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# **The Grandmaster**

**New In Chess 2026**

## CHAPTER ONE

# October – Lund

The traffic light turned red. Lukas took a step onto the road, but Sonja held him back.

“We are not in a hurry.”

“No,” he said, assuming she didn’t understand. He had to move on, push forward, chase after new goals. Every now and then, he woke up from a dream in which he retired, sat in a sunbed on the beach and watched the sunset – until the chair collapsed. The dream haunted him with its unmistakable message: he had to work harder. Time was running out. At twenty-five, he was still not a grandmaster.

“Are you ready?” Sonja asked.

“Mm...”

A snail with a light grey shell marked by dark rings was about to cross the road. The tentacles pointed upward, as though seeking direction. Did it realise that it was making its very last journey? Unlikely. The light would turn green, then red, then green again before the snail crawled far enough to be run over.

A car passed by, splashing water around it. Had it rained this morning? He couldn’t recall whether he’d even looked outside.

“It was pouring earlier,” Sonja said, taking a step away to avoid getting wet, while pulling Lukas along. Her hand was warm.

The snail left the white line and continued across the tarmac, leaving a rippled stripe behind it. Half a metre farther on, a white Saab Turbo braked. The driver kept both hands on the wheel and stared straight ahead. Perhaps he was on his way home from work, with both direction and destination mapped out. Or so he thought. In truth, few people knew what they really wanted.

Lukas did. He nodded – then it struck him. It was Hassan, a familiar face from the handball stands. They hadn’t seen each other for a long time, and when their eyes met, it was too late to pretend he hadn’t noticed.

Hassan rolled down the window, showing his styled dark hair shining with products.

“It’s been a long time!”

“Nice to see you,” Lukas said, thinking it sounded ironic, which wasn’t his intention.

“Have you met my girlfriend? She’s from Greece.”

They were on a temporary visit from Crete, where Hassan had moved earlier in the autumn. Looking in the rearview mirror, he told Lukas how they had renovated the kitchen in their new home. The TV was built into the wall, seamlessly blending into the room.

“Are you coming to watch Lugi on Saturday? It’s a derby!”

Lukas expressed regret, saying he couldn’t attend the handball match as he wouldn’t be in town.

“What are you doing these days?” Hassan continued.

“Actually ... playing chess.”

Lukas looked down toward the snail. Normally he didn’t say that, as people found it strange and it led to awkward follow-up questions. But Hassan knew him well enough to be honest.

“Chess? You’re still keeping that up? Do you go to tournaments and stuff?”

“A lot. Mostly in Europe.”

“How’s that going?”

“Up and down. But it’s great to travel.”

To non-chess players, he would say it went up and down, though he always thought it went either up or down, never both at the same time. He also added that he liked travelling; it was something people could relate to.

“But what do you do?” Hassan asked, letting the engine idle.

“Er... studying. A little bit of everything.”

Lukas observed the snail, now a few centimetres closer to disaster. He was disappointed both in Hassan for not realising that being a chess player was a legitimate profession, and in himself for not daring to stand up for what he was. The lie had come reflexively, before he had time to think. Above all, he was disappointed that Hassan probably believed he wanted to swap places with him.

It should have been the other way around. Hassan, trapped in his own narrow perspective, didn’t understand how significant it was for Lukas to have finally gone full-time, despite all the nagging from his family. That he could plan his time as he wanted and do what he loved the most. But Hassan was as narrow-minded as everyone else who prioritised a steady job with a secure salary. Sonja had not come to the rescue either.

As the traffic light turned yellow, three runners crossed the street, paying no attention to the traffic. One heavily built, one tall and one skinny, packed together

with thin, spattered clothes, their faces contorted with pain. Lukas shook his head. He hardly ever exercised.

“See you again in two years,” said Hassan, revving the engine.

“I’ll be in Crete around New Year.”

“Come to our New Year’s party!”

Hassan disappeared, and Lukas felt Sonja pulling him across the street. He looked up from his thoughts and saw the snail one step ahead and slightly to the right. It crunched under his foot as he put it down. A sacrifice made to succeed in the blindfold simultaneous exhibition at the chess club. Or rather a way of preparing for battle and showing what was more important: an insignificant snail or the evening’s games.

He avoided looking down but could feel an imbalance between his shoes during the next steps – likely just his imagination. Sonja didn’t seem to notice, which came as a relief. She did not understand what it took at that level. Her cheeks were soft, untouched by pressure and loss.

“There’s light inside,” she said, pointing to the clubhouse a hundred metres ahead. “Wouldn’t it be nice to get into the warmth?”

They kept walking and crossed the last intersection without having to stop. Sonja said something, but he didn’t catch it, being busy going over the strategy for tonight’s record attempt. He was ready, had prepared as well as he could.

Sonja raised her voice.

“There is someone trying to talk to you.”

From the north, an elderly gentleman wobbled across the street without looking back.

“Are you out cycling?”

“That’s exactly what it looks like,” said Lukas’s grandfather. “I’m on my way to the psych ward.”

It was a long-standing joke. August, a scholar of Russian literature, had always avoided administration and contact with students and other staff. To be left alone, he had set up a study in the attic of the old psychiatric centre.

The fact that he was cycling was worrying, but impressive at the same time. At 90, he still wanted to run his own life.

“Who is the pretty girl you’re dating?”

“Sonja,” Lukas said quickly. “From the chess club.”

“Another lunatic! Did you also learn chess from your grandfather?”

Sonja laughed and moved a lock of hair from her cheek.

“We’re friends, I think.”

August raised his stick, which he claimed he had for chasing away dogs, and started cycling.

The club was located just over a kilometre from the centre, but on the less desirable side of town. Anything west of the railway was considered inaccessible. The members were careful to emphasise that the entrance to the cellar room was on the ground floor, and they were constantly disappointed that the few journalists who came to visit wrote about the enclosed atmosphere. The hope was that on this night, the media would give chess the attention it deserved. Lukas was to attempt a Swedish record in blindfold chess by simultaneously playing against thirty-two opponents.

The sign on the door hung askew and was worn by years of rain, so only the initiates knew it was a chess club. At the entrance was a simple cafeteria, and the rest of the clubhouse consisted of small rooms in a corridor. Some of the players had already sat down at the boards, while others stood by the coffee machine, discussing. Sonja disappeared down the corridor.

“You’re home,” said Hjalmar.

He was a pensioner and the club’s chairman, but didn’t play very often.

“It’s just like the migratory birds,” he continued. “Wherever they fly, they come back. How is it living abroad?”

“I’m happy. I have everything I need.”

“Everything is ready for tonight. When is your flight?”

“One o’clock in the morning. From Sturup.”

Hjalmar looked at his wristwatch. To read the numbers, he had to bring his hand close to his eyes, and combined with the moustache and the arched back, he looked older than he was.

“We have a newcomer. He read about the event in the newspaper.”

“Hello,” Lukas said to the man, who was bent over a cup of coffee. He seemed to be in his thirties and had round glasses, a puffy patterned woollen jumper and a big beard.

“Stig Karlsson.”

“What is your rating?”

“Nothing. I have never been in a club.”

The front door opened and Dennis walked in. Although he was only twenty-two, he was the best player in the club. A year earlier he had become a grandmaster, the highest title a chess player could receive. As a grandmaster, he was given accommodation, flights and a couple of hundred euros in entry fees for the tournaments he played. The title was a kind of degree that he could keep for life.

Lukas had a stated goal of becoming a grandmaster before the summer. He already thought he was playing better than many of them and often fantasised about how it would feel to write GM Lukas. Grandmaster Lukas.

He wished Stig good luck and walked over to Dennis, who was hanging his denim jacket in the entrance.

“I didn’t think you would come.”

“Didn’t have anything better to do. Heard you wanted to be on TV. It’ll be damn interesting.”

“I don’t want that at all! It’s for the club.”

Lukas was both excited and nervous about the attention that the blindfold simul was expected to attract. He was afraid that his friends would think that his occupation was more legitimate just because it was on TV. That was not the case at all.

“Sonja here?” Dennis said when he saw her coat. There was no curiosity in his tone; it was as if he was talking to himself.

“Shall we get started?” Lukas said. “We haven’t got all night. The flight leaves when it leaves.”

Hjalmar didn’t take notice.

“We’re waiting for the journalists. They should have arrived at half past four.”

It took half an hour before there was a knock on the door. “The clubhouse was hard to find,” said the younger of the two reporters.

Hjalmar introduced himself as the president and outlined the evening’s programme. As Lukas would be blindfolded, his opponents had to say their moves while making them.

In one of the corridor rooms, the reporter explained that she would first conduct an interview and then play a few moves against Lukas. He put on a scarf as a blindfold.

“How do you think the match will go?” the reporter asked.

“The main goal is to finish the games, but of course I want to win.”

“Isn’t it hard to keep so many games in your head?”

“We get a special chess memory. It’s easy for me to remember moves, but I can go to the shop to buy milk and come home with a newspaper.”

It wasn’t true. He didn’t buy either milk or newspapers, but he thought it was what normal people bought.

“There must be thousands of pieces.”

“No, sixteen games give 1,024 pieces. And I don’t see them individually, but in groups of five or six. I’ve seen so many positions that everything feels familiar. It’s also easier to remember your own games. The moves become like a part of me, you could say. That’s why bad moves hurt so much.”

“Not physically?”

“Yes, like a phantom limb. I want to amputate the bad parts, but I can’t. They are always there anyway.”

He heard the reporter scratch her head.

“Your opponents are all men,” she continued after a pause that lasted a little longer than before and made him wonder if he had said something stupid.

“Pure coincidence. And it’s not true.”

Sonja was certainly not a man, and moreover, a little girl was going to play. In fact, Sonja was the only woman in the club who was older than twelve. Lukas didn't see this as a problem, but many people thought it would be better to have a more even gender balance.

"Is it possible to combine chess with school?"

What would he say? He knew he looked childish and had occasionally thought he should spend more time on his clothes and hairstyle – he had not been to the hairdresser for many years. Each time he had forgotten about it the next morning or thought something else was more important.

He heard Hjalmar's voice and was glad he didn't have to answer.

"He's twenty-five years old."

"So you play chess full time?" the reporter continued. She seemed unconcerned.

"You could say that."

"Is it really possible to make a living out of that?"

He looked up at the ceiling, even though he couldn't see anything, and wondered what to say. A no would be bad publicity for chess, but he couldn't say yes either. What would he say to the tax authorities?

"Without spending, you can live on anything."

The reporter was ready and asked him to take off the blindfold temporarily. She hadn't played since she was a kid, so he needed to show her the first two moves.

"d4," he said when the film camera went back on and the reporter made the move for him.

"Horse e6," she answered.

"Stop!"

Dennis's reaction was immediate. Lukas pulled the blindfold up to his forehead and saw that the reporter had moved the knight diagonally, making an illegal move. Dennis was standing so close to the board that you would have thought he wanted to be caught on camera. He looked good on camera with his light-coloured thick hair and fit body, and he knew it.

They started all over but failed again. On the third try they did better. After two moves, Lukas heard a slight thud, and the reporter said she resigned because she knew how it would end anyway. That wasn't part of the script. She could have asked anyone in the room and found out that you don't resign by knocking over the king, but by stopping the chess clock and offering a handshake.

The reporters said goodbye, and the blindfold simul could begin. Before sitting down, Lukas shook hands with his opponents. Some looked bored, others sat concentrated with their elbows pressed against the table and their eyes on the board. Sonja was warm and relaxed, holding her hand a little too long, as if chess was a social game. Stig smiled with a look that seemed too honest to be genuine, unless you considered that he was a beginner.

Putting on the blindfold, Lukas felt that he wasn't just playing chess tonight, he was playing a role, one he had been rehearsing for years. To the others, he was a player with potential, but they didn't know how deep the stakes went. Each move, each game, was a step closer to that title — Grandmaster Lukas. The past had become a blur, and the future was nothing but an endless series of games to win.

The simul was just an exhibition. Some of his opponents were strong club players who on a good day might have a chance against him even without the blindfold. A handful, on the other hand, were children who had only been playing a year or two. Against them he was ruthless and finished as quickly as possible. After only fifteen minutes, the worst player was lost. Someone started applauding, probably Stig. It quickly became quiet when no one followed.

“Well played,” Hjalmar said to the boy.

“It wasn't,” said Dennis. “It would've been an achievement for Lukas if he hadn't won.”

As the games continued, Lukas began to pick up the pace. On average, he spent just under half a minute on each of his moves and immediately had a new position to think about. But not against Sonja, who had rarely decided when it was her turn.

After twenty moves – he kept count so he could go through the games from the beginning if he got lost – he got a slightly crazy idea. He would sacrifice a pawn to lure away her queen and then attack the king. Her king's position was known to be safe, and it looked unlikely that the attack would work, but despite going through piece after piece, he could see no defence. Since chess is largely based on pattern recognition, it was the deviations that were beautiful. He had found a surprising pattern, and blindly at that!

He realised that the others were waiting. His biggest problem was that he became absorbed in calculations and thought too long. This habit led to time trouble, forcing hasty moves later in the games. In the blindfold simul, there was no time limit, but the other players were likely getting impatient. He took his hands away from his eyes, where he had been holding them despite the blindfold, and stretched.

A few moves later, Sonja made a big blunder and lost. Lukas thought it was a shame. He would have liked the real point to be played on the board instead of just passing by in his head. Above all, he would have liked to share it with someone, to feel the fellowship of both seeing the same thing.

Lukas didn't make any illegal moves, but he did catch the young girl trying to make one.

“It was unconscious,” said Hjalmar. “That can happen to a beginner.”

Lukas was convinced that she thought she would get away with it, but it was no big deal. He remembered how easy it was to fall for the temptation to cheat at that age. Children were like that.

He lost a game and drew with Stig, but the overall match was still a clear victory. The light felt harsh when he took off his blindfold. He squeezed his eyes shut, then

opened them carefully. The wall clock showed a quarter to twelve! Had he been playing for six and a half hours? It felt like one at most.

One of his favourite things about chess was forgetting his surroundings. It was the same when he watched handball, only not really. He would enter someone else's world, but at the board he was creating it himself. But it could be dangerous to lose track of time – it wasn't the first time he'd been late for a flight.

On a notice board on the wall, he saw the names and results of the opponents. Stig (-) ½–½, Amir (2314) 1–0... The numbers in brackets stood for the players' Elo ratings – the proof of their strengths. He himself had 2480, only twenty points from his dream of 2500, but almost fifty from Dennis. He remembered that his friends were no longer at the club and wondered when they had left.

“Dennis and Sonja left shortly after she lost,” said Hjalmar. “Hurry up, I'll drive you to Sturup.”

Before leaving, Hjalmar sent home one of the strange bohemians. His face was sheepish, but it looked more worn than old. His trademark was a pair of homemade earmuffs made of socks. Otherwise, he was dressed in suit trousers and a checked shirt, the same clothes he had worn every time Lukas had seen him.

The Earmuff certainly didn't have any friends outside the club, and even within it, few people spoke to him. Even though they met week after week, nobody probably knew why he wore the earmuffs. But at least at the club he was alone with the others. Besides, he had chess, unlike all those poor souls who didn't have a hobby to be passionate about.

When the television came to visit, The Earmuff had been turned away. He had been let into the clubhouse only after the reporters had left.

“That was wise,” said The Earmuff. “But I don't understand how Hjalmar could know that I get rashes from video cameras.”

Lukas grabbed his jacket, a red one he had got from his grandfather, and slipped into the car. As his bag was taken care of, he closed his eyes and leaned back. The car started moving but soon stopped, perhaps at the traffic light where he'd seen the snail attempting to cross the road. He kept his eyes closed, replaying the attack against Sonja in his mind, move by move. By the time she resigned, they had left Lund behind. Hjalmar was hunched over the steering wheel, his curved posture making it difficult to tell his true height. Without the hunchback, he would have been considerably taller than Lukas.

“How can she play like that?” Lukas said, shaking his head demonstratively.

“Why do you think about that now?”

“What else should I think about?”

“At least you're better at handling losses than when you were a teenager.”

Hjalmar's phone rang. He started rummaging through a bag with his right hand, while keeping his left on the steering wheel. Lukas watched as he looked both forward and sideways. When he picked up the phone, the signal had stopped.

“That was your grandmother. You can call her back if you want.”

She answered immediately.

“Congratulations! You won twenty-two games, right?”

“I won twenty-two games.”

“It’s nice that TV is paying attention to chess.”

“I guess it doesn’t matter.”

“A visit to a basement,” they said.

“It doesn’t matter either. Did you see how the reporter moved the pieces? The knight two steps forward and one to the side, like she was doing a demonstration video for two-year-olds.”

“I didn’t realise that.”

“And in the end she turned over the king.”

“It was a bit too early to resign.”

He hung up. Grandma didn’t understand anything either.

“You still haven’t got a new phone?” Hjalmar asked.

“It wouldn’t have been possible to train effectively. I need five undisturbed hours in a row.”

“You could have had it switched off.”

“If you have a phone, people expect it to be switched on. Now everyone knows that Lukas is the one you can’t contact.”

He had long thought about getting rid of his phone. After a loss a few months earlier, he had thrown it into a lake, immediately feeling ashamed. Such an act was only genuine if it was done in anger, not if it was planned. He waded out and retrieved the phone, but it couldn’t be saved.

They arrived at Sturup at half past twelve. Hjalmar followed him to the barrier at the security checkpoint to make sure that Lukas arrived safely. He had been there before and knew that it wasn’t obvious. After they had said goodbye, Lukas placed his memory stick in a separate box and watched it slowly slide through the X-ray machine. It was a relief to leave. Even though he didn’t know anyone who had travelled more in the last couple of years, he never felt he reached the destination – until he had settled in Saint Petersburg. Soon he would be back home.