

Spy's Mate
Brad Buchanan

SPY'S MATE

A Novel

Brad Buchanan

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Author's Note

All characters in this story are entirely fictional; any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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This book is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Susan Elizabeth Buchanan (née Castle), who taught me and my brother James to play chess when we were children. In doing so, she conferred on us a lifelong gift.

“Chess is a war over the board.
The object is
to crush the opponent's mind.”

—*Bobby Fischer*

“There is no remorse
like the remorse of chess.”

—*H.G. Wells*

BOOK I: OPENING

Chapter One

*Hrazdan, Kotayk Province
Socialist Republic of Armenia*

“Please don’t go to the hospital, Mama,” said Yasha Basmajian, his dark eyes downcast and his fists clenched tightly. Yasha was an earnest, beetle-browed boy with high cheekbones, dark curly hair, and thick red lips that he tried to hide when he was nervous. He was short for his age but had the round shoulders and thick torso of a boxer.

“Yasha, be reasonable,” said Shoushan in a soft, raspy voice. “The doctors can’t very well operate on me here.”

She made a graceful, helpless gesture which encompassed both the bed on which she lay and the cold, dingy, one-room apartment she shared with her son. She was a wiry, sad-eyed woman with strong, uneven teeth that gave her face an equine look.

“But I don’t want to go to Yerevan...” Yasha said sullenly. “I don’t want to stay with Uncle Boghos and Aunt Narguiz.”

“Why not?”

“Semyon bullies me.”

“I have asked your aunt to make sure it stops,” said Shoushan.

“When I am feeling better, I will join you in Yerevan.”

“What if you don’t feel better?” Yasha asked.

“Don’t be silly,” Shoushan rasped. “Of course I will feel better, after they remove the mass in my throat.”

“I have read about your illness, Mama,” he said.

“About my illness?” she asked, alarmed. “Where?”

“In the school library,” he replied. “The medical textbooks say that advanced pulmonary diseases like yours are difficult to cure.”

“Oh, Yasha...” Shoushan closed her eyes and turned her head away. “You shouldn’t believe everything you read...”

“Mama, I’m afraid—”

“Afraid of what?”

“Afraid that if you go into the hospital, and I go to Yerevan, I will never see you again.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Yasha. You can come and see me the day after my procedure, if you like. I won’t just vanish into thin air.”

There was a long pause.

“That reminds me,” she said, sitting up straighter. “Before I go to Nairi, I want you to have something. Bring me that box over there, please.”

Yasha complied, and she rummaged ineffectually through the box.

“What are you looking for?” he asked.

“Oh, that Khachkar cross of my father’s...” She sank back down into her nest of threadbare pillows.

“A cross?” Yasha frowned. “Why?”

“Why?” she echoed him softly. “I wanted you to give something to take with you to Yerevan, that’s why.”

“Don’t bother yourself about it, mother.”

“Well, have a look in the box to see if there’s anything you want.”

“Well, what about this?” He pulled out a rectangular box with checkerboard patterns on its sides.

“That old chess set...” she murmured. “Do you want it? Do you like to play chess?”

“I don’t really know...” Yasha rubbed his jaw. For as long as he could remember, he loved to watch the old men playing chess in Arabkir park, but he had never worked up the nerve to join in any of their games.

“Let me show you how the pieces move, anyway...”

Shoushan laid the set across her lap, opened it, and carefully set up the four ranks across from each other on the yellowing board.

“Aren’t the pieces beautiful?” Shoushan spoke the names of the pieces: *peshka*, *kon*, *slon*, *ladya*, and *korol*. Then she picked up a tall, curved figure with a crown. “This is *ferz*, the queen. She is the strongest one.”

Yasha knew this, of course, but something in her fierce dark face kept him quiet.

“You can sacrifice her,” Shoushan told him, her eyes narrowing, “but only if you are sure you can win without her.”

Yasha bit his lower lip.

“But remember this too,” she said, putting the queen back down in her place. “You can also make a new queen.”

She showed him, with short hops and little diagonal thrusts, how a pawn might travel all the way up the board and reach the other side. Then, with a magician’s flourish, she pulled another piece from the box and planted it among the black ranks.

“It’s like a new baby sister,” Yasha said with a smile.

“Or, you could say, it’s like a second mother.”

“But I don’t want a second mother,” he protested childishly. “I only want you.”

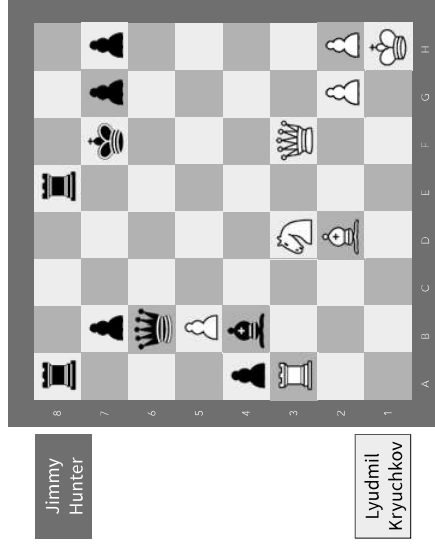
Seeing his youthful face set so firmly, she gave a soft wheeze of laughter.

“All right, my boy, very well,” she said. “A baby sister, if you like.”

*

“Check.”

Lyudmil Kryuchkov noted his move on his scoresheet: queen to f3.



“Thanks a bunch, Comrade Kryuchkov,” said Jimmy Hunter, his pinched face twisting in sarcasm. “I know when I’m in check.” It was long past dusk, and the gallery of the Hotel Petollinen had become a striking chiaroscuro, with white stage lights throwing dark shadows on the floor and walls.

The two men sitting at the chessboard were also a study in contrasts. Jimmy Hunter, the World Chess Champion, was a thin, pale young American with a monkish air. He had chosen chess as his religion and held the world’s follies in extreme contempt. He wore a cheap brown suit with a drab brown tie that was loosened and off-center, and his haircut was a slapdash affair, with a brush cut at the back and an aesthete’s lank coxcomb at the front.

Kryuchkov, his Russian challenger, was a cultured, middle-aged *bon vivant* with a distinct penchant for wine, women, and song—especially in the moist mouth of the enchanting soprano Maria Guendouzi. His thick black hair blended smoothly into a pair of virile but well-tended sideburns, and he wore a bespoke tan suit made from sharkskin, with a tasteful paisley pattern and a matching cravat fastened tightly in an impeccable Windsor knot.

Their histories too were remarkably different: Hunter had been a child prodigy who had risen like a rocket and reigned over chess for eight turbulent years. A mercurial genius who lived and breathed chess, he had delayed this latest defense of his title for months with capricious demands and last-minute changes of heart. Kryuchkov, on the other hand, had been a concert pianist before ascending to the chess elite, and he had managed to straddle the seemingly opposed worlds of Communist Party ideology and cosmopolitan *joie de vivre*.

Kryuchkov’s detractors in the Soviet Chess Federation had often wondered when his virtuoso balancing act would begin to take its toll on him, and his latest move seemed to lend some credence to their gloomy predictions. Instead of giving the more aggressive check on h5, Kryuchkov’s white queen had rather lazily offered check on f3.

Hunter’s dark-square bishop was hanging undefended, and would no doubt be taken with the next move, but that was nothing to worry about since Black still had a pair of rooks. The World Champion examined his challenger’s expression. Was there confidence or frustration in his enemy’s eyes? Did the Russian’s move have some unsuspected venom in it somewhere?

*

While Yasha and his mother prepared to leave their home in Hrazdan, and Hunter was pondering his next move in Helsinki, two distant but related events occurred.

The first was a heartwarming reunion of the sort memorialized in American made-for-television movies, the kind a few lucky residents of the Soviet Union might watch on smuggled video cassettes if they wanted to cry a few crocodile tears. A middle-aged American man with fashionably ugly muttonchop whiskers descended from an airplane, his overcoat over one forearm and a cheap briefcase in his hand. Accosted on the tarmac by his long-suffering wife and two adoring children, he dropped his meager baggage and sank to his knees in gratitude.

The second event was a much less telegenic affair: a slim and slack-jawed bureaucrat—bearing another symbolic briefcase and wearing

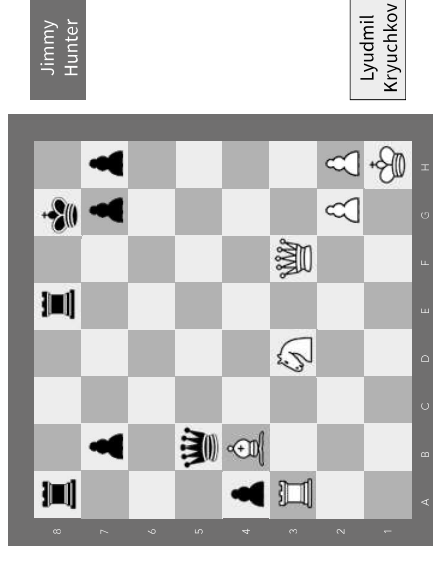
a well-tailored if lightly soiled suit—was walking briskly through a deserted airport, escorted by two walrus-faced CIA officers. This unhappy party was met by a matching set of thugs from the KGB, who hustled him aboard a red-eye flight to Berlin. The dark-haired Beau Brummell was none other than Adom Levoni Rutskoï, an infamous dandy known to his few friends and many enemies as an absurdly ambitious KGB operative, a kind of Marxist James Bond. Into the lining of Rutskoï's haberdashery something small but important had been sewn: an integrated circuit, also known as a microchip.

These crisscrossing gentlemen, the subjects (or objects) of a prisoner exchange between the United States of America and the USSR during the last few frigid battles of the Cold War, never met officially. However, their paths crossed briefly in Berlin, as the already euphoric American was changing planes and Rutskoï was frogmarched along mercilessly by his humorless minders. Familiar to each other from their shared professional interests, they nodded respectfully *en passant*.

※

Hunter calmly evaded White's check by moving his king behind his g-pawn, then turned back to scrutinize his opponent. Kryuchkov avoided Hunter's searching glance for as long as he dared, then shot back a would-be intimidating glare as he took Black's unprotected bishop with his own bishop on b4. In calm reply, Hunter gently moved his queen on b6 one square down the board, to b5, thus eliminating White's only advanced pawn.

It was an unspectacular move, but it seemed to bring the truth of Kryuchkov's position home to him rather thuddingly. To his growing horror, the challenger realized that his king was now cowering nearly undefended on h1, while his rook was stuck behind an advanced black pawn cemented on a4.



White's queen was fully occupied defending his knight, which was in turn stretching to protect his bishop. Meanwhile, Black's rooks were free of any immediate defensive duties, and a second black passed pawn was getting ready to waltz down the board in search of the consummation of a queenship.

Kryuchkov's frown deepened.

※

Meanwhile, in Moscow, three individuals had gathered, not for the first time, in a small and exceedingly dingy room in the Grishko Building, home to the Fourth Division of the Twelfth Department of the Third Directorate of the KGB. Two middle-aged men in gray business suits sat at their respective desks, while a woman in equally drab if more feminine dress was seated at a stool between them, gazing blankly at a neatly stacked pile of papers on her lap. One of the men—a former wrestler who had the face of an eager pig and cauliflower ears—had a pen in his hand, while the other, a young man with a prematurely receding hairline, twirled an unlit cigarette between his fingers.

"I told you, Comrade Pugachov," cooed the twirler. "It's perfectly useless. They know we are listening to them."

"I am not convinced of that, Comrade Ulyanov," replied the porcine would-be scribe. "Please continue, Comrade Melinskaya."

“Very well.” Melinskaya refocused on her pile. “This is Edelstein’s wife speaking now: ‘I think we need some new shoes for the children. They have nearly worn through their soles.’”

“Ah! Treason!” exclaimed Ulyanov with leaden sarcasm. His high-browed face, more expressive than even he realized, became a mask of stupid accusation. “The Jewish extremist is claiming that Soviet cobblers are unable to repair children’s shoes properly. Arrest them immediately.”

“Perhaps it is some kind of code,” Pugachov suggested, without much conviction. “Can you please remind me, who else was present for this conversation?”

“Edelstein was present,” Melinskaya said in her stenographer’s soothing monotone. “His wife, of course, and two of Edelstein’s chess coaches: Grandmaster Alleyne, the Britisher, and Grandmaster Fredericksson, the Swede.”

“His entire chess team, then?”

“Yes, I suppose so,” said Melinskaya.

“Then perhaps they are discussing strategy for his next chess match!” Pugachov gazed at Ulyanov defiantly. “New shoes for the children’ could mean that she is suggesting new opening, with pawns advancing, could it not?”

“It might...” said Ulyanov with a yawn. “But I wouldn’t bet my career on it, Comrade, if I were you.”

“Remember that his wife is a grandmaster too. She advises him on such matters, I am sure of it. Please continue, Comrade Melinskaya.”

“This is Edelstein speaking now,” she went on. “We have no money for that right now, my darling. We barely have enough to eat.”

“There you are.” Ulyanov stood up. “Let us alert his next opponent: Edelstein’s strategy is clear: he will advance his pawns and then let them starve to death.”

“I cannot commit to any specific interpretation,” Pugachov said grimly. “What comes next”

“This is Alleyne: ‘I might be able to get you some funds through the British Embassy. They have set aside some additional resources for

my wife and children to join me, but as you know, my family is still stuck in London. Visa problems, as usual.”

“Please interpret this for me, Comrade Pugachov,” said Ulyanov. “I am at a loss.”

“The Britisher is perhaps advising him to play the London system.”

“How patriotic of him.”

“Please continue reading the transcription.”

“This is Fredericksson speaking: ‘What size of shoes do your children wear? Perhaps my wife can send us some used shoes from home.’”

“Can you translate this code for me, please?” asked Ulyanov. “I am baffled by their sophisticated theoretical chess advice.”

“I am not a chess expert, Vasily,” said Pugachov.

“Nor am I. Nor do I need to be...” said Ulyanov. “They are simply having a normal conversation about shoes!”

“That remains to be seen,” said Pugachov. “I may need to refer this to a higher quarter for further interpretation.”

“Your surveillance of their flat is ridiculous! What a waste of time!”

“I disagree.”

“This whole operation has been a joke, from first to last. Can you believe that Dr. Pestilence actually wanted to infect Edelstein’s wife with pubic lice?”

“It was a good idea, poorly executed.” Pugachov glanced accusingly at Melinskaya.

“Tell me, what went wrong when you poured that vial full of gonorrhea onto her panties, Comrade Melinskaya?” asked Ulyanov.

“Yelena didn’t get gonorrhea, did she?”

“They gave me a medal, that’s all I know.” Melinskaya shuffled her papers.

“A medal? For incompetence? My god, what idiots you both are!” Ulyanov exclaimed. “Why don’t you leave these people alone to play their little games of chess?”

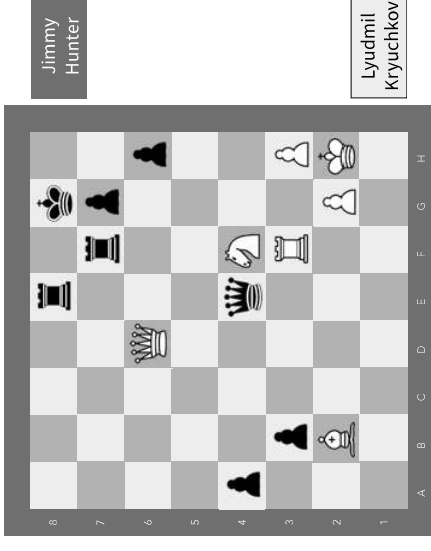
“They are disloyal, Vasily,” said Pugachov. “They are renegades.”

“So let them go to Israel, or America, or wherever they want to go”
 “That would encourage others to imitate their bad example,”
 said Melinskaya.
 “So do you admit the possibility that people might consider their
 exile a reward?” asked Ulyanov. “That life outside the USSR might be
 preferable for some of us?”
 “Of course not.”
 There was a tense silence.
 “Shall I go on reading, or not?” asked Melinskaya.
 “Fine, fine. By all means,” said Ulyanov. He lit his cigarette and
 exhaled resignedly. “Let’s have some more fun.”

*

Kryuchkov’s mood was not improved by the next few moves,
 which saw Hunter make various rook threats against White’s
 major and minor pieces, and push Black’s b-pawn all the way to the
 third rank. However, he was pleased to make room for the white
 king to claim the relative safety of h2, and to get his rook to a more
 active square on f3, hoping for some counterplay.
 For his part, Hunter was confident of eventual victory, with the
 benefit of a night’s sleep and a consultation with his seconds in the
 morning. His queen was centrally placed, and he had two passed
 pawns on the queenside.

The clock read 22:45, which meant that the day’s play was
 ending. Hunter only had to find one or two more moves before he
 could rest and recuperate. A prophylactic move seemed in order,
 so he gave his king some breathing space with h6. Kryuchkov took
 advantage of Black’s passivity, however, and promptly blocked the
 b-pawn’s advance by withdrawing his bishop from c3 to b2.



The arbiter sidled up to Hunter and made an obsequious bow.
 He offered Hunter a small piece of paper and sketched a writing
 movement with his right hand. Hunter nodded. It was time to make
 Black’s final move for the day, a move which Hunter would write
 down, then place in a sealed envelope and give to the arbiter for
 safekeeping. The envelope would be opened the next morning, and
 only then would his opponent learn of Hunter’s move.
 Hunter put his pencil to one side of his nose, reflected another
 moment, and made a few clear, dark marks on the page, jammed the
 paper clumsily into the envelope, licked the adhesive strip profusely,
 and sealed his move with a firm thumb.

*

It was two weeks before Shoushan was duly installed in the Nairi
 Medical Center, where Yasha bid her a stoic kiss farewell before
 boarding an evening train to Yerevan. In his small suitcase, padded
 with a few threadbare clothes, was the chess set his mother had
 given to him.

The sky over the capital city was dark and overcast, but Yasha
 caught a glimpse of one of Ararat’s snowy peaks as they neared
 the station.

His Uncle Boghos and Aunt Narguiz lived more than an hour’s walk
 away, according to Shoushan, but Yasha had insisted on making the

journey on foot. Eager not to keep them up too late waiting, he made it to their address in under 45 minutes.

"You got here fast, my boy. And you travel light..." Uncle Boghos observed, his sleepy face showing concern. "What's in that suitcase? Don't you have any books for school? No toys?"

"I don't own any books," Yasha replied. "And I don't play with toys anymore. I play chess."

"Ah. Did you play with your school friends? We shall have to find you some new opponents."

"No. I didn't play with anyone."

"You played by yourself?" His uncle made another worried grimace.

"Yes."

"How are you going to get better if you only play by yourself?"

"I don't want to get better," Yasha said. "I just like to play."

"Well, that's fine, I suppose..." Uncle Boghos rubbed his neck thoughtfully. "Let me see you do it."

"You mean, right now?"

"Yes, why not?" Uncle Boghos said. "Your aunt and cousin are already in bed."

"If you like," Yasha said. "I'm not tired."

Yasha unpacked the set and knelt beside the board, as if neutrally observing the action. He set the pieces up reverentially, then began to play a game. White's knight leapt nobly out to a central square. Then a black knight answered, gracefully alighting on a square across the board. Pawns dutifully stepped forward and scrimmaged swiftly, their movements interlacing and canceling each other out.

"Ah, you know *en passant* already, I see!" His uncle sounded pleased. "I didn't recognize that opening, though. What is it called?"

"I don't know the name," Yasha said, his hands still busily advancing and exchanging pieces. "I just do the moves."

"And who will win this game?"

"White always wins."

"I see." His uncle seemed impressed. "Why always White?"

"Because White goes first..."

"Very true."

"But I never know how until it happens," Yasha looked up briefly, then brought the white queen carefully into the fray. "I just keep playing... until..."

"Until Black resigns?" his uncle asked.

"No," Yasha answered solemnly. "Until checkmate."

"Right. Until checkmate. Good."

There was a long silence. Yasha meticulously maneuvered the white pieces into a winning position, taking time to allow the black pieces their turn. There was an invasion, some violent resistance, and a counterattack that only just fizzled out. Finally, a patient white passed pawn slowly reached its apotheosis on the eighth rank and gave checkmate.

His uncle clapped loudly, twice.

"Who taught you to play?" he asked. "It can't have been Adom..."

"My father died when I was a baby."

"Yes, of course, boy, I know he did," his uncle sighed. "He was sent to Afghanistan..."

"He didn't play chess. He was a soldier."

"He was a loyal servant to the Soviet Union, God help him..."

"What do you mean?" Yasha scrutinized his uncle's wry face, as if seeking clues to an invisible puzzle.

"Never mind. I'm glad Shoushan taught you to play."

"Actually, I taught myself," Yasha said in a quiet voice.

"That was a very interesting game." His uncle leaned forward and pointed at the board. "Why don't you show me another way for White to win?"

Chapter Two

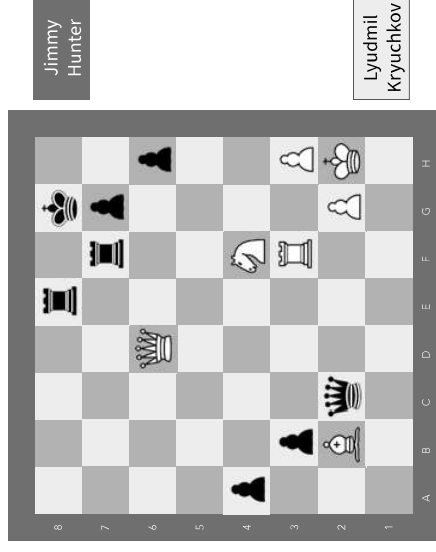
Hotel Petollinen

Helsinki, Finland

The first game of the World Championship match between Hunter and Kryuchkov had paused for the night, with a sealed move pending. However, this sealed move, so trustingly handed over by James Hunter, was not preserved in amber, nor even in a modestly secure location, by the arbiter.

Rather, it was handed over to a slim young man named Filipov, who, with the help of some steam and a dull knife, gently pried it open. He took it to a smoke-corrupted hotel room full of expectant listeners and held it aloft.

“Black queen to c2!”



“Bloody Jimmy,” Lyudmil Kryuchkov exclaimed gently, a cigarette fuming between his fingers. “Trust him to play the most annoying move...”

“Is it a very good move?” Filipov asked brightly.

“Yes, of course it is...” Blazevic, Kryuchkov’s Yugoslavian second, pointed to the board on the coffee table. “Now Black’s queen threatens the bishop, which can’t be moved or defended without grave risk.”

“So how should we respond?” asked Chigorenko, another one of Kryuchkov’s seconds. “What is our plan, comrades?”

“I recommend that we consult the Mayak,” said Professor N. She was a tall woman with even features and steel-rimmed glasses, and her face betrayed none of the nervous excitement crackling all around her. “It will evaluate the position objectively, at least,” she added.

“The Mayak? What is that, anyway?” Kryuchkov scoffed. “Some piece of space rubbish brought back by Sputnik?”

“It’s the strongest chess computer that we have,” said Professor N.

“Aha! The strongest one *we* have!” Kryuchkov exclaimed sourly.

“No doubt the Americans have a much better one, telling Hunter precisely what to play.”

“Probably,” said Filipov equably. “No doubt that’s why we tried to get Belle last year.”

“And failed, as usual,” said Professor N.

“Belle?” Kryuchkov knitted his heavy eyebrows in confusion.

“We bought a copy of a chess computer called Belle last year,” Filipov said, “but the Americans intercepted it...”

“Yes,” added Professor N. “That was an embarrassing incident.”

Belle was an American prototype that had beaten all challengers in a recent worldwide computer chess tournament. Purchased by the State Sports Committee, a copy of Belle had been packed in a crate and addressed to Moscow, allegedly for display at a Soviet chess festival. It had also been earmarked for examination by a group of engineers at the Moscow Institute for Physics and Technology for unspecified other uses. However, American customs officials had refused to allow this valuable piece of Western ingenuity to be sent to the Soviet Union, and no amount of sputtering by embassy attachés could persuade them otherwise.

“More incompetence, more nonsense...” Kryuchkov gestured at Filipov. “Who are these buffoons to tell me what to play?”

“They are the technological branch of the KGB, that’s who they are,” said Chigorenko.

“And you don’t want to make them angry,” added Blazevic.

“To hell with them,” Kryuchkov blew smoke defiantly. “I want to win the match on my own.”

“You will get all the credit, Lyudi,” said Blazevic. “The Party rewards victory very generously.”

“To hell with the Party,” rasped Kryuchkov, his throat filling with phlegm. “Why can’t they—Ough! Ough!—leave me alone?”

There was a long silence.

“Please do consult the Mayak, Professor,” Blazevic said quietly, “since nobody seems to have anything helpful to contribute,”

“Very well.” Professor N. picked up the telephone receiver lying on the desk beside her and spoke into it quickly: “Enter Move 41, Black Qc2, into the Mayak, please, Volodya.”

“How long does this robot grandmaster take?” Kryuchkov asked.

“Millenia?”

“Its calculations are very rapid. We should have the results in an hour or so.”

*

Yasha looked at the pieces arranged in their rows. They were ready to begin a new game, but he needed to perform one more ritual. He reached out to touch them, whispering their names as he tapped them with his fingers in benediction.

To the pawns, he murmured *peshka, peshka, peshka, peshka*.... The word was a gentle insult, delivered in a soothing tone. A *peshka* could set forth timidly or boldly at first: one space, or two. Then it advanced haltingly, was easily stopped in its tracks, and could only kill in a sidelong, sneaky fashion. If it was faithful and brave, it might reach paradise and become a demigod.

To the rooks, he said *ladya, ladya* with a respectful nod. A *ladya* was a low-slung, steady barge advancing and retreating along

canals, ramming everything it could find. A strong but stupid piece, especially dangerous when it linked arms with its brother.

To the knights, he said *kon*, *kon* with a glance of expectancy. Each was a wild stallion, bucking and curvetting, menacing every opposing piece near it with its unpredictable hooves.

To the bishops, he said *slon*, *slon* with a cunning smile. A *slon* was a wounded elephant, leaning this way and that, butting through the underbrush and leaving a trail of ragged stumps in its wake.

To the King, he said *korol* with eyes respectfully wide. A *korol* was a shy, sickly father upon whom the whole army, and by extension the whole kingdom, depended.

To the queen, he mouthed *ferz* silently, as if invoking a secret code. She was a passionate tyrant with a taste for diplomacy, ready to lay down her life in defense of her husband, but also a bully when it suited her.

When Yasha had touched all the pieces and said their names, he began to move them—or rather, as he believed—the dormant forces inside the pieces moved themselves. Thus, he placed the pieces on the squares that best expressed their immediate needs or their ambitions. The stallions had to have full scope for their jumps, and the elephants wanted the longest paths to sweep with their upraised trunks. The barges liked to form a convoy into the heart of the enemy's country. The pawns held hands as they made their way towards almost certain death.

The game was soon in full swing, and Yasha made quiet guttural noises to accompany the thudding and clattering of the colliding wooden shapes.

He heard the creak of a step in the hall, and the doorhandle rattled. The door opened slowly to reveal Semyon's red, leering face. Yasha's cousin was five years older than him, and almost a foot taller.

"*Was machst du, Yasha?*" Semyon was learning German in school. "Are you playing with your toys again?"

"I'm playing chess, as you can see," Yasha answered. He did not want to argue with his cousin in the middle of a fascinating assault on Black's queenside.

"No, you are not playing chess," Semyon said. "You are pretending. To play chess you need an opponent."

"Then play with me," Yasha said, knowing his usual plea would fail. "It's so boring," Semyon made a suitably exhausted face. "I can't be bothered with that stuff anymore."

"That's probably because you are no good."

"Me? I used to beat kids twice my age..."

"Then show me."

"All right," Semyon sat down and slapped his own knees. "If you truly want to be humiliated, I will oblige you. White or Black?"

"I prefer White."

"Fine."

"*J'adoube*," said Semyon. "I am adjusting my pieces."

"Pardon me?" Yasha was mystified.

"It's French, the language of romance," Semyon explained. "If you touch any of your pieces, you must move it, unless you say *j'adoube*." Still wondering at this strange invocation, Yasha first touched, then moved, his e-pawn forward two spaces. Semyon replied with a similar advance of his c-pawn. Yasha, eager to develop his pieces, brought his d-pawn shoulder to shoulder with his e-pawn.

Semyon took Yasha's d-pawn by violently crashing into it with his c-pawn. Unnerved by this aggression, Yasha offered another placating pawn, deflecting Semyon's reckless, hungry *peszka* back to the c-file, where it gobbled Yasha's own c-pawn up.

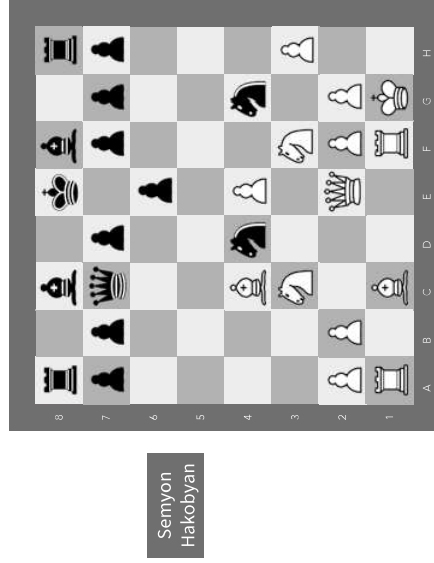
Yasha lifted his gallant knight and gently stomped on Semyon's upstart pawn. Semyon, not to be outdone, brought his own knight down loudly on the c6 square.

Yasha placed his other knight on f3, planning to castle promptly. Semyon shifted his queen, with a grunt of mock effort, one square from its starting position to c7.

Yasha's light-squared bishop skimmed the board and perched expectantly on c4. Semyon, with an air of indifference, advanced his e-pawn by one square.

Yasha, eager to find more scope for his noble queen, brought her to e2, keeping an eye on her bishop. Semyon immediately jumped his knight, first to f6 and then—after Yasha had hurriedly castled—to g4. Yasha's spine tingled, but he slowly advanced his h-pawn by one square, administering a rebuke to Semyon's hyperactive horse.

With a disdainful smirk, Semyon brought his other knight from c6 to d4, threatening Yasha's fine, upstanding queen.



Semyon
Hakobyan

“And Yasha can resign,” Semyon said calmly.

“But...” Yasha looked up at his cousin. “But I don’t want to resign.”

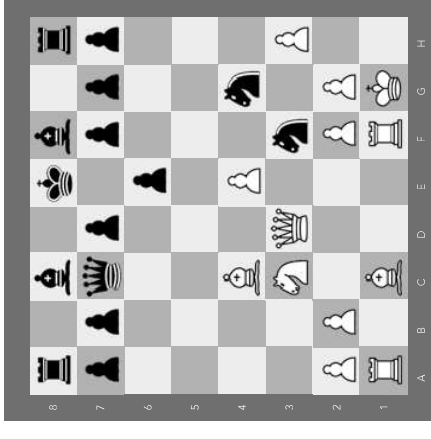
“Okay, you don’t have to resign,” Semyon said. “Make your next move.”

Yasha moved his queen to d3, getting out of the line of fire and defending his knight on f3. Semyon snapped off Yasha’s knight anyway.

“No matter what you play, it will be mate in one,” Semyon said. “It’s called ‘The Siberian Trap.’”

Yasha stared at the board and saw the mate: even if he captured one of Semyon’s knights, the black queen would emerge from its ranks and mate his king on h2, supported by the other *kon*.

How could he have allowed his king to be trapped in such a childish way?



Semyon
Hakobyan

Yasha closed his eyes to let the full horror of his lost position sink in.

Up until this moment, he had felt that the chessboard and its pieces had been his refuge. Now he was imprisoned in these barren cells, eight ranks deep and eight files wide. There was no exit overhead to the sky, no side door to sidle out of, no trapdoor to a dank, safe basement. How had he allowed himself to be entombed in this square dungeon?

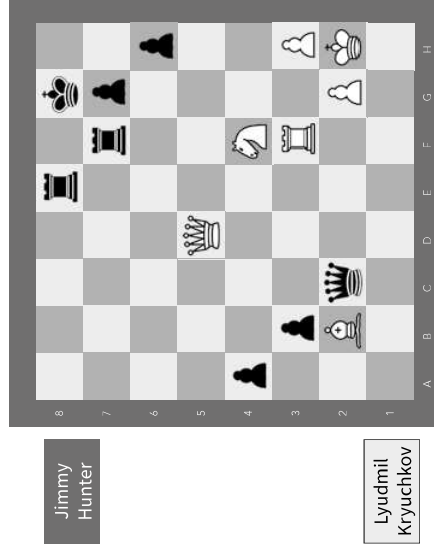
“What’s the matter, Yasha? It’s just a game.”

“I hate chess,” Yasha said.

“You don’t hate chess,” Semyon said. “You hate losing.”

*

As promised, the Mayak's calculations eventually bore fruit, and the result was relayed faithfully to Professor N: "Queen to d5."



Filipov played the move.

"Queen to d5?" Kryuchkov asked incredulously. "What the hell good does that do me? My bishop is hanging."

He strode across the room and plopped himself back down with a sigh.

"Lyudi, please, be reasonable..." Blazevic murmured. "The Mayak Chess Computer says you should play the move. At least you should consider it..."

"You must exercise objectivity, Comrade," Professor N said. "Queen to d5 is the best move."

"Objectivity?" Kryuchkov repeated the word in his most deadpan manner. "Who is to say what is objectively true in life? Or... Ough! Ough! Or in chess?"

"That's a nasty cough," Professor N replied. "You should get more fresh air." Her green eyes peered at Kryuchkov over her steely spectacles.

"After the match is over, Professor," Kryuchkov replied sardonically, "perhaps I will invite you to my dacha and we can frolic in well-ventilated natural scenery. First, I must vanquish Hunter and win his title."

"Then play the best move," said Professor N. "Queen to d5, which the Mayak recommends it. You still haven't refuted it."

"I wish to save my bishop!" Kryuchkov pleaded.

"Very well, then let us play it out from there. You wish to play queen to d4, yes?"

"I do." Kryuchkov planted his piece on the black d4 square. "What is Black's reply?"

"Rook e8 to e4." Professor N replied.

Kryuchkov waited for her to move the black piece, but, with another significant flash of her emerald eyes, she invited him to do so instead.

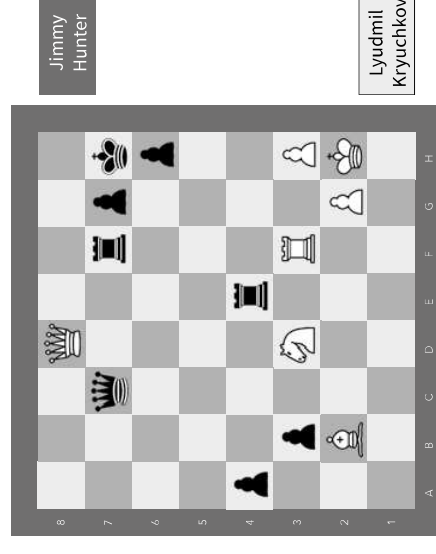
With a grunt, he placed the black rook down next to his delicate white queen, where it was protected by the black queen on c2.

"Ah, good!" Kryuchkov banged his queen down on d8. "Check!"

"King to h7."

Kryuchkov dutifully hid the black king on its safe square and pondered the position. He swiveled his knight to d3, defending the bishop on b2.

"Yes, a logical reply," said Professor N. "Black queen to c7, check."



"We trade queens," said Professor N. "And Black's two passed pawns, supported by two rooks, win the game."

“Perhaps. Ough!”

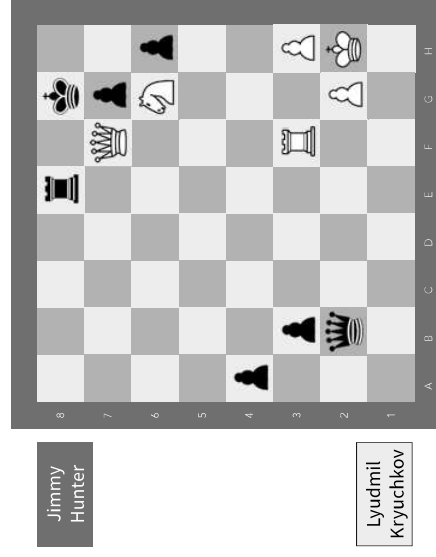
“Perhaps is not a word in my vocabulary.”

Professor N put the pieces back to where they had been before the adjournment.

“Look,” said Professor N. “If your queen comes to d5 instead of d4...”

“Goodbye bishop.”

“Yes, but watch this. Your knight goes to g6. Black can’t defend the rook on f7, and so your queen takes it with check, supported by the rook.”



“Yes, but—Ough! Ough!” Kryuchkov shook his head. “Your computer forgot that he has a move to play after knight to g6.”

“But what move can he play?” asked Professor N pointed to Black’s collapsing kingside. “His rook is pinned, and his queen is too far away. Your knight controls all these dark squares.”

“He’s losing a rook, no matter what,” said Chigorenko. “It’s a nice trap you are setting for him, Lyudi.”

“It’s not me that’s setting the trap!” Kryuchkov protested. “Ough!”

“Please, Lyudi,” said Blazevic. “Remember your health.”

“It’s not me playing this game anymore,” Kryuchkov continued. “It’s the Aztec computer from Mars. Ough! I know how to beat Hunter; I don’t need some piece of space junk to help me. Ough! Ough! Ough!”

The room echoed with gagging, rasping coughs.

When the noise had subsided, Professor N rose and put her hands on her hips.

“Do you want to beat Hunter, Comrade Kryuchkov?” she asked.

“Yes! Ough!”

“Then you must exercise maximum objectivity. Even if it means playing the Mayak’s move.”

Kryuchkov could only blink his bloodshot eyes in reply.

*

Zavidovo Dacha was the preferred country residence of Nikolai Pavlovich Bogdonov, the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet.

In the dacha’s ornate front parlor, Evgeny Ilyich Volosin—a slightly-built, twenty-six-year-old grandmaster with sunken, pale blue eyes, weak chin, and greasy mess of dirty-blond hair—stood tapping his foot. It was not his first visit to this rural fastness, nor was he accustomed to wait very long before being admitted into the Comrade General Secretary’s presence. Volosin may have been wan and bloodless in appearance, but his pallor concealed a ruthless ambition which manifested itself in one way: an utter devotion to the task of mastering positional strategy, both on and off the chessboard.

Volosin’s rise to this lofty social and political height had been shaped and accelerated by all the right institutions. Enrolled in the Spartak Moscow Sports club by his father, he had been coached by Gennady Magnelius himself just before dementia claimed that *éminence grise*. At seven years old, Volosin achieved an official ranking (Category Three) and at nine years old he was already a Category One player. He won the World Junior Championship in Oslo at fourteen (by three full points, no less), and a year later he became a grandmaster.

His playing style has been aptly described as anaconda-like: his pieces, after having been deployed into a perfectly balanced defensive structure, slowly coiled round his opponent’s position and

squeezed firmly until all the air left the body and the enemy king suffocated.

His detractors called him boring, circumspect, drab, unimaginative, and bureaucratic; terms which he would have smilingly accepted, even relished. Unlike Lyudmil Kryuchkov, who barely concealed his contempt for Communist Party ideology, Volosin was the consummate committee man, always careful not to offend his coaches and “ideological advisors.” However, the one thing Volosin could not abide was having his time wasted.

Before Volosin’s impatience could grow into impertinence, he was greeted by a bulky veteran of the Patriotic War with a violent handshake.

“Comrade Volosin,” the veteran’s hand squeezed Volosin’s even harder. “I am Colonel Liapkin. It is a great pleasure to meet you. I particularly enjoyed your victory over Kapuchinsky in Vilnius.”

This, at least, was a well-informed compliment; Volosin’s win in Lithuania had been his most notable victory to date. In a stellar field that included all the top Soviet players, Volosin had won the tournament by beating the dissident David Edelstein, his former nemesis.

“Thank you,” Volosin replied, trying not to wince at the manual pressure from his congratulator. “It is kind of you to say so.”

“It is my pleasure. The Comrade General Secretary is ready for your interview. Please come with me.”

Volosin was still flexing his fingers when he came into the General Secretary’s presence. Comrade Bogdonov, his famously tufty eyebrows screwed into tight bunches, was hunched in a wicker chair and gazing thoughtfully at a chess set. Two somnolent men, each in ceremonial military attire, were stationed on Bogdonov’s flanks.

“Comrade General Secretary,” Colonel Liapkin announced, “Comrade Volosin is here.”

“Ah, Zhenya,” Bogdonov stood up, revealing a rack of medals mounted on his dark suit. “Come here and have a seat. Sergei, Dimitri, and I were just admiring the final moves of your game against Kapuchinsky.”

“Ah, yes,” Volosin gave the board a perfunctory glance. “I thought I recognized the position. I played knight to d2 against the French defense.”

“The Steinitz system!” Bogdonov declared joyfully. “I used to play it myself sometimes.”

“Tarrasch,” Volosin corrected him with a nervous smile.

“Excuse me?” Bogdonov’s hearing seemed to have failed him, but he was evidently displeased.

“Yes, of course, the Steinitz,” Volosin corrected his own correction.

“But he should not have moved his king so early...” Bogdonov proclaimed. “His king ended up wandering around the board like a drunkard.”

“For instance,” added Liapkin, “what if instead of king to f8, Black moves his bishop to d7?”

“You mean after I played knight to e5?”

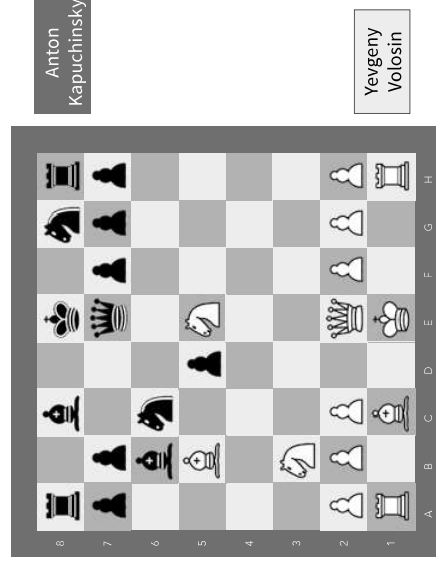
There was an undignified scramble as the Comrade General Secretary and his companions reassembled the position.

“Forgive me, Comrade General Secretary,” Volosin oozed.

“My knight was here.”

More scrambling.

“Now this is the correct position?” Bogdonov’s face was a purple steak with two caterpillar eyebrows poised above the boiled eggs of his eyes.



"Yes, I believe so."

"Well, what if Black moves his bishop to d7 instead?" the General Secretary asked. "He defends the knight, removes the pin, and Black can still try to castle later. Much better."

"With the utmost respect, Comrade General Secretary," Volosin murmured, "Knight takes d7."

The move was made by the dutiful Sergei.

"Queen takes e2, check!" Bogdonov proclaimed.

"King takes on e2," said Volosin.

There was a pause.

"What is Black's move here. Comrade General Secretary?" Sergei asked earnestly.

"King takes on d7, I suppose," Bogdonov said bluffly. "But now neither side can castle."

"Castling is not always necessary, Comrade General Secretary," Volosin explained. "I play rook to d1," said Volosin. "Now your d-pawn is pinned to the king."

"I defend the pawn with the other knight," said Bogdonov. Sergei followed a shaky fingertip and brought Black's knight to f6.

"I double the attack," said Volosin. "Pawn to c4. Black is still losing, I'm afraid."

There was another long pause as the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union stared in apparent outrage at the chessboard.

"Well, anyway, Comrade Volosin won the game," Sergei cast a wary eye on his superior's angry face. "That's what matters. We congratulate him."

Volosin bowed right on cue, and as he rose again, his eyes peered up timidly to meet the Comrade General Secretary's gaze. The purple steak had paled to a shade of lavender, and the caterpillars had relaxed their grip on the boiled eggs.

"Exactly," Bogdonov said fiercely. "You won the game, so it doesn't matter."

"And what a joy to see checkmate on the board," said Sergei. "It's a rarity these days."

"Yes," Bogdonov chuckled. "Usually when your opponents see a punch like that one coming, they duck!"

The five men laughed at this excellent joke.

"Comrade Volosin," Sergei inclined his head deferentially, "what do you make of Lyudmil Kryuchkov's chances of beating the American?"

"Ah, yes, that dratted Yank," The Comrade General Secretary made a face. "What's his name? Johnny Butcher?"

"Jimmy Hunter?"

"Yes, Jimmy Hunter..."

"Well, I wish Lyudi every success, of course..." Volosin said diplomatically.

"But he doesn't stand a chance?"

"In my opinion, no."

"Well, it will serve him right!" Dimitri declared. "He has been wasting his energies in decadent pursuits, from what I hear."

"Yes," Volosin nodded sadly. "We deserve a better champion of Soviet chess than him..."

Everyone agreed.

"Now then, what can I do for you, Zhenya?" The Comrade General Secretary's voice sounded less gruff than usual. "What do you want with an old pawn-pusher like me anyway?"

*

The day after he had fallen into the Siberian trap, Yasha came down to breakfast later than usual, hoping that Semyon had already left for the day and that he would be spared his cousin's triumphalism. Fortunately, when he entered the dirty, cluttered kitchen, only his Aunt Narguiz was present.

"Good morning, Yasha," His aunt was a tall woman with dark curly hair and a prominent chin that wagged when she spoke. "I am going

out, so you will have to fend for yourself. By the way, Semyon left you that book.”

His aunt tilted her head to indicate the kitchen table, on which there sat, amid a few crumbs of bread, an unusually large book.

The book’s cover was badly worn, but Yasha could make out the single word CHESS in large bold Cyrillic type. Above this title was the author’s name, I. Maizelis, written in thin cursive, and a faded picture of a chessboard with gold and black art deco pieces in their starting positions.

Yasha’s fingers trembled as he touched the battered edges of this sacred text. “May I keep this?” he wondered aloud.

“Look inside it,” his aunt replied. “Now make sure to lock up when you leave.”

Yasha opened the book. On the first blank page, there was a note written in Semyon’s barbaric hand:

To Cousin Yasha, from Semyon

You could stand to learn more about how your precious little pieces move, and I have better things to do than pore over dusty old chess stories. Don’t fall into any more stupid traps!

Despite his cousin’s ungracious words, the gift sent a warm flush of gratitude through Yasha’s body. He gently turned to the next page, and the next, and the next.

His eyes rested briefly a sketch of a bewigged Frenchman (the great François-André Danican Philidor). He smiled at the caricatures of chess pieces, which included a prancing elephant, representing a bishop; various funny pawn smoking pipes, stretching like gymnasts, and running away in openmouthed terror; queens in rampart-shaped gowns preening in front of handheld mirrors; and kings being lassoed around the neck by frolicking knights.

He pored over the columns of print that framed diagrams of fascinating chess positions, and the puzzles designed for curious minds just like his! What a treasure to have in one’s hands! What a trove of endless diversion and stimulation for the expanding mind!

“Goodbye, Yasha,” his aunt sang from the doorway. “You had better eat quickly. School starts in half an hour.”

“I will!” Yasha called. “Goodbye!”

Yasha’s ravenous glance feasted on concatenations of as yet inscrutable moves and an irresistible tide of commentary and advice. There was punctuated applause for brilliancies (!), quizzical marks for dubious moves (??), and at the end of each game, an eloquent coda: the simple yet resounding arithmetic marking ultimate success or failure: 1-0 or 0-1.

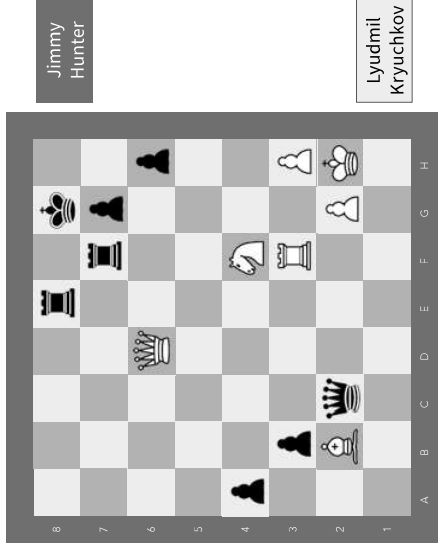
Yasha was very late for school that day.

*

When Hunter’s move was unsealed (for a second time), there was a murmur of excitement in the gallery of the Hotel Petollinen.

“Black queen to c2!” an excitable boy exclaimed.

“Watch out, Mr. Bishop!” A woman whispered to her companion.



Kryuchkov stared sulkily at the oddly stale position. His eyes were red and raw-rimmed, and he closed them for a few seconds. The coughing fits that had racked his pudgy frame the night before had left him vomiting miserably in the sink in the morning, and his primary aim in this moment was not to start retching again.

Hunter, for his part, seemed bathed in a glow of moral righteousness as he awaited Kryuchkov’s response. He had manually and