

THE HUSTLER

ONE CUP CHRONICLES SERIES



VLADIMIR ROSS

Vladimir Ross

The Hustler

«Издательские решения»

Ross V.

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From a young age, Alexei has loved the art of gambling. It gave his life meaning through all the hardships he endured. When his father mysteriously disappears and his mother is taken ill, Alexei turns to his craft in order to survive. Over the course of his life, he becomes infamous, sitting at card tables with some of the most influential players in the world. He never imagined he could lose everything in one night, thanks to his own lucky charm and a mysterious challenger.

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The hustler

In the criminal underworld, money goes by many names. Some use the term “dead presidents.” Others use less creative expressions – moolah, dough. One of the most distinctive names, however, is a rather practical description: bread. Along with the consumers of this bread, bread which is as necessary for life as its namesake, comes a game.

Alexei made his living as a gambler. It would be very difficult to find a game, no matter the rules, principles, or essences, with which Alexei was not completely familiar. A phenomenal memory and persistent lifelong training allowed him to easily conquer any challenge laid before him. His signature game, and his favored tool of profit-making and self-assertion, was backgammon.

Alexei was eight years old when he first saw his father – a man who, between jails and criminal work camps, had always been gone – a man who went by the name Big. He just turned up one day at the house of his son who, upon rushing to open the door, found himself face-to-face with a gray-haired man. He wore an elegant black suit paired with a brimmed felt hat; he was a man of both presentable appearance and worldly luck. The stranger’s smile formed two rows of gold crowns as he extended a tiny bundle to the boy, and asked, “Well what are you gawking at, boy? I’ll deal with you soon enough, now where’s your whore of a mother?”

The boy went red. He wasn’t prepared to acknowledge such an insult. He turned his attention to unwrapping the gift. Fishing his hand inside the leather pouch he found some ordinary dice. Lyoshka threw the gift into the dustiest corner of the closet, when he was startled by a rude shout.

“You little bastard! I’ll beat the skin off a you, get over here!”

For the first time in his life, Lyoshka was truly frightened. He couldn’t begin to imagine what he should expect from his papa, who had only checkered his life with various obscenities and strange, confusing rules. Summoning up his courage, the boy tucked his head between his shoulders and went into his father’s room. Lyoshka came to a stop before him, peering at the intricate, well-worn frescoes adorning the walls. His father nodded toward the table where lay the already-familiar cubes and asked, “What are those?”

It seemed that those paternal eyes tossed lightning and that his voice boomed thunder.

“I threw them away,” the boy whispered.

“There’s no room for backtalk in my house. I’m only interested in whether or not you know what these are.”

“Cubes...”

“What? Cubes!?” His father almost had a stroke. His eyes bulging, he roared, “Or maybe they’re balls? No? Then remember, you dumbass, normal people call them ‘dice’.”

Lyoshka sniffed loudly. His father quickly calmed down, sighed, and said warmly, “Son, it’s the bread that you eat. It’s the air that makes you a real man. Never, you hear me, never abuse them. Dice must be respected, and they’ll pay you back in kind.”

Lowering his eyes, the boy fell silent, not quite understanding what his father was trying to explain to him.

“I see. I arrived in time. Predict the stones!”

“Me?” replied Lyoshka, unsure.

“You and you alone. Come on, no stalling.”

Thinking for a moment, the boy blurted out, “Five – three.”

“Good choice,” his father beamed. And now, let’s see – he squeezed the dice in his hand, whispered some mysterious words and, much like a circus performer, threw the dice onto the coffee table with a flourish.

Lyoshka was stunned. Never again did the magic touch as deeply as it did then. He looked incredulously at the dice from every angle. No matter how he looked at them, the five and three

stamped into the top of the dice never changed. Handing the dice back over to the sorcerer himself, he asked his father for a five – five.

His father held the boy's gaze, hid the dice away in his hands and repeated the ritual, incantation and all. The ensuing fiver jackpot drove an eternal love for the game into his son's heart.

Two months after his initiation, all Lyoshka did was study to improve his various focuses. He hadn't parted with his father's gift since his awakening, holding firmly to his belief in the stones' magical powers.

One morning, the father called the boy over to him, sat the boy on his knee, and spoke to him sternly.

“Son, promise me you'll take care of your mother if something ever happens to me.”

“Dad,” Lyoshka startled himself, for the first time naming this stranger Papa. “What could ever happen?”

“Just promise, and don't ask!”

“I swear!”

“Also promise that instead of playing with idiotic cars and toy weapons, you'll play checkers, backgammon, chess, cards, and even after amassing all the wisdom of such crafts, you'll be the first to play ‘for the very air.’ If I ever disappear, I will leave you my register with a list of debtors. Call on them if you ever find yourself in desperate circumstances.”

“You have my word.”

“Alright then.”

As quickly as his father appeared in his life, so too did he vanish. His mother, unable to hold back her tears, merely went to her son and held him close. Lyoshka needed no explanation.

He never forgot the about deal he made with his father. Incapable of coping with the boredom of school, Alexei would sneak out of his dreary chemistry, history, and geography classes and meander over to the chess and checkers club. Amongst his father's belongings were found books filled with mathematical card tricks which he would commit to heart. The boy's memory knew no bounds, and his vision was superb. In the sixth grade, while barely making C's in humanitarian studies, he came home with proud A's in math, physics, and geometry. He was dubbed the chess champion of the region amongst his peers.

His mother alone could not scrape up enough to provide for a growing boy's needs, let alone buy him fashionable clothing. The only thing which was holy, each and every day, was one ruble for lunch. Any time she fell ill, was injured, or ended up without work – hunger struck. Alexei looked upon advertisements from high-end clothing stores with a stony stare.

In the eighth grade, when he was already considering the meaninglessness of his studies in an eternally hunger-panged life, one of his classmates called Sucker (for the overbearing, loving care his father gave him – his father was some important boss somewhere) went over to the chalkboard during the class shift.

“Well, ladies, does anyone wanna play?”

Alexei disengaged himself from a perplexing chess move and asked, “Play what?”

Pulling a deck of cards from his pocket, Sucker masterfully shuffled the cards from one hand to the other and smirked.

“You know this isn't tic-tac-toe, right?” he said. “Board games are for chumps. Real men play cards.” Lyoshka modestly declined. “What, mommy doesn't give you an allowance? I can start a line of credit for you!”

Beaming internally, Alexei accepted the challenge. They agreed to play for a ruble. For several years now, he had saved up about a hundred rubles by eating cheap dumpling pies at lunch. Upon agreeing to a game, Lyoshka was already thinking about winning more than just a few bucks, rather, about solving his troubles at home.

Alexei lost the first ruble. On purpose. He continued to lose in this fashion every day until about 30 rubles were left, but he upped the ante anyway. The thought of all this money in the pot got Sucker worked up and, flaunting his status, he decided he would put the squeeze on his opponent.

“I say we go all in. Go big or go home. A thousand riding on one pot. And may the loser go crying home to mommy.”

The students were speechless. A classmate nudged Alexei’s arm and whispered, “Don’t even think about it. It’s a trap.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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