

**THE SHADOW**  
**By Ivan Philippov**  
Excerpt

**STEPA'S DEATH**

Stepa headed towards the entrance of the park. It was a late evening and the guards were driving out the late visitors. Some young mothers pushed their strollers quickly past Stepa, a couple of teenagers walked by vigorously discussing some unknown topic, funny looking scotch terriers scrabbled by led by a gloomy heavysset man. Stepa entered the park. An old woman on an electric scooter appeared out of nowhere, Stepa jumped aside and the lady drove past the confused young man.

Even at night Moscow is full of noises. This city never sleeps – there is not a moment, when you can have a window open and not hear some engine running or drunk people talking. Stepa loved Lefortovsky Park for its silence. He only walked a few meters deeper down the main alley, and the city's hum faded away. The silence enwrapped him. Tree leaves quietly rustled in the empty park. And yet again, he sensed something magical in the air, a sort of premonition. Even his callous soul knew that something was going to happen. The leaves had already started to fall, and Stepa could hear some small animals scurry about in the first leaf piles. Probably rats, since squirrels for some reason didn't live in this particular park. He marched through the park directly towards the large stadium located at the other end near Yauza embankment.

Stepa didn't want to think about work anymore and he tried to concentrate on something different, but Colonel Morgunov and the upcoming conversation kept persistently coming to mind; he spat bitterly. He had already reached the agreed-upon location. The park was small. One day Stepa calculated that it took him about seven minutes to walk from gate to gate along the main alley. "Damn it, I got here early, now I have to wait for these morons", he thought irritably and pulled out another cigarette.

'Korneev!"

Stepa turned around. Makhmudov and Smirnov were heavily marching across the lawn towards him. They looked quite intimidating walking in the dark park in uniform with machine guns in their hands. Smirnov was finishing his shawarma on the way.

"You been waiting long?" asked Smirnov talking with a full mouth.

"Just got here, " Stepa handed the envelopes to Smirnov. "That's it. Take care, guys. My cat is home alone waiting."

Smirnov grinned.

"You're a strange person, Korneev. Normal people have families waiting for them, but you have a cat."

Makhmudov chuckled:

"The clock is ticking, Korneev, tick-tock, tick-tock..."

Stepa really wanted to go home and decided to ignore the stupid joke.

"See you later".

He turned to leave and almost walked into Makhmudov. The fat policeman was right in front of Stepa staring at him. That alone seemed a little strange, but then Stepa noticed a detail that stunned him even more. Makhmudov had a weapon in his hand – not his work rifle with a worn stock, but a submachine gun. Stepa was familiar with that one. Agram-2000, favorite weapon of 90s gangsters, not perfect because of regular misfires, but cheap and accessible; there was quite a traffic of that kind from Balkans to Moscow at the time.

Makhmudov aimed the "Agram" straight at Stepa.

"No offence, Korneev. Personally I don't have anything against you," said Makhmudov hoarsely and pulled the trigger.

At first Stepa didn't realize what just happened. It would be great to say that he didn't feel anything and that it was an instant death, but, unfortunately, that was not the case.

Stepa felt everything: how the first bullet hit his chest and pierced the lung, how the second and the third one (Makhmudov didn't take into account the recoil and the gun shifted upwards) landed next to each other, tearing apart his throat. A waterfall of warm arterial blood poured onto Stepa's chest. He wanted to say something, but instead of words, he made a strange gurgling or grunting sound. As he was falling down a stupid thought flashed in his mind – I just had the last meal of my life and it was instant noodles? Even the condemned to death have a right to have a feast... The last bizarre thought faded away. The body fell silently onto the ground.

Surprised Captain Korneev Stepan Viktorovich, born in 1982, was staring up the sky with his eyes wide open. The magic was over, and autumn fell onto Moscow with a freezing rain.

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"Shine the light, I need to collect the casings", Smirnov's calm and serious voice came from behind Makhmudov. He finally finished his shawarma, wiped his mouth with a sleeve, and squatted next to Stepa's body.

"This is not cool at all", began Makhmudov, when Smirnov found the last casing and expertly placed it into a plastic shawarma bag, which still had a bit of juice and lavash left at the bottom. "He was a good guy."

"Don't think about it too much. Yeah, he was nice, but what has to be done - has to be done. Just our job..." Smirnov stood up from his knees. "Wait for me here, I'll get to the car."

Smirnov walked quickly to the side alley, where they parked their Ford Focus. When left alone with Stepa, Makhmudov nervously lit a cigarette. He circled twice around the body, then grabbed Stepa's hand and dragged him towards a manhole hidden under the leaves ten meters away from where Stepa was a moment ago. When they built the Lefortovo Tunnel, that part of the underground facilities was no longer in use — it was laid deeper. Makhmudov was dragging Stepa's body to one of the abandoned wells. He took a short crowbar out of his pocket and pried the lid. It looked as if both Makhmudov and Smirnov knew exactly, what they were doing and had planned it all a long time ago. Makhmudov finally managed to lift up the heavy lid and he threw it on the ground. He then dragged Stepa's body towards the well and pushed it down. A muffled thud came from the bottom of the well.

"You fucking moron! How am I going to get him from the well? Did I ask you to put him in there?" Smirnov was in rage. "We were supposed to pour acid on his face, remember?"

It was only now that Makhmudov remembered that part of the plan. Not just to throw Stepa into the well, but first disfigure his face beyond recognition with acid.

Smirnov was shaking furiously a closed plastic bottle in front of Makhmudov's face.

"Oh, I forgot!" Makhmudov began to justify himself. And immediately counter-attacked: "Do you think it's easy to shoot someone you know? We've been friends for five years, we've been through a lot! I got nervous, that's why I forgot."

Smirnov waved his hand. He approached the well and shone a flashlight down it.

"Let's try something. I will give you light and you pour this thing down on him and try to get as much as you can on his face."

The rain was getting stronger and both policemen wanted to leave the park as soon as possible. Makhmudov clumsily poured the contents of the plastic bottle into the

well. From above he couldn't see if anything got on Stepa's face, but it was too late anyway. Smirnov hurriedly dragged the heavy lid and they closed the well. Stepa was left in complete darkness.

The policemen hurried back to their car, and soon the park was empty again.

## **ON THE OTHER SIDE OF DEATH**

Stepa's body laid on the cold concrete floor of a ventilation well. Over the past twenty-four hours the body got covered with autumn leaves seeped in through the crack in the ceiling. Two fat rats were nibbling on Stepa's left leg. A yellowish centipede crawled on the grey concrete directly towards Stepa. She had heard a lot about the unforgettable taste of the human brain from her fellow centipedes and was over the moon at the sight of the feast she was blessed with tonight. She completely ignored the rummaging rats, crawled under the pants and took her way up the body towards Stepa's beckoning nostril.

Stepa opened his eyes at his own terrifying scream. It wasn't related to rats, nor to the centipede in his nose. He hadn't even realized yet that he was not alone in the well. Stepa was screaming because the moment he opened his eyes he remembered everything that had happened to him in the last twenty-four hours. The centipede that already got quite far inside the nose froze for a moment and listened. In the course of her short life, she never heard people scream like that, especially dead ones.

Stepa kept shouting. His awakened mind was picturing everything he could have missed, while he was unconscious: the terrifying emptiness of an icy desert and a burning cold. The cold that doesn't let you breathe turning into a frozen lump causing a cough that tears apart your chest. Stepa remembered everything at once. Finally, his scream trailed off. He sat up and looked around. Guided by the laws of physics and gravity, the centipede flew out of his nostril and dropped onto the concrete floor.

Stepa remembered the events of the last few hours of his life and started to feverishly feel himself: no, it wasn't a dream. His fingers easily found the bullet holes in his chest and throat. He reached his face: ears in place, hair, eyes, nose... Stepa snapped back his hand. Instead of the light stubble on his chin, his fingers only found bones and... teeth. Stepa jumped up in horror, trying to find a reflective surface in the dim well.

"They poured acid on you", said a hoarse voice from behind. "They wanted to burn your whole face, but they missed. It's not so easy aiming at a face with a jet of acid from up there."

Stepa turned around. From the far wall of the well, an elderly man in a strange military uniform was walking towards him. The centipede crunched under his feet; the rats scattered in all directions. The man kicked one of them with his foot, so that the rat made an ungraceful arc in the air and smacked against the wall.

"Fomich. I am Fomich," the man introduced himself. As the man came closer Stepa could finally get the idea of him. Fomich was a sturdy, medium-height stocky man. It was obvious from the first sight that he was speaking with some kind of peasant manner and if he wasn't wearing a strange looking uniform, Stepa could easily picture him behind the wheel of a tractor or in a barn with cows. He had a thick mustache that was only a little gray and Stepa estimated that he must have been in his early sixties. In the dim light Stepa examined Fomich's uniform. It took him a minute to recognize it, it was a uniform from the second half of the Great Patriotic War (already with shoulder boards). Stepa once read a book about the war and he still remembered the pictures in it and maybe, if he thought hard, he would be able to differentiate ranks and colors on them.

"You up, pig?" Fomich got right up to Stepa. From his vantage point on the floor this guy didn't look so friendly. "Do you remember what happened?"

Stepa shrugged his shoulders. He was too stunned by all that he had been through in the past couple of minutes. He was feeling a little lost, but the aggressive tone of the shabby old man gave him a sense of confidence.

"What do you want from me, asshole?"

"Don't you talk to me like that. You are not my equal. I am saying that you were screaming too loud. I nearly went deaf".

Fomich was looking expectantly at Stepa.

"I had a bad dream", Stepa finally found something to say.

"Wasn't a dream". Fomich just got even more serious. "You died and gone to hell. You spent twenty-four hours there".

"I felt like it was longer," Stepa scratched his head. He was never really a religious person, but he was familiar with the concept of Heaven and Hell. "But if I was in Hell then why are we speaking right now? Nobody gets back from there, do they? Or is this also Hell then?"

“This is not Hell. You won’t confuse hell with anything”, Fomich answered grimly and Stepa understood that Fomich knew what he was talking about, and that maybe he had also been «there» once.

Fomich turned his back to Stepa, and he saw an old PPSH submachine gun with a round drum magazine hanging on a long strap across Fomich's back. To complete the picture, he would just need to sing some war-song like “We hastened this Victory day as best we could” in a beautiful low baritone. Stepa was about to say something, but Fomich interrupted him.

“No time to waste. Let’s go. They’re already waiting for you.”

Stepa didn’t understand, where they were going to and who could be waiting for him, but he recognised an order when he heard one. In the last seventeen years he had gotten used to the fact that orders had to be followed no matter what, and so he did. After a couple of steps Stepa realized that what he had taken for a wall of the well was just a dark shadow. They were walking through a narrow corridor, and soon the concrete beneath their feet became a resounding cobblestone.

A couple more meters further ... Stepa turned around to check if it was just his imagination, but in fact there was nothing behind him but the park. They emerged out of nowhere and ended up on a gravel path in a well-maintained large park. Stepa stopped. “There must be some explanation for this madness”, he thought in panic. “I was shot, then I went somewhere (or I imagined that I went somewhere) and now I am following some World War II veteran who looks like he is sixty but he has to be at least ninety-four”. Fomich beacons Stepa to follow him.

"Don't stop. They're waiting for us. Don't be distracted, you'll have time to look around later".

Stepa decided to set aside his questions and followed Fomich. They walked a few meters along the alley and reached a paved road. Stepa felt like he knew that place: here’s the hill where there must be an ugly stele, tram tracks there, the Yauza River should curve to the right, enveloped with bridges and viaducts of the Third Ring Road. But none of it was there. Yauza river was still curving, but the hill was completely empty with just tall grass rustling on it. Stepa fearfully looked around and got stunned at what he saw.

All around him a row of various strange houses towered over the park entrance. There were wooden huts, different tall towers, solid merchant stone mansions, and even gracious palaces. They all crowded along a wide paved street. Many of them didn't have roofs but reached up into the sky like some magical architectural stalactites. The higher

the walls of these houses went, the more they transformed along the way. A hut turned into a clapboard house, then into a brick mansion, with its checkered walls disappearing into the clouds. The colonnades of the palaces stretched for hundreds of meters, creating a sense of...roots. "Roots!", it suddenly came to Stepa's mind. "They are not dead stalactites, but living roots..." He looked up and stared into the clouds.

Stepa had been searching in vain for the sun in the "sky" until he realized there was none. It wasn't covered with clouds; the sky just had no source of light. It was lit up by itself shimmering with different colored lights – from bright red to muted purple. Kilometers of strange threads entangled the sky; they were blue electric threads, sparkling, softly crackling. Occasionally, flashes darted across the entire sky, and Stepa could distinctly hear the sound of train wheels clattering.

Stepa shifted his glance to Yauza. There was a bizarre city on the other bank. It had uprising phantasmagoric houses, but Stepa could only distinguish them as small buildings with blackened upper floors or as separate cathedrals, palaces and terems. Sometimes a wasteland would stretch in between houses, and high up in the sky their remains would be floating, as if somebody chopped the root with a shovel or an ax and one part shrunk and died in the darkness and the other remained frozen in the sky as a deathly reminder.

In the distance, somewhere near Lubyanka, a reddish glow dimly shone and behind it... Stepa was sure that he could barely make out the towers of the Kremlin, but even if it was them, they were hidden by a massive cathedral. It was so enormous that it seemed to obtain the entire horizon. Initially, Stepa thought that it was that famous colored fancy cathedral on the Red Square, that he could never remember the name of. But that cathedral was small and bright like a gingerbread house, and only remotely resembled that gray behemoth.

Stepa opened his mouth to say something, but Fomich roughly tugged at his sleeve.

"Stop gaping, I am telling you, you'll have time after. Keep walking or I'll drag you".

Fomich turned away and marched with a serious face across the road towards the field. Stepa silently followed.

At the edge of the road, they stopped to let a beautiful black carriage with gilded emblems pass by. The carriage was being pulled by an obviously dead horse. Stepa had no doubts about that one; he could see the other side of the road through a hole in the horse. A young man with a dandy hat was sitting on the box. At the sight of Stepa and

Fomich, he politely lifted his hat, revealing the part of his head that still remained on his shoulders. To Stepa's experienced eye, it was obvious that someone had shot the young man with a double-barreled shotgun from both barrels simultaneously. The carriage passed by and Stepa along with his grumpy companion continued their journey. Behind them in the opposite direction a small car with massive wheels quickly drove by and disappeared behind tall buildings.

Stepa obediently followed Fomich through a small meadow up the hill. He understood that they were heading towards the river and a graceful stone footbridge spanned across it. Stepa enjoyed walking the meadow breathing in the fresh smell of the grass... Suddenly he stopped dead. He couldn't smell anything, but that was the least of his problems. Stepa suddenly realized that from the moment of his recent awakening he had not been breathing. He did mechanically inhale and exhale, but purely out of habit... his lungs weren't filling with air. In panic Stepa frantically felt his hands. He touched his right hand, then his left hand, grabbed his heart—nothing.

Fomich glanced at Stepa bent in a fit of terrifying coughing and a trace of pity flickered in his eyes.

“There you go. I was wondering, when you'd realize. Don't worry, pig, you are simply dead. Kicked the bucket! You don't need to breathe anymore”.

Stepa fell to his knees. He looked at Fomich with bewildered and pitiful eyes. Fomich crouched down next to Stepa, and suddenly embraced him by the shoulders, gently and affectionately, almost paternally.

“It happens to everyone who gets here. You seem to speak and walk, but you don't breathe. The brain doesn't get used to it straight away, it is trying to convince you that it cannot be real that you are about to die, but don't you worry. You are already dead and so there is nothing to worry about”.

Stepa started coughing even harder and Fomich got angry again.

“Stop that now. Dead don't need to cough, it's “phantom”. Fomich spat, as if the difficult foreign word left an unpleasant taste in his mouth. "It will pass soon. You know, when people have their hands or legs cut off... they still feel pain in the amputated limbs. It is called “phantom pain”, the professor explained to me. That's what you have. You cannot breathe, so you can't cough either, but your brain makes you think otherwise. Don't listen to it, what does it know anyway. You're dead. And from my point of view, that's your greatest achievement in life”.

Stepa raised and stared at Fomich. Ashamed of his momentary weakness, Fomich quickly stood up and turned away, but not fast enough and Stepa had a second to notice



a small neat hole at the base of his skull. Stepa had seen a lot of holes like this during his work life and knew perfectly well what could leave such a mark. Fomich moved forward.

“Everything had already happened to you, there’s no need to think about it anymore. Have you heard how the believers sing at funerals: “Where there is no sickness, nor sorrow, nor sighing?” Well, that's where you are right now. The dead don't experience pain, fear, love, or compassion, and you're dead, so get used to it».

## **TEREM<sup>1</sup>**

They had been climbing for ages. Finally, Fomich and Stepa found themselves in front of a brightly painted wooden door. Fomich carefully opened the door, and Stepa followed him into a spacious hall. Dozens of narrow stained-glass windows let warm colourful light pass through. A tall carved wooden throne stood against the far wall.

As soon as Fomich and Stepa entered the hall, the hum of dozens of voices speaking simultaneously instantly ceased, and all that could be heard was the echoing sound of their footsteps. Stepa looked around. There were people standing on either side of the throne. As they walked towards terem, he had already noticed the unusual citizens, but he didn’t expect to see such a motley crowd.

There were dozens or even hundreds of the most unusual people there. Mongolian archers, Swedish and German knights, dandy young noblemen in top hats, gymnasium teachers in surcoats, a couple of boyars in beaver hats, men and women in costumes of all possible eras, from ancient Russia to the present time. Stepa kept turning his head around in amazement staring in wonder on one or another unusual member of this strange society.

At the edge of the crowd stood a XVI-century soldier in chain mail leaning on his mace. Next to him, against a decorative column was a German knight in armour. Behind them fidgeted a nervous-looking woman in her forties: she was wearing a fashionable dress from the «swinging thirties» and had a slim cigarette with a mother-of-pearl mouthpiece in her hand. A little further away gathered a few priests in somber cassocks - the bishop in his ceremonial robe who stood next to them looked like a peacock surrounded by a murder of crows.

Following Fomich towards a carved wooden throne Stepa noticed some people who clearly were from the same era as him – young men in jeans and sweaters, girls with fluffy 80s hairstyles in short leopard-print dresses. An early 90-s mafioso in a

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<sup>1</sup> Terem – a tower-like house in ancient Russia and Slavic mythology.

crimson jacket was arguing with a Polish hussar. Two young girls in identical old-fashioned maid outfits were whispering about something behind them.

In front of the throne, Stepa and Fomich were greeted by a gaunt old man in a neat suit, with a neat hairstyle and a neat bullet hole in the base of his skull. Stepa managed to sneak a peak at the hole while the old man half-turned to them argued about something with a bloke in general's uniform with gold epaulets. The whiteness of his sideburns emphasized the blueness of his face, and a crimson silk cord was tightened around general's thick neck.

The old man stopped arguing, turned to them and removed his pince-nez. He smiled politely and reached out his hand to Stepa.

"Very nice to meet you, young man. Allow me to introduce myself: I am Professor of Moscow State University, Anton Andreevich Voznesensky. Deceased. At your service, so to speak".

"Stepan, – he answered confusedly and immediately corrected himself: – Major Korneev, Stepan Viktorovich.

"So, Stepan Viktorovich ... may I call you Stepa? After all, we have a significant difference in age and, ahem, social status".

Stepa wasn't at all offended (or didn't get it) and just nodded. While Fomich stayed at the foot of the throne, Professor Voznesensky firmly took Stepa by his elbow and carried him forward without missing a beat in what was surely a carefully prepared speech.

"You see, Stepa, we have been waiting for you for a long time. The whole city is talking about you, but, of course, you don't understand that yet. You are an important person, you see? I suppose Fomich couldn't have explained anything to you; he is not much of a talker, you see? Or thinker if we are being really honest. We will fix that in no time, don't you worry! But first, allow me to introduce you to Princess.

Stepa realised that he was so occupied examining the strange crowd in hall, that he didn't even look once at the throne! He shifted his gaze upwards. A lady of oriental appearance... or rather just a sixteen-year-old girl was looking down at him from the throne. She was mesmerizingly beautiful. Her delicate face looked as if it was made of porcelain and if you even breathed at it too hard it would crack and break into small pieces. Her black hair was neatly tucked into a braid, her graceful features and miniature nose emphasized the beauty of her big almond-shaped eyes. The girl's head was adorned with a thin silver hoop. The only thing that spoiled the picture was a long,

straight wound on her tanned neck. The girl looked at Stepa with curiosity and anticipation.

"Hello, Stepa". Princess' clear voice dispelled any doubts about her age – she was still a teenager. Somehow, that fact made him feel a little easier and he smiled. If Stepa saw himself that day he would unlikely dare to smile, but there weren't any mirrors around, so he smiled believing that he was making the best impression on Princess. Princess smiled back at him. After all, she was a real princess, and it was not her custom to point out the flaws in her subjects' appearances.

"Stepa, allow me to introduce you to our ruler, Princess Khutulun," said the professor. Khutulun smiled graciously again at Stepa and nodded to the professor. Perhaps, it was because of her age, but it seemed to Stepa, that Princess was trying very hard not to burst out laughing and maintain a serious face. Even now when she spoke to him in a deliberately official manner, Stepa could've sworn, that he saw a hint of a mischievous smile hiding behind her curious eyes.

"Before I tell you why I summoned you here, I think I will allow Professor Voznesensky to answer the questions you already must have. I'm sure the professor would also like to tell you as briefly as he can manage about our world. You are new here and I know that giving such lectures is a rare pleasure for him".

Professor indeed straightened up at Princess's words, put on a serious face and adjusted his pince-nez. His tone immediately got more formal.

"Allow me, dear Stepan, to ask you first: what question currently concerns you the most?"

Stepa did not expect the conversation to take such a turn and blurted out the first thing that came to mind:

«What's with the elephant?»

Professor Preobrazhensky tilted his head and looked at Stepa with surprise over his pince-nez. Somebody quietly giggled in the back.

"The elephant? Excuse me, Stepan Viktorovich, did I mishear you? After everything you've seen here, are you really interested in the elephant?"

It was too late to back down, and Stepa decided to go all the way. "Well, yes. We met him on the way here. Why is there an elephant here?"

Preobrazhensky relented. After all, Stepan Viktorovich had gone through a shock, it would be strange to expect reasonable behavior from him... explained professor to himself.

"The elephant was a gift to Tsar Ivan IV, who you probably know as Ivan the Terrible, from the Persian Shah Tahmasp, or, possibly, Abbas. Historians haven't yet agreed on the fact. The elephant was brought to Moscow with his brother as a gift to the Tsar. A trainer was sent with them to look after the animals. Two elephants were sent to Moscow, but unfortunately, only one made it there".

Stepa did not listen to the professor. As Voznesensky had correctly guessed, the question about the elephant was a kind of strange instinctive reaction of his dead brain. In reality, Stepa was preoccupied with a completely different question.

"The tsar liked the elephant, played with him, and, according to the sources, enjoyed cutting his forehead with a sharp dagger. But then, the plague broke out in Moscow, and the Tsar was told that the elephant was to blame, that it was this strange animal that spread the disease and that the plague came to the capital with him."

The professor looked around at the audience that looked as it was already bored with his lecture.

"The first person to be killed was the arap<sup>2</sup> who took care of the elephant," Voznesensky looked again at the audience. "Mohammed, are you here?"

A swarthy young man with a friendly face squeezed forward from behind the tall boyars. His black hair was stuck to the bloody spot on his head, where the tsar's oprichniks<sup>3</sup> had crushed his skull with the handles of their poleaxes.

"Yes, yes, I am here."

Mohammed approached the throne and turned to Stepa.

"Then they killed the elephant, cut off his tusks, and brought them to the tsar. We were sad to die. Me and the elephant, we had come to love this city... But the tsar paid me too well, the other servants didn't want some 'dark-skinned Basurman' to get more than them..."

The story of such an obvious and sad ending distracted Stepa from his thoughts. It is fascinating how the time and circumstances change, but human nature doesn't. Whatever the age, people enjoy killing each other. Sometimes they do it not even for profit, but simply out of envy. This type of behavior was well known to Stepa; over the years of his service he had seen tons of murders like that.

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<sup>2</sup> Literally, a black-skinned person. Araps (arabs) were a type of slave/servant figure at the court at the time of Russian tsars

<sup>3</sup> Oprichnik was a type of bodyguard in Russia. This title was established by Tsar Ivan the Terrible and existed from 1565 to 1572.

Voznesensky impatiently nodded at Mohammed indicating that the conversation was over, and it was time for him to step away from the throne. He turned irritably to Stepa.

"Well, now that the mystery of the elephant has been solved, perhaps, you have other questions?"

Stepa felt a hint of mockery in the words of the deceased professor.

"Where am I? What is this place?" he asked and suddenly realized that he didn't really want to know the answer. Well, he did, but only if the answer would be a rational explanation and not some foolish tales about Stepa's «death» ... He looked at Voznesensky with hidden hope.

Professor Voznesensky cleared his throat and turned to the audience, as if he was preparing to answer not only Stepa, but everyone gathered in the great hall. Indeed, the professor's former university habits had awakened, and Stepa prepared to listen to a longue lecture instead of a simple answer.

"Do you know, Stepa, what the subconscious is? As professors von Hartmann and Jung taught us, it's a part of our consciousness, that has an independent existence. In the subconscious, thought processes occur completely without the participation of our consciousness. He paused to let Stepa feel the importance of the moment and then continued. "And not only humans have a subconscious, but cities do as well".

Professor Voznesensky's words were lulling Stepa to sleep. He felt soothed, although he had not understood a word that Voznesensky was saying. The professor continued:

"From the day, when the first man dug his first primitive shelter in the bank of a river and decided to stay there, a city began to grow around him. A city is not just a settlement, it is also a metaphysical phenomenon! The city isn't just a collection of buildings, the true nature of the city lies with its people. People live together and they experience strong emotions every day: love, compassion, hatred, despair, happiness. These emotions never truly disappear; they form the basis of the subconscious of city. Also, the city's history, fears and memories reside here. They have been accumulating for centuries...

Stepa thought about strange houses they passed by on the way to Terem, and interrupted the professor:

"And these houses, are they... roots?"

Voznesensky frowned at first, unhappy at being interrupted, but then his face lightened up again.

“Subtly noted! Exactly, they are roots. Historical roots. People breathe life into the places they live in – their houses become places filled with happiness, peace or the opposite – with grief and pain. Either way, houses absorb our emotions and stop being just a bunch of building materials held together by brick and mortar. They become living things with complex souls of their own. You look at the house in a city and it is just a building, but you don’t see its roots that has been growing for centuries, fed by human emotions and experiences. And the longer people live in a house, the deeper the roots grow into this place – the subconscious of the city, Submoscow<sup>4</sup>. It's logical to assume that theoretically places like ours exist under every city on the planet, but that's only a theory. You understand, of course, that when it comes to travel, we are a bit limited in our options.”

Professor Voznesensky looked closely at Stepa to see if the gravity of his explanations has registered, then his gaze began to wonder around the assembled crowd. Out of an old habit, he was looking for students who had decided to take a nap during his lecture. But no one was sleeping. On the contrary, everyone was paying quite close attention to the professor and Stepa. Perhaps more to Stepa, at least that was how he felt.

"As I said, people breathe life into the houses they live in, they give them souls. And so, the city becomes alive, just like a beehive brought to life by the minds of thousands of bees that inhabit it.

"And who are you then?"

Stepa didn’t want to interrupt, but he feared that if he didn’t stop the professor, his endless speech would put Stepa to sleep. Voznesensky frowned.

"We are the forgotten souls. Lost souls. You, my friend, must be aware of the ancient tradition of placing coins on the eyes of the dead? The ancient Greeks believed that these coins were used to pay Charon, the ferryman who transport them across the River of Oblivion from the world of the living to the land of the dead. The ancient Greeks were very clever. Obviously, Charon doesn’t exist. But they guessed the principle correctly. After death, a human soul must go to the realm of the dead. Humanity knows about this, it is encoded in our DNA, and that is why burial rites exist throughout the

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<sup>4</sup> Podmoskovie is a modification of the word “Podmoscovye”, which is basically a region of suburbs around Moscow. By modifying the name of Moscow’s suburb by adding “i” instead of “y” we get a typical name of an ancient Slavic city.

world. The buried dead are handed over to a kind of “higher authority”. Which means that an unburied one... ”

Stepa was no longer listening. He realized with despair that Voznesensky was talking the same nonsense as Fomich, just using more eloquent and even less understandable words. Stepa’s gaze started to wander around. Voznesensky, who didn’t notice he lost Stepa’s attention, continued:

"...we are waiting for the Last Judgment. The ordinary dead, buried according to all rules, find out right away whether they go to Hell or Heaven. We on the other hand have to wait in the hallway, so to speak. And answering your unasked, but logical question, this is not Purgatory. Purgatory implies the possibility to change one's “status” and get to Heaven by making a few additional efforts. We don't have an opportunity like that here; we can only wait. And so we do. We were all killed, hidden somewhere; some were drowned in the Moscow River, some were walled up, hidden in a ditch, buried in a park, or dismembered and fed to dogs like Father Valerian".

Voznesensky waved at one of the priests standing at the entrance of the hall. Stepa was horrified to see a detail that somehow escaped his attention before: the head of the priest was resting on his bent arm. The head was stripped of flesh, with long grey hair covered in dried blood. Apparently, that was Father Valerian that the professor was talking about – the head winked cheerfully at shocked Stepa.

Stepa shook his head. No, he should not be distracted. While Professor Voznesensky was telling him about the subconscious and the realm of the dead, he had a life-saving idea.

Yes, he had been shot, but he did not die, he fell into a coma. Meaning that all the madness of the last few hours was nothing, but a hallucination. He is in coma and this is just a dream. Stepa once read in a newspaper that people in comas imagine themselves in a labyrinth and those who find the way out get to wake up. The rest wander in the depths of their subconscious for the rest of their lives. That thought calmed Stepa. If all of the bullsht he had to live through in the past few hours was just a product of his sick subconscious and his mind right now was indeed trapped in a labyrinth, then all he has to do is to find the way out. He has to escape and then things will get back to normal. In the meantime, he should play along, make sure to calm his inflamed imagination that came up with the grotesque fantasy. Stepa decisively turned to Voznesensky.

"And you, professor, how did you end up here?"

Voznesensky smiled almost purring with pleasure. Stepa suddenly noticed how much that old academic resembled a big, respectable cat. Voznesensky was dying for Stepa to ask him about the circumstances of his untimely death, and was pleased that he finally did.

"How good of you to ask, dear Stepa. The thing is, after the Soviet government came to power, they deemed my living arrangement to be too bourgeoisie and made me share my spacious apartment with some proletarian elements. It was done for educational purposes of course, to better my understanding of the nature of the people's revolution! And that's how two workers and a collective farmer sent to the capital for training appeared in my humble adobe. The man from the collective farm was studying something to do with cattle breeding, I never fully understood what it was and didn't really care. My fourth neighbor was, to my surprise, another professor, but a former one. He was fired from the university due to his "unreliability" – he was a son of a priest.

Professor paused, took off his pince-nez again, and wiped his absolutely dry forehead. "We became friends with him and were spending evenings discussing science and politics, and that's exactly what eventually ruined me. The fellow from animal breeding program denounced me to the authorities, accusing me of anti-Soviet propaganda. What an idea! I welcomed the revolution; I saw a triumph of a true human spirit in it. I was waiting for the flowering of science, when the absence of religious and state censorship would give opportunity to such scientists as myself..."

Voznesensky stopped. He was overwhelmed with all the unpleasant memories. After a short pause, he continued in a quieter voice.

"They shot me in 1937 at the Butovo shooting range along with hundreds of other innocent people. When the excavators started digging, my body, which was lying on top of the pile, was accidentally hit by someone and I rolled down into a ditch... They didn't notice me and didn't put me with others into the mass grave, I was just covered with dirt and... and here I am. An unburied dead man, a restless wondering soul, forced to spend eternity in the company of others like me."

The hall was silent. The professor coughed and turned to Stepan who was no longer there. While everyone was listening closely to the story of the professor, Stepa quietly backed away step by step towards the door, and when everyone looked at him, he turned around and ran away. He easily jumped over the crossed poleaxes of the guards at the door and disappeared around the corner.



## THE WORLD OF SUBMOSCOW AND THE SHADOW

They approached the tall white wall of the Kitaj-Gorod and headed towards the gate. On both sides of the street there were white stone merchant and noble houses, and dead people roamed around. Princess stopped by a spreading oak tree: a beautifully tied strong noose hung from one of its thick branches. Fortunately, the noose was empty. Princess sighed and turned to Stepa.

"Stepa or Stepan?" she asked.

The question caught him off guard.

"Stepa is better. Stepan is more for colleagues..."

Khutulun nodded. She looked him straight in the eyes.

"Stepa, you understand that you died, right?"

The events of the previous day left him with no doubts. Died. Kicked the bucket. Played his last card. Pushing up daisies now. It was pointless to argue.

"I'm very sorry," Princess said gently. "Dying is scary."

She paused for a moment, as if remembering something sad completely unrelated to Stepa. Then she shook her head dispelling the darkness of memories and continued.

"And you understood where you ended up?"

"Well," Stepa hesitated, "Not exactly. In general terms. But not entirely..."

He understood a lot from the professor's explanations. A lot, but not everything—some words sounded too bizarre for him to take them seriously. And, to be completely honest, there were some explanations he simply couldn't process. Princess either understood his confusion or decided to repeat the concept just in case.

"All of us here, we are restless, unburied people. We continue to live here, in the subconsciousness of the city, that has been built up by millions of its inhabitants over the centuries. We are the city's memory, like bees in the hive, all together. We are the city's consciousness. Or rather, its subconsciousness."

Stepa listened carefully.

Now that he had come to terms with the idea of his own death, he was interested in learning all the details and specifics of the matter. The part about Shadows wasn't clear—how did he manage to become a Shadow in Morgunov's apartment yesterday, how he was able to run along the sheer wall. Stepa hoped that this beautiful girl, he mentally corrected himself, a beautiful young woman, would finally explain everything to him.

"This is a strange place. I've been here for many centuries, and I myself don't fully understand how it works. We seem to exist, we have bodies, but at the same time, we are not humans, but souls. Professor Preobrazhensky believes that it is a question of 'anthropomorphization'..."

By Stepa's face expression, Princess easily guessed that the last word needed clarification.

"It's when something inanimate is given human qualities. Like when children think that their toys come to life at night. Same thing with the city – It preserves souls, that's how the universe works, and in order to do it the city chose the most logical and familiar form of itself."

Stepa nodded. Maybe it wasn't exactly the information he was looking for, but he figured it was best not to interrupt.

Princess turned around and pointed towards the street. Two men were engaged in a lively conversation near the entrance of a small shop with a beautiful antique sign read "Bakery." Stepa wasn't an expert in military uniforms, or in history in general, but he guessed that one of them was dressed in the soldier uniform from the War of 1812. Even from across the street, Stepa could see a terrifying saber wound on his neck. The other man was the type Stepa knew very well from his youth. The middle-aged man looked like he had stepped out of the newspaper "Arguments and Facts" issued in 1993: his jacket wasn't just of crimson color, it was scarlet like the flag of Soviet pioneers. A massive gold chain hung from his thick neck, and his fingers were adorned with equally massive gold rings. A wallet dangled at the bend of the elbow of the deceased man, and quite a messy bullet hole gaped in his temple.

"You see these two? Monsieur Legrand died in Moscow in 1812, he was one of Marshal Mortier's guards who stayed in the city after Napoleon's departure. In the turmoil of the night retreat, he was hacked by one of the locals. And his friend here is our Fedor Ivanovitch, who was a very important persona in the city in the 90s, he ran a clothing market in Konkovo".

Stepa's eyes drifted towards Princess. Of course a Russian gangster could speak French, he thought. But only in theory...

"They speak different languages. Fyodor Ivanovich's Russian had never been perfect, no need to mention foreign languages. But for some reason, here in the Submoscow, they understand each other perfectly well. Princess frowned again and got melancholic. "To be completely honest, I don't speak Russian either... But here it makes no difference."

Stepa listened to Princess's explanations with great interest. The important details she provided filled in the gaps in his understanding of the world around him. But with a slight annoyance he thought that what he was really interested in right now was not why everyone here understood each other but rather what these strange people wanted from him.

"All right", the impatience was clear in his voice. "I understand. Strange place, strange people, everyone understands each other even though no one speaks the languages. What's it all got to do with me?"

His words sounded sharper than he intended, but Princess wasn't offended.

"And you, Stepa, you are our hope. You are the only one, who can save us."

Fomich spat irritably on the ground behind their backs.

Stepa was looking at Princess with his mouth open with astonishment.

"I can what?"

"Save us", patiently repeated Princess. "The city is alive, and it senses when it is in danger. Not just something unpleasant that disrupts the city's life, but a real catastrophe that threatens the very existence of Moscow. And the Submoscow. And when such a threat arises, the city chooses its champion, a hero who will deal with the danger. Or won't".

Khutulun paused to look at his reaction. He was staring back at her completely puzzled.

"What kind of hero am I?" Stepa was indignant, genuinely shocked Princess' words. "This must be some kind of mistake, I don't know how, I can't, I..." Stepa stumbled.

"Have you ever wandered, Stepa, what heroes look like? Who they are?"

He faltered.

"Well...I don't know..." Stepa mentally went through all the heroes he knew of when he was alive—an endless iconostasis of war heroes, heroes from textbooks appeared in his head. Serious people with strong chins and stern faces, people who were nothing like him. Or some fairy-tale heroes—that was not him either. Superheroes! He dismissed that thought with annoyance. "Heroes are good people. And I..."

There was another thought that had never crossed his mind in his lifetime. Ordinary people, except for those cursed with endless self-reflection, rarely pondered such questions. Healthy and alive Stepa had never asked himself whether he was a "good" person or not. He was just ordinary. Like everyone else. Not better, not worse. Like all other people. He did his job, fairly decently by the way. Sometimes in good faith,

sometimes according to circumstances. And now, looking at Princess, he suddenly realized one thing...

"No. I'm definitely not a good person, and certainly not a hero".

To Stepa's surprise, his words didn't shock Princess. On the contrary, she nodded with unhidden enthusiasm.

"You're right, you're not a worthy person. But a hero shouldn't be all good. Knights 'without fear and without reproach' only exist in fairy tales. A real hero is an ordinary person, and the only thing that makes him different from others is the ability to take responsibility and act when faced with a difficult choice. "And as for the rest," Kutuluun waved her hand disdainfully, "Nothing but glitz".

For some reason, saying that, she looked at Fomich, who turned away shamefully.

"The city chooses its own hero. And it never picked good people; they have always been traitors, thieves, murderers, or rapists. But one thing united them all was the possibility to earn forgiveness. The city gives you a chance. Not a reward, but a chance: to perform a deed and, perhaps, change your fate."

Fomich abruptly turned toward Princess and Stepa interjected into their conversation without invitation.

"Do you remember, where you were?"

Stepa understood perfectly well what Fomich meant.

He remembered everything: the icy desert without end, a thousand frosting needles piercing his lungs with every breath, the pale sun reflecting in the infinite blue ice around him. He nodded.

"Well, you have a chance not to go back there anymore."

Fomich fell silent, and Stepa felt that the old man was withholding something again. Something very important.

An elderly couple in neat, old-fashioned gowns walked down the paved road by the oak tree. It was hard to tell exactly what era they were from, but they were dressed in pre-revolutionary outfits - the man was wearing a tidy frock coat and slightly greasy dark trousers, while his wife was in a dark green long dress with a white apron. They noticed Princess and waved to her from a distance. Princess responded with a bow.

"Those are the Mishins, very nice people. Their son has gone mad and strangled his father and mother. They lived alone, and so no one noticed, when they went missing. The son played with their bodies as if they were dolls - held tea parties, bathed them, put them to bed. And then he 'buried' their dried mummies under the floor. I am not

sure, but I think their house is on Bolshaya Karetnaya Street. They told me once, about fifty years ago... And their bodies still lie there."

Princess turned away from the road and looked at Stepa directly in the eyes. She was staring at him as if aiming to get across the importance of her words.

"The city chose you specifically. We will never know how or why. The city has given you special powers; and it looks like you understood it yourself yesterday. And now the city wants you to save it. You are the Shadow of the City. You are the one and only hope for everyone who lives in Moscow: both living and dead."

Stepa looked at Princess in astonishment.

"Erm... And what exactly do I need to do?"

Khutulun took a deep breath and turned towards the gate.

"Nobody knows the answer. When the Shadow appears, it means that the city is in danger. But finding the threat is the Shadow's task, and we cannot help you here. Perhaps the Oracle will give us advice, but apart from that, all hope rests solely on you."

She suddenly stopped talking and quickly moved towards the gate. Stepa hesitated to follow her, he stood there thinking about what Princess had explained to him. "If I were alive", he thought, "All this nonsense could never convince me. Shadow, threat, the living and the dead—pure nonsense". But in the current circumstances, such a simple conclusion was no longer possible. And Stepa clearly understood that. Now that he knew there was life after death, and quite a busy one, it also meant that the whole story of saving the city could be true...

His thought process was interrupted by Fomich, who rudely jabbed his finger in Stepa's back once again.

"Move, she is not going to wait."

And Stepa obeyed. Fomich walked alongside, muttering something incomprehensible and angry under his mustache, while two guards followed them at a slight distance, neither approaching nor losing sight of them.

Stepa passed under the massive gates made of white stone. Before him Stepa noticed a cathedral, in fact, this gigantic construction was overshadowing the entire sky. Princess was heading straight towards it. Stepa was mesmerized. He had been to the Red Square many times and had an understanding of what St. Basil's Cathedral looked like, the one that tourists called the "ice cream cathedral," but Stepa called it the "colorful church." Although compared to the construction now standing before him, that Moscow's temple was just a child's toy.

The roofed gallery leading to the entrance of the cathedral reached upward, encircling the body of the cathedral like a snake and disappearing somewhere in the clouds. The towers were richly adorned with ornaments—each of them was twice or even three times wider than the towers of its real prototype in Moscow. Presumably, they also had domes looking like pine cones, but they could not be seen from the ground. All this immense splendor looked as if the architect Antoni Gaudi suddenly decided to rebuild his Sagrada Familia in the style of the famous Russian church. Stepa stood with his mouth agape. He noticed that the cathedral was still unfinished; workers were bustling around the scaffolding almost at the level of the electric clouds. At the foot of the cathedral, near the entrance to the roofed staircase, two identical-looking men were arguing about something.

Khutulun noticed that Stepa was lagging behind and turned around. His surprise seemed to amuse her.

"Impressive, isn't it?"

Stepa could only nod in response. Khutulun pointed at the two men he had noticed near the staircase.

"These are the architects Postnik and Barma—they are the ones who built the cathedral for Ivan the Terrible, who you probably know well."

Stepa didn't remember or even knew about Ivan the Terrible. Besides, he wasn't born in Moscow and, even when he moved there, history and architecture were not something he was interested in. Terrible it is. Something else caught his curiosity.

"Architects as in builders, right? And they were also tsar's? What are they doing here then? You said that only restless souls end up here."

In Stepa's image of the world that he was used to, the sovereign's servants lived their lives in comfort and peace, and after they died, their bodies would be buried in VIP cemeteries in the historical districts of the capital. How could such important people be murdered, and, moreover, with their bodies not being found?! How is that possible?

"The Tsar was pleased with their work. He received what he had dreamed of: a cathedral that had no equal in the world. — He generously rewarded the architects..."

Khutulun paused—Postnik and Barma bent down in a respectful bow. Both of them were dressed in plain white shirts, fastened at the waist with colored ribbons. These solid, simple-looking men with faded flaxen hair didn't give an impression to Stepa as major architects. By the way, he did know this word from somewhere. Perhaps he

understood it exactly because Princess had just explained it to him—everyone here understands.

When they approached Princess, Stepa noticed another detail that had escaped his attention, when he was looking at them from a distance: both men had no eyes. Instead, there were two black empty eye sockets with clotted blood. Apparently, the brothers had heard Princess's words because one of them continued her speech.

“And on that evening, satisfied with themselves, Postnik and Barma allowed themselves to fully relax. The construction of the cathedral had taken years of their lives, they started to go gray and their children have forgotten what their fathers looked like’.

Stepa listened spellbound. The storyteller (Stepa had no idea which one of them was Postnik and which one – Barma) had a very pleasant, melodic voice.

“And that evening, they drank a lot of wine, and Barma”, he patted himself on the chest, “Barma started shouting in a drunken rage across the tavern that he could build a cathedral even more beautiful than the one he built for Tsar Ivan!”

Barma fell silent. Postnik affectionately patted his brother on the shoulder and continued the story: “Good people reported this to the envious Tsar, and he ordered to his oprichniks to catch and blind us. But it wasn’t enough for the oprichniks. After they blinded me and my brother, they slit our throats and threw our bodies into an abandoned well.”

The brothers spoke in unison:

“We ended up here and we swore that we would have the final word! That we would build such an amazing unique cathedral that neither Tsar Ivan nor anyone alive has ever seen!”

Stepa looked up at the cathedral: wherever Tsar Ivan the Terrible may be now, if he saw what the murdered Postnik and Barma had built, he would be seriously impressed. Postnik frowned:

“And everything would be fine, but we haven't figured out how to paint our cathedral yet. But we will definitely find a way!”

Khutulun respectfully bowed to the architects.

“Gentlemen, allow me to introduce you to Stepan. He is...”

She couldn’t finish her phrase as the architects interrupted her again.

“He is the Shadow. We know”, they said in unison and stared at Stepa with a grain of, as it seemed to him, condescension. It was a strange feeling as the architects didn’t have eyes and so Stepa couldn’t tell for sure, but he felt with his entire body the contemptuous gaze of the deceased architects.

“We don’t want to offend you, Princess”, started Barma.

He made a respectful pause, as if choosing the right words, and continued:

“But with all due respect, he looks more like a common extortioner than a hero”.

The unfamiliar word sounded offensive, and Stepa even wanted to object, but Khutulun placed her hand on his shoulder and gently squeezed it: don’t.

“All the recent Shadows have failed your trust, Postnik’s brother continued. “And we are afraid that this one will fail as well”.

There came an awkward pause.

“And if we are all destined to soon disappear, with your permission, we would like to try to complete the construction of our cathedral”.

Barma and Postnik bowed to Princess and quickly walked back to the unfinished building, while Khutulun, Stepa and the unusually silent Fomichev headed towards Tverskaya street crossing the Red Square.

## **KHUTULUN**

*Moscow, year 1315.*

Two week journey completely exhausted Khutulun.

She didn’t really want to go to Moscow in the first place, leaving cozy Sarai-Batu, that she explored inside and out and knew every corner of every street by heart. She didn't want to leave her father's palace. Yesterday, she dreamt of the day of her departure and that very moment, when the golden palace shining brightly in the sun disappeared beyond the horizon. Khutulun quietly wept. She missed home, but most of all, she suffered from the idea that she won’t ever be able to return there.

Her father explained why he was sending her to Moscow. Khutulun understood that she had been entrusted with an important task: she would become the wife of the eldest son of the Moscow prince, Daniel, and their future children would be guarantors of peaceful relations between the Orda and Moscow. It was important to her father—even though Moscow was currently an insignificant principality, one among many—he sought peace. Peace and predictability in relations with the Russian principalities would give him the opportunity to focus on other, more important matters. He hoped that Khutulun would understand him.

At first, she was sulking and complaining: “What do I care about your wars and truces? Why are you sending me to the cold world of Russian barbarians?” Khutulun had heard many stories about Rus at her father's court, and none of them inspired her.



They didn't even have running water in their houses; like savages, they had to go use wells to get water. A special place in the traveler's stories was given to the descriptions of latrines. Citizens of Saray-Batu used to sanitation were horrified at the sight of the "filth" and were telling in full detail about the suffocating smell reigning in the capital of Moscow principality.

All of that frightened Khutulun. But her father's will was law, and for the past two weeks, she had been shaking in the carriage along the dreadful roads. To be fair, her carriage was equipped with soft cushions for the comfort of the Mongolian princess, and she had all her favorite sweets with her prepared by her mother for the journey. Khutulun pouted once again and gazed out the window.

Soon she saw a wooden wall enclosing the city through the window. Khutulun wrinkled her nose: after the luxury of Sarai-Batu, Moscow seemed like a poor village to her. And it was the place, where she was destined to live her life... But her mood changed quickly; next minute she was thinking about a completely different thing – about Dmitry, her future husband. Before she left, her mother had a serious conversation with her about everything a young woman needs to know before getting married – about such an important thing as sex and childbirth. Mother's explanations disturbed the mind of a young girl. She saw prince Yuriy Danilovitch only once – at a gathering at her father's palace. Russian prince was tall and had a full beard.

Khutulun hadn't had a chance to examine him properly from her women's side of the court, but she definitely knew that she was very curious to know what a beard felt like; from a distance, it seemed very soft and cozy. Perhaps life wouldn't be so bad in this stupid Moscow if she had by her side a husband with a cozy beard.

Princess's cortege entered Moscow. The warriors guarding the gates respectfully made way for the Mongolian riders who went before Khutulun 's carriage. Behind her, there were carriages of the retinue and wagons loaded with gifts for the prince from the Mongol Khan. Khutulun knew that her dowry was quite modest: the marriage was important to Moscow, not the Orda. And the convoy of carts with furs that arrived in Sarai-Batu before her departure was much more impressive than her humble few carriages. At the previous stop, Khutulun changed into her ceremonial attire; it was a whole ritual – a silk dress, intricate makeup and the finest French jewelry. The Khan didn't deem it necessary to bestow on the prince with excessive gifts, but he spared no expense for his daughter. Khutulun wanted to meet her future husband fully armed.

The carriage suddenly stopped, and she heard angry shouting from outside the window. The riders ahead of the carriage encountered an unexpected obstacle: an

overturned cart of firewood in the middle of the road. Khutulun peeked out of the window, then stood up and opened the carriage door. She was ready to walk by foot the final minutes of her exhausting journey to get it all over and done with as soon as possible.

She turned around to give a command to the riders and saw them falling one by one off their horses. Archers were leaning out from the windows of the house opposite, where the carriage had stopped. Warriors in chainmail suddenly appeared from behind the cart. Khutulun looked around in panic and realized that the same thing was happening behind her: the warriors who had just let them into the city were carelessly watching as more and more people poured out of the surrounding houses.

They were killing her companions one by one. Some of them managed to draw their swords, but the majority fell after the first volley of arrows. The attackers set fire to the carriages with the dowry. Khutulun wanted to scream, wanted to beg for mercy, but at that moment, her throat got slashed by a sword, and she choked on her own blood. Lying on the ground, the Mongolian princess was looking in horror at the face of her killer—a pimply boy of about seventeen. He leaned over her to snatch from her neck the necklace her father had given her.

It all ended in less than five minutes. The attackers dragged the bodies off the road and one by one threw them into a cesspit. And the Mongolian princess never found out what her Moscow's prince's beard felt like.