

Living and All Grown Up

Book One

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For my daughter Anya

Part One: Childhood Secrets

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“Are you out of your mind?” her mama hisses. “You mean you’re planning to go to school like that? On September 1st? The first day of school? Looking like that?”

Marina smiles.

“Looking like what?” she says. “I look fine for a special day like today, just like I’m supposed to. Don’t I? You were the one who said these were for special occasions.”

“I did?” Her mama raises her voice ever so slightly in indignation—and catching herself, repeats a little more softly, “I did?”

In the mornings they try not to make noise. Her papa often comes home just before dawn. What can he do? That’s the job: diplomatic receptions always start after sunset.

“Yes, you did,” Marina answers, “when I wanted to wear them last summer to the disco on the ship.”

“Enough of the demagoguery,” her mama hisses again. “You know perfectly well what I mean!”

“I don’t understand.”

They’re standing in the hallway of their large, two-room apartment. The hall is too wide, and her mama is only making out as if she won’t let Marina pass. Naturally, it would be easy as pie to move her mama’s arm aside and go toward the front door. Marina looks at her mama for a moment and then shrugs, brings a stool out from the kitchen, and sits down.

“Fine,” she says. “The first of September will happen without me. The Fish is going to call you in to school and ask why your daughter played hooky the first day of class.”

“Not the Fish. Valentina Vladimirovna,” her mama says. “You shouldn’t refer to your elders like that.”

“Right.” Marina nods. “Now you’ll explain to her why you didn’t let me go to school. By the way, you know I’ve always dreamed of playing hooky on the first of September.”

Marina is lying, in fact. She’s always loved the first of September, the first day of school. Probably because six years ago it was she who’d been chosen to bestow the silver bell sparkling in the sun, the bell with the blue ribbon, to put it around the shoulders of the tallest upperclassman and circle the star in the middle of the schoolyard while perched on his shoulders—to the deafening and happy ringing of the first school bell of her life.

Naturally, Marina has sometimes felt like skipping a class or two—especially geography or chemistry. But on the first of September Marina has always wanted to go to school. Always always! Just yesterday she couldn’t have imagined she’d be sitting in the hall with her legs crossed in their criminal white jeans. Her mama’s birthday present to her, by the way.

Her mama sighs.

“Why don’t you want to wear your regular school skirt?”

“I already told you,” Marina says in a bored voice. “It’s too small. You’re the one who says I’ve grown over the summer. The skirt comes up to here on me now”—and she passes her hand somewhere between her hip and knee.

“Don’t exaggerate,” her mama says.

“I checked,” Marina replies. “Do you really think I decided to wear jeans for no reason?”

“Can you imagine how the Fish is going to yell?” her mama asks. “Just pants would be all right. But no, jeans, and not just jeans but white jeans. *Dead* white jeans.”

“All good jeans are dead jeans.” Marina shrugs. “Even the Fish knows that. Even you aren’t going to argue with that. Anyway, if you’d bought me a proper school skirt, I’d already be at school.”

Marina sneaks a peek at the massive clock, a gift to her father on his fortieth. A silver circle with the same silver star inside. That clock annoys Marina no end. There’s the exact same kind at school—in

fact, in all state institutions. Only her papa's clock is honest-to-goodness silver, and the school clock is cheap aluminum. For some reason, Marina's sure her mama doesn't like the clock either, though she never talks about it.

The clock says ten 'til eight.

Marina and her mama look at each other. In chess, this is called a stalemate, the girl thinks with anguish.

No one has a move—and at that moment her parents' bedroom door opens behind her mama's back, and out comes their black and white kitty, Lucy, followed by her papa looking sleepy and wearing his heavy robe, a gift from Uncle KOlga. The robe is dead, too, naturally, like all of Uncle KOlga presents.

“So what's all the fuss about?” he asks drowsily. “I got home at four. Can't a fellow get a little sleep?”

Oh well, since her papa isn't asleep now, her mama can shout with a clear conscience.

“Just look at how she's planning to go to school! On the first of September! In dead jeans!”

“Well, her skirt is too small,” her papa says, yawning. “What choice is there? Do we have other pants? Ours, not dead ones?”

“All ours are in the laundry,” Marina says quickly. “The washing machine broke and the repairman isn't coming until next week.”

“At your age I did laundry by hand,” her mama says.

“And at your age Major Alurin was already commanding a sabotage team,” Marina says apropos of nothing.

Her papa laughs.

“All right, my little saboteur, run along to school. Just don't stand in the front row.”

“Oh, yes,” her mama says, “you're so nice. You let her do anything. You're not the one who has to go to school and see the Fish. . . .”

At this, Marina can't restrain herself.

“Not the Fish. Valentina Vladimirovna. You were the one who explained I shouldn’t refer to my elders like that.”

“She’s your elder”—her mama sighs—“but we’re nearly the same age. All right, run along. Maybe she won’t notice.”

Marina tears along, kicking scarlet maple leaves as she goes. When she was a kid she pretended scary things had her surrounded on the battlefield and she was fighting her way back to her side. In those days she only saw things like that through a crack in the door—in the movies her parents watched in their room.

That was why she thought “things” looked like autumn leaves—blood-red and five-fingered. It was only later that Pavel Vasilievich told her the story. A true “thing” is a chopped-off human hand invested with a single desire: to turn the living into the dead.

The very short route to Marina’s school passed by No. 5—a sports academy behind a tall wooden fence. They refurbished the fence every year, but in September the 5-ers would pry off a few boards first thing to make for easier forays. Usually on the first of September Marina preferred avoiding the sports academy. In fourth form she’d come running into the holiday lineup all soiled and tattered. Although she had emerged the victor (the two girl 5-ers had retreated in disgrace from the field of battle, acknowledging the murderous force of Marina’s shoe bag). The Fish had called her parents in and lectured her mama for a long time behind closed office doors. Marina’s authority in the class soared to unimaginable heights after that, but she had to promise her mama to avoid fights—and she tried to keep her promise—at least on the first of September.

Just a few minutes to go until lineup begins, and Marina is hoping the 5-ers have already been locked in their yard. She races like a whirlwind past the fence, and when No. 5 is almost behind her, she hears a whistle and something strikes Marina in the shoulder—it doesn’t hurt, but she feels it. Without stopping, she turns around: and the back of a closely cropped head flashes above the boards.

Vadik, probably, Marina thinks angrily. The top instigator and dirtiest dog of them all. “Well, that’s all right, I’ll be seeing you again!”

Marina shakes her fist as she runs and races on.

Two minutes to go until lineup.

Gosha doesn't notice Marina's jeans at all, of course, but Lev immediately gives an ecstatic whistle.

"Cool. Where'd you get 'em?"

Aha.

Lev nods: that's what he thought.

"Hey, look at Petrova's get-up," says Olga Stupina, puckering her pretty little face—the pretty little face of the top pupil, class monitor, and Fish's pet. "Our things aren't enough for her, so give her dead ones."

"You're just jealous," Marina says.

"Well, no"—Olga twitches her little nose—"I would never wear anything dead, not for the world. People who wear dead things turn into zombies."

That's nonsense, of course. Even fifth-formers know where zombies come. Or rather, fifth-formers think they know—because, in fact, as Pavel Vasilievich explained, even scientists don't have an unambiguous answer to that question. There are a few theories, but which one is true, nobody knows. Actually, clothing, music, and movies have nothing to do with it. When the subject came up, Pavel Vasilievich just burst out laughing.

Lineup was already over, and the seventh-formers were filing into the school. Marina, wearing her dead jeans, tries to get lost in the crowd. Most important is that Olga not snitch. Just in case, Marina shows her her fist and makes scary eyes.

Naturally, Olga is dressed the way you're supposed to be: skirt, apron with blue lace, two braids with enormous bows, and a silver star in a circle on her chest. Seemingly just like all the other pupils have—but Olga's looks like it was specially polished, as if it had been purposely put on display. Marina hates looking at it. You'd think Olga actually understood what stands behind the badge. Naturally, for Victory Day and the May holidays their monitor dramatically recites from the stage the correct poems

about warriors, *the men who perished, the star's borders to defend*—but Marina doesn't believe her for a second.

Last year they studied "Daughter of the Regiment," and during class Pavel Vasilievich got carried away reminiscing about the war. Marina always listened every second, but Olga would draw on a sheet of quadrille paper torn from her notebook and then slip the page into her textbook. During the break, Marina stole up and pulled it out: it was completely covered with flowers and princesses in fabulous gowns.

At the time, Marina winced. How could someone draw such vulgarity during a story about the Great War? And turn her nose up at dead jeans, too!

Marina sits by the window, third bench. All fifth form and half of sixth she sat with Lena KovaLev, but after New Year's Lena's parents got an apartment in a new neighborhood, Lena moved to another school, and Marina was left to herself. To be honest, she preferred it.

She put her satchel in the empty seat and dumped all her notebooks and textbooks on the desk.

That turned out to make it much easier to hide the books Marina was secretly reading during lessons.

Actually, today she doesn't have any other books besides her textbooks. It's the first of September, after all. Marina takes her journal, her new chemistry textbook, and a blank notebook out of her satchel. From the fifth-floor window she has a good view of the trees' scarlet and yellow crowns and, in between, a black rectangle: the roof of No. 5.

A little farther off, past the avenue, the apartment buildings crowd in (one of them is Marina's), and on the horizon like a medieval tower is the silhouette of the Ministry for Affairs Abroad, one of the city's five highest spots, where her Uncle KOlga works and Marina's papa often goes.

"Hello, children!" a thunderous voice booms.

This is the Fish's favorite technique: enter a class without a sound and immediately deafen everyone with her greeting.

"Good morning, Valentina Vladimirovna!" The seventh-formers stand up.

It's been a long time since the other teachers have required the schoolchildren to chorus a greeting and stand at the beginning of class, but the Fish acts as if they were still seven years old in first form instead of thirteen in the seventh.

"You may take your seats," she says.

Marina sits down and immediately stares out the window again.

"Look! Who's that?" She hears Lev's whisper behind her.

"A new girl or something?" Gosha suggests.

Indeed, by the blackboard, next to the Fish, stands a skinny little girl with two scraggly braids poking out to the sides. Her school uniform fits badly, and she's holding her book bag from Children's World in one hand and her shoe bag in the other.

She probably hasn't been told you're supposed to leave your bag in the coatroom.

"This is Veronika Loginova," the Fish says. "She's going to be in your class. Take a seat, Veronika."

Veronika surveys the class in dismay and walks toward the last empty bench.

"No, not there"—the new girl shudders and turns around. "The third bench, with Petrova."

The new girl walks up to Marina's bench and for a second freezes at the other chair, where Marina's satchel still lies.

"I'm sorry," she says in a quiet whisper, and Marina puts her satchel on the floor.

"Are you unhappy about something, Petrova?" the Fish asks.

"I'm very happy, Valentina Vladimirovna," Marina replies without hesitation.

"Well, then go to the board," the Fish says. "Let's see if you've forgotten everything over the summer."

Here we go, Marina thinks. I wonder whether the class next door will be able to hear her holler when she sees my jeans.

Lev likes getting to class before everyone else. Then he has a little time to read before school starts.

Today, though, at home, Sonya dawdled longer than usual and Lev even shouted at her—for which her grandmother immediately chewed him out. In the end, they had to take the shortest route—past No. 5. Sonya whined and said she was afraid, but Lev lied confidently that 5-ers didn't bother second-formers.

There was this pact, he said, not to start fighting until fourth form.

“A gentlemen's agreement,” he said, “like the dueling code for the Musketeers.”

Lev had been telling Sonya about the Musketeers all last year—to get her to walk to school faster.

Somewhere around New Year's he was caught up short because the book was about to end, so he started making up new adventures. Although the Musketeers lived long before the Drawing of Boundaries, Lev stuck extra stuff into the novel—an army of dead Guards, things, romeros, and fulcis—driving the plot into such a dead end as a result that he had a hard time coming up with a happy ending, by sending a dead Constance to the Musketeers' rescue.

In fact, Lev suspects that his came out even better than in *Doomas*. He's actually afraid Sonya will be disenchanted when she reads *The Four Musketeers* herself. Although, according to Lev's calculations, his sister isn't going to get to the tattered volume on his favorite shelf for a couple of years, and by then either she'll have forgotten everything or else Lev will convince her she's mixed something up.

From third to sixth form, *Doomas* was Lev's favorite writer, but this summer he read *Lord of the Glass Key* and *The Last of the Maltese Falcons*—and was now delirious about searching for the treasures hidden by the dead during the Drawing of Boundaries. Between drawing make-believe maps and contemplating genuine maps, Lev reread the two great books, trying to pick up the heroes' way of speaking succinctly and weightily.

After taking Sonya to the second floor, Lev hurries to his classroom. Usually he gets the key from the teacher's lounge, but today someone beat him to it. Lev looks at the clock in the hallway—he doesn't

have a watch of his own—and seemingly it's still pretty early. He wonders who's first today. If it's Gosha, he won't let him read in peace, but if it's Olga Stupina—well, to hell with her, she can go to hell, that's all there is to it.

No, it's not Gosha or Olga but—this is something he wasn't expecting! --the new girl, Veronika. She's sitting at the third bench, her hands folded, looking straight ahead.

“Hi,” Lev says.

“Hi,” Veronika replies. Her voice is lackluster, colorless, no voice at all. Her book bag is lying in the aisle.

Two years ago, Lev had one just like it until his aunt in Grachevsk sent him a satchel as a present. Apparently, her Misha happened to have an extra one.

“My name's Lev,” he says, getting out *The Last of the Maltese Falcons*.

“Mine's Nika,” the girl says, “but you'd better call me Vera.”

“Okay.” Lev nods as he opens his book. He's already had time to wonder why Vera is better.

Nika's a pretty name and rare, but he immediately forgets all about it—as always when he has a book in front of him. Especially *The Last of the Maltese Falcons*.

Right now he's reading the chapter where the heroes guess that the bird's secret is by no means that it's made of silver. In fact, under the layer of paint they've found ordinary bronze. But why is a whole gang of the dead and their stooges hunting for this statuette?

Naturally, rereading the book for the fifth time, Lev remembers the answer perfectly well: there's a hiding place in the bird that opens when you press on its eyes, and in that hiding place is a map indicating where the dead hid their treasures before the Boundary closed in the north.

Strange though it seems, the novel doesn't recount in detail what kind of treasures these were—not that it needs to. Everyone knows the dead possessed tremendous wealth and even now are a lot richer than the living. You could tell dead things right off. They were more colorful and elegant and sturdier than what the living made. Marina's white jeans. Gosha's pen. Even Zinochka's shoes—Zinochka was the math teacher, Zinaida Sergeyevna—the ones she wore to the May Day holiday last year. That time the

Fish yelled even louder than on the first of September, and although it happened in the teachers lounge, the whole school found out that Zinochka had dared show up for the holiday—and not just any holiday, but May Day!—wearing dead shoes.

The shoes really were very pretty. Lev was probably the first in his class to notice them.

Lev himself had never had dead things. Once he'd asked his mama why, and his mama had said that dead things belong either to those who work with the dead—exorcists, scientist shamans, gravediggers, orpheuses, and other employees of the Ministry for Affairs Abroad—or else those who either found a treasure or inherited dead things from pre-Boundary times. Now Lev knows, of course, that you can just buy dead things. True, you could hardly ever pick them up in stores, and they were so expensive that with Lev's parents' small teacher salaries they could barely buy a chewing stick, the kind Gosha once gave him to chew.

The gum was bright green (like lots of dead things) and smelled like summer. Gosha broke it in half and for a long time they concentrated on chewing. Then Gosha said there were these special chiclets that you chewed *and turned into a zombie*—and Lev started shaking his arms like the zombies in the movies about the war, and they roared with laughter for a solid half-hour, after which they went on discussing whether maybe this was some special laughing gum.

If his mama and papa had found about that, they would not have been pleased. Well, they wouldn't have punished him, but they would definitely have yelled. His mama always said she couldn't stand it when people wore dead things to school. It's all right for grownups. Sometimes they need dead things for work, but they're pointless for children.

Once Lev really wanted to ask where dead children's things came from, like toys or that gum. But now he thinks his mama doesn't like possessions in general, and it doesn't matter whether they're living or dead. It's no accident that one of the worst curses for her is “materialist”—someone who places things above books, music, and other kinds of art.

Lev agrees with his mama; books are certainly better than any things. Still, he did wish he could have something dead and attractive for himself. Like Marina's white jeans.

Maybe that's why he likes reading *Lord of the Glass Key* and *The Last of the Maltese Falcons* so much.

They're books where children like him find pre-Boundary treasures.

The classroom is gradually filling up. Olga, the class monitor, walks up, clicking her heels.

"Hi, Red," she says. "Still reading?"

"Uh huh," Lev replies.

He doesn't like Olga. To be honest, hardly anyone likes her except for two or three mean girls and the Fish herself, who suggested making Olga monitor back in the fourth form. Apparently, even Pavel Vasilievich, their homeroom teacher, isn't thrilled about her, but every year the same scenario gets repeated:

The Fish comes and proposes Olga and the whole class amiably votes. Except for last September.

Gosha suddenly asked, "Can we nominate another candidate?" Lev actually froze in surprise. Even he hadn't expected something like that from his friend. The Fish didn't lose her cool, though. She grinned and asked, "What is it, Stolpovsky, do you want to? First fix your grade in chemistry"—and Olga became monitor again.

Maybe this year he'd suggest Marina, Lev suddenly thinks. Of course, she's not the top student, but she doesn't have any bad grades. She would definitely be better than Olga.

Excellent idea! Lev tears himself away from *The Last of the Maltese Falcons* and raising his head, sees Olga standing next to the new girl, who is sitting just as still, her hands folded in front of herself.

"I know you used to be at No. 5," Olga says.

"Yes, that's true," the new girl says quietly. "My aunt sent me there."

"They say you were the worst student of all there, is that true?" Olga says loudly.

Well, that's unlikely, Lev thinks. You've got to try hard to do worse than everyone else at No. 5. 5-ers are stupid. Everybody knows that.

"No, I had excellents in nearly all my subjects," the new girl says.

“Is it true they called you Nika-Kika there?” Olga says just as loudly.

“Yes,” the girl replies, and Lev thinks he hears her voice tremble slightly.

Olga really is a pig, Lev thinks. Why is she picking on the new girl? He’d had his share of taunts. Lev the loser, Lev the lover. Just think! And right then he understood why the girl had asked him to call her Vera.

If Olga were a boy, he could get up and give her a good shove! True, Lev’s no expert at fighting, but in this case he’d give it a try. But hitting girls isn’t good. That’s what his papa said and what it says in all the books. That means I can’t hit her. I should say something, something really sharp, succinct and weighty, the way the heroes in *The Last of the Maltese Falcons* know how to do.

But just his luck, nothing succinct and weighty comes to mind. So Olga walks toward her own bench, Nika sits there without moving, and Lev returns to his treasure hunt.

On the way home, Lev recalls the morning scene. He should have told Olga, “Lay off her!” There, that would have been succinct and weighty. Or, “Why are you picking on her?” That’s good, too. Damn, the best words always come to me when it’s too late. That’s all right, if Olga picks on the new girl again, he’ll let her have it!

Lev opens the door with the key he has hanging on an elastic so he won’t lose it. His parents don’t come home until evening, and Sonya’s probably been home for an hour. He wonders whether she heated up her own dinner or is waiting for her older brother as usual.

“Sonya!” he calls to his sister.

A soft sob reaches him from her little room.

“What on earth is going on?” Lev says firmly and weightily.

Sonya is sitting on the floor, and sleepy Mina is lying in front of her, hiding its paws and head under its shell.

Sonya sniffs her snub nose.

“What happened?” Lev asks, and instantly Sonya starts crying, sobbing, mumbling unintelligibly. Tears are running down her round cheeks, and her swollen lips are trembling miserably. Lev brings some

water from the kitchen, and when Sonya calms down he asks her again, “What happened?” And it all starts in again. Only at the third attempt does Lev understand that Sonya went home past No. 5.

You were the one who said second-formers didn’t fight, but some big kids came up to her, emptied her shoes from her bag, stuffed it with leaves, and tried to put it on her head, laughing the whole time, and taunting her, and saying that only weaklings studied at Sonya’s school, and when Sonya said she had a big brother and he’d beat them up they started laughing even more and said they knew her big brother, the red-headed four-eyes. He was a weakling and a coward, he’d even be afraid to get close to them, and he’d be doing the right thing because if he did, oh ho what a thrashing they’d give him—and Sonya is saying all this without stopping her sobbing and sniffing, and for some reason Lev remembers Nika, how she sat there perfectly still, hands folded, looking straight ahead, and remembers her voice trembling when she answered Olga “Yes,” and Lev thinks that probably the 5-ers are right, he really is a coward and a weakling because he never interferes in anything, he just reads his books, and no musketeer or hero in *The Last of the Maltese Falcons* would shake his hand.

Then Lev hugs his sister and says, “They’re all jerks, Sonya. Who cares about them.”

But she sobs and asks him, “You’ll beat them up, right?”

And Lev answers, “Sure I will”—and all of a sudden he realizes it’s the truth, that this time this is going to happen. He’ll go to the sports academy, call out their ringleader, and smash his ugly face in for weeping Sonya, for her soiled shoe bag, and for all the kids who are afraid to walk past No. 5.

And for the new girl Nika, too, for her idiotic nickname, trembling voice, and frozen gaze. For the fact that he didn’t speak up this morning.

“Twenty-three,” Gosha counts, “twenty-four, twenty-five . . .”

Gosha does pull-ups every time on his way to the House of Little Stars. Last year he noticed this apple tree with the low-hanging branches. At first he just jumped up and touched the rough bark with his fingers, but over the summer he stretched out and could easily jump and grab hold of a branch.

Doing more pull-ups was a matter of technique. Sometimes he got to twenty, sometimes twenty-three. But today—twenty-five. To be honest, Gosha didn't care how many. For him, jumping, doing a pull up, running, and fighting came as simply and naturally as reading books did for Lev, and kicking the red autumn leaves with the tip of her shoes did for Marina.

Gosha prefers movies to books. The best are about the war, like *Uncatchable!* Terrific movie! And the main role in it was played by Ilya, Gosha's cousin. Gosha's proud of that but he hasn't told anyone. He doesn't want to be "the cousin of that Ilya who said, 'Hey, kid, show us what you've got!'" "Hey, kid, show us what you've got," is a catch phrase from *Uncatchable*. Everyone knows it and they even shout it during fights when they're cheering their side on.

Yes, war movies are good but even better are movies about fights and kara-ho, the technique specially developed after the Drawing of Boundaries to repel attacks by the dead. Ob-gru is a system of bare hands defense, and a true kara-ho master can polish off an entire detachment of armed corpses all by himself, to say nothing of any zombies, things, or fulcis, who in the kara-ho movies the heroes fling every which way by the dozen.

Gosha studied kara-ho for two years at the Palace of Little Stars and even earned a double silver bracelet—that was what the third degree of study was called. In fact, it wasn't a bracelet but two braided silver threads you could wear on your wrist.

Once the Fish saw those threads and made a terrible scene. She shouted that in fact kara-ho was a dead technique. You couldn't adapt it for the living and she would not permit any dead bracelets to be worn in her school! Gosha tried to stammer something about the Palace of Little Stars, but in reply he heard that he could do whatever he wanted at the Palace of Little Stars, jump out the window for all she cared, but in school he had to behave properly. Today boys start wearing bracelets, and tomorrow girls show up in earrings and beads!

There's stupidity for you! In other schools girls in the senior classes have been wearing earrings for a long time, but the Fish is always snatching girls in the hallways and demanding they show her their ears: to see whether there's a hole or not.

"Where did she get the idea that kara-ho is a dead technique?" he asked his friend and bench mate Lev then.

"Well, in fact, dead technique only lies at the base of kara-ho," Lev explained. "That is, they say it's a technique from Eastern Abroad. And also the top kara-ho masters employ a special practice. Before the start of a fight they imagine they're dead. That's why they fight fearlessly, people say."

"I think that's bonkers," Gosha said. "I've never heard that. And by the way, why is it the dead who fight fearlessly? In the war they were the ones who did a runner from us. All we saw was the soles of their feet."

Gosha wondered how he'd gotten into an argument with Lev. Normally they agreed about everything.

I'll say! Lev's read so many books and knows so much about everything! Still, calling kara-ho a dead technique is ridiculous.

If there's something unconditionally and unambiguously living, then it's kara-ho. Gosha's totally sure of that.

At the count of twenty-five, Gosha jumps to the ground, grabs his satchel lying in the leaves that have turned red in the last week, and runs in the direction of the Palace of Little Stars. There's a tournament today, and he's afraid of being late.

Gosha runs into the Palace's spacious lobby. The old woman at the door looks up from her knitting and sees a short, chunky little boy hand his jacket in at the coatroom. Gosha takes a number and runs to the second floor, to the locker rooms. He's probably late, the old woman thinks, and she goes back to counting her stitches.

She doesn't know that today is the district kara-ho tournament. More than fifty sports teams at the Palace.

Just try keeping track of them all!

Gosha adores tournaments and has his whole life.

In first form he tripled in the class tournament for spitting chewed blotter paper through a tube—for distance and density. The tournament was held during the long recess, and when Tatyana Mikhailovna returned to the classroom, the entire blackboard was plastered with wads of paper. To the question “Who did this?” Gosha jumped up first. Then half the class stood up, but it was his parents who got called into school.

Gosha'd had an awfully pleased face when he'd shouted, “Me!” It wasn't until a couple of years later that Gosha admitted to his mother that he'd been certain the teacher was asking who had won—and he'd jumped up for his well-earned reward.

In the spring of third form, Gosha came up with a spitting contest. You had to hit a target set up in the courtyard from a first-floor window. The target was Gosha's own book bag, and Lev was the winner—the first and last time in the whole history of school competitions. That time he'd thought that the distance and strength of the stream depended on the diameter of the hole in the sprinkler more than on the power of the squeeze. True, there wasn't any prize for the winner, as always. On the contrary, as a result of the competition, Lev gave Gosha two textbooks to replace his soaked ones.

“I know them by heart already anyway,” he said.

Facing Gosha in the first round is a short, sandy-haired boy. Gosha easily parries a few initial blows and shifts to the counterattack. Leaping off one foot, he pushes his rival in the chest, drops to the ground, and trips him up. His opponent falls but immediately jumps up, his shoulder blades barely touching the padded mat. Gosha wards off a few more blows, dodges to the side, and grabbing his opponent by the lapel of his white cotton gi, throws him across his hip.

Gosha hears the spectators' cries. The referee stops the fight and raises Gosha's hand. That's good. That means he's already made it into the next round.

In the locker room, Gosha pours a glass of fizzy water from the free dispenser. The fizz tickle his nostrils. Gosha holds his breath and counts silently to twenty.

In fact, he's not all that worried. This isn't a serious tournament, just a district competition. When his papa asked him this morning whether he should come root for him, Gosha just shook his head. Let him work. If his mama had been in town, she probably would have come anyway. But his mama was on an expedition now and wouldn't be back until next week. So today Gosha doesn't even have his own cheering section—if you don't count the other kids from his team, of course.

The referee announces the pairs for the second round. Gosha scowls: he got some Annabel Ostapenko.

A girl.

Competing with girls has always turned out badly for Gosha.

Two years ago he argued with Marina about who could slide down the banisters from the fifth floor faster.

The result was the most scandalous contest Gosha had ever taken part in.

Lev worked out the plan: start on a signal—the school bell—with two observers on the fifth-floor landing and two more keeping watch on the first. The observers would shout as soon as the participant's feet touched the ground on the first floor. A fifth group of observers was posted in the middle of the locker room. They were supposed to determine the winner by deciding which direction the first shout came from.

Lev also suggested a heat during class, when there wouldn't be any bystanders on the track—that is, the stairs.

For two weeks they waited for a suitable occasion, and then Zinochka, the math teacher, was out sick and a window opened in the schedule. Fifteen minutes after class started, Lev shorted the wires and the bell rang. The rivals started sliding down, and on the third-floor landing Gosha flew feet first straight

into the chest of Dmitry Danilovich, the short and malicious geography teacher, who had left his classroom to find out what had happened with the bells. Dmitry Danilovich—or DD, as the kids called him—was quite a lightweight, and Gosha had already worked up a head of steam. Basically, the blow knocked the geography teacher off his feet as if Gosha had used an *kara-ho* technique on him.

Naturally, five minutes later the Fish was shouting that she was going to expel Gosha from school, but five minutes after that Marina flew into the teachers' lounge. She said the contest had been her idea, as had the whole organization of them. For some reason, everyone still considered Marina a “good girl,” and not only that but “the daughter of such parents”! Somehow, the scandal died down of its own accord, and the race down the banisters became a school legend.

Actually, the story's continuation isn't nearly as well known. A week later, late one night, Lev, Gosha, and Marina snuck into school and finished the contest. This time they did without observers at the start, and the finish line was moved to the middle of the locker room, where Lev was sitting.

The convention was to consider Marina the winner, though Gosha said she only won at the final stage, in the sprint down the ground-floor hallway.

One way or another, Marina came out of it with one loyal friend and two ill-wishers—the Fish and the geography teacher—but Gosha scowled every time his opponent was a girl.

This time it's fifteen-year-old Annabel Ostapenko.

Black hair, closely cropped. Half a head taller than Gosha. She moves easily, as if she's dancing. In fact, she's a serious opponent.

Gosha dances around Annabel, his feet barely touching the mat. The girl waits him out, as if inviting him to attack.

Gosha shouts *hai!* and strikes a blow. A thrust, and another thrust! One after another, Annabel fends off Gosha's attacks.

Before the boy realizes what's happening, she shifts to the counteroffensive. Gosha tries to protect himself and thirty seconds later he's moved to a solid defense.

The girl pedals back, as if she's trying to catch her breath. Gosha attacks—hai! —and immediately misses a kick with his left foot off a spin. He falls on one knee and barely manages to parry the next thrust, but Annabel's next strike knocks him off his feet.

The referee's whistle. The single combat is over.

It's true. Gosha has no luck against girls!

Two hours later, Gosha and the other participants take the coatroom by storm. Grabbing his jacket, he notices Annabel. The girl was knocked out in the quarter finals and is now sitting on the next bench, lacing her tall boots. She's wearing a black jacket with silver zippers and broken hearts. Awesome! Gosha thinks. That means she's a deather.

Deathers first showed up a few years ago. They wear black clothes decorated with contrasting silver designs, and lots of them pierce their ears and even noses. People say deathers want to be dead—to dress like the dead, listen to dead music, watch dead movies, and basically live like the dead. The newspapers say it's all a result of dead propaganda, the consequence of special ops by the dead secret services. The Fish calls deathers traitors, but Gosha thinks that if deathers were traitors they'd have been arrested a long time ago.

Although, on the other hand, it's a bizarre urge—to be dead.

Actually, Gosha likes dead movies, nothing strange there.

Up until today, Gosha has never once seen a deather, and here he is staring at Annabel.

The girl looks up and meets his gaze.

“Hi,” Gosha says. “You gave me a good bashing!”

Annabel snorts, tosses her black gym bag with her kara-ho gi over her shoulder and heads for the exit. The old lady at the door gives her a disapproving look.

The girl passes very close, and Gosha can see she has five silver earrings inserted in her right ear, one over the other, little rings that get bigger as they descend toward her earlobe.

Awesome, he thinks. She wouldn't get very far in our school wearing beauties like those!

The blackboard is covered in triangles and circles. Zinochka is standing on tiptoe, looking for a free space, doesn't find one, picks up the damp sponge, and with a few quick motions erases a few drawings.

"Now we'll prove this lemma here," she says.

Zinochka is the youngest teacher in the school, just three years out of college. Because of that she tries her hardest to look grownup and solid, but the result is—not so much. Heels, a striped top, skinny arms—in short, she's a Zinochka and definitely no Zinaida Sergeevna!

Through his concave lenses, Lev looks at the white lines on the blackboard. Circles, triangles, and formulas. A slanted ray of autumn sun draws its lines and angles on his bench. Lev gnaws at the end of his ballpoint pen. So, let's prove this lemma here. . . .

When Zinochka suggested they stay after class to prepare for the Mathematics Olympiad, only Lev and Nika responded. Gosha was in a hurry to get to kara-ho training and wasn't really all that in love with mathematics. Marina could have kept Lev company, of course, but today she had things to do. So here they are in the classroom, the three of them: Lev, Nika, and Zinochka. Before the start of the lesson, Zinochka went up to Nika and whispered something. All Lev could hear was, ". . . realize it's hard for you . . ." and ". . . can always talk to me. . . ." What was Zinochka talking about? Olga, maybe?

Nika sits in her usual seat, but Lev has moved to the first bench. He thinks he can feel the girl's attentive gaze with the back of his head—although in fact Nika is looking at the board, too.

White circles, triangles, and formulas.

The flat world of plane geometry is a very understandable world. Axioms give rise to theorems. With the help of simple logic, from a few obvious assumptions, you can come up with an infinite multitude of true assertions and learn the truth about triangles, squares, and circles. Here you can find the answer to any question—if you're attentive and patient.

In life, it's never like that. No formula will help Lev find out which of the 5-ers hurt Sonya. No logical chains of causes and effects will suggest how he can avenge his sister. Lines and points, letters and numbers—they're powerless here.

The door cracks open, and for a second a shaggy head with big bald spots appears.

It's DD, the shrimpy geography teacher.

"Ah, Zinochka, you're busy," he says.

"Just a moment," Zinochka replies. "I'll be right there. Think over this problem for now"—and nodding to Nika and Lev, she quickly leaves the classroom.

Lev turns toward the girl.

"Do you know how to solve it?"

"I think if you draw the medians, it'll be clearer," Nika answers.

"Why's that?" Lev grabs his notebook and moves to Marina's seat by the window.

Usually Lev only sees Nika's bent-over back—and now he's looking at her from the side. She's not pretty at all: a big nose, red spots on her cheeks, two skinny braids poking out in opposite directions.

"Here, look. It's obvious. These two triangles are similar," Nika says, and she pokes at the page with her finger with the bitten nails.

Lev remembered how a few days before, at class break, Olga and her friends stood facing Nika and taunting her, pretending they were biting their nails. They giggled nastily, and no matter where Nika went, they chased her down and blocked her way. In the end, Nika ran off, sobbing. What a snake that Olga was really, and how ashamed he is that he can't seem to do anything to defend Nika.

But what can he do? Boys never get involved in girl stuff. Here Marina might stand up for Nika, but she pays no attention whatsoever to the new girl. She's probably angry they've been seated together.

The tracks in the sand repeat the outline of the wood snake's body, and the dry snag looks like a snake. Lev presses his forehead to the terrarium's warm glass.

"I always wanted to have a snake," he says.

“Well, a turtle’s a reptile, too,” Nika replies.

After their studies with Zinochka they left school together. Nika had to stop by the pet store to buy mosquito grubs for her fish, and Lev suddenly remembered he’d been planning to buy Mina new food for a long time. Now they’ve been going from cage to cage for half an hour.

An old tomcat lies there without moving, first opening one eye slightly, then suddenly reaching out a paw and baring his claws. What is he, so old, doing in a pet shop?

“I think he looks like Pavel Vasilievich,” says Lev. “Just as meritorious, battle-tested, and old.”

“Was Pavel Vasilievich in the war?” Nika asks.

“Naturally,” Lev replies. “He always tells us about it in October, on Victory Day. About the zombies, about crossing the Boundary. Well, you’ll hear for yourself. It’s very cool how he tells it.”

“I have an aunt who fought,” Nika says. “I’ve heard my fill about the war. Silver bullets, aiming straight for the head, and all that stuff.”

“Uh huh”—Lev nods—“like in that movie, *The Beyond*.”

A light gray meerkat is standing over a sandy mink as still as a pillar. Only its little eyes are darting and its little paws trembling.

“Looks like our geography teacher,” Lev says.

“I think our geography teacher is more repulsive,” Nika replies.

“That’s not the word for it”—Lev nods—“in class—that’s just the half of it! On field trips, they say, he behaves like a total beast.”

“How’s that?”

“Well, he makes them take the hardest routes, the most pointless ones. There isn’t even anything interesting there—nothing beautiful, no landmarks. It’s just to bully them.”

“Maybe he’s looking for something?” Nika asks.

“Looking for what?” Lev looks at the girl. “Dead treasures?”

“Dead treasures are where there are ghosts,” Nika says confidently. “In old houses and abandoned mines. Does he climb through abandoned mines?”

“Don’t think so,” Lev replies. “Or old houses either. Anyway, there aren’t any ghosts now!”

“Next to my old school there's this boarded-up house,” Nika says. “Everybody knows there are ghosts there.” STARTHERE

“No way!”

“Way! The girls used to climb over there and they saw. They say it’s just like the movies! This whitish little cloud . . .”

“Just like the movies. Uh huh,” Lev says. “So you say!”

“So I do say,” Nika says, offended.

“Come on,” Lev says. He already regrets not agreeing with Nika right off, but now it’s too late to do over. So he says, “Listen, do you think maybe DD’s a spy? That he has places where he has to hand over secret information . . . you know, about weapons or something like that. Dead people wait for him there—and he goes there on his field trips, so as not to attract attention!”

“But why does he have so many schoolkids with him then? Why doesn’t he just go on a hike by himself?”

“Maybe he needs the kids to open certain doors . . . like keys. We don’t know anything about how to get across the Boundary. Even Marina’s papa doesn’t know. That’s top secret information.”

“You think he places the children some special way and that makes the passage through the Boundary open?”

“I don’t know,” Lev says pensively. “But imagine he really is a spy and we expose him. That would be cool! Like in *Lord of the Glass Key*!”

In the autumn twilight, the white lines on the asphalt shine brightly. Nika’s black boot covers the chalk line and touches the number 4 with her toe. Lev puts his foot on the 7. After Zinochka’s studies, the hopscotch drawn on the pavement looks like a continuation of their math problems.

“Listen,” Lev says. “Don’t pay any attention to Olga. Don’t sweat it. She gets at everyone, and basically she’s a real viper.”

Nika doesn't say anything. She's walking by his side, holding her book bag and shoe bag in her right hand. He probably shouldn't have said anything about Olga, Lev thinks. Maybe Nika doesn't like bringing that up. As it is, they get after her at every class changeover.

"I wanted Marina to be monitor," Lev says, "but she refused. She said screw it."

"You mean you think Marina's better?" Nika asks.

"Naturally," Lev says. "Marina's cool . . . you know, smart and generally . . ."

A few years ago Lev'd thought he was in love with Marina. They got along the way they always had: sometimes the three of them, with Gosha, walked home from school; sometimes Lev called Marina to find out the homework, and a couple of times he'd been to her house—that was it, basically. At one time he'd thought to draw a heart on his book bag and write "Marina," but somehow he'd forgotten about that. Then he fell in love with the girl from the next entryway—and was just friends with Marina.

"Gosha and I are friends with her," Lev says.

"And you're friends with Gosha?" Nika asks with interest.

She likes Gosha, Lev guesses. That's what it is! Well, yeah, he's strong, and girls like boys like that. Papa's right always saying I should do sports. That's probably why Nika went with me, to ask about Gosha. His mood's spoiled now. For some reason, Lev thinks of Mina, his wise old turtle. Ugly. Nobody needs her.

"Well, yeah, we're friends," he says.

They'd just come up to Nika's building. The girl opens her door, and Lev is getting ready to say "Bye, then," when Nika asks, "Come in?"

"Once upon a time they were all different colors, but then they all got to be like this, the same. Well, you get the idea, interbreeding."

Lev nods. They're standing in Nika's room by a small aquarium, thirty liters or so. Indistinguishable gray fish are swimming back and forth in the cloudy water.

“I like them,” Nika says. “They don’t talk. And they’re interchangeable. If one dies, and another is born in its place—you can’t even tell. Also, I don’t feel sorry for them.”

For some reason, Lev feels awkward. He wants to ask why she has pets if she doesn’t love them.

Take Mina. If she were to die, it would hurt. Same for his mama and papa, to say nothing of his grandmother. And Sonya crying—he dreaded the thought. Fortunately, turtles live a long time.

“Didn’t you used to go to No. 5?” he asks to change the subject.

“Yes, my aunt sent me there,” Nika says. “She said I needed to do sports. True, I didn’t make much of an athlete, that’s for sure.”

“Is that why you left?”

“Well, not only that.” Nika is still looking at her fish. “You were the one who said I should ignore the girls, not to sweat it. I’m used to that. You know how they used to torture me at No. 5? Either they’d put mud in my shoe bag, or they’d stick my book bag into the toilet tank.”

“Two weeks ago, they beat up my younger sister,” Lev says. “When she was walking by No. 5.”

“That’s probably Vadik,” Nika says. “He was always the ringleader in those things. He’d lie in wait for someone and sic the boys on him. One time he poured glue on my chair so I’d get stuck to it.”

“What happened?”

“Well, I had to throw out the skirt. My aunt was so mad.”

“Didn’t your parents go to the school after that?”

Nika taps the aquarium glass with her fingers. One after another, the little gray fish swim by through her reflection.

“No,” she says. “They’re gone. They passed in an accident the summer before last.”

Lev freezes. How can that be? Nika’s parents are dead? No, of course, he always understood that the dead are the former living, somebody’s friends, grandmothers, or grandfathers . . . But here you just knew these people, your mama and papa, you loved them and they loved you, and now they’re dead, on the other side of the Boundary, and along with the other dead are threatening the living. No, it’s impossible.

“Just don’t tell anyone about it, okay?” Nika asks. “Or else, you know, they’ll think that if my parents are dead then I’m some kind of deather or even worse.”

Dead parents. . . . He tries to imagine the dead—like they show them in the movies, only with his mama and papa’s faces. . . . No, it’s impossible. No, no, no.

“Promise me, swear to me,” Nika says, and she turns to face Lev. “Swear on your parents’ life you won’t tell anyone.”

“I swear,” Lev says, “on my parents’ life. Yes.”

Thank God they’re still alive, he thinks. Thank God.

5

Outside, white snow is falling on the black trees. A few snowflakes come to rest on the window ledge, and Marina thinks she can see them slowly melting, turning into barely noticeable wet dots.

The first October snow, the promise of a long winter. But it doesn’t matter. It’s still too soon to get out her skis, too early for snow forts, ice skating on frozen ponds, hard snowballs flying in her enemies’ faces and her friends’ evening windows. Hey, come out! Let’s play! Marina knows the snow piles up and melts away again more than once, and only later comes winter, frost, decorated trees twinkling on the streets with garlands and balls on their branches and topped by a silver star in a circle.

But that’s not anytime soon. Right now all she can do is look out the window and try to guess whether the first snow will last until classes are over or vanish the moment it touches the ground, like a snowflake on the window ledge.

“And Marina Petrova, I see, is still looking out the window,” DD says. “She must know the subject of today’s lesson better than the teacher. Isn’t that right, Petrova?”

After that business with sliding down the banisters, DD took advantage of any occasion to pick on her. Now she wasn’t supposed to look out the window, thank you very kindly.

“No,” Marina replies. “I don’t know the subject of today’s lesson. But you’re not going to write it on the board anyway, so I can look out the window.”

“Fine,” the geography teacher says. “Since I’m not writing on the board, then I’ll ask someone to come up and write for us, for example . . . the five main characteristics of non-black-earth soils.

“That would be . . .”—plunging his fingers into his tousled hair, he leans over his journal—“that would be . . .”—the class falls still because no one knows the five main characteristics—“ah, here, let’s have Petrova!”

Marina stands up and out of the corner of her eye sees Nika has opened her textbook and is pointing with her bitten nail at the relevant paragraph. Marina jerks her head up proudly—she wouldn’t be able to read it anyway!—and walks to the board. As if she hadn’t had enough crumbs from Nika! It’s not enough that Marina has lost the free seat beside her. Now even Lev is starting in at the drop of a hat: “You know, Nika said . . . Nika thinks . . .”

True, Lev only talks about Nika to Marina and Gosha. They’re friends, of course, and they’re not going to tease him. But the rest would die laughing if they heard him. That’s great! The smartest boy is friends with the stupid fool from No. 5! 5-ers are stupid. Everybody knows that.

Marina is standing at the board. It’s good she remembers three of the five characteristics, but she’s going to have to make up the other two. They don’t give you less than “average” for anything—and they’ve been shrugging off Marina’s “averages” at home for a long time. Her mama knows that at the quarter there’ll be nothing but “good’s” again, but during the semester they never happen—just “average” or “excellent.”

Of course, Marina could study better—but why? There’s so much that’s interesting in life without that! Instead of studying boring lessons, it’s better to race bicycles with Gosha or discuss with Lev whether there’s going to be a sequel to *The Last of the Maltese Falcons*, or whether it’s true DD is a spy for the dead.

Marina thinks no, it’s not true, but Lev tried to convince her that it could very well be because first of all DD is nasty, secondly it’s unclear why he goes on those idiotic field trips, and thirdly there are always spies in schools—just watch any movie!

Gosha as was his habit said, "Awesome!" but Marina argued that if the geography teacher was a spy, they would have caught him long ago. Anyway, now there was peace with the dead and spies were only in the movies.

Marina knows more about the dead than anyone in class. After all, sometimes her papa goes to receptions at the Ministry for Affairs Abroad, meets with dead envoys, and concludes various trade deals, buys dead technology or dead clothing—the very same you'd never find in stores, only from friends or on the black market. Marina has asked her papa a hundred times to get her a dead cassette player because the living players sold in the stores keep breaking and chewing up the tape—but her papa categorically refuses. Her mama has explained that the dead are always offering him presents to get him to reach an agreement with them, on their terms. But he can't accept the presents.

If people found out, at best he'd be fired from his job.

Now Marina is going to have to limit herself to her papa's rare stories about the dead. He says the dead aren't anything like the way they're shown in the movies—at least, not the dead her papa knows. They're well dressed and white-skinned, they wear sunglasses, as a rule, and dinner jackets, and basically look like people in every way except they really don't like sun. So their business meetings take place at night, and in the morning her papa sleeps in, so Marina sees him only on weekends.

Naturally, her papa doesn't care about Marina's "averages," especially in geography. She always has "excellents" in the dead languages, and her papa values that. Not for nothing did he once want to send her to a special language school.

Marina goes outside. Great, the snow still hasn't melted! Laughing, she throws a snowball at Gosha and shouts, "The season opener?"

"Uh huh!" And dropping his satchel, Gosha grabs a handful of snow.

Lev's already run off somewhere, so fast Marina was even surprised.

"What's with him?" she asks Gosha.

"Maybe he went to walk Nika home?"

“Nika-Kika,” Marina replies meanly. “Isn’t he our friend in anymore? Have I understood correctly?”

“Why isn’t he?” Gosha shrugged. “Can’t he be friends with her and us?”

“We got along without her before somehow,” Marina said, “and it was fine.”

In the coatroom she told Gosha about the dead movie her Uncle KOlga had once seen and later told her about. It was a movie about dead kara-ho, only it was called something different. The action took place in a special monastery school, and the main hero had to be taught the subtleties of martial arts by four ghosts.

Basically, dead movies always have quite a few ghosts—which is no surprise, of course.

Ghosts are dead, too, only they’ve crossed the Boundary.

At this point Marina always gets confused but she’s embarrassed to ask her papa. The dead her papa and Uncle KOlga deal with aren’t ghosts, that’s for sure. And naturally they aren’t fighting zombies either: dead who’ve lost their minds and been thrown at a gap in the Boundary. That means not all the dead who cross the Boundary become ghosts. She wishes she could figure it all out, but there’s nothing written in books, and Marina can’t bring herself to ask her papa. She could also talk to Pavel Vasilievich, but for that she has to wait for the right moment, when he starts reminiscing about the war. That’s when she should ask.

Gosha’s snowball hits Marina right on the nose. Things get wet and silly.

“Okay, watch out!” she shouts. “You’re not getting away!”

“What’ll it be, until first blood?” Lev says.

Vadik shoves him in the chest:

“Hey, Red, the very fleetest, are you?”

“You’re the fleetest.”

It’s a traditional ritual: the pushes, the insults, the stomping around in a circle, and only after that—the fight.

Lev and Vadik are stomping around the sports academy yard surrounded by 5-ers. Yesterday Lev walked up to the fence and yelled: “Tomorrow after classes I’m coming to fight Vadik, one on one, like men!”

One on one, yeah!

He didn’t tell his friends anything. Gosha wouldn’t have let him go alone, and Lev wanted an honest duel.

Now, surrounded by the crowd of 5ers, he regrets it. He wouldn’t mind his own cheering squad.

Lev takes the first blow on the ear. With his left hand, Lev grabs his opponent by the shirtfront, and with his right takes a swing and punches him in the face. Vadik didn’t have time to block the punch—looks like he’s sure to have a black eye! He breaks Lev’s grasp and jumps back half a meter.

“Good punch, right?” Lev asks, catching his breath.

“To the max,” Vadik replies, and he gives Lev a sharp push in the chest.

Lev jumps back and immediately falls. Tripped! An underhanded, treacherous trip! He tries to get up, but one of the 5ers pulls his cap down over his eyes. Another starts twisting his arm, and Lev cries out from pain and surprise.

“A little pain trick,” he hears over his ear.

“That’s dishonest,” Lev’s voice is hoarse. “We agreed one on one.”

“How about it, guys, did I ever agree?” That’s Vadik’s voice. “Somehow I don’t remember that.”

They shove Lev face first into the ground, which is wet from the melted snow.

“Let’s beat the living crap out of Red,” someone suggests.

Lev tries to break away, but in vain. They’re holding him too tight, and his cap is still pulled down over his eyes, and Lev doesn’t even know where to expect the blow to come from.

“Hey, kid, show us what you’ve got!” someone encourages Vadik.

“Smart guy’s looking for some blood, eh?” that one asks, and he punches Lev in the face.

Half an hour later, the snow in the schoolyard is nearly gone. Marina is shaking what's left of the snowballs from her messy hair.

"Let's call it a draw," she tells Gosha.

"I think I won."

"And why's that I wonder?"

"That's the sign. Even if you say it's a draw, that means I really won," Gosha explains, "but if you shout 'I won!' –well, that means a draw."

"Well, that means I won!" Marina laughs.

They pick their satchels up off the ground and walk toward the school gates—and stop. Standing there is Lev. Tattered, mud-stained, he's holding his shoe bag with a torn strap under his arm.

His busted lip is bleeding.

"Awesome!" Gosha says, dismayed.

"What happened to you?" Marina says. "Did the 5ers attack?"

"Well, they didn't attack," Lev says. "I called Vadik out for a duel, but the whole mob showed up, well, and then. . . . I wanted to wash up at school so I wouldn't scare Sonya. . . . I didn't know you'd still be here."

"Wait up," Gosha says. "Start from the beginning. What duel? Over Nika was it?"

"No," Lev says, wiping his nose with his sleeve. "Sonya."

He tells them his story, and Marina feels herself growing angrier by the minute. This means war. Just like that great war between the living and the dead. Only this time, this is her war, Marina's war, against Vadik and the other 5ers. Lev's busted lip and his torn bag are a challenge the 5ers have thrown down to her, Marina. The Fish could make Olga monitor every year, but Marina knows who's in charge in their class. So any insult against her classmates—and especially her friends—is a personal insult for her, Marina.

"Well, if they haven't already run away, I'll cut them down this minute," Gosha says.

“They’re probably already hiding, the cowards,” Marina says, but she’s already mapping out her battle plan. Encirclement, capture, annihilation. Traps, maneuvers, and attacks. No, this time the 5ers won’t get off with a simple fight. She’s going to find a way to recoup Lev’s loss and force Vadik to eat dirty snow.

To first blood? To the last drop!

Marina’s fists squeeze.

“That’s all right, Lev,” Gosha says. “We’ll get even with them.”

“We will definitely get even,” Marina says. “We promise!”

“We swear!” Gosha adds.

Lev wipes off the blood running down his chin and remembers swearing two weeks ago, too, to get even for his sister. He looks at Marina and Gosha and wants to believe that together they can do what he couldn’t by himself.

“Let’s go to my place,” Gosha says. “I’ll sew up your bag. And you can wash up at the same time. My parents aren’t home anyway, so it’s perfectly fine.”

The three of them walk across the autumn square. The first snow has nearly melted and only under the trees here and there can you see islands of white—but they’ll disappear soon, too.

6

Pavel Vasilievich is sitting with his elbows propped on his teaching desk. His gray mustache has drooped mournfully, and his eyes are looking out under bushy eyebrows. Right now he really does look like the tired old cat Nika and Lev saw at the pet store.

“What can I tell you?” he says. “You’ve heard it all a hundred times. You know everything.”

He doesn’t mean Nika, of course. She’s never heard Pavel Vasilievich’s war stories. True, her Aunt Sveta has told her about the war a hundred times, and Nika’s not all that interested in one more story. She doesn’t say anything—not because of that but because every word of hers provokes a burst of snide comments and insults from Olga and her little friends.

“Tell us about the fulcis,” Lev asks from the fourth bench.

“Or about how you crossed the Boundary,” someone chimes in.

“Pavel Vasilievich, tell us about some defeat,” Marina says all of a sudden.

“A defeat?” The teacher is surprised. “On Victory Day?”

“Well, this is the conventional day,” Marina says. “We know all about it. In fact, Victory Day is celebrated on October 30 because that was the night our troops pushed back the dead and crossed the Boundary. The forces of the dead were routed on their territory, but when that happened, nobody knows. It took the soldiers six months to get back from the other side. Everyone told stories about the losses and the victory, but they couldn’t name a date. Apparently, on the other side of the Boundary time moves completely differently. It may not move at all. Some scientists describe Abroad as a series of areas, each of which has its own frozen piece of time. That’s probably why the dead shoot so many historical films. For them, the days of the Musketeers and pirates are still going on. You just have to find the area where that specific time stopped.”

“Fine,” Pavel Vasilievich says. “I’ll tell you how Ard Alurin’s squadron perished. I know for a fact I’ve never told you that one.

“You know, of course, that before the war the Boundary was still not strong enough,” Pavel Vasilievich began his story. “The dead could cross it here and there. If some movement was noticed, of course, something would be done about it. But for the most part, the Boundary in those days was like a sieve. There were various reasons for this, and now’s not the time to talk about that. What’s important is that only we, in the capital, had securely blocked all ways in. So when the war began and the dead crawled out of every nook and cranny, they couldn’t get to the capital. That is, they couldn’t cross the Boundary right here, in the city. They crawled out there, in the domains, and then assembled into detachments and from there moved over the land, like ordinary troops. That means our main mission in the first stage of the war was to keep them out of here, our city.”

Pavel Vasilievich stands up and, leaning on his stick, walks toward the board, as if about to write something. He looks pensively at the quieted children and continues.

“You know, the war started very suddenly. The troops were untrained, we didn’t have much in the way of weapons, let alone enough bullets. People brought the family silver, candlesticks, knives, forks, even teaspoons, even earrings and rings to be melted down. It was later that the northern silver mines started working full tilt, but for the first months it was very hard. And here Major Alurin’s detachment was supposed to defend the city on the northwestern front, along the Petrovsk Highway. There were just twenty-six of them, but these were experienced soldiers who had fought back during the Drawing of Boundaries. Back before the war Ard Alurin had been a living legend, a real fighter. People said even he had lost count of the dead he’d annihilated. In short, if anyone could defend the Petrovsk Highway, then it was his detachment. So they fortified themselves on a height, in an old church, and from there they repulsed the attacks of the dead.”

To her own surprise, Nika is listening with interest. Her Aunt Sveta has very different stories.

She’d fought in a partisan detachment as a very young girl. More than just once or twice she had infiltrated the headquarters of the dead, passing herself off as a bitten dead officer (their weakness for pretty girls was already well known). A couple of times her Aunt Sveta had let Nika touch the very silver knife she’d spirited in in her broad sleeve. Nika imagined it breathed death and fear to this day.

In fact, Aunt Sveta was Nika’s great-aunt, but since childhood she’s called her “aunt,” the way her papa did. After Nika was left on her own, her Aunt Sveta took her in.

At first, Nika was afraid of her aunt’s war stories and kept thinking that all of a sudden one of the dead her aunt had destroyed—maybe he was somebody’s papa, too. What if her papa was trying to fight his way through to her, but border guards were waiting for him at the Boundary with silver bullets and trained dogs?

For the first six months after her parents' death, Nika didn't mention them even once. What was there to say? After all, to everyone else they were enemies, the dead, and only for her did they remain her mama and papa, whom she loved so dearly.

But later, at No. 5, someone found out what had happened to her parents.

"There were just fifteen of them left," Pavel Vasilievich continues, "and then the fulcis went on the attack. I hope you never have to find out what a fulci attack is. In the movies you can't show the most terrible part. And the most terrible part is the smell. Well, and also what they feel like. In that sense, even romeros are better. They're more dangerous of course, and nastier, but psychologically they're much simpler to deal with. The main thing is to shoot them in the head, even with ordinary bullets. But if the flesh of a fulci runs between your fingers even once—you'll never forget it until your own departure."

Pavel Vasilievich falls silent. Once again he's sitting at his desk, examining his big, wrinkly hands. Nika is sitting with her eyes lowered, too, and she can't forget either how the mud her shoe bag was filled with ran between her fingers.

When they found out her parents were dead, her classmates at first avoided Nika, as if they were afraid they'd catch death, like a contagion. Later they tried to find out how her parents had perished. By accident?

Or maybe they themselves wanted to be dead. Maybe they themselves had fled Abroad. Maybe Nika herself wanted to be a defector. Maybe even now she was spying for the dead.

That was when Vadik suggested they check it out. If they tormented Nika, would her dead parents show up to rescue her? They should stuff her bag with mud, stick her book bag into the tank of the men's toilet, and glue Nika to a chair and see what she would do. . . .

In fact, Nika knew what she should do. She should declare herself a deather—like the famous Annabel from her old school.

Legends were told about Annabel at that school. For instance, people said she always carried a silver dagger on her, which she'd inherited from her grandmother, who were lost at the front. And that

once, when she was attacked by a gang of enemies—which gang and which enemies Nika didn't remember—Annabel had said, “I can't deal with all of you, but I want you to know I'll fight to my very last. I'm a deather and I'm not afraid of death. I'm a deather, and I scorn pain. Watch!” And grabbing her knife she stabbed her own hand so that blood gushed in a stream in her attackers' faces. People said that after this her enemies fled without doing her any harm whatsoever.

That's how she should act! Wear black clothing with silver zippers and hearts, and at the slightest provocation say, Yes, she's proud of her dead parents!

Too bad I'm such a chicken, Nika thinks, biting the nail on her left pinkie. I'll never be able to be like Annabel. I was even afraid to go up to her—so I'd watch her from a distance.

Thank God no one in this school except Lev knows what happened to my mama and papa.

She probably shouldn't have told Lev either, but for some reason she trusted him that evening, and for some reason she still does.

If Olga and her little friends find about her mama and papa, she dreads what will happen!

“In short, Major Alurin's squadron beat off the fulcis. Then, from the other side, they sent a truce envoy. It was a girl, somewhere around your age, who looked a little like her,” Pavel Vasilievich nods at Nika, “only skinnier. She walked across that stinking field where annihilated fulcis were decomposing and held a slender branch, freshly cut, still green. Tied to it was a lacy white handkerchief.

“She came very close when suddenly Major Alurin grabbed his gun, and if the soldiers hadn't piled on, he would have shot her. Still, we did try to fight honestly—not wiping out truce envoys, honoring ceasefires, well, and all that sort of thing. But the girl got very very close and said to Alurin, “Uncle sends greetings, Papa. He says, come see us, our men have all gathered already.” You realize they'd sent Ard Alurin his daughter. They'd found his family somewhere and killed them all. Now Major Alurin would have to shoot his own relatives—his brother, wife, and daughter. That's what a terrible war it was, children. That's why people say history has never known a more terrible war.”

No, Nika thinks. Aunt Sveta never told me stories about anything like that. To listen to her, no one ever encountered their own dead, just dead that showed up out of nowhere, strangers. Maybe even from other worlds on the other side of Abroad, like the fantasy writers write about. But here, apparently, you can also encounter your own dead.

Your mama and papa.

The last time Nika saw her parents alive was a little less than fifteen months ago. An ordinary summer's day, the small vestibule of their apartment. Her parents were late, her papa was nervous, and her mama was looking in the mirror. Then they kissed Nika—and left. And four hours later, on the way home, a drunk driver crashed his dump trunk into their taxi.

To this day, Nika envies those people her mama and papa were visiting then because they saw her parents a few hours longer than she did.

“ . . . and when the sun was setting, they went on the attack again. Everyone realized this was the final attack. Ard Alurin realized it and so did all his fighters. They had almost no bullets left, and for weapons they had only silver knives and aspen stakes—in case of an upyr attack. They held out all night, almost 'til dawn—and in the morning new troops came up and knocked the dead back. But Major Alurin and his men were already dead. They held the road to town for five days against entire hordes of the dead. We buried them and with a military salute honored these heroes' memory. Because even though they were lost, they carried out their combat mission and did not let the enemy approach the city.”

Pavel Vasilievich falls silent.

“Excuse me”—Nika hears Lev's voice—“I wanted to ask you something. What do you think, after his death did Major Alurin see his relatives?”

“That no one knows,” the teacher replies. “We don't even know whether the dead took Ard Alurin into their ranks. You know, they always tried to kill soldiers like that. After all, dead fighters nearly always kept fighting, only on the other side now. I said 'nearly always' because some refused to fight against their recent comrades. Some even fought on our side, in the enemy's rear, so to speak. They

became saboteurs or scouts. People say Ard Alurin was one of those fighters, but as you realize, this information was top secret then. It may still be.”

Nika nods. A long time ago she'd heard there was such a thing as “good dead.” Before her parents passed, she'd never believed it. But for the last year she's often thought that maybe in fact after they passed her mama and papa didn't change at all, didn't forget her, didn't become enemies to everyone living.

While changing her shoes in the coatroom, Nika listens to Olga whispering about something with her little friends. She catches “said that she looks like it, after all, you heard yourself . . .” and then they come up to her as a gang, and Olga asks her with a malicious grin, “Kika, tell me, is it true your parents are—dead?”

Well, here it is, Nika thinks. I was wrong to tell Lev. Wrong.

She raises her head and answers, looking Olga straight in the eyes.

“Yes, it's true. My parents passed. What's it to you, you vile creature?”

7

Gosha greeted Annabel for the second time that day his mama left again on an expedition.

This time she was going to the White Sea. It had taken her two years to get permission for the journey. She'd stocked up on certificates and permissions, obtained access to secret maps—and now, finally, the Institute directors had backed her itinerary. On the eve of her departure, his mama cooked dinner, and Gosha baked a festive cake from a box.

It's a snap to make a cake like that: you mix the packet contents with water, add butter and cinnamon (if you have some in the house), then grease a cake pan and dump in the batter. The first time Gosha baked this cake he was all of ten—it just so happened both his mama and his papa were delayed on an expedition so Gosha had to prepare for the occasion on his own. He invited Marina and Lev, and they had a grand time, and they ate the whole cake, although that time he burned it a little.

Gosha liked to invite guests to his house; after all, it was his home, sometimes maybe even more than his mama and papa's.

When a week later Gosha visited Lev, his mama asked, "Why didn't you say your mama and papa weren't back? I would have given you a hand."

At the time, Gosha was actually a little offended.

"Sofia Markovna," he asked, "you mean Lev said I couldn't manage? Did I really need your help?"

"Oh no," Lev's mama replied. "You're very independent. We know that."

Gosha had in fact grown up to be independent. His parents were constantly away on work trips and expeditions, and his grandmothers and grandfathers lived in another town.

Independent is fine and dandy, but saying goodbye to his mama was always sad.

"Don't be sad, Gosha," his mama said. "I'll be back by New Year's. If I'm lucky, I'll bring you a starfish as a present."

"I don't need presents," Gosha growled. "And really, it's perfectly fine, Ma, don't sweat it."

But when his mama was leaving, he suddenly hugged her and pressed his cheek to her smoky-smelling canvas windbreaker.

"Time for me to go," his mama said, and she kissed the back of his head.

Now Gosha is trying not to think about his mama. He has another, important matter. He either walks at a leisurely pace or runs fast to the next corner, pokes his head around for a second—and immediately pulls it back.

Today he's following DD. Lev said the shrimpy geography teacher was a spy, and Gosha's used to believing Lev.

Actually, even if Lev's wrong, it's turning out to be an excellent secret game.

DD lives far from school, downtown. Five metro stops—so he had to keep running out of the car all the time to make sure he hadn't gotten out. Gosha was already afraid he'd missed him—but no, there he was, DD, his coat and soft flat cap, walking fifty meters or so up ahead.

His hands stuck into his jacket pockets, Gosha creeps along the leaning wooden fence. The exact same way Yashka, the hero of *Uncatchable*, crept along following his enemy. Gosha tries to make a special face, like his cousin Ilya's—courageous and sly at the same time. Oh, too bad no one can see him!

There's rusty barbed wire across the fence top, and here and there the boards are barely holding on. If DD turns around he can try to slip quickly into the yard . . . well, or whatever that is there, behind the fence. Some institute?

Gosha peeks through a crack: a vacant lot overgrown with burdock and tall grass, and set back, a lopsided old house.

There are lots of old houses in the city. There are apartment houses on the outskirts, but downtown, in an irregular polygon bounded by the river on the south and squares on the three other sides, there are more old houses, four or five stories, built back before May, before the Drawing of Boundaries. Some buildings hold various institutions—ministries, institutes, and commissions, but the majority are residential. Sometimes there are several families in one apartment, the stove is gas, not electric, and there's not even hot water. They have to heat it with special water heaters. What a difference the new brick buildings—nine, twelve stories. It's usually successful, famous people living in those; at the extreme end, highly placed officials, like Marina's papa. Well, right now Marina has an apartment in a very ordinary building, but she's told me lots of times that her papa was offered an apartment downtown. Apparently Marina persuaded him to turn it down. She'd have to take the metro to school from there, and anyway, she'd lived her whole life near Lev and Gosha. Why would she leave?

Gosha turns the corner—in time to see DD vanish into an entryway. Okay, that means this is where he lives.

It'd be great to set up an observation post behind the fence, Gosha thinks. Why not? Pull off a board and there you have it! No big deal. Look, the 5ers are always putting holes in their fence—so why shouldn't he, Gosha? Especially since the building and the lot look totally uninhabited—which means no one's going to notice.

So Gosha, his hands stuck in his pockets, walks along the fence, pretending he's just looking from side to side. One of the boards is slightly pushed back. He walks up and casually tries to pry it off. At first nothing happens, but then the board gives way and falls with a crack to the ground, opening a narrow gap to the overgrown yard.

Gosha looks around and crawls through the crack.

Gosha has always been proud of his city and its broad avenues and green boulevards, its handsome modern apartment buildings, its Palace of Little Stars, and the silver stars on the tall towers.

When he was little, he often thought how lucky he was to be born at just this time, a little less than sixty years after the Drawing of Boundaries and thirty after the Victory. He tried to imagine life the way it used to be, when the dead had all the wealth and the living were their slaves. He tried to imagine his own life in that old city, the way he saw it only in the movies—and every time, nothing came of it. Because it was impossible to imagine his hometown without high-rises, honking cars, and multicolored traffic lights. . . .

Here, in this vacant yard, Gosha feels as though he's dropped through a hole in time.

The tall, overgrown weeds, stunted bushes, and shriveled autumn grass—and the silent, gloomy house with the boarded windows.

It seems to Gosha that nothing here has changed in the last sixty years. The same bushes, the same grass, the same house. They built a fence around this place and strung barbed wire—and time stopped, stopped moving.

Just like Abroad.

A dead house, Gosha thinks.

For some reason he immediately realizes that this is a dead building, a building where there should be ghosts.

It turns out that dead things aren't always pretty and stylish.

Sweat dribbles down his back. The house looks at Gosha through its boarded windows as if through lowered eyelids.

For some reason, Gosha remembers saying goodbye to his mama in the morning—and a vague alarm rises in his chest. He turns around and presses up to the crack in the fence. How could he forget? This is an observation point!

In fact, DD's door is in plain view.

Now all Gosha has to do is figure out how long he intends to sit here. And what he actually intends to see.

At that moment he hears voices.

“But my uncle was telling me about another dead movie, about a killer . . . he lured girls to his house and killed them. And laid it all on his dead mother.”

A cracking boyish voice.

Answering him is another voice, older, deepish.

“And the killer himself is dead?”

“Of course not,” the first boy answers. “It's a dead movie. In dead movies the killers are always alive and the dead are good.”

“You mean his mama was good?”

“Well, yeah, probably. He kept her in the basement, but later she got out and attacked him.”

“Can your uncle get a hold of the movie?”

This is a third voice. Girlie, girlish. Gosha's heard it somewhere. He presses up harder to the crack and squints to make out who's talking.

“No,” the boy says. “He saw it at someone else's house. Well, you know how that is, right? Someone got a tape, everyone got together one night, and they watched. They don't let kids in there. They're afraid we'll blab,” the older one says with contempt.

“We never blab,” the girl says. “We're deathers and we know how to keep our word.”

Deathers! Well, of course. They should like dead movies, too.

Right then Gosha recognizes the voice. Of course! It's Annabel, the girl from the Palace of Little Stars.

Gosha starts feeling uneasy. No, he's not scared—he's no scaredy cat, of course.

That's all he needed! Still, people said different things about deathers. What if they were to come here, into the yard, see him, and guess he'd been eavesdropping? Who would like that?

An abandoned house, a vacant lot. No one around.

True, deathers weren't 5ers. They were grown up, decisive.

There was nowhere to run.

Trying not to make any noise, Gosha looks back at the house. Hide there maybe?

For a second Gosha pictures it: here he is crossing the yard, pulling off boards, and climbing through a window.

The dimness, the smell of old dead wood. . . .

Gosha thinks the building winks at him: Come on, what are you waiting for?

Naturally, Gosha's no scaredy cat, but for some reason he stands there, unable to move. Stands there, pressed up to the fence. Behind him is the empty yard and the boarded-up house. In front of his face are the rough boards and the narrow crack.

He sees the three deathers crossing the street. Black leather jackets and tall boots. In the yellowish light of the streetlamps, their zigzag zippers and broken silver hearts gleam.

Two boys and Annabel. The taller one has his arm around Annabel's shoulders—and for some reason Gosha doesn't like the look of that, though he's glad the deathers are walking away. They're strolling down the sidewalk—and they part to let a young woman in a red jacket by.

Opening the door, she walks into a building—the very same entry DD went into half an hour before.

A tall young woman. Wearing a dead red jacket and dead knee-high boots. Her face is half-covered in a scarf, but Gosha recognizes her right away.

Zinaida Sergeevna, Zinochka.