dennis folded up his hands like a scoop and passed them along his face from top to bottom. It seemed he was not wiping off sweat but washing. "You're the stool! If Delta had stopped..." Yara did not finish talking.

Dennis looked at his hands. The sweat was flowing from his fingers even now. His wrists were covered with indecent beads. "It pinches. Gets into the wounds and pinches..." he complained. "Strange!" "What?" "Huh? The burning heat, but the water in the stream is cold. But what's killing me more is the dew. Why didn't it evaporate?" Yara laughed. Every hdiver poses this question during his first dive.

"It isn't hot here." He looked at her with bewilderment. "How isn't it hot? Do you see me?" "I see you, but all the same it isn't hot. Look at Eric, look at Delta. Look at me, although today I'm a poor example." Dennis sat up on the grass, distrustfully looking at her face closely. "Didn't even unbutton the jacket," he said with envy. "Everyone goes through this. The main thing, *Duoka* let you in. It happens that a novice passes the entire way through *the swamp* and is forced to turn the horse around. And the heat... It seems to me filth comes out of us." "Cursed *swamp*! It was the end of me!"

Dennis staggered forward and got up. A branch got him in the eyes. He brushed it aside. "Likely no longer so scabby... Let's search for markers! Where are they?" he said decisively. Yara glanced over at the meadow. She was holding Eric by the rein, afraid that it would enter the stream and, excited, would begin to drink. "No markers here. Too close to *the swamp*. Must fly further."

"Perhaps we can wait till dawn?" Dennis with hope proposed. "Nothing to wait for." "How nothing? Already any minute now!" "Here 'any minute now' stretches to eternity," said Yara and, feeling that Dennis understood nothing, added, "It's always cloudy dawn in this meadow and nothing else. In order for it to become brighter, we must fly further. Or remain and be satisfied by what is. But then, no markers."

"It's illogical," objected Dennis. "Illogical for us but logical for *Duoka*. We have a world of cyclic variations. Morning, day, evening, night. Spring, summer, fall, winter. Sit by the window, pick your nose, and life will revolve around you. The *Duoka* world though is three-dimensionally constant. Here everything has unfolded."

"How's this?" Dennis did not understand. "Like this. The source of light and heat is somewhere in the centre of *Duoka*; it nevertheless must exist, although none of us has seen it. You haven't noticed that all the trees lean a little to one side? On the edge, nearer to *the swamp*, it's always night and cold.

Here it's always early dawn. Further is morning. They don't come by themselves. In order to change something, one must move constantly."

Dennis pulled his jacket zipper. "But if indeed so, then it'll be hotter nearer to the centre!" Yara nodded, not seeing any sense to deny this. "Here everything is this way. When it's difficult and painful, it means you're moving in the right direction. But today we won't find ourselves in the centre really." "And you?" "Me neither. Each hdiver has his personal boundary. It moves back a little with each successful dive. Not so much that they wouldn't let us in. Simply doesn't turn out otherwise."

Dennis again began to torture the zipper. "And if I'm unable to dive to a marker at all?" he asked suspiciously. "Possible to dive to some, but you'll do it on your own. It's not too deep. Otherwise you wouldn't have gotten this job." "And if we force ourselves and whip off to the centre? Simple drive the horse and all?" Dennis obstinately asked. Yara thought that what happened with her hairpin would happen to him then; however, she kept the thought to herself and only muttered, "It's impossible. An icicle can't fly to the sun and remain an icicle."

Dennis walked the five metres to Delta as if they were five metres to the gallows. Having seen out of the corner of an eye where he was heading, sly Delta moved aside several steps. It did not run away, but moved away imperceptibly, each time managing to maintain the same distance. "Look at what I have!" Dennis shouted plaintively, trying to pretend that he had a piece of rusk in his pocket. Delta looked around and at his pocket with an explicit sneer.

Yara knew that Delta was capable of pushing him around this way till eternity. Horses, of course, are good essences, but not enough to pity a tired rider. Without letting go of Eric's rein, Yara overtook Delta in several leaps, jumped with her stomach onto its back and, after slapping its rump with her hand, drove the mare to Dennis. "Don't let go of horses on *Duoka*. If you really must leave them, then tie or hobble them," she reminded him.

At this point the horses were not getting up high but racing above the ground. Eric was considerably ahead of Delta and Yara had to hold it back so that it would not rush off completely. The plain over which they were flying became stony. Chains of boulders similar to the spikes on the back of a petrified dragon looked out of the earth. Yara clearly distinguished in front a long rocky ridge resembling a horseshoe.

It was already light here, but somehow inconclusive, as if early in the morning. The air became dryer. It seemed to Yara that she was bouncing towards a fiery wind; however, to her, weakened and drained by *the swamp*, this thought was not scary but cheerful. Now she already had to wipe off sweat continually. Dennis sat in the saddle only because it was not clear to him in which direction to fall.

Yara slowed Eric down, letting it cool down. After recalling that they had shot at it from a schnepper, she looked over the wound and with relief discovered that it was not dangerous. The blood had dried and here, on *Duoka*, the scratch would skin over in an hour or two.

After flying up closer to the rocks, Yara hobbled the horse's front legs and with a short belt bound the base of its wings. Eric was Eric. The pine tree, to which she tied it, was young. Yara did not trust it too much. "Rest! You already worked. Now it's my turn!" she said and, after loosening the girths, unfastened the trowel from the saddle. A sandy slope began in front of Yara. Gradually becoming steeper, it abutted against a cliff with many cracks.

Delta appeared to have fallen behind. The sly old mare did not fly but dragged itself along the last length. It knew from experience that they would now tie it up.

"The first ridge. The Horseshoe Cliff. This is our mine. There are others here, but we would have to cross the ridge," Yara shouted to Dennis. Dennis slipped down from Delta. His face covered with sweat became less streaky. The boundaries blurred, the red spots were changing to pink. "Don't fall asleep, else can't even rouse yourself with kicks later!" she warned.

Dennis reached for his trowel. His turned out to be collapsible, with initials, which he, as the malicious owner, had burnt on the handle. He attempted to pull the retainer ring down from it, but dropped it. He leaned over, grabbed it with the other hand, and clutched it between his knees, hoping

to finish the struggle with the ring. The ring was mocking him. It willingly turned over but remained in place.

“What happened?” Yara was surprised. Dennis raised his right hand. She saw that two knuckles on the edge were broken and the fingers were shuddering continuously. “How did you manage that?” she was amazed. It turned out, against the front pommel. Dennis was leaning back carelessly and when Delta abruptly touched the cliff with its hooves, his pelvis was thrown onto his own hand. “I’ll dig with the left,” he said, convincing himself. Yara silently took his trowel, unfolded it and began to walk along the slope.

Their *clmses* were radiant, sensing the proximity of markers. The reddish sand did not sink under her feet, but produced a narrow crack in the shape of a toe. Occasionally there were areas with white sand, which drifted in front of large stones. Yara and Dennis got up quickly along the gentle slope; however, soon the incline became noticeably steeper. It was necessary to climb, using their hands.

Yara was clambering, looking out for hdiver signs on the rocks and the stones. She met few signs today. Only scratches on a piece of bark cut with a trowel, warning, “Do not tie horses!” Maybe, the ground is slipping away? Who knows? An experienced hdiver always trusts a warning and will not tempt fate.

Dennis frequently stopped, squatted down and rested. He was no longer pulling air in through his nose but swallowing it with his mouth like a fish. “How are you doing? Quite poorly?” asked Yara. Dennis wheezed that he had never felt better and she understood that it was worthwhile to restrain from further questions. It is better not to pity people in this state. There are moments when even a friendly hand, sympathetically placed on a shoulder, is capable of breaking one’s back. “The overhang in five minutes. Almost there!” she said to the side, as if to herself. Dennis nodded, pretending that it was unimportant to him.

“The overhang” turned out to be a narrow, about twenty steps, ledge under the vertical cliff. Detached rocks and formations sliding down whole spoke of frequent landslides. The cliff was fragile, heterogeneous. Compressed sand and cockleshells were discernible in it. Many pieces broke off easily and crumbled in the fingers.

After estimating where best to begin, Yara walked several steps along the ledge. She stopped and, showing that they had reached it, dropped the trowel. The blade went in, but shallowly, and, having splashed sand, tumbled down. Dennis slid wistful eyes along the endless ledge. “And where are the markers here?” “Everywhere. Sometimes directly under your feet. But most of them are waist deep, chest deep. Don’t know why. Maybe, the cliff crumbled more at that time?”

Yara wiped her nose with a boyish gesture and, after getting down on her knees, stuck the trowel into the sand. They dug for a long time. The sand was revealed as layers, but under it began caked clay. Every now and then the trowels caught something and tinkled, producing dry sparks. It was necessary to stop and look, after clearing the clay. In the majority of cases this turned out to be a stone.

It had to be harder for Dennis than for Yara. He had to dig with one hand. “Let me dig and you drive the trowel in the cracks and enlarge them!” she proposed, having forgotten whom she was dealing with. “Leave me alone! I’m not tired!” Demonstrating that he was managing very well, Dennis struck the trowel with such force that a splintered off stone cut his upper lip, almost knocking out a tooth.

In the first hour Dennis attacked the clay with impatience, rejoicing with each tinkling of the blade. However, the happiness of expectation was dulled after many failures. He was short of breath. Instead of a heart, a stone with sharp edges was turning in his chest. Now he was rather annoyed when he heard the next tinkling sound. His back had gone numb. He often stopped and jerked up his head. His gaze was lost in the endless vertical cliff, either rather rusty, or yellow, or almost white. How much he thought about *Duoka!* What he had not imagined when he was going through preparation in HDive! But here only clay, sand, and stone.

Yara was standing chest-deep in the pit, which she had dug out in the past two hours and, not going deeper, enlarged it with short strokes. There were no blisters on her palms yet, but a special sensation and redness were detected on the skin, which would only go away with the white bubbles.

Dennis drove in the trowel at random about three steps from the base pit and dragged it towards himself. In the peeled-off layer of earth something was scattering light. He leaned over and picked up a hand-sized piece of rock covered with clay. One side was cleaned by the impact of the trowel. He swung his arm, intending on throwing the stone down along the slope. “Stop!” Yara yelled, crawling out of the pit on her stomach. She took the stone away from a confused Dennis and started to scrape the clay off carefully. He fussed around first on one side, then on the other. He squatted, got in the way, and caught the handle of her trowel with his forehead. “Get out of here! You wanted to throw it away!” she shouted merrily to him. “Don’t fuss around a hdiver when he’s holding a marker!”

The radiance became bright, persistent. Yara squinted. She shaded her eyes. A dark-blue flower, woven from a live, timid fire, blazed up inside the rock. Small, like a bluebell. How it had fallen into the rock and grown there was a riddle. Yara no longer scraped off the clay. She held the stone in her hand and was continuously tossing it up, as if it was very hot.

“A good marker. Strong... Only it’s blue,” added Yara with regret. “And what’s so bad about blue?” Dennis tensed up. “Nothing. But today we need another one. Blue markers are for talent and ability. For example, the owner of this will be busy with his favourite work for twenty-four hours right through without getting tired. And he’ll never be disappointed, never droop, never let down, although there will only be obstacles around.” “How do you know?” Dennis asked suspiciously. “*It* told me.” “With words?” “Of course not. But while you’re holding a marker, you feel that it is so.”

Yara leaned over and lowered the marker onto a flat fragment of rock etched with brown cracks. Dennis looked at her interrogatively. “I put it down so it wouldn’t begin the merge. And tossing it up for the same reason. I don’t want to tease myself. If I keep it, *Duoka* will never let me in again.” “Why?” “One can never take *for oneself*. Only for the job,” she explained. Dennis’ questions did not surprise her. Earlier he knew everything in theory. But what is theory? A cardboard folder with training inside. “And if you for me, and I for you?” proposed Dennis. “No go. Either you’re a hdiver or you’re not,” she said with confidence.

Dennis squatted, lovingly looking at the marker. The flower had piped down. It was burning, but no longer as vividly as in Yara’s hands. It was resting. “Are you going to leave it here?” “Let’s say this: it’s in reserve. If we don’t find what they sent us here for, we’ll take it with us so as not to return empty-handed,” said Yara, wavering. She was wavering because she was trying to recall the regulations: does the guide have the right to take a marker when accompanied by a beginner? She had had several dives, but till now, she had always acted strictly on the job.

“But two of us today!” said Dennis. “Finding a marker is a little thing. Still have to smuggle it through *the swamp*. The most failsafe is to leave with the marker you’re sent for. It’ll give you strength. If a marker is more than your performance capabilities, better not ask for it,” Yara explained seriously. “Do you mean to say that the elbes know which marker I’ll be carrying?” Dennis asked suspiciously. Yara did not answer. She only looked at him.

“How many years before this flower formed?” Dennis suddenly asked. Yara shrugged her shoulders. Such a thing never occupied her. “Many.” “To what degree, at least?” he tried to find out. “A hundred million... A billion. I don’t know,” she answered carelessly. Dennis became round-eyed. Yara had forgotten what significance numbers have in a man’s mind. “It’s not exactly a flower. Well, that is, not like pine trees, grass. They disappear, they replace each other, but this is eternal,” she added, as if justifying herself.

The marker, which no one was touching, almost faded. But Yara knew that if she would take the stone and, not letting go, hold it, then the flower would burn so vividly it would melt the rock. Then the marker would merge with her and would hand over its gift to her.

“Is it always a flower in a marker?” asked Dennis. “Depends. A blue one is most often a plant: a mushroom, moss, a branch. Sometimes a hardened fruit. I found a peach, a plum. A scarlet marker, and we’re searching for it now, has something like wild strawberries inside the stone. I like the scarlet ones more. They always fit. For a blue one though, you have to dive ten times to find a suitable one...” With her need to feel everything, Yara ran her hand upwards along the cliff. The cliff was rough as a tree, but no life could be perceived in it.

“Markers – they’re like a separate world flowing independently inside *Duoka*. Once Ul saw an ant,” said Yara. “And what did it do?” “The ant? What all ants do. It was crawling.” “Crawling?” Dennis again asked suspiciously. “Simply crawling along the stone. Throughout. Very simply and businesslike. Maybe, already five thousand years. Or a hundred thousand years. Or more. And sometimes it’ll crawl out of it. A real live ant, shining like a small sun.” “Did Ul take it?” “He had another job. And when he returned for the ant after several days, he no longer found it.” “But what could this ant be?” “Anything you like. A live marker is always a riddle.”

Yara picked up her trowel and, having climbed down into the pit, started to enlarge it with short strokes. She knew from experience that it would progress faster this way. When she came across stones, she cleaned them, quickly inspected and rejected them. She tried to move in the same direction, where Dennis had found the nugget.

Hoping for a repetition of his success with the flower, Dennis stuck the trowel in wherever. Yara shook her head. Dennis reminded her of a person biting off bread in different places from a loaf. “Why is it mandatory to dig? If we fly along the cliff and look out for markers directly in the thick layer? What if they’re somewhere on the outside?” he suddenly proposed. Yara smiled. Novice hdivers loved to generate ideas. And she did too. Dynamite, a shaft, a mine. Only what bright thoughts have not visited a person tired of working with a trowel! Up on her knees, she swung the trowel evenly, controlling the narrow flow of earth escaping from the crack and clay. “Can’t see in the thick layer. A marker has to answer. And it answers to touch. Otherwise, a rock is just a rock,” she muttered. Dennis turned away.

For a long time they worked in silence. To the right of the pit a whole pile of rejected stones was already scattered around. Yara managed to drive a fragment of one of them in under her nail. She tied up the finger with a handkerchief and, listening to the pulsation of pain, continued the search. The pain disrupted her rhythm. A jab of the trowel gave a shot of pain. She remembered Dennis none too soon. That one was moving like a sleep-walker. He had dropped the trowel and was groping for it on the ground. Yara started to pity him.

“I hurt a nail. Let’s rest a little,” Yara proposed, knowing that he would not agree otherwise. Dennis stopped groping for the trowel and turned his head to her. She felt like saying to him, “I have flattened fingers, but you some nail!” She crawled out of the pit and lay on her back. A rock lumped over her. From below it was similar to a crumpled piece of paper with watercolour. A small stone ran along the rock and fell onto the overhang.

“There beyond the ridge is a huge valley. Transparent trees of live glass grow on the water. A flying fern. It attaches itself onto a horse’s tail and drifts together with it,” Yara said dreamily. “Have you seen it yourself?” Dennis echoed suspiciously. He was not lying down but sitting, nursing a hurt hand. “Ul described it. I haven’t dived there. The eyes water, the ears begin to feel pressure. Too much light there. Both smells and sounds, everything is solid, tangible. It seems that both sound and smell can be felt. Imagine: touching sound with your hands! And the colours! Such red that it burns the eyes. Or such green that you can’t tear yourself away at all. And the blue indeed knocks you over... And in the distance, mountains – white with snowy caps.” “More mountains? And has anyone been beyond those mountains?” asked Dennis.

Yara got up and jumped into the pit. Now the pain was gnawing her finger slowly, with enjoyment. Dennis, tardily trying to start his own pit, quickly wore himself out and, after jumping

down, worked beside her. He held the trowel like a sword and was swinging it in such a way that Yara feared for her head.

After four hours Yara felt a metallic aftertaste in her throat. She touched her nose with the back of a hand and saw a speck of blood. "Time to go! The time of a dive is over," she wanted to say, but at this moment Dennis yelled. At first Yara decided that he had hit his hand, which he had put far in front for equilibrium, with the trowel. With his adroitness this would have been the logical outcome. But no. After dropping the trowel, Dennis, shaking it loose, freed an average sized stone. Half cleaned by slanting strokes of the trowel, the stone was burning so that its crimson flashes were everywhere: both on Yara's trowel polished to a shine and on Dennis' sweaty face. It was hard to believe that these flashes originated from just three small berries inside. "Three 'strawberries'! You're lucky today! First dive and two markers!" Yara was happy for him. That she had dug out the enormous pit and, in essence, done all the preparatory work, had no importance for her. The main thing was to deliver the marker to HDive.

Dennis greedily felt the stone with his good hand. He looked stunned. The marker was talking to him in the nonverbal language of being. "Hide the marker in the knapsack!" ordered Yara. He looked at her without understanding. "Huh? What?" he echoed. She understood that he had not even heard her. "Don't hold the marker! We're returning! Job's done," she pulled him by the sleeve. "Yes! That's it! Already!" As if coming to, he said.

Entangled in the straps, Dennis hastily pulled a small leather knapsack off his shoulder and thrust his hand inside. Yara, from her own experience knowing how difficult it was to part with the first marker, took a breath with relief. She began to crawl out of the pit, but here he took his hand out of the knapsack and... she again saw the stone. The three red berries could not be made out. Now it seemed that the entire stone was one enormous blazing berry. "Okay. I'll put it in the knapsack. Then what?" asked Dennis. Yara froze, anxiously looking at him. "You'll save the girl," she reminded him. "Yes, I know," he said impatiently. "But describe in greater detail!"

"*Duoka* is a world of deeper bedding,"⁴ Yara was speaking hastily. "Do you remember that before the dive we seemed to ourselves less real than the horses? It's because the pressure of our world is less. Our world still hasn't hardened, hasn't taken shape. It's seething, there're waves, but here everything has calmed down in the depth. What happens when you get down to the bottom and disturb an air bubble?" "It floats." "And a marker will float, though not alone, but together with you. You'll guide it through *the swamp*. There, in the dead world, they'll try to take it away from you. If the marker doesn't give you strength, you pass *the swamp* slowly. The elbes report to the warlocks your exit point, and those wait on hyeons for you. But, I hope, everything will be managed. In HDive you'll give the marker to Kavaleria. And... honestly speaking, I don't know what then. I know that the marker itself will arrange everything."

The crimson flashes were reflected in Dennis' pupils. They irritated Yara's eyes and she could not understand how the novice could look at the marker without blinking.

"And what about me?" Dennis asked brusquely. "You'll become a hdiver. Possibly, for several hours you'll have a headache. Nausea, sharp pain in the eyes, a cough. For bringing the marker and not keeping it for yourself, you have to pay. But this is also part of the path of a hdiver," Yara was talking rapidly, choking with words. Each second was precious. Dennis looked first at the stone, then at Yara. His fingers began to unclench, but suddenly they closed again.

"Give it to me!" asked Yara. "It'll be easier for you. The first time is always hard and painful." Dennis started to laugh nervously. "I'll give it. Certainly, I will! Do you think I'll keep it?" "I don't think so," she assured him in a hurry. She was feeling sorry already that she had begun to talk about this. "Why did you say it at all?" muttered Dennis. "You think I'm only saying that I'll give it but I

⁴ In geology, bedding is the arrangement of sedimentary rocks in strata.

won't? In your opinion, I don't want the girl to be healthy?" "Yes, I believe, I believe. Only unclench your fingers!" Yara rushed him. "I can put it in the knapsack myself."

Dennis licked his lips. His fingers were shaking. He almost let go, but suspicion flickered on his face in the last second. "Why do you want to take away my marker? How do I know that you'll return it to HDive? Maybe there isn't even a girl? I broke my fingers, they nearly finished me off in *the swamp!*" his voice broke. "What guarantees that Kavaleria won't keep my marker for herself? That she hasn't kept all the markers for herself?" Yara kept silent. It was pointless to answer.

Dennis' face was distorted. He jerked a hand up and decisively, as if trying to tear off his own face, ran it over the skin. "I don't know what I'm saying. I don't want to be someone evil! I'll give it, but a little later," he said in a sick voice. "Give it now! Please!" Yara repeated persistently. "Business isn't decided in a few minutes, is it? Do you think I can't deliver the marker to HDive myself? You all can, but I alone can't?" he again began to get irritated. "Of course you can. But the longer it remains with you, the..." "Nonsense! This was my job! They sent me for it! ME! Naturally it's easy for you, but not for me! How do you know that it's so? You have a heart like a young mare!"

Yara realized that this would go on forever. And the longer, the worse it would be. She no longer looked at Dennis' face, which sometimes brightened up, sometimes became obstinate, but at his fingers. The stone gradually faded. The scarlet radiance was creeping over onto his wrist. His nails were glowing as if enveloped in fire. Pretending to tie her laces, she squatted and then jumped him like a cat would. She succeeded in grabbing Dennis by the hand, but he hit her chin with the base of his right palm. Yara fell.

"Did you want to cheat me? YES? YES???" Yara sat on the sand and looked at the marker in his hand. "Excuse me for hitting you... Earlier I never raised a hand to... Why did you jump me?" Dennis, coming to his senses, muttered guilty. Yara got up silently and, reeling, walked to the horses. He overtook her, pushed her in the shoulder, and easily brought her down to the ground. She felt that he had become much stronger. The awkwardness and chaos of movements had disappeared. "Wait! I'll give it! But why, say why?" shouted Dennis. "We must," Yara responded frigidly. After the hit she was in a fog. "Whom do we owe this? We're the ones who dived here! By our own efforts! Like condemned men!"

Yara stood up and again walked to her horses. Dennis did not upend her again, he only barred her path. The radiance enveloped his entire hand and rose in thin streams to his elbow. His chicken-like chest was filled with strength. The right sagging shoulder rose. He even became taller, a little bit but nevertheless perceptible. Yara understood that she could not take away the marker by force. It was too late.

"You stop! I only want to understand!" Dennis shouted with desperation. "This marker will only help..." "Lyuba," Yara cut him off. "What Lyuba?" "What, you've forgotten? The girl has a name." He stumbled over the name and grimaced. "Ah, yes! Clear. Only her and no one else?" "Yes." "But that's not enough! How many sick children are in the world? And we'll help only one! It's unfair! It's settled! I'll quickly dive deeper, for rocks! There I'll find another marker, ten times stronger than this! I'll cure dozens of people of heart disease, hundreds!" He was talking feverishly, with passion, all the time believing more in his own words.

"Listen," Yara said tiredly. "We mustn't heal all of mankind! I don't know why, but we mustn't. It's not in our power. Our job is a specific girl, who is now three months... If you keep the marker for yourself, you'll never end up in *Duoka* anymore. Not just for the rocks, but not even here." Dennis both believed and disbelieved her.

"Lots you don't know!" he continued, justifying himself. "I never told anyone this... I had three heart surgeries in childhood. Three! Loads of things are never for me. If you would only know how much it cost me to learn to ride! I cover ten metres and I'm already gasping for breath... And here as if taunting me, they send me for a marker for the heart!" "Clear," Yara said quietly. "What's clear to

you? What?” Dennis exploded. “Why they charged precisely you to get this marker. The first time a hdiver is always tested for maximum pain. It was so with Ul, also with me.”

“It’s unfair!” Dennis obstinately repeated. “I could dive doubly better, if I were healthy. But if we do this... I’ll give this to the girl and keep another for myself? Which I’ll find next time? Eh?” “There won’t be a next time,” said Yara, at once cutting off all his hopes. “But if...” Dennis began carefully. “No ‘ifs’,” Yara said bitterly. “What don’t you understand? There are no ‘ifs’. This is *Duoka*.”

Dennis took a step towards her, hoping to explain something, but suddenly stopped and, after inclining his head, stared at himself. “Indeed I’m now agitated? But when I’m agitated, I gasp for breath,” he recalled belatedly. Having bent his arm at the elbow, Dennis with surprise clenched and unclenched his right hand. The pain from the bones had left. Ready coordinated strength filled his fingers. He rushed to the small puddle, got down on all fours and began to look. “You’ll never gasp for breath anymore,” said Yara. Dennis rose. Clay stains remained on his knees. “They always looked at me like at a freak! Everybody and always! Girls, whom I would like to meet, smiled at me like they were smiling at old men or sick cats!” he muttered, justifying himself.

Yara touched her nose with a closed hand. A red ball trembled on the back of the hand. “Excuse me! I must get to the horses,” she said. Dennis did not detain her. He ran beside her. He passed her, stopped, and turned around. “Is this marker indeed in me now, huh?” he repeated. “It turns out I now possess a gift! I’ll finish medical school, become a surgeon! And I’ll return this marker, I will! Don’t look at me this way!” Yara was also not looking at him. Only once in passing did she look at the hand with the marker. The stone was dim. It was possible to drop it safely. But Dennis certainly would not believe her and would drag this useless cobblestone with him.

Yara reached the horses. Eric neighed impatiently and caught the sleeve of her jacket with its teeth. She climbed into the saddle with difficulty, feeling her legs turning into cotton. Dennis, on the contrary, jumped onto Delta easily, like a grasshopper. He did not even recall the existence of stirrups. Now he again argued that there was no Lyuba and he simply would not let himself be fooled. Yara heard this already. Self-justifications always go in a circle until they stop at some argument, which seems maximally convincing to the one defending himself. In a day Dennis would even believe himself. He simply had no other way out.

Yara turned Eric around towards the Horseshoe Cliff. “Where are you going?” Dennis was surprised. “To that side. I’ll try to find a red marker. Ul says there are many more of them there. They won’t send another hdiver. The operation is today.” “Of course there isn’t any little idiot! Don’t you understand? They use us!” “Good-bye!”

Yara picked up the trowel and, scraping off a piece of bark the size of her palm from the pine tree, with the sharp edge of the shovel drew the hdiver sign: a circle and a cross. The circle came out uneven, only an outline, but this was unimportant. Whoever needs it would understand.

“Are you abandoning me? You’re my guide!” Dennis was alarmed. “You no longer need a guide. Delta knows the way back, and you’ll pass through *the swamp* easily. It’s only possible to take away a marker not merged with the person. The elves know this and they won’t report your point of exit to the warlocks.”

Another red drop fell onto Yara’s jacket. It was time to hurry. No one knew when strength would finally leave her. She shouted at the grown-lazy Eric and immediately urged it to a gallop. After galloping about thirty metres along the increasingly steep slope, Eric took to its wings. It gained altitude slowly. Yara sat in the saddle unsteadily, jolting from one wing to the other. She was in pain, suffocating, miserable, but already through the weariness appeared something new, for the time being unclear to her.

She heard how behind her Dennis was shouting at Delta, kicking it with his heels, beating it with the whip. The old mare strained, attempted to skip; however, it could not move even a metre to the rocks. Something invisible retained the horse by the pine tree. “Good,” thought Yara. “The blue marker, which we found first, is no longer for him to take. And that, perhaps, would do.”

Yara looked around no more. She knew that neither on a horse nor on foot nor crawling would *Duoka* allow Dennis to the rocks. Possibly, it would still be a considerable time before Dennis finally realized that there was only one direction of motion for him now – to *the swamp*. And he understood this. He lowered the whip and, after turning the tormented Delta around, flew to where dawn, in spite of the customary flow of things, switched over to the cold dull twilight. He flew and, cursing everything in the world, recalled against his will the small figure moving away in the direction of the Horseshoe Cliff.

Five months later

Chapter 3

“Gomorrah” Receives Guests

*The harder the nut of a soul, the harder one must hit it against a stone
in order to reach the meat.*

Henri Alphonse Babu, Kenyan thinker

*Can never go upwards rolling down.
Law of universal gravitation*

On an April evening of 201*, the well-known floating restaurant with the flirtatious name of Gomorrah,⁵ situated in a quiet park by the Moscow River, was not receiving strangers from five in the evening. The extensive parking lot in front of Gomorrah was cordoned off. Brawny men in austere suits not hampering movements approached vehicles driving up and politely requested them not to park. Automobiles made U-turns and drove off. Someone had time to notice that a small truck with the sides lowered was occupying the centre of the area. In its body was something bulky, covered.

However, they did not chase away all automobiles. They let some through, those who sat inside did not show a permit, only lowered the glass slightly. Far from all of the cars “approved” by security were luxury class. Among them were old foreign brands, beat-up Zhigulis,⁶ and neutral minibuses. At close to seven in the evening, eight motorcycles in a single group drove up.

Another curious detail was that exactly four people always got out of the dashing right-hand-drive Toyota with cracks on the windshield, the insanely expensive Porsche, the obscurely tinted SUV, and the minibuses. Each team of four kept together and as a single organism went up the clattering metallic gangway leading into Gomorrah. The teams of four were mixed. There were not so many muscular guys in good shape. There were enough women, old men, girls, and young people looking like students.

In the parking lot – a stretched-out field of asphalt divided into blocks by twin round bushes – the vehicles that arrived made up large groups. In each were thirty automobiles with one more in front. In the middle group, eight motorcycles replaced two cars.

After destroying the precise geometry, a powerful Hummer rushed past the astonished guard pointing out to it the parking spot at the head of the central herd of automobiles and, having flown about a hundred metres, rammed the side of a new Bentley. From the blow, the Bentley turned over twice on the spot. The front wheels flew off the bank, but the car did not fall off, instead it was hanging steadily on its bottom.

A girl of sixteen, pert and pretty, got out from the driver’s side of the Hummer. The better look you had of her, the more puzzled you would be, although, it seemed, all of her was in sight. In order to form an initial and completely lasting impression of a man, one needs ten minutes. That of a girl is two seconds. And two more, because it will surely appear that you understood everything incorrectly. And two more... And again... With the last two seconds invariably stretching to infinity.

The girl approached the Bentley, pushed it appraisingly with a foot, then again returned to the Hummer and began to back up, intending on toppling the Bentley into the river. “Anya, stop!” a displeased voice demanded from the Hummer. “But Dad!” protested the girl. “It’s the Tills’ car! And

⁵ In the Old Testament, Gomorrah was one of the two ancient cities, the other being Sodom, destroyed by God because of the wickedness of its people.

⁶ A 4-door sedan produced in the Soviet Union between 1970 and 1988, the compact is known as Zhiguli domestically and as Lada outside of Russia.

they've attached themselves to me, by the way!" "All the same, stop! I forbid it!" "But Dad! I'll only finish it and immediately stop!" "ANYA!"

The Hummer stopped angrily. The girl jumped out in annoyance and turned her back to the car, showing that she was extremely offended. Another girl, somewhat three years older, got out from the Hummer after her. She approached Anya from behind and, after first lowering a hand onto her shoulder, said something quietly. Anya shrugged her shoulders. Without paying this any attention, the older girl continued to talk. A little later Anya started to laugh, grabbed her by the wrist, and impatiently pulled her towards Gomorrah. "Run! You'll have a great time!" she promised. "We'll see," answered the older one. It was noticed that she had doubts about this.

From the back of the Hummer stepped out a rather dry, tall, and round-shouldered man in a black suit, holding a large old-fashioned umbrella with a bent handle. The rather prominent shoulder blades of the man and the shape of the umbrella's handle amazingly echoed each other. They echoed in such a way that in the wrong evening light it could seem that this umbrella was carrying the man, or two umbrellas were carrying each other... On the whole, one never knows what will appear in the wrong evening light.

The head of security, a stout man with catlike movements and bulldog eyes, ran up to him. "Albert Fedorovich!" Bulldog eyes attempted to smile, but lost the smile in his cheeks. "Everyone's here! Both Beldo and (an embarrassed look at the Bentley)... eh-eh... the Tills. They're only waiting for you!" The man with the umbrella stopped. He turned. Colourless and flat fish eyes met dog eyes. The bulldog became ill at ease. There are no cowardly piranhas. Cowardly bulldogs are rare but possible. "And Guy's only waiting for me?" he asked with suspicion. "Guy's not here yet." "Had to start with this! Get to work, Vtorov! Showing friendliness isn't part of your direct responsibilities! Anya, let's go!"

The man with the umbrella glanced around at the girls and made his way to the boat. The iron bridge resting on high buoys began to make a chomping sound. An empty plastic bottle floated out from under the bridge and, hitting against the side, was dragged away slowly by the current. The extensible doors of Gomorrah opened and closed.

A young guard from the new recruits ran up to bulldog eyes. "Who was it in the Hummer? Dolbushin himself?" he asked excitedly. The head of security looked at him suspiciously, checking if he had heard how they shouted at him. No, he did not. Or was pretending that he had not. "Dolbushin, head of fort two!" he said unwillingly. "And who rammed the Tills' car? His daughter?" "He seldom brings her," Vtorov screwed up his face, as if all his teeth started to ache at the same time. He imagined that he had to explain to Till Sr. what he was busy with when the Hummer knocked his car into the river.

"Ah-h..." the young one drawled. "The girl's not bad. I wouldn't mind her." "Her father also wouldn't mind shooting you," Vtorov clarified. The young one pertly evaded. "And who's the second one?" "First time I've seen her," Vtorov said dryly. "Maybe a friend of the daughter. Maybe a new recruit." "Ah-h..." again the young one drawled. "And why is Dolbushin with an umbrella? Afraid to get wet?" "Somehow you meet him in the alley. You with a crossbow and he with the umbrella," bulldog eyes advised irritably and, as a sign that the conversation was over, took a step towards the river.

Dolbushin and his daughter disappeared into Gomorrah at around seven thirty. At quarter to eight Vtorov with uneasiness pressed his headset with a finger, answered something curtly, and gave the sign to his people. Security began to bustle. Two ran up to the jeep and, having jumped into the body, pulled off the tarpaulin. Under the tarpaulin turned out to be a combat arbalest of an intimidating size.

One of the men – swarthy, with a healthy bald spot similar to the rind of a watermelon – having jumped into the jeep, took aim and looked uninterruptedly at the bright red dot. The tip of his tongue, stuck out, with bluish veins on the underside, slid along his lips. His partner – with a crew cut and a

complex spider tattoo from the wrists up to the elbows – set in motion the pneumatic windlass and put into the trench an arrow with a three-edged tip. According to its shape, this was precisely an arrow and not a shorter and more massive bolt.

“Estimated time: thirty... twenty-five... twenty...” he muttered, continuously looking at his wrist. The watch intertwined with the tattoo, disrupting its intricate figure. The red dot of the reflex sight poked into the breaks of the endless violet cloud like crumbled cotton, unhurriedly creeping in the direction of Pechatnikov. The forefinger with the phalanx blue from pressure froze on the trigger. Broth-like drops of sweat on the melon-like bald spot flowed together into islands and continents.

Suddenly a voice, like many splinters glued together, began to rattle in the headset of the shooter. The voice squeezed into the ears, cut into the brain. “Yes, Guy!” not taking his eyes off the sight, the arbalester reported. “An observer at Strogino spotted him fifty seconds ago. He’s probably flying in our direction. Yes, looks like the same screwy one, which... Ooph!!! Here he is!” The steel “arms” of the arbalest straightened. The tattooed fellow was working like a robot. The pneumatics barely had time to cock the bowstring and a new arrow was already lying in the trench. The cat-and-dog-like chief of security flew to the jeep, “Well? Got it?” “Something flickered... Seems it shouldn’t have missed the mark!” the arbalester answered doubtfully and suddenly bent down, saving his head.

A column of water shot up the Moscow River about fifty metres from Gomorrah. Terrible, soundless, glassy black. It seemed the river had grown a terrible finger piercing the clouds. The glass finger stopped in the clouds and, shattered, came down onto Gomorrah shuddering from the impact. It swept the security along the parking lot. It plucked the shooter and his assistant off the jeep, flipped them over, and almost drowned them in the shallow, furiously seething water running off into the river.

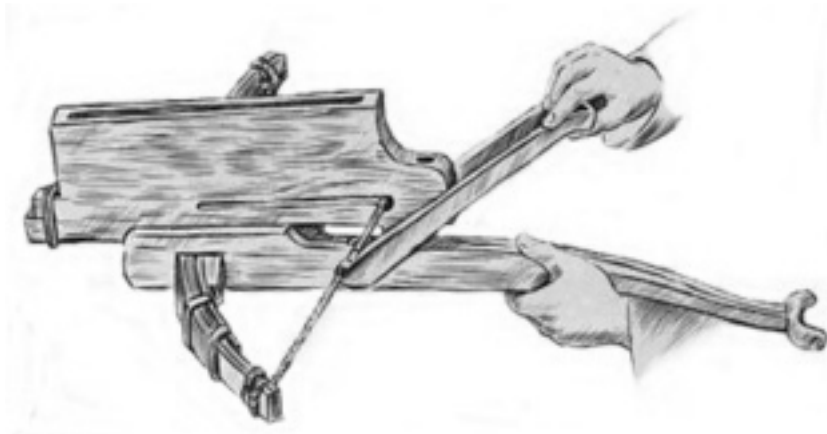
The chief of security got up, holding onto the side of the jeep. Water was flowing from him. There was blood on his right cheek. A siren howled. Ten cars on the edge, on which most of the weight of the water had come down, had their roofs crushed. Contrary to expectation, Gomorrah suffered little damage. Several hatches were knocked out, the dome of the winter garden sagged, and the gangway was torn off. The Moscow River had already licked clean its wound and was running as if nothing was the matter.

The tattooed fellow, limping, approached Vtorov. “Something splashed!” he said uncertainly. There were bags under the bulldog eyes. The upper lip began to tremble like a dog baring its teeth. “Splashed?!” “Already after the explosion,” Tattoo hurriedly added and drew with a finger from top to bottom, as if tracking someone’s path. Vtorov squinted. “Verify!” he ordered. Tattoo did not want to climb into the water. “Such a current there! Even if something fell, already carried away!” “Verify, you’re told!” The fellow went, uncomfortably looking around. It was heard how he yelled and demanded a boat. A motor began to clatter somewhere behind Gomorrah.

Vtorov coughed for bravery and turned on the microphone, “They dropped an attack marker on us... It passed. You can go, Guy! They won’t reach a new marker today!” said Vtorov into the microphone. “Sure?” “I guarantee it! The arbalesters think that they could bring it down.” “Stake your life on it?” a voice tinkled in the headset. The chief of security swallowed. His Adam’s apple rolled like a small apple and again emerged above the collar.

After about ten minutes, two automobiles crept out of the park, dodging along the twisting road. A massive SUV with blue flashing lights blinking silently, and immediately behind it, glued to its bumper, a long armoured Mercedes. Both cars easily broke the security chain and drove up to the gangway of Gomorrah. The doors of the SUV opened while still in motion. Four men with Chinese army-model crossbows with cartridges sprung out onto the asphalt. In some ways, they resembled wooden boxes and evoked a questioning smile, but only to those who had not seen them in action. Bolts with recessed plumage slid into the trench under their own weight. The crossbow was cocked with the movement of a lever. The arbalesters moved to the Mercedes and surrounded it. Two squatted

down to their knees. Those who remained standing took aim at the sky. The other two aimed at the bushes. Vtorov, blue from diligence, courteously opened the rear door.



From the automobile, a sinewy, lithe man of medium height slipped more than walked out. He raised his hands above his head. He snapped his fingers. The jumping reflection of a blinker picked up his face at random from the semidarkness. It was similar to a deflated ball, having lain in a room at night. There were bags and bumps. It was swollen in one place and it sunk in unpredictably in another. The mouth was small, capricious, feminine. The lips were chubby. It seemed a teaspoon could not even push through, but with a smile, the mouth suddenly widened, extended. And it became clear, not only an apple but also a whole person could swallow dive in there and disappear without a trace. The teeth were bluish, close together. The hair was curly, to the shoulders. The eyes were not visible: dark glasses like round saucers. And this was Guy.

* * *

Gomorrah (formerly the triple-decker cruiser Dmitrii Ulyanov, retired by the Volga Steamship Line at the end of the last century) was eternally docked at one of the picturesque places of the Moscow River. Since then it had changed hands many times. It had been a casino, a nightclub, and a floating hotel, until the next owner with the last name Zhora opened a restaurant here. His business did not go badly, but then he became gloomy and nervous. Either he laughed for four hours straight so that they were afraid to visit him in the cabin, or sobbed, then before the very eyes of everybody cut his own veins and shouted for them to save him because he did not do this. It all ended when Zhora stumbled here on the deck, hit his head and died, they say, even before he fell into the river.

Soon after Zhora's funeral (for some reason everyone was embarrassed to place a cross, and they also only briefly wrote "Zhora" on the headstone without a last name or dates), it turned out that Gomorrah had a new owner, who purchased it almost on the very day of the old owner's death. The new owner was a man wearing scent, with a pleasant voice, wore tight suits, ridiculous ties, and was constantly smiling. His last name was in its own way more striking than Zhora – Nekalaev, with an "e".⁷ He brought very beautiful chrysanthemums to Zhora's grave and stood for a long time, wiping his eyes with a handkerchief. Despite his never shouting at anyone and even extremely politely calling the mute seventeen-year-old maid Faride Ayazovna, waiters and cooks feared him to the point of trembling. At the same time, Gomorrah became Gomorrah. Prior to this, it was called something in Italian, with a hint of the southern sun and languid women in hats with a wide brim.

⁷ "Nekalaev" is very similar to the common last name "Nikolaev" and the pronunciations of both are almost the same. "Nekalaev" can even be "Nikolaev" misspelled.

Waving off Nekalaev, who was about to climb up to him with a handshake, Guy quickly went to the elevator. Since its pseudo-Italian days, the inside of Gomorrah had been greatly overhauled. Now on the lower deck were a kitchen and two-three cabins for personnel and technical accommodations. On the second was the restaurant proper. The third, the upper deck, was re-equipped for holding VIP presentations and private parties. Guy made his way there, to the third. Nekalaev, not even allowed by the arbalesters into the elevator, remained outside. In the glazed doors of the closed elevator was reflected his polite smiling face, not getting tired for a second.

The third deck buzzed like a cluster of wasps. The motliest set of people filled it. Next to the outrageous suits from Sir Zalmon Batrushka and the evening gowns from Laura Bzykko were red jackets of road workers, lady's lacy knitted jackets, sweaters smelling of tobacco...

In a corner far from the elevator, screened off from the rest of the hall by smart half-height walls with teeth, from which spouted illuminated streams of small fountains, rather strange people were crowding around. Some were pale with sunken cheeks, slowly dancing in one spot. They would raise and lower a hand, raise and lower. On their faces was frozen rubbery bliss. Others, on the contrary, were blotchily rosy, excited. These, however, were moving so swiftly that it was incomprehensible how a person could maintain such a pace. They were laughing, continuously touching each other, and heatedly talking about something. One fellow was laughing, laughing, and then at equal intervals suddenly started to yell briefly and terribly. On a sign from Dolbushin they led him away, firmly and adroitly holding him by the elbows.

Dolbushin himself walked with the umbrella, greeted some people, grinned at some in the simulation of a smile, and simply rewarded some with a flat look. Usually something is reflected in the eyes of a man as in a mirror. Dolbushin's eyes reflected exactly nothing. They were like black holes. Light was pulled into them and disappeared somewhere. He only looked once in the direction of the "enclosure" and spoke through clenched teeth, "Herd mentality! They've no idea how to behave at all! Only why give them psyose?⁸ I don't understand Guy!"

Anya was chattering non-stop. She enjoyed having the older friend beside her. She was sincerely proud of her friend like being proud of expensive accessories or friendship with a celebrity. Although her friend was not a celebrity and was dressed in things from Anya's own wardrobe. At least here on Gomorrah, no one looked particularly at the clothing. Here they would even treat a naked person in a fire helmet calmly.

Anya knew little about her friend. Only that her name was Paulina and that Father had brought her home a while back. Thin, weak, complaining about a headache, with a burn on her right cheek. Paulina recovered slowly but behaved independently and simply. She managed to stay as herself in an environment where everyone wanted to look like someone else. Accustomed to solitude since childhood, home-schooled, and rarely seeing others of her own age, Anya was immediately drawn to her. Dolbushin was not too pleased about this, but he was hardly home after all.

"In my dad's fort are solid eccentrics," chattered Anya, pulling Paulina by the sleeve. "Look over there! Do you see that modestly dressed old man, who is shoving pastries into his pockets and thinking that no one sees this? The largest diamond in the world belongs to him!" "Really not to the English queen?" Paulina was astonished. "No, she has the second or the third. Papa says this old man has the largest. And Dad also says that he hasn't seen his diamond for about fifteen years. He's afraid they would shadow him. Interesting, where does he hide it?"

Paulina looked thoughtfully at the old man who soiled his pockets with cream and was now wiping his hand clean in a hurry. "But if he's so rich, why is he so shabby?" she asked. "Who told you that he's rich?" Anya was surprised. "He's practically a pauper. He hangs around forever as a guest. Yes, he has the largest diamond, but he has no money." "But if he can't even see his diamond, why

⁸ Psyose will be explained in Chapter 7.

doesn't he sell it? At least to your father?" Paulina did not understand. "Really so hard to understand? Then he wouldn't have the largest diamond in the world!" Anya laughed, dragging Paulina further.

"And there, that uncle with the goblet..." Anya whispered, pushing Paulina to the side, "smells the smell of money. Roubles, dollars, Euros, any paper money rustling. He can distinguish the smell of a hundred from the smell of a thousand. A one-rouble coin from a two-rouble coin! And all this, mind you, through a concrete wall! But only money! He can't distinguish a fish from a rose by the smell! Well, to him they have no smell!"

Paulina looked with interest at the man who could not distinguish the smell of a rose from a fish. He smiled at her and dashingly, like a hussar, drank up the champagne. His Adam's apple rolled along his neck. The goblet was empty. "Two hundred and two roubles and four kopecks! One of the notes is slightly torn. Should be more careful, girl!" he shouted to Paulina, nodding towards her right pocket.

Anya laughed and dragged Paulina further. "And do you see that tall woman there?" she continued to chatter. "Ask her what will be the value of any stock for next Friday, and if she makes a mistake even down to a kopeck, I'll give you my shoes with rhinestones. Well, the ones you called 'Turkish slippers'."

Manoeuvring among the guests, the friends by chance turned up by the "enclosure." "Anya!!! How are you!!! Come to us!" someone shouted. A quite young girl with rosy patches on her cheeks jumped out of the "enclosure" and with happy exclamation threw herself at Dolbushin's daughter. With a speed difficult to expect from a man so solid, Dolbushin cracked from the waist up, roughly caught the girl by the neck with the handle of the umbrella, and threw her back inside the enclosure. "Tries to sneak up to my daughter again, shoot her!" he ordered the bodyguard. That one, not surprised, thrust his hand under his coat and extracted a small, toy-like and not-scary-looking crossbow. Anya gripped her father's hand. "Only try! What's the matter, Dad? It's Ella!" "Was

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