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THE ZEROth DAY

1.

The autumn was rainy. Succumbing to the heavy drops, yellowed leaves slipped from the trees and tumbled onto the wet pavement. Nature had shed its ochre corset, laying bare the innards of dacha plots as glimpsed through the ribs of their wooden fences—unevenly placed gray paving stones wending their way to dilapidated cottages, sagging sheds, and yard lights that had been switched off for a long while.

The fences, houses, and even century-old pine trees seemed toylike against the huge wind turbine towering over the village. Although the giant white blades looming above the trees were not in motion, the windmill's drone muffled the rustling of the leaves and the pattering of the raindrops. The red warning lights flashing right below the clouds were barely legible, but their light would fill the night with a rhythmic flicker when darkness came.

The streets of the village were deserted. The infrequent pedestrians lowered their eyes when they met and hurriedly passed each other: they had to get home before sunset. In the evenings, the few residents who had stayed behind for the winter pulled their curtains shut. Sprawled on creaking couches, they would drink a cup of tea, clamp horn-like rubber antennae to their temples and, closing their eyes, dive into the Flow.

When the last candles were snuffed out, the village would be plunged into a darkness lacerated every few seconds by the flashes of red light. The first gust of wind gave impetus to the blades, which spun slowly at first, then ever more rapidly. The turbine's low, ear-piercing hum penetrated indoors, and none of the villagers could go outside without donning ear protectors. Fortunately, most of them had much earlier donned their horns (as they called them) and were voyaging in other worlds.

The village was practically bereft of nightlife except for Suren's Shop, a roadside store. Its proprietor (whose name, predictably, was Suren) had been awarded an electricity quota by some miracle (or by heftily bribing the right people, as the village scuttlebutt had it) and turned the shabby store into an epicurean oasis of pre-war life featuring bright lighting, cold beer, and frozen food.

Suren was in his forties. He sported a fresh white shirt and pressed black trousers and spoke with a thick Armenian accent. He had no employees, which was why he was rarely seen away from the store. That evening, he was polishing, as usual, the shop's preternaturally shiny counter, occasionally glancing at his reflection in a large mirror on the wall.

Opposite Suren stood a customer—Nikolai, a tall, broad-shouldered man in his fifties wearing classic fit jeans, a green checked flannel shirt, and a brown raincoat. Stooping a little, the man stared at the floor, occasionally casting a beseeching glance at the merchant. The silent scene lasted for several seconds, before Suren, frowning, put down his rag and picked up a thick, plastic-covered notebook. After perusing his ledger, Suren closed the notebook and addressed the man.

"You have a debt of five thousand seven hundred and eighty-two rubles, my friend. You probably forgot. Write it down. I won't sell you anything until you pay me back."

Nikolai wanted to reply, but changing his mind and slouching even more abjectly, he turned on his heel and made for the exit.

"Your head!" Suren tried to warn him, but the man hit his head on the door jamb and left the store, cursing.

"Kolya, stop!" Suren shouted loudly after him.

Nikolai turned around and, nearly hitting his head a second time, walked back to the counter.

"When can you pay me back?" Suren asked, looking up at Nikolai.

"Soon, Suren. I've got a gig doing commercials coming up. I'll pay you back as soon as I get the money."

"You already promised." Suren shook his head. "You're not the only going through tough times. Times are tough for everyone."

"There is this one absolutely killer project. They said they would call," Nikolai lied, gazing at the floor.

"You said that before too," Suren grumbled. "Okay, what can I get you?"

Nikolai asked for some vegetables and a bottle of vodka. Handing him the bag of groceries, Suren nodded at a framed movie poster. It showed a man resembling Nikolai, only much younger. The man was kicking a chubby man armed with a pistol. The poster read: "*Fury of Light!* Nikolai Vasilyev as Agent Toulemonde!"

"It was a good movie, a real movie. Not like nowadays! Okay, what will you give me in exchange for the food?" Suren asked, sizing himself up in the mirror.

Nikolai shrugged. "I don't know."

"But I do know!" the shopkeeper pronounced triumphantly, looking up from the mirror. "Let's pretend that I'm McDee, and you're Toulemonde. Do you remember the scene where you first say—"

"No, Suren, not here," Nikolai mumbled, blushing. "What's the point? Put on the horns and be whoever you want."

"Ugh! I don't want to do the horns. I want to play it for real!" Suren exclaimed.

Two men entered the shop. The first man, a stocky blond fellow, nursed an unfinished bottle of beer. His friend, a tall man in a hood that hid his face, dragged a basket filled with empty bottles. Upon seeing Nikolai, they traded glances.

"I'm not taking empties today," Suren muttered.

Nikolai made a move to leave, but, catching sight of Suren's stern look, he stopped. Setting his bag on the floor and straightening his shoulders, he grew ten centimeters taller. Suren rubbed his palms, while the blond man and the hooded man whispered to each other. Nikolai unfastened the top button of his shirt.

"Don't break anything," Suren warned. He came out from behind the counter. Taking a comb from his pocket and touching up his already perfectly coiffed hair, he commanded, "Action!"

"I am McDee, and who are you?" Suren said solemnly, looking in the mirror.

"I am the light that pierces the darkness, I am the flame that incinerates evil, I am your death, McDee!" Nikolai thundered, fixing his gaze on Suren.

The shopkeeper gestured for him to go on. Nikolai jumped somewhat laboriously into the air, kicking an invisible opponent. The chubby blond man set his bottle on the floor and applauded, while the tall one, his eyes flashing from under the hood, exclaimed, "Bravo!"

Suren was beside himself with happiness.

"Well done! Let me give you some more cucumbers! How was my acting?"

"All right," Nikolai mumbled confusedly.

The blond man asked Nikolai for his autograph. He signed the label on the man's beer bottle.

The customers left satisfied, their unwanted empties rattling in their wake. Nikolai nodded to Suren and made to go home, but Suren asked him to stay for a second. Opening the massive door to the back room, the shopkeeper vanished into the darkness. A few minutes later he reappeared, carrying a wooden case. Inside it were two small glass beakers filled with a transparent liquid.

Peering more closely, Nikolai noticed marvelous patterns and inscriptions in an incomprehensible language engraved on the beakers.

"It's Murano glass," Suren explained, catching Nikolai's eye. "Can you hang on to it for me?"

Nikolai hesitated. "Me? Well, I don't know..."

"It's a gift for my cousin. She has a big birthday coming up. I have to go somewhere tomorrow, but she'll be coming this way. Although I won't see her, at least I'll be giving her a present. She'll call you and set up a meeting at a time convenient for you, and that's it. She'll be staying downtown. If she asks you to, go there to meet her, and treat her to a coffee. I'll spring for it. Is that a deal?"

"Will you be away for long?" asked Nikolai, worried.

"Don't worry, I'll be back soon. I won't leave you in the lurch." As Suren said this, he put the beakers back into the case and handed it to Nikolai.

"If you drink them, you'll turn into a goat, like Ivanushka in the old fairy tale," Suren said, laughing. Nikolai took the case, placed it gingerly in his bag, and left the store.

2.

It was dark outside and drizzling as the red spots burst through the overhanging clouds. Nikolai walked along the muddy village road and smiled, paying no mind to the raindrops dribbling down his face. *What nice guys*, he thought. *Especially Suren. And the blond one, and the tall guy. It's great when people remember you after all!*

Nikolai looked up at the flashing lights. The wind blew. In the twilight, the giant blades came to life above the treetops. *Whoooooo...*

Nikolai grimaced. The hum of the windmill was not so loud yet, but it was already getting on his nerves. It was no big deal. He would soon attach the two clumsy antennae to his temples and dive into the Flow, his body becoming indescribably light and his mind no less delightfully lucid.

Nikolai walked around the yard of his dacha. The old apple trees bulged out from the darkness like huge spiders. He could not wait to clamp on the horns and, after drinking a glass of vodka, sink into a reverie. He would rise over the boring brownish gray houses and then what happened would happen. The journey was unpredictable but always beautiful.

Nikolai happily remembered last night. He was a great actor who had been cast by Zeffirelli himself to star in a titillating screen adaptation of *Hamlet*—in the title role, of course. It did not matter that the director and actors had been dead for a hundred years, nor that the cinema itself was on its last legs. The Flow was not bound by space and time.

They were shooting the final scene. Nikolai was sprawled on the floor between the enchanting Glenn Close and a plump man playing the role of Claudius. (Nikolai could not remember his name.)

Nikolai was mortally wounded. Coldness flowed through his veins to his chest, his fingers went numb, and black and red spots flashed in his eyes. Here it was—freedom: it was quite close. “Cut!” the director yelled. Nikolai heard the applause and woke up.

Choosing between the insufferable business of being alive and the cold sleep of death was a game he felt he had mastered. Poor Hamlet had not been able to make it out of this sickening world alive, but Nikolai could do it. He just had to don the horns and plunge into the Flow.

Nikolai was eager to continue the game. He wanted to go further, to go beyond the cold and darkness. The next update to the Flow was scheduled for today, the promo campaign promising users even more vivid impressions and unlimited possibilities.

Nikolai stopped at the door, fumbling in his pockets in search of the key. Quite inopportunistically, the phone chirped in his left ear, and a photo of Vera appeared before his eyes. Nikolai dropped the key and irritably hung up the phone. A few seconds later, a message flashed before his eyes: *Don't go into the house—leave. I've booked a room at the National. See you later, Vera.*

Nikolai cursed and, picking up the key, stood for a while in the drizzle before swiftly opening the door. Stomping loudly, he went into the house and lit a candle as quickly as possible. The rain outside had turned into a downpour.

Nikolai laid out the vegetables on a plate, opened the vodka, and sat down in an old armchair. Staring out the window, he listened to the rain and thought about Vera. Glancing at the floor, he saw a photograph he immediately recognized: a lean, tall, black-haired iteration of himself embracing a pretty young woman. They stood in St. Mark's Square, surrounded by people and pigeons, the basilica and the azure sky in the background. Vera laughed, Nikolai smiled, the sun shone.

His mood was utterly spoiled. Nikolai recalled that he had been rummaging through the family photo album a couple of days ago when he happened upon this snapshot. Then he had got a phone call, one so important that he had dropped the photo and rushed off somewhere. He could not remember who had called or where he had