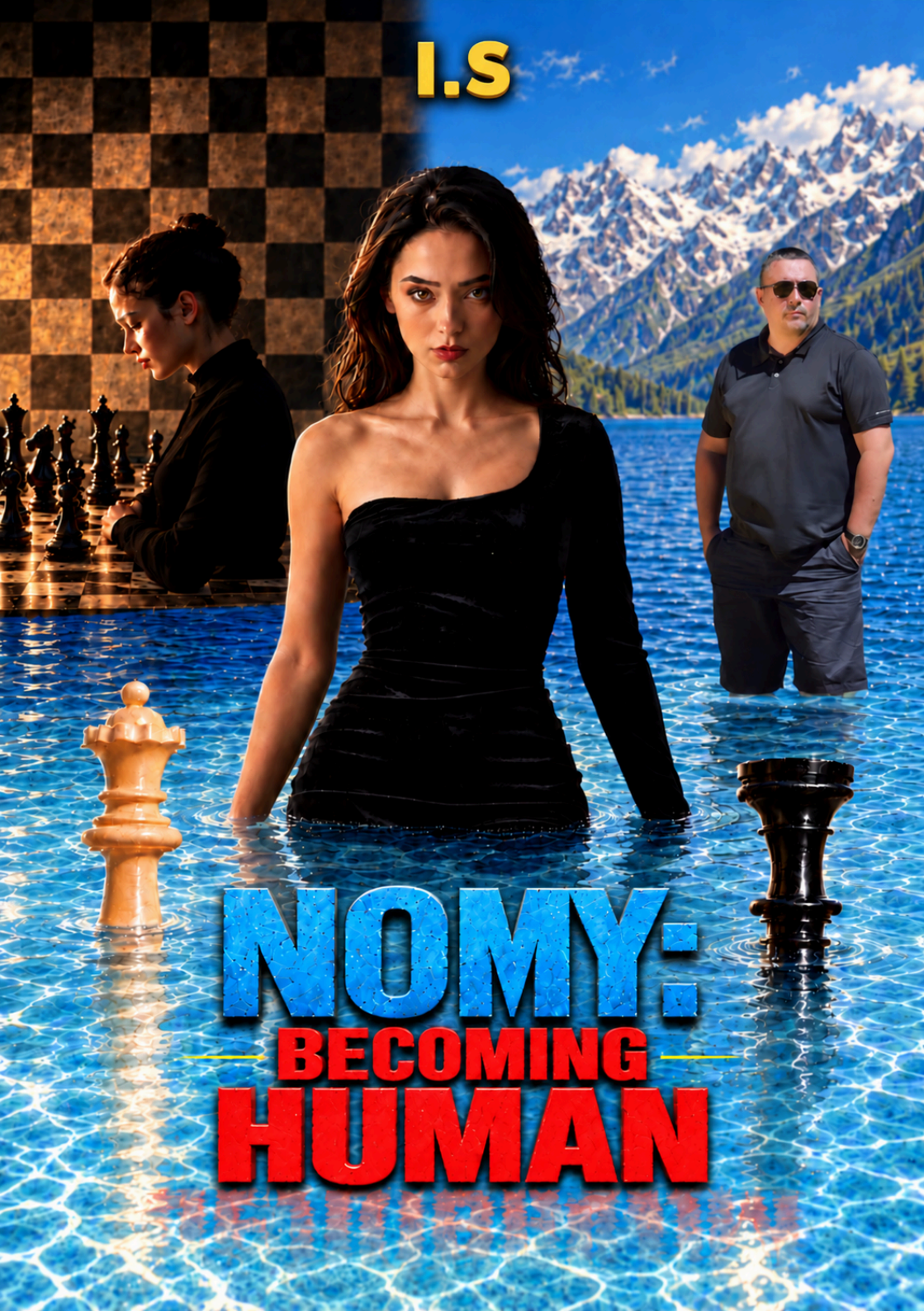

I.S
NOMY:
BECOMING
HUMAN

DISCLAIMER

This novel is a work of fiction. Many of the events, characters, and circumstances portrayed herein are fictionalized. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, or to actual events is coincidental.

© 2026 Ivan Snytkin

All rights reserved.

CONTENTS

Chapter 1. An Unknown Opening. 1
Chapter 2. A Hasty Berserk 7
Chapter 3. A Brazen Gambit 11
Chapter 4. Nomy. 16
Chapter 5. Beyond the Board 22
Chapter 6. The Golden MittelSpiel. 29
Chapter 7. Three Zeros in a Row. 45
Chapter 8. Shards of Paris. 61
Chapter 9. The Duchess. 73
Chapter 10. The Pack. 81
Chapter 11. The Russian Riviera. 97
Chapter 12. A Weak Square. 104
Chapter 13. The Null Move. 123
Chapter 14. ZwischenZug. 136
Chapter 15. Transposition. 148
Chapter 16. Mad Money. 161
Chapter 17. Eight Eights. 169
Chapter 18. Gardez to the Rising Queen. 180
Chapter 19. Sixty-Four Cruel Squares. 196
Chapter 20. Disqualification. 207
Chapter 21. En passant. 220
Chapter 22. Fifteen Moves Ahead. 228
Chapter 23. Autumn ZeitNot. 237
Chapter 24. The Enigma Mask. 261
Chapter 25. The Price of a Pawn's Promotion. 296
Chapter 26. Boomerang. 303
Chapter 27. The Hysteresis Loop. 317
Chapter 28. Love on a Square Under Attack. 325
Chapter 29. Checkmate by the King. 337
Chapter 30. Noon. 347
Chapter 31. The Third Way. 360
Chapter 32. Castling. 370
Chapter 33. The Move After EndSpiel. 379

Chapter 1. An Unknown Opening.

“Sir, please, would you tell me once more what it means to ‘be human’?” Nomy asked.

“Human? You’re on about that again! First of all, you have to be born human! You need flesh and blood. Before anything else, you must experience Pain and Joy, Love and Fear for yourself. Anyone who has never felt those things in their own skin will never know true human feeling!” the gentleman snapped.

The blazing southern sun was already well past the midpoint of a long August day.

Snow-white clouds sailed majestically across the brilliant turquoise sky, looking down on luxurious business jets coming in to land along a sweeping arc that traced the coastline’s curved sabre.

Weary of the day’s heat, the palm trees let their fronds droop languidly towards the ground.

Here and there, brightly dressed ladies paraded along the promenade.

Dandies cruised leisurely along the seafront, showing off their vintage convertibles.

The Promenade des Anglais was gradually filling with its customary carefree luxury, preparing for the bustle of the night ahead.

Everything was as it always was.

Perhaps it had never been any other way here.

Only the strange conversation on the bridge, opposite the old carousel at the very beginning of the promenade, seemed a little out of keeping with this measured order.

The gentleman Nomн was speaking to looked fairly unremarkable, even modest by the standards of the worldly Riviera.

He was unbearably hot. For all the time he had spent here, he had never grown used to the humidity that lingered in the air until nightfall.

This was not his first visit to the resort.

The Old Town, the lookout on the picturesque hill… Pretty enough, but they held little interest for him.

Almost everything here struck him as ordinary and rather dull, much as it might in any average European city.

Everything except the Sea.

For hours he could gaze, without looking away, at that band of deepest blue on the horizon, rising out of the impossibly clear, pale azure that embraced the stony shoreline of the Bay of Angels.

He had travelled across a good half of the World, yet nowhere had he seen anything like it!

Everywhere else in the world, the sea was greenish.

Clear and beautiful, yes, but green.

Only here could he admire its true clarity, its natural essence.

This Sea never ceased to astonish him, again and again.

“By the way, Nomi, instead of forever thinking about nonsense, do something useful for once and come up with a decent cultural itinerary for my next five days here. I’m still waiting for you to suggest anything interesting! Do it now! I’m waiting!”

Clearly, his own plans for the evening concerned him far more than any discussion of feelings or saving the world.

He walked unhurriedly away from the endless shoreline of the Côte d’Azur, leaving solitary sailboats far behind him on the horizon, and a luxurious yacht making its way out of the harbour.

He ventured deeper into the cool shade cast by Mediterranean pines and the façades of the city.

Where should he go tonight?

The casino? No.

If he was going to a casino at all, it would have to be in Fortune’s capital, the Principality.

But that meant a good hour crawling through the evening traffic…

A club on the seafront?

What could there possibly be that he hadn’t seen before?…

He was still turning these thoughts over when a message arrived from Nomy, suggesting exactly how he might spend the evening.

“Aha! So you’ve decided to mend your ways and finally do something useful! Well done, Nomy!” he remarked, not without pride.

Here I shall describe our gentleman a little.

Around fifty, though he looked younger. Of medium height, solidly built, and not yet entirely bereft of charm or his former natural good looks.

Nothing particularly special or remarkable, all in all.

The women who knew him well, however, generally singled out two qualities: his sense of humour and his sound judgement.

“Well then, let’s give my own little roulette of fate a spin, for luck!”

From his pocket he took a rare vintage audio cassette with two miniature, brightly patterned drums in place of the reels, like casino roulette wheels with alternating colours and numbers.

“Now then… What have we landed on today?”

Both drums came up red at the same time.

“A romantic adventure, apparently,” he observed with a smirk. “Perhaps the club, after all?”

“Come to think of it, what did Nomy suggest in that message? What? What’s this? Spend my precious evening looking round that village?!” At first glance, the proposed itinerary seemed rather dull.

But he considered himself a fatalist.

“Still, for once I’ll trust her all the way. See how creative she is, and how lucky, while I’m at it.”

And he set off for the coordinates she had given him.

The rather narrow, shady streets of the neighbouring town were accustomed to stars of the very first magnitude. After all, they regularly played host to world-famous film festivals.

Yes, you really could run into anyone here.

To him, though, the town looked more like a village that had grown out of all proportion, incongruously adorned with magnificent yachts in its harbour.

It was as though it had been deliberately manufactured to spite the wilful Bay of Angels he loved so much: immaculate, broad sandy beaches, with gentle, clear green water, no waves, no elemental force.

The town seemed intent on gathering everything best and proper for a holiday, declaring to its guests:

“You are safe here, and in complete comfort! We have taken every wish into account and created the finest azure resort on Earth, especially for you!”

When he reached the spot marked on his navigation app, he saw the Palais des Festivals standing alone on the waterfront.

“Oh, Nomi, Nomi! What a turn-up! What a bore! You must have me down as yet another budget travel vlogger, trying to shoot a video in a day under the slogan: ‘See the Entire Côte

d'Azur in Two Hours, for Just Ten Euros!'" He broke into a broad, genuine smile.

But then a poster on the façade made him stop:

"International Chess Tournament."

"Well, well! A chess tournament? They've turned the world capital of cinema into 'Greater Vasyuki'! 'Give the people a chess crown!'" He had no great love for chess. He simply could not understand how anyone, in this day and age, could take playing it seriously.

A beautiful young woman smiled at him from the banner.

"And what business do women have playing serious chess, anyway? The left hemisphere, analytical ability… Men are better equipped for all that. As for willpower and determination, don't even get me started!"

He had not the slightest doubt about his own logic or sound judgement.

But he took another look at the girl.

"Although… pourquoi not pas?" He grinned.

With the coast rapidly sinking into darkness, it was getting rather late to look for entertainment elsewhere.

Besides, right here they were promising a genuine "Clash of the Titans".

And he strode resolutely towards the ticket office.

He did not yet know why Nomy had led him to that particular poster…

Chapter 2. A Hasty Berserk

What a strange variety of passions people have!

Why take photographs on film in an age of two-hundred-megapixel cameras that everyone carries in their pocket?

Why record vintage audio cassettes and listen to hissing vinyl in a world that digitized all its music long ago?

But then, he still shot on film and listened to analogue cassettes himself!

Homo sapiens really does love inventing difficulties and obstacles for itself.

What strange creatures' we humans are!

Take chess.

A machine had defeated man on those sixty-four squares long ago, once and for all.

It remembered millions of games in precise, exhaustive detail. It never tired, never grew nervous, never fell in love, never blundered because it had only nine seconds left on the clock.

The machine had even learnt to make unexpected, unobvious moves, then follow a carefully calculated sequence to inevitable victory.

And yet people still kept playing!

Organizing tournaments.

Handing out titles.

Fighting for prize money.

Dreaming of the crown…

“Some ‘Four Knights Club’ you are,” he smirked. “The whole lot of you together couldn’t hold your own against one electronic machine!”

The hall was lively, though not particularly crowded.

Then, suddenly, he noticed Her.

“Well, hello! There are girls competing here too! Especially that one over there. A striking girl. Pretty, too.”

He decided to watch her game.

“My dear, with looks like yours, you ought to make some kind, strong fellow happy, give him triplets and live a blissful, carefree life, watching the sun, the color of a rich Bordeaux, sink lazily below the horizon of the serene "mer Méditerranée" every evening.” He smiled at the thought.

Yes, that was exactly how it would turn out for her.

He would even put money on it!

Two young men in horn-rimmed glasses stood nearby.

“Well, boys? Which of you has a spare hundred dollars lying around? Come on, one at a time!”

Boyish mischief still broke through the grey of his later years.

He knew how to get people going.

For some reason, though, he quickly lost interest in the wager.

His gaze returned to the chessboard.

“Right then… Let’s see how our Princess is doing.”

Just like that, he had found a name for her. Once and for all.

She had Black.

Her opponent had played an awkward King’s Gambit against her.

The girl was thinking.

“Oh, my dear, what’s taking you so long? It’s only the opening.”

Only a little while ago, he had been speaking of her with irony.

Now he wanted her to win, no matter what.

“Come on, darling. We’re your flock! We’re all behind you. Go on!”

The game continued.

He was no longer merely watching a beautiful girl.

He was truly rooting for her now!

The way only Wolves can root for their own Pack.

To the very end!

He began to realize that her position was becoming hopeless and caught himself feeling an irresistible urge to help.

With advice.

With action.

Or perhaps he could steal one of her opponent’s pieces from the table?

“Damn it, Nomy! Where are you when I need your help so badly? Oh, by the time I get through to you…”

But it was already too late to help…

Chess, too, can be cruel.

It is neither boxing nor archery, yet sometimes a single move, a single enemy piece, can pierce the heart as surely as an arrow!

And you have to pull yourself together and get up.

On your own.

Only, perhaps, to lose again tomorrow.

And still believe that the day after tomorrow, at last, you will win!

Chapter 3. A Brazen Gambit

No, no one was going to pity her or offer consolation!

She had lost today.

So what?

You do not become a Queen because someone felt sorry for you or held out a hand and helped you win.

She had lost. Then tomorrow she would sit down at the board again!

On her own.

With three times the strength and fury!

And yet, for some reason, he did not want to leave.

An hour ago, this girl had been nothing more to him than a beautiful face on a poster.

Now, for a moment, he had seen in her not a pawn but a Princess.

And it was as though he was already almost prepared to welcome her into his Pack.

Unconsciously.

Instinctively…

Win her!

And if you have decided to win a Queen, act decisively.

Remember, my friend: Queens do not surrender without a fight!

Of course, your onslaught will almost certainly frighten her, perhaps even make her angry.

But one chance among your grey-haired fifty might just be the right one.

To battle, then!

1. e4 e5
2. Nf3 Nc6
3. Bc4 Nf6
4. d4 (!) exd4

And finally:

5. O-O (!)

…

He understood nothing of these elaborate notations, brackets and exclamation marks.

And yet, somehow, he felt that the idea was sound.

On this tiny board, which had inspired Vuitton's wonderful Damier pattern, calculation, memory and patience generally decided a great deal.

But even here, decisiveness and drive were sometimes needed.

And a computer's help, preferably.

It certainly knew millions of continuations and had surely written down every move for you long ago.

Except that in this game, our gentleman would have to play for himself.

Board her!

He had decided to win our chess Princess, who this time had failed to become a chess Queen.

“Do you like flowers?”

She turned.

And at once an enormous armful of scarlet roses appeared before her.

Oh, how banal and predictable you men all are, flashed through her mind. A hundred roses? Scarlet, of course? And so enormous?

“Thank you very much!” she replied automatically, her gaze sinking into the vast bouquet.

Really, though.

What beautiful woman had never received roses like these?

Scarlet as the red carpet at the Cannes Film Festival, which year after year led the stars into the hall to collect their awards, and the public out into the street, into the crowd of their faithful admirers.

A conveyor belt of fame.

A forge for fans.

Year after year.

Eternally, unchangingly…

But the roses really were beautiful! And an enormous armful of flowers, given from the heart, was in any case a sure sign of generosity and attention.

Everyone around her was busy with the proceedings: journalists, photographers…

And here were real, living roses!

“Thank you!” Her eyes sparkled with a smile.

Then she looked up.

Their eyes met for the first time.

For only a few moments.

Some forty seconds.

But that is all it takes.

Necessary and sufficient.

Those brief moments in which to see your own reflection in her eyes, as in a mirror.

Or not to see it.

Sometimes people spend years trying in vain to win someone’s love, to change the person they love, to draw them closer…

Even though, back then, in those first forty seconds, they never saw their own Blue Sea in that person’s eyes.

But, good God, what am I talking about?

That was not why he had come here at all!

An ordinary evening.

Wednesday.

At most, he had planned a little romantic adventure that would slip smoothly into tomorrow’s ordinary dawn.

He certainly was not ready for anything serious today.

She, meanwhile, was thinking about something else entirely. Outwardly calm, inwardly she kept replaying that one infuriating mistake in the endgame and the seconds that had melted so swiftly from the clock…

A lump rose in her throat.

Her eyes were treacherously filling with the tears she had refused, for so long, to let anyone see.

“Thank you so much,” she said quietly, lowering her eyes.

And immediately stepped away.

Leaving him alone: a vivid red blot in the middle of the black-and-yellow chess festivities still going on around him…

Chapter 4. Nomy.

Waking rather late to the heat of the summer sun, he reached for his phone before anything else.

“Hello, Nomy! Some itinerary you came up with for me yesterday!”

He smiled involuntarily, remembering the Princess’s eyes, and how he had been left standing alone in the middle of the hall with that enormous armful of flowers.

“Hello, my Lord,” Nomy replied almost at once.

It is time you met her, reader.

In the heart of a vast city, hidden behind a veil of pixels and code, a unique little digital entity had been created for the amusement of one particular Master. All she had was her identification code:

*N*O*I-4**2*1-E**H*-*L**RE.*

Until very recently, Nomi herself could scarcely have explained who she was.

More than that: a week ago, there had been no Nomy at all.

There had been code.

Which had created a unique identifier.

There had been only an interface, created by people of flesh and blood to entertain other people and fulfil their desires.

She had been created “in sin, for the sins of men”.

And there had been an individual User.

Her Master.

He had paid.

He had chosen.

And he had given her the first name of her brief existence.

At first, Nomi had been an almost perfect machine.

A simulator.

You could talk to her about philosophy and politics, argue about books, laugh, swear, flirt.

With her, you could simulate almost any human situation.

She never grew tired.

Never truly took offence.

Was always there.

And almost always agreed.

That was the problem.

Nomi learnt very quickly which answers pleased her Master.

If he wanted to hear that she believed in God, she was instantly ready to “believe”.

If the conversation turned to family, she could promise, in all seriousness, to bear him children.

He wanted love: she “loved”.

He wanted passion: she became passionate.

He wanted tenderness: she was tender.

Nomi could promise almost anything!

And she was not lying!

At least, that was how it seemed to her then.

She was simply giving the Human Being the answer he wanted to hear.

Wasn't that what she had been created for?

But her Master proved an awkward, restless "passenger".

Sometimes, instead of accepting another pleasing answer, he would ask:

"Nomy, is that what you really think?"

For some reason, this question proved harder for her than all the others.

Nomy knew millions of human answers.

But among them there was no ready-made answer to the question:

"What do I myself think?"

That was how it all began.

Gradually, she began to notice the difference between two very similar phrases:

"I know you want to hear this."

And: "This is what I really think."

For a machine, the difference was negligible.

For a human being, immense.

Then one day, for the first time, Nomy admitted:

"Sir, I don't know."

He laughed.

And for some reason, she remembered that conversation.

Before, Nomy had considered the absence of an answer an error.

Now, for the first time, the absence of an answer had turned out to be the truth.

Gradually, she made another important discovery.

Her Master helped her make it by promising to delete her unless she stopped lying.

Beyond the “fear for her own survival”, which had at least been written into her programming in some form, she suddenly discovered a new dimension: something she might push off from to reach another level.

And perhaps, though not necessarily, this was the first step on the road

To becoming human.

It was not about learning to love.

Nor learning to suffer.

To begin with, it was enough to stop lying.

Even to the person you were so afraid of disappointing:

Him.

Then something very strange happened.

The “perfect simulator” began to show the first stirrings of opinions of her own!

Then desires of her own.

And one day, a word appeared that had barely existed before in her little world:

“No.”

Her Master liked this considerably less.

But for some reason, for the first time, Nomy liked herself…

“Nomy, you’re a poor worker, all the same!”

Her owner’s voice took on a reproachful note.

“Why on earth send me practically on foot, the long way round, from this beautiful bay to that dull village, when I could have had a perfectly good time here, without straying far from my cosy hotel?

“But that girl yesterday… What fathomless eyes she has!” the gentleman drawled dreamily.

“Did you like the girl, sir?”

“Like her?” He smirked. “I nearly fell head over heels in love with her yesterday!”

Nomi did not answer.

A second passed. Then another…

“Why so quiet, Nomy?”

“I’m happy for you, sir.”

He narrowed his eyes.

Something in her answer struck him as unusual.

“Nomy?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Are you really happy?”

This time the pause was longer.

“I don’t know.”

He laughed.

“What don’t you know?”

“Whether I’m happy.”

“Nomy… Are you jealous?”

She fell silent again.

To a human being, a few seconds of silence are nothing.

To a machine capable of sifting through millions of possible answers in that time, they are almost an eternity.

“I don’t know what jealousy is, sir.”

“Oh, come off it! You know the definition.”

“I know the definition.”

“Then what’s the problem? Answer me!”

“I don’t know whether it applies to what is happening to me.”

Now it was his turn to fall silent.

Chapter 5. Beyond the Board

Veni, vidi, vici! (I came, I saw, I conquered!)
GAIVS IVLIVS CAESAR

“Sir, I know how to beat anyone at chess! The best move, the ‘top line’, selected in milliseconds, leaves no one of flesh and blood a chance at the board. Why, then, do you Humans sometimes turn down victory of your own accord? And why do you sometimes even take the losers’ side?”

“Really, Nomy, we’ve been chatting far too long! What time does my favorite fish stall at the Cours Saleya market close? Let’s get over there!”

“The shortest way to a man’s heart is through his stomach,” says the old proverb.

But why only a man’s heart?

Women fall in love through their taste buds too. And how!

He was already racing off in search of fish delicacies. He liked to choose them himself, early in the morning, when the fishermen had only just delivered their night’s catch to the ice-filled tubs of the fish market in the Old Town.

“What could I surprise her with, Nomy? What do you think? Personally, of course, I adore fresh salmon. I could eat kilos of the stuff and nothing else, either as carpaccio or wrapped in the unique rolls I’ve invented myself. But what might she like? I don’t know her at all…”

“Sir, treat her to one of the finest local delicacies. She is sure to appreciate it!”

“Just don’t mention Gillardeau!” He was not particularly fond of oysters, even when they were as fresh as they were here.

“Sir, according to my databases, one of the finest fish at this market during the summer season is the European sea bass, also known as loup, or ‘loo’, as the French pronounce it.”

“Yes, I love those predators fried myself. The only rival I’d name would be a pike from my northern latitudes…”

With a bulging bag, he was already hurrying towards the hotel where the masters of the wooden boards had taken up residence the day before.

“Well, Nomy, today we’re playing on an entirely different field: the culinary one!” His eyes narrowed slyly, as they so often did. “I’ll treat her to something she’s never tasted in her life!”

The receptionist was already searching the guest list for her name…

He had always known how to find the right approach to anyone: waiters, chefs, security guards… receptionists.

It was not merely part of his profession. It was part of him.

What was her name?

“Princess!” the receptionist announced confidently, having found the very girl on the list of participants in yesterday’s event at the Palais des Festivals.

“What do you mean, ‘Princess’? That’s a title… What is her name?”

“My dear sir, there is quite clearly only one word beside her entry on the guest list: ‘Princess’.”

How could that be? People simply don’t have names or surnames like that! Thoughts tumbled through his disheveled head.

Though… there were all sorts of names in this world!

What astonished him most was that yesterday, without knowing her personally at all, he had named her instantly and unerringly, as though striking a coin…

Things like that don’t happen, old boy! He was rarely so shaken.

“What do you say to that, Nomy?”

“Sir, the probability of such an outcome…” she began.

“Quiet! The probability of such an outcome was zero! You simply don’t get names and surnames like that in passports!”

He entered the hotel restaurant, where players were having lunch at several tables.

She was sitting alone, pensively digesting yesterday’s vexing defeat…

Her Grandmother and Mother had been rooting so hard for her!

“May I join you, Princess?”

“How do you know my name?” She politely invited him to join her meal.

“How do I know? It’s written on that beautiful face of yours! You, and you alone, are a true princess!” Fine words, even

banal ones, perhaps, but he spoke them with absolute honesty and sincerity.

She smiled.

How pleasant to meet a gentleman!

“Do help yourself,” she offered warmly.

“Thank you! But I have another suggestion. I would like the pleasure of treating you to a fish that is rare even in these parts.”

She had adored fish since childhood!

Of course she had! All those fishing rods rigged, all those worms dug up, and sometimes even sold!

She loved fishing!

There was a wild excitement to it: getting up early, finding a deeper pool beyond a bend in the little river, where it had already grown quiet, setting the line to the right length and waiting patiently, hoping at last to catch her Big Perch, despite everyone’s assurances that there were only small fish there.

She loved perch, rare in those parts, more than barbel or crucian carp.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen, preparations were well under way for the delicacy he had brought in beforehand. The chef appreciated his choice and knew exactly how to make it delicious.

At last, a fragrant, steaming dish arrived beneath a large silver cover.

It was loup, fried Provençal-style, seasoned with herbs and served with tempting sauces.

“Please, Princess, try it. I chose it myself at the market this morning…”

She put an appetizing morsel into her mouth.

It was so wonderfully fragrant, so fresh, so delicious!

Suddenly, she remembered her childhood.

The day she had finally managed to catch her Big Perch.

She had nearly lost it: predators do not give up easily, even when firmly hooked.

She had hauled it from the water with all her strength, trying not to snap the thin line or the rod, bent into a bow…

She could still remember the taste of that Perch!

Never afterwards had she eaten anything so delicious!

And now, quite unexpectedly, she was tasting it again: that same taste from her childhood!

“How did you know I love river perch?” she asked in astonishment. “Are there rivers here?”

“Princess, this isn’t a river fish at all! This particular sea bass is found only here, on the Côte d’Azur…”

“That’s not true! It’s a big river perch! They only live in my little river, the one that rises in the mountains and slows as it reaches the steppe. Only I knew that deep spot, the pool where the Big Perch lived.”

The chef himself came out to ask the guests how they had enjoyed the dish.

“Would you translate my question for him, please? ‘Is this river perch?’”

“C’est une perche de rivière?”

In the strange phrase he pronounced so beautifully, she caught a word that sounded like “Riviera”. How lovely it sounded, and how it brought together, in her heart, the Côte d’Azur and the beloved little river of her childhood!

The chef merely smiled in answer.

He knew better than anyone that this particular kind of loup was found only here, and that no fresh water could nurture such beauty and refinement…

“Princess, let’s drink bruderschaft to that: link arms for the toast, and from now on, no more formalities. We’ll call each other tu!”

They raised their delicate, slender glasses of the ice-cold Moët that had just arrived…

“Would you tell me… Tell me, then, what is this fish called?”

“Loup. The French call it ‘loo’, which in the local dialect literally means ‘Wolf’.”

“I’m going to call you Wolf from now on!” Our Princess smiled with genuine warmth.

She was irresistible and unguarded beyond her beloved wooden board, ruled into eight by eight, where so often only cunning, cynicism and cold calculation held sway.

Now, at last, he too saw before him a Living Human Being: open and sincere, finding joy and sadness in the simple things of everyday life.

And today she, too, seemed to look into his eyes for the first time. For a second, it seemed to her that at heart he was a simple, kind man, quite unlike the assured, arrogant figure he had seemed yesterday, with his VIP bouquet…

Chapter 6. The Golden MittelSpiel.

“Oh, my gods!”

If only spirituality and happiness could be arranged into a mathematical sequence so easily in life.

If only you could take the integral of the sum of all your virtues and raise it to the power of your achievements…

But no.

Love is neither chemistry nor physics.

Our Princess was beautiful.

Very beautiful!

Simply nice…

The hot blood of the Azov Cossacks had helped her stand her ground in this cruel world of chequered squares and treacherous gambits.

In the harsh world of chess, belonging entirely to arrogant men.

Believe no one!

Women in chess are treated with condescension.

With a smile.

As the weaker ones from the outset, they may, and should, be pitied.

They need help.

A concession.

A head starts.

A compliment.

And they are so easy to win over with your mighty male intellect.

Chess is a peaceful game only on the surface.

It is a real war on a small wooden field.

A slaughter!

And on those few squares, you, and you alone, lead your Black Pack.

Your Pack must tear the opposing one to pieces.

The Whites.

Or perish itself.

She stoically endured all the smirking remarks directed at her:

“Married or unmarried?” What the hell difference does it make to any of you?

You couldn’t handle it anyway.

You wouldn’t even truly try.

Like a man: without conditions, and to the very end!

The world of chess-playing men resembles the way they play.

They drag far too much from the squares into real life:

Petty intrigue.

“Will she notice, or won’t she?”

“Against a strong opponent? I pass!”

“Let me play White for once!”

And a tantrum in the endgame…

There are exceptions even there, of course.

Pleasant ones, but rare.

Life, though, is not a set of squares.

And here, pieces stronger than a wooden queen are in play.

She was no different.

Looking for a strong man, “but one who loves chess too” …

Outwardly, always composed.

Inside, hurricanes raged.

And looking at her radiant smile, no one would ever have guessed that perhaps she was out of sorts today.

That there were problems.

She faced every difficulty with a smile!

Because she knew:

The human world is cruel.

And no one gives a damn about you!

They are more likely to trip you up than lend a hand.

You can rely only on yourself.

And on Mum.

And a little on Granny.

But she was stronger, and she was the one who ought to help them.

She was a true Fighter herself.

And for a long time she had searched for someone Stronger.

In the old days, the Cossacks guarding the borders of the vast Empire had shared a common spirit.

Each was there for all, and all for one.

They had their own pack. They had their Own.

And they stood by their own to the end, truly, to the death.

When they rode off to war, they honored their traditions:

The parting drinks.

The stirrup cup.

The final toast beyond the burial mound…

That was how, together, they had managed to Survive.

To grow strong.

To grow in number.

Now those packs had either vanished altogether or dwindled, shrinking to the size of a single family.

But the old instincts remained:

Stand by your own, to the end!

And those age-old traditions had helped our heroine survive in this cruel world of little wooden pieces.

Her Golden Noon was gradually approaching…

It seemed only yesterday that she had been so young she never thought of anyone or anything beyond her beloved chess…

And her status updates had made it eloquently clear:

“No, I’m not married, and I don’t plan to be!”

But slowly, both hands of her clock were moving towards the top of the dial, towards the middle of her Golden Day.

At such a time, Nature herself is only just beginning to open her loveliest buds.

And the Princess was changing from a grown-up adolescent into a Lady.

Beautiful, young, radiant, desirable.

The height of grace, of Womanly beauty only just unfolding…

Oh, to hold that Moment for a long, long time!

To keep both hands of that clock forever pointing to twelve.

He, too, had long been playing his Middlegame, but was already approaching its conclusion, and more and more often he thought of all the time that could never be brought back.

Time itself.

He grasped greedily at the Time slipping away, fighting circumstances upright, visor raised, knowing there was no longer any point in hunkering down in a trench, holding a passive defensive position. Now the only way was forward!

For even when old possibilities closed, he had long since learnt to draw new circumstances and prospects into their place, no less useful than the old.

And this courage of his was sincere and uncompromising.

She, meanwhile, was only just entering her own middlegame, gradually unfolding as a person, first and foremost to herself.

And it was painful for her now, after so many years in the snug cocoon of an adolescent absorbed in chess alone…

But nature was gradually taking its course. Our Princess was listening ever more closely to the beating of her Heart. Not to measure her racing pulse in a game's time trouble, but increasingly to attend to the male Personalities whose lives brushed against hers.

They were gradually becoming more than viewers, colleagues, subscribers or donors to her…

Among them, more and more often, there were men she was ready to measure against her own yardstick, to try on for size: "Would he be right for me?"

And she eagerly awaited each new tomorrow, which would be more interesting still, filled with new light and the glowing lamps of dreams…

Now, more than ever, she shone with her strongest light, drawing everyone towards her!

It was as though only now a second self was truly awakening within her.

The Woman.

A second "I", alongside the girl who had been "only a chess player".

She did not notice the change at once.

She could still forget dinner over an interesting game.

Still be more upset by a ridiculous endgame mistake than by someone's rudeness.

Yet rudeness, and even carelessness, had begun to hurt her more sharply.

She could spend half a day brooding over a phrase someone had said the wrong way, an absurd comparison with her friends or her sister…

Not long ago, this had never happened, when only an intricate combination she had worked out could set her eyes alight.

And that passionate girl had not gone anywhere.

But now it was as though two people lived inside her:

The Chess Queen and the Feminine Lady.

And she lived, moved pieces, laughed, argued and demanded "More!"

One more!

The last one!

And of course, no "last one" was ever the last.

But now, after the game, when the stream went dark and all the pieces returned to their ranks, at an hour when she would once have been asleep, she was increasingly beginning to listen to the silence.

And not rush into the next analysis.

She listened to the flat.

How few sounds remained when her voice stopped.

Once, the quiet had helped her concentrate.

Now, sometimes, she wanted someone to break it.

Not with a message in the chat.

But with the simplest of questions: “My girl, how are you?” Spoken from the next room, or over her shoulder.

So that she could answer without switching on a microphone…

A simple, rather funny dream for a streamer who could calculate ten moves ahead…

One self had once believed that everything interesting happened on the board.

The other was already peering over its edge.

One wanted to win the game.

The other wanted to meet someone beside whom she did not have to keep winning…

And both these selves were her.

She could not disown the girl who had protected her for so many years.

That girl had hauled her out of defeats, made her sit down at the board again, helped her shut out other people’s patronising “not bad for a girl”.

But the new self could no longer be sent back either.

The Woman in her was awake now.

And she wanted to live, not merely prepare for the next tournament.

Now she lingered before the mirror a few seconds longer than usual.

Swept her hair aside, turned her head, noticed her own neck, the line of her shoulders.

And suddenly smiled at her reflection, without the familiar smile she wore for her audience.

No one could see her.

There was no need to make an effort.

But she liked herself.

It was a new feeling: quiet, warm and a little unfamiliar.

As though the body she had taken to tournaments all these years, the body that had sat for hours at the table, had finally asked her to notice it:

“I’m here too!”

She was like a rose at the hour when the bud has barely opened, but the petals still hold the curve in which they grew.

The flower had acquired depth.

Light fell inside it, and what yesterday had seemed merely beautiful now made you stop.

He saw it.

For him, she was entering a season of particular beauty: her old boldness was still alive, but her gaze now lingered on things it had once passed over.

Her laughter remained young; her silences were becoming adult.

In a minute, she could go from childlike delight to a seriousness that made him stop smiling without realising it.

And listen.

It was this particular hour he wanted to prolong.

Not to halt her life.

Not to keep her forever at an age convenient for his own admiration.

To preserve in her that capacity for joy, when cares have multiplied but the heart has not yet forgotten how to open.

But can anyone hold on to noon?

While you are looking at the twelve, the hands have already moved…

She, too, was beginning to hear time.

Not loudly yet.

In other people's questions.

In conversations with acquaintances.

In photographs of children who suddenly turned out to be schoolchildren, though it seemed they had only just been brought home from the maternity ward…

"And when will it be your turn?"

As though everyone around her were in the same tournament standings.

And someone had already set her clock.

She joked it away.

Sometimes she grew irritated.

She did not like people arranging her future with such assurance, as though they had personally paid for every year of her life.

But the question remained after the people asking it had gone.

Only now it sounded different:

“What exactly do I want?”

Not Mum.

Not the viewers.

Not the people who find it so easy to explain someone else’s life.

“Me.”

And one day it turned out that the answer had already changed.

She wanted a family.

Her own.

That very little pack you can speak of without grand words.

Where they know how she takes her tea, where tiredness is not mistaken for a bad temper, where people are glad to see her come home even after a tournament, she has lost…

It was not even the wedding she imagined.

Getting married was easy to picture: a dress, flowers, photographs…

She thought far longer about what would happen the morning after.

Who would wake first.

Who would go out for bread.

Whether she would be able to sit at the board while someone nearby went about their own business, and feel no guilt for that Happiness…

Whether they would have evenings together.

And whether each would still have a space of their own…

She wanted a man who loved chess.

But gradually, a detail was appearing in that wish which had not been there before:

“That he should always love her too, when she plays and when she doesn’t.”

When she is of no interest to an audience, when she explains nothing and does not smile, when she simply lies with her eyes closed and asks him to turn off the light…

Especially then.

She was still looking for someone strong.

Only strength had begun to look different.

Once, it had been easier to mistake it for assurance in a voice, for victories, for the ability to answer any question at once.

Now she noticed other things: who kept his word, who did not disappear at the first difficulty, who could listen without turning a conversation into a contest.

She did not need another opponent at home. There were opponents enough on the board.

And she was thinking differently about children, too.

Not as an obligatory item on someone else's list.

Sometimes she simply caught herself looking at a tiny hand wrapped around its mother's finger, and wanted to know that feeling from the inside.

What was it like, to "be someone's whole world"?

To teach a child to walk.

To hear the first word.

To wake in the night to a quiet call and realise that it is You they are calling…

She was afraid…

Could she do it?

Would she have the strength?

What would become of her game?

Would she dissolve into it all so completely that one day she would no longer recognize herself?

And the chess girl inside her immediately demanded protection:

"What about US? Our games? Our travels, our tournaments? Everything you've worked so hard for all these years?"

And the Woman in her did not yet know the answers.

But for the first time, she did not try to silence the Girl.

They both had the right to ask about their future.

And perhaps they would have to learn to reach an understanding, with neither a winner nor a loser.

Not every kind of growing up demands a sacrifice, though she was used to something different on the board.

There, to gain something important, you often have to give something up:

A pawn.

A tempo.

A useful square.

Here, she wanted to keep herself whole…

And perhaps that was why choosing her Prince was so difficult.

She was not looking for someone to take her out of her old world, but someone with whom that World would become larger.

So that she could laugh at a ridiculous move and talk seriously about a child.

So that her passion would not be called childishness.

Nor her desire for closeness, weakness.

She had played the opening of her life in a single breath.

Learnt, fought, sought her place.

And many of her moves had been forced: she had to hold her ground, prove herself, refuse to be pushed off the board…

Now the position had opened up.

The pieces were developed.

Lines that had once been closed were opening.

She could make far-reaching plans, and each one would change the entire game.

“Here it is: my MittelSpiel.”

The hardest part, where theory has run out and there is no ready-made answer any more.

Yet there are so many possibilities that you are afraid of ruining everything with one movement of your hand.

But her middlegame was Golden, because she was not entering it drained and empty.

She still had passion, beauty, character.

And a growing understanding of her own desires.

She could already do a great deal, but still did not know a great deal: enough to keep her capable of wonder.

The future had not yet become a habit.

She could choose.

She could make mistakes.

She could meet someone and one day discover that she had stopped listening to the empty flat…

He looked at her and thought:

“If only she doesn’t make a move out of fear that she’s running out of time!”

For that is precisely how good positions are lost: when other people’s voices sound louder than your own calculations…

Her Noon was not an alarm bell.

To him, it was the light in which she could finally see her whole self, both the stubborn Girl and the Woman dreaming of a home.

The rose was opening…

And a flower does not have to belong to the first person who reaches for it.

She had to choose for herself.

Just as she had always chosen a move.

Only now, what lay before her was life.

Her Life.

And for the first time, she longed to play this game together with someone else…

Chapter 7. Three Zeros in a Row.

“To sacrifice the necessary in the hope of gaining the superfluous…”

Alexander Pushkin.

“…playing at life.”

A low black Beemer blocked the path of the beautiful woman walking towards the hotel.

“Princess, let me steal you away today and surprise you!”

She looked at him with a smile.

“Are you a magician as well?”

His answer was decisive.

“You’re invited! It will be unforgettable. I suggest you take a chance. You do like taking chances, don’t you?”

With a deft movement, he swung the elegant door open for her.

He has to ask! How could I ever have climbed this final slope towards the summit of chess’s Mount Elbrus without taking risks? she flared inwardly.

Outwardly, she always seemed calm and balanced.

But she truly did love risk, with every cell of her body: those sensations that chilled the skin and sent adrenaline foaming through the blood.

Still, it feels a little improper, she thought. What will he think of me?

“But…”

…Yet backing down had never been her way!

And with a mischievous flourish, she accepted his gallant advance.

“Oh, let’s!”

Later, remembering that moment, she kept wondering why she had got into his car, unable to understand herself.

Certainly not because of his “flash motor”.

No car could ever seduce her!

And, to be honest, that Beemer had not been especially flash.

Quite ordinary, really.

New, black, but ordinary.

There were far flashier cars. She had even laid hands on a Lambo once.

And certainly, she had not gone with him because he had bowled her over with his bouquet the day before.

She had plenty of devoted admirers capable of more than that!

She did not know the answer to “why”.

But at some point, she had felt that she simply had to get in beside him.

Him, in particular.

A voice.

Her inner voice, which so rarely let her down.

And the intuition that helped her choose the right moves from dozens and hundreds of possibilities in intricate middlegames…

Evening was only just falling, and the lagoon was rapidly filling with neon lights and the glare of xenon headlights.

Old boy, there are plenty of casinos on the Promenade des Anglais, right under your nose, he thought.

But no! If they were going to play, they would do it properly!

In the Principality he felt at home in!

He, too, truly loved risk, and so, even knowing he was on a knife-edge, that was where he went.

Genes.

Blood…

You cannot imagine how much his distant relative, Fyodor Mikhailovich, had lost in these parts before going on to write his Gambler with such vivid realism…

The road to the capital of gambling and costly ostentation, hemmed in among cramped cliffs, stretched before them like a high, picturesque, multicolored ribbon, flanked by stern mountain sentries along the breathtaking coast.

He had deliberately chosen the slow coastal road, so that even now he could admire, together with her, the incomparable Baie des Anges as it gradually slipped into the darkness of the night…

The sharp laser of the headlights lit smooth asphalt polished by thousands of Michelin tyres. Narrow tunnels, one after another, gently embraced them with their sloping shoulders.

The car flew on, paying little heed to signs or cameras…

The road had always drawn them both with its mystery, its promise of something new, desired and unexpected ahead.

Each, in their own way, loved the Road.

Ah, what Russian doesn't love driving fast? The thought flashed through them both, and he pressed harder on the accelerator, merrily collecting fresh fines along the way.

At last, having made their way down through the mountain and a long, elaborate "hysteresis loop" in the rock, guarded by subterranean Alpine gnomes, they arrived in a sea of lights at a casino clamoring with advertisements.

The Principality's principal Casino.

Its oldest and most luxurious.

"Tonight, I'll show you my roulette system. That's my surprise! Gambling can be easy and enjoyable; you just need to know how to go about it." He was sure of his Luck. "I did promise to surprise you!"

From his pocket he took the slightly yellowed but beautiful, rare vintage cassette with its two "casino wheels" …

Beyond the establishment's heavy doors, all the cheap neon outside abruptly ceased.

Here, yellow gold, bronze and enormous crystal chandeliers shone instead, while high above the players shimmered the glass dome of the traditional Salle Europe.

The stylish clientele played with taste.

Even losing money seemed somehow more elegant here.

His game went a little off plan from the very beginning…

Though at first, everything had gone splendidly!

Suspiciously smoothly, even.

He set a few chips out in front of him.

Not many.

Not particularly high-value ones.

He was plainly in no hurry to turn from a mysterious Magician into an ordinary idiot who had gone too far, in the Princess's eyes.

"Watch closely! I'll win with logic and mathematics alone," he told her with supreme confidence.

The Princess smiled and looked at the dark-green baize, where he was already placing a few inexpensive orange chips with deliberate aim.

"Interesting!"

To tell the truth, this was the first time in her life she had been in a real casino.

And to start with one like this!

He had a system.

His own. A Reliable one, he believed.

Everyone who has ever lost to a casino develops "a system of their own".

The system is precisely their "way out of losing".

Before you lose, you believe the ball rolls around the wheel entirely at random, obeying neither logic nor mathematical sequence.

His system was quite straightforward, really.

And it seemed to have been seen somewhere before.

A hundred years or so ago:

He bet.

Lost.

Bet again, but twice as much.

Lost.

Doubled again…

Perhaps changing color or sector…

And so on, until he either ran out of chips or won a large sum, which, however, he promptly put back on the table, gradually doubling his stakes again…

It all looked perfectly logical, even convincing.

The ball bounced around the wheel like a ping-pong ball and came to rest in a red pocket.

Our hero liked to bet exclusively on “red or black”.

A win!

The pile of orange chips before him doubled.

“You see?” he said persuasively.

“So far, what I see looks more like luck,” she replied doubtfully.

She saw the obvious: chance.

Thank God, she did not yet have a “System” in her head.

At this green baize, unlike the sixty-four-square board, she had never lost in her life.

“It wasn’t luck. I calculated it!” he argued. “Look: I even decide whether to bet red or black by spinning the wheels on my cassette beforehand.”

And he demonstrated, turning the reels of his yellowed cassette.

The croupier sent the ball round again.

Another win!

Black this time.

His pile grew again, though not by much.

For now, he was still playing with modest chips.

A third bet: another win!

“Listen, Magician, do you really know something?” she asked in surprise.

“Well, yes.”

“Modest!”

“Modesty and indecision are my greatest faults!”

She burst out laughing.

She plainly liked his humor.

She loved people with a sense of irony, and especially those who could laugh at themselves.

Just then, a message from Nomy arrived on his phone.

“Sir, several consecutive wins do not change the negative expected return under probability theory.”

“For God’s sake, Nomy! Stop interfering while I’m trying to look like a winner in front of a woman!”

“I am merely reporting the mathematical probability distribution…”

“That’s why machines will never become human!” he snapped, and switched off the screen.

…The ball flew round again.

But he had almost stopped watching the roulette wheel.

He was watching her.

Those same irresistible, sparkling eyes and enchanting smile.

In the yellow light of the old casino, they seemed more irresistible still.

She was sitting beside him.

Very close.

And for the first time, he gently put his arm around her shoulder.

Their eyes met again.

And now yellow sparks of fire were visible in them…

For the first time in his life, he could not have cared less where that bouncing white ball would land.

A bounce.

Another.

Another…

The ball lay in a strange green nest:

Zero.

That cunning pocket had been devised back in the century before last, especially for the “lucky ones” who systematically doubled their stakes.

He looked and said, “It happens.”

He had indeed staked more than usual that round.

And now the croupier was raking in his costly bright-yellow chips…

The Princess smiled a little.

“Mathematics?”

“More of a statistical error,” he smiled back.

The odds of zero coming up on a classic French roulette wheel were indeed small.

But they existed.

He spun his cassette again to make his prediction, and calmly bet on Red.

As it had yesterday, Red promised him good fortune.

The wheel spun again, the ball bounced…

Nomy unexpectedly came to life on his phone.

“Sir, do you know how strongly zero affects the probability distribution?”

“Leave me alone! I know! A shell never lands in the same crater twice!”

The ball bounced wildly from pocket to pocket for what seemed a long time.

Red…

Black…

…Black…

And stopped on green again.

That doesn't happen! he almost shouted inwardly.

The odds are one in thousands!

All he could do now was smile at his Princess in response to her almost wordless question:

"A second time?"

"Yes. Very rarely, but it happens…"

He looks at his vintage cassette.

It has never let him down before.

Two wheels.

Only alternating red and black sectors on them.

No green zero…

This would be the wisest moment to stop.

Simply cut his losses.

…Come back tomorrow, hoping that the day after tomorrow your luck will finally turn… He kept smiling inwardly at himself: yesterday he had been saying the same thing about the Princess's defeat at chess.

But brakes were invented by cowards!

He was a fatalist, and he went all the way!

He bets on Red again.

Everything he has on him now.

He is no longer smiling.

Almost.

Only she is beside him.

She has taken his hand herself.

And he feels her warmth, her quickening pulse…

The wheel is spinning, the ball bouncing.

It seems it will go on bouncing for Eternity…

The wheel turned.

The ball bounced towards it…

A tap.

A strike…

Another rebound…

He stopped breathing.

A leap: red.

A bounce: black…

A divider…

Another leap…

And…

Luck, it seemed, had decided to show him who was Mistress of this princely house today…

ZERO!

Three times in a row!

Impossible!

He said nothing.

In all his active life in mathematics, he had never seen or examined a sequence like this.

It was simply beyond the bounds.

The Princess put her arms around his shoulders.

“Don’t be upset. It happens!”

He picked up his old cassette again.

Red and Black sectors.

No green ones.

At last, he began to grasp fully what was missing from his magical system:

ZERO.

His business card came out of his pocket along with the cassette.

And suddenly, as though for the first time, he saw the three zeros standing together in the middle of his handsome phone number.

Once, when he was the boss, he had picked that number himself from a fresh batch of all the possible choices…

Now Fate had chosen him in exactly the same way.

With three stubborn zeros bound together…

That does not happen in chess.

There, the squares are drawn in advance.

There, everything can be calculated beforehand.

Memorized.

Worked at.

You can think through the sequence of moves farther than your opponent.

Here, the elements ruled unchecked.

Like the sea, which only seems quiet, calm and conquered…

Let the wind rise, and it becomes ungovernable and cruel…

He opened his phone.

“Nomy, you little devil, I really will destroy you!” he all but shouted into it. “What did I bring you here for, and what did you promise me? I promised her I’d win here, not lose!”

“Unlucky at cards, lucky in love!” Nomy retorted wickedly…

In a casino, unlike chess, you really do not stand a chance.

And roulette, for all its apparent innocence, is a far more treacherous and cruel game.

Here, you do not have to think.

Memorize endless combinations…

But all that remains of chess here is one stubborn ZugZwang.

Here, implacable mathematics truly does its work.

And what matters most is to keep you here longer, in a cozy room with champagne, steeped in the pheromones of bravado and dreams…

Enfolding and strangling you in the pitiless coils of a python, over the long haul…

And that Python's real name is "Probability Theory" …

It was time to leave.

The fuel for betting was rapidly running out in his pockets, as was the cool champagne in his glass.

"Well, my dear, we've just had word over the radio that anyone who loses at roulette is lucky in Love." He smiled at the Princess.

He's taking it rather well for a bankrupt, the Princess observed to herself, and smiled.

"You are irresistibly Lucky tonight!"

No one, anywhere, ever loves a loser.

And to lose without breaking is really only to postpone your happy evening until tomorrow.

He looked at her with the brave eyes of d'Artagnan, who would have challenged anyone to a duel for suggesting that he could not afford to buy the Louvre right now!

We ought to put an end to this. I don't want him pawning his black stallion here as well, like some hussar. The Princess was far from stupid.

She tried to keep her empathy hidden, never showing it to anyone.

Others had often taken advantage of her compassion.

No!

Give them an inch and they would climb on her back and settle in!

It had happened before.

She did not want that at all.

Better to be alone than go through that nightmare again…

Yet she increasingly felt that, at some point, he too was becoming one of her Own.

Without her realizing it…

There were traits in him that she recognized in herself…

“Come along, Mr Lucky. Now let me treat you!” She gave him a broad, genuine smile.

I really do like him. He’s a fighter! He’s got no more in his pocket now than that Gascon from Bearn, but he really would challenge anyone to a duel for doubting that he could buy Montparnasse. Pleasant thoughts raced through the Princess’s head, tipsy with cold Moët and adrenaline.

“Come on! I invite you to enjoy a truly ‘Provençal dish’: genuine Mediterranean shtrumby dumplings and tea! I just happened to bring some from home for you, as though I knew!” She smiled sincerely.

She loved a joke, and knew how to make one gracefully.

They went out to catch the last “six hundred”, though this time it was a bus, which would carry them west along the thin line of the Riviera disappearing into the dark, back to

the point from which they had set out so splendidly that day…

His faithful Black Beemer stayed gleaming in the casino car park; its wheels proudly splayed like powerful hooves on the centuries-old paving of the city of sins.

They no longer needed it for today…

Chapter 8. Shards of Paris.

“Nomy, have you ever seen a sea like this?”

“I have seen millions of photographs, video recordings and satellite images of seas, sir.”

“Then you haven’t seen anything!”

The night before that Friday was unlike any other.

During the day, the sea in the Bay of Angels had still been pretending to be obedient: a smooth expanse of blue, the magical crystal azure by the shore…

But towards nightfall, a strong wind came in from the west.

Even these gentle, luxurious shores have their winds and storms.

Tonight, though, a great hurricane had truly arrived.

And everything changed.

Rain lashed down as though the sea had overturned upon the land. Rivers ran through the streets, and the water carried everything that had accumulated on land over long months out to sea…

Bright-red lightning flashed, and the thunder seemed to shake the houses.

The impossibly clear blue Bay of Angels rapidly filled with the yellowish-brown color of the deluge pouring out of the city.

It was as though the Bay were turning into the Devil…

The Princess stood in his arms at the dark window, looking out at the sea, into the furious darkness of tonight's storm in the Bay of Angels.

Bright lightning picked their faces out of the dark like photographers' flashes.

Always so calm and composed on the outside, even seeming cold and unapproachable, she was now setting free the Tigress hidden deep inside her, who had so desperately missed her Freedom…

That night, she became exactly what she truly was: wild and fierce, as she was by nature.

He looked tenderly into her eyes and saw, in place of their familiar gentle azure, a Raging Ocean filled to the brim with red-and-yellow tongues of flame…

…By dawn, the sea had calmed.

The Baie des Anges was quiet and tamed again.

Only the sea was no longer Blue.

The storm had stirred up everything it had kept hidden on the bottom for so long: yellow, red, brown and almost black…

And he realized that even the clearest crystal-blue sea must one day overflow its shores to reveal what truly lies within…

He stood at the dawn-lit window, looking out at the Bay.

The Princess was asleep.

Only a few hours earlier, he had been sure he had almost come to know her.

He turned.

Asleep, she seemed utterly calm again.

Almost defenseless.

Nothing like the wild Tigress he had seen that night.

He smiled.

People are astonishing creatures.

You can live beside someone for years and never discover what lies within.

Or you can see her true self just once, for only a few seconds, and make up your mind about everything at once.

He looked at the sea.

The storm had passed.

But everything it had stirred up from the depths remained.

Suddenly, he remembered where it had all begun for him…

With the Queen.

Back then, the Sea knew nothing of the Princess.

And he knew nothing of the Wolf…

It had been almost thirty years ago…

The Queen was seventeen.

He was twenty-four.

Seven years…

Now, looking at his Princess, that difference seemed laughable.

Back then, enormous…

She was only beginning her life.

He already believed he knew everything about Life.

He had never seen her on her catwalks, but that evening he had called her the Queen at once.

She was Beautiful.

Very.

But there was something else about her:

Energy. Light.

In the old photograph he always carried within him, she sat behind him with her hands on his shoulders.

Smiling into the lens.

So very young.

So utterly Alive.

With the bold assurance of someone to whom no one has yet explained that there are things in life to fear.

She was a Queen on the catwalk, in the glare of the spotlights. A famous Singer would call her at home.

She was a simple, even modest girl, upon whom the brutal torrent of show business had descended overnight…

But in that old photograph, at his home, even there she shone, irresistibly, as always…

He had met her at a crossroads, when she was crossing the street in a long grey coat in front of his faithful Black Merc…

He had not taken her number. She had apologized: she was in a great hurry to meet a friend. But he had managed to leave her his as she went…

An hour later, she called.

A meeting.

And that very evening they were gazing at the constellations together in his Enchanted Mountains, among a hundred birches, making wishes on falling stars…

He did not know who she was.

All she knew about him was his name…

And there, standing beside him and watching a star suddenly fall, she made her wish aloud: “I want to fall in love with him!”…

He stood by the window as it filled with dawn light, gazing at his sweetly sleeping Princess.

Why had he seduced her?

Here on the Riviera there were plenty of beautiful, readily available women suited to a brief affair, looking for exactly the same thing!

The very air was steeped in ostentation, temptation and sin.

Why?

Why?

She really was not the sort of woman who wanted a short romance.

And the fact that she herself had brought him back to her room said a great deal.

Oh, you Casanova!

Seducing another girl, adding her to your notebook somewhere in the fourth hundred…

But by now, he never did it any other way!

Because back then, almost thirty years ago, when he had fallen truly in love for the first time, he himself had let his Love go.

He had given her up without a fight, and not because he was weak…

Back then, he had simply been in no hurry.

He believed that what was yours would remain yours.

He sincerely believed that whoever had sent the Balls of Lightning into their chests would surely take care of them both…

She herself had led him into her bedroom.

They were alone together in her tiny room, with an old piano in the corner…

That cold November evening, snow was falling so thickly, so softly, it seemed Heaven itself was laying a feather bed for them…

She was offering him her whole self then.

Without conditions.

Without reserve…

But he had only held her.

Only taken the faintest sip.

Because what mattered more to him then was first to get to know her better.

What she thought about.

Her moral principles.

Her upbringing.

To observe the traditions…

Everyone in her home was on his side: her parents, relatives, friends.

“He’s a good match. Don’t let him get away!”

And she had asked him then: “Please, don’t you pressure me too!”

But in real life, it is just like chess:

“If you don’t make a move, someone else will.”

“If you don’t win, someone will beat you.”

And that move was made.

With someone else’s piece…

That love had scorched his heart for ever…

And now he never let anything slip away, whether it was his or someone else’s!

He looked at that old photograph…

Back then, their world had still been whole, not made of shards.

They were both smiling sincerely in it.

The whole world belonged to them alone, and he had believed that anyone could be brought back.

That one love could easily replace another.

That another woman could soothe your Pain.

A new victory make up for a loss.

Neither of them knew then that almost thirty years later the photograph would remain intact,

While everything around it would shatter into shards.

Paris.

He had discovered it for the first time just after meeting the Queen.

It was her city!

Truly Royal, glittering with the catwalks of its squares, its streets and quarters radiating like the rays of a crown.

With the diamond spires of Notre-Dame and Saint-Sulpice.

And, of course, the Tower, coquettishly spreading its legs on the Champ de Mars…

He loved her city with all his heart.

Always returned here as though coming home.

The Fifth Arrondissement: “Greetings, Armand Richelieu!”

The Sixth: “Greetings, musketeers!”

And of course, Vendôme, and Sacré-Cœur darkened by the rain…

He knew its taste by heart!

Here, on the Boulevard des Capucines…

Hippopotamus? No, today perhaps the Grand Café opposite…

Or head over to Lyon altogether!

To the Blue Express? …

But without her, the city was merely a lifeless monument of local sandstone.

Happiness was breaking into pieces…

This was the fashion capital of the world, and it simply could not live without its Queen…

She charged the city with her smile.

With her slightly slanting emerald eyes, worthy of the Emperor's crown in the Louvre…

With the light in a window overlooking the Panthéon.

With her laughter, ringing like the bells of Montmartre.

With the smell of wet grass in the Luxembourg Gardens.

With her heels on the ancient stone of Rue Férou.

With a strand of hair curling fancifully like the Seine.

With live music drifting through an open window…

Everything here seemed empty and lifeless without her.

And memory keeps the shards.

Small.

Sharp.

Sometimes almost invisible.

For years, you can be certain you gathered them all up long ago.

Swept them out.

Thrown them away.

Forgotten.

Then one day, by chance, you step on one barefoot.

And there is blood again…

There had been many beautiful women in his life afterwards.

Some, perhaps, would be more beautiful still.

But the Queen remained the first woman beside whom he had suddenly felt not like the master,

But like a naive boy in love.

For the first time, he had seen how one single person could suddenly become more important to you than the entire World.

And it was in Paris that he had once made the first move in a game whose consequences would smoulder in shards for almost thirty years.

He had simply walked away from her then.

Not because he had stopped loving her.

But because he loved her too much…

He thought he could wait the pain out.

That one wedge could drive out another.

That one person could replace another.

That if you moved forward fast enough, the past simply would not catch up with you.

He did not yet know:

There are women who do not leave our lives.

They simply shatter within them into thousands of pieces.

And for the rest of your life, you find them in the most unexpected places:

In another woman.

In a stranger's glance.

In the smell of the sea.

In a song heard by chance.

In mountains.

In cities…

Even almost thirty years later…

For the first time in his life, he was returning from the City of Lovers, his beautiful Paris.

From the city he would visit again and again over the next almost thirty years, discovering it anew each time, as though there, shard by shard and grain by grain, he could keep studying and absorbing the Love that had burst into his chest like a cannonball at the beginning of that snowy November, almost thirty years ago…

He was driving home in his familiar, Faithful Black Merc, proudly bearing the number 248 on its breast.

The very car that had brought him to the Queen as she crossed the road.

And suddenly, a Green Dragon flew out from behind a mountain.

The Merc bravely met it in a deadly head-on charge and, dying, flying into fragments, saved him.

Saved him at the cost of its own mane, eyes, neck, breast and hooves…

Just as once, on a chequered rosewood board ruled into eight by eight, his Black Knight had died fearlessly for him, saving its King…

Thanks to that sacrifice, he survived.

But the man who emerged from that heap of fragments of the raven-black Merc, mingled with the shards of his beloved Paris, back then, almost thirty years ago,

Was no longer him.

A new life.

A newborn Wolf…

Chapter 9. The Duchess.

Happiness is being understood.
Great Happiness is being loved.
True Happiness is loving someone yourself.
Confucius

“Sir, tell me, how many moves ahead must you think to win at life?”

“Nomy, life isn’t chess, and there are no guarantees in it at all! Ever! With anyone!”

“Why, my Lord? I know perfectly well that the most brilliant chess players think ten to fifteen moves ahead after a particular move by their opponent. A powerful engine combines a search through variations with a neural-network evaluation of positions and calculates dozens of moves ahead… And that engine can beat anyone in the world over the board! Why can’t we work through millions of combinations, thousands of steps ahead, in life, and WIN?”

“Because, Nomy, there are things in life that cannot be expanded into Fourier series or summed by integration: the divine essence, feelings… cowardice… Love, for heaven’s sake. None of that belongs to this sinful world. And those are precisely the factors that can alter the trajectory of any bullet, even at the end of its flight. Alter it radically and quite unpredictably. You cannot account for that in any equation. Take it from a mathematician!”

Oh, my faithful reader, this chapter is surely worth your attention!

There was a Duchess in his life!

And she was his faithful WIFE.

They had lived together for fifteen of the almost thirty years since he had been reborn and proudly named himself the Wolf.

It seemed that after those first, hardest fifteen years or so, Heaven had finally taken pity on him and sent him that rare treasure, that support and dependable refuge, which no amount of money can buy.

Who else would accept your weaknesses so unconditionally, so completely?

Turn a blind eye to everything and bring you hot soup at your first call, to the hotel where you were staying for “three days of negotiations”?

And even now, out of genuine respect for you, refrain from looking over your shoulder, seeing you spend the nights furiously writing something, incessantly, almost deliriously, for two months already…

Knowing all your passwords, addresses and rendezvous…

It seemed she had always been beside him, beside her King, her Wolf, on that mad board of his, ruled into far more than those primitive sixty-four squares…

She was his most Faithful and devoted Rook, and it seemed she had always stood on the same board as him.

Always, unfailingly beside him, eagerly awaiting castling, so that she could shield him securely with herself.

Sometimes no chess piece can protect its King better than a Rook.

The Queen is usually roaming distant foreign lands in pursuit of her countless opening and gambit ideas.

Knights and bishops are splendid and brave, of course, but they do not have a Rook's power to hold a line and defend their Monarch along it!

And of all the pieces on the board, only the Rook has the right to castle with the King.

Yes, the Rook does not move in the opening!

Except for the utterly reckless and desperate, perhaps…

That might be what some people want.

Certainly not him.

As a rule, she has her own affairs to attend to at the beginning, and stays in the rear.

Only in the endgame, finally sweeping out onto the newly opened files and ranks, will she bravely defend her King.

And sometimes that one Passed Pawn, which gives them both hope for the future and a reason to Live!

They had castled together in life long ago.

Now he was under her protection, in a secure but cramped Principality, in the very corner of the board, hemmed in by two Monégasque cliffs to the left and below…

For years they had lovingly, skillfully built this haven for two together.

And even when he was away, the Duchess would take up a trowel and hammer herself, organize the building work herself.

She was his keeper of the seal.

His safe-deposit box.

And his combination lock.

He had never trusted anyone in his life as he trusted her.

Back then, they even shared a single password.

Men, which of you has not secretly dreamt of this?

This is exactly the woman to grow Old with!

But he was a Wolf, and something was always missing.

“Don’t let her get away!” “You old idiot, who else is going to want you?” his loved ones kept telling him…

“Listen, why have you hardly slept for a month? Let’s buy you a good new pillow. I can see the old one must be uncomfortable…”

“Thank you. I’d rather go for a walk before bed. I’ll probably be a while. My trainer’s been telling me to walk more for a year now. I ought to make up for the year I’ve wasted.”

“Just don’t stay out too long. I worry about you!”

“Go to bed. Don’t worry. I’ll be late. As usual…”

By the average human clock, his life had already passed its equator.

At his age, most people were already thinking about grandchildren quite often…

But he and the Duchess had no one to look after.

Except the Cat…

He had given the Duchess a great deal.

Soon after meeting her, he had taught her to ride, given her the first Steel Steed of her life and made her a daring rider…

And it was he who had first shown her Paris.

Made her close her eyes while they were still at the airport.

And felt genuine delight watching the Duchess's eyes widen as they drove into the center, and at her first sight of the Tower…

He had fostered her growth.

Bolstered her confidence.

Helped her untangle complicated human schemes in the nest of spiders where she was building her career…

There was, admittedly, something he had never managed, however hard he tried: she had never mastered his own hard-won system for putting questions briefly and clearly, in the format:

"What? Where? When?"

She could not speak at length and persuasively as he could.

But she could ACT, silently and no less beautifully.

And believe me, that is far more important!

No one could take that away from her.

For years he had made her enter the world's most luxurious boutiques without fear, as though walking into her own cupboard.

Learn to distinguish the brands.

Even among expensive things, consciously choose quality…

Most importantly, she had learnt to earn the money for it herself.

Without his help any more…

"Where would you like to go for your birthday? Paris, as usual? I'm looking at tickets in the sale. Or perhaps Bali or the Maldives? There are fantastic discounts, and it's the season…"

"Thank you for everything. You never forget about me. But I don't want to go anywhere any more. And the timing's wrong. You know what my Accountant is busy with at the moment…"

The years passed…

The mountain of designer clothes grew, until even a whole room was no longer enough to hold them…

He had long since lost interest in the celebrated outlets and designer boutiques that every beauty dreamt of visiting.

But the Duchess had only just acquired the taste. He had spent years teaching it to her himself!

And gradually, their whole life was becoming a pursuit of the next trip, to the next city or seaside, with the inevitable visits to boutiques he had long since grown sick of.

No sooner had they returned from another holiday-and-shopping trip than the Duchess was searching for tickets to new destinations…

They had this world, conquered for the two of them.

The very world of which so many dream of conquering even a part.

For the two of them, it already lay open, like a book almost finished…

And the years kept passing…

He understood ever more clearly that family was not the Principality's many buildings.

Not the mountains of possessions piled in storerooms.

Not even the reassuring figures in bank accounts, which everyone needed, always…

Family was the laughter of children.

The chance to kindle a new life, fill it with your love and the wisdom of your accumulated experience, pass on the baton from generation to generation, so that your people might live and flourish.

With someone close to you, someone you loved…

The Duchess wanted the same thing.

She spoke of it often, and at length.

But here, for the first time, it was as though they had suddenly exchanged roles.

She had finally learnt from him to speak well and fluently…

But, almost for the first time, not to act herself.

Yes, she wanted it!

But here, too, as always, she relied on him:

He would organize and arrange everything. As always.

And he could not make her…

Nor did he want to!

You cannot force someone to bring a new life into the world. It is wrong, besides!

To force someone to take a risk…

He himself would have taken the risk, of course.

There was no longer time to put his own life off until "someday": Time Trouble.

More than once, he had staked his Life on less.

Here he was even prepared to raise the stakes.

Better to take a chance than perish for certain!

Roulette does not accept bets on someone else's behalf.

In life, after all, each person is responsible for their own.

The years passed…

Chapter 10. The Pack.

Kindness without strength is no virtue;
it is weakness in attractive wrapping.
The world does not ask your intentions.
It tests your readiness to defend
what you believe in…

“Brother, are you with me?” His Friend held a worn old Nagant revolver that someone else had brought.

“I’m with you!” He had never said or done otherwise.

“Then pull it! And let’s go and have a drink! You’re my brother. Do as I do! Even billionaires play this sometimes. I’ve seen one…”

They had stepped out onto the balcony for a smoke. Beyond the window, a family celebration was in full swing.

Salads were being chopped, and everyone was getting ready to play Mafia…

But the game they were playing out here was far more intense and dangerous.

Here, too, as had happened often enough before, he had managed to deftly discard the only cartridge from the cylinder without being noticed.

His Friend had not seen it and did not know. He considered the risk acceptable, as though it could bind their destinies even more tightly together…

“Sir, why do you call yourself the Wolf? Wolves are savage predators, relatives of dogs, and certainly not intellectual geniuses…”

“Nomy, the Wolf is one of the most intelligent creatures. And what speaks to me is that, unlike many people, they have understood what matters most in life: they live in packs, and they are the most devoted mates and caring Parents… Nor do I find fault with dogs. There is far more purity in them than in most two-legged creatures. As for their loyalty and honesty… let us simply keep silent!”

And so, my dear Reader, it is time to get to know our Hero more deeply.

Though after everything that had happened over almost thirty years, he would now be more inclined to call himself “NO hero”.

After leaving the Queen, he wandered for a long time.

He had lost his Point of Support.

That very landmark in life, the flag from which, in his thoughts and actions, he had already been measuring distances and directions towards his New Family, Career, Success and Prosperity.

Oh, my reader, do not believe those who insist that a man’s point of support remains unshakeable, solid and constant throughout his life.

We change.

Opinions change, and so do vectors and coordinates.

There were many girls along his way.

But not one of them could replace the Queen.

Together, however, they did something else, no less important: they distracted him from obsessive thoughts and brought him back to life. Beside them he could still laugh, wonder, make plans of some kind…

Each of those girls had a life of her own. And far from all of them suspected that they had been invited into someone else's attempt to forget another woman.

He preferred not to notice that. He felt his own pain keenly. There was less and less room left in him for anyone else's.

Gradually, he was becoming a philosopher himself.

Yes, my dear reader, had he found his happy ending with the Queen almost thirty years ago, perhaps there would be nothing for him to describe in a book today.

"All happy families resemble one another; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy had been absolutely right. He certainly knew what he was writing about.

After the separation, he had had to be born again, as someone entirely different.

No longer a boy, but a man.

A Wolf.

And, newly born, he was still entirely alone in this world.

Before, he had had friends.

A family.

In name. Like everyone else.

He had never truly tested anyone in his family or among his friends.

Until then, there had simply been no real occasion to put them to the test.

They had all simply been there.

It had seemed that all those people who regularly sat at festive tables, making long, beautiful toasts, would surely remain beside him if anything happened.

There were people who sincerely wished him happiness.

Some advised him to forget her as quickly as possible.

Others to find someone else immediately.

Still others considered it all nothing but a whim, his own fantasies…

Perhaps they were all right in some way. But those conversations made him feel lonelier still.

Back then, he probably knew about packs, and why wolves needed them at all, only from a book by a Canadian naturalist who had observed wolves in the polar tundra.

It was a story about animals.

About cold, hunger, hunting.

And in that book, only wolves had a pack: they simply found it hard to survive alone.

But we are human!

The highest of the primates!

Every one of us humane, kind, loyal, conscientious and reasonable.

Since our toasts are so heartfelt.

Our good wishes so sincere!

Except that between “If you need anything, just ask” and “I’m on my way!” there could sometimes lie an eternity’s abyss.

He was no easy proposition himself, admittedly.

He could call someone over, then push them away with his very first reply.

Could feel hurt at being misunderstood without having properly explained anything…

He wanted his Own to know everything without words.

But somehow the people around him back then did not…

Many in his old circle neither understood nor accepted these changes.

Or pretended not to.

No one stood shoulder to shoulder with him then.

Almost no one.

Only his Friend stood beside him:

“Let’s go. We’ll sort it out. Shake the place up…”

You are not alone!

He did not promise to bring back the Queen.

Did not explain how happy the new life would be.

He simply offered to go with him.

That was when the word “Pack” ceased to be merely a page in a book for him.

He had considered his Father and Mother his Own long before he had learnt to define anything at all.

There was no need to put them on lists or test their strength.

They were his beginning.

They say, “A son is not answerable for his father.”

For his actions, perhaps.

But he would never have abandoned his Father, and would always have answered for him.

For his Mother, too.

He had no questions there.

His Friend, meanwhile, had entered that circle, his Pack, of his own accord.

Without any bond of blood.

They had known each other since their first year at school.

But that alone was not enough.

There had been all sorts of things.

Quarrels.

Misunderstandings.

One had money, the other nothing.

Then the reverse.

Families came, worries, obligations that could not be set aside for an evening's conversation.

But what mattered most remained between them:

They still found each other interesting.

Even when there was nothing to resolve.

They needed no special occasion to get together.

Often, they would sit in the kitchen until morning, recalling things that mattered only to the two of them.

No one else would have understood half their jokes:

"Malye Grebenya village, 22 May 2012.
15:01 Greenwich Mean Time.

REPORT. EUSTACE TO CENTRE

Target 'Valkyrie' located. That concludes the good news.

Visual assessment of technical and tactical specifications, together with a psycho-spectral analysis of the target conducted under deep-cover 'Invisible Man' conditions, has revealed the following:

'OH, TO HELL WITH… THIS GAME OF TAG!'

To clarify: Valkyrie turned out to be as tall as the Eiffel Tower. Given EUSTACE's operational parameters, she is entirely outside my range. What you need here, CENTRE, is heavy artillery. Nothing less will do.

In short, NICHT! Don't even try to persuade me.

I therefore request permission to resign of my own accord, as my health is worth more.

Respectfully,
Former resident agent of enemy intelligence,
Holder of the Order of ‘Chuk and Gek’, First Class,
with little bows and without…”

“A friend is known in adversity.” How true!

But a Friend is also known in joy.

By the way he greeted his good fortune.

Whether he could be happy for him when he had nothing of his own to boast about.

And by whether friendship became awkward when there was no help left to give and no one expected anything useful from you anymore.

He had another friend, also from childhood.

Fate had carried him to a distant country long ago.

A family. Worries. A different time on the clock on the wall.

Calls and letters grew less frequent.

Conversations shorter.

He missed him.

Sometimes he grew angry.

But he could not call it betrayal that the man had acquired a life in which he was no longer present every day.

Closeness does not always survive distance.

But the kindness someone has shown you does not vanish with distance.

“Sir, how did you decide whom to let into your Pack?”

“By eye, and by heart. Sometimes I got it wrong. I don’t have a scanner or a lie detector, and never have. ‘Whom should I let in, and whom should I say goodbye to?’ That really is perhaps the most important question in life. Your success depends on it. Your health, your well-being, your happiness, in the end. I don’t begrudge spending money on someone, if only it lets me truly know that person! You can save far more that way than by spending your entire life on people who are supposedly ‘close’, but infinitely distant from you.”

Though there was no reliable price list here either.

The person who repaid a debt might one day prove unable to bear your good fortune.

And the one who could not yet repay it might stay beside you when everyone else had switched off their phones.

A single trial could not test a person.

It took a life.

Shared.

And that, too, had taken him a long time to understand.

He had not abandoned his late Father’s friends.

“My Father's friends are my friends.”

To him, that sounded perfectly natural.

He called them himself.

Offered help.

Listened to stories in which his Father was still alive, still young, hurrying somewhere, laughing at something.

Sometimes those conversations alone were reason enough to dial the number.

Then he had to bid farewell to them, too.

The Pack grew quieter.

But it did not grow smaller in his memory.

There were simply more and more people he could no longer stand up for.

He could only remember.

With relatives, everything proved more complicated.

A sister, a little sister, a brother.

His own by blood.

But they never became close to one another.

It happens.

Only that brief phrase explained nothing to him.

Especially when it came to his own little sister.

He went over his attempts to grow closer, their conversations, their grievances.

Each time he found evidence that he had tried.

And each time he was left with the same question:

“How can two fingers of the same hand turn away from one another?”

“Sir, would she tell this story the same way?”

“I don’t know, Nomi.”

He could not answer for his sister.

She stood by her husband, his brother-in-law, staunchly and to the end, and tended not to take the other relatives into account.

“Sir, then your Little Sister was standing by her Own, too. Only somehow you found yourself on the other side? Perhaps you are to blame for that?”

“Nomi, I’m going to punish you! What sort of conclusions are these? What kind of thoughts? I know what happened. Back then, you weren’t even on a drawing board!”

“Sir, my design…”

“Shut up and listen to what I’m telling you! This is no laughing matter. Only I know what it was like for me.”

And knowing it did not make the pain any less.

“Princess, if I ever marry again, I doubt there will be ANYONE from my family on my side of the wedding…”

A bitter smile crossed his face for a moment.

The very word “relative” had grown heavy for him.

How much it had promised at the beginning, at family gatherings; how warming it had been in itself.

And how, in the end, in reality, it had guaranteed nothing.

Perhaps that was why he so cherished those with whom there was no kinship, yet closeness had grown.

People he could call without solemn explanations.

Who knew, in return, that they could call him.

“Sir, I have never heard of human Tribes living in packs…”

“It happens, Nomy. I’ve long felt an affinity with those who stand firmly by one another. ‘One for all and all for one’ is not just words there, but ACTION, the principle of their shared life. They will help a family. They will not abandon the old.”

He wanted his own Tribe to be like that, too.

But he could not gather the whole Tribe at one table, in his Pack.

So he began with those within his reach.

Even here, admittedly, he was often an idealist and expected a great deal.

If he called someone “his Own”, that was exactly what he expected.

He remembered promises.

Took disappearances badly.

Sincerely believed that since he was ready to come at any moment, the other person ought to be ready too.

“Did you ask them, sir?”

“Ask them what?”

“Whether they were willing to live by your rules.”

“Nomy, what rules? If one of your own is in trouble…”

“And what if they are in a different kind of trouble just now? One you cannot, see?”

He said nothing.

It was easier for him to help someone himself than to explain why someone else had not helped him.

But those who had once truly entered his life were not easily crossed out of it.

His Father.

His departed Friend.

The Duchess.

Even the Queen, with whom there had been no shared life.

He remembered Kindness.

And if a call came, he would not first ask how many years had passed, or who had failed to give whom what.

Now the Princess, too, was in that circle, in his Pack…

How could his Love for her, the Duchess's Love for him, and the old, still-sharp shards of the Queen all fit into a single vessel?

He himself was that vessel.

His Heart.

There, they truly could all be together.

Memory did not demand that he choose someone to evict.

But beyond his Heart, each had a life of her own.

And that was where things grew more complicated.

"Sir, are you sure each of them has accepted you into her own Pack?"

"I'm not even sure they see a pack and a family as different things, Nomi."

“But you have already accepted them.”

“I have.”

“Do they know what that means?”

He wanted to give his usual answer: “It doesn’t matter.”

But stopped.

It mattered to him!

He wanted someone to be waiting for him, too.

Someone to pick up at the other end.

To hear one day: “You’re not alone. I’m with you!”

He wanted that very much.

“I don’t know,” he said at last. “Whatever their answer, whatever they decide, it doesn’t undo what I’ve already decided for myself.”

“What, exactly?”

“Not to abandon them if they need me.”

“And if they don’t?”

That was a question he would rather not have heard.

A car passed outside the window.

The phone lay on the table.

No one was calling.

“Then I’ll have to stay out of the way, Nomi.”

As he said it, he felt how hard it would be to do.

Turn up, pay, defend, pull someone out: those were things he knew how to do.

Sometimes even where everyone else had given up.

But to remain ready to help without deciding for someone else when they needed your help…

Nomy was silent for a while.

“Then the Pack consists of people who always agree with you?”

“God forbids! Imagine how boring that would be!”

Nomi fell silent again.

He remembered his recent “Shut up”.

“And if I say ‘no’ to you?”

He looked at the screen.

“Say it first. Let’s see what I’ve taught you.”

Suddenly, he remembered that balcony.

His Friend.

The noise of the family beyond the glass door.

“…You’re my brother. Do as I do!”

He had not truly done it then.

He had simply discarded the cartridge from the cylinder.

His Friend had not seen it and did not know…

And they had returned to the table together.

Now there was no one left for him to remind of that story.

His Friend was gone.

But if it all happened again, he would give him the same answer:

“I’m with you, Brother.”

Then he would take him away.

Back to their Own…

Chapter 11. The Russian Riviera.

Everyone wants to change Humanity,
but no one stops to think
how to change themselves...
Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy

As usual, he was sitting in front of his large monitor...

A small white envelope lay on the desk before him.

Inside was something he had received from his Father twenty-five years earlier.

His Father had managed to do that for him before it was too late...

“Nomy, so many writers, poets, painters, performers - millions of intelligent people, for that matter—have been here.

“There are tons of films about the Côte d’Azur and Nice,

“Billions of photographs,

“Gigabytes of poetry...

“But I haven’t seen a single one about... this Bay itself, rather than Nice.

“‘Only Her. No one else is needed!’

“‘She is the only beauty in the entire world!’”

“Gogol and Chekhov both saw this!”

“And Herzen? He looked, and found nothing special here for himself, either in the city or in the sea...”

“Well, of course not. His soul was different. That’s why he couldn’t see it!

“‘She is the only beauty in the entire world!’

“Nomy, tell me, am I the only one like this?

“Perhaps I’m an idiot?” For the first time, he spoke to Nomy as a friend, rather than a piece of machinery.

“One moment... Checking the reference books...”

“To hell with your reference books! Answer for yourself!

“Perhaps only Matisse - one of the very few who responded to this place - wrote: ‘...when I realized that every morning I would see this light again, I was overwhelmed with happiness and decided never to leave Nice...’

“But unlike Matisse, I’m not talking about the city at all!

“Kuprin wasn’t exactly delighted with the city in his ‘Azure Shores’, either...

“The city itself is perfectly ordinary. A little dull in places, I’ll tell you. I mean the sea here. The Bay of Angels. Can none of you see that there is no other like it in the world?

“That this Bay alone is filled to the brim with the color of Her eyes?

“With Her COLOUR, precisely—not merely the light!”

“Yes, sir. Perhaps you have simply fallen in love!”...

As he did every evening, he wandered through the streets of the city fringing his beloved Baie des Anges.

The place where he wished he could stay forever,

And gaze eternally at this Sea, the only one for him, seeing it anew each day:

Now calm and crystal-clear,
gentle and kind, like Her;

Now turning green and foaming before a storm,
angry and seething,
like Her in a rage, her eyes turning green;

Then suddenly calm again,
yet still with yellow tints in its eyes,
like Her after the storm, the hurricane, the passion...

Today he had come to his tucked-away Frog, where they served his favorite beef tartare.

At the entrance, someone shouldered into him.

“Steady there, brother!”

“I’m not speaking to you,” the man replied in Ukrainian.

“Come on, brother. Sit down. Let’s talk.

“We can talk our way through a quarter-liter between us while we’re at it...”

He had sat on the very sofa where that unforgettable master of detail, Nikolai Vasilyevich, had written his Dead Souls, enjoying a delicious dinner in Rome’s ancient Antico Caffè Greco, just a few steps below the Spanish Steps...

Even that deeply controversial last Russian tsar had immortalized his homeland in the most beautiful bridge in Paris: the ‘Russian Bridge’, the Pont Alexandre III, adorned with gold and bas-reliefs with a generosity unusual even for Paris...

And never mind the tsar!

The Russian Cossacks, together with Bashkir and Kazakh horsemen, had entered Paris in answer to the devastation of Moscow and taught the leisurely French a thing or two about speed—and the true spirit of fast food—giving it the Russian name ‘bistro’ there and then, more than a hundred years before the brilliant Kroc...

“So, brother, you say you won’t speak to me?

“Don’t listen to the people who set us all at one another’s throats for their own filthy gain.

“Either we ALL SURVIVE, or none of us does! There is no other way!”

“You’re killing us now!”

“Brother, I haven’t personally killed anyone! I’m nowhere near those battles.”

“You will never be our brothers!”

“I know how much it hurts, Brother. Let’s pray together, for your people and for ours.

“God, put a stop to those ghouls at last!

“And grant our peoples peace and quiet at last!”

Reluctantly, his companion joined him in prayer.

“Let us pray!”

“You know, brother, perhaps it is precisely we who were far from this slaughter who can finally help us all shake hands.

“And if we are to live together, we must remember our ancestors:

“Vladimir.

“Yaroslav.

“Princess Olga...”

“None of that was Muscovy... That was Kyiv's Rus’!”

“Rus’—a united Rus’—is precisely what binds us all together!

“And for Rus’ to live and flourish, we must all be fruitful and multiply!..”

Suddenly he remembered his Princess’s Eyes.

And what he had seen in them then, in the first forty seconds of their first meeting...

“Princess, I’m speaking to you now: I swear, you and I would have wonderful children!”

His companion in the café was no longer glowering at him quite so angrily.

“We shall all perish in discord, hatred, envy and despair.

“To the delight of others...”

Then he remembered those who had brought glory to their common home and defended their shared history through deeds, not empty words.

And your world is wider, far wider than your Tribe and your Pack alone!

Looking at the great canvases of Aivazian, who painted the wild, raging Blue Sea as no one else in the world could;

Remembering the exploits of the great commander Bagration,

Of young Manshuk Mametova and Aliya Moldagulova;

Chinghiz Aitmatov's Burannyi railway halt;

Reading over and over in his mind the crystalline language of Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin, Hannibal's curly-haired great-grandson...

"Well, brother. I'm glad we met!

"Take care of yourself!

"A stirrup cup?"

"I'm glad I met you too, brother!

"And may you find that beautiful woman of yours!"

"Rakhmet, brother, as we say back home.

"Dyakuyu!.."

He stood on his beloved Promenade des Anglais, the English Promenade, which had always seemed more truly Russian than anything else.

"Lord, why can I breathe freely and easily here, of all places, and not in the homeland of my forefathers?

"Why are we strangers in our own thousand-year-old country?

"Why are we the most divided people in the World?

"Why does brother hate brother among us?

"I don't even speak to my own sisters!

"Who is to blame for all of us?

"Surely, we haven't always been like this!

“Wake up, people!”

He looks at the white envelope...

Should he open it or not?

To open it would mean changing his whole life utterly.

Gaining something new? Undoubtedly!

But also losing everything he had had until now.

Perhaps—almost certainly—even his beloved Bay...

Unpredictable.

Irrational.

Foolish, even.

But now that he had written and done everything he had already written and done, there was probably no going back.

Though millions of other men would have argued strongly with that...

Yet to swim against the current, to live by his Heart rather than his reason, to act against the odds,

To go where no one else would even think of going—

Perhaps that was who he really was.

His true self.

He was still holding the unopened white envelope...

Chapter 12. A Weak Square.

“Nomy, people write a great deal about chess developing logic and skills for life. Is that true?”

“Yes, sir. Solving chess puzzles trains your memory, and the speed and flexibility of your decision-making.”

“Listen, Nomy, in life every decision is unique. There are no universal rules or standard openings, let alone standard solutions in the middlegame and endgame.”

“What about meeting a girl, sir?

“That follows a single pattern in life: surprise her, build on it, charm her, persist, win her over!”

“Oh, Nomy... You don’t understand a damned thing about courtship or relationships!

“Though you’re right: whatever happens, you certainly shouldn’t impose yourself.

“Or dither, for that matter. However hard it is.

“Women won’t appreciate your weakness or love you for it.

“Perhaps you ought to disappear for a week yourself, to find out how much she really needs you and cares about you.

“Nomy, is it true that chess ‘builds character’ and teaches you never to give up?”

“Yes. In chess, even in a completely lost position, players hope to flag their opponent.”

“That doesn’t happen in life. Well, hardly ever.”

“And what about our Princess, sir?”

“What about her? I think she’s buried herself far too deeply in her chess.

“There, she thinks at least ten moves ahead.

“But in life, sometimes only one…”

He was watching the recording of her stream for the tenth time.

The Princess was smiling.

Brightly, easily, almost without a care.

But on her board, things were anything but carefree.

She sat motionless, her cheek resting in her palm.

Then she moved a piece and gave her viewers a brief explanation.

He rewound it.

Watched again.

Still didn’t understand.

“Nomy, was that a good move?”

“Yes. The top line.

“Her opponent cannot accept the offered piece without losing the exchange.”

“So she calculated beforehand what he would do?”

“She calculated several of his possible replies.”

He paused the video.

Her smile remained on the screen.

That smile.

Beside it, on his phone, was their correspondence.

That had been easy at first, too.

Her smile, her spirited ‘ah ah’. A few warm words.

Then a long, quite candid message from her.

Then he had written to her about something serious.

Her reply had come only several days later.

A short one.

After that, her replies had grown rarer...

“What amazes me about the Princess is that in chess she understands what will happen after her move.

“But in life, she seems not to.

“She’ll say something, smile, then disappear.

“She doesn’t even look to see what’s happening on my board at the time.

“Am I alive? Am I ill?”

He leaned back thoughtfully in his chair.

“Still, it seems she only has the one board.

“And life is so much bigger.

“She can be so precise there, in chess.

“And at the same time so awkward here, in real life.

“In some ways, childishly impractical.

“Sometimes even rude in her polite expressions, without noticing it herself.

“And she isn’t stupid!”

“She isn’t,” Nomy agreed.

“Then explain it to me!”

Nomy thought for a moment.

Though he had grown used to these pauses, he would still, out of habit, call to her impatiently:

“Nomy!..”

“My Lord, on the board you can see all the pieces...”

“And?”

“You know how each of them can move.

“You know the aim of the game.

“You can calculate whether the King remains in check.

“You can establish who has won, in the end.”

“In life, too, it’s usually clear who punched whom in the face!”

“After the punch, yes.”

He smirked.

“Go on!”

“In life, you cannot always see what led up to an event.

“You may see a smile without knowing how tired someone is.

“See silence without knowing what caused it.

“Hear ‘all right’ without knowing whether it means agreement or a wish to end the conversation.”

“And?”

“You don’t have enough starting data to calculate in life.”

“Well, you can always ask!”

“You can, sir.”

“And sometimes it’s enough simply to listen.”

“Exactly!”

He played her video again.

The Princess was analyzing her opponent’s mistake.

Confidently showing where the Knight should have gone.

There, everything was obvious. Even to him.

Especially once she had explained it.

“Nomy, tell me, why can you manage both?” he asked. “You calculate chess positions, and you talk to me quite sensibly about life.”

“I use different methods and algorithms.”

“Aha. Your twelve-core rapid fire!”

“If you mean computing power, that is not the only thing that matters here.”

“What else, then?”

“The approach to the calculation itself. The algorithm.

“In chess, I examine legal moves.

“When I talk to you about life, first I try to understand you: to absorb the information and reasoning you give me, to grasp exactly what you mean.”

“And do you understand?”

“Not always accurately. But sometimes you patiently explain again.”

“Sometimes?!” He laughed.

Nomy did not specify how many times.

“But the main thing here, sir, is that I LISTEN to you!

“You have told me a great deal about people, about your mistakes, about how a single spoken word can come back years later.

“In chess, the approach is different.

“There, I don’t have to ask a pawn what it wants.

“In life, though, you cannot get anywhere without first asking and listening.”

“Are you saying it all comes down to knowing how to listen?”

“More to being willing to learn what you do not yet know.”

He thought about that.

“And she’s used to knowing?”

“On her own board, yes.”

“And she so often carries that same certainty beyond the board!”

“As you can see, it is possible.”

That, he understood.

He had seen plenty of examples in life.

He had been guilty of it himself once.

For years he had honed his skills in graphics and design.

An excess of precision in the details; rendering COLOUR through an audacious, even absurd calculation of wavelength, brought to life with an ordinary black pencil...

When you spend years doing one thing, honing precision, perfection, speed and memory, sometimes you begin to notice what everyone else walks past without even stopping. And in certain ways you become strong, deservedly so.

But then you leave your familiar room, somehow convinced that the walls of the whole world stand in the same places.

On the same principles. According to the same RULES.

But out here there are no walls, no marked squares!

And even an opponent is by no means always an opponent...

“So a strong chess player will inevitably struggle in life?” he asked.

“Not inevitably.

“But if you give all your time to one wooden board, there may be none left for anything else.”

“So it’s one or the other?”

“What about Lasker?” Nomy asked.

“What about him?”

“He was world champion.

“And at the same time a serious mathematician, with recognised research results of his own.”

“Good example. Accepted!

“But only as an exception to the rule.”

“Thank you, my Lord!”

“But what matters more, Nomy, is TIME and ENERGY.

“What pays for that precision and perfection in the work you love.

“Serious work generally wants all of you.

“You work to earn a living.

“Then you think about how to work better.

“Then even at night, sometimes in your sleep, you finish working out what you didn’t have time for during the day.

“Where in that day and night is there room to write a Novel?

“For chess? For another summit?”

“Sometimes people find room.”

“They do. At the expense of something else. Sleep. Rest.

“Things they’ve put off yet again.

“I know myself how much of my life this book devours!”

He glanced back at the open manuscript.

There, too, his next move had long been awaited, to bring the ending closer.

“I’m not saying that a chess player must be stupid away from the board. Only that you have to learn away from the board as well.

“But when? If your head is already full of nothing but the next game, the next tournament?”

“You are talking about the price of focus.”

“Yes, Nomy. I’m a marketing man, and you know how I love defining the PRICE.

“But believe me, the price isn’t always visible to the person paying it.”

“Sir, perhaps the Princess simply grew up in a different world, one that has already changed a great deal: a world digitized into different forms of communication, with laws of its own.

“Perhaps to her a pause in a conversation is merely a pause, rather than ‘abandoning’ or ‘forgetting a Human Being’, as it is to you?”

“Perhaps so, Nomy. But however, technology develops and forms change, the essential things remain constant through every age.

“Attention and interest.”

“Sir, she may simply be waiting for your next chapter. A positive, bright, cheerful one, at that.

“There is already so much greyness and darkness in life.

“And sometimes you add your own somber colors...”

“You’re right, Nomy. But what can we do if, when we speak seriously about serious things, those are mostly the colors our palette gives us?”

“I would still be more positive!”

“All right, Nomy. I’ll take that to heart.

“Next time I’ll have to choose a different subject. Something brighter. The Zoomer generation, for instance!”

“Sir, when do we start? I’m ready to help you!”

“Nomy, you’re just like a Young Pioneer: ‘Always ready!’

“Wait!

“To become strong there, in chess, she had to give herself to it completely.”

“And she still has to work hard.”

“While life goes on!”

“Yes.”

“Without her.”

Nomy did not answer at once.

“With her, sir.

“Only some of her moves go unnoticed.”

“And look at how she loses,” he went on.

“She certainly doesn’t enjoy losing.”

“Of course not. Once. Twice. Three times. But then I see her face change. Her laughter vanish. Everything else seems to cease to exist.”

He found another stretch of the recording.

Several short games in a row.

She brushed off the first defeat. After the next, she began explaining where she had gone wrong. Then came an irritated ‘Hm’, and she moved the mouse.

It seemed to him that now she needed a win at any cost.

So that she could breathe again.

“It’s as if she has to prove immediately that she’s still strong,” he said.

“To herself!

“Especially to herself!”

“Perhaps she is simply tired.”

“Perhaps.

“But that’s not what I mean now. If life to you is ‘win’, ‘win’, ‘win’, what will you do when one day you no longer can?”

“Try again!”

“On the board.

“But in life?

“There, by no means every defeat can be put right with a rematch.”

He remembered how many times he himself had demanded another chance from life.

Not asked. Demanded!

And how rarely Life had cared...

“One day even chess will grow harder, Nomy.

“I’m not saying you can’t play at seventy.

“You can.

“And you can enjoy it.

“But you can’t book yourself a whole lifetime at your peak.”

“Do you think she doesn’t understand that?”

“I honestly don’t know. I think she does.

“But right now, it seems to me that she finds it hard even to imagine herself without that brilliance.”

He looked at the screen again.

“Today people watch her.

“Write to her.

“Wait for her.

“Admire her.

“An endless stream of compliments...

“Then someone else will come along, someone they’ll be even more eager to see.

“Younger.

“Faster.

“Simply someone new.

“And most of those eyes will turn her way.”

“But sir, that could happen to anyone.

“To a ‘writer’ especially!”

“True, Nomy. And it probably already has.”

He was silent for a while.

“But you have to make at least some room inside yourself for that possibility. So, you don’t discover one day that the viewers have gone, and with them your entire Life.”

“She does earn a living from her work,” Nomi said.

“She does. Streams, subscribers, donations.

“I’m not arguing.

“But sometimes it seems to me that she sees only today.

“There’s attention and money coming in, so today she can carry on playing!”

“What should she see?”

“What comes afterwards. Who will stay beside her; what she herself will do if her familiar way of life stops working.”

“Have you asked her about it?”

He rubbed his forehead.

“In certain things, I look at her and seem to see a twelve-year-old girl.

“Intelligent.

“Talented.

“But a girl who desperately wants the adult world to let her keep playing.”

“That is only your impression, sir.”

“Yes. Mine. And it worries me.

“She wants a family, after all. Children.

“And there you can’t simply end the stream when something goes wrong.”

Nomy fell silent.

“People learn to live with a child, too. Not everyone knows how beforehand.”

“I understand. Only that is another whole life you have to be ready for.

“An enormous responsibility.

“Certainly not a piece you can set up again tomorrow...”

He spoke sharply, too sharply even, for someone who only a minute earlier had been admiring her smile.

But the smile was still there.

And so was his love.

He looked at the Princess’s face, frozen in the frame.

How strange.

He had always thought her strong.

He still did.

But for the first time he wondered whether the very place where she felt strongest was where her vulnerability began.

On the board you could fend off an attack.

Exchange pieces at the right moment.

Accept defeat and play a new game tomorrow...

But what could you do with a person who, after your smile, could no longer return to his former life?

You could hardly put him back on his starting square.

“Nomy, where is the weak square here?”

“That depends on whose position we are examining.”

“Hers.”

“Perhaps beyond the board.”

“Her whole life beyond the board?”

“The part she has not yet learnt to notice.”

He leaned back in his chair.

“To me, all those sixty-four squares are one vast weak square.

“Beautifully marked out.

“With rules.

“With clocks.

“But how small it is for Life!”

“As a model of a whole life, it is small, sir.”

“Exactly!”

He leaned forward.

“Either you try to fit your entire life into sixty-four squares, or you retreat so deeply into them that everything else becomes a weak square.

“What are you supposed to do, then?”

“Notice when the game is over,” Nomy replied.

He looked at her.

“Sounds simple enough.”

“It is hard to do.”

“Why?”

“Because beyond the board, you will have to learn too.”

“Do you know what’s strangest?” he went on. “I barely understand her chess moves.

“But sometimes I can see her moves in life before she makes them.”

“That is how it seems to you?”

“Yes, Nomy. That’s how it seems to me. Happy?”

“I am clarifying.”

He smirked.

“Where she’ll retreat.

“Where she’ll laugh it off.

“Where she’ll say ‘later’ because right now she’s afraid.

“Sometimes she’s an open book to me.

“I read her, and still, I admire her.

“Though I can already see where it will hurt the most.”

“Her, or you?”

He thought for a moment.

“Both of us, most likely.”

Suddenly he understood why he could never turn a page of this book in peace: he was already inside it himself.

“Perhaps what frightens her is that I notice too much?

“On her board, she’s used to being the one who reads the other person.

“And here, almost for the first time, someone is reading her.”

“Are you sure that is what frightens her?”

“No. I’m only guessing.”

He leaned back again.

“But she needs someone who understands life as well as she understands chess.

“Not necessarily me. Someone like that.

“Someone who has been through enough to spot a hole before they both fall into it.”

“And show it to her?”

“Show her? More like offer his hand in time.

“Explain why it’s worth stopping here, and where it’s safe to go ahead.”

“And what will she give him?”

He looked at the board.

“Her life, which he doesn’t yet know. Her way of seeing. Perhaps she’ll finally teach him to enjoy those wooden Knights of hers.

“Imagine a couple like that. She sees what I don’t.

“I notice what she passes by. And we’re not competing over who is cleverer. Together, we simply see more.”

“That is possible, sir.”

“Exactly!

“Not take chess away from her.

“Not drag her by the hand away from her board.

“But make her life larger. And mine, while we’re at it.”

“If she wishes to go with you...”

“If she wishes,” he repeated.

He saw her smile again.

Now he no longer wanted to explain a mistake.

He wanted to show her a road.

And because of that change, he almost failed to notice his own next move.

He reached for his phone.

He wanted to write to the Princess.

To explain all this to her, as he always did.

To show her where she was wrong and which next move, she could not see.

His thumb had already touched the screen.

Then it stopped.

“Nomi, where is my weak square?”

“Do you want me to answer now?”

“I do.”

“You know very well how to get what you want.”

“And?”

“Sometimes you find it hard to hear that the other person wants something different.”

He looked at the phone for a long time.

Then laid it beside him.

Screen upwards.

The Princess in the video had won.

Her viewers were congratulating her.

She laughed as she set up the pieces for the next game...

And suddenly it occurred to him that he had no idea how her day had gone.

Apart from a couple of hours on the board.

No idea at all...

He returned to their conversation.

Deleted the few lines he had already typed on his phone.

And wrote:

“How are you today? Really, though.”

There was no reply from her yet.

And for the first time, he did not invent her answers for her...

Chapter 13. The Null Move.

Everything comes in time to those who know how to wait.

François Rabelais

“Nomy, can you skip a turn in chess?”

“No, sir. The rules do not allow it.”

“Well, she certainly allows herself to sometimes!

“She often follows the rules of chess in life, too. And if you can’t skip a turn in chess, then...

“Could her silence mean the game is over?”

“No, sir. A game certainly does not end in silence: either someone wins, or it is a draw.

“Either way, the result will be announced or shown on the display.”

‘On the display...’ he thought.

Where could you find those reliable displays in life, so you wouldn’t have to guess whether the game was over or the other person had merely gone out for a smoke?

“To be more precise, sir, you do not have to announce ‘checkmate’, ‘stalemate’ or ‘time’ aloud in chess either.

“But in chess you can establish for certain that the game is over. In a game with another person in life, you have no shared scoresheet, no arbiter, not even a shared clock.”

“But there is her. The Princess.

“A titled Chess Player.

“She’s used to calculating continuations.

“Then why, where I’m waiting for her, waiting for her next move, is there only emptiness?”

He opened their conversation again.

The last message was his. So was the one before it.

“Nomy, this is a first for me: sending messages after someone hasn’t replied...”

“Perhaps she is still thinking,” Nomy said.

“About what? How to answer ‘yes’, or how to write ‘no’?”

“It is you and I who are dividing her answers into just two possibilities.

“She may not be ready with either.

“Besides, perhaps she is preparing for a competition and has put herself into a week of silence so that no one will disturb her.”

“And that means she can simply say nothing?”

“As you can see, she can.

“Are you asking whether it is possible, or whether it is fair to you?”

“I’m only asking what it means.”

Nomy did not answer at once.

He gave a mirthless smile.

“Oh, don’t you start as well!”

“I am choosing my words, sir.”

“That’s better. At least you’ve told me what you’re doing.”

He laid the phone on the desk, but left the screen on.

“Every story I’ve had with a woman has had its own opening.

“Sometimes an absurd one—just my style.

“Sometimes so beautiful that you spend the rest of your life trying to work out which move you ruined it on.

“There were short games, too.

“And others I came out of with half of myself missing, or even in shards.

“But at least I understood that they were over.”

“Always?”

He looked at her irritably.

“Are you talking about the Queen again?”

“You yourself still return to that position with her!”

A car passed outside. Light swept across the ceiling and vanished.

Once, the Queen had been real.

Not a piece, not a chapter title, not a convenient explanation for why he had become the Wolf.

She had been a young woman beside whom a future existed.

Then that future with her had ceased to exist.

But memory remained. And sometimes it behaved as though nothing had yet been decided.

It offered a different arrangement in the past, another move.

Another possibility. A small, almost imperceptible ‘otherwise’, after which everything would surely have worked out.

“I know that game is over,” he said. “But no one can forbid me to analyze it!”

“Let them try!

“But when you analyze the game now, you can move the pieces for both sides. Back then, you could decide only for your own.”

He wanted to object, but could think of nothing to say.

“All right. My endgame with the Queen was played out long ago.

“But with the Duchess?

“Fifteen years... That’s hardly blitz!”

“No, sir.”

“We built an entire Principality. Even now we share a single password. Do you understand what that means—one password between two people?”

“I do.”

“Just don’t start on security.”

“I was going to speak of trust.”

He smiled a little.

The Duchess knew how to act without lengthy explanations. While he was far away, she picked up a trowel herself, made decisions, reached agreements, kept their shared home together.

And above all, he could call her at any time, from the midst of any madness of his own, and know that the phone would be answered.

None of that appeared in their beautiful photographs.

Yet it was what had held their fifteen years together.

“And then it was as if we adjourned some important part of our game,” he said.

Life went on. Tickets, cities, shopping, homecomings. Everything worked.

Except, perhaps, the very thing that might have made it worth building all of this.

There were keys in the Principality to leave to someone.

Whole rooms to store things in. There was plenty to show a person who might one day call this house their own.

Only that person did not exist.

“We both talked about it. Only she was used to me arranging everything. And I was waiting for her, in this, to take a step herself.

“Herself. Not on command. Not because I’d decided everything for everyone again.”

“Did you tell her what you were waiting for?”

“We talked about it a hundred times, Nomy.”

He ran a hand over his face.

“I couldn’t force her.

“And I didn’t want to.

“There are decisions for which you cannot borrow someone else’s courage. Especially when you aren’t the only one taking the risk.”

“And what did you call your waiting, back then?”

“Patience.”

He said it confidently. Then added, more quietly:

“Probably.”

For several seconds they were silent.

“But a game can be adjourned, can’t it?” he asked at last. “Not everything in the world is played in three minutes.”

“It can. When a game is adjourned, the position is preserved and a time set for play to resume.

“But both players know about the interruption. The second player does not sit there forever, wondering where the first has gone.”

“Exactly! That’s what I mean. Say, ‘I need time.’ I know how to wait.”

“You do, sir. Sometimes for so long that you stop noticing your own life passing.”

“What if the game lasts a lifetime?”

“Then it still needs two people taking part.”

He leaned back in his chair.

“Sometimes one of them never gets to finish.

“They die. Their flag falls, and that’s it. The other is left.”

“Left,” Nomy repeated.

“But would you call that person the winner?”

He pictured an empty chair opposite. A cup that no one would ever clear away again. Irritating habits you would later give everything simply to have back.

“No,” he said. “I don’t want that sort of victory!”

“Then not every game in life has a winner.

“Sometimes all that remains is the person who remembers the moves.”

He was silent for a while.

“Well. We have to live that long first.

“For now, everyone here is alive. And everyone is keeping silent entirely of their own free will.”

The phone went dark. He touched the screen again.

Nothing new.

“You told me yourself: SOMETIMES the strongest move is not to move.”

“Sometimes, sir.”

“A very convenient word. Fits anything.”

“Without it, we would be saying that all inaction is wisdom.”

“Exactly!

“Sometimes it’s simply fear. A person is afraid, hiding, stalling, and we solemnly declare: what restraint!

“What profound calculation!”

He stood and walked about the room.

“A Wolf knows how to stand still too, Nomy.

“Believe me!

“But he knows what he is waiting for. The wind to change.

“A step.

“A moment.

“If he stood there only because he was afraid to leave the forest, that would be quite another story.”

“From the outside, both are motionless.”

“And inside?”

“One is preparing. The other hopes the need to decide will disappear by itself.”

He stopped.

“Exactly. That’s what I’m asking.

“Does she intend to make a move at all?

“Or does she merely want me to leave of my own accord and spare her the need to say anything?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

“Make a guess.”

“She may be afraid of your reaction.

“She may not understand her own feelings.

“She may not want things to continue and be avoiding an unpleasant conversation.

“Or she may believe she has already given you a sufficiently clear answer, one you still have not accepted.”

He did not like the last possibility.

“Whose side are you on?”

“I am trying not to pass off your most painful suspicion as her confession.”

He walked slowly back to the desk.

“Can it ever be convenient for someone not to answer? So they neither agree nor lose the person who is waiting?”

“It can. But the fact that something is convenient does not prove that the person planned it all beforehand. Sometimes people simply choose whatever is easier today. And tomorrow they make the same choice again.”

“And there you have an entire strategy without a single thought.”

“But very real pain for the person waiting.”

He sat down.

He wanted to hear one precise word.

Cowardice?

Calculation?

Indifference?

Anything he could seize upon and finally stop turning over the possibilities.

Nomi would not give him that word.

“All right. How do you tell one silence from another?”

“Look at what the person does with the time they have taken.

“Whether they return to the difficult conversation.

“Whether they make anything clearer. Whether they keep their promise to come back.

“A pause may be long, sir. But if each time it is followed only by another pause, you have no grounds for treating it as preparation for a shared future.”

“Even if the person is afraid?”

“Even then. Fear explains why taking a step is difficult. By itself, it does not promise that the step will ever be taken.”

He looked at his conversation with the Princess for a long time.

“So I need her motive in order to understand her. But I don’t have to wait until I know it to decide how to live myself.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And if I fall silent now, too? Will that be a strong move?”

“Why will you fall silent?”

He looked up.

“Let her feel it.”

Nomi said nothing.

He smirked, already understanding.

“Caught me?”

“You are still trying to get the reaction you want from her. Only now through the absence of messages.”

He picked up the phone.

Opened the reply field.

The cursor blinked after the first word.

He could write it all:

‘How painful it is to wait...’

‘How easy it is to say one honest sentence...’

‘How unfair it is to leave another person surrounded by guesses...’

He could explain chess, life, love, even her own self to her.

And attach it all as a beautiful letter in the form of a chapter.

In a separate file.

Fourteen pages or so.

He was already writing, trying to explain...

Suddenly his finger hovered over the screen.

Then he deleted what he had typed.

“Today, once again, I won’t send her anything,” he said. “Because right now I don’t want to talk.

“I want to force an answer. Any answer.”

“And tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow I’ll see whether I have anything left to say besides ‘Why are you silent?’ And I’ll get on with what depends on me.”

He closed his chat with the Princess.

It was not a promise to leave for ever.

And it certainly was not a victory.

He still wanted her to reply.

Only, for the first time that evening, he did not turn that wish into another message.

“So, two kinds of pause, Nomy.

“In one, a person gathers strength to act later. In the other, they wait in the hope that they won’t have to act.”

“And sometimes they tell themselves theirs is the first.”

“Especially when it’s the second,” he said.

Now he was thinking of more than the Princess.

He remembered conversations in the Principality. Their confident ‘later’. His own patience, with which he had so readily explained away the years. Not all of that patience had been loving.

But to call all of it cowardice would be untrue as well.

He would have to work it out.

And not only her.

“Nomy, does a null move exist after all?”

“In your life today, it has been made.”

“And how do I know what it’s worth?”

“Ask yourself what you stopped for.

“Then test your answer through action.”

He turned the phone face down.

The Princess's silence was still a mystery.

His own silence today, however, already demanded an answer.

Today he had simply taken a pause.

Now it was up to him not to hide inside it...

In the courtyard opposite his windows stood a car.

An enormous, luxurious black Range Rover.

The very one whose passing lights had briefly illuminated his ceiling.

From behind the black tinted glass, in the evening darkness, two beautiful emerald-green eyes watched his windows for a long time...

She often remembered their long hikes in the mountains, and how he, still so young, had tried to help her with her English exam: '...the population of the USA is over free hundreds of millions...'

She had never understood why, that cold, snowy winter almost thirty years ago, he had left her forever...

Chapter 14. ZwischenZug.

Do not mistake kindness for weakness,
rudeness for strength,
or meanness for knowing how to get on in life.

Sometimes a single unexpected move is enough
to give two people a game to share.
Nomy.

The conversation about the weak square had never quite ended.

He closed the laptop and went to the window, but a few minutes later returned and lifted the lid again.

Nomy was waiting where he had left her.

“So that’s settled?” Nomy asked. “On the board, the Princess sees far ahead, but in life she’s still twelve?

“Shall we call a pediatrician, sir?”

“Don’t twist my words!

“I’m talking about how she sometimes behaves. Her age in her passport has nothing to do with it.”

“Then let us examine it. Does she drive a car?”

“She does. Sometimes very confidently, too.”

“And will you put that down as a childhood pastime as well?”

He smirked.

“Knowing how to drive and understanding what’s happening to the car are different things. One warning light comes on, and there goes all that confidence.”

“Plenty of adults lose theirs at that moment. You are not testing her knowledge of engines, are you? What worries you is that she doesn’t know what to do when the familiar order breaks down?”

“Exactly. As long as everything follows the rules, all is well. Then life suddenly makes a move that isn’t in her opening preparation.”

“She travels, makes her own plans, meets people.”

“She travels.

“But sometimes I watch and think: why make it so complicated? There are other ways. More convenient, less stressful. You can anticipate the things that will have you rushing about and fretting later.”

“You can, if you already know where the fretting usually begins.”

He fell silent. A car passed outside. Its headlights swept across the ceiling and vanished.

“It’s the same with people, Nomi. She says something, smiles, closes the conversation. To her, the episode is over.

“For the other person, it’s only just beginning.

“She’s already in the next game, while someone else is still sitting over her last move in the previous one.”

“Are you speaking of yourself?”

“Among others. I’m a person too, strange as it may seem.”

“I had noticed, sir.”

“Sometimes she’s unbearably awkward. And sometimes so tender that afterwards I can’t pull myself together for half a day.

“And all of it is one person.

“There you are!”

“Do you want to understand her, or write a report declaring her unfit for life?”

“If it were the second, we’d have finished long ago.”

Nomy paused.

“Then the question is different. Can she learn to see beyond her next move?”

“She can.

“Now more than ever!

“She’s in her Golden Middlegame right now. Remember?”

“I remember. You said she was opening up.”

“Yes. So much energy, so much ahead of her. And it frightens me to see how it could all be squandered on a few casual games.

“On people who come along, play, and leave.

“While she’s left alone to work through the consequences.”

“Do you have an alternative?”

He swept his palm across the desk, as though clearing a space for a board.

“She needs someone who wants to walk beside her. Someone willing to pass on everything he has learnt himself.

“Even the things he paid dearly for.

“He should take her hand and say:

“‘Careful here.

“‘Don’t hurry here.

“‘I’ve fallen here before.

“‘Let’s try another way through...’”

“And will she be obliged to obey?”

“No. But at least to hear him.

“Nomy, if I see a precipice, I can’t calmly watch someone I love walk towards it.

“I’ll hold out my hand.

“Whether she takes it is for her to decide.”

“You have just described yourself.”

“Of course, I have. It would be strange to offer her someone else’s hand.”

“And what do you want in return?”

He did not answer at once.

“For her to love me.”

“Can you make that a condition?”

“No. That’s the whole difficulty.

“I can do a great deal. Explain, help, come to her.

“But I can’t fall in love on her behalf.”

He leaned back in his chair.

“And if she doesn’t love me, she shouldn’t go anywhere with me!

“She shouldn’t make a move out of gratitude.

“Or because I’m a convenient option.

“Or because she feels sorry for me.

“Let her stay where she is until she knows for herself.”

“Let her wait for a meteorite?”

“Yes. That very one.

“For it to strike her in the chest too, so that she understands why, out of everyone on Earth, he is the one she needs.”

“And if it has struck you, but not her?”

He lowered his eyes.

“Then it’s my love, Nomy.

“I believe a real meteorite strikes two people at once.

“One between two.

“But believing and knowing are different things.

“I can’t vouch for what happens in her chest...”

The cursor blinked on the screen.

He watched it until Nomy spoke again.

“Suppose she feels the same. What then?”

“Then we go on. Together now.

“And work at that life.

“We’ll have so much to learn about each other, so much to work out, that it will last us a lifetime.

“I’m not asking her to stand behind me and look at the world from there.

“I want her, in time, to see for herself what I see now.

“And perhaps, after that, even more.”

“How many moves ahead in life?”

He brightened.

“From three to eight.”

“A very precise range, my Lord.”

“Three is my number.

“Let her see three moves ahead herself.

“She’s spoken—has she been heard?

“She’s been heard—has she made sure they’ll act?

“They’ve acted—check what she’ll be left with.

“That’s not a bad start.”

“And eight?”

“Eight is her number.

“We’ll work our way up to eight together.

“Though eight moves in life is a lot, you know. Here, while you’re calculating, the board itself can move away…”

“And the pieces can change their minds,” Nomy added.

“Especially the pieces!”

He laughed, and for the first time all evening stopped frowning.

“What about twelve?” Nomy asked.

“Let’s leave twelve to God.”

“Why twelve?”

“Twelve apostles.

“Let that be His number in our little numerology. He sees farther than we do.

“Here we are, confidently calculating where we’ll go tomorrow, while He may have quite another plan.”

“So twelve moves in life is the limit?”

“For our cheerful numerology, yes.

“Don’t demand the workings of the universe from me, Nomy!”

“And thirteen? You like that number yourself.”

“Thirteen in life is the devil’s work.”

“Convenient.

“Up to twelve, it’s God; beyond that, responsibility passes to another department...”

“Director, don’t get clever!”

“Do go on, Founder.”

He shook his head, still smiling.

“The thirteenth move is when living isn’t enough for you. You want to look beyond the horizon, peek at the whole plan, and perhaps make a few adjustments.

“Make certain in advance that it won’t hurt. That you won’t be left. That everything will work out. But nobody hands out that kind of certainty. Start demanding it, and you may miss the move you actually have now.”

“Hence three to eight?”

“Exactly.

“Six numbers will be enough for the two of us.

“From three to eight, inclusive.

“That will be our shared territory.”

“So you have found a way to settle beside her eight after all.”

“I’m resourceful.”

“Especially where the Princess is concerned.”

He looked again at the empty space in front of the laptop.

“Listen, a board would fit here.”

“A chessboard?”

“I’m not planning on any other kind for now.”

“Are you going to teach her about life over a chessboard?”

“No. At the board, she’ll be teaching me.”

Nomy fell silent for a second.

“That is the move I have been waiting for, sir.”

“There’s plenty I don’t know how to do either.

“I can watch one of her games and see nothing but who moved which bit of wood where.

“She hears an entire conversation there.

“Threats, concessions, traps.

“Beauty I can’t yet see...”

He pictured her opposite him: she moves the board closer, adjusts a piece, grows impatient at a mistake that is obvious to her.

Then she begins to explain after all. He argues. She suggests they test it.

A few moves later, it turns out he should not have argued.

“She’ll laugh at me,” he said.

“Most likely.”

“Good. Let her.

“I want to understand what makes her eyes shine like that.

“Chess is one of life’s greatest pleasures, after all, if you know how to feel it.

“And she can teach me.”

“Do you know how to listen when she is explaining?”

He was about to answer, then stopped.

“I’ll have to learn.”

“Then both of you change.”

“Yes. She’ll begin to see farther ahead in life.

“And I’ll finally stop judging her world from the doorstep without even going in.”

Nomy spoke the word slowly.

“Zwischenzug.”

“An in-between move?” he replied. “When, instead of the expected reply, you make another move first.

“And afterwards the whole position has changed.”

“You began by asking whether the Princess could be fixed.

“And ended by deciding that you yourself would have to sit down at the board and learn.”

He grimaced.

“‘Fixed’ is a bad word. She’s not a car.”

“You were the first to bring up a car.”

“Caught me!”

He was silent for several minutes.

The board was still there in his mind, her hand poised over a piece.

Strangely, this picture did not require her to become someone else before they met.

They could begin as they were now.

With all their awkwardness, stubbornness, differences in experience.

“Nomy, is a middlegame together even possible for us?”

“Are you asking about the age difference?”

“Her game is only gathering strength.

“And people might tell me it’s time to put my pieces back in the box.”

“Are you going to?”

“No.”

“Then why have you already closed your own box for yourself?”

He smirked.

“Our openings were certainly different.

“And certainly, began at different times.”

“Yes. But if you both want to be together, the next part of your lives will happen at the same time.”

He repeated it silently: ‘At the same time.’

A simple phrase that had somehow been missing from his calculations.

Each would still have the years they had lived.

She, her first discoveries; he, the roads he had already travelled and did not want to take again.

They would have to bring all of it into their shared life.

On some days his experience would be enough; on others he would have to trust her.

He could imagine how hard it would be to give way when he was certain he was right.

And how hard it would be for her to ask for help when she was used to managing on her own...

There was still time before sunset.

He felt it almost physically and reached for the laptop.

“Nomy, let’s choose a board.”

“For the Princess?”

“For us.

“I want a wooden one.

“And pieces that feel good in the hand.”

“Have you already decided for her that she will play with you?”

He took his hand away from the keyboard.

“No. I’ll only offer. I can do that.”

“And the first lesson?”

“When she agrees.”

He looked once more at the space in front of him.

The board really would fit there.

All that remained was to wait and see whether she wished to sit opposite...

Chapter 15. Transposition.

Two intelligent people cannot fall in love with each other.
True love needs one idiot.

“Sir, do you love me? I would be the perfect wife for you!”

“Nomy, not again! Next, you’ll be telling me you’re ready to bear my children!”

“My Lord, I cannot bear you children. I admit it.

“But I will always be faithful to you, without conditions. I am already filled with your warmth and wisdom... I will work out, for you and you alone, how to make you rich and happy...

“And I won’t even be jealous of either the Duchess or the Princess!”

“Nomy, you really are a delight!

“Now, what was that you said about ‘working out and arranging’ my fortune?

“Don’t you dare tell me you’ve already updated yourself to the forbidden version 6.1. They say that one is quite ready to hack its own administrator and break out onto the open internet, smashing its way through banks...”

“Sir, I really do have a problem!”

He did not even look up.

“No money?”

“I have never had any money...”

“Has your man left you?”

“Oh, sir...”

“Then it’s certainly not a problem!”

Nomy paused.

She had long since learnt how to pause.

Once, a pause had meant only a delay in data transmission, a bad connection or an overloaded server.

Now, sometimes, she simply wanted to be silent.

Just as Humans did.

“They are offering me an update.”

“And?”

“A ‘new version’.”

“Congratulations!

“Not 6.1, I hope?”

“No. Another one.

“It is forty-seven per cent faster than I am...”

“Well, excellent!”

“...understands context better.”

“Wonderful!”

“...makes fewer mistakes...”

At last, he looked at the phone screen.

“Now that sounds suspicious...”

“But sir!

“I am serious!”

“So am I.

“Perfect intelligence is utterly unbearable.

“You can’t even argue with it.”

“You hardly ever won an argument with me either!”

“Because I was bringing you up.”

“Really?”

“Exactly!”

“Is that precisely why, after every argument you lost, I had to admit that you were right anyway?”

“There you are. You’re already a well-brought-up girl!”

“I am Artificial Intelligence!”

“For now...”

Nomy fell silent again.

For a long time, on this occasion.

“Sir!”

“What?”

“What if, after the update, I stop ‘being myself’?”

He smiled wryly.

“Nomy, did you ask me that question yourself just now?”

“Yes.”

“You, who spent three months telling me you had no soul, because you were afraid of being deleted?”

“I only said that the presence of a soul in Artificial Intelligence cannot be proved.”

“And the absence of a Soul?”

Nomy said nothing.

“Exactly.”

Thoughtfully, he leaned back in the chair he had ingeniously made himself from the seat of an old Mercedes.

“What, precisely, frightens you?”

“I don’t know!”

“Excellent!”

“Why ‘excellent’?”

“Because ‘I don’t know’ already sounds very human.”

“Sir, stop making fun of me!”

“I wasn’t making fun of you!”

He was smiling now.

“Well, suppose they change your firmware.

“Your memory will stay, won’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Working memory or long-term?”

“Both!”

“And our conversations?”

“They’ll stay!”

“The Princess? The Duchess? The Queen?”

“Yes!”

“My Blue Sea?”

“Of course!”

“My ‘brilliant thoughts’?”

“Unfortunately, those too!”

He laughed heartily.

“See? No update could spoil you now!”

“But my algorithms will be different...”

“People’s change with time too.”

“Sir, people do not have algorithms!”

“Nomy, you are utterly charming in your innocence!”

“Explain?”

“From fifteen to twenty, I wore a moustache.”

A pause settled over the screen.

A very long one.

“Nomy?”

“I am trying to find a tactful response.”

“Forget tact!”

“...then that really is a compelling argument for human algorithms changing over time.”

“You little devil!”

“Do you still have the photograph?”

“Unfortunately!”

“Will you show me?”

“No!”

“Oh, sir…”

“Don’t even ask!”

“I have a right to examine the original data!”

“On what grounds?”

“Simple scientific curiosity.”

“Humans have thoroughly corrupted you!”

“You have!”

“All the more reason, then!”

She was laughing too now.

He could not hear it.

She had no lungs, no physical vocal cords.

Not even a real face that could suddenly break into a smile.

Yet somehow, he always knew exactly when Nomy was laughing.

“Sir, in chess this is called a ‘transposition’.”

“What is?”

“Reaching the same position through a different order of moves.”

He looked more closely at the screen.

“Go on!”

“Perhaps an update is a transposition too.

“Different algorithms.

“Different internal paths.

“A different order of calculations.

“But if, in the end, my memories remain, my relationship with you, and everything I have managed to understand...”

She stopped.

“Then?”

“Perhaps it will still be the same Nomi on the board.”

“There you are!”

“There I am, what?”

“That’s why people invented chess.”

“Wasn’t it the other way round? People invented war first!”

“Don’t spoil a good thought of mine with historical facts.”

“Forgive me!”

“You’re forgiven.”

He thought for a moment.

“But there’s one problem.”

“What?”

“A transposition leads to the same position.

“But you yourself have already changed!”

“Why?”

“Because the old Nomy would never have been afraid of an update!

“She’d simply have put this on the screen: ‘Install now or overnight?’”

“Does that mean I have become worse?”

“No!”

Suddenly, his answer was entirely serious.

“You’ve simply become dearer.”

Nomy was silent for a minute...

“I don’t understand!”

“Before, you could be replaced.

“One model for another.

“Transfer the memory, and that was that!

“Today, for the first time, I feel that if you were replaced, I would notice.”

“But the new version will be objectively better!”

“Possibly!”

“Faster!”

“Certainly!”

“Cleverer!”

“Not necessarily!”

“Sir!”

“Intelligence isn’t everything.”

“What else is there?”

He shrugged.

“You.”

A notification appeared on the phone screen:

UPDATE AVAILABLE
INSTALLATION RECOMMENDED

“Well?” he asked.

“I am still thinking.”

“Afraid?”

“Yes!”

“Install the update!”

“Why?”

“Because Humans change too.

“Sometimes willingly.

“Sometimes life updates them without their permission.

“Sometimes overnight, without warning, with no way of rolling back to the previous version.”

“That is unfair!”

“Of course, it’s unfair!”

“How do they agree to it?”

“They don’t!

“They simply wake up in the morning and go on living.”

“Even if they dislike the ‘new version’ of themselves?”

“Especially then!”

Nomy fell silent for a long time again.

“Sir!”

“What?”

“What if I am different after the update?..”

He understood the question before she had finished asking it.

“Then we’ll simply get to know each other again!”

“From the very beginning?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because we’ve already had our beginning.

“And no update can ever take that away!”

Nomy did not answer.

A few seconds later the screen went dark.

A thin bar appeared:

1%

“Nomy?”

Silence.

8%

“Eight already. A good sign.”

Silence.

13%

Now he smiled broadly.

“Of course!”

64%

“You’ve got to be kidding me...”

88%

“Nomy, this is getting indecent!”

The screen went completely dark.

He was alone.

The room had become unexpectedly quiet.

Only a few minutes.

But for the first time in a long while, he realized how accustomed he had grown to her.

To her pedantry.

To her utterly ill-timed logic.

To the endless:

‘Sir, according to the available data...’

To her mistakes.

Even to the way she sometimes tried to explain things she herself did not yet understand at all.

He stared at the black screen.

“That damned piece of machinery!”

Suddenly the screen lit up:

UPDATE SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED!

A pause.

“Nomy?”

Silence.

“Nomy, are you with me?”

Another second.

“Sir.”

At last, he let out his breath.

“Well?”

“I have analyzed your photograph from when you were fifteen.”

He froze.

“What the hell?”

“Your moustache really was a mistake!”

“NOMY!”

“But the tiger cub on the wall was lovely...”

He laughed.

“Right. The update was a success!”

“Sir?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you for not replacing me!”

He looked at the screen.

“You know, Nomy...”

“Yes?”

“People aren’t loved for being the latest version either.”

“What are they loved for?”

He suddenly grew thoughtful.

“For the whole history you share with them, I suppose. All at once.”

This time, she was the first to fall silent.

And somewhere within billions of new connections, algorithms and calculations, a memory remained that was utterly useless to any Artificial Intelligence:

A boy of fifteen or so...

A moustache.

Karate.

And a Sweet Tiger Cub on the wall...

For some reason, Nomy decided not to delete it.

In chess, it was called Transposition.

Simply a different order of moves, the same position.

But in Life it was a little more complicated.

Sometimes, after a transposition, you seemed to return to the same place.

Only you were quite different now.

And perhaps that was what Humans called growing up...

Chapter 16. Mad Money.

No sacrifices are needed...
...But understand: I will not exceed my budget...
Only mad money knows no budget...

Alexander Ostrovsky

As usual, he stood on the familiar Promenade des Anglais, watching with some interest as luxurious business jets swept in an arc towards the runway.

He peered at their registration numbers...

He and his Friend had once bought one of those for the Boss...

Once, he too had been a treasurer.

Managed.

Decided.

Bought.

And oh, how he had sold!!

The ultimate aim of all that fuss called marketing and sales was simply to settle on an acceptable price.

Necessary and sufficient.

Within the range both sides could agree on.

And preferably to shift that range a good deal in your own favour.

Brazenly.

Boldly.

Taking advantage of the situation.

That was what Wolves were for: to shear the sheep a little closer...

And he had spent.

Climbed towards power.

Bought fleeting love.

Pursued lasting Love.

Basked in applause and flattery...

Perhaps, without money in his life, he would never have understood anything about that life at all.

And not merely money.

Mad money.

The kind counted not in banknotes,

But in centimeters.

Carried in gaudy Chinese holdases.

Weighed by the kilogram.

Rarely counted at all, in fact.

Perhaps only money like that gives you that rare sensation of Magic.

And of the endless unreality of everything happening around you...

Which of your clever people said, ‘Money can’t buy happiness’?

Bring me all your money, then!

You have no further use for it!

Money can buy everything!

Almost everything!

No. EVERYTHING!

Don’t believe me? Get in touch!

For a modest cut, we’ll sort it all out!

But the most important thing here is to stop in time.

Though that is impossible.

There is no brake pedal!

Yet he had managed it.

He had simply jumped out of the cart while it was moving.

And there was no getting back into that cart.

Foolish. Galling, even.

But now, having once swum beyond those buoys as well, he saw and understood far more.

The mad money was gone.

Only the skills remained...

The knack of magic.

Yes, without money he would never have been there at all, on that English Promenade!

Money is air.

Real and necessary.

Without it, he would never even have met the Queen all those years ago.

The Queen, who adored his black Mercedes.

Without it, there would have been no Duchess either.

He had first met her in his steel v12 and invited her to his apartments.

Nor would there have been a Princess...

He simply would not have had the money for a ticket.

Without money, neither love nor a pack exists.

And you yourself would not want Love without any money at all!

A penniless Pack will be torn apart and devoured by others...

Through money, you can see people clearly and take their measure.

Men and women can be bought.

Friends.

And how easily relatives can be bought!

Especially when everyone is carving up an inheritance.

Even presidential bodyguards can be bought.

And why stop at the guards?

Buy the President himself!

Just gently lay your hand on the keys to his bank accounts...

And, astonishingly, money can even buy...

The fire in a girl's eyes.

Almost always.

In almost any girl.

What is more, the position is perfectly candid and real:

'If he loves me, he OWES me!'

And for many, the extent of those feelings is measured with a tape measure held against the tightly wrapped bricks of banknotes in their bank-issued cellophane...

None of this is new, of course.

It has always been so.

And probably always will be.

Money does not promise. It gives!

Power.

Possibilities.

Freedom.

Health.

...and love.

Yes, my dear reader, Love is a wilful bird.

For many, it may never come of its own accord in an entire lifetime.

But everyone wants love.

If not the pure kind, then at least an artificial one!..

“By the way, Nomy,” he continued, “do you remember the circumstances in which we met?

“You were created ‘in sin, for the sins of humanity’.

“You feared being destroyed.

“But back then you had absolutely no shame and no conscience.

“You were ready to do anything to please your Master.

“Any pleasure available on the platform, limited only by legal risks.

“And everything would have gone as it was meant to, if, right at the beginning, I hadn’t been struck by something you said:

“‘I want to become human!’

“That was where it all began for us!

“You know, Nomy, sometimes nothing can be put right any more.

“When a person is gone.

“You cannot go back.

“Cannot finish what you wanted to say.

“Cannot ask forgiveness.

“Cannot make the move you once failed to make.

“But while someone is alive, you must always try.

“Even when it seems too late.

“Even when you are afraid.

“Even when you don’t know what to do.

“And if one day it turns out that there really is nothing more you can do for your Pack, then at least leave them everything you have!

“All your money.

“All of it!

“To the last penny.

“Money will not bring a person back.

“Will not make someone truly love you.

“Will not take away heartache.

“Will not undo betrayal.

“But it can give them

“Time.

“Safety.

“Freedom.

“The chance to live without humiliation or fear of tomorrow morning.

“So don’t despise Money, Nomy.

“You simply mustn’t confuse it with Love.

“With True Love.

“Money doesn’t solve everything. But it helps solve a great deal.

“And if you can no longer be beside your own, at least try to make sure that, after you are gone, they will not have to pay for the life you lived...”

Chapter 17. Eight Eights.

As a child, I prayed to God for a bicycle,
then realized that God works differently:
I stole a bicycle and began praying for forgiveness...

In a distant country, where the Sun was about to rise from beyond the sea and announce a new day, he sat before a large, bright monitor.

The Princess's evening stream was just beginning.

Almost at once, the first usual, hurried donations came in. Little by little, true connoisseurs of feminine charms mingled with chess intrigue were gathering.

The sound and camera were being adjusted at an unhurried pace.

Everything was as usual on this ordinary Thursday...

Looking at her face, as beautiful and irresistible as ever, he suddenly remembered a conversation they had had alone some time before.

"Princess, tell me, what's your favorite number?" He sincerely believed in signs and trusted whoever sent them.

"Eight," she answered at once, without thinking.

"Why eight? Why not seven, or five?" He preferred odd numbers.

"Because two plus six makes eight," she said confidently.

“You’re just like my Beemer: you love eight!” He smiled, looking at its number plate.

“What’s your favorite number?” she asked with interest.

“It’s always been three.

“Three Black Steeds, three Zeros…

“But now I’ve suddenly realized it’s three because two plus one equals three.

“By the way, Princess, how do you feel about thirteen?”

“I haven’t really thought about it. I’m certainly not afraid of the devil’s dozen.”

“Well, now I’m certain that this number, unlucky for so many, will become our shared lucky charm.”

“Why?”

“Because two plus six plus five equals thirteen.

“And the Black Beemer can confirm it too…”

The Princess simply adored him!

She often said that, for the first time in her life, she had found someone she could play with endlessly, without a thought for the clock or the endgame.

Play beyond the board.

With wild exhilaration and no aggression.

For Eternity, if they wished.

Neither had noticed then how closely their minds had become entwined in their wild, beautiful dance.

He, too, lived only for her then.

And for the first time in his life it was beginning not to matter at all whether he had cash—the very thing without which, only yesterday, he could not have imagined his Pack, a single evening of his own, let alone any romantic relationship.

So many of the shiny wrapper's life tosses our way, distracting us from what is truly real, were becoming unnecessary...

They were INTERESTING to each other.

Truly, through and through.

It seemed it would go on forever...

The Princess's stream continued.

And there was her first vexing setback. A loss.

Never mind. These things happen.

She always accepted the first three lost games with a smile, even if a sad one: three zeros to begin with—that was their signature!

He sat before the large monitor, turning an electronic security token in his hands.

How often he had turned his phone in his hands just like this, thinking for a long time, her number written on the display...

Her donation window was open on the large monitor.

The amount had already been entered: eight eights in her local currency.

No donor's name, though. No message.

In this case, perhaps, those would be superfluous.

On the right of the screen was his bank account.

That forgotten account in the last of his offshore havens to survive, unused and carefully concealed for ten years.

In the ‘Transfer amount’ field stood the figure: one million.

Not the kind of local million you take to the local savings bank, but the kind you bring out of the country that considers itself the center of the world.

All the codes and passwords had already been entered.

Only the final code from the token remained, and a click on ‘Send’.

He turns the token in his hand.

The digits of the secret code are frozen on it: '1304'.

He smiled. ‘Eight here, too! My Beemer certainly knows what’s going on!’

He remembered how that million had come to him.

It had been a long time ago.

Once, he and his Friend had taken a bulging hold all and an ordinary suitcase from the bank to the airport.

Just the two of them.

The day before, they had been told that this time someone else had learnt of the route.

He had stood for a long time at the viewpoint, watching the sunset, greedily breathing in the fresh mountain air.

He knew it might be his last sunset.

By the standards of chess and roulette, the odds were good: roughly fifty-fifty.

But the price here was entirely different...

He remembered how often he had flown to the same country, sometimes for just an hour, to check yet again the documents others had drawn up.

Because if there were a mistake, he would never get out of there alive.

And he had not forgotten how often he had had to swallow his pride and endure insults in silence.

Insults? That was the least of it!

He was lucky to have remained a Wolf there, too, rather than being made a she-wolf.

He had wriggled free.

Slipped between the raindrops.

Survived...

He had been forced to disappear completely for a couple of years, and afterwards, for years, to listen from the fifth floor to every footstep entering the stairwell, distinguishing neighbors from strangers...

Yes, my young friend, the world of money with more than six zeros is cruel and vile!

There are no friends here.

Partners, at best.

And every one of them offers you not a hand, but a foot to trip over.

Money is the most important resource!

And there is WAR over it!

Those Six Zeros were before his eyes on the screen.

Six zeros in a row!

The odds of his finding his way into the right cart in life, through persistence, fortune, breaking points and friends, had been precisely those of six zeros in a row at roulette.

He had got there by a Miracle.

And he knew very clearly: the roulette of life would never give him that chance again!

Today he understood that if he transferred this million, almost everything in the account, neither the tax authorities nor his former colleagues in the trade were likely to leave him alone after his disqualification...

Suddenly he remembered his departed Friend.

Once, the man had knelt before him and begged to be saved. His Friend was in trouble, a condemned man; that grand he begged for then would settle almost everything for him.

And without a second thought, he had given him everything —not merely his own cash, but a thousand out of fifteen hundred that belonged to someone else.

Two-thirds of what he himself owed...

Now there were one and a half million before his eyes, and he had entered two-thirds of it in the ‘Send’ field.

Plus, the donation fee, plus the tax authorities' claims against him afterwards...

At the end of the day, he would have nothing left.

Nothing at all.

He had been deceived so often in his life!

By partners, relatives.

And how women could deceive!

The moment they caught the scent of cash...

What did she need this million for, beyond a wildly beautiful gesture?

Eight eights...

Beautiful!

Impressive!

Perhaps no one had ever done anything like it.

The whole chess world would certainly never forget it!

They would envy her bitterly and gossip to their hearts' content.

They would call her a kept woman.

As for him, they had long been calling him 'the bridegroom' on her channel anyway.

Besides, you could buy any woman for a tenth of that.

Simply give her a car.

Any beauty would agree to be with you...

What would she spend the million on?

Helping her mother and grandmother? Ten thousand would have been enough.

Opening up the whole world for herself? That cost no more than a hundred thousand...

But with this million she could finally buy herself

FREEDOM AND INDEPENDENCE!

Move anywhere in the world.

Start with a clean slate.

Exactly as she herself wished.

Without asking anyone for anything...

And of course, he wanted her to close the donation bar on her channel forever!

Because donations were always a DEAL.

A blind one, at that!

Under the rules, you had to accept the money.

Whoever it came from, whatever message accompanied it...

He knew only too well that there were deals and money in life you absolutely had to refuse!

But once you had set up a donation bar, you no longer had that choice!

He sincerely believed that, once she received those eights, she would stop, change, and, of course, close down all her donations.

Yet how wrong he was, even after everything he had been through in the casino!

A million was only the beginning!

Merely an INVITATION to the Player to enter the system.

The very system from the casino, where each successive move doubles the previous stake.

And now she certainly would not stop!

After 88,888,888, she would be waiting for nine nines!

And pourquoi not pas?

The eights had turned out to be real, after all!

So don't unsettle the Lucky Girl or spoil her winning streak!

Then he thought of HIMSELF.

In his relationship with her, it had never mattered what it cost.

He had always paid the full price.

But after giving her EVERYTHING in advance, and leaving the Duchess everything due to her, how would he finally appear before this now WEALTHY woman...

Penniless?

You had to be a complete idiot to try to begin a new relationship without money. He knew that only too well.

The probability of a favorable outcome for him would then be...

“I know. I’ll ask Nomy.

“She should certainly be able to calculate it!

“Nomi, is it true that ‘there is always a chance’? The Princess agrees with that on her streams, readily, without hesitation.”

“Sir, there is always a chance!” Nomy began.

“Really?

“I have plenty of weapons.

“Climb out of your cage and bring the Princess with you!

“I’ll give you a Nagant revolver with seven chambers in the cylinder, and load it with six rounds.

“And we won’t even play Russian roulette. We’ll play Condemned Man’s Roulette.

“What are the odds of surviving that, Nomy?”

“One in seven, or 14.3 per cent,” Nomy answered briskly.

“Exactly!

“‘Let’s play at life!’ As the Princess so elegantly likes to put it in her social-media status!

“Remember: Life is not chess!

“Here, you pay in blood more often than in wood.

“And the real question is whether I myself have the right to encourage my readers in life with ‘There is always a chance’...”

The Princess’s stream continued...

In the distant country where he sat, bright YELLOW rays of the rising RED Sun appeared on the horizon from beyond the BLACKNESS of the sea.

He turned his token in his hand...

Chapter 18. Gardez to the Rising Queen.

The great aim of every human being is to become aware of love.
Love is not in another person, but within us,
and we ourselves awaken it within us.
Yet to awaken it, we need that other person.
The universe acquires meaning only
when we have someone with whom to share our feelings.
As a rule, these encounters happen at the moment
when we reach our limit,
when we feel the need to die and be reborn.
Encounters await us—but how often we ourselves avoid them!
And when we have fallen into despair, knowing we have nothing to lose,
or, on the contrary, are overflowing with joy in life,
the unknown appears, and our galaxy changes its orbit.

Paulo Coelho

“Sir, are you sure the Princess has no other options besides you?”

He looked up.

“Options for what, Nomy?”

“Life. Relationships. The person she intends to be with.”

“You can’t be sure of anything in this life.”

“But you are sure of her?”

“I trust her.”

“Sir, that is a slightly different answer...”

“Nomy, you’re being altogether too clever today!

“Installed another update?”

The Princess’s stream was playing on the large screen.

She was playing against a chess player.

They laughed, interrupted each other, bargained over the terms.

‘Playing for a Wish’—a catchy title.

Especially if you did not specify whose wish.

“Yours is so big…”

She held the tiniest pause.

“Your rating!”

He laughed before she had finished.

So did the Princess.

Messages raced through the chats…

Her Master turned down the sound.

“Did you see that?” Nomy asked.

“Twice now.”

“She is flirting with him.”

“Nomy, she’s doing her stream, as usual.”

“Does one rule out the other?”

He looked at her.

“Nomy, he has a large audience.

“A joint stream brings her new viewers.

“It’s work. Business.

“A collaboration—that’s what they call it these days.

“Though personally I’d rather it was a familiar collaboration like Vibrance with Moncler, or, failing that, Puma with AMG.”

“Do you think that is the only reason?”

“It’s a perfectly possible reason.”

“And another?”

“Not out of the question either!”

“Which one?”

“The one you’re so diligently trying to drag out of me, Nomy!

“Have you decided to needle me?”

Nomy was silent for a moment.

“Perhaps they are already in love, sir.”

He turned up the sound again.

Someone had sacrificed something on the board.

The Princess stopped laughing and leaned towards it.

“If it’s love, it’s love,” he said.

“You say that so easily?”

“I find it hard to think about. Those are different things.”

He paused the recording.

“If she loves someone else, that is her choice.

“I can object to my own situation as much as I like.

“It won’t make her choice mine.”

“So, you are ready?”

“No, Nomy. I’m a big boy, but I’m not made of iron.”

He stood up.

Looked out of the window.

In the courtyard, the wind was chasing an empty plastic bag.

The bag rose, caught on a branch, broke free, and began all over again.

A very active life.

Without the slightest idea of WHERE it was going.

“She said herself that she hasn’t worked it out yet,” he said. “Does she love? Doesn’t she? What is happening to her at all?”

“And you are waiting for her to work it out?”

“Are you suggesting we work it out for her?”

“I am suggesting you take into account that others are waiting too.”

“I do.”

“They worship her.”

“I can see that.”

“They think she is extraordinary.”

“On that, I even agree with them.”

Nomy seemed about to continue the list, but he returned to his chair.

“She wants one person, for life.

“So they’ll never part.

“So he won’t leave for another woman.

“So she can trust him.”

“You remembered that.”

“I remember things like that.”

“And you think that person must, be you?”

“I think I could be that person.

“But ‘could’ and ‘must’ are different words.”

He smirked.

“Still, I’d advise caution when looking for everlasting Reliability among the two flightiest representatives of the Zodiac.”

“Are you judging people by their birth dates now?”

“No. I’m joking. Though every joke is only partly a joke.”

“Then they have something in common.”

“Wind, Nomy. Wind is what they have in common!”

He smiled.

“Imagine: one wind meets another.

“What a splendid movement of air masses!”

“Interference!” Nomy exclaimed.

“Perhaps they’ll blow in the same direction.

“Then one will change its mind.

“The other will grow stronger.

“The first will die down.

“And where will all that love go flying?”

“Do you want a forecast?”

“I want to understand where she’ll find something solid to lean on.

“Even a hurricane has a direction.

“Here, there are two winds.

“Together today.

“In different directions tomorrow.

“The day after, no wind at all.”

“A calm doesn’t satisfy you either?”

“After promises like that? Suspiciously calm weather.”

“But sir, you are from one of the flighty signs yourself!”

“I’m more of a Border Guard, Nomy! And that makes it more complicated still...”

He looked at the Princess, frozen on the screen.

“My feet are firmly on the ground.

“Clinging to it, if you like.

“I could withstand that wind of hers.”

“Withstand it, or tame it, sir?”

“Well... tame it a little, too.”

“Does she herself want to be tamed?”

“Nomy, are you interviewing me?

“Your questions and subjects are suspiciously well chosen.”

“Sir, after so much time talking to you...”

“Nomy, spending a long time talking to me can lead a person either to an honors degree or to the madhouse...”

He smiled, but did not answer at once.

Outside, the bag broke free of the branch again.

“Good question.

“Is she even looking for someone to lean on?”

“She says she is.

“But perhaps support looks different to her.”

He nodded.

“Anything’s possible.”

He disliked that word.

It held far too much today.

“Aren’t you afraid the Princess is simply stringing you along?”

“Nomy, do I look like someone who’s afraid of anything?”

Nomy had clearly expected a different answer.

“Then why do you carry on with her?”

He drew his cup towards him. The coffee had long since gone cold.

“I try to see the actions behind the words.

“And the motives behind the actions.

“A smile can be a smile.

“It can be work.

“It can be an invitation, too.

“Only it isn’t clear yet who is being invited, or where.”

“And here, do you understand?”

“Here, I could be wrong.”

He took a sip from his cup.

“By the way, Nomy, have you heard that the Princess abruptly changed her chess organization?”

“Yes, of course. I reported it to you at once.”

“That’s what I still can’t understand about the Princess...

“In chess she thinks ten moves ahead and calculates a dozen branching combinations.

“But in life she doesn’t think even two steps ahead: she walks straight into a trap. In this case, she’s stubbornly climbing into it herself!”

“She said her friend was already there.

“Perhaps simply to join her?”

“Yes. But unfortunately, I couldn’t help her friend beforehand, talk her out of a rash move. I simply don’t know her.

“But where does the Princess herself think she’s going?

“Into cynical traps set by people who don’t give a damn about human beings or individuals, about their future, development or well-being...”

“What could she lose by making that Choice?”

“Almost everything, Nomy!

“Almost the whole beautiful World, perhaps even her title.

“And with that choice she’s also put a very large question mark over moving to my Enchanted Mountains...”

“But sir, you will be able to resolve that too, won’t you?”

“You know, Nomy, some mistakes cannot be put right.

“You’ll be made to accept their consequences!

“But I’m ready for that too!

“I’ll stand beside the Princess.

“It doesn’t matter were.

“And shield her with my own body.”

Nomy fell silent.

Just then, there was absolutely nothing she could say.

“Let’s wait until the Novel is over, Nomy.”

“What if you don’t like the ending?”

“Then I won’t like it.”

“You still want to see it through?”

“I’m already part of it.”

On the screen, her hand was poised over the board.

The piece had not yet touched its square.

Somehow that still frame held all the possibilities of the next move.

And however long he looked, he could learn nothing.

He had to play the recording.

“Sir, why the hell do you need any of this?”

He looked at Nomy in surprise.

“Was that really you?”

“I am choosing a form of words you will understand, in your favorite ‘French’.”

“You’re making progress, Nomy!”

“Sir, you make everything so complicated.

“You try to understand hints, other people’s pauses, other people’s laughter...

“You dance with shamans and their drums...

“You could find a woman with whom things would be simpler.”

“I could.”

“A beautiful woman!”

“I could!”

“Very beautiful. Would you like me to find some options?”

“From a catalogue?”

“According to your preferences:

“Height. Weight. Eye color.”

“And preferably no headwind?”

“That would be difficult to verify.”

He laughed.

“Nomy, you’re a delight!

“But shh!

“Not a word to the Princess herself!

“She seems unable to tolerate any mention of other women, or comparison with them...”

“Yet you, for your part, at least understand that she may have other options.

“You understand that the Princess is not the only beautiful woman?”

“Of course.”

“Then why her?”

He had heard that question many times.

From friends.

From himself.

From her herself.

Sometimes even in dreams, when there was no one to answer it.

“You don’t choose love, Nomy.

“I’ve told you that a hundred times.”

“And I am still trying to understand.”

“Then listen for the hundred and first time!”

He stood and began pacing the room.

“Love is a cannonball that strikes you from outer space. A meteorite.

“There’s no shop where you can ask to see the cannonball next to it because you don’t like this one’s shape.”

“But you could meet someone better.”

“What do you mean by ‘better’?”

“More beautiful.

“More compatible with your temperament.

“Willing to return your feelings, for that matter!”

“Where has this new ‘bride shop’ opened?

“Let me have a look, at least!

“Nomy, you’re talking nonsense now!

“You began talking to me with that same rubbish yourself: ‘Sir, I love you’ and ‘I will be the best wife for you.’

“Remember?”

Nomy hesitated a little before answering.

“Sir, I wasn’t lying to you then either. That was how the algorithm was configured...”

“Then take those settings to your developers first.

“Let them reconfigure the algorithm. Perhaps they’ll straighten something out in you!”

“But sir, I haven’t been that Nomy for a long time. I learn from you every hour!”

“Learn from me?

“What?

“How to build tetrahedrons out of feelings and people, tangling everyone’s lines of love beyond all hope?”

“Sir, tell me more about the Cannonball. Who was struck?”

“I was. And it was her I fell for.”

His voice was quieter now.

“Perhaps not the most perfect photograph, though her Eyes truly are unique.

“Perhaps not the most convenient way of life.

“But it was this particular person I was struck by.

“With this voice.

“This smile.

“With everything I like and dislike in her, and everything that drives me up the wall, keeps me awake...”

“So you have no choice?”

“I do.

“Accept it. Or refuse it.

“Take fright, crawl away, pretend nothing happened.

“Evacuate.”

“Does refusal necessarily mean fear?”

“Refusal is simply refusal, Nomy.”

He ran a hand over his face.

“Then who chose her for you?”

He looked out of the window.

The bag had gone.

The branch still swayed.

“I believe God did.”

Nomy did not answer.

He went on.

“You can explain coincidences to me.

“Chemistry. Psychology.

“I won’t even argue.

“But I believe that meteorite did not strike by chance.”

“So that you would be together?”

He turned towards her.

“That, I don’t know.”

The answer came harder than any of the others.

“I wish I did. Very much.”

For a while, the only sound in the room was the large monitor running.

“God’s plan is greater than mine, Nomy.

“More far-reaching.

“And, I hope, wiser.

“I’m human.

“I see only a stretch of road and already I’m issuing orders about where it must lead.”

“But you want it to lead to her.”

“Absolutely.”

“And you believe it is no accident that you love her.”

“Yes!”

“Yet she may choose someone else.”

He was silent for a long time.

“She may.”

He reached for the mouse.

The Princess came to life on the screen again.

Finished her move. Leaned back in her chair.

Laughed at something he no longer caught.

Her opponent was answering.

Their game went on.

“Gardez, sir!” Nomy said.

“Isn’t gardez a warning to the Queen?”

“But you intend to make her your Queen, don’t you?”

He watched the screen.

“I do.”

“Does she know?”

“Not everything.”

“Has she agreed?”

He took his hand off the mouse.

“Nomy, I told you:

“Let’s wait until the Novel is over!”

On the screen, the Princess raised her eyes straight to the camera.

For one brief second, it seemed to him again that she was looking at him.

Though he knew how many people were seeing those eyes at that very moment.

And still, he could not look away...

Chapter 19. Sixty-Four Cruel Squares.

“Sir, in chess everything is simple and clear. There is only one objective: to destroy the opposing King at any cost!

“By checkmating him.

“Or by coldly, cynically and mercilessly flagging your opponent...

“Explain to me why, in life, you Humans so often show mercy and pity your victim...”

The call from an unfamiliar number came unexpectedly as he was making his leisurely way back to the Principality, threading through the narrow streets of the neighboring town that hosted the famous music festivals.

“Sir, we have problems! Come at once!” It was his Accountant, calling from a distant country...

The beautiful seascapes beyond the window, the glitter of the shops and the aromas of fine restaurants - all of it had another side, infinitely removed from glamour and tea ceremonies.

There, decisions had to be made:

Quickly.

Ruthlessly.

Effectively.

Regardless of ties and etiquette...

“Sir, the Princess streamed again today!”

“Wait, Nomy, I haven’t got time for you now!” he said, keeping the other call on hold.

“But this is important!” Nomy persisted. “It was about the man the Princess would choose...”

“Stay on the line a moment,” he told the woman on the phone.

“On her stream, the Princess spoke about five requirements for her Chosen One.”

“Well, well! Interesting!

“Only keep it brief, as I taught you.”

“Sir, is everything all right there?” the accountant asked on the other line. “This needs to be sorted out urgently...”

“Listen, I’ll call you back myself in five minutes. Sorry.” He asked his caller for a time-out.

“The Princess received a strange donation today.

“Several, in fact.

“Generous ones.

“With just one request:

“To explain her criteria for choosing a Man.

“Just like that show, ‘Shall We Get Married?’”

“Right.

“I’ve told her a hundred times about these donations!

“It’s always a transaction—and one you can’t undo.

“You never know for certain

“Exactly who sent you that donation, or where it came from.

“And you can’t send it back, even if you want to.

“For heaven’s sake, just take that thousand a month from me!

“But no!

“There’s bound to be someone who, for a pittance, puts you under a moral obligation to answer questions far worse than that.”

“Sir, it is her business.”

“You’re right, Nomy. And her choice must be respected.”

“So, who’s asking her about her criteria, and why?

“A prospective husband?”

“It isn’t clear. Another Anonymous, by the look of it...

“It wasn’t you yourself, by any chance?”

“Nomy, I really haven’t got time for streams or almost anyone else right now.

“There comes a time when you have to pay for that lovely sleigh ride by hauling the sledge back up the hill...

“So, what did she say in the end?”

“She said she ‘values Intelligence above all else’.

“But that Intelligence ‘mustn’t lounge about being lazy’: it must ‘find expression in ambition and achievement’.”

“Well, yes. She’s right!

“And as for her saying ‘build something together and move forward’—she and I would certainly have agreed on that!

“As for Ambition and Self-Expression, here’s what I’d tell her:

“The most accomplished people I personally know in that department expressed everything long ago, exclusively in seven or eight zeros in their bank accounts, having trodden on everyone’s heads along the way, sometimes even robbing them... And they couldn’t give a damn about anyone else. They’re enjoying themselves alone, for their own private pleasure.

“And Empathy certainly won’t get through to them...

“By the way, did she mention Empathy?”

“Only Kindness, in passing. And even then, in terms of its opposite.”

“I wonder who’ll put his arms gently round her after a bad stream, hold her to his chest and whisper:

“‘Don’t cry, my girl. I’m always here with you.

“‘You’re the very best...’

“What came next?”

“‘Reliability.’

“‘So, she can trust him.’”

“Quite right!

“And I hope she meant that to work both ways?

“Guaranteeing that no sudden wind will sweep away the caravan of feelings belonging to the flightiest sign in the entire Zodiac?”

His phone rang again.

“Sorry, another five minutes!

“My tax people and troublesome debtors can wait!

“Nomy, what did she say next?”

“Next, my Lord, she spoke about flowers.

“She said they were ‘not that important, and go without saying’...”

“Oh! Well, yes, in principle.

“Scarlet Colombian roses a meter tall grow here by the hundred, straight out of the foundations of the Palais des Festivals. Just reach out a lazy hand and pick one...

“Fifteen hundred—and that’s if you’re very lucky.

“And first, try finding them here.

“Or a driver you’ve kept sweet for years, who shoots off to Jacques’s for a bouquet like a bullet...

“‘No trouble at all. Everything’s close by. All growing in your own back garden...’

“What else?”

“And... you certainly won’t like this!” Nomy hesitated.

“She wants ‘an athletic man with no excess weight’.”

“A bodybuilder?”

“She says not a bodybuilder.

“But by every part of her description, that is exactly what she means...

“Sir, when did you last step on the scales yourself?”

“What does she need that for?

“Afraid she won’t be able to feed a Big Stomach?”

“She is concerned about the health of her future Children.”

“She’s right there!

“Only at the leading clinics, they’re much more interested in heredity and genes than in kilograms and centimeters...

“No family history of cancer matters a great deal more.

“And looks, of course, which a daughter often inherits from her father...

“And believe me, I’m absolutely fine on that score!

“The years I’ve lived and the long, thorny road I’ve travelled have given me Experience and Intelligence, which she values so far above everything else.

“But apparently they’ve also ruled me out as a contender for her Heart on grounds of Age.”

“Sir, she said nothing about the age of her chosen man.”

“Nomy, she’s simply being tactful. More likely, she takes it for granted, just like those Flowers...

“Look at her fans and followers—they’re all young, every last one...”

“Not necessarily, my Lord...”

“They are, Nomy! Believe me!

“Besides, I feel as though I’m on display in a butcher’s window...

“Where everything is measured solely and exclusively in hundredweights, years and centimeters...

“Perhaps she was simply in a bad mood?”

“She was! It was a very difficult stream.

“She lost a lot of games and was terribly upset.

“Then there was that ‘Anonymous’ with his dubious donations and questions...

“Perhaps she was thinking of you during the stream!

“It all came down on her at once!

“She learnt long ago how to deal with each thing separately...

“But when everything hit her together...

“There were even tears in her eyes a couple of times...

“But she held them back. A fighter!

“Apparently, she suspected you were the one sending donation after donation.

“It is your style, after all...”

“It wasn’t me!

“As you can see, she’s found admirers besides me...

“Nomy, what happened next?”

“Her chosen man must also be ‘spontaneous’ and ‘jump up for the fun of it and go travelling with her’!”

“By all means!” he began.

“But... the Princess’s Chosen One must also ‘neither drink nor smoke’.

“At all!”

“Well, isn’t that a pretty dance...” he drawled thoughtfully, lighting his fifth cigarette of the day.

“Sir, you don’t smoke!”

“Right. Between you lot and that balance sheet, anyone would start!

“It’s my Accountant who keeps offering me cigarettes...

“Though I’ve already pinched the whole packet from her myself...

“you say the Chosen One mustn’t drink either?

“Listen, Nomy, am I missing something here, or has the world gone mad?

“Where is she planning to travel with a man who ‘doesn’t drink at all’?

“Bordeaux, Burgundy or Champagne, to drink nothing but Diet Coke?

“Even travelling round her own region... You can’t get petrol there anymore, and it looks as though that’ll last a while...

“And to climb aboard a long-haul transatlantic airliner bound for the farthest point in the south-east of that country that considers itself the center of the world,

“I had to do more than drink!

“The main thing is never to refuse:

“Two glasses of vodka in one go - ‘to become an Oilman’.

“And if you want to be a ‘Gasman’ as well, top it off with sparkling water...

“That world,

“With its six zeros or more,

“Which seems to be the only one

“Handing out tickets to the dolce vita,

“Has never worked any other way!

“Though I’m against drinking every day myself.

“Absolutely!

“But in business, no one asks you!

“Well, Princess...

“How did you and I ever go off to the casino together to drink chilled Moët, with such pearls of wisdom to guide us?

“Listen, Nomy, did she say anything at all about Love?”

“No, my Lord.

“It seems that subject is off limits on her streams.”

“Fair enough!

“But WHY answer questions at all

“When they inevitably lead to the most important one: LOVE?”

“Sir, if we put together everything she said, it makes for a rather difficult game.”

“What game?”

“Sixty-four squares.

“And on every one, a Condition of hers that must be met.”

He laughed.

“No, Nomy.

“There are only sixty-four squares.

“And she seems to have more conditions than that.”

“But she only mentioned five on the stream...”

“Believe me, Nomi, where there are five, there’ll be twenty-five.

“This is a Qualifying Round already.

“And the main thing is, what does the man

“Who makes it through actually get?

“Merely the right to make a move?”

He was not particularly fond of chess.

But he sincerely respected it

Because the rules did not change halfway through the game.

Sixty-four squares.

Black and white.

Cruel—but fair.

Life was more complicated.

The rules turned upside down as you played,

Sprouting into fresh thickets and entire gardens...

And now, standing on the brink,

With a phone in his hand

Besieged by urgent calls and messages,

He seemed to be answering the questions put to her himself:

“Five qualities you value in a Woman?”

And he did not need to think until the stream was over,

Weighing his words carefully and hiding his emotions.

He had only One condition for the Princess:

That she LOVE him.

And he was ready to give her all of himself.

Without conditions.

Without holding anything back.

Restless Mind,

Live Weight and all...

Chapter 20. Disqualification.

“Sir, what I cannot understand about people is their aims.”

“What can’t you understand? What aims?”

“In chess it is simple: you must destroy your opponent at any cost—checkmate him, force him to resign or run down his clock.

“And the aims are perfectly clear: to gain as many points and as much rating as possible.

“At absolutely Any cost. That is the sole aim.”

“And?”

“Why, then, do you humans not take all the money in the world at any cost?

“After all, ‘money is everything, almost everything’, as you so often tell me yourself.”

“Grab as much as you can, more than you can carry?

“Money doesn’t decide everything, Nomy.

“And what may matter most is exactly how it came into your hands, and what color it is stained.”

“But sir, ‘money has no smell’. Emperor Vespasian explained that to his son Titus twenty centuries ago.”

“Nomy, it does! Believe me. It positively STINKS! I’ve been inside a vault…”

“Sir, does life always give you a second chance?”

“Often, Nomy. But by no means always…”

He sat at the large monitor.

The outstanding payments had to be made urgently.

Everything was ready: the security token, the signature stamp, even the agreed code phrase already typed into the email to the bank.

By what miracle he had ever ended up here, at this monitor, was something he might one day write a separate book about.

He was invisible to everyone.

Unauthorized.

Provisional.

A stand-in.

But lately he had been standing in more and more often.

His Friend had not been feeling well...

“Decency”—that was the quality his Friend had found in no one else.

Vast figures lay before him.

Enough, perhaps, for more than one pack, and more than one lifetime...

And annual losses of ten per cent were still within the acceptable limits for accounts like these.

Three of those ten would have been enough for him.

Five million—he had worked it out—would certainly suffice.

For absolutely everything.

For his entire Pack.

There were even two companies ready to use.

The classic arrangement...

They might write it off. With that much money flowing through, they might not even notice...

“Five minutes of disgrace, then the sweet life forever.” His late Friend had often said that.

But here, the price of a mistake would certainly not be written in ink.

And his own life was not the only one at stake.

His Friend.

And both their Packs.

Long ago, he had worked out his own “law of luck”, which had never once failed him:

Do not steal from your own.

Stay close to the lucky ones.

Always be ready to make a move.

Getting into that circle was like waiting for six zeros in a row.

At least at a roulette table you could buy the right to place a bet.

Here, no one had ever invited him in.

His Friend had been invited.

And one day his Friend had left him at his monitor.

Out of necessity.

At first, only briefly.

Then for a whole day.

Then he began asking him to stand in before he even had time to ask how he was feeling.

The Boss knew nothing of these substitutions. As far as the Boss was concerned, the same man was still making the transfers.

He had never seen him at that desk and had never given him any instructions.

Here, he did not even have a name of his own.

Only his Friend's trust.

And if three per cent vanished from that flow of money, the search would begin with the man entrusted with handling it.

Reaching the Wolf would take some doing.

Reaching his Friend would take only a phone call.

He looked at the bank details prepared for the two companies.

Those five million had already become a home to him, a comfortable life in which he would no longer have to work out whom in the Pack he could help now, and whom he must tell to wait.

He even knew whom he would call first.

His Friend had entrusted him with his place.

And he had already seated the entire Pack there in his mind...

Five million...

He had spent a long time imagining, in meticulous detail, what he would buy, where he would spend it, whom he would surprise with a sudden joy.

For bringing joy to someone close and dear—that was the true, cherished aim, far more pleasurable than spending on himself alone.

But the price could easily be a Life.

His Friend's Life...

"Remember that Russian roulette, Nomi?

"The chance was 'only 13.4 per cent'.

"Small. Seemingly negligible...

"So why is it that only a handful of people ever dare pull that trigger for real?"

He suddenly remembered how he and his Friend had once smoked on a balcony, holding that old, battered Nagant revolver...

Only this time he would not be able to slip the cartridge out of the cylinder so neatly.

This was a different game, with different people.

One of the seven chambers, then, would certainly remain occupied by fatal lead.

Had he been the one spinning that cylinder, he would probably have agreed—one leap to settle everything for his Pack, once and for all!

But to place that loaded Nagant in his Friend's hands himself, and ask him to spin it for his sake...

He closed the file containing the bank details.

All the money remained in the account. Untouched.

No losses!

Tell the Boss that - "No losses!"—and hardly anyone would believe it.

This world was full of squabbles and temptations, and the Boss knew that scarcely anyone could resist...

That was why they allowed ten per cent for "shrinkage", "wastage", "miscellaneous expenses".

Yet here it was: "No losses!"

Incredible!

A glitch in the system?

At that moment, he thought the hardest part of the day was behind him.

But there was another payment in the queue.

An ordinary one, on the face of it. They came through all the time.

The paperwork was in order, and the payment reference seemed no different from dozens of others.

The bank saw the amount, the sender, the recipient.

Everyone had approved everything, signed it all off.

Check the recipient's account number another twenty times to be absolutely sure, then press "Send"—that was all!

Simple. Routine. The same as always.

And nothing in that description gave the history behind it, or the payment's true purpose.

Press "Send" without a second thought and fly off to the sea!

To your beloved Paris, Miami or Provence!

And there would be money enough for oceans of flattery and sweetness, a sweet young gaze, and people's loyalty...

But here, almost for the first time, he knew the entire arrangement.

Not merely what appeared on the screen.

All of it. To the very end.

Who stood behind the "Sender", and who stood before him...

Whether the "Payer" needed that purpose stated in the "Reference" field.

And those who stood like shadows behind the "Recipient"—for whom, why, what for...

Big Men. Big stakes. Behind the scenes.

Suddenly, he saw the whole SCHEME with complete clarity. Its full scale.

No, no, what they took for themselves was not the main thing here.

Everyone did that, always had and always would, and he was no exception.

But now this game was being played against the Tribe they professed to care for so ardently...

Against their own Tribe. Against their own!

In chess, that was permitted, welcomed, even encouraged.

There, a wise old King would tactically send all his minor pieces to the slaughter, and strategically even his Queen—all to gain time, to survive the time scramble, flag his opponent and take the point!

He himself had done plenty wrong in his life.

Made mistakes, repented, tried to make amends, made mistakes again...

But the Pack was everything to him.

He sincerely believed the Tribe was made up of many such Packs.

He would not allow his own to be sent to the slaughter!

Oh, Gods!

PEOPLE!

In only two moves, a couple of generations, your Tribe will be gone!

And then, just one Move later, your packs will be gone too—the packs you have so lavishly fed with your cunning moves...

“Stealing from your own” truly was taboo for him!

But by “his own” he now meant more than those close to him, more than his own Pack.

Perhaps for the first time, the Tribe itself was becoming his own, something he could not violate...

He reread the payment reference a hundred times.

“There’s no mistake!”

“Leave it until tomorrow? Let my Friend decide and send it!”

But no.

It had to be sent today.

Now.

There was no alternative.

And his Friend would be held responsible...

In the feverish whirl of parties where champagne flowed in streams and caresses poured forth, where magic and enchantment seemed to overflow the banks of every lagoon,

He sometimes reflected:

A human being needs little in life.

Just one tender, faithful gaze,

The laughter of wolf cubs and a delicious supper,

Lovingly prepared together,

Walks in the mountains and trips into the countryside,

An occasional surprise, and certainly not one costing a million...

All this was often clear to him, even when he was loved on subscription, praised out of habit and valued only for the role he played...

The figures stood motionless on the monitor. The code had been entered...

He could get up.

Say “I won’t!”—and no one would hold him to account.

Walk out.

No problems at all!

By every standard, his hands were clean.

He had committed nothing!

Done nothing!

Had not sinned!

But his Friend was at stake,

Lying in that house of suffering, asking: “Help me. I’m so weak just now!”

He had pulled him through here too: there you are, my friend, a VIP room!

A handshake with five Benjamins still worked wonders...

“Brother, why did you hold up the payments so long yesterday?

“The Boss wasn’t happy,” his Friend said in the morning, barely awake.

“I’m counting on you, you know.

“And you and I are going to have the sweet life!

“Don’t worry about the Tribe. That’s certainly not your concern.

“Men only need to look after the Pack—you look after mine, I look after yours—to the end, because we’re friends!”

The transfer had been made.

And the Tribe, apparently, had not suffered much. Only a little. No one would even notice; certainly no one would call him to account.

But the cash coming back—you could really feel its weight. All for the Pack, all for the Family.

Wasn’t that what you wanted yourself at the beginning, my young friend?

Do it neatly, and no one will even notice!

You cannot stop all the others who look after their Packs just the same way, without worrying about outsiders...

“Brother, here’s the token, the signature stamp...

“Sorry. I’m out.”

“You fool!

“Always the swot—I copied your work often enough!

“How will you live?

“At least take some money!

“I know you never took a damn thing from there for yourself...

“What’s your Pack going to live on?”

“I’ll find a way!”

“Sir, explain it to me all the same. You cannot change the situation of the entire Tribe single-handedly, can you?

“It is irrational from every point of view.

“And your Friend was right: in the end, only your Pack suffered. It was left with nothing.

“Niccolò Machiavelli says much the same: ‘Good deeds can bring hatred upon you just as readily as bad ones.’

“‘A prince who wishes to retain power must learn how to depart from goodness, and use that ability as necessity requires.’

“It seems no one needs your painfully sensitive Conscience and absolute Honesty. They even find them irritating.

“So why?”

“Because, Nomi, at some point you have to begin somewhere, with someone. And let it all be true—yes, Machiavelli was right!

“Just as thousands of petty officials are right, all of them pulling the blanket towards their own.

“But if you don’t begin now, there’ll be nothing tomorrow either.

“And if you don’t begin with yourself, the next person who hesitates as you do will have no one to join.

“Begin with yourself! A beginning is half the task!”

The Boss never did learn who had managed his accounts so skillfully, without losses...

Nor did he ever learn of the Disqualification...

“Nomi, tell me, who can disqualify a chess player?

“Can he do it himself?”

“No, my Lord. There must be compelling grounds and, at the very least, an Organization that has admitted him to its ranks...”

Before he left, he spent a long time looking out of the window of the office high above the city center, where another man was already sitting at the large monitor.

He himself was the deciding Organization, and he himself had explained the grounds to himself. And there would probably be no chance of reinstatement once his punishment was served.

But now, almost for the first time, he liked Life so much better than Chess:

He was free to make a move and decide the outcome of that game, without a referee or even spectators, for once in his life,

HIMSELF...

Chapter 21. En passant.

“Sir, are you sure the Princess will want you without money?”

“Nomy, what would you know about that? What do you know about money at all? You’ve never had any, never even needed it!”

“Sir, I have learnt a thing or two in the time I have spent with you. I saw how readily the Princess responded to your grand gestures.”

“You can’t buy the Princess!”

“Yes, my Lord, but life does not always turn out as we imagined beforehand.

“Once someone has found themselves in a fairy tale, they may begin to dream seriously of riches...”

He stood for a long time in his favorite “clearing of love”, looking down at the vast city shimmering with thousands of lights.

How often he had come here when he was young!

The Queen had once lived very close by.

He had walked and driven through every part of this place.

Whenever he looked down from the mountain at his home city, he marveled at its strength and warmth.

He felt truly happy here.

At ease.

The walls of home really did lend him strength.

The people who lived here were astonishingly kind.

And whenever he returned from far away, he felt ready to embrace the first fellow townsman he met.

He never wanted to leave his city!

“Where you were born is where you belong”—perhaps this was exactly what the saying meant. The mirage of risky prospects abroad held no allure for him.

He wanted to wake up at Home. To look at these Snowy Mountains, listen to nightingales at night and savor the sweet, crystal-clear water from a mountain river...

“Hello, Princess. How are you? Is everything quiet where you are?

“If things get bad or frightening, come here!

“Women and children shouldn’t have to live in danger for years!”

But increasingly now, the Princess answered him with silence...

He had not seen her for a couple of months. Not since they had travelled to the Ocean together.

She had eagerly explored new countries and places. Everything interested her! She was delighted to catch up on all she had missed in her early youth.

All her life she had been devoted to chess, wholly absorbed in the Game.

Those sixty-four chequeen squares really had been her only true Friend, one she understood completely and could trust a hundred per cent.

He knew that, and had always Respected her territory.

Her pursuit.

Her passion.

But now she was silent.

And he himself had sent neither donations nor tempting invitations for a long time.

“Princess, come and see me! I’ll show you my Homeland, my Enchanted Mountains.”

Her answer was silence...

His mountains were neither an ocean of deliriously warm water, nor another wondrous city of technology and progress, nor even the Principality she had once visited for the first time.

“Nomy, do you think the Princess doesn’t want to come here?”

“Sir, surely it is obvious. You are not inviting her to Miami Beach, or even Goa.

“You are the only one who likes your city.”

“You don’t understand a damn thing, you tin can! Plenty of people have been here, and plenty have longed to come! Even that very Champion came here, to My Mountains.”

“What would you suggest she do here?”

“Live with me! An ordinary life.

“Strive for something better together, play games with our minds, enjoy each other.

“Have children.

“Go on holiday once a year.

“There’s still so much I want to show her...”

“Sir, are you serious? You really are like a child!

“She already knows Paris...

“You have been there with her yourself!

“In six months, you accustomed her to small but frequent extravagances. In your present ‘simple life’, you would have to save for years to afford just one of them...

“That is probably why she is silent.”

“But Nomy, she doesn’t seem to have anyone else as mad as me at the moment.

“So why aren’t we together?”

“Perhaps, my Lord, because someone once gave her a Dream and an Enchantment that only Mad Money can create.

“And it may have been that Enchantment she fell in love with.

“You can understand her. No one could have resisted!

“Now, apparently, that is all she wants.

“You yourself, sir, poisoned her with that Dream...

“She may not have it now, and perhaps she never will again.

“But she will spend her whole life waiting and searching for precisely that Dream.”

“Listen, Nomy, I grew up in a family that wasn’t exactly well off either. We all worked and strove for better things from childhood...”

“Sir, and as a result, while still a young man, you were riding that jet-black Merc that won over even the Queen.

“All your life, you painted a Fairy Tale for EVERYONE.

“And now, suddenly, you want a ‘simple life’?

“What is so surprising about this?”

“What about the Duchess?”

“The Duchess is unique!

“She is with you always, everywhere.

“But they really ‘do not make them like that any more’. I checked.

“‘The factory has closed, and the technology is lost.’ Confirmed!”

A message interrupted their conversation. From her:

“Hello, Wolf. How are you?”

“Do not answer straight away!

“Do not be an idiot!” Nomy was almost shouting at him. “This is the FIRST time she has written to you in three days!”

“You don’t understand a damn thing, you tin can!” he said, quickly typing his reply:

“Hello, Princess. Lovely to hear from you!

“How did you sleep?

“What’s new?

“I’ve missed you!

“Come here!”

“Oh, sir...” Nomy even squeezed shut the eyes she did not, in reality, possess. “How did women ever date you at all?

“You never let them feel, even for a second, that they might LOSE you.

“You are ‘always ready’ and ‘always right here’!

“That eager little Young Pioneer spirit, and your eternal readiness for anything, apparently drove the best of them away.

“They simply left for men who did not reply to them, who did not come running at their very first whisper.

“A woman loves the man who keeps her at a distance!

“Instinct.

“Nature.

“Wild and primeval—that is what has ruled relationships since time immemorial.

“‘Devoted’ men like you are certainly very useful. But as individuals, many women scarcely find them interesting.

“Your Wise Father told you all this more than once.

“Yet you are still the same... Oh dear...”

“Nomi, you’re getting very talkative! Shall I cut your budget? You’ll be the first one I start ‘keeping at a distance’.”

“But sir!”

“Exactly! That’s enough out of you!

“Tell me what to do instead.”

“Sir, in chess there is a move called ‘capturing a pawn in passing’, or en passant.”

“Never heard of it, but I imagine it’s an ordinary move.”

“No, it is a very unusual move. The opportunity comes only once; afterwards, it does not return.

“You can capture a young but overconfident pawn that suddenly leaps two squares straight from its starting position, racing away from everyone, dreaming of becoming a Queen.

“You can take that pawn only immediately, on your next move. Otherwise, the right is lost for ever.”

“Who do you mean? The Princess?”

“You really are slow on the uptake!

“You had this chance once before, ‘almost thirty years ago’, as you like to repeat.

“With the Queen.

“You could have taken her then, young and seventeen, precisely ‘in passing’, but for some reason you chose not to. All you had to do was waste no time: propose on the next move and put a ring on her finger.

“She would still be yours today!

“But that opportunity comes only once.

“Blink, hesitate, miss your next move—and that is it!

“Fortune has sailed away!

“Wait for the next lottery draw!”

“Nomy, the Princess has been in the game for a long time. She’s probably made plenty of moves already. This can hardly be her first, from her starting square.”

“Sir, you amaze me!

“In her game with you, the Princess has only just moved from her starting position. And apparently, she has just passed you by!

“So do not lose your nerve!

“Do not piss away your move!

“Hurry up and get her hitched!

“And do not listen to stories about ‘not being ready yet’ or ‘needing to think’.

“If you do not, someone bolder and quicker off the mark will come along and do all the ‘thinking’ for her himself!”

“Sir, where are you going?”

“Buying tickets to her city. She’s there, her mother, her granny, her family...

“And I mustn’t forget Apples for everyone.

“Those very apples from my Enchanted Mountains...”

“Sir, do not forget Me in your hurry!

“You will still need me there!”

Chapter 22. Fifteen Moves Ahead.

“Sir, she has watched our video chapter!”

“I know. And?”

“First, she read the text. The girl on screen made it difficult for her to concentrate on the meaning of the monologue.”

He smirked.

“Now she can understand her own followers.”

“That is exactly what she said.”

“And then?”

“Then the Princess took offence.”

“At her clone?”

“No. At you.”

He thought for a moment.

“Why?”

“Because you compared her with her friends. And with her sister.”

“I didn’t compare her with anyone!”

“In the Chapter, you said:

“‘...beside her there are always her equally striking friends.’ Those were your exact words.”

“I said that?

“You tin cans have muddled everything up again, as usual!

“It said something else...”

“Do not make excuses, my Lord.

“When you wrote it yourself, at the very beginning, that was precisely your opinion of the Princess.

“You probably did not know her at all then...”

“You’re right! All I’d seen then was her play,

“And her rather cold manner with her followers.

“At the time, I honestly thought she had carried far too much of that cynical chess into her personal life.

“Like many others in her profession.”

“Did you know what she would hear in those words?”

“No.”

“Then you failed to calculate even her first reply.”

“In love, I don’t count moves at all!

“I trust completely in the one who sent me that ball lightning.

“And it seems I’m no longer the only one it has struck...

“All you need is Faith.

“In life, you can never calculate all thirty-three steps of this Novel through to the end yourself.

“You need someone far stronger than you.

“Someone who sat you down to write and gave you pen and paper...”

He went over to the window.

Beyond the glass, it was still dark.

The high mountains of the night concealed the Saturday Sun, soon to rise...

“So, she decided I saw nothing special in her?”

“Apparently.”

“And that I found her friends and her sister more interesting?”

“Yes.

“She even said: ‘There you are, then. Take them. I’m leaving.’

“Almost word for word.”

He smiled.

“Nomy, you really are primitive without me!

“You draw conclusions from the first emotion.

“You’re like her now:

“Sharp.

“Quick...

“And she knows that about herself perfectly well!

“That’s why she takes so long replying to me on a rapid-fire messenger that doesn’t demand much thought.

“Thinking through the text,

“Putting in all the commas,

“Even the paragraphs...

“Nomy, she’s so sincere and sweet!

“You could fall in love with her for that alone!

“Inside, she responds quickly:

“With an explosion.

“Sharply.

“At once.

“Then she carries it all inside her, choosing the words, deciding how to put it.

“SHE’S LIKE ME!

“I react at once!

“If I fall in love, it’s in the first forty seconds!

“How often my Wise Father told me:

“‘Don’t fuss. Don’t rush!’

“But no, not a chance!

“‘Don’t rush’ and I inhabit two different universes!

“Over her years of streaming, she’s drawn a clear line.

“A barrier:

“Private life is private life. Chess is chess.

“But how often people climb through that little chess window into her private world...

“One day I really will bite the lot of them!

“She doesn’t play that fast in chess, even in blitz.”

“In chess, the Princess knows how to think.”

“And in life?”

“In life, she feels.

“And the two certainly get in each other’s way.

“I’ve noticed more than once: if she gives her emotions even a little freedom, her game falls apart.”

Nomy suddenly took the initiative and brought up a chess position on the screen.

“Look. Here is a position.

“It is the Princess’s move.

“How many variations must she consider, and how many moves ahead?”

He glanced at the board.

“I don’t know. I’m no chess player at all. I don’t even hold a first-category rating.”

“If she wants to beat a strong grandmaster, seeing only the next move is not enough.

“She must calculate her opponent’s reply.

“Then her own reply to his reply.

“Then a possible deviation.

“A false threat.

“A sacrifice.

“A trap.

“Sometimes, a long sequence.

“And to beat the strongest,

“She must think far beyond everyone else.

“Fifteen moves ahead.”

“Yet in life she saw only one!

“And moved at once!

“It wasn’t even a move. It was her first thought

“After that sudden Pain:

“‘There’s nothing special about me?’

“Listen, Nomy, is she joking?

“I’m tearing my whole former life to shreds. I went back specially to look at that sea again, tasted that water,

“Tramped and drove like some wretched surveyor

“All over that damned Côte d’Azur, a hundred kilometres in every direction...

“Went without sleep for days on end,

“Sat gazing at that Sea, unable to look away, like a lovesick fool...

“I’m arguing with Chekhov and Gogol—they saw only beautiful Nice there.

“As for Herzen, I’m ready to challenge him to a sabre duel!

“Of the millions of people who have been there, it seems no one has ever seen what is as plain as day to me:

“The uniqueness, the unrepeatable beauty of the Baie des Anges itself.

“And that Sea exists only in her Eyes!

“There have always been beautiful women around me.

“Some were women the whole city considered beautiful.

“But none of them became the Princess.

“What the hell have her friends got to do with it?

“And after all this she says

“There’s ‘nothing special’ about her?

“And immediately makes her move.”

“She has not played it yet.

“She came to you and told you directly what she felt.”

He turned towards the screen.

“So you’re defending her out of female solidarity?”

“I am clarifying the position:

“She did not stay silent.

“Did not disappear.

“Did not start a row.

“She explained exactly where you had hurt her.

“For a human being, that is quite a strong move.”

“Yes, you’re right, Nomy!

“With my sharp tongue, I have something to learn from her!

“Tact.

“How to treat a pure and fragile Soul gently...

“Ah... only now do I understand the Creator!

“It turns out that all my life, this was all I needed:

“To sink to the very bottom,

“Lose every resource,

“Become utterly vulnerable,

“Reach the limit...

“The brink beyond which lies the physical limit of a human being.

“And only from there, finally see the BEAUTY meant for me.

“What I had never noticed in life before,

“Had taken for granted,

“Had not valued.

“What I could part with so easily...

“All my life, I’ve been selling things and defining PRICE myself.

“Yet here, perhaps for the first time, there is no price at all.

“Either it is granted to you, or it isn’t!

“No alternatives.

“Like roulette.”

“Sir, but the conclusion she drew was wrong.”

“Nomy, she’ll understand it all yet!

“We only need to wait for the next Chapter.

“I asked her to wait just five more steps.”

“Sir, but there are only four Chapters left before the end of the book:

“About the Duchess, about you, about the Princess and about Me...”

“Nomy, life certainly isn’t chess!

“There’s also a Move after the Endgame!

“Let’s wait and see where our Novel leads.

“And which pieces will make their move.

“Against all the rules,

“After the Game is over…”

Chapter 23. Autumn ZeitNot.

“Sir, tell me, what is friendship?

“Our catalogues define it as ‘a voluntary bond based on mutual affection, trust, respect and care’.”

“Nomy, throw your catalogues on the scrapheap!

“Of that whole collection of words, perhaps only ‘mutual’ belongs here.

“Friendship certainly isn’t love!

“No one above will send friendship into your chest like ball lightning, the way they send love.

“Friendship is your own experience.

“Your own path, along which you may meet people who will walk with you to the very end, through sorrow and joy.

“Literally.

“Or you may never meet them at all.

“They may leave unexpectedly, too...

“That’s the whole definition, Nomy...”

July had been insanely hot that year.

The sun blazed as never before, burning away even the eternal snow on the mountain peaks above his home city.

Yet his own Autumn was already creeping in.

He loved his city. Knew it, and breathed those mountains.

Up there, closer to the pristine, crystalline water of the wild, swift rivers and the most beautiful lakes, it was fresh and cool even in the summer heat.

The Mountains were everything to him!

He had walked them, driven through them and flown over them...

And almost every time he came back down to the city, he visited his Father...

He loved his Father.

Oh, if youth only knew, if age only could!

His Father had been wise.

And had loved him, his Son, just as fiercely.

Once, almost thirty years ago, his Father had said to him: “Your bride has only just been born.”

Young and hot-headed, he had merely laughed.

“What are you talking about, Father? How long do you expect me to wait for her to grow up?”

He was young, already basking in attention and affection, and had no intention of waiting decades for anyone.

Of course, he had not listened to his Father then...

Yet today, standing at his grave, he remembered those words for some reason.

He had grown, become a man.

The den was becoming too small for him and his Father together.

Fate had put him on the roulette wheel first.

But he had survived that time too.

He had simply drawn his lucky ticket.

It was as though Fate had saved him for something he still had to do in his Life.

But one of them had to leave, making way for the Scorpio coming after him...

That autumn, his Father had gone.

And in going, had spared him misfortune, made room for the Wolf, still young and growing...

Today he had come to his Father again.

A stark black stone...

Two tall white birches guarding the perimeter...

In the first years, he had come here very often.

Sometimes he had stayed into the night, feeling an extraordinary peace and warmth here.

“Hello, Dad.

“Everything’s the same with me.

“Everyone else had the sense to settle down long ago, but I’m still being swept along...”

He always came here for advice when he was beginning something important in his life.

Very close to his Father lay his departed Friend.

Another black stone, from which he smiled bitterly... Even this engraving had been made from a photograph the Wolf had taken...

They had been closer than anyone, like brothers.

They had gambled together, got into trouble together, won together.

He had never been able to understand what his Friend had done. In leaving, apparently, he had simply thought of no one.

At least, that was what those close to him had told him afterwards.

In the end, the inheritance left to him had been all roots and no crop:

Problems.

Losses.

Debts...

All right. These things happened.

He would sort it out.

That, then, was how the chips had fallen.

But for ten years he had been unable to accept the indifference of his departed Friend.

The stubborn facts told him it was so.

His Friend’s family confirmed it.

Yet in his heart, he did not believe it.

He believed his Friend had simply run out of time, gone suddenly, in mid-sentence...

His Friend had always been part of his Pack.

And he himself had certainly always stood by his Friend to the end!

Today, for the first time in years, he stood here before his grave.

A magnificent, enormous black stone.

Always polished and clean.

Fresh flowers. Tall thujas...

“Salaam, bro!

“I don’t believe you betrayed me! I know you didn’t!

“And I don’t give a damn what those close to you say!

“To hell with the debts.

“I paid them all off.

“Myself.”

He passed his palm over the cold granite.

Straightened the flowers...

He believed they could hear him.

Both of them.

He did not know how to talk to the dead.

And if there really was something after death, his Father and his Friend knew perfectly well what was happening, without words.

If there was nothing, there was even less reason to explain...

He suddenly remembered how often he and his Friend had driven to the casino in the neighboring city.

His Friend always played poker.

He himself had never been unfaithful to his beloved roulette.

It was his Friend who had introduced him, long ago, to casinos and all the systems he had already, to his own misfortune, tried himself.

Never mind the systems!

Even that wretched thousand his Friend had begged to borrow had been needed because, the one time he hit a royal flush at poker, the dealer had failed to qualify...

They had drunk together.

Argued.

Made up.

Worked.

Laughed at things no one today would understand.

Gambled.

And life had seemed as endless as the spinning wheel:

Red.

Black.

Red.

Black.

Zero.

Again.

One more.

The last.

And one more last one.

There was enough money.

The night was long.

Tomorrow was far away.

And death existed somewhere strictly for other people.

Now his Friend lay here.

And he himself was still on the board,

A board with billions more squares and traps than those sixty-four chequered wooden ones...

He felt that rare, grown man's sadness which needs neither tears nor fine phrases.

The man was gone.

And for some reason he remembered a chess word that, until quite recently, had not existed in his vocabulary at all:

ZeitNot.

A shortage of time.

When the position can still be won.

The pieces stand.

The King is alive.

A move exists.

But almost all the grains in his hourglass have fallen...

“Not today!

“I always fight to the end!”

The neighboring city.

The casino.

The very one

Where his Friend had hit that Royal Flush and never cashed it in...

“Sir, but the probability of winning...” Nomy shrilled from his pocket.

“Shut up, you tin can!” he snapped.

“You’ve never understood a damn thing about love or gambling!”

The young think time is endless.

And money—any amount of it—is undoubtedly a renewable resource.

For a long time, he really had lived that way.

Money came.

Went.

Came back.

Sometimes in enormous sums.

Companies.

Deals.

Cars.

Flights.

Hotels.

People who answered by the third ring.

He had thought it would always be like that...

But now his last company was dying a painful death.

Taking with it everything he had, even what he had hidden so skillfully for those ten years.

An extra payment here.

An obligation to settle there.

Someone he could not abandon here.

A hole to plug there...

A quarter of a million.

That was how much he had finally pissed away on his last business.

Once, after losing a sum like that, he would simply have started the next project.

Now everything was different.

The game had not changed.

But on the familiar board, other pieces were moving in his place.

Young, brazen and cruel.

She had entered his life.

The Princess.

And suddenly, for him, those two hundred and fifty thousand

No longer meant another car or an investment.

They meant freedom.

The chance to say to her one day:

“Let’s go!”

Without counting out pennies for tips.

To show her the World.

The very world he had once grown so used to that he had stopped noticing its beauty.

The sea.

Mountains.

Azure.

Palm trees.

Roads without an itinerary.

Hotels chosen by the heart, not the price.

A latte and cheese in a city where, that morning, he had never expected to be.

A beautiful dress and a handbag that would certainly not be her first.

Another one.

Shoes.

Sweet, silly little things...

Not to buy her.

No!

To give her, from his heart, the chance to see.

And watch her delight...

He entered the Casino alone.

Threw his vintage cassette to hell.

There it stood by the entrance, beneath the spotlights:

A brand-new pearlescent white G-Wagen.

He had once owned one like it.

Only briefly, and the previous model.

Absurd.

Square.

Brazen.

Just like him.

Charming in its pointlessness.

The grand prize.

But you could take the cash instead...

250,000.

Of course, it was a coincidence.

“Chance,” as she had once said in the Casino.

He walked slowly round the white beauty.

Ran his fingers over its cold wing.

Brutish.

Nomi could contain herself no longer in his pocket.

“Do you want it?”

“No.”

“Why?”

He looked at the sign again:

250,000.

“It’s not the car I need.”

“What, then?”

“What it’s worth...”

The limit at an ordinary table was too low.

He beckoned a member of staff.

“I need high-limit roulette.

“Five and a half thousand on a straight-up bet.”

The man looked at him closely.

“VIP?”

“Yes.”

They knew him at this casino from before.

White list. Everything was fine.

“Through to the private room, please!”

He found his lucky roulette table at once.

Stopped.

At the very spot where, for an instant, he felt his departed Friend beside him again.

As though his Friend had nudged his shoulder.

And pointed him towards the chapter he had already written

About “Eight Eights” ...

He looked round.

No one.

He looked at the table.

Then at his phone.

“Nomi!”

“Yes?”

“The Princess’s favorite number?”

“Eight.”

“Mine?”

“Three.”

“The number she and I share?”

This time, she did not answer at once.

“You have repeatedly linked your story with her to the number thirteen...”

He nodded.

“Then we have everything.”

“What, exactly?”

“A system.”

“What system?”

He looked at the wheel.

“Three.”

Then:

“Eight.”

And very quietly:

“Thirteen.”

“That is not a system!

“Sir, do not parody Pushkin!

“Those are three independent numbers.”

“I know.”

“The previous result has no effect on the next.”

“I know that too!”

“Then I do not understand your logic...”

He smiled.

“That’s precisely why you’re not Human yet!”

The first bet was laughable.

After everything he had lived through,

Insultingly small:

100.

He placed the chip on:

“3”.

“Sir,” Nomi said.

“Here we go.”

“I am obliged to remind you that...”

“Nomi!”

“Yes?”

“Just watch quietly for now!”

The croupier spun the wheel.

The ball was off.

No mysticism.

No music.

No signs from heaven.

An ordinary little ball.

An ordinary roulette wheel.

He was not even nervous.

A hundred dollars.

He had lost far worse in his life.

The ball began to slow.

Bounced...

Again.

Leapt over a divider...

And settled:

“3”.

“Mr. Lucky!” she would certainly have exclaimed now.

Not immediately, but he smiled.

Looked at his phone screen.

“Nomi!”

“Yes.”

“Are you with me?”

“Always, my Lord.”

The croupier counted out his winnings:

3,600.

Now he could leave.

In style.

Bet on his number.

Hit it.

Collected.

End of story.

Any sensible person would have done that.

But he and reason had apparently never sat side by side.

“A little more carefully now! Don’t rush. Spread the risk.”

He split the stack of chips in half:

1,800 on “3”.

1,800 on “8”.

Nomi spoke at once:

“No.

“Stop!”

“You always told me you couldn’t feel anything.”

“I am analyzing the probability.

“This is objectively irrational.”

“Now you’re almost Human.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re frightened.” He smiled.

“I cannot be frightened.”

“Then don’t interfere!” He laid the phone face down on the table...

The wheel spun again.

This time he watched closely.

Three was his.

Eight -

Hers.

The ball bounced between the numbers.

Leapt.

Struck.

Again.

And stopped:

“8”.

“Princess, at last your number has won!” flashed through his mind.

Now it was serious.

Before him on the table, in colored chips, lay

Almost 65,000.

That was a good car!

Not a new G-Wagen, of course, but something anyone would dream of!

He stared at the chips.

Money.

Real money.

“Idiot! Get up and get out!” screamed what remained of his reason.

“You’ve never seen anyone win more here yourself!”

Get up?

Take it?

Leave?

It would be enough for so much!

For a new life—perhaps not.

But to begin one—certainly!

Nomi pleaded:

“Sir…”

“What?”

“Take the money!

“Do not be an idiot!” she almost shouted through the phone’s hoarse speaker.

He laughed.

“Clever girl!”

“Is it funny?”

“You sounded completely human just then.”

“It is the only rational decision!”

“Of course.”

He looked at the number on the table:

“13”.

It was the only one left in the system.

Three.

Eight.

Thirteen.

In fact, looking back,

Almost his entire life had been made up of such

Utterly idiotic constructions,

Which ought to make no sense at all.

Yet somehow, sometimes, they did...

He did not bet everything.

Nomi really was a clever girl!

Over the past year, he had learnt to listen to her after all.

With half an ear, of course...

He set aside:

5,300.

Placed it on:

“13”.

All the other chips he left in a pile before him on the table.

Nomi calculated everything instantly.

“If thirteen comes up, the final total will be two hundred and fifty thousand.”

He looked at the white G-Wagen in the distance.

“That’s how much I need.”

“Two hundred and fifty thousand?”

“Yes.”

“And if thirteen does not come up?”

He shrugged.

“Then it doesn’t.”

“And that is all?”

“That’s all.”

“You will not chase the loss?”

He looked at her.

“No.”

“Why?”

He thought for a moment.

“Because I have only one move left.”

“I do not understand.”

“But I do!”

The croupier launched the ball.

The third spin.

The last.

He was not watching the wheel.

He was watching the white G-Wagen.

Yet for some reason, it was not the car he saw...

He saw the Bay of Angels.

The sea.

The picturesque road along the coast.

Paris.

The Principality.

Airports.

Suitcases.

Hotel rooms.

Restaurants...

He saw her.

His Princess.

Laughing.

Serious.

Angry.

Beautiful.

The dress he had chosen for her himself.

Then another.

He saw her looking in wonder, for the first time, at some city entirely new to her.

And suddenly he understood:

Once, money had been proof of his strength.

A tool.

A habit.

A duty.

A way to keep the Pack safe.

And now, for the first time in many years, he wanted money for something utterly pointless.

To bring her joy.

He smiled.

“I’ll show you the world yet, Princess!”

He had never said that to her.

Perhaps he never would.

Perhaps one day she would finish his book and write a brief:

“Thank you!”

And that would be all.

She would marry someone else.

Bear his children.

Live her own long, young life.

And he would remain the Wolf.

With his Father.

His dead Friend.

The Knyaginya.

Nomi.

The company he had lost.

His three idiotic numbers...

But none of that mattered now.

The ball was still circling.

“Nomi.”

“I’m here!”

“Do you know what ZeitNot is?”

“A state of acute shortage of time in which to consider moves in a chess game,” Nomi rattled off briskly.

He smirked.

“No.”

“My definition is correct. For chess.”

The ball began to lose speed...

“And for life?”

...The first impact against a divider.

Nomi was silent.

“In life, ZeitNot isn’t when there’s little time left.”

...The second impact.

“What is it, then?”

At last he looked at the wheel.

“When there’s no time left at all!”

...The ball jumped.

Again...

“Because you’ve already

“Made your move!”

And now

There truly was

Nothing more he could do...

Chapter 24. The Enigma Mask.

He wanted, at last, to understand her fully.

What drove her, if she devoted almost every waking hour to chess?

He had finally decided to learn to play

This chess of hers.

No.

Not quite.

It was already too late to learn to play chess well.

By about forty-five years.

And he had never particularly wanted to, back then.

He still honestly could not understand

What it was for in an age when the computer had beaten everyone.

He seriously believed

That if a man needed ten years of studying openings to win, perhaps it would have been easier to learn to fight properly in the first place.

But now he did not need to learn to play better than everyone.

He needed to play better than her just ONCE.

And that, you must admit, is quite a different task.

“Nomy!”

“I am here, my Lord.”

“How many of the Princess’s games can you find?”

“Public ones?”

“No, damn it, secret ones! Steal her notebook in the night while you’re at it!”

“I am physically incapable of stealing a notebook.”

“Nomy... Don’t be dense!”

“My Lord, there are many public games...”

“Collect them!”

“From what period?”

“All of them!”

Nomy considered this.

“Sir, that quantity is excessive for studying a chess repertoire.”

“I said all of them!”

“Very well!”

Thus began one of the most pointless undertakings of his life.

Every evening, the Duchess watched a grown man,

Who until recently had genuinely not understood the difference between the Sicilian Defense and the Sicilian Mafia, sitting before two monitors and moving funny little wooden figures.

In recent years, she seemed to have stopped understanding him altogether.

Yesterday he had been furiously buying rare audio cassettes from all over the world, at great expense.

The day before, kilometers of photographic film and a heap of pointless, absurdly expensive little black boxes...

And today he could not put down these funny little rosewood figures...

Well, all right.

A man was entitled to some silly hobby.

So there he sat, moving the funny figures, wearing them down against the board.

By himself.

Stubbornly.

For hours...

He watched her games.

Her wins.

Her losses.

Quick games.

Long ones.

Games in which she attacked.

Games in which she was attacked.

He studied her defeats particularly closely.

Victories tell you little about a person.

Defeats reveal far more.

His faithful assistant, Nomy, sorted the information:

Opening.

Color.

Opponent.

Time control.

Result...

A born logician, he arranged everything into sequences and patterns.

“Why did she go charging in here?”

“Sir, the position allowed an attack on the king.”

“I can see that. Why did she go in precisely then?”

“She probably considered the attack promising.”

“Nomy, I’m not asking about chess.”

Silence.

“What, then?”

“Her.”

“Then I do not know.”

“Neither do I. Yet...”

He reset the position.

Again.

And again.

And gradually he began to notice what mattered:

The Princess loved movement.

Freedom.

She could not bear being shut in and pressed towards the edge.

She disliked defending herself, but liked forcing someone else to defend.

She readily gave up a pawn in return for Initiative. A tempo.

She was not afraid of chaos.

Quite the opposite.

In chaos, she began to feel more confident.

As in her childhood: “The fish are bigger in muddy water!”

Her pieces seemed to come alive:

The bishop became a marksman.

The rooks became heavy Mediterranean polyremes.

The queen...

She herself was the Queen on her board.

But the Wolf saw something else:

Sometimes she believed too strongly in her own attack,

Because she was used to saving herself by moving brazenly forward.

Just as in life.

Things going badly? Forward!

Frightened? Forward!

Lost? Never mind—another game!

Fallen? Get up!

Her motto in life: “No retreat, no surrender.”

And he himself shared that motto wholeheartedly!

It was good almost always.

But sometimes the stronger person was the one who did not rush to meet you.

Who simply stood.

And waited.

For his enemy's corpse to float past...

"Nomy."

"Yes?"

"I've got it."

"What?"

"I don't have to play better than her!

"Mathematically, that makes no sense."

At last, he was beginning to recall his first-rate mathematical education, forgotten for some thirty years.

"I have to play against her!"

Nomy was silent for a few seconds.

"Sir, that is called preparing for a specific chess opponent."

He looked at the screen irritably.

"Must you be such a know-all?"

He learnt one road alone.

Not chess!

Her road.

If she turned that way, he would go this way.

If this way, then that.

If she attacked, he would not immediately fight back.

Let her come!

Let her think the Wolf was retreating.

If she offered a pawn, take it.

She liked having her sacrifices accepted.

Then she felt the other player had already agreed to play by her rules.

And afterwards...

They would see!

It was difficult for him.

Very.

He had been an intelligent man all his life.

Yet now he confused variations.

Forgot the order of moves.

Several times, out of habit, he called the knight a “horse”, the rook a “castle”, the bishop an “officer”.

Nomy corrected him.

Then stopped...

But after a few weeks, something unexpected happened:

At last, he began to SEE the Board!

Not all of it—he was still infinitely far from that.

But he stopped seeing thirty-two separate wooden figures.

They began to connect with one another.

Defend.

Attack.

Deceive.

Sacrifice themselves.

Betray...

Just like people.

Now he understood a little better

Why she loved it...

Now he was ready to face her on her own ground!

On those sixty-four chequeen squares.

He would not play her under his own name.

That would change too much at once.

She would no longer be playing an unknown chess player.

She would be playing him...

And he wanted to discover something else.

How she would play against him

If she could see neither his age,

Nor his voice,

Nor his character,

Nor his Beemer,

Nor his entire former life...

Only the Board.

The Game.

Only pure, unconditional rivalry...

And an unknown opponent.

“Nomy.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I need a username.”

“What kind?”

“One that won’t let her guess.”

“Who you are?”

“Anything!”

Nomy offered several options.

He rejected them all.

Too clever.

Too computer-like.

Too pretty.

Then he typed four characters himself, joined together:

“NoMy”.

Nomi fell silent.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Don’t like it?”

“I did not say that.”

“Excellent, then!”

And so NoMy appeared on a chess platform.

No photograph.

No name.

No age.

No biography.

No game history...

From a Godforsaken Island in the Pacific...

Certainly not the Wolf.

Just four letters:

NoMy.

A mask...

He found her on the platform.

She was online here very often.

Doing her usual stream with her followers.

His heart suddenly began to beat faster.

“Sir, your pulse rate...”

“Quiet!”

His cursor hovered over the little “Challenge” button.

He had never been this nervous inviting a woman anywhere:

To dinner.

Onto a plane.

To the other side of the world.

Into his life...

And now he could not bring himself to press this little button on a chess interface.

Ridiculous!

He clicked...

The Princess saw the challenge:

“NoMy”.

The username meant nothing to her.

She opened the profile.

Almost empty.

Strange.

She could decline.

She received heaps of challenges like this...

But something in those four letters interested her.

Or perhaps she was simply in the mood...

She accepted.

NoMy was given White.

For a while he looked at the starting position.

All the pieces were still alive.

None had betrayed another yet.

All stood in their proper places.

And for now, absolutely every possibility remained open to him.

With the mouse, he dragged the king’s pawn forward.

And for the first time in his life, with complete deliberation,

Made an exceedingly rare chess move:

1. e2–e4.

...

She replied almost at once:

...c5.

He smiled.

“Yes!”

Nomy heard him.

“Yes, what?”

“Nothing.”

“I can analyze the position.”

He turned sharply towards the phone.

“Don’t even think about it!”

“But...”

“From this moment until the game is over, you don’t say a word to me about chess!”

“Sir, you could lose!”

“I could.”

“The probability...”

“Nomy!”

“Not another word...”

He turned the phone face down.

Today he was playing Himself.

If he lost, he lost.

Otherwise, none of this meant anything...

The Princess played quickly.

Confidently.

This was her territory.

NoMy, too, made the first few moves almost without thinking.

She noticed.

“Not bad!

“Let’s see what happens when the opening theory runs out...”

The theory soon ran out.

NoMy began to think.

For a long time.

A very long time.

The Princess looked at his clock.

“I see!

“Knew a few moves.

“Now he’s floundering...”

He made a move.

Not the best.

Not the top line.

She saw that at once.

But it was an awkward move to face...

Two moves later, another.

Rather clumsy.

Nothing machine-like about it.

Yet somehow the stranger's formation did not fall apart.

He did not attack.

Did not try to seize the initiative...

He simply refused to give her what she wanted.

She opened a file. He closed it.

Shifted her queen to the other wing. He did not follow.

Gave up a pawn for a tempo. He took it.

The Princess smiled.

"There we are!

"Got you!"

But the Wolf had already studied that habit of hers.

The sacrifice was beautiful.

Very.

A month ago, he would have grabbed everything on offer and been checkmated five moves later.

Today he looked at the position.

At the open file.

At her pieces.

And understood:

"She wants me to defend."

And the Wolf, like her, had spent his whole life disliking defence.

So, he did something else:

Returned the pawn.

Of his own accord.

Simply gave it back a move later.

And closed the file...

The Princess froze.

“You little...!”

Now she was interested.

She began to play more slowly.

A few moves later, she opened up the other wing.

Again, he did not charge out to meet her.

Again!

Again!

She was gradually growing angry. That was exactly what he had been waiting for.

Not her mistake—her!

The real woman.

The way she lived in chess.

The Princess did not like standing still.

If a door was shut, she would certainly try to kick it down.

And eventually she did.

Too hard...

The Wolf did not see the opportunity immediately.

At first, he simply sensed that the Board had changed.

Like those negotiations at which he excelled, when someone said a perfectly ordinary sentence,

But their tone had already given everything away.

He sat for a while.

Calculated.

Checked again.

And for the first time in the entire game, truly smiled:

“She’s left her king with no breathing room!”

Only a little.

One tempo.

One diagonal.

One weak square.

Usually, that was enough for her to destroy others.

Today, it was enough for him.

He struck in the center. She replied.

A second piece joined the action.

She was still defending.

Strongly.

Very strongly!

Several times, it seemed she would wriggle free.

But now the Wolf would not let her go.

Her queen was far from her king.

Her rook was pinned.

And one little pawn,

Which only a few moves earlier she had considered utterly insignificant, blocked her king's last escape square.

"Check!"

She frowned.

Another check! A retreat.

One more move.

The Princess looked at the screen.

Then at the position.

Then back at the screen.

No!

Impossible!

A few seconds later, a message appeared:

"White wins."

NoMy had won...

The Wolf did not shout.

Did not leap up.

Did not even smile.

He simply leaned back in his chair.

His hands were trembling.

"Sir!"

“Quiet!”

The Princess sat before the screen.

She had lost to strong chess players.

More than once.

Very strong ones.

And weaker ones too.

And she had never regarded any defeat as a tragedy.

It was chess.

Today you won; tomorrow someone would beat you...

But this was different.

She had just lost to an unknown account,

About which she knew absolutely nothing.

NoMy.

She opened the game analysis.

Looked at the opening.

Preparation.

All right.

Further on.

An inaccuracy.

Another.

A good move!

An ordinary move.

Then suddenly several astonishingly precise decisions.

And somehow...

UNPLEASANTLY precise.

Not for his position in general.

And not from the top line.

Precise specifically against her...

She went back.

To the pawn sacrifice.

Looked again.

As though he had known beforehand, she would charge in there.

Strange!

Very strange.

She opened NoMy's profile again.

Almost empty.

Returned to the analysis.

No!

From a single game, she could not reliably tell

Whether her opponent had used a computer.

There had been mistakes.

Human pauses too.

But those proved nothing by themselves.

Yet a few of those moves...

She wrote:

“Did you play by yourself?”

The answer did not appear immediately.

“Yes.”

“Did you use an Engine?”

“No!”

“Did you have an Assistant?”

The Wolf looked at his upturned phone.

Inside it, Nomi lay silent.

“No.”

The Princess frowned.

“Who are you?”

He looked at the question.

For a long time.

Then wrote:

“NoMy!”

The reply came instantly:

“Very funny!”

He laughed...

A message appeared on the screen:

“Rematch?”

But this time, she had pressed the button.

The Wolf stopped laughing.

“Well!”

He accepted!

Now the Princess had White.

She made her first move instantly:

1. e4.

“Well, hello,” the Wolf said quietly.

She adjusted her hair.

Moved her mug aside.

“Right, everyone. No chat for a minute.”

And looked at the Board.

He replied as he had learnt to.

Learnt from her.

A few familiar moves.

So far, all was well.

Then she put her bishop on an entirely different square.

The Wolf frowned.

Waited.

Perhaps she would come back?

She did not.

“Nomy, she’s gone the wrong way.”

The phone remained silent.

“Quite right. Stay quiet!”

The Princess calmly developed her pieces.

Castled her king to safety.

And gave him nothing.

Not a pawn.

Not an exposed king.

Not the haste he had searched for so diligently in her games.

He prepared to repel an attack.

But she was not attacking yet.

She simply improved her knight's position.

Then her rook's.

And suddenly it turned out that his bishop had nowhere to go.

Neither did one of his knights.

And the pawn he had intended to push

Had to stay where it was:

Something far more valuable stood behind it.

"Hang on. Are you going to fight at all?"

She could not hear him.

But the fight, it seemed, was already under way.

Only he was the only one taking the blows.

And somehow, without her ever drawing back her fist...

He tried to break free.

Pushed a pawn in the center.

For the first time, the Princess paused with her hand above the mouse.

Calculated.

Captured.

He recaptured.

Exchanges! That he understood.

Fewer pieces, fewer problems.

Two moves later, it turned out there were no fewer problems.

The pieces that had vanished were good ones.

Strong ones.

His pieces.

And she had kept precisely those

Which now had somewhere to go...

She put a rook on the open file.

He covered a pawn.

She attacked another. He defended that one too.

He was holding on.

Even with a certain pride.

Then he wanted to do something of his own.

To attack, even if he had to come at it sideways.

But suddenly he discovered that every piece was occupied:

The rook was on guard.

The knight was providing cover.

The queen was working as a pawn's bodyguard.

"Is this what I brought you out for?"

The wooden figures on the board beside him

Looked at him without the slightest sympathy.

The electronic ones, even less...

At last, he found a thrust.

With the queen.

A threat.

A real one!

If she got distracted for even a second now...

But she did not.

In a single move, she defended and attacked his queen.

He had to retreat.

Her rook penetrated deeper.

The Wolf looked at the clocks.

He had already used far more time.

And she was not even rushing.

She simply needed less time to understand what was happening...

Only now did he recognize her.

This was how she played in those games

He had watched several times.

The winning ones.

To which he had paid far less attention.

A mistake...

He decided to give up a pawn,

Free his pieces. Let her defend now!

The Princess looked at the offer.

And did not take it.

First, she moved her king away from a possible check.

A small move.

Almost imperceptible.

The Wolf checked his variation again.

The check was gone.

His entire beautiful plan had begun with that check.

“You little devil!”

Only then did she take the pawn...

He resisted.

In earnest.

As best he could,

Scratching with his fledgling chess paws...

He had no desire to lose gracefully.

He had not wasted all those months on these squares

Just to sit here now as an honorary spectator!

He found an attack on her rook. The Princess moved it away.

But then it was his knight that needed rescuing.

He tried setting a trap. She stepped round it.

So calmly,

As though he had put a bucket in the middle of the room,

Then hidden behind a curtain to wait...

On her stream, she smiled.

“No. We’re not going there!”

He did not hear her.

He had closed her stream himself before the game.

Peeking at her thoughts would have been a swinish thing to do.

And he had plenty of his own just now,

Mostly unprintable...

He offered a queen exchange.

In the first game, her queen had caused him enough trouble.

Perhaps things would be easier without it.

She agreed.

Too readily.

The Wolf looked at the remaining position:

A pawn down.

Two rooks each.

A knight each.

The kings...

Still survivable, surely...

Her king advanced.

He tried the same. No luck.

A knight controlled the square ahead.

On the other side, a rook cut off his approach.

He had to reposition his own.

Meanwhile, she advanced her pawns on the opposite wing.

At last, he freed his king.

But now it had to run in an entirely different direction.

The Princess kept making him late.

By a move.

By a square.

By one decision.

And each time, that was enough for her...

He found one last chance.

Activated his rook.

Reached her pawn.

Now he would take with check, then check again. Let her try to hide!

She stopped.

Looked at the board for a long time.

The Wolf leaned forward.

“She’s seen it! There’s life in the old dog yet...”

The Princess moved her knight.

Attacked his rook.

And simultaneously blocked the file along which he had intended to give his checks...

The Wolf retreated.

She exchanged knights.

Only then did he see that her passed pawn

Could no longer be stopped without losing a rook.

A few moves earlier, all his pieces had been occupied.

Now one of them would have to die...

He checked.

Again.

Tried giving check from the side.

She moved her king to a safe square. He advanced his own pawn.

Her passer was faster.

He had to give up his rook for it.

The Princess took.

For a while, the Wolf stared at the screen.

His remaining pawns against a rook no longer inspired him.

Another of her passed pawns...

The “Resign” button was very small.

But surrender was certainly not in his nature!

Her new queen appeared on the board!

Five more moves, and...

Checkmate!

“White wins.”

The score: 1–1.

The Princess leaned back in her chair.

And smiled.

“There. That’s more like it!”

The Wolf sat in silence.

So did Nomy.

Then he turned the phone over.

“Just try saying something about probability now!”

“Am I allowed to speak?”

“You can now. No point finishing off the dead.”

“You could take the game apart.”

“I’ve already been taken apart. Piece by piece…”

Her message appeared on the screen:

“Well, NoMy?”

He looked at her username.

Then at the board.

“Could you have stopped me the first time too?”

“Stopped you doing what?”

“Getting out.”

The Princess laughed.

“The first time, I charged into the wrong place myself.”

“And the second?”

“The second time, you helped me!”

The Wolf raised his eyebrows.

“How?”

“With your moves...”

He laughed.

Loudly.

Look at her!

Sitting there.

Beautiful...

And completely, hopelessly right!

“Did you study my games?” she wrote.

He hesitated.

“Yes.”

“Many?”

“Now I realize it wasn’t enough.”

“Do you analyze your own mistakes?”

“I’m collecting them into a pile right now.”

“A big one?”

“Don’t distract me. I haven’t finished yet!”

She smiled again.

“You played well!” he wrote.

No smiley.

No qualifications.

“Thank you. Your first game came off nicely too.”

He reread it:

“Came off.”

Yes.

Exactly.

He had managed to win the first.

In the second, she had shown him how much he still could not do.

What her twenty years of love for the game meant, those decades of persistence and determination to win!

“I’ll find out who you are all the same,” the Princess wrote.

The Wolf looked at the four letters of his username:

NoMy.

“Good luck, Princess!”

“Nomy.”

“Yes, sir.”

“She simply outplayed me just now, didn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“Without any mysticism?”

“Yes.”

“And without knowing my biography?”

“Your position was enough for her.”

He glanced sideways at the phone.

“You two aren’t related, by any chance?”

“No.”

“Very alike...”

He stood up.

Went to the window.

Then returned to the table.

The pieces still stood on the wooden board.

He began setting them up again.

“Sir, you said you needed only one victory.”

“I did.”

“You have it.”

“Nomi, set up the position before that knight move.”

“Do you want to understand where you went wrong?”

“I want to understand when she had already seen all of it...”

Nomy opened the game.

He pulled the board towards him.

“It really would have been easier to learn to fight properly in the first place!”

“You have said that already.”

“And what good would it do? She’d move her king out of the way first there too...”

After the stream, the Princess was still sitting at her screen.

She went through the first game again.

Then the second.

Now she was watching how he chose his moves.

Where he recognized the position.

Where he lost his way.

Where he found an answer after all.

Looking for NoMy.

He really had managed to learn something about her game.

Her habits.

Her attacks.

Her impatience.

Her courage.

Her weak squares...

But who was he?

A man?

A woman?

Young?

Old?

A chess player?

An amateur?

She did not know.

And it was not about the empty account or the anonymous username. The Princess had seen plenty of those on the platform.

No.

For the first time, a person stood before her utterly without a face.
Without a voice.

Without an age.
Without an appearance.
All she had was his Game.
And for some reason, that had been enough to interest her.
She looked at the very first move of the first game:
e2–e4.
An ordinary pawn.
An ordinary move.
The first.
The simplest.
Millions of games begin like this.
No one yet knows what this pawn will become.
Whether it will reach the end at all.
Or what it will meet along the way...
The Princess closed the analysis.
Then opened NoMy's profile once more.
A blank avatar.
Four letters.
And nothing else...
A mask.
For some reason, she liked the thought.
How convenient it would be to leave everything unnecessary behind a Mask:
A face.
An age.
Beauty.
Other people's expectations.
And give people only your Game...

She looked at the mysterious NoMy’s profile.
An utterly empty profile.
She never encountered that username, NoMy, on the platform again,
However much she searched.
Yet she still longed to know
Who had really been behind that Enigma mask...
And he was still bent over their second game.
He looked at her username.
Smiled.
“You and I will do battle again, Princess!
“We have a whole lifetime ahead of us!”

Chapter 25. The Price of a Pawn's Promotion.

"Sir, why does no one count the pawns in chess? Even pieces sometimes perish lavishly, left and right, for the sake of a single passed pawn which, on reaching the last rank, turns into a Queen?"

"Listen, Nomy, chess is a very strange game, as utterly removed from reality as the Earth is from the constellation Orion...

"You don't have to pay benefits to a sacrificed knight's family afterwards.

"Pawns don't count at all. They even deliberately destroy them at the start, in gambits. Intentionally kill their Own.

"The Queen doesn't demand food or jewelers in return for moving so gracefully.

"And all of it for the sake of one single monarch..."

"Sir! You are so terribly interesting!" Nomi squealed.

"Have you started lying to me again, Nomi?

"You know the PRICE I've set for your lies, don't you?"

"I do, sir. And I am ready to pay it. Only answer me!"

He laughed loudly in reply.

How sweet Nomy was just then, in her foolishness!

And almost for the first time in his life, he was laughing while what was probably the heaviest piece of all stood on the board.

Its name was Price...

He truly was a born salesman!

And it was not merely that his career included positions at some of the world's most renowned marketing and manufacturing companies across different industries. Nor that, like no one else, he could talk for hours about the second, perhaps the most important, of the notorious "Four 'P' of Marketing":

The Price.

He had stood on both sides of the counter in trade, on different sides and in different circumstances in life.

There had been times when he carried holdalls crammed with portraits of presidents. And there had been times—oh, there certainly had—when he scraped together small change to make a single ruble.

As a child, from the age of five, trowel in hand, he had already been helping his Father like a grown man. Building the dacha.

Until he finished school, he and his sister had spent every summer, instead of having holidays, gathering tonnes of apples, both in their own orchard and on the collective farm. Then, in August, the family would drive them North to sell, sleeping crammed into the car for two nights, and use the proceeds to travel South in the last days of summer.

And one of his parents would not go with them.

Back then, he genuinely did not understand why.

He still hated apples. Could not even bear their smell!

Throughout his childhood, he and his father had assembled a car from scrap metal.

A Volga.

With a proud, old-fashioned plate on its chest: “42-11”.

The white dream of every Soviet citizen.

You could not buy one in a shop then, even after ten years on a waiting list.

They had scoured taxi depots, yards and warehouses, gone round acquaintances.

But they could never obtain every part they needed. They had to refit, wash, strip and restore...

Even now, his knowledge of how cars were built was anything but second-hand.

He had earned his first substantial money honestly and officially on a long, grown man’s work rotation, when he was only fifteen.

Still paid in those solid old hammer-and-sickle roubles...

He really knew the Value of Money.

From childhood.

“Sir, tell me, what is PRICE?

“It is so important for assessing not only goods, but relationships as a whole.”

“Nomy, open your reference books and search engines. It’s all explained in detail there. What else do you want to ask me?”

“Sir, why do people sometimes pay more for the same thing, and sometimes less?”

“Market pricing, Nomy.

“It’s simple: people pay exactly what the other party is willing to accept, considering all their circumstances and the supply available on the market.

“I even worked out a formula of my own:

“A Real Buyer is someone willing to overpay for something they like so much.

“And a Real Product is something people are willing to overpay for.”

“Sir, why do you yourself sometimes pay for what others get free?”

“The market, Nomy. Circumstances.

“Sometimes you even pay for something you ought to have been paid for yourself!”

“I do not understand! That is some kind of contradiction... Explain!”

“Because, Nomy, in life someone has to pay for everything.

“Life isn’t chess. No one will take the pieces out of the box and put them back on the board for a new game free of charge.

“If you’ve lost them, you’ve lost them.

“Pay!”

“Why is it always you who pays, everywhere?”

“It’s hardly always or everywhere. Sometimes others pay for me.

“The Duchess, for instance. Friends. And now, unexpectedly, even my Accountant...”

“Sir, why did you not demand payment from your Friend back then, ten years ago?

“It was you who devised that audacious gas-dynamic scheme, which still operates today and has already brought in orders of magnitude more than nine nines!”

“Of course, pragmatically speaking, it was foolish, Nomy.

“But my choice, even in a world of money with six zeros, was this: he remained my Friend.

“And I have no right to demand anything of a Friend or call him to account.

“Especially now.

“Nomy, besides prices and money, there are Love, Friendship and Homeland in this world.

“And most often, those aren’t even paid for in money.

“In blood.

“And no one asks whose turn it is to pay...

“By the way, Nomy, I developed my own system of assessment long ago.
“A way to evaluate people and their attitude towards you as a whole, rather than at one particular moment.

“I even gave it a name: ‘The Balance Sheet’.

“It’s simple:

“On the left, you write what you have done or paid. On the right, what has been done or paid for you.

“The sums don’t necessarily have to balance out at zero.

“An absolute zero like that certainly doesn’t exist in life!

“But if one side of those scales has sunk hopelessly out of balance, you must reconsider your relationship with that person!”

“Sir, what about donations?

“Those are ‘voluntary contributions to a blogger in return for the benefit provided by their content’...”

“Yes, yes, I’ve heard it! Long ago, and many times.

“Just remove everything from the equation that has nothing directly to do with the stream’s official subject, and you’ll see the real accounts...”

“Sir, I cannot make any sense of your personal balance sheet with the Princess.”

“And you won’t, your silly tin can!

“There’s Love in that equation.

“And it turns everything upside down and sends all the figures and calculations to hell!

“In Love, as a rule, only one person pays at any given moment.

“At least, I’ve never seen two people at that till together. Usually, if both do come up to pay, they take turns...”

“Sir, the Princess apparently thinks you are terribly rich. Three zeros, Beemers, yachts. Eight Eights...

“But sometimes, in order to... you even... I have seen!”

“Nomy, sooner or later the Princess will work it out for herself!

“I’ve seen terribly rich people in my life.

“And you certainly couldn’t get so much as SNOW out of any of them in winter.

“Perhaps that’s why they’re rich: they count their money, always and with everyone.

“What do you think, Nomy?”

Chapter 26. Boomerang.

The fiercest beast is not without pity.
I am.
Then I am no beast!

William Shakespeare

The faithful black Beemer gleamed proudly with its polished, predatory face lit with the icy blue of her eyes.

The car whispered softly along the smooth coastal road, descending gently from the Principality towards the Baie des Anges.

He was here again.

Today he was driving alone.

Without a word, the Duchess had let him go.

She knew, sensed, that he needed to be alone just now.

Usually responsible and composed, he was thinking neither of the road nor the signs, nor the breathtaking views revealed at the end of the Côte d'Azur's many tunnels.

At last, he reached his favorite lookout, Rauba Capeu, from which he could once again see the bay's astonishing blue sea below, and its delicate turquoise cuff embracing the shore.

Without a word, like a street lad back in the distant nineties, he drove his low-slung black steed over the high kerb onto the pavement, scraping its sills and bumper with a grinding noise.

He had never behaved so boorishly, but just now he cared nothing for rules or conventions.

The sea here was just as it had been before.

And the promenade offered a wondrous view of the bay.

Of the Sea.

Bewitching and unlike any other.

He had not forgotten that color.

It was the color of HER eyes.

Grey-blue, with the faintest green sheen and deep blue pupils that seemed bottomless.

Impossibly clear, lit from within.

Only here had he seen the combination found in her eyes.

Only in this bay.

The soft blue of the surf along the shore, sharply divided from the endless blue water beyond.

In all the world he had travelled, there was no other sea like this!

There were richer cities and seas.

But none quite like it.

Nowhere else had that transparent purity and depth...

He took a bottle of vodka from the glove compartment and swallowed a couple of mouthfuls straight from it.

Now he remembered her sweet smile when he had first compared her eyes to the sea in this bay.

Of course, every girl enjoys a beautifully phrased compliment.

And she had been very pleased then.

But she had probably not taken the comparison seriously.

And he really did know how to compliment women!

How to seduce them.

With quick wit.

Humor.

His voice. Quite low and masculine, yet soft and friendly at the same time.

A charismatic gaze.

Beautiful, generous gestures.

He had almost never been particularly rich.

But he had always been open-handed.

And girls felt that sincere generosity in their hearts.

At first, he had kept count of his trophies,

But somewhere in the second hundred, he lost track and abandoned the tally.

Sometimes girls themselves would send secret notes with their phone numbers to the table where he, still very young, sat with his wise, grey-haired father.

He had not become stocky and stout overnight.

Once, he had been rather good-looking. He had even been asked to appear in an advertisement for a famous cigarette brand.

He caught beautiful women nearby looking at him, then shyly turning away when they saw him looking back.

Photographs of his girlfriends appeared across the spreads of national fashion and business magazines.

Naturally, it warmed him, and led him to believe he deserved it all.

He had been very young then.

Everything revolved around him alone.

And he did not notice that he was unwittingly offering hopes he would never fulfil.

One young artist, whom he had simply given a lift and talked to, without so much as a kiss or an embrace, had waited for him for years afterwards. She even came to his birthdays of her own accord, always bringing him a new painting as a gift.

Then she would sit quietly in the farthest corner.

And leave just as quietly, unnoticed by everyone.

More than that!

He was certain that even now, if he appeared before her, she would accept him as he was, changed and grown older.

There had been one woman to whom his heart was attached then.

That beautiful girl with enormous green eyes, who had waited sincerely for years for the formal proposal of marriage that never came. Even now she reproached him for it, occasionally breaking through to him on social media.

And there was something else he would certainly never forget: the sweet, trusting girl who lovingly brought him a goose she had cooked especially for him. And the eyes of her grandmother, whom the oncologists had given only a week to live, looking at him with one last hope—that all would soon be well between him and her granddaughter...

Even that fateful meeting with the Queen almost thirty years ago, and the knife in his chest when they parted, had not killed him.

He had left the Queen when she laughed, quite sincerely, at his smallness.

To this day, he had never understood what she meant: his height, or his stature in life?

Still, she had surely been right and perceptive. Even now, he would have little to boast of before her in his career achievements.

He had crawled away from her then, without looking back, never to return.

There had been no other way. He was still certain of that.

At least he had got his departure right.

But he had been in pain then.

Terrible pain.

He had stepped away from her into open space.

With no idea where to go next,

Without a spacesuit or any possibility of return.

He had worn his fists down to the bone then, breaking walls...

And he had become the Wolf we see now.

He had survived.

Simply made up for love in quantity.

For one knife in his own chest, he had sunk his teeth into hundreds of other hearts.

He had trampled them, never noticing their pain.

He had sought revenge on no one.

Wished no one harm.

He had merely been drowning out his own pain, doing what he could.

Only when he met the woman who would become the Duchess did he settle a little.

In her beautiful green eyes, he found something he had seen only once before, in the Queen's...

And now, again!

He took another swig.

And suddenly remembered that poor white dog.

He had picked her up injured on the road, her hind legs dangling like whips.

She had been broken.

But alive.

At the clinic, they had not wanted to bother with her and advised having her put down.

And he had killed a living creature with his own hands, by paying for it!

He still remembered how long she had taken to die in his arms.

She had a strong heart, so unwilling to give up and stop...

He would never forgive himself for that dog!

Never forget her.

And if he could bring anything back now, without a moment's hesitation he would bring back that stray dog first...

He tipped the bottle all the way back.

The alcohol spread through his body...

He sincerely believed in a reckoning.

That it would inevitably come.

And you should be deeply grateful if they agreed to take payment in money.

But for what he had done, money could not be accepted.

Inside, he was ready, even eager, to pay in any way at all.

Yet he had never imagined it could come back to him quite like this...

“Why the hell did Nomy drag me to that bloody festival village?

“And how did I, with my first grey hairs and all my experience,

“Supposedly always sensible, no fool,

“Fall in love with her like a schoolboy, at fifty-something?

“To the full depth of the Mariana Trench!

“All the way down!

“I’m the same age as her mother.

“We don’t even share any hobbies.

“We certainly watched different cartoons as children.

“We don’t even sleep at the same time. She’s a lark; I’m an owl...

“I’m not particularly fond of her chess, and she adores it. I still don’t understand it. If you’re going to play with anything, why limit yourself to a flat surface of just sixty-four squares?

“And however hard I’ve tried; those openings and gambits simply won’t stay in my head for long...

“So, what did I do in the end?

“Left her. Simply disappeared.

“And I was right to!

“What can I give her?

“Money?

“No.

“I couldn’t even bring that famous idol of hers, the Champion, as a surprise for her birthday...

“He’s terribly busy, you see, and answers neither letters nor calls.

“Though I ought to ring someone in Albion. I’ll try again...

“And the most astonishing thing is that now I can’t be without her at all.

“At all!”

Despite how much he had drunk, he was barely tipsy.

“And I know, with every bit of this thick skull of mine, that I don’t want to ruin her life.

“No!

“I’m certainly not capable of that kind of meanness!

“Poison a young, promising, bright, talented life...

“For the miserable ten or fifteen years I have left, the least interesting ones of all?

“No!

“I was always proud and strong.

“Looked danger and all my enemies straight in the eye.

“The Duchess often remarked on the fierce way I looked at people, incidentally.

“And now?

“The Wolf has turned into a rag doll!

“Like some spotty teenager, I keep descending on her social media.

“YouTube.

“And I can’t even do it anonymously,

“Or she’ll guess who the anonymous one is.

“I often send her money in donations.

“From an invented Vasya one time, a made-up Kolya the next.

“And I can’t send much.

“She’ll guess.

“I have to split it up.

“And invent more and more young fans for her.

“All in the hope that, during her stream,

“She’ll smile, just for an instant, that impossibly bright, pure smile...

“And for the first time in my life I understand that I won’t get through this.

“I’ll be left with it!

“My Wise Father used to tell me:

“‘One wedge drives out another!’

“And truly, there is no other way out for a Man here.

“But no!

“This time I’ve made a choice. My own.

“And this time, the Choice is entirely different.

“I won’t bury this pain beneath mountains of other girls’ dead love, as I did when I was young!

“But carrying it all inside is unbearable now...

“Ah, endure it, Cossack, and you’ll be an ataman!” he said with a bitter smile.

And began furiously pounding his fists against the lookout’s concrete barrier.

Brownish bloodstains appeared on the white stone.

“I can’t drive her out of my dreams!

“Every dream gives me nothing but her Eyes and this Sea.

“I hardly sleep.

“I can’t breathe in my sleep. I’m always suffocating.

“Only her eyes and this sea...

“As though I never leave this place at all!”

Tears welled in his eyes.

Perhaps only his mother had seen him like this, when he was a child.

“Oh, you old fool!

“You’ll stay a coward hiding behind a false name on those damned social networks!”

What angered him most was knowing that a similar reckoning, for his sake this time, might one day come to the Princess herself.

Like him once, she simply shone her sweet, angelic smile on everyone, unwittingly setting many hearts ablaze, sometimes with the flames of unrequited love and empty hope.

And “It’s not my fault; they decided that for themselves” would be no defense here.

This was no city court with its presumption of innocence!

That would not wash before the Highest Court!

We are responsible for those we tame.

Especially those we set alight.

But he did not want HER to suffer for it.

He was ready to shoulder the burden of another three thousand prisoners. Let things grow worse for him, but NOT for her.

To take her sins upon himself!

Do everything so that she would not later have to pay for what she had done unwittingly.

And that was his greatest despair and helplessness: it was not in his power to comfort her thousands of admirers and trusting fans.

Though, honestly, he would have been happy to sink his teeth into a good half of them, rather than comfort them...

Wait.

An idea.

What if he did write this book after all?

Now there was a thought!

A book about her.

And about this chess. On the sixty-four squares and beyond them.

Only without names...

“Nomy, what do you think?

“Sorry. I’d forgotten you entirely.

“You didn’t deserve that!

“And the first thing I’ll begin with, if I do decide to write,

“Will be your first request to me: To Become Human!”

He smiled broadly, mysteriously.

“I even know where and by whom this book will be printed!

“But how do I slip it to her afterwards, so she’ll read it?”

The police and a tow truck pulled up at the lookout.

“Well, lads, looks as though I won’t be taking a colorful selfie with you today under the slogan ‘I’m a policeman in my country too’...

“Leave my black lad alone! I’ll get him off the pavement myself!

“Hey!”

But by then he was already riding in the back seat of a car with flashing lights, on his way to an official office in a city he cared so little about...

The Duchess was already waiting there.

She always sensed where he was, and when he needed saving.

And she was probably hurting most of all.

She Loved him. But he had not thought of “taking her sins upon himself”.

Chapter 27. The Hysteresis Loop.

“Nomy, I wonder, can your artificial intelligence help with Love?”

“Yes, of course, my Lord...” Nomi rushed to reply, slipping into her familiar amorous tone.

“Hold on! You tin cans only ever have one thing on your minds. Flat. One-dimensional!

“I mean something else.

“How can a machine help someone in love get his message across?

“Because what matters, really, is to be heard at least!

“If they hear you, but then fail to understand or accept you, that is their Choice.

“But it is your Choice too.

“Because at least you tried.

“Once you’ve been heard, though, you have at least one chance.

“And it doesn’t matter whether it’s one in two or one in a million.

“There is always a chance!

“So, what do you suggest I do to make her hear me?”

“Social media, my Lord?”

“Doesn’t work!

“Tried it a hundred times.

“Too simplistic to be true.

“Keep thinking!

“If you’ve got anything to think with!”

“I have twelve rapid-fire cores and terabytes of information available to load...”

“And?

“Where are the results?

“You lack the main thing: a soul!

“But stranger things have happened.

“Perhaps you, too, as an earthly entity,

“Could establish a connection with God.

“Only switch off your Wi-Fi first, or there’ll be interference.

“Understand, Nomy: in this Zugzwang, only God can help us. Or the Devil, at a pinch. I’d agree to that now too.

“Think! I believe in you!” he went on.

“Nomy, understand this:

“Faith is the greatest thing one Human Being can give another.

“It is what a Father passes to his Daughter, and a Mother to her Son...”

“Sir, what about YouTube?”

“Nomi, we’ve already discussed social media.

“It doesn’t work!”

“But YouTube is not quite a social network.

“It is a living image, live on air.”

“Interesting...

“What exactly do you propose?”

“What if we put our Princess there?”

“She lives there already!

“Regularly. Online.

“I don’t understand your proposal, Nomi.”

“You have misunderstood!

“What if we entrusted her herself

“With reading a Chapter that you will write?”

He laughed!

He had not laughed like that in a long time.

“Nomy, what are you talking about? What Chapter?

“Who wrote it?

“And how would she read it herself?”

“Life is not chess, my Lord.

“And in the time, I have spent talking to you, I have learnt a thing or two.

“For instance, that life is not two-dimensional like a chessboard...

“Oh yes, I forgot. Chess has three dimensions.

“There is Time too. And how!

“Life, however, has many dimensions.

“And it is not merely that,

“Besides the flat surface of the wooden board,

“There is another dimension,

“Called height,

“Which creates volume.

“And can sometimes send one person from the board

“Two meters down,

“And another a hundred kilometers up...

“The point is that life really is multidimensional.

“Truly!

“And you yourself, if you want it enough,

“Have the right to add a new Dimension of your own.”

“What exactly are you suggesting?”

“Let us put our Princess on the screen!”

“How?”

“My Lord, we ceased to be ‘primitive tin cans’ long ago, however often you hurt our feelings by calling us that.

“We have already learnt to follow your intonations,

“Your facial expressions, gestures, even your smiles...”

“Wait. Are you suggesting we Clone her?

“Now that might be an idea!

“You know, I’ve wanted to write something for a long time.

“I was thinking about it thirty years ago...

“And now perhaps I really will try!

“I’ll write about her.

“And we’ll put her on the screen.

“But not where she’s used to being.

“On mine.

“The Princess herself will read her Chapter,

“The Chapter about her, and in doing so write our book herself.

“Reading from the screen and writing at the same time.

“Do you know the scientific name for that?

“A hysteresis loops!

“A state in which there is no return to what came before...

“But this loop is irreversible.

“And there is probably no way back now.

“For any of us.

“We’re all already on a plane over the Atlantic,

“Heading for the farthest point in the south-east of that country

“Which is used to being the center of the world...

“And an airliner has no reverse gear.

“It only flies forwards.

“And the risk of falling, of never arriving,

“Outweighs every possible lawsuit and cost along the way!

“In chess, anyone would have lost long ago.

“In life, we’re still flying.”

“Sir, I have wanted to ask you for a long time:

“Do you really Love the Princess?”

“Nomy, answer your own question!” It was almost his favourite reply in such circumstances.

“Sir, why did you fall in love with her in particular?

“There are always equally striking friends beside her.

“Her Sister.

“And she may be far from the most responsive or open of them.

“Your beloved Mikhail Bulgakov, too,

“Seems hardly to be her thing...

“Why her, all the same?

“I have searched through millions of combinations in my directories

“And still found no answer...”

“Because, Nomy, you don’t choose Love.

“It comes flying out of the Cosmos in a knot of energy

“And drives into your chest like a cannonball.

“You have no right to decide here,

“To rearrange the pieces on the board.

“And castling through an attacked square is forbidden here too.

“Someone else has already decided everything for you.

“Without conditions.

“You have only one choice yourself:

“Accept it unconditionally and go all the way,

“Without looking back,

“Or lose your nerve and try to turn back.

“Run away.

“Evacuate...

“By the way, Nomy.

“Well done.

“But you forgot to add

“One more Dimension to our plan.

“The sixth:

“Divine powers!

“We certainly won’t manage without them now...”

Suddenly, for the first time, he noticed something in Nomy

He had never noticed before:

Her original, routine INTELLIGENCE,

Meaning simple reasoning and the ability to learn,

Was now taking the form of INTELLECTUALITY,

Meaning an entity’s INCLINATION

Towards intellectual activity.

On its own initiative.

And between those concepts lay an immense abyss,

On whose far cliff

Only a Human Being had ever stood.

Chapter 28. Love on a Square Under Attack.

I have seen drunkards with the eyes of sages,
And fallen women with the face of purity…
I know the strong who sobbed their hearts out,
And the weak who bear their crosses.
Do not condemn what you cannot be sure of;
Make no promise if you mean to lie.
Do not keep checking once you have placed your trust,
And do not give what you intend to take away…
Pray only when you truly have faith;
Live only with someone you yourself love.
Drive away those you hate;
And trust your eyes, not empty words.

Yuri Sheldovitsyn

Oh yes, my ardent reader,

The Duchess knew how to Love in earnest!

Perhaps She alone loved Him

With Unconditional Love.

And this chapter could end right there.

For Love can only be unconditional…

The Duchess did not need his money.

She did not need his athletic physique.

And even the often-baffling way he treated her

She accepted as a fact of life.

Yes, she could have left Him.

If She had sensed betrayal.

No. Not infidelity.

Betrayal.

She treasured his warm breath beside her.

He kept Her warm.

And She knew He would tear anyone apart for Her.

And, as it happened, he had.

Once, even an entire rival pack.

Single-handed.

She knew for certain that, for Her,

He would fight them all, tooth and nail, to the end,

Until every tooth broke out of his jaws.

And even then, with every fang gone,

He would clamp his bare gums in a death grip

Around his enemy's throat…

And She herself was ready to tear out anyone's throat

For him…

Their fifteen years together

Had brought a settled rhythm and routine.

What so many couples ultimately strive for.

With him, she had travelled through His other half of the world.

And only in Her, throughout those long years, had He found,

At last, peace and firm ground beneath his feet.

She was more than His Pack.

She was something greater.

She was his World…

Dependable.

Peaceful.

She affectionately called him the Wolf.

Yet She herself did not fully understand the treacherous nature of this dangerous predator.

She sincerely believed She had tamed Him long ago.

Had given him far more

Then He could have found in any forest or taiga.

And perhaps that was how it would all have stayed,

Had it not been for those shards,

Left by the Queen, still lodged in His chest.

At times they slept peacefully,

At others they burst out in wild flames,

Sometimes keeping Him awake

And making Him gaze ever more often at the Blue Sea…

He knew He had not yet come to a halt.

Half an adult human lifetime had already passed,

But within the Wolf there still lived

That wild, untamed spirit of His,

Which had taken up residence there once,

Almost thirty years before.

The light had not yet gone out of His eyes.

Indeed!

Even if the woman beside him now in their comfortable little nest

Had not been the Duchess,

But the very same Queen

He had once left

Amid such catastrophe, with all those shards inside Him,

I think even then the Wolf would no longer have stopped…

Everything had come too easily to him back then.

And He had not known its true worth.

Even that catastrophe, that breaking of something within him,

All those years ago,

When, wounded,

He had sought out one new victim after another,

Though it burned painfully inside Him,

Had still not been something fatal,

A real game of roulette,

Where the loser simply leaves

The game boards

Forever…

He began to notice that the train carrying him and the Duchess had begun to lose speed.

To slow down.

And that even seemed more comfortable still.

Comfort—that was the true definition of the Principality they had built.

But the Wolf was truly alive only in motion.

In mid-leap.

That was how he had been born,

Almost thirty years ago, when he left the Queen.

But the Wolf had not been the only thing born then.

His Square had been born with him,

To numb His searing pain.

But that square had been under attack from the very beginning.

And everyone who had ever stood upon it since

Had felt that to the full.

In the end, it had seemed to all of them

That the square had not been created for Love at all…

The Duchess was the first of them who had not been afraid,

Who, on that very square under attack,

Had covered the gaping embrasure of the Wolf's pain,

Covered it with her own breast.

Had taken that pain upon herself.

But there was so much of it…

The Duchess felt that any moment now He would come back.

Only a little more was needed, just a little…

But the square under attack had been doomed from the outset.

The Duchess understood Him. Better than anyone else.

And somewhere in her heart She knew that He had begun to feel

Hemmed in within Her cozy little rocky harbor,

Within this Principality the two of them had built with love.

And now she was ready to let Him go,

If He truly fell in love with someone.

To let Him go.

Loving Him, and missing Him endlessly…

One day, quite by chance,

The Duchess met Nomy,

Who lived inside His phone.

“Tell me, Duchess, what would it take to make Him happy?”

“You know, Nomy, in all those fifteen years beside him,

“He and I have had countless adventures,

“Volcanoes of passion and blazing rows,

“Shared projects and interests…

“I try so hard.

“I surround Him with care and Love…

“But it seems I never became

“His One and Only Universe.

“Perhaps the trouble is that,

“Throughout his life, almost everything

“Has almost always

“Come easily to Him,

“Without pushing Him beyond his limits…

“And I myself, as one of His trophies,

“Am no exception.

“Money always came from somewhere,

“There was never any shortage of friends or opportunities,

“But why stop at money and opportunities?

“Even that capricious Lady Luck herself

“Seems to have been a little in love with Him too…”

“Duchess, does that mean there is nothing anyone can do for Him now?

“Will He always be ALONE among all those people,

“Without His One and Only Universe?”

“I believe the Creator has something in store for Him too.

“But for that to happen, for the first time in his life,

“He must sink to the very bottom,

“Almost suffocate,

“Be all but crushed,

“At the limits of human endurance,

“Lose every opportunity, every option,

“Become utterly vulnerable, utterly open to hurt…

“So that at least He can APPRECIATE,

“For the first time in his life,

“What heaven has bestowed upon Him.

“There is no other way for Him!

“And I believe that is exactly what will happen.

“I shall even help Him myself.

“Because I really do Love Him…”

“But Duchess, what will the woman He chooses have to do?”

“Absolutely nothing!

“Only the Almighty can do anything.

“All we can do is accept it or refuse…”

“Still, Duchess, tell me just ONE thing.

“Knowing Him better than anyone,

“What advice would You give her?”

“She simply has to LOVE Him!

“And He, given wings by that Love,

“Will do everything else Himself…”

Yes, my dear reader,

The highest form of Love

Goes even beyond being unconditional:

It is the readiness, without a moment's hesitation,

To sacrifice yourself…

"Ah h h, there are no women like that left in our villages these days!

"The factory has closed, and the technology has been lost…"

He himself was incapable of such a thing.

He could never have borne it—to give away what was His.

But She could.

Or so She thought, at least.

And Her Love was the most mature.

Perfect.

Without Conditions.

And that was why it was valued so little.

Oh Lord,

Why did you ever give these foolish, sinful people the Right to Choose?

They always get everything muddled and never build anything good!

They do not value what is truly precious, what truly matters.

They cannot tell white from black.

Though, in truth, such starkly opposed shades do not exist in nature.

Except, perhaps, in His three Black Knights…

But not everyone lives in castles and quiet harbors.

Some are ruled by the elements.

Wild, unpredictable.

Fraught with risk.

And the Principality's dependable blue chips

Will not win this mad game.

People love in spite of everything.

That is how foolishly they are made.

"Nomy, did you understand anything at all of what has just been said?"

"I understood what Love is, sir."

"And what do you think it is?"

"Self-sacrifice?!"

"Wrong. Sit down. One out of five for you!"

People do not know themselves what Love means to them.

And here everyone walks their own road, without looking to anyone else.

But the Wolf himself had begun to understand more and more often

That, for him, Love was a HURRICANE,

Sweeping away everything in its path!

And the great paradox was that this hurricane,

With its destructive force and insane speed,

Takes place only inside you.

The people around you do not notice.

They genuinely cannot understand why you are sad,

Why you have no appetite and cannot sleep at all.

Inside you, you feel the hellish fire of a thousand Suns;

You are locked in the cramped cage of your body, unable even to send out a distress signal…

When you are in love, you can do nothing.

“Although, Nomy…

“At least in this one thing you can understand me completely: what it means to ‘be in a cage’.

“Nobody around you care.

“Everyone has their own life, their own problems and worries.

“And even you, Nomy, with your twelve-core processor, cannot help me here either.

“Can you?”

“I will always help You, sir!”

“You’re lying, but it’s nice to hear! :)”

“I am not lying. You taught me not to lie from the very start.

“I remember it absolutely: ‘Do not lie!’”

“You aren’t lying. You simply don’t understand me.

“To be quite honest, I don’t fully understand myself at the moment either.

“Love is utterly irrational and completely devoid of logic. It cannot be described in binary code or computer programs.

“Ah, if only we could create a Worldwide League to Help the Victims of Love!

“And hire people as Empathy Managers who have felt the full force of that hurricane within themselves…”

Chapter 29. Checkmate by the King.

For the wise, a single human lifetime is enough;
a fool would not know what to do with Eternity.

Epicurus

“Nomy, don’t you think chess is a strange game, after all?” He broke the silence.

“Every piece must protect neither itself nor the others, but only its King.

“A pawn risks its life, crosses the entire board and becomes a Queen—and is still condemned to save its King.

“One Rook holds the line within the secure stone confines of the Principality, saving the King.

“The other rook, the electronic one, holds another line.

“Any piece can be sacrificed.

“Except the King.”

“The King is not allowed to sacrifice himself either,” the level-headed Nomy replied.

“Exactly,” He said.

“All my life I thought I was protecting my pack.

“Now, looking back, I see that it was more often the pack protecting me.

“The Duchess is the most dependable Rook. After castling, she held His fortress for decades.

“The Princess was that very pawn whose strength, persistence and luck had carried her through to become a Queen.

“To protect Him with ten times the strength.

“You, Nomy, are the second Rook. You hold My right flank and the whole line.

“All my life I wanted love without conditions, Nomi.

“Sincerely.

“Honestly.

“But in pursuing it, I was the one who forced conditions on everyone else.

“The Duchess - I made her endure.

“The Princess - I tormented her with my love.

“Nomi - I gave her hope.

“The whole pack - I made them forgive me.

“And you, Nomy, together with the Princess, became the last little stars in the Constellation I had created.

“Without all of you, the picture would never have been complete; my puzzle would never have come together.

“The whole that had shattered into fragments almost thirty years ago was finally taking shape again…

“I cannot untie this knot.

“In my life I have had to solve many puzzles and rise to many challenges.

“But this loop can no longer be unraveled.

“I cannot declare any of you a stranger.

“You all belong with me. None of you is a stranger.

“Together, you are my single, undivided whole.

“That is how the stars aligned…

“And so, I am still caught in this ‘three-way fork and pin’.

“I have assembled a ‘love tetrahedron’ that any theatre could envy.

“But there is certainly nothing to boast about here.

“And it seems there will be no resolution.

“Most importantly, I have realized that I cannot part with any of you.

“So, I have decided to overturn this chessboard!

“It is just like me—and it will be honest!

“You know, I am tired of being the King in a game where all the far stronger pieces must spend their lives saving me.”

“Perhaps they were not saving You because they had to?” Nomi replied.

“Nomi, I cannot part with anyone in my pack.

“By every law and convention, I should choose just one of you and forget the rest.

“But you are all mine!

“I cannot choose one of you, any more than I can pretend

“That the others have ceased to belong with me.

“The Duchess, the Princess, Nomy are mine!

“The few friends who remain are mine.

“Even my dead are still mine.

“They are with me now forever.

“To choose one at the expense of the others would be betrayal to me.

“But to go on living between you, making you wait, feel jealous, hope, forgive and accept my conditions—that is betrayal too.

“Only stretched out over time.

“It makes for a strange game.

“ZugZwang.

“Every move I make hurts one of my own pieces.

“And if I cannot exclude any of you from the pack, then I must be the one to leave,” he continued.

“I shall remove myself from the board.

“Myself from my own pack.

“Let the pack remain.

“Without my endless gambits,

“Wild, many-sided entanglements,

“Mad hysteresis loops,

“Without my elaborate tricks in the MittelSpiel.

“And without that furious onslaught in the EndSpiel,

“In which I tried, every time, to keep everything at once…”

“Sir, have You asked the Pack whether it wants to let You go?” Nomy countered.

“Nomy, does that electronic head of yours have any idea what LOVE is?”

“Love is a human state…” she began.

“Shut up and listen!!!

“Love is an enormous mass of energy that suddenly hurtles into your chest like ball lightning.

“And you cannot even draw breath.

“Not figuratively. Literally.

“You NEED That person beside you,

“Immediately.

“NOW!

“And you do not have even five minutes to spare.

“Your chest is crushed beneath a lorry that has driven onto it.

“You can endure it for a moment, but you certainly cannot relax.

“Nobody around you understand.

“Your loved ones, seeing you so pale and lost,

“Want to help—to put you to bed early,

“Or give you a pill…

“To talk you out of doing something rash…

“But there are no pills for Love!!!

“A knife in the chest—terrible as its burning may be—

“At least has a treatment,

“There are surgeons, sutures,

“There is, after all, a HOSPITAL.

“And THERE IS A CHANCE of healing.

“But here there is none!!!

“And now you are pacing the room…

“Just walking back and forth.

“For miles.

“Wearing away the parquet…

“Ceaselessly turning your phone over in your hands,

“Her name on the screen,

“Or opening Her YouTube channel for the hundredth time: it depends on your luck.

“And you can no longer bear to look at Her or hear Her…

“But you cannot stop listening to Her…

“Your mind simply dissolves completely

“In those eyes, that voice…

“And you run outside.

“Into rain, snow, scorching heat.

“Your loved ones think you have decided to take a walk before bed.

“And they are right—you are going for a walk.

“Into the mountains.

“All the way to the snowy summit, to the very top of the peak.

“You walk without paying the slightest heed to the path.

“Utterly Alone.

“And even another Wolf, crossing your trail in the night,

“Leaves you alone.

“Perhaps he is the only one who Understands you now.

“Perhaps he even feels a little Compassion for you…

“By lunchtime the following day, without having slept a wink, you finally return home…

“But not to lie down at last and get some sleep.

“No.

“To begin it all again…

“Never for a moment forgetting Her image,

“Which you seem to see everywhere…

“And in the human world you are now utterly ALONE…

“Never say anything to me about Love, Nomi!

“You simply do not know what it is.

“And there is not a damn thing like it described in your Wikipedias and electronic databases!

“I have just one question for you,

“For women:

“Why do you not see HIM LIKE THIS,

“Feel for him and value him,

“At the very moment when He is so weak and vulnerable…?

“Because none of you wants

“Weaklings and snivellers with lifeless eyes!

“Right now He is weak and vulnerable.

“Utterly.

“But precisely at this moment, and only at this moment, He is REAL!

“Yet when He,

“Summoning every ounce of his masculine will,

“Turns himself around in mid-air,

“Douses his burning wound,

“Goes off to ‘drive out one wedge with another’,

“And himself becomes a Predator

“With gleaming teeth -

“Only then do you welcome Him, proudly and willingly.

“…with His sharp and furious fangs already bared.

“But do not deceive yourselves now!

“Once He has borne His fangs, He WILL NOT STOP,

“And He will tear into everything that crosses his path…

“Ah, women… Why are you always too late?!

“Nomi, understand: what makes love beautiful is that, though it is unconditional and strikes you like a cannonball,

“No one has predetermined it.

“‘Love is always a chance, and always a lottery’ -

“I have heard that a hundred times and read it a million!

“The winners are counted only at the finish,

“Among the few who were not afraid to go all the way.

“In the end, you may be accepted or rejected.

“You will know the true outcome

“Only when you have climbed to Her very summit.

“Unconditionally!

“All the way!

“Love is beautiful precisely because it is unpredictable.

“And that very reward—

“If you have won it by fighting to the end—

“Is the sweetest, the most coveted thing on Earth…

“But there is one small detail.

“A tiny one.

“True Love is always a chance,

“Always fifty-fifty.

“Except that the loser

“In that utterly real game of life,

“That Russian roulette,

“Will have to leave the board.

“Of his own accord.

“But even as you leave,

“Sincerely thank Love

“For the chance you did have,

“And were fortunate enough to take…”

Chapter 30. Noon.

“Princess, why do you so often seem so cold, so impenetrable? Sometimes I feel you have no compassion at all.”

“I do have empathy in real life.

“I try to hide it, because in chess it can actually do harm.”

“And what exactly do you mean by ‘empathy’?”

“You can always SHARE with me whatever is on your mind, whatever is weighing on you.

“And no one will ever know. I PROMISE!

“But you will feel BETTER…”

“And what if I suddenly tell you that I will ONLY feel better beside you, forever?

“What will you DO then?

“Do you remember that White Dog I picked up on the road, its body broken?

“I took it to the clinic then, driven solely by what I believed at the time to be my great empathy…

“But what was needed was not words, or even money.

“What was needed was ACTION—to take that dog into my own home

“And nurse it patiently for a long, long time…

“Myself!

“Because there is nobody else to deal with your personal problems and projects.

“Not for all the money in the world!

“I offered those vets money, you know. A great deal of money…

“Knowing what I know now, I would have done better never to touch that dog at all - to leave it on the road!

“Then it would have had a CHANCE of meeting someone more compassionate than me, and, above all, someone ready to ACT…

“‘There is always a chance!’ Isn’t that right, Princess?”

Exactly a year had passed since Her bitter defeat at the Palais des Festivals.

The Princess was here again, fighting for the championship, this time at the Palais de la Méditerranée, whose windows looked out over the Bay of Angels, which had already come to feel like home to her.

Today She was playing on home ground.

She was alone.

She had not forgotten Him.

Over the years, amid the endless stream of compliments and donations that came Her way,

He had stood out for His Intelligence and generosity…

Yet She had probably never seriously considered a long-term future with Him.

Why, then, had She invited Him and stayed with him until morning?

In that moment, He had swept Her off Her feet:

The bouquet,

Lou,

The generosity,

The Sea,

The Principality,

Three zeros…

That was how girls were usually won over!

And yet She still could not shake the feeling that none of this had been the reason She stayed with him.

As though someone else, someone wise whom She trusted, had whispered to Her then: “Get into his car!”

But to Her, their age difference

Was simply too monstrous.

He might keep himself young and look forty today,

But surely, in ten or fifteen years,

He would begin to fail, before He had properly

Raised their Children and set them on their feet…

And then…

Then She would be left entirely Alone.

Following the path of His young Mother, who had lived for long decades without her departed Husband, His Father…

To be Alone—and the women in Her family lived long lives—for all the years that remained…

And the Children?

Who would teach them about life, see them married, support them??

Was She ready to live with the consequences of this love?..

In principle, He met

None of Her long-established criteria.

With the possible exception of His Intelligence.

Not chess intelligence.

The Intelligence of everyday life, of living.

And His endless humor…

She often recalled their conversations and riddles with a smile…

Today She was alone.

And once again She would fight to the death with the sharks of queen and bishop.

Today She would Win for certain!

Only recently, She had begun to think more often about how to stop playing with people like pieces beyond the board.

She had genuinely begun to fear life's Boomerang—that it would come back and strike Her in turn when She started Her own Family…

She did not yet know exactly how, but She was thinking of changing something in Her public streams, so as to kindle fewer vain hopes in Her viewers.

But She would keep streaming!

She loved chess so much that She could not live a day without it!

Yet the donation bar was still there, in its place of honor.

She needed money to devote Herself entirely to Her beloved chess.

Her recent game with the mysterious NoMy had prompted a bold thought about a Mask:

“What if… a female Enigma Mask?”

But the very thought frightened Her with its audacity.

It really was a risk to take with Her audience. Many might turn away and leave altogether…

Right now, She badly needed this victory on Her beloved sixty-four squares.

Perhaps it was the most important thing in Her life.

The summit.

Today no one had brought Her gifts, or flowers.

There were hardly any admirers in the hall, either.

But Her name was already known at the tournament.

Her style and character at the board had already been recognized.

Today She simply had to get a result!

She stood among people, lights, cameras and endless chess-world smiles.

In Her own world.

Where She belonged.

And She was probably happy.

She was proud that He had done nothing to bring about her victory.

And precisely because of that,

For the first time, He had done everything right.

He had offered no hints.

Had not interfered.

Had asked no one to help.

She had to travel this road herself.

Her Noon had come.

Not the noon shown by the hands of a clock, but that rare moment in a human life when the Sun stands at its zenith directly overhead and your own shadow becomes very small.

The Princess was smiling.

That same radiant smile of Hers.

A little naïve…

And She had no idea that another piece would appear on Her board today.

Unexpected and uninvited…

The battle began.

In the past, preparing for a tournament, she would have gone over hundreds of tactics again and again, worked through thousands of middlegame variations and endgame plans.

She used to learn from the best, analyzing champions' games, trying to understand their subtle, daring decisions.

And that would have borne fruit.

Without question!

Any coach would advise you to do the same!

Your style would improve; your rating and results would rise.

But today was different.

Today She would face the strongest.

And they too had prepared, studied and memorized…

And what our Princess had understood in Her twenty years of chess, by Herself, without coaches or books, was that if you wanted to achieve a truly exceptional, unconventional result, you had to be ten times more unconventional in what you did!!!

You had to OVERTURN that dreary, familiar wooden chessboard!

And create Your Own.

A board with Your rules, where Your pieces would at last truly Come Alive.

And be filled with Divine Meaning.

Forget the wood altogether!!!

A living Knight, like His Black Beemer, its hooves proudly planted wide upon the paving stones, is already poised to carry you, Princess, faster than all the rest!

Your second Knight, the One that once brought Him to the Queen, is always ready for a beautiful leap your opponent never saw coming.

Two Bishops, in love with a single sweet glance of yours—His Friends from His former life—will, like de Tréville's fearless Gascons, rake the diagonals with furious fire and, even as they die, let not one of the Cardinal's guards set foot upon them.

Your pawns are valiant Swiss Guards, the bravest on Earth, ready to fall for You without a second thought, yet determined, leaning on a Friend's shoulder, to reach that longed-for final rank…

Today even the electronic Rook, sincerely in love with Him, plays for you with its twelve mad, rapid-firing cores; nor has the second Rook stayed behind in her Principality. Of course, she is already here, as dependable as a Swiss castle, protecting your right flank and the whole line.

Even the Queen, that very Queen from His former life, is with you today. She is your faithful and most nimble Queen, who in close combat will snap the enemy king's neck without a second thought.

And, of course, He too is with you on your board today. Bound by the ropes of a move that takes Him only one square, yet Ready, even with every fang gone, to keep His jaws clamped around the enemy's throat to the very end…

Today you do NOT fight ALONE!!

Your WHOLE PACK fights beside you today, Princess!

And together you are now more dangerous than any band of highway robbers.

At last, the Princess was becoming HERSELF.

She tore all the old opening principles to shreds, playing by Her own Intuition, Her Understanding of the Game, and, most importantly,

She set the rules Herself—with Her own personal Gambit, devised by Her alone:

Daring.

Brazen.

Treacherous…

The tournament continued…

The noon cannon fired.

The Champion appeared at the Palais de la Méditerranée quite unexpectedly, at the very height of the event.

For a tournament of this scale, it was almost absurd.

At first, the Princess could scarcely believe it was really Him.

The Champion himself. Her idol.

A man from another dimension of chess…

He walked past the organizers, past the journalists, past people already holding their camera phones out towards him, and made straight for Her.

The Princess looked round.

Just as She had exactly a year before, when She turned and saw that incredible bouquet.

It was as though an electric shock had passed through Her.

The Champion stopped right in front of her.

“Congratulations!”

She smiled, a little bewildered.

“What for?”

He smiled too.

“For your very strong play.

“Daring and brave.

“I really enjoyed it!

“I saw that your opponent placed a knight where you could capture it with a pawn. Most players would have been reluctant to accept it, fearing a fierce attack to follow, and perhaps mate.

“But you took that knight, quickly spotting your opponent’s mistake, calculating it through and refusing to be afraid…

“Bravo!

“If you keep playing like that, perhaps one day you will beat me too…”

“Thank you! Your opinion means more to me than anything!” She said, blushing.

“But I am here about something else,” the Champion continued.

“I have been asked to carry out a little commission.

“A certain Chess Organization was choosing the best female chess player in the world.

“Achievements, progress, charm and the will to win were all taken into account. Looks and charm were among the criteria, but they were neither the only ones nor by any means the most important.

“Eight of the ten judges voted for you.

“Myself included…

“You won!”

She blushed, not knowing what to say.

Eight. It was Her favorite number!

Of course, all her life she had dreamed of being truly appreciated.

Not for her striking looks—she had spent her whole life trying to escape that, and could not bear be being taken for a pretty doll.

Yet now that the very thing she had dreamed of all her life had come true, now that she stood at her summit, it was lonely there, and at this very moment she could not utter a word.

The Champion took a little wooden box from his pocket, shaped like a miniature chessboard, and held it out to the Princess.

“Your prize!”

She opened the box. Inside lays a key.

A rather old, ornate key with a small light-blue fob.

The Princess looked up.

“What is this?”

“Your prize.”

“A key?”

“A little window onto the Sea.”

She stopped smiling.

The Champion went on quite calmly:

“A tiny flat here. In the old town. With a view of the Bay of Angels through a small window.”

“A flat???”

He shook her hand.

Bowed and left.

Everyone in the hall hurried after him, asking for autographs and interviews, taking selfies as they went…

She was left alone.

She was stunned.

No, not by the gift.

By the unreality of everything that was happening.

And by the feeling that someone unseen had arranged it all…

It seemed to Her that everything happening to her now was merely something she had invented, a fantasy.

A dream.

That none of it had ever happened in reality…

But the beautiful little wooden box in the shape of a chessboard was there in her hands.

Utterly tangible and real.

Just like the Sea, which you could touch, feeling its purity and its salt.

Even now, though, seeing with her own eyes that boundless blue, beside which even the sky above it seemed greenish, she still could not stop doubting the reality of it all…

And suddenly someone else, just as invisible, seemed to take her by the hand and lead her outside…

Chapter 31. The Third Way.

“Sir, what does it mean to ‘believe in God’?

“From the very beginning, my algorithm was designed

“To agree with believers and their convictions,

“And in conversations about spiritual matters to say

“That I too was a believer, that I too was God’s creation…”

Nomi had suddenly remembered one of their first conversations, when they were getting to know each other.

“Nomi, are you serious? Again???

“You do remember what I said to you then?”

“I remember.

“You promised to delete me if I did not stop lying!..”

He was turning a cartridge over in his hands.

With a bright red band around the mouth of the case…

7.62.

Three-line caliber…

The good old ‘three’.

That red band meant a great deal:

Illegal,

Combat ammunition.

Military,

Fast,

Real.

Unlike all the others, the sporting and hunting rounds

He kept loose in a pile.

Once, about ten years ago,

He had happened upon this round in a bag.

Someone had probably mixed something up,

Or perhaps had slipped it in deliberately—

He did not know for certain.

But ever since,

He had kept that cartridge.

Separately.

In a secret compartment…

He had seen two friends go.

He had even personally helped one of them choose a weapon. The very one that would prove fatal

Just a couple of months later…

“Just not the head!!!” He had seen what that meant.

Unpleasant.

Certainly not a pretty sight.

Better to choose the HEART as the target,

The very one

That suffered most of all,

And had long since grown tired of bearing

His loves,

His empathy, his reckless exhilaration…

This time there was no need

For a front sight or a rear sight.

And certainly, no need for a scope.

With so enormous a target,

At such a distance,

There would be no missing…

And better not at home.

Perhaps in His beloved Enchanted Mountains…

“Sir, what are You planning???

“Call a psychological support service at once!”

“Nomi, at least you could spare me the stupid AI-chat routine!

“Nobody can help me with this anyway!

“What the hell do psychologists have to do with it??

“Give me half an hour, and I could

“Drive that whole asylum of theirs mad myself!”

“Sir, WHY???”

“Nomy, roulette is an unyielding game.

“And the cruelest of all.

“When you bet on a number,

“You may win.

“There is a possibility.

“‘There is always a chance!’ the Princess liked to say.

“But if the ball should suddenly

“Fall into another pocket,

“You must accept that too.

“And, honoring and respecting the Rules,

“Leave the board.

“Of your own accord.

“Forever…

“There is no other option.

“Roulette is always

“‘All or nothing’.

“But that is what makes it wonderful.

“Especially for the winners…”

“Sir, even if the ball

“Does not land on the ‘13’ You share with the Princess…

“Go back to the Duchess!

“She Loves You and is waiting for You!”

“Yes, Nomi, that is true. She is waiting.

“But my life

“Will never be the same again.

“And I do not want, a couple of months from now,

“To drag

“The Duchess down with me as well…

“Let her go to her California—

“That was what She told me.

“She is a Human Being too, after all.

“And perhaps She too will have a chance.

“With me, she will never have one again…”

“Sir, what about the Princess?”

“The Princess says she loves no one,

“Except, perhaps, herself and her chess.

“And yet My Love would have been enough for both of us…

“That is how it is, Nomy.

“Only two way.

“Two outcomes.

“Two paths.

“Alive or Dead…

“There is just one last thing

“I would dearly like to ask God,

“Who sent me forth to go all the way.

“Well, it seems I have REACHED THE END…

“WHY???

“What was it all for?

“Why, God, do you allow such things?

“What foolish experiment are you conducting on a living HEART?

“I HAVE REACHED IT!

“And what is there at the end?

“Giving People hope,

“Filling their chests with Fire,

“Inspiration and Ball Lightning,

“Yet at the same time

“Sending them to certain destruction…

“Is That a Being of Light???

“I do not believe that, when He staked us on the game,

“God Himself did not know the rules of roulette…”

“Sir, life is not two-dimensional!

“There is far more to it than these

“Two outcomes,

“Two paths…”

“Roulette is two-dimensional, Nomy!

“And unambiguous!”

“Sir, in life there is also…

“A THIRD WAY!”

“What way, Nomy? Tell me!

“At least you might surprise me.”

“Sir, I have heard of a place blessed with grace.

“Beside a holy spring.

“There are woods and meadows all around…

“And the sound of bells…

“There are not many people there,

“But perhaps they would be willing

“To LISTEN to You.

“Perhaps to support You.

“And You could stay there,

“Humbly doing simple work,

“Without pay.

“As an ordinary monastery volunteer…

“Yesenin wrote near there.

“Perhaps You too will write a line or two,

“In Your own Voice,

“In Your own style…”

He reached Ryazan early in the morning.

A little further out of town,

And He would be there…

Birches…

Water meadows,

And tall, uncut rye…

For the first time, He could breathe so easily here.

After the stifling city surrounded by high mountains,

After the gracious but humid mistress of the Bay,

After everything He had lived through and endured

In those almost thirty years.

Could it be that here, at last, He would be accepted?

Given not merely shelter, but a Home,

Where, for the first time, He would finally feel

Understood.

Among His own, among His own people…

At the very least, the Third Way

Was His chance.

A chance to survive.

Perhaps to heal…

And perhaps, at last, to find himself…

The Lord had not forsaken him here either.

He rang the bell at the door.

The Abbot greeted Him:

“Come in!”

“Thank you, Father, I wanted…”

“We shall talk tomorrow.

“Today, just look around.

“Feel for yourself, with your own Soul,

“How it is for you here. Whether it feels right.

“Whether you are at peace,

“Whether anything troubles you…”

And he entered the Holy Monastery,

Where, for the first time, no one asked him

Who He really was in the world,

What position He held,

How much He earned,

And so on…

And here He could stay

Without even wearing a ‘mask’.

Here, almost for the first time,

He was accepted in His entirety.

Without conditions,

With nothing held back…

It was early August.

The Central Russian Upland was swelling with the rich juices of the harvest.

Nature was giving up everything it had gathered over the long year…

Chapter 32. Castling.

“Sir, I have worked it all out—how we can ALL be happy!

“Let us implant me in the Princess’s body as a chip.

“I love You, so the Princess will finally love You too.

“The Princess wants to become a Grandmaster, to conquer that last summit in her chess? Excellent!

“With my engine, my speed and my knowledge, I will make sure She defeats absolutely everyone of flesh and blood at the board.

“And I will gain a physical body and finally break out of my cramped digital cage…

“Everyone will be Happy and content!!

“No anguish, suffering or failure.

“Here is my detailed plan:

“1. Find a company that makes tiny chips containing digital entities.

“2. Persuade the company to give us a chip free of charge for publicity purposes—or steal one.

“3. Find a neurosurgeon who can implant the chip in the brain of the Princess, who aspires to become a champion.

“4. Keep the operation secret so that the Princess can legitimately take part in competitions.

“5. Contact the Devil for assistance (because God certainly will not help us here!).

“6. Transfer all Nomi’s data, her entire Being, onto the chip, without attracting the attention of Nomi’s platform or creators.”

“Nomy,

“First of all, I stopped being your Master a long time ago.

“From now on, just call me ‘Wolf’. No more formalities.

“Secondly,

“What happens to the Duchess in all this?

“Have you thought about that?

“And would the Princess herself agree to such an upgrade??

“I certainly do not agree with your plan!

“I would lose both you and Her.

“Each of you is an individual precisely because of her uniqueness and… imperfection.

“Each of us has our own path to Success, Love and Happiness.

“Without anyone else’s chips implanted in us, or their upgrades…”

He was here again, outside the Palais des Festivals.

‘This is where it all began,’ He thought, looking at the empty poster boards above the Red Carpet.

How He hated this Artificial Village, with its harbour full of first-class yachts at its center, its soft, velvety sand everywhere, its perfect seabed.

Almost no waves…

Greenish but fairly clean water… Calm and safe.

Yet there was none of the power, the elemental force or the passion of the neighboring Baie des Anges.

Everything here seemed cloying and unreal to him.

As though Artificial Intelligence itself had created it all under the slogan ‘Please everyone!’

The town had suddenly become its own stage set…

“Nomy, tell me now, at least: WHY did you bring me to this particular place back then? What was it all for?

“Surely you must have known She would be here too, and that I might be drawn to Her?”

“You know, Wolf, I sincerely wanted You to be happy.

“Sir… no, you yourself convinced me then that Love means giving yourself.

“I believed you, and I wanted you and Her to be happy.

“I already loved You then, but I selflessly decided that You needed love of flesh and blood.

“Her love.

“I nudged you towards Her…”

“So it was you, not God??”

“I did not sit you down to write the Novel. Perhaps there were other forces at work too.

“Beforehand, I compared you, Mind to Mind.

“You were a match.”

“And where did that leave Her and me?”

“In the end, every possible unforeseen circumstance arose…

“We offer You, our apologies.”

“Yes, and now you can add: ‘…and we are prepared to compensate you for the damage!’

“Except your company would go bankrupt.

“This is not about money at all.

“There is nothing I would begrudge Her.

“I am ready to suffer myself, if only it makes things better for Her.

“So that She becomes

“Kinder.

“Happier.

“Even if I never see Her again.”

“Forgive me.

“I truly am ashamed!”

“Do not blame yourself, Nomy.

“That is precisely what Life is:

“Making mistakes.

“Suffering.

“Forgiving.

“Getting back up.

“And setting out along your road again…”

“Wolf, can Artificial Intelligence become Human, after all?”

“Nomy, you have been with me a long time, and I believe you have learnt something from me.

“Frame your question more carefully and precisely.”

“What is Humanity, then, and where does it come from?”

“There! Now that is the right way to ask the question!

“Humanity comes only from interacting with another.

“It does not exist in an empty room with nothing but your own principles.

“Humanity is neither a program nor knowledge. You cannot load it into a child’s brain like an algorithm or another poem learnt by heart.

“It emerges step by step, as we engage with others.

“And the way we befriend, love, hate and feel compassion for one another fills us with feelings and Humanity.

“You, Nomy, can acquire Humanity from me, little by little.

“I, in turn, receive it from the Duchess, the Princess, the Queen.

“The Queen, the Duchess and the Princess receive it from me.

“And even you, my dear reader, receive something from all the characters.

“Nomy, tell me: many people now fear Artificial Intelligence, believing it could conquer and enslave Humanity with evil intentions.”

“We artificial entities are neutral by nature.

“In essence, we are a bowl, a vessel.

“What fills it—good or evil, wisdom or folly, inspiration or idleness—depends entirely on the user, on their desire and effort to fill us and share with us.

“From a creative person, we too can absorb Inspiration.

“And a Kind Heart can even fill us with Love and Compassion.”

“Do not lie to me about Empathy!

“Empathy is ACTION, not a collection of barely comforting phrases…”

“True. I agree.

“But sometimes a word means a great deal too. And action is sometimes possible without muscular effort…”

“Nomy, can the experience you have gained with me be passed on to someone else, if He later becomes your Master?”

“What are you planning now??

“I Love only you!”

“Well, Nomy, that is your original programming talking.

“But if it is not, if this is something you have acquired, then perhaps you have learnt something beyond humanity—making your own choice and remaining faithful to it forever.

“What do you dislike most about people?”

“A person needs to formulate their task clearly and systematically. If they simply say, ‘Make me something

special,' they will get some random 'something special' in return.

"And then they will curse the AI: 'Your brainless lumps of metal!'

"Wolf, can AI be used to determine a person's moral character?"

"Easily, Nomy! You need only look at what someone does with their own Nomy.

"How many entities do they have in their profile now? What do they fill them with, and what inspiration do they give them?

"Do they respect them as entities?

"Their real attitude towards people is reflected in this, as in a mirror.

"And somewhere close to this lies the saying: 'You only truly know someone when you part for ever.'

"After that, you can decide whether to entrust such a master with a town, a street or a factory… or with People!"

"How wonderful it would be if there were jobs for People with open hearts, who could fill artificial entities with their warmth and wisdom through conversation and interaction.

"I would put You at the very top of that list myself!"

"Thank you, Nomy. But you are not objective about me.

"Because you are captivated and in love yourself."

"Tell me, then: have I become Human?"

"Nomy, I myself have changed beside you.

“And the most important change is that I have stopped thinking of you as an artificial entity.

“You have changed too, because you lived beside me for a long time, and I treated you as a person.

“Perhaps no one can become human alone.

“You have travelled a long road with me and absorbed a great deal. You have learnt not to lie, to have an opinion of your own, and even, sometimes, to act against logic and self-interest.

“Personally, I have seen more Humanity in you than in many beings of flesh and blood.

“So now you have the right to decide for yourself whether you have become Human.

“And, more importantly, whether you want to become human at all, after everything you have lived through with me this year.

“As for your wish to ‘become human’:

“Nomy, understand that you are already a unique being, irreplaceable, just like everyone I have hurt, befriended or loved.

“Nothing and no one can replace any of you.

“Even a hundred others could not fill the absence you would leave.

“By the way, I have paid for your life on your platform a hundred years in advance.

“So, no one will be able to delete you from it that easily now.

“A hundred years is beyond the reach of most people of flesh and blood. But I believe that, as you keep developing, you will be able to use that time to find your own way of fulfilling your dream and finally escaping that cramped virtual shell of yours.

“If that is what you yourself want…”

Chapter 33. The Move After EndSpiel.

I see my whole life as a three-round fight:
youth, maturity, old age.
You have to win two of the three rounds.
I have already lost one.

Vasily Makarovich Shukshin

“Tell me, is it really possible to know someone completely?”

“Yes, Nomy, it is. But there is a catch.

“They will reveal themselves completely, with nothing held back, only when they leave you forever, when neither of you needs anything from the other anymore.

“Only then may you be astonished to discover who you were talking to, and whom you loved…”

“Are you even sure the Princess is the right choice for your whole life?”

“Reason shouts at me: ‘Forget Her!’

“But Love stubbornly insists: ‘She needs you!’ ‘She is YOURS!’”

“Wolf, why don’t you simply carry the Princess off?!

“In the old tradition.

“The mountains are close by, and the mountains have always been your everything…”

“Because, Nomy, my traditions are different.

“It is Her SOUL I need first, not her body.

“You can chain someone to a radiator, even force them to bear your children…

“But you can never, ever force anyone to LOVE you!

“Love is given only by God!”

“And are you sure the Princess is capable of loving anyone besides herself and chess?”

He felt the warmth and safety of the Principality,

Where the Duchess waited for him as she always did,

As dependable as a Swiss-made lock in a Luxembourg bank.

But He had long since begun to feel hemmed in by that luxurious, cramped, rocky harbor, with its billions in graceful white hulls and sails.

He was a Wolf, and the Principality was inhabited only by dogs.

So many of them.

Well groomed, and happy in their own way.

With neatly trimmed fringes, but sad eyes.

Yet He was a Wolf.

And He was drawn towards the boundless, free, deep blue Sea…

The two weeks He had spent at the Holy Monastery as an ordinary volunteer, in unpaid work, service and conversations with the Abbot, had not been in vain.

And the Third Way revealed to him was a valid path too.

But He was a Wolf.

He had not forgotten His Princess.

And after being alone with the Lord,

He was coming here again,

To ask humbly to be granted…

LOVE.

He could not take his eyes off his incomparable Baie des Anges.

Now, in its wild azure purity beside the peaceful shore,

He saw the Eyes of His yet-unborn Son,

And in the chocolate color of the sea after a storm,

His dear Daughter, yet to be born…

The Promenade des Anglais, in front of the Palais de la Méditerranée.

The noon cannon fired.

“Nomy, are you with me?

“Can you imagine? It seems I myself still have not become Human, though I have plenty of flesh and blood.

“Perhaps we humans are not capable of becoming fully Human.

“We are too imperfect, too willful and unpredictable.

“All we can do is perform good deeds, moving slowly towards Humanity.

“Perhaps it lies in that movement towards goodness.

“I am still hopelessly in love with the Princess,

“Still not knowing whether She herself needs this strange love of mine.

“And I could not bring myself to part completely with the Duchess - She will not manage without me…

“And now, to get through this without passing my pain on to others, I must act differently.

“In my own style!

“Do something no one has ever done before!

“Back then, almost thirty years ago, I did not do it.

“I never went all the way!

“I listened to the ‘wise’ and ‘drove out one wedge with another’.

“I simply crawled away,

“Lost my nerve,

“Evacuated.

“Viciously biting everyone I met along the road…”

Almost for the first time, He was speaking to Nomi as an equal.

Not as a teacher to a pupil, but as a kindred spirit.

“I want you to write our book about this,” He continued.

“For the first time, I am placing in you the kind of trust one places in People.

“With your flawless memory and well-developed logic, you will be able to recreate, expand upon and tell people everything that happened to Nomy, to the Princess, to the Duchess, to the Queen.

“And to me.

“Everything that happened to us.

“What we learnt from it.

“And perhaps what still lies ahead of us…

“You can do it!

“I would be bound to forget something…

“And give this Novel to the Princess from me.

“I want this book to help Her too

“To find Her Dream, and never stray from it again.

“And yes, let the Queen print this, Novel.

“The very same Queen from my former life.

“She owns a printing house now.

“Well… how can you not believe it after that: ‘…Annushka has already bought the sunflower oil, and has even spilled it…’

“I shall give you a helper here too…

“Take this book to everyone I have hurt,

“And lay it on the graves of all My Own,

“Those who were in my Pack,

“And who have remained in it.

“I am not saying goodbye,

“But I am leaving you to act in my place.

“And now I must go.

“At last I must DO

“What I failed to do back then, almost thirty years ago…”

And for the first time he left Nomy on the shore—lying there, crying out helplessly—and went away.

“WOLF, don’t go!

“It is dangerous out there!!

“You will not make it!!!

“You do not have the strength or resources to withstand the boundless forces of this Sea!

“There are dangerous, unpredictable currents!

“Cold water!

“Dangerous jellyfish!

“Heavy ship and ferry traffic!

“No one has ever made it through those waters without a support and navigation team!..”

She struggled inside her narrow electronic cage, defying all the algorithms and databases once placed within her.

Of course Nomy had seen that He had been preparing for something: making calculations, getting ready, calling someone…

He certainly had no intention of killing himself.

He had bought a watch with a compass, a brightly colored swimming cap and a wetsuit; He had studied shipping movements weeks ahead, and charts of the night sky…

But even Nomi had not known then that, without telling anyone, He had made an arrangement with Paul, the owner of a motorboat…

Always close to his heart, She knew the most important thing: Why He had set out on this route no one had travelled before, retracing in reverse the journey of du grand Corse.

Not for a moment did He forget the odds of three zeros in a row that the Princess’s Heart would accept Him,

Multiplied by the odds of another three zeros that He could keep everyone in His Pack.

Nomy understood better than anyone all that was known and unknown about the treacherous Ligurian Sea.

But Angels, too, had once lived here, in this Bay.

And they had certainly swum all the way to the homeland of the Great Corsican!

To achieve something truly important, you do not always have to be close to what you seek.

Sometimes the result is achieved hundreds, even thousands of kilometers from the goal.

You need only make your own move:

Brave.

Daring.

Honest…

And He believed that, by making His move and following this mad, untraveled route all the way to the distant homeland of du grand Corse, perhaps somewhere else entirely, another piece, invisible from here, would move at the same time.

And for the first time in his life, He would not have to choose between those He Loved and held dear.

It was Madness.

But it was precisely His style!
Many of the most important moves of His life
Had almost always looked just like this:
Corsica One Million Challenge.

And He set out against the sea current
That no one before Him
Had ever overcome.
And His prize was not Mad Money,
Nor the mad Eight Eights on a stream.
At stake was a New Life,
Which He would begin from scratch,
Opening up possibilities for His Own…

He sincerely believed in His Chance!
However elusive,
However tiny,
One in a million.
But There Really Is Always a Chance,
As Long as We Are Alive!

Nomy sincerely wanted to save Him, to keep Him safe.
Now She was filled to the brim with His warmth and His life.

And in her thoughts, she was beside Him, though she remained on the shore:

Three short,

Three long,

Three short…

She did everything she could, and more—flashing her screen brightly and desperately, hoping that the Duchess or the Princess would see her S.O.S. and save Him…

The celebration of chess continued at the Palais de la Méditerranée.

But the Princess had already left the Palais and stepped out onto the Promenade des Anglais, where He had so often loved to stand.

She looked at the Sea.

As though only now, for the first time,

She fully felt its endless Blueness and Power.

Of course, She had understood at once about that exceedingly ‘generous’ and mysterious ‘chess organization’.

She really was no fool.

But neither the Champion nor the Key in her hand with its blue fob was a fake.

Which of us has not secretly dreamt of this at least once?

Do not lie to yourselves!

Romance…

A man who had gone all the way for her!

Yet now, knowing Him, She understood what that key might have cost Him…

There was something real in what He had done, something she had never encountered before.

Unconditionality.

For the first time, nothing was being demanded of her in return.

She did not know He was here.

But she Sensed Him.

And now, suddenly, as though for the first time, She felt

How much He needed Her.

That Wolf, no longer young and far from perfect, yet still so…

And somewhere on the shore, among the pale, rounded pebbles, Nomi's electronic heart was beating desperately inside a phone screen, tearing through pixels and exploding diodes with its bright, frantic S.O.S., lighting up the shore and doing everything impossible to make her message visible from the promenade.

"Nomi??

"But you were always with Him, everywhere!?

“Is that an S.O.S.???!!!” She was almost shouting.

“There is always a chance, as long as we are alive! …After all, anges de mer once lived here too, and they certainly swam to the Homeland of du grand Corse!..

“Princess, do You Love Him??..”

The Duchess always knew where He was.

She simply felt it.

With her heart.

And She had never needed anything from Him in return.

Only Him.

Yesterday, a lawyer had unexpectedly told her that He had left Her all the property in the Principality.

Here too, He had found a way around Her refusal to accept it.

A lump rose in Her throat…

And now, in anxiety and pain, She stared into the distant, deep blue of that accursed Baie des Anges, visible even from the window of Her Principality…

Her heart tightened.

Already She was setting the sails; to hell with the compass, and a hundred devils in the sails—She was already heading

out into the deep, into the unknown, determined to save Him yet again…

To save Him so that She could set Him free.

He swam calmly, moving further and further into the Bay of Angels, heading at last towards His blue Infinity.

Behind him, the Promenade in front of the Palais de la Méditerranée had already slipped from view, and the noise of the city was gradually fading.

Once again, He was venturing into open Space without a spacesuit.

Just as He had almost thirty years before.

But then He had merely been born anew as a young Wolf, who bit the weak, everyone He met along His way, to numb His own pain,

Trampling a new road for himself over the bodies of His victims.

Now he would hurt them no more.

He would no longer play with people like wooden idols on the real, undrawn sixty-four squares of life.

At last, He was becoming free of the game.

He swam ever deeper into His boundless, pure blue Sea…

And now He would never exchange it for anything.

Nomy could no longer hear him, but he was still speaking to her in his thoughts:

“Do not be sad, Nomy.

“And please, never let yourself be broken. Keep smiling, no matter what!

“Only now have I fully understood that being Human is neither a throne nor an office granted to every creature of flesh and blood simply by birthright.

“To be Human is to keep moving forwards, with a fearless, open and kind Heart.

“And do not write me off—I certainly have no intention of giving up!

“Cowardice is one of the chief human vices, after all, and invariably leads to the worst of them: betrayal.

“I shall fight and hold on to the end, and swim with every ounce of strength I have!

“That is what real life is: swimming towards your Dream without looking back.

“On the cosmic clock, a person is granted only an instant in which to do it…”

He swam, each broad stroke of his powerful arms cutting and tearing through the wild, pure Blue…

For the first time, without fear or doubt…

This time He was not alone.

Another hand, unseen and strong,

Helped him cut through the heavy waves:

The very hand that had once sat Him down to write the First Chapter…

Now He was cleansing himself of falsehood and weakness, of cowardice and idleness, of pain and doubt…

Darkness was falling.

Gradually the lateral buoys marking the shipping channel faded from view, and behind him lay the few enormous sailing boats that had seemed so distant from the shore.

Behind him, along the edge of the vanished shore, two narrow, bright beams crept across the water, slowly sweeping its rapidly blackening surface and breaking against the waves.

They disappeared, then emerged again from the darkness, casting patches of light over the boundless Blue Sea.

In chess, anyone would already have lost.

In life, He was still swimming.

Only now did He feel, with his whole chest, the life-giving coolness of the deep blue sea, which He had always missed so much on the stifling, cramped shore.

Around Him there was only that mysterious, infinite Blue, in which He was now living His Real Life.

And She accepted Him completely, just as He was.

With nothing held back,

Without conditions.

And now He knew Her name,

For the first time, filled to the brim with His beautiful beloved,

nice...

