

Vladimir Anderson

Struggle

Prisoners of Darkness



18+

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Year: 2170. Humanity survived the terrible catastrophe of World War III, but fate has prepared another test for it. A century after the war, Earth has become a bleak and ruthless place where survivors face a new threat. The humanoid monsters known as plagues are returning from the dark past to fulfill their sinister designs. The protagonist of this saga is the foreman of a group of miners who has lost all his loved ones in the horrors of the post-war reality. His soul is filled with bitterness and the desire for freedom. He decides to rally those who refuse to accept slavery around him and lead a desperate rebellion against the plagues. However, the plagues are not just ruthless warriors. They possess inexplicable power and a secret ancient artifact, the Black Stone, an object of worship and the main source of their power. The book, written 18 years ago (2005) chose Makeyevka, a suburb of Donetsk, as the setting, which is unusually relevant in our time.

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Struggle. Prisoners of Darkness

Prologue

No one remembers the time when we were free anymore. Once upon a time, long ago, there was a war between us humans. We didn't know we'd have to face anyone else. We thought we'd conquered nature, split the atom, mastered space. And then they came... And all our equipment, all our "artificial minds" refused to work... not for us, but for anyone at all: they simply failed. All our achievements became nothing in an instant: missiles, computers, distribution systems, what's more... half of everything became junk. And the shuttles and satellites... who knows what happened to them. Maybe they fell into the ocean, or maybe they are still flying... in fact, nobody is interested in it now....

And all because of some crystal. None of the humans have ever seen it, of course, but the plagues (the very ones who consider themselves our masters) have always propagandized its power and greatness, claiming unimaginable size and intelligence. Yes, it's alive. What's more, according to them, he's the one who told them to start the war, and then opened

the portal, after which he jammed all our electronics. Jesus, we're down to one firearm and a couple thousand tanks that survived World War III.

Some put their hope in KAZ (active protection complex; armored vehicle defense, which works on the principle of throwing metal balls in the direction of a flying shell), but it was so little, as well as forces, and the enemies were so many that. God, why did we fight each other?

There's what's left

Why the plagues needed us is quite clear – raw materials, material and labor. Now they pump our oil, our gas and coal, and everything else is also ours and only by ourselves. Here we are slaves and have no rights, that is, not that to our oil or gas, but to ourselves and our children. And how many of us are left? I don't know. maybe a third or a quarter of a

billion. Who cares, as long as there is enough for production?

People are finally equalized in rights. Nonsense, but that seems to be possible when there are no rights at all. When everyone has to work for the chums.

There are those who disagree with this – the Maquis (in honor of the once former rebels). They hide somewhere, they are few in number, but they attack, though rarely. We are all with them, but we see perfectly well that we can do nothing now.

After the conquest of the plague divided all several groupings by continents, and already there formed into several columns. The largest grouping is Eurasian. It consists of four columns: Iranian, Indian, Chinese and Slavic (in the last one everyone was shifted, so in some way it became as before).

Gavriil Zheleznov (for chums he is 643075A2) was the commander of the 381st working soma (in their language "soma" – slave). In the soma he was called no other way than "Gora". Sometimes even in a direct manner. The nickname was justified for a number of reasons: firstly, his orders were always given clearly and unambiguously, secondly, his decision, at least outwardly, could not be shaken by any arguments, thirdly, the very appearance (taller than two meters, heavier than a hundred kilograms, and his face face – a combination of wrinkles and folds, however, not tense muscles),

and, finally, most importantly, the permanence of his position. On this he became a legend. The thing is that it was impossible to hold the position of A (commander, which is written at the end of the serial number) for fifteen years: in case of failure to fulfill the plan, the plagues killed, in case of fulfillment – the Maquis or those who cooperated with them, and such, for some reason, always found. But Gabriel did both with strikingly correct alternation. Some let him live because they thought he was sometimes capable of exceeding the plan. Others, on the contrary, hoped for purposeful "hackwork".

What remains to be noted is his "blood". His great-grandfather was in the war (the name of it his grandfather didn't want to tell his father), and his grandfather was in the war (no one gave it a name), and his father was in the war (no one saw the end of it). Despite such a list, the plagues were unaware of this. They were also unaware that people still have names and surnames, marry, though only in their minds, remember the past and their ancestors, believe in God and deep down cannot live without freedom. They were only interested in the result, and they considered the study of people unworthy of their power.

Work. Now it meant literally everything, and it all existed in the understanding of the plagues, how they would decide to feed and how much sleep they would allow.

A mine, a rig, a mine – all the habitats of an unwilling man.

The 381st catfish worked in a coal mine in Makeyevka, Donbass, along with the 420th, 647th and 253rd. It is impossible to explain what it is like to work in a coal mine, you can only feel it.

Thoughts of a free slave

March 25th, 2170.

Today, the 381st catfish got sorted and cleaned.

"So, did you get any sleep?" – Gavriil joked, approaching his deputy Konstantin Bogatoy (number 5396413B2; category "b" – deputies). The latter was glad to hear such a joke, because all the other jokes he had heard concerned his surname.

"You know... How I'd like to get into a fight with you," he replied doubly: plagues were killed on the spot for fighting, but it was an easy death.

"Should I take it in a positive light?"

"And only with her. All day long I think about death..."

"Good. Even great for the start of the work week. That we have a plan."

Konstantin opened his decrepit yellow-and-black (half charcoal, half clay) notebook and tried to read something. "Okay. If the 420s make it to 11-all and the 647s make it to 13-all, we'll have to clean all 24."

"Is there a deal on the 'exit'?"

"Output" was "left" cargo, which the plagues did not know about. That is, it was extracted, but it was not registered anywhere – it was given to "blacks" (in other words, "doomed" workers, who were put into separate pits with a small layer of coal and in three cases out of four were never taken out of there; only two of them were really saved).

"No," the deputy proclaimed.

"All right, I'll handle it myself. Keep an eye on things here. I'll be back in twelve minutes."
"Got it."

Gora motioned toward the 2 way.

The sorting room was a large hall with a total area of 30000 square meters (100x300) and a height of 3 meters, so that the plague was easier to observe. In addition, there was electric (though weak) lighting in the form of bulbs covered by a thin grid. In spite of these "conveniences" it was the most difficult to work in the purification room: the plagues were too visible. Every time one looked at that gorged face breathing fresh air through the mask, listened to that disgusting laughter spewed by yellow throat and pale green snake tongue and realized that it would go on forever – it was a real torture.

Rounding the corner, the commander looked around the room – empty for now, just two chum booths on either side; Groups A and B wake up early for five minutes to study the plan.

Entering the "coal face hall" (the room where direct mining was done), two figures came into view: Dominik Brazik (number 572644A2) and Piotr Dożyk (number 323372B2). Their faces were not grim with the gravity of the task at hand, but they were squinting from sleep.

"What, didn't sleep?" – Gabriel greeted the miners. He liked to inspire the people with such remarks, arousing anger and rage in strictly limited quantities (and it didn't matter who it was poured out on, the main thing was that it would help them survive). Today, the plagues were only allowed to sleep for 4 hours, as opposed to the usual 8; generally speaking, this was the only thing humans were lucky with – the plagues needed 16 hours of sleep, and they thought it was similar to humans, so they cut it down to 8.

"Sleeping. – whispered Dominic to the approaching commander, "Those bastards got in the way. Don't know what's causing all these surprises today?"

"It's not hard to understand," said the deputy. – They've got their hands full."

"Two boots to a pair. How lucky they are to work together. – thought Gora. – Even their eyes are the same... Dark blue with spark and hate. How come they haven't been caught yet?"

"What do you think Gora?" "What can I say... Assholes..." Everyone laughed in unison.

"From words to action. – Gabriel continued. – Here's a question..."

Their foreheads tensed, their eyes glistened, their mouths opened slightly – in short, every part of their faces was engaged, as if in anticipation of a lightning strike in a clear field where only one man stood.

"Exit."

"Well, I thought so," the muscles relaxed.

"Don't tell anyone what you're thinking. It's not time to think yet... But it's time to dream."

"That's what everyone's thinking about, and you know very well."

"And plagues, too," Gabriel brightened here. He had said the phrase before, but only now did he realize the power its realization gave him. It's a chance.

"Well Exit..." – Dozhik said.

"This is a chance. It really is a chance," thought Gora. "Kilograms 125, ah..."

"What?" – Stumbled the commander. "YOU asked about Exit."

"Ah, yes. И?"

"We're 125, 647 is 80. I've already talked to them, so you don't have to try, they say they're getting hit hard today." "They haven't finished their work yet and already they're seceding..." – the chums had a whole charter on

punishments – "All right. We'll organize the transfer," Gora replied and thought again: "This is really a chance.

When the commander returned to the sorting place, the catfish began its work. But Gora didn't care about that now: for the first time in his forty-five years he saw a real chance to free people.

"Gora," Konstantin called out to his commander.

The one in turn "woke up" for the third time that day, "What?" "Raphael. He decided to come out today."

"Where is he?"

The deputy pointed somewhere in the middle of the hall, where it was impossible to see anything behind the backs and faces, as well as, of course, the methane dust that littered every corner of the mine.

After a ten-minute search, the young boy Raphael (number 97899213B2; category "B2" – "gray" worker) was found. "Are you doing that on purpose?"

Five days ago, methane exploded and the 381st Soma lost three dead and one wounded. That wounded man was Raphael: second-degree burns on half his arm. Gora had given him a "leave of absence" (those who didn't work, the plagues didn't follow, as long as the plan was fulfilled).

"I'm already healthy," the boy replied, continuing to scrub the ground of embers without raising his head. The bubble from the burn burst, then another burst: clear liquid flowed into the water. Raphael shuddered, then his hand shook, but he kept his head still.

"Stop it. That's an order," Gabriel commanded.

Raphael stopped and raised his head. The gray, impenetrable eyes expressed calmness and restraint. A high forehead and strikingly white skin. It seemed white, despite the obvious charcoal grime that covered it almost everywhere; and even gave off a bluish color. Gabriel saw him as a descendant of the Aryans, who were considered a remarkably advanced and harmonious civilization.

"I can't not work. You understand that," the boy replied and fixed his commander in the eyes with his heavy glassy gaze. The only person capable of "translating" that gaze was Gora. He often observed his most poised subordinate and always saw sadness first. His eyes often looked not at the chums, but at the men at work; they poured blood from the fact that all the hardships the men went

through were of no avail. The eyes watched and suffered the slavery of others. And now Gabriel saw those eyes; they wanted, by all means, to end the suffering of the people, including by means of their own sacrifice – for this Hora loved his son very much, but it was beyond him to watch such altruism.

"Raphael, listen to my command. – The commander switched to a completely businesslike tone. – Go to Sector 1 (something like a "human house" a place of rest after work; also in the mine, the plague surface was taken out twice a month for about half an hour) and sleep. Don't come out of there for a week. That's an order."

The Son of the Mountain turned his eyes away and looked at the woman in her fifties washing coal two meters away from him, her eyes bloodshot and another blister bursting on her arm.

"Got it," Raphael replied and wandered off toward Route 1, tilting his head even more than before. He never wanted to be thought of as lazy or afraid of death. Although no one thought so – on the contrary, they called him "The Rock" rather than "Son of the Mountain" for his strong character, as if to separate him from his father's merits, even if they were not so great – even his father had not been so eager to work.

"And don't forget to bandage your arm," Gabriel shouted after him. On top of the fact that bandages were terribly scarce (so scarce that you had to wash old ones several times until they were completely washed out), the plagues also forbade them to be worn outside of Sector 1. This went in as an appendix to the "Clothing Charter", where you couldn't wear any items that weren't work related, and went on to list those items. And if something was forgotten (this was the case with Stanislaw Leszczynski, who wore a chain with a cross many years ago; generally speaking, many people wore them, just as long as they had one, but it was him who was noticed for it), it was immediately introduced, including the "first case" (Leszczynski's head was cut off, because it was the chain that held the cross).

"That's a fine son you have," the same woman addressed Gabriel. "Yes... Yes..."

"His fiancée is the same, isn't she? It's like they were made for each other..."

"What?" the Mountain turned to the woman and, seeing her sincere and joyful eyes, asked. – "What bride? Elizaveta Mikhailovna, aren't you confusing anything?"

"Gavriil Vladimirovich. How can I be confused? Her name is Maria. You know her... She's so light-skinned... He wanted to tell you himself, but obviously he didn't have time..."

"Wow... How long have they been together?"

"Oooh... A long time ago. She's from the 253rd soma. When did we 'move' here? Three years ago, I think. They've been together ever since."

"Wow," the commander marveled once more, not at the fact that his son hadn't told him such a thing (that wasn't uncommon), but at how long he had been able to hide the very fact of their love.

"What is it? Are you not pleased?" – Elizaveta Mikhailovna asked.

"No, more like the opposite. And very much so... And what did you say her name was?"
"Maria."

Gora stared at her with a waiting look – need a last name. "Maria Volina."

"I see... Thank you, Elizaveta Mikhailovna. Good health to you," Gavriil led out and walked towards the transportation hub (tracks 4, 5 and 6) where the loading of coal by the 253rd Soma was taking place.

Now all of Gora's thoughts went to his family. He remembered how he had met his wife Elena twenty-one years ago. She wasn't from his soma either, yet he hadn't managed to hide it from his father for more than two months (a very tangible result for a situation where "free" movement is not at all – plagues pass to work, then back, and sometimes outside

–

that's all movement). But three years?! That's a real conspiracy... Although the main factor in Gabriel's discovery of his

relationship with Elena was strong feelings – he couldn't live with her (it's past tense, now you have to: Elena died in an explosion four years ago).

How comparable it was to the relationship between his son and Maria Gora could not determine – for that it was necessary to see

her with his own eyes.

Entering the sector of the transportation hub, Gavriil outlined to himself one of today's problems and calculated with what kind of question the commander of this event would come to him now – the work at the 253rd soma today has not gone well. It was clear why: the people had not slept well, and in addition to that yesterday they had no strength left.

Gora moved a little from the entrance to the corner of the room: there was a wide view, in fact, he himself often stood at this point during his group's shifts.

The pretty girl glared at him for a moment, then turned away, continuing to fill the container with coal. Despite her lustrous golden hair and rather tall stature, she didn't really stand out, but her gaze gave him away. She looked at him like someone she didn't know personally, but at the same time familiar in general. It was hard for Gabriel to get a good look at her face from such a distance, but it seemed familiar.

"Mountain!" – came a shout from somewhere on the edge, which is how everyone greeted him today for some reason: Georgy Volin, deputy chief of the 253rd Som (number 2536484B2), sparkled with joy.

"Volin, of course! – Gabriel cried out in thought. – That's whose daughter she is. Well, that's good. She has a great father. A real actor."

Three seconds later, the zam was already beside him. "Ahhhh..." he cheered, hugging Gabriel. – It's good to see you."

Volin relaxed his hands, leaned back, still holding on to Gabriel's forearms: "My chief is looking for you. We don't

have any rage here – we're obviously going to fall short of the plan.

"I don't think it's a gimmick to anyone," Gora replied, trying to put his colleague at ease.

#Yes, yes. – Volin couldn't stop playing with his eyebrows. – Except that today we're going to surprise everyone. Ha- Ha-Ha-Ha."

"I like your healthy optimism."

"Who else here can be healthy... Since you like it, take me in with your family."

"And does he know, too," thought Gabriel. – that my son is about to marry his daughter?"

"I'm just kidding! – he was really joking. – Without people like me, people here would die from losing their sense of humor... Really, people like me are almost all catfish here. Don't you think?"

"Our whole column is differentiated by that."

"Here, by the way, is a new anecdote: "A miner asks another, "Who can be considered a coward?" Answer: "He who volunteers for the Maquis." Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha. It's true, there's nothing to do here but die: there's nothing to breathe, everything around is exploding, and there's nothing to say about food and water," at the end of the sentence he turned serious and shook his head negatively.

"So is there anything I can help you with?"

"Sure, buddy, sure. Here comes the commander. Talk to him, and I'll go cheer up the people," – Volin retreated and, turning around, rushed towards the locomotive loaded with minerals.

Gora turned his head to the side – the commander of Soma #235, Ivan Dubrovsky (number 547137A2), did not radiate half the optimism of his deputy (a good and effective method in contrasting leadership). As he approached, he reached out and shook his hand, then turned his sad eyes away and mouthed, "Gavriil. I've been looking for you since the beginning of the day. Zhora has probably already told you... and you can see for yourself. Work is just not going well today..."

Pardon the pun, but that's just the way it is." He sighed heavily: "Gabriel, I hear your team is cleaning twenty-four tons today..."

"Right."

"What the plagues did to those who fulfilled the plan by one-third could be imagined (their norm was 75 percent, for every percentage below that two percent of the soma were punished with five strokes of stones, as the number of strokes increased, the number of strokes reached ten, and the critical level was 25 percent). Ivan's eyes were already filled with impending deaths and the realization that it was not in his power to fix it.

"You shouldn't downplay your abilities. I'm sure your score is between 8 and 10... But it doesn't matter. We'll help you anyway. 14 tons. You can't go any smaller."

"Fourteen?"

"Yes, exactly. That's the most you'll get today. Even if they get all 24." "Mountain... God, you just saved us all."

"You'll thank me later. And not me, but my men. Twenty-seven percent of them to receive five strokes each. There are a total of one hundred and eighty-three men in my team. Twenty-seven percent is fifty men, that's 250 strokes. Of those, mine are only five. What are they worth?"

"Yes, yes, Gabriel. Well you just saved us..."

"Okay, okay. We'll talk about that later, you better go make the most of it, including for us." "Thank you very much again, Gavriil..." – Ivan immediately rushed forward into the labor. Now was the perfect opportunity to chat with Maria.

"Maria? – Gora asked the pretty girl.

She turned, "Yes... And you, I think, are Gavriil Vladimirovich."

"Yes, yes, that's absolutely right. Can I ask you something?" – Gora, like any self-respecting boss, had a knack for and liked to discern the wording of a sentence, such as the one he was using now. The expression "May I talk to you" and its derivatives were common, but he had noticed that the word "talk" not infrequently alarmed the interlocutor, so his interpretation of this address would include the word "ask", which, in particular, was very applicable to women who liked to talk about themselves.

"Of course you can. Just wouldn't want to take a break from work," her eyes were brimming with sincerity. – You're probably already aware of the fact that we're not tucking in today..."

"Altruistic, but partially so. That's a good thing. Will make an excellent mother... and wife too, of course," Gabriel thought and said: "That's alright, you don't have to worry about that issue. Our team will help your...you know what I mean."

"Honestly, it doesn't matter what rank you'd be, but if I didn't know your authority I wouldn't believe you," the girl admitted and jumped off the wagon and onto the ground.

Finally, she stood a step away from the Mountain, the light fully illuminating her. She was even lovelier than before.

She even looked a little like her fiancé, and her eyes were almost the same: They showed a will (internal, to the core, though of a different character), a certain impenetrability (much less than Raphael's, and it covered personal places, not everything that was of interest), as well as the absence of weakness (of course, everyone has weaknesses, but both Raphael and Mary did not show them, he because of his intransigence to himself, she – unwillingness to show it to others, and if something did not work out, they all had "their" ways out: Raphael's was prayer and self-conviction, Maria's was anger up to certain limits; she was angry, in principle, on every occasion, but always exclusively at herself, which moved forward, to achieve the goal, which she could not fail to achieve). In addition to her eyes, her facial expressions were noteworthy, which, if successfully "translated", showed her moods, including her own.

"So, what did you want to ask me?"

"You don't know a guy... blond hair, like yours, skin so white, well quite former, and also his arm has burns on it... left?" – the future son-in-law asked slyly.

"Raphael? Are you talking about your son?" "Yes, yes... And you know him well?"

"Well, I know almost everyone here already... And how well... well, that's not for me to judge."

Gora almost cringed -Raphael, was he specially preparing her for this kind of talk? Or is she that amazingly intelligent? No, she's not. Obviously both.

Gabriel decided it was time to ask directly, "Mary, do you love my son?" "Yes... I love it very much."

"Have you guys been dating long?"

"No, I wouldn't say that, but that doesn't stop me from loving him." "And for timing, clarify..."

"Three years... A little more."

"Do you consider that, under our circumstances, to be 'not long ago'?"

"I don't know exactly what conditions you're talking about, but it takes a long time for people to understand each other... Especially under these conditions."

"Generally speaking, you're right. I've been with my wife for seventeen years and I've never fully understood her.

You're right. It takes a lot of time. I don't have a home of my own." "I'm glad you understand me."

"Yes... as far as I know, you have a wedding coming up..." "Yes. Raphael was going to tell you today."

"so... you're in enough of a relationship to get married."

"I love him... And he loves me too... It's more than 'enough' for me."

"Then you may consider that you have my blessing... I wish you happiness..."

"Thank you. That's the best I could hope to hear from you. Thank you, Gavriil Vladimirovich."

"Yes and... I wish..." – Gabriel was about to say the word "grandchildren" when Maria suddenly vomited. Easily, out of the blue. Gabriel himself had a wife, he didn't need to explain why such things happen – the question dropped by itself.

Maria immediately got to her feet, so that Hora only had time to help her by supporting her by the elbow. "Masha, darling, what's wrong?"

"It's okay, it's okay. It's okay."

"You don't have to try to fool me. I've got a kid myself. So how many do you have?" "A month, or rather almost four weeks."

"It's nothing, don't worry. It's a common thing... I'll go tell Vanya to set you free..." "Don't. It's okay."

"I have to. You bet I do. I want healthy grandchildren, so no talking." "Thank you, Gavriil Vladimirovich. I'm glad I have such a father-in-law." "I'm pleased with you too... And one request..."

"Which one?"

"Love him always as he is now."

Where are the insiders and where are the outsiders

While the catfish were working underground, the imaginary and actual bosses were sitting right above the mine. The actual boss was Manhr Chum. He had at his disposal the whole of Donetsk and Makeyevka, consisting of 24 catfish, developing 7 mines. Plus 12 security drills and two special purpose drills (mainly against the Maquis). Total 3728 people and 560 chums. Strangely enough, despite all the squeamishness of the chums towards people, they knew the exact number and checked on them once a week. I remember once thirty-eight people had defected to the Maquis, so Manhr himself went into the mine to beat up the Soma, who had lost twenty-two of her miners, along with her deputy. After the punishment she lost eight more killed. This was the only time a karak ("karak" being the head of a group in a column) went underground.

Manhir himself did not differ from all the others in his position, except for his weight: his peers ate up to two hundred kilograms, but he only up to ninety. The plagues actively propagandized this, explaining it by Manhir's sympathy and his desire to help people through constant, including his own work. The only truth here was the weight (the real reason was known to a very narrow circle of the column's leadership, which consisted in some terrible and very rare disease among the plagues; as for "help", it was said that he stole from his own people, and in such quantities that it was possible to buy his own mine of no smaller size).

Now the power is imaginary. Pavel Pozharin (number 726629A1) represented it. Underground, this man was hated more than the chums, despite the fact that it was not from him that the orders to stone them came. The Maquis hated this man more than anyone else, despite the fact that it wasn't from him that the orders to raid the "wild field" came. And even the plagues, including Manhra himself, hated him more than the Maquis and the miners, even though he wasn't the one who killed them and forced them into this place. He was hated by those who didn't know him, and those who did know him realized he was needed. Before him, no one had been in office for more than a year and a half; he had been there for ten.

The task of the number with the ending "A1" included a "basic" report to the karak on the work done, as well as some nuances in accounting. Manhr, with his help, was stealing. The miners and Maquis saw it as a benefit – since he was stealing for himself, less was going to the Empire.

Pozharin received privileges for his "labor": First, almost all the time A1 was on the surface of the earth, not in its depths, which allowed him at least to breathe air, not dust overflowing with methane, second, he had the opportunity to choose seven helpers from the mine, although he did not take any of them, and, third, special living conditions: good food, more time to sleep and so on.

All this Manhir tolerated, but for his own reasons. He hated him for letting him steal too much. He had been taught from birth to love and honor the power of the Darkstone, the Plague Empire, and his own kind, but he stole from his own kind. Shame and greed clashed in him, and the other always won.

Pozharin admired it all for him: the structure of the Empire's society, the supernatural abilities that had overcome once human civilization, the physiological makeup, and even his squeamishness towards humans. He disdained humans, even though he was one of them.

On March 25, the situation in the Donetsk-Makeyevka group changed: a message arrived from the center (the phones were working):

"Personally to the karak of Donetsk-Makeyevka Manhru from the broz of the Slavic column Bluh:

I am disgusted to inform you that some time ago I was informed that you, Karak Manhr, are engaged in treasury theft and are secretly transporting raw materials to the territories of Kuban, Sector

7, granted to you. Do not try to deny your involvement in this. You are required to return 264 tons of coal to the Dark Stone Empire within two weeks. In addition, pay 36,000 Roks as a fine. If you fail to do so, you will be stripped of your rank, position, lands and other property, and you will be placed in the employ of your former subordinates, where you will remain for the rest of your days.

Broz Slavic Column Bluh.

After reading this message, Manhra's eyelid twitched, the fingers on both hands shook, and the green snake tongue came out and became immobile.

Half a minute later Pozharin appeared in the karak's office. According to the rules, the man was not allowed to sit in the presence of the chum – an exception was often made for the A1 category. But this time Pozharin, when he saw the grimace on his patron's face, thoughts of that jumped out of his head.

"I should definitely thank you! Slave!" – Roared the plague. Pozharin lowered his broad head and stared at the floor. "You don't know why?!"

"Nah, sir, I don't know."

"Ahh... You don't know... Ah, what I'm facing for this, do you know?" – Manhir got up from the table and walked over to 'his guilty self'.

"No, sir, I don't."

Manhir swung his palm at his opponent with a wide, nasty swing. Pozharin flew aside, against the wall, and fell to the floor; he knew well enough that if he tried to get up, he would get hit again. It was useless to argue with the chums – they were incapable of admitting their mistakes.

"They'll twist my head, that's what they'll do! Me! I, Manhru, will have my head cut off! Do you hear me, slave?! Me! Manhru! Do you hear?!" – Manhru went up to the lying man and kicked him with his foot as hard as he could. Then again. And again.

"Do you hear, slave? Do you hear?" – Karak went into hysterics. He couldn't believe this was even happening. It was simply impossible. He shouldn't be the one on trial – someone else. For thirty-five years he'd been in charge of this region, he'd had no complaints, and then suddenly here he was.

After a series of blows of varying strength and emotional coloring, Manhir stepped away from the half-dead, universally hated number 726629A1 toward the window and gazed into the distance. And for the first time in his destructive lying life, he looked objectively at the sky. Imperial propaganda had portrayed the Earth Sky without a shadow of a doubt as some kind of natural error: in their world, the sky was purple. Now it didn't seem like dogma, or a weighty statement at all. For the first time, Manhir could feel his own self, already separable, albeit at an insignificant distance, from the Empire. He had formed his own opinion.

"Your own opinion? – thought the karak. – What does it represent without everything else? Nothing. No... It does. It's me, after all. Manhr. But I'm separate now... Nonsense. How can anyone be separate? It's impossible. It's possible. That's how the Maquis live. No. That's humans. It's not like that with humans. They're people. Not us. We're better. Why are we better? Why are we better?"

Something stuck in Manhra's head, then everything else stopped. The whole machine came to a standstill. And all because of one trivial question, "Why?"

Chum turned around and looked at the still lying Pozharin, "How am I better than him? This is nonsense! He's a piece of garbage incapable of anything. Of course I'm better than him!... Him yes, but there are millions more people... They're working now. They sleep only eight hours. They endure such conditions... I couldn't do that... But then why did we defeat them if they're stronger?"

Manhir sat down at the table and leaned forward and clasped his head with his hands: he had never had to think before, he had only thought of money before. He was faced with a dilemma: on the one hand he thought of the superiority of the humans over the plagues, on the other hand he knew for sure that the humans had lost the war. It was impossible to reconcile the two, and it was simply not

possible to cancel any of the theses. The second thesis was almost an irrefutable fact. And the first one was so ingrained in his soul, so obvious that it made him literally pick up arguments in his favor.

"Do you hear that, slave?" – Without moving his hands away from his head, Manhr asked.

Turning from his stomach to his side, Pozharin opened his mouth and tried to make a sound, but he couldn't – his breath wouldn't let him, it was too heavy. Manhr had broken three of his ribs.

"Speak!" – The karak's hands remained in the same position. Number A1 mumbled something and immediately coughed.

"Who's the strongest? – Manhr spoke loudly and menacingly as usual. – Tell me, who is stronger? Us or the humans?"

Seeing no options, Pozharin opened his mouth and, nodding in agreement, tried to answer. "Don't you dare lie to me! Think before you answer. Think! And tell me, who's the strongest?" The answer came out quickly crisp and from the last of his strength, "Chum!!!"

Manhra's eyes turned away to the side, his hands moved away from his head and rested on the windowsill, "You're lying to me. I know. You've all lied to me, all this time... But that's okay. I won't kill you... Okay. Go and get everyone working. Today's plan is to double the workload. Go and tell everyone that."

Chum turned toward the window and looked at the Sky again, "I don't know how much stronger humans are, but their Sky is a hundred times more beautiful than ours."

Same on March 25.

After explaining all matters: family and work, Gabriel finally took charge of the purification. The task was extremely difficult – to clean no more than 12 tons. Ah, what a difficult word "no more" was, and what it meant to the miners. They had to hit that number: more than that, and the 253rd catfish would give everyone a long life; less than that, they themselves would give everyone a long life; the others were on a slightly different calculation, but still they would probably get some too.

In the past, coal was cleaned automatically – it was placed on a conveyor belt with water sprayers along it, which was necessary to prevent methane from condensing: it penetrates the lungs and can explode. Now we used our hands. Everything was long, and there was nothing to breathe, and everyone worked, and eventually everyone died from it.

The commander was somewhere in the middle of the hall when Deputy Rich approached him: "Commander, urgent business."

"What else? Some of the chums are in danger of not fulfilling their plan to stone us – do we need to help?" – Gora looked at his assistant with a look characterized by the phrase "we will help in this – we will help in this, as long as our old men are not touched" (only the old men kept them from "running over" to the Maquis).

"Kolya. The black laborer. I'm told he has something to say..." "Which one of us doesn't?"

Nikolay Zemlyakov (number 52436483C3) is one of only two black workers of 381 Soma, the other was Sergey Chernousov (number 77242388C3).

What could he say – they prepared him a royal "exit" – 20 kilograms. Is it too much for him? Nevertheless, seventeen minutes later Gabriel was standing by the pit, "You called, buddy?"

The six-meter-deep pit seemed like an infinite space, that all the coal mined for a month could be thrown in there, but in fact it reeked of rotten decomposing corpses of former workers: and no matter how many of them died there, the space did not get smaller – it is hard to believe that the bodies of the dead can so easily fold into nothing..., but it is so. Inside, the miners got used to it quite quickly, but those who came out of there alive told me that even after a full day's work the first week it was impossible to fall asleep, and then it was terrible to wake up, in the bones of their comrades and continue working.

In fact, they were "thrown in" ten or fifteen kilograms a day, and then honorably pulled out in front of the plagues, writing down the "plus" in a notebook. But no matter how much they wrote down in a day, they gave us almost no food, so that in case of rescue it was not difficult to get it at all. Skin and bones alone; the ribs were so prominent that the skin covering them was folded between them; the hands were almost immobile for a couple of days afterwards, the disease was called "Life Syndrome", because the patient did not quite realize that he was alive, it was as if he were born again; the face protruded forward with the cheekbones and especially in the chin because of the almost exhausted muscles. But there was always one factor that never faded to death: the eyes. They glittered with a fiery luster, and no one could understand whether it was from joy or from the grief of not being able to die.

Those eyes were glittering now, but with that fire that arises so abruptly and wants so much, and when not getting it quickly fades away, taking with it the one who carried it. This is the Fire of Freedom.

"Commander, you won't believe this..." – Nikolai looked up with his mouth open. Dust flew inward, but it didn't seem to matter.

Gora noticed something he had only seen in those who were not alive now, who had already died, "Since you think so, I won't argue..."

"Commander, this is..." "Uh-huh."

"What I found–"

"Oh, what have you found," Gabriel was already enjoying the drudgery. "Guns."

"What?"

"Weapons. Commander, there are tons of weapons here... It's just, I don't even know how to say it..."

"Okay. Throw something on the hoist, I'll get it up," the commander was ready to see anything; the people in this pit were going crazy by the dozens.

Something rattled below, whereupon Gabriel began to spin the winch.

Half a minute later the rope rose to the right level: an AK-74 was lying on the hoist. Gabriel looked around: there were no plagues.

"And you have a lot of that?" – he asked in a low voice.

"I don't know myself... But it looks like a whole warehouse," came the reply of a somewhat thoughtful man – apparently he really didn't know.

"Hold on, I won't be long," Mountain tossed down and, putting the machine gun aside in the shadows, went to the purification room.

Three minutes later the commander, held by Konstantin, was sinking to the bottom of the pit. Now it seemed to him that it was not so dark and damp, but it stank of decomposition more strongly, and his opinion about food had changed: strange as it may seem, but here in the pit, for some reason he felt hungry.

At the very bottom stood Nikolai, already calmed down but still as eager for "free air", with a pickaxe in his left hand and another AK-74 in his right.

"They're hungry for it, aren't they? – Gabriel thought. – They are tired of being slaves... It's not just one tortured man, it's all of us... We are all in his face now... Everyone here is already dreaming of war... I'm already dreaming about it... For example, today. I dream Manhir comes down to us. He comes up to me. He looks me straight in the eye. And then falls to his knees and says, "Forgive us, my lord. "Save our lives. And everyone, all the plagues do the same... God, we're supposed to be free, aren't we?"

"Commander?" – Nikolai asked, coming up to Gavriil. He immediately came to his senses, recognizing to himself that this had become a habit, and replied, "Well, Kol. Come on, show me what you've got here."

The one waved the machine gun back and stepped aside... A pile, just a pile of weapons was visible from the hole made in the ground.

"Ahem..." said Gora. – Okay, we'll take five of them with us. We'll leave the rest here – the plagues won't come down here anyway..."

"That's it?" – Nikolai was stunned, and had obviously planned a lot of things, so this answer knocked him for a loop.

Now he could be tricked or killed-what he had planned, he couldn't help but do.

Gabriel chose the first: "We need to prepare. I promise we will rise, but it will take time. Will you be patient? For my sake."

The authority is so strong charismatic, no one could argue with him, and if he asked for something, respect will make him do it. Gora, he's like a father.

"Commander," Konstantin heard from above.

"What?" – The voice took on its usual not-so-"charismatic" forms. "A1's here to see us. Himself."

The five minutes during which Hora reached the second sector were filled with deep thoughts: the people really need freedom as much as sunlight, which they are not allowed to see enough of, and the most important thing is that one day they will get it. Gabriel kept tying his son and daughter-in-law to all this: he wanted them to be free, and his grandson to know no slavery at all.

Sector number two was the office. Here everything is counted, everything is reported, and there was a separate room, though entirely empty, for separate meetings, which were very few (A1 really rarely went downstairs – it was difficult to breathe for the unaccustomed).

When Gavriil and his deputy arrived, everyone else was already there, including Pavel Pozharin himself. All but A1 nodded respectfully, Volin even smiling: a nice man after all.

"Well now that everyone's gathered, I can tell you what's the matter..." everyone could see how difficult it was for him to speak, and how he was greedily gulping for air. – I'm ready to take ten of your men upstairs with me. I was wrong about them. The plagues are bastards, they must die. They..."

Dominic was the first to speak: "You'd better explain what's going on today. My men are working like hell, and at night they can't sleep and they're thrown out to work. We need rest. Does this have to be explained in writing?"

Of course, his deputy Peter added oil: "They should not be explained in writing, but in a practical form. You should hit them between the eyes!"

Golushko and Preskovich, commander and deputy commander of Soma No. 647, had a friendly swearing, but to the point.

"How much do you want us to load? Twenty-four tons? – Dubrovsky was perplexed. – Do you understand this

figure? Or is this someone joking?"

"Nah... They're devoid of a sense of humor. – Georgie intervened. – I've already tried to tell them a couple of jokes.

They thought I was crazy... I can tell them the Stirlitz joke now.

"It's Manhr," Pozharin tried to stop the onslaught against him. – It's all him."

Volin laughed from the bottom of his heart: "No, Stirlitz's name was Max von. Only he was Russian... Anyway, you're not used to such subtleties. Except that he was Russian from birth. And you became a plague in the process." The others, except Gora, told Pozharin in brief everything they thought of him. The "brief" was enough to make him wish to vaporize – the truth can be kept out for a long time, but once it's out, it won't come back.

"Explain his fault?" – After Gora's words, everyone fell silent.

"He... Ah, he..." Pozharin stiffened from his knees to his neck. – He got a message from the broz. With an accusation."

As each word was squeezed out as a confession, and few wanted to wait, Dominic began to encourage him with exclamations of "Well done," "Well," "Come on more," "Don't give up," and "Go ahead."

It went like this: "Well, well, go ahead. – Corruption. – Well done. Do more. – He's been told to... uh... – Give more. Don't give up. – To give it back. Give it all back. – More. More! That's it. – Well, no.

At the end of his mad speech, Dominic gave a look of extreme displeasure, and Peter folded his lips and nodded sympathetically.

"Yeah we should soak him," Dominic said as if drawing a conclusion from his part of the dialog. "Why, he's not a Jew," the deputy deduced.

"I'm sick of him too," Dubrovsky confirmed.

"Maybe..." – A1 started to say, but then Golushko interrupted him: "Shut up. You're not being asked," – in another way, ashamed to admit, I couldn't say it.

Pozharin shut up. He looked at his patch, which had a number in black and white, with "A1" at the end, and shut up like that. He could have called the guards right now, as he had done before, and told them to shoot anyone for disobeying him, for disobeying the hierarchy, which in the plague empire was akin to heresy, for thinking of killing a karak, which, though he had submitted – anything; because they would listen to him, he was "A1," above them. But he didn't. Couldn't. He saw their faces: scarred, dirty, tense with worry for his subordinates, and knew that his face was not haggard, not dirty, and really didn't deserve to be. Pozharin had never been loved, and knowing this, he raved about the plagues who hated him, even more than other people. And when the plagues turned their backs on him, showed that he was a tool for them, he decided to "change sides." But who needs such a man but his mother.

Now almost everyone in the office was disgruntled, half asleep and angry about it. They had only had three hours of sleep after their hard work.

Try to wake up a person, and then ask him about his attitude to you at a given time – if it is not your closest relative, the answer will most likely be "negative". Wake up a bear early, and he will go around and kill everyone who gets caught, and not because he is so bad, but because you broke his regime. You break the regime, you break the system. You break the system in one place, you break it everywhere.

Those present were also in charge of several hundred people, all of whom they thought about without ceasing. Pozharin felt it all perfectly, especially now that he was alone with them. In private, reality itself, without challenge,

comes out.

After two minutes of exclamation of all but Gabriel about what was going on, everything was stopped by Volin with the question: "Gora, why are you silent?".

Gabriel looked at Dominic, "You're right. He should be killed."

Everyone knew the commander of the 381st Soma perfectly well, and even better knew his instructions about not killing chums now, because for each of them they would kill a dozen of ours, toughen the regime and God knows what else; nobody expected such an answer.

"Have you decided to change your positions. Or is this Volinsky humor," Dubrovsky asked.

"No. The positions are the same. – Gabriel continued to speak. – But Manhr is dangerous to us now. Because he is alone, without an empire. But only for now. Until he pays his debts. And only now can he be killed."

Surprisingly enough, it was the most ardent supporter of "killing enemies indiscriminately" who opposed him: "He's a plague. He is one of them. When we kill one of them, they will kill a dozen of us. You said so yourself.

"I did. And I don't deny it... But he's not one of them now. He's one of them now. And when we kill him, they'll take his possessions and rest on that. He's a thief. Who'd want to avenge a thief like that? And to make sure we don't have any questions, we'll get the Maquis involved."

"It would have been all right. – Peter continued to ask. – But how will you convince them too? If they wanted it, they would have done it a long time ago.

"That's already my problem... Right now I need three men on the surface, and Manhr will be dead by the 27th."

Who is about freedom and who is about his wife.

When Maria returned to the first sector, in addition to the eight elderly people, she noticed her fiancé with a bandaged arm. Raphael was reading something brownish in color.

Maria slowly walked up behind him and sat down on her knees and covered his eyes with her palms.

Raphael did not calculate the probability of someone returning to the "lounge" (or simply "bedroom" as everyone called it), inhaling and recognizing the smell and tenderness of hands, but simply said "Maria". Loved ones are felt with the heart, not the senses.

They embraced, and for a moment they forgot that there was anything else around. But only for a moment, they couldn't go on: everything around them was too disgusting and disgusting.

"How's your arm?" – Maria asked, stroking the row of bandages wound from elbow to fingers.

"Fine," Raphael replied and stroked her braid that hung from her head and down to the middle of her back. "I know your 'fine'... Does it hurt?"

"No, my love, it doesn't hurt...? Did my father send you here?" "Yes."

"Did you tell him?"

"He already knew when he came to me. I just confirmed it. You didn't have to?" "I must, I must, Mash... Did you tell me about the baby?"

"he realized it himself... I threw up right in front of him..." "Oh, and you're also asking me about my health." "Beloved. It's common in pregnancy..."

"Yeah I know, but whatever."

"That's all the same, Gavriil Vladimirovich sent me here."

"Did you get there without adventure? Didn't anyone from the tower ask about it?" "No. They were sleeping there."

Raphael laughed a little, then said, "That's who we lost to."

"You know, I've been thinking... I think you're overthinking this..." "Mash, that's what everyone's thinking."

"Yes, but you're special... Here, what were you reading just now?"

"Raphael didn't though as he held out a book to her. "Twentieth Century Terrorism. "So what is it?"

"It says so right here."

"Yes I can see that... Beloved." "What?"

"I'm afraid for you."

"And I'm afraid for you and I don't want you to live here."

"And what do you suggest...? It's not our fault it's like this. We just have to get over it."

"No. Stop worrying about it. This is the fourth generation we've been doing just that. It's time to change things." "Beloved, please don't do this. You know how rebellions end. Please, love, don't leave me... We're going to have a

baby soon. Think of him. Please... Don't go and die," Maria was saying it from that part of her heart that can only be spoken to someone you care for more than anyone else in the world; for five days now she had seen him somehow different, she didn't know how, but definitely different, and there was nothing more frightening than that shape.

Residento dissidento

It is not a problem to imagine what a person living at home who "disagrees" with something is like – as a rule, outwardly he does not differ from the "agreeing" person; maybe he even thinks the same way, only in the "other" direction.

But if this "dissenter" took up arms, not because he is so used to it, but because he was brought to it, his appearance changes to "indefinable recognizability". And that means the following:

The first is escaped slaves (and from completely different places: sawmill, mine, rig – anything) becoming themselves within the framework of free runaway;

The second is people from different places, mostly arriving on their own, entering the established subculture there, while acquiring qualities they might not have thought of before;

Third, having escaped from slavery, people who fall under the influence of a new charismatic leader unknown to themselves, striving for the one and only true, first of all for himself, goal – the freedom of all mankind without exception.

In general, all separately taken groups of maquis are united on energies of certain persons – leaders. There were not a few cases when after the death of the leader the group collapsed, and already separate particles merged into those where there was a "similar" leader: in fact, in general, the people, if they are the people and not a mass unbridled on politics, do not care how tall the leader is, and what his views on the structure of the World, as long as he led to the goal that is vital for them – to free the Earth from the plagues.

This was the case with the "Wolf" group, which not so long ago joined the "Bohdan Khmelnytsky" group. Now the total pressure territory of this association extended to the entire former Eastern Ukraine plus the Kursk, Belgorod, Voronezh and Rostov regions.

There was a lot of talk about their leader Viktor Khmelnytsky. First, whether he was a descendant of the national hero of Ukraine, in whose honor the group was named. Secondly, where he was from, i.e. from what mining zone and what kind of occupation. Thirdly, what contacts he had and whether they existed at all.

Victor did not engage in dialogues on any occasion, and the third point caused him bewilderment. "What kind of a fool would I be," he answered sharply but calmly. – if I told you about my connections. Or do you consider the Chums to be outright inept, incapable of planting an agent in our group? No... Even if they were, it would still be foolish to talk about it.

He addressed the rebels frequently, each time giving them strength by his steady and firm voice alone, which perfectly matched his stout figure and imperturbable face.

Here's a brief example of his speech (July 2, 2168, after the attack on the railroad train carrying the 22nd Imperial Chum Storm):

"Three hours ago, I gave the order to attack a train of chums traveling from Volgograd to Donetsk. An hour later, I watched thirty-five of our brothers fight for freedom. Now they're dead. Dead every last one of them. But free... God gave for this opportunity. One way or another, by staying alive or dying, but fighting, we will still be free.

Our brothers died as heroes fighting for freedom... our kin dying now in the mines and mines. I have never hidden the truth from you. Nor will I do so now... Only two plagues were killed in the attack. Just two... Yes, some will say, "Our brothers died for nothing. They only killed two." But they didn't. Because this is war. And you can't win a war without casualties. And without great losses there will be no great victories – in the last attack, having lost three, we destroyed forty. And that's not the only example.

To minimize the cost of today's losses is to be blind. One of the chums killed was Rumhir. Does everyone know him? My first task for this group was to destroy him. And they did it. Vladimir

Krasnov, having climbed into the train, blew it up with him. Our brother died, but he accomplished the task. Who will now say that the feat of thirty-five sons of the Earth means nothing? I, like all of you, am sorry for those who died. But this operation was necessary as air... Our time will come soon. The dead children of Earth have brought it closer than ever, and we will not forget their lives and their deaths.

Don't look at the numbers. They mean nothing when freedom is so close."

After this speech, the rebels believed in victory not only because of Khmel'nitsky's charismatic personality. In his speech the name Ruminhr was mentioned. This is one of the best specialists of the Black Stone Empire in organizing security and defense. Such chums can be counted on the fingers of one hand. If he arrived in Donetsk, the sector would turn into a fortress.

On the evening of March 25, 2170, Victor received a message from one of the commanders of the soma working in the Donetsk-7 group through a new channel ("thread") that had just been created.

After being ordered to study the "thread," Victor took up the message:

"Personally and top secret to Viktor Khmel'nitsky.

I, Commander Soma, have decided to bring to your attention a number of the following factors.

One. The active treasury theft of our group's karak Manhra has been uncovered, and he has been asked to return the stolen raw materials and pay a fine. According to our information, he is short of funds, so instead of a fine, he intends to destroy the Maquis group, apparently yours.

Next. In order to increase coal production, Manhira has reduced the rest time for all of us to four hours.

And finally, and most importantly. He foresees an uprising, so, according to our sources, he summons several additional drills to the Donetsk group.

I cannot give my name for obvious reasons of the possibility of this letter being intercepted."

"Sanya!" -called the leader to his assistant. He showed up fifteen seconds later.

"Sanya, I need all the information on Manhira by tomorrow morning. Including his disagreement with the Center.

Second. Get me Orlov."

Vasily Orlov, commander of the special elimination squad, arrived forty-six seconds later.

"Vasya, you have a special assignment. Actually, as always. Tomorrow you have all day to prepare. If I give you an order after tomorrow, Manhira must be dead."

Three people were sent up from the 381st Soma: Evgeny Severa, Sergey Bolshakov and Ivan Tikhomirov. Gora was particularly hopeful about the latter. He had been preparing this man for quite a long time (about seven years) and especially carefully. It was through him that the letter to Khmel'nitsky passed.

On March 26, Tikhomirov was assigned to work as a janitor of the main corridor. On the one hand, it seems like nothing, but on the other hand, the main corridor is the main corridor, and if we take into account the contents of, for example, just garbage cans, the picture changes to the opposite.

The corridor itself was so long that by mid-afternoon only three-quarters of it could be scrubbed.

At 3:32 p.m., a man walking down the hall stopped two steps away from Ivan and whispered to the side, as if not to him, "I'm from Maki. Khmel'nitsky. I need to get in touch with yours."

The time for such conversations looked as good as any – exactly half past four in the afternoon the plagues went to lunch until five.

In fact, this man could be as many as one of the four, and that's the minimum.

Option number 1.

The simplest and most failed. He serves the Imperial Black Stone Defense Service (BSDS).

Option number 2.

He is amateurish, that is, he wants to turn someone over to the plagues for possible help or reward (few people knew, but such plagues, after receiving information, were usually shot together with the accused; exceptions were in cases when they were used several times, but then killed anyway – well, who can sympathize with a traitor?).

Option number 3.

He was sent by someone like Gora from the mine to check on training or something.

Option number 4.

He really is who he says he is.

The first thing Gabriel taught his disciple when contact arose was to never "play his part" at once, that is, to check and make up his mind before performing the true task.

"It's better to miss some information than to bog down half the network on nothing," Gabriel used to say. That's what Tikhomirov did.

"In my opinion," Ivan replied. – you've come to the wrong place."

"How could it be wrong? Hey, everybody's making a lot of noise. They say it's going to be hard..."

Gabriel was not out of his head with his admonitions: "Constantly. Constantly try to determine who you are talking to. Sometimes it doesn't even matter what side he's on, it's who he is. Maybe he's a weakling... What would it take to make a weakling change sides? And if he's strong in spirit, look at how firm he is in his own convictions. How much confidence he has. Where are his traits of limit... All this, of course, will have to be felt, sometimes there is no time to analyze."

From the first appearance the stranger was a very uncontrollable person and unaware of his own desires. But after the second phrase I could feel his trained ability to exert pressure by putting the interlocutor in front of an immediate choice.

The only thing that Tikhomirov could unmistakably do now was to evade answering by understating his own importance: "I told you. I can't do anything. I don't know anyone at the mine... I know the chums and I certainly don't want to bother them. Ask someone else.

"Who else? I have an urgent matter."

"Well, you've got an emergency, and I've got a floor to mop. There's a lot of work to do. God willing." "In short, yes or no?"

BCC. He's from there and that's for sure. For one thing, he's completely unconcerned at this moment in time, as if it's a game and not a matter of life and death. He's under the nose of the plagues, who will tear him apart if anything happens, and he feels relaxed and at ease. The main thing is relaxed, as if he knows that no one will come out of the corner now, he will not be killed or something worse, as if he is doing what he is officially authorized to do. Ivan should be mopping the floor at his job, and he should be talking about rebellion.

Tikhomirov now even sensed the pallid dim odor that emanated from him, and decided at last to completely rid his enemy of suspicion: "No, I have already said. You want to be shot, you can be, but without me."

The stranger grinned and, spitting to the side, strode away.

In the middle of the day Gavriil Zheleznov received a letter from Khmel'nitsky through the outside channel, namely through Bolshakov. He was not asked leading questions, as Tikhomirov had been, but the parcel was slipped to him at once. The Maquis had their own well-informed people in the mine itself, and who could be trusted was known to them in advance.

Gora printed the envelope without notes on the front side and saw the document, which was not clean (the Maquis used to dirty such things on purpose to confuse the chums; this time it was covered with brown earth and a little sawdust, just a little, and an expert examination would show that the document was written in the area of the town of Krasny Luch, in fact they carried earth from different places with them, it was just a little bit – even if it was small, but still a deception of the enemy).

"Secret. From the Maquis.

Your letter has reached me. I will not hide, its content interested me very much and even excited me. Therefore, I think you will understand my request to you to provide concrete evidence.

I hope to have your support."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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