

The Little Hunchback

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I

April. A holiday.

It's merry and noisy on the common beyond the miners' settlement. Farther away, near the railroad, the older boys and girls have come together. The boys are in red, blue, green or yellow shirts, with jackets, new caps, and fine shining boots; the girls are dressed in varicolored skirts, necklaces, ribbons, and brand-new kerchiefs. Some are playing spring games, singing songs around an accordion. Others sit on the grass, watching an inventive dance, chatting and cracking sunflower seeds.

Closer to the houses, the children—boys and girls separately—revel in their own sport. The girls are playing jacks with some round pebbles. Two teams of boys are chasing a ball. Those not chosen for either team sit off to one side and watch the game with interest.

Running, clamor, laughter...

The small hut where Grandpa Antyp lives with his widowed daughter and grandson Pavlyk stands on the edge of the settlement, unfenced, like all the other miners' huts. Behind the hut lies the common, and beyond it, across a wide road, stretch the colorful lands (they're now green) of the manorial tract of the steppe.

The sun is shining—it's warm and joyous. The bright, cloudless day has even lured Grandpa Antyp, once a miner and now a stableman at the mine, out of his hut.

Puffing on his pipe, Grandpa Antyp sits under a window on the earthen ledge of his house. Pavlyk sits beside him. They're both watching the ball game, their faces beaming with joy. Their pleasure is expressed in short shrieks and extended, raucous laughter, as if they themselves were taking part in the game.

"Grandpa, look... look at Pronko there! Ha-ha-ha!" Pavlyk, choking with laughter, bends his head down to his sharp bony knees, his big hump swaying back and forth.

"Hee! hee! hee! Quite a show that squirt puts on! Hot ziggity damn, he really can sprint! But he missed! Oh no, brother Pronko, you won't score that way. Pronko's like a flying bullet! Hee! hee! hee!" Old Antyp, getting excited, is stamping his foot and spitting to one side.

"Ha-ha-ha!" shrieks Pavlyk with laughter.

"Run-run! Go-go-go! Hee! hee! hee! Hot ziggity damn! Whose boy is that?" Grandpa inquires about another nimble fellow.

"Which one? That biggest one over there?" Pavlyk asks, pointing a finger. "Zakharko, Iavdokha's boy."

"My, he's quick! Like a rabbit."

"Grandpa—he smokes tobacco."

"Really? One of those, is he!" Grandpa says angrily. "He should get a good lashing. A belt lashing, for sure. How do you like that—smoking tobacco! Hmm. But he's got legs, damn it! Faster than a horse. See!... See that ... see how he kicked that ball! But I'll have to tell Iavdokha about his nasty habit. That rascal needs a taste of the lash before he gets used to devil-knows-what!"

"Grandpa—he steals money too, from his mother to buy tobacco."

"No! What a fellow, ... Aha! Hee! Hee! Hee! Our Pronko has missed the ball again, hot ziggity damn. But that other one—what's his name?—he deserves a good lashing..."

"Grandpa... I'm going over to the boys."

"You? Hmm..."

Grandpa Antyp gave Pavlyk a sidelong look, his glance flitting across the boy's hump and fathomless, radiantly clear eyes, which shone with a deeply concealed and silent sadness. Then he turned away, knitting his thick, bristly, and ash-gray eyebrows.

"Hmm... over there, you say?"

"Yes, to the boys."

"They're troublemakers, son. They might beat you up. Those boys are an unruly lot! Hot ziggity damn—look, look, what Pronko's up to again. What do you say about that?" Grandpa was trying to change the subject.

The old man was ill at ease—and not because he wanted to deny his grandson some fun. Despite Pavlyk's horrible, weird hump, Grandpa loved the boy immensely. But he knew only too well what those Zakharkos, Pronkos and others were like—how those children failed to see Pavlyk's wonderful heart because of his hump. That is why he was afraid they would bring Pavlyk to grief: many a time on his way back from work he had to rescue Pavlyk from his tormentors.

"Then I'll go join the girls, Grandpa."

"The girls?" Grandpa said, delighted. "Oh yes, that's where you can go, son. The girls—well, they're not like those rowdy boys. They're quiet, the girls are. You go join them—they won't do you any harm."

Pavlyk set off.

Grandpa Antyp took the pipe out of his mouth and watched his grandson wobble off like a duck, his weird hump bobbing up and down and his arms swinging somehow comically, palms turned outward. His small, thinly haired head was almost concealed behind the hump.

The old man shook his head sadly and heaved a sharp sigh, as if

chasing away his sad thoughts. Stamping out his pipe with a gnarly, tobacco-stained finger, he put it in his pocket, got to his feet with a grunt, and went inside the hut for a rest.

"Pavlyk, come over here!" the girls called when they spotted the hunchback.

"It's better over here, Pavlyk," some others interrupted. "With them, it's ... God-help-you!"

"You're not a God-help-you type, are you?" said the girls competing for him.

The girls really liked to play with him, to look into his sad blue eyes and to listen to his placid, lecturing tone when he spoke, instructing them how to play a game or telling them something interesting, like a long and complicated fairytale.

II

Pavlyk knew quite a few such fairytales.

When he was younger and got fed up listening to a snowstorm rage behind the frosted windows during a long winter evening or watching a needle dance in Mother's thin fingers as he got drowsy from the wind whistling in the oven and Grandpa snoring on the bench, Pavlyk would say:

"Sleep-time, mama."

"Right away, dear," she would reply, raising her head and putting the needlework aside. "Let's go, my darling."

"You'll sit beside me for a while, won't you?" asks Pavlyk as he undresses.

"I'll sit beside you, dear. Yes, I will. Get into bed now."

"And you'll tell me a story?"

"And I'll tell you a story."

"But we don't need any songs," Pavlyk pouts, waving his hand in rejection.

"No, we don't need songs tonight," Mother confirms.

"They're so sad..."

"Yes, they're sad, my child..."

"... and the songs will make you cry again."

"Me, cry? No, dear. I won't cry. Mother of God, save me and have mercy," she says, covering the boy with a blanket and making the sign of the cross over him. Then she places a stool next to his bed and settles down on it.

"Yes, don't cry," Pavlyk chirps away. "Crying causes headaches. Better to tell me a story, Mama."

"I will tell you a fairytale, my son. Sleep, with God's blessing!"

"Tell me the story, you know, the one about Hoppity-Rabbit, who sits under an oak tree and weeps."

Pavlyk curls up under the blanket and prepares to listen.

"Sure, sure," Mother replies and begins a long, interesting fairytale about an old man in red boots, a deceitful billy goat, and Hoppity-Rabbit. "And then Hoppity-Rabbit jumped out of his hut, sat down beside an oak tree, and burst into tears..."

"And he wept and wept," Pavlyk intones in sympathy with Hoppity Rabbit; a shadow of suffering flickers across his face, and his big eyes well up with tears.

As this sad adventure unfolds, Pavlyk's mind goes on to work feverishly. Mother has finished one tale and begun another, about a young prince and his princess or about Ivasyk Telesyk or some other tale, but Pavlyk isn't listening to her anymore. His mother's words flow past him like a quiet brook.

In his mind's eye he sees a dark and dense forest with glades of green. In one such glade Hoppity-Rabbit has built himself a hut the size of the watchdog Hector's kennel; Dereza, the horrible billy goat with raggedy sides and huge sharp horns, stalks around this hut seeking to deprive Hoppity-Rabbit of his life. Looking out from behind the bushes in the forest are the cowards: the rude and clumsy Well-Met-Bear, the habitually hungry Brer Wolf, and Sly Sister Fox. Just the thought of Hoppity-Rabbit's dreadful lot makes Pavlyk's heart contract with pain and horror.

"Mama, is Hoppity-Rabbit afraid of the billy goat?" Pavlyk interrupts his mother's tale.

"What?" Mother is confused by the unexpected question. "Of course he is afraid, my dear. But I see you aren't listening to me. Maybe that's enough for tonight?"

"No, no—go on. I'll listen."

Again Mother spins the thread of the tale he interrupted. At first Pavlyk tries hard to listen attentively, but by and by his thoughts return to the forest, the beasts, and poor defenseless Hoppity-Rabbit.

"Mama, why is that billy goat so mean?" Pavlyk interrupts her again.

"What? The billy goat? I guess that's how God made him, dear," says Mother and continues her tale.

Pavlyk thinks and thinks and thinks, until his mind is tired and sleep gently seals his eyes, his long thick eyelashes casting shadows on his face. But his far-roaming thoughts do not rest. Bound and chained by their enemy, sleep, his thoughts still resist, striving to break free. Pavlyk has strange and fascinating dreams. His mother's stories aren't nearly as interesting as his dreams.

Pavlyk has an excellent memory, and he always remembers his dreams, down to the minutest details. He recounts them to the girls as new fairytales, but without mentioning that they were his dreams. Sometimes he forgets that himself.

Pavlyk grew, albeit slowly.

His peers shunned him because of his hunched back, and so he became used to being mostly alone—alone with his thoughts, with which he lived, rejoiced, and entertained himself. The serene, kindly and beautiful world of his mother's tales had made his thoughts kindly too, and his heart became receptive to all the adventures experienced by small and defenseless creatures. Pavlyk loved animals and birds so much that he wept, and even fainted, whenever one of the boys crushed a bird's egg or wrung the neck of a baby sparrow.

III

Pavlyk joined one of the groups of girl playing jacks with pebbles.

The boys must have gotten bored with their game. They had quarreled over something, there was some pushing and shouting. The boy whose ball they had been using, put it in his pocket and said that he wouldn't let anyone use it any more.

Zakharko tackled him from behind, threw him to the ground, and began choking him with his knee.

"Live or die?" Zakharko demanded, raising a fist above the boy. He had seen grown-ups say and do this in their fights, and now he was imitating them.

The boy under Zakharko's knee was crying.

"Leave him alone! Get off him!" Pavlyk, on the verge of crying himself, shouted to Zakharko.

"Well, how do you like that?" Zakharko guffawed. "A defender!"

"I'll tell Grandpa on you..."

Zakharko let go of the boy and made for Pavlyk.

"I'll tell Grandpa on you!" he said, mocking Pavlyk and showing him his tongue. "I'm not afraid of your grandpa. I'll punch your hump and then you can run off to your grandpa and complain—hunchback!"

"Now you cut that out, Zakharko!" the girls came running to Pavlyk's defense. "Go away! When you were playing we didn't interfere."

"Neh-neh-neh!" Zakharko mocked the girls, knocking the pebbles out of one girl's hands. She began to cry.

"Cut it out! Leave 'em alone," Pronko said. "Let's go pick some cranberries."

"At this time of year?" Zakharko asked. "They're not ripe yet."

"They are," one of the boys assured them.

"They're not..."

"They are!" the girls confirmed.

"All right, let's go," Zakharko said. "If there aren't any, we'll look for lark eggs. Who's coming?"

They got to their feet and marched off into the steppe.

"Shall we join them?" the girls hesitated.

"Yes, let's go. We'll pick some berries too."

"There are no ripe berries yet."

"Oh yes, there are—I saw them myself."

"Coming with us, Pavlyk?"

Pavlyk did not know whether to go or not. He wanted to, but he hadn't asked Grandpa's permission. Grandpa was still sleeping, and Mother hadn't returned home yet.

He looked toward his hut: there was no one in sight.

"Grandpa's asleep, and I didn't ask."

"We're not going far, Pavlyk."

"It'll be just there and back home again," said the girls coaxing him.

It really wasn't far. Just beyond the common, across the road, spread the luxuriant virgin tract of manorial steppe.

Pavlyk had always liked to go there whenever Grandpa was at the mine and Mother was working at the manor. Other children would either be at school or working around the mines, and Pavlyk was not afraid of wandering the steppe alone.

He loved to slide across the slippery, verdant steppe in his boots, to inhale deeply the fresh, balmy air, and to lie on some little hill, watching as small clouds on silvery wings passed in the blue sky overhead. Or to cross the gully and from there take in the flat scenery: the straight rows of miserable miners' huts, the steep-roofed buildings over the mines, surrounded by high mounds of clay, and the soaring brick chimneys, billowing smoke near the mines. From afar the people looked like ants and the huts were small too, and the mysterious mine didn't seem all that scary. He would imagine himself a fairytale king over all that he saw; or, at times, he would suddenly want to take wing and fly higher still, where the full-throated meadowlark fluttered in the blue heavens. It must be so nice up there—all that open space and everything in clear view.

Like a flock without a shepherd, the children scattered over the huge green carpet: the girls looked for flowers and tied them into bunches with shaggy feathergrass, as the boys raced around, looking for cranberries.

Pavlyk settled on a hill and watched: his sky-blue eyes were calm and content. His sensitive ear picked up the gentle lilting song of a lark hovering over his head. And his thoughts, as charming as his fairytale dreams, drifted quietly one after another, like beads on a string, forming a tale of magic and wonder. If the girls hadn't run off in all imaginable directions, Pavlyk would have told them a beautiful new tale about the meadowlark-songster flying high, high above and conversing with the deep sky and bright clouds. Curly clouds drifted from far-off lands, across the sea. They had seen and heard so many fantastic, fascinating things. They really had something to tell the gray-winged musician.

IV

"Hey, he-e-ey, boys!" Zakharko, bending over something in the grass, shouted across the steppe. "I've found a ne-e-e-st! It's a la-a-ark's!"

"You're ly-y-ing!"

"No-o-o! For su-u-re."

Suddenly Pavlyk was frowning. His heart, chilled with fright, gave a start. Quickly he got to his feet and wobbled over to the boys and girls bent over a tiny nest. In it lay four gray speckled eggs.

"There I was, walking along," Zakharko was recounting excitedly, "when all of a sudden—whirr!—right in front of me. I spent a lo-o-ong time looking for it."

"Oh, they're so bea-u-u-ti-ful," one of the girls said joyfully.

"Look, they're so tiny and cute," another girl said, skipping and clapping her hands with delight.

"Let me pick them up," Pronko said, extending a hand to the nest.

"Don't! Don't touch them!" the girls shouted at him.

"And why not? Are they yours?!"

"Just don't touch them," Zakharko declared in a serious manner, and that took a load off Pavlyk's heart. He knew that if Zakharko didn't touch the nest and told others not to, the nest would stay intact.

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Because if you take it in your hands the lark will know you touched it."

"So what?"

"Then it won't come back to the nest again. I know what we'll do! Let's mark this spot with a stick, so we know where it is, and then we'll come here every day to have a look. And when the nestlings hatch, we'll take them out."

"Don't do that," Pavlyk said.

"Why? Do you pity them?"

"Of course I do. It'll make the mother lark cry."

"Just listen to that hunchback!" Zakharko said. "Did you ever see a bird cry? I've snatched plenty of sparrows out of their nests, and I've never seen a mother or father sparrow cry."

By that time Pronko had already found a stick. They pushed it into the ground and Pavlyk walked away, dismayed.

"Let's go and look for some more!" Zakharko cried.

"Let's go."

"Come on, boys! Let's go, girls!"

Several minutes later, the boys found a second nest and marked it with a stick, too. Then they went off to search for more.

Pavlyk sat on the grass, deep in thought, eyes unblinking. He imagined how the mother lark would return to her nest and, on seeing it empty, would

squeak plaintively, beating her wings and body against the ground, searching and searching for her fledglings. They'd be gone... Zakharko would have taken them and torn them to pieces, just as he had the baby sparrows.

Pavlyk shuddered and quickly got to his feet. Seeing the boys had gone off a long distance, he pulled the stick out of the ground and threw it away. Then he walked slowly toward the second nest.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing, hunchback?" Zakharko cried when he saw Pavlyk take hold of the stick. "Now I'll show you..."

"Boys, he's taken this one out, too!" yelled Pronka, trying to find the first nest.

Pavlyk grew pale at the sight of Zakharko running at him, fists swinging. He cried out in terror and burst into tears.

Zakharko pounced on Pavlyk like a wild beast and drove a fist into his back. Pavlyk fell to the ground and Zakharko held him down with his knee, pounding him in the ribs and chest with his fist. The other children gathered round.

Pavlyk fell silent.

"What are you doing?" the girls shouted through tears. But they were afraid to defend Pavlyk against the enraged bully Zakharko.

"Stop beating him! Oh my God, he'll kill Pavlyk!"

The boys pulled Zakharko off of Pavlyk.

When the children saw that Pavlyk wasn't screaming or crying but lay with eyes closed and hands outspread, barely breathing, they scattered like frightened sparrows.

V

Pavlyk was already sitting up, quietly gulping down his sobs, when Grandpa Antyp and the girls ran up to him.

"Oh, my God! What did those rascals do?!" lamented Grandpa, lifting his grandson up in his arms.

"It's Zakharko who did it," the girls twittered.

"He nearly killed him..." they said, interrupting one another

"Yes, he would have strangled him if the boys hadn't pulled him off!"

"One of those, eh?! That good-for-nothing. Now, now, dear boy. Does it hurt? Where does it hurt, son?" Grandpa asked worriedly.

Pavlyk said nothing and quietly moaned, closing his eyes like someone utterly powerless. In fact, he wasn't as much hurt as he was frightened. Meek and peaceful himself, he couldn't understand what made others so evil, and this always frightened him. When he saw Zakharko's beastly black eyes flaming with anger, he had all but fainted with fear.

"Never mind, son! He won't get away with it, hot ziggity damn!" Grandpa reassured Pavlyk. "He won't get away with it, I tell you! If

Iavdokha won't give him a lashing, I'll paint his back black and blue with my own hands, damn it! Who ever heard of a child behaving like that?"

"You won't find him now, Grandpa," the girls warned him.

"I won't find him, you say?"

"When he hides, his mother searches and searches and never finds him."

"Is that so? This Grandpa will find him, all right!"

"He usually hides in the building at the old mine."

"Or else he climbs into a prospecting shaft and sits there on a ladder, where his mother is afraid to go."

"She ends up begging him to climb out of there."

"You see, she's afraid he'll fall down into the shaft."

"That's all nonsense! This Grandpa isn't Iavdokha and won't be afraid. I've climbed in all kinds of shafts. He better watch out! I'll pull him out of there by his ears."

Talking to the girls in this manner, Grandpa Antyp carried Pavlyk to his hut, where he undressed him and put him into bed.

"Do you want something to eat, son?"

"No," Pavlyk replied in a whisper, closing his eyes.

"I'll boil some tea, and by the time it's ready your mother'll be back."

Wheezing, the old man filled a big tin kettle, put it on the stove and began to kindle a fire.

Shaken and exhausted, Pavlyk fell asleep.

Dusk had fallen. The sound of merry singing came from the common. Grandpa closed the window, but he did not light the lamp, lest he wake his grandson. He sat down in front of the stove and kept muttering under his breath as he filled his pipe. The bright red flame illuminated his ruddy gray beard, short smoke-tarred moustache, and hairy chest beneath his open shirt. The light glimmered on his bald head as if it were trying to smooth out his wrinkled forehead, release his tensed brows, and blow away his dark thoughts.

The old man was deep in thought. He was reflecting on the fate of his dear, unfortunate, and crippled grandson, whom just about anyone could abuse.

"With a lot such as his, he won't get far," he sighed. "While his mother and grandfather are alive he's still got a chance, but when we're gone... God gave the boy a heart, but denied him appearance. And without good appearance there's no fortune. Why did God mete out this punishment? His mother is beautiful and a good person, may God preserve her. It's because of him—that drunkard of a father—that God punished the boy with deformity. But now the father is dead, so his son's fate is of no concern to him any more."

"What happened here? What's happened to Pavlyk?" Pavlyk's worried mother rushed into the house, interrupting Grandpa's thoughts.

"Hush!" Grandpa gestured to her.

"Is he asleep?" she whispered and hurried over to the bed, where she bent over the boy. On hearing him breathe serenely in his sleep, she came back to Grandpa.

"Is he all right? Was he hurt?"

"No," Grandpa mumbled, taking the pipe out of his mouth. "Just frightened."

"Who did it? The girls told me it was Iavdokha's Zakharko."

"Yes—him, the rascal..."

"They're having company at the manor. I left everything and came running back here. Why was Pavlyk beaten? Was it because he got in Zakharko's way?"

"Nonsense! I'll find that scamp tomorrow, I will! I'll show him, hot ziggity damn!"

For a long time Grandpa kept mumbling at the stove as he smoked his pipe and contrived how he would catch the culprit. Mother placed a stool by the boy's bed and, sighing deeply, settled at his side. Her eyes filled with tears and maternal sorrow as she looked at the boy's face, pale even in the dusk. She gently stroked his head and took his thin hands into hers; she started every time he tossed and cried out in his sleep. Thoughts much darker and more desperate than Grandpa's oppressed her heart.

VI

Pavlyk was roused from sleep by the morning sun, as a sheaf of golden rays played on his face.

He turned his head toward the window and smiled.

"Oh no you don't! That won't do!" Pavlyk heard stamping feet and bustling in the entrance hall. "You won't get away from Grandpa, you scamp! Keep moving, or I'll pull you inside by your ears!"

Pavlyk looked toward the door with wide-open eyes, making no sense of anything. He looked around the room, but there was no one there.

The door burst open with a bang. Grandpa Antyp literally carried in a horribly frightened Zakharko: the boy resisted and kicked the air with his bare feet.

Surprised and frightened by this unexpected scene, Pavlyk sat up in his bed.

"You're up already, son?" Grandpa asked, tightly closing the door lest Zakharko attempt to slip out. "Here he is ... I barely managed to find the scamp! He dug himself into the straw in the barn. Good thing the boys told me where to look for him. Get ready now, you bully! Pavlyk and I are going to give you the works!"

The old man grabbed the boy by his shoulders and pushed him toward the bed.

"Hit him, Pavlyk! Hit this rat so he won't be nasty any more."

Pavlyk hid his hands under the blanket and looked at Zakharko with fear.

"Don't you want to hit him?! Go on!"

"I'll never do it ag-a-a-ain!" the culprit bawled.

"That's a lie! Ha! He'll never do it again! I'll bet you won't, after Pavlyk and I beat the stuffing out of you! Mind you, boy, I've got a good belt!"

Grandpa let go of Zakharko and started looking around for his miner's raw leather belt.

"Now, where did I put it?"

Zakharko pressed himself into a corner and howled:

"I won't do it again."

Tears began to tremble on Pavlyk's eyelashes.

"Grandpa ... he'll never do it again," said Pavlyk, on the verge of tears.

"Who won't?" Grandpa asked angrily. "He won't? Just go and believe him, and next time he'll bash in your head and kill you! Now, where is my belt, hot ziggity damn! I'm sure I put it here yesterday."

"I wo-o-on't!" Zakharko howled.

"Ah, here it is!" Grandpa said, happy to have found what he was looking for. "All right, you bully! Come here and I'll teach you a lesson."

"I won't anymore! I wo-o-o-n't!"

Pavlyk quickly rolled out of bed and ran up to Grandpa in tears.

"He... he won't do it again! Grandpa, dear Grandpa, he... he..."

Pavlyk burst into sobs.

"Saints alive!" Grandpa threw up his arms in surprise. "Now you're crying, too?"

"He won't do it again," Pavlyk said, wiping away his tears.

"How's that?" Grandpa said angrily. "You want to let him get away with it? What kind of business is that? Next time he'll crack your head open with a rock. Am I supposed to pat him on the back for it, hot ziggity damn?!"

"He's not like that. Zakharko, you won't fight again, will you?" Pavlyk hastened to intercede, afraid that Grandpa would make good on his threats.

"I won't do it again," said Zakharko, quieting down. He sensed that matters were taking a favorable turn.

"Grandpa, Zakharko and I will play for a while," Pavlyk chirped, seeing his grandfather hesitate. "We'll play, Zakharko, won't we?"

"Well, well!" The old man was still angry, but he did not want to sadden his grandson and stepped away from the boy. "You're not gonna get away with this! Just wait! I'll go get your mother. She'll take care of you, hot ziggity damn! See how he looks daggers at me!"

Grandpa went out and locked the door behind him.

"Zakharko, let's play jacks," said Pavlyk solicitously. "Look at the beautiful pebbles I've got!"

Zakharko was reluctant to play what he considered a girls' game, but he didn't want to displease Pavlyk, who had kindly and selflessly interceded on his behalf.

"All right," Zakharko agreed, sighing and glancing at the open window.

When Antyp and Zakharko's mother, Iavdokha, arrived at the hut, they stopped at the threshold in surprise.

Zakharko and Pavlyk were sitting on the floor, playing happily, and laughing.

"Grandpa," Pavlyk cried out joyfully to the old man. "Zakharko isn't angry at all—he's nice! Now we'll be playing together often."

"Well, well, what do you say to that?" said Grandpa, angrily slapping his thighs. "That boy should be given a good drubbing, hot ziggity damn, and here he's... Boy, this time luck's on your side!" said Antyp, wagging a rebuking finger at Zakharko, as Iavdokha smiled kindly through her tears.

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