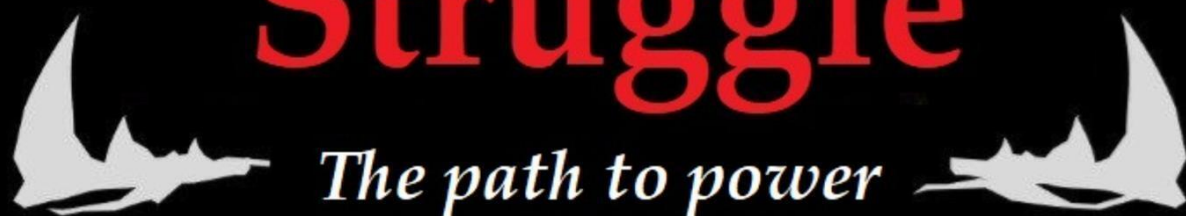


Vladimir Anderson

Struggle

The path to power



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Struggle: The Path to Power

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The second part of the Struggle saga. Gora takes control of the entire Deez sector and is now the prefect. In his hands is concentrated all the power to make decisions about the fate of people. He sets the standards for reward and punishment, and his decisions are non-negotiable. With the protagonist's power comes a myriad of opportunities and resources to fulfill his schemes. He begins to gather supporters and allies around him, increasing his army and influence. His opportunities are limited only by his own aspirations, and he seeks to gain strength before he strikes his decisive blow. *** Reveals the complex moral dilemmas that arise when unlimited power is wielded and shows the consequences of decisions made by one man for many.

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Prologue

It's evening. It was getting dark, and it was time to go to bed. Masha was given a spacious room with three windows, two large oak cabinets against the wall, and a bed.

The girl was left alone, saying "Good night". It became so unclear to her what to do now that she was even a little afraid: her conscience would not allow her to disturb these kind people, and she did not know what to do.

First of all, what is a bed? Grandma took so much care in laying it all out: the sheet, the duvet cover, the pillowcases... What is all this? Can't you just lie down and cover yourself with a blanket? Put your hand under your head and sleep... Why climb on something? What's the pillow for? That's not what everyone in the mine is used to. And it's more comfortable this way.

The hosts had already gone to bed. Time was running out.

Masha never took off her clothes before going to bed, like everyone else at the mine, but now is different. It was all so clean, and her light jeans were half in the ground and no longer light at all, her gray jacket was wet, and she didn't want to get it all dirty with what Maria Sergeevna had obviously washed for so long.

Carefully placing her clothes on the dresser, Masha lay down on the bed and covered herself with a blanket.

Nice and easy.

"These people are right. It's much better to sleep this way," Masha thought.

That dim and mortal moonlight. It was carried all over the room, and in every corner it reflected a plague. The girl remembered her husband again. The vile yellow images of his dead body hovered before her eyes. How he had stopped breathing, and she had been left alone, without him.

And there's nothing you can do about it!

"Jesus. – Masha covered her eyes with her palms. – How can I live without him? Why did you take him and leave me...? I want to go to him. I can't live without him... Lord, why did you take him away?"

"I'm always with you. – it was that inner voice in the middle of my chest. – Mash, I'm always with you."

And neither the moonlight reflecting the plagues in every corner, nor this high bed with white sheets-nothing could suppress that voice. He spoke to Masha for half a minute, or half an hour, or half a night, and it seemed to her that it was an eternity. That it was the same eternity that could never end. Because in these moments he was beside her, and he was a part of her... Just like that dream, which gathered all her tiredness of the previous days and took her to itself until the morning.

Prefect

Weeks had passed since Maria's escape from the Disa sector, then another, then a month...

Life was different, different for everyone.

Gavriil Zheleznov decides who will work at which site. Gavriil Zheleznov decides how much is extracted per day. Who and how to punish and reward decides Gavriil Zheleznov.

The only direction from the chums is the monthly plan.

Now nothing happens in the whole group without the knowledge of the Mountain. The only two sectors that remained under the control of the chums: 2nd and 5th (the guards rested in the fifth sector, and the access to it was from the corridor connecting the purification room with the loading room – this area was closed off for the night).

Moreover, Gora had a separate office at the exit from the purification room to Sector 1. Even though he was rarely there, the fact of having a room for the prefect of the group was important,

which, by the way, had a file cabinet with reports on all the advantages and disadvantages of mining with different tools in different conditions: to tell the truth, everyone knew it by heart and without any reports.

On April 27th, the prefect appointed his former soma to the cleaning sector. His place was by this time occupied by Kostya Rich.

Immediately after the instructions were given, Gora would retire to his office behind his oak desk and chair. This was a special maneuver: everyone had to think over their task and come back for explanations, if they needed them, and if they didn't need them, then get to work. But do everything quickly, or else Hora himself would appear with his iron dictatorial voice.

Sitting down in his chair, the prefect froze. Every day, for him, those few minutes of waiting were incredibly long. He was even thinking of abandoning the whole "big boss" and "unshakeable tyrant" strategy. The waiting was getting harder and harder with each passing second: he saw his dead son everywhere and how dozens of trains carrying tons of coal were passing exactly where he was buried. The constant bad thought that he could have found a much better place than that.

This time it was Volin who entered the room; his position as deputy allowed the maximum possible. And he was darker than a cloud, and with good reason. How long had it been since he'd seen his child?

"Gavi, will you explain to me what's going on?" – he said even a little too calmly for his condition. The question had been on his tongue for a month, and now it came out like this.

"Sit down," was the only correct answer now: start telling him anything at once and he wouldn't stand for it.

Volin sank down in his chair, staring at the wall to his left. His face showed no resentment or anger: it was just scolding itself for the fifth week in a row, which made it lose its expression it was painfully tired.

"Let's deal with this in order..." – Gora felt that something harsh should happen after these words, but nothing of the sort happened: the man simply shook his head and sullenly agreed. – Masha had to get to Razdolnoye. Right?

– So

– There were poppies waiting for her. Until April 10th. Right?

– Well, well, well. But there's nothing.

– The group that was supposed to meet her was ambushed before reaching the rendezvous point 26 kilometers away. There were two survivors. They turned back. The next group was sent later and arrived on April 8.

Volin listened to the whole story and could barely hold himself together: the Maquis had failed to meet his daughter, and he already hated them: "Gavi, you understand me... I have no one but her. And now I don't have her either... You..."

– I didn't finish. She was never seen, that's true. And there was no trace of her anywhere in the vicinity. But. You realize that at any other time no one would have taken this seriously, but one of the Maquis saw a girl, tall, long blond hair. You know there aren't many of those out there....

– Where?! Where have you seen her? – Volin jumped up so that the chair flew back against the door like a deflated chair.

Gora smiled, albeit a little fake: "It's all right. It's okay... That rebel didn't remember the exact location. It was on the other side of the river. Not for long at all." – Where? What river? Don't drag it out!

– Kalmius. Where it was supposed to be... It was near the town of Novy Svet... Don't worry. Ask Tikhomirov, he'll tell you everything. Who better than him to know such things?

Volin's face twisted in an unknown direction. Creases popped up on his forehead, stretched by old wrinkles. These wrinkles had been going on for a month now, and here they cracked. The miner began to slump down and, unable to find a chair, sat straight down on the ground – he felt no better

and didn't know what to do next. All these messages only added to the heaviness of his soul, and with time he stopped feeling both time and the surrounding reality.

Nikolai Lesin burst into the room without knocking: "Gavriil Vladimirovich, there's a mess going on in there!" His face was filled with something unnatural, something that had never occurred before.

"You should get some rest. – Said Hora, standing up from the table and picking up a chair lying by the door. – Just sit for a while. Don't do anything."

Coming out of his office, the prefect immediately realized what the matter was: two miners, right in his soma, were fighting with each other.

The prefect understood this situation, but Gavriil Vladimirovich didn't get it at once – his mind was going through some hitherto unknown thought processes: "Two miners got into a fight... They are both miners. They share the same fate. Shoulder to shoulder. And they fight. Fighting is a way of showing dislike, hatred, maybe attempted murder, loss of self-control...

Hate. Murder. Emotion."

One miner beats up another. When did that happen?

Nearly two hundred people, including Rich, were watching all of this, and no one had a thought to do anything about it.

No one could believe it.

The oldest man still living underground, miner Nikolai Pavlovich Krasnenko, thought he was suffering from marasmus. He thought that by the time he was eighty-two years old, it was time for his mind to move. And to this he was presented with strong evidence ... That he himself has ever even thought of the fact that you can hit his comrade ... Yes never. Never even a thought. Getting mad at someone, yes. An argument, yes. But not hitting. The plagues do that for us. But to hit a fellow man. Never. How can you do that? We're shoulder to shoulder. You can't survive here without each other. We're all family here! No, such things just don't make sense. "Young people? No. What youth? We didn't do that when we were their age," thought Galina Borisovna. It seemed to her that all this was some ridiculous coincidence that these two had misunderstood something about the relations between everyone at the mine, about the fact that here one individual person does not represent anything without the rest of the collective.

And in spite of all the excuses for their stupidity, she still felt sorry for them.

The thoughts of all the miners went around these two words: stupidity and pity.

Gora moved toward the fighting men. They were fifteen meters away, and when it became ten, they both spotted the approaching man. Immediately they separated and froze in their places.

Gora didn't even think about what was going on; he walked over and cracked one of them so hard that his head flew back a few meters and he fell to the ground. The other didn't move, for fear of doing something worse. A broad, sweeping blow knocked him aside. Both were now lying on the ground, barely moving or breathing.

Kirill Stolov stood aside, not even blinking. He had seen Pinishchev executed once before, and he knew perfectly well that he himself could have been in his place. That incident had been enough for him for the rest of his life, and now he wanted it all to be over and the work to go on.

Gora spotted the one he needed and beckoned to him with his hand. It was Stolov. His eyes fell open in fear and froze at their last point. His legs slowly swung forward.

"For the first time they will live," said the Mountain to the one who feared him most. – But the next time will be the last." His voice was quiet enough that no one but Stolov could hear it, but as soon as he was gone, every word he said would be known to everyone. And Stolov would tell it all so that no one would ever think of doing anything like that again.

Zhivenko

The city of Kremenchug. It is quite warm and the snow is almost melted. Spring is almost here. Victor Khmel'nitsky and his "Squad 14" moved here for a while.

A house among the houses, as wooden as all the others. Inside, an unheated stove and Misha Zhivenko at the table. His eyes darkened and his head drooped, but his hands did not drop.

His thoughts are slow and anxious. For a month now he had been blaming himself for letting Sasha go alone, for letting his horse twist his leg, for giving him a chance to change everything.

The commander of the Nikopol group wrote him a letter personally. He had read it so many times that he had learned it by heart: "My friend! I cannot write officially, because this is an unofficial letter. It contains neither secret information nor instructions for action. It is only to help us in these difficult times.

I am sure that you, like me, have seen our comrades die and give their lives for the sake of victory. You and I have lost many friends and family members. And there is nothing we can do about it. We can only endure and continue what they died for and what we may have to die for.

This is our destiny, and we have no choice but to follow it.

We all think that way and strive to do what we have to do at all costs. But there are moments that push us forward even harder, that make us believe in victory. That's heroism.

More than once I have seen it on and off the battlefield, and each instance I will never forget.

That morning was unusually beautiful and sunny. The ancients believed that the beautiful days of the Earth should be beautiful for man as well... I stood on the porch then and felt that this was that beautiful day.

Two of them were returning from the patrol, but soon I saw a third with them. It was Sasha. At first I thought he was all right. He got off his horse easily and came toward me. But then I noticed that his fingers weren't moving, they were blue and dead. I don't know how, but he pulled something out of his jacket with them. It was a letter. And then he collapsed on his back and never regained consciousness. I didn't even get to hear his last words. Then I remembered his eyes well... I didn't immediately realize what their expression meant. They were calm and contented. I had never seen such eyes in the dead.

Only the next day it became clear to me why he looked at the sky like that for the last time. He didn't need anything else, he wanted to die.

Then we found his footprints. In the snowy steppe. I can't describe how I felt then... Those footprints went into infinity. I can't imagine what it must have taken for him to walk all that way.

I couldn't help but write you this letter, I had to at least tell someone about our friend's courage. Heavenly kingdom to him!

Your eternal friend, friend of Sasha Rucheyov."

Quite some time had passed since that incident. Misha had been promoted to captain and had recently been in charge of three officers and a platoon: Max Rozhkov, Grisha Listov and Kostya Metsov.

There was a light knock on the door, and Major Sergei Bolotnikov came in. He looked quite satisfied, though he didn't say anything, but still reassuring.

"And today is a good day..." he said cheerfully, rattling his boots on the creaking floor. This is a typical Soviet officer: neat, but not dressed up as for a parade, with apparent adherence to the rule "A healthy body has a healthy spirit" and without unnecessary forms of ostentation like a wide step a meter to the side.

"Yes." the captain answered him without raising his head. – Just like when Sanya died."

– You know, your insubordination is gonna get you to the edge someday. I'm okay with it, but you know how it is. It's not like we don't have it.

"You're right," Misha simply brushed it off now, not wanting to spin such a pointless conversation with only one ending in prospect.

– Come on, that's not why I'm here. I have good news for you. Don't ask me why it's so late, I won't tell you... A month ago they sent Sanya and you a letter. You've been going crazy about this story. I hope you'll feel better. The letter contained an order to mine the

Dnepropetrovsk-Donetsk road near the Volchya River. Thanks to Sana, they managed to do it in time. Five buras were ambushed. That's more than two hundred chums.

It really made me feel better: "Two hundred plagues. Well done, Sanya."

– On top of that, the river flooded the tunnel. It is not known when they fixed it and whether they fixed it at all, but they got it in the nuts, that's for sure.

Both postants smiled sarcastically.

"All right, Mish. We're on the right road to victory. – Bolotnikov deduced and made his favorite greeting sign – tapping his heels, soundly and decorously. – Bless you, my friend."

This rebel was quite encouraging to the man who had become miffed with himself, and he decided to walk through the camp.

When he went outside, Misha found the place full of people. Why did everyone come out like it was a holiday?

After walking past a few cabins and saying hello to a dozen wonderful and not so wonderful people, he came across someone he never would have wanted to see and wouldn't have approached, but that person wanted something, so she approached herself.

Captain Ranierov. He's a real loudmouth. Every time something came up in conversation, he'd start an empty argument. Just about nothing. I don't know why, but on some genetic level he was trying to prove that his point of view was right and everything else was worthless. Not only that, but if there was no business to be done anywhere and no one called him, he would come in with completely useless questions and almost demand answers, especially from the lower ranks.

Having experienced this more than once, Misha prepared to open his mouth and send him away.

"Have you seen Kostya?" – Ranierov asked.

A rather odd question, and the answer was a negative nod of the head with a continued forward motion.

– You've heard of Wolfsbane, right?

Maybe we should give him a chance. At least this time he'll say something nice.

"I heard," Misha replied haltingly.

– They're all right, aren't they?

– Uh-huh. Probably just a little bit more and that's it...

– That's it?

– And we will win. – The voice came a little timidly, but from the heart.

At this Ranierov grinned: "Shall we win?! Ha! You're all fantasists here! You like to think about your feats. That's maximalism..."

There was neither strength nor sense in speaking further – Misha switched off his hearing and moved on. He kept shouting something, but it didn't matter: he'd had enough. Somewhere in the middle there was a pinch and an ache. It was the pain of resentment; it lodged somewhere in my stomach and pressed deep down. It's unclear where that depth is, and where it's allowed to press, but it's getting stronger and stronger, and it's not going to go away.

"Why did I talk to that man again. It's the same thing every time. And each time it gets harder. We say, 'We're dreamers.' We dream? "Maximalism." This stupid psychoanalytics; they invented words to explain unknown things and unknown why, and now they use it... We're trying our best, and they wipe their feet on us. If only they had found a place where it was still clean, they would have dirty the whole place... Doesn't someone like him have no one who died in the war, doesn't he want to continue and finish what whole generations laid down their heads for? Does he like to confuse others instead of doing what life obliges him to do? That's what we're all doing here – learning. To love, to fight, to overcome... well, we have to fight, so what if we can't cope? We have to cope. We must win!" – this was going through his brain in waves, and despite all his convictions, the pain did not subside.

Grisha, one of his subordinates, sat on a bench near his porch and ate bread. It was stale and withered, but still real bread.

Seeing the commander, he jumped up and saluted in a military manner over his cap:

"Greetings, Comrade Captain."

"Sit down already, what's up," Misha didn't like all these honors, even though he understood perfectly well how important all these formalities were. But he especially hated formation training. When it came to the elementary techniques of formation step, he had no questions about the expediency of practicing them, but he had once read that the ancients gave it a certain delicate importance: they created special units that dealt only with this, organized special performances. What kind of nonsense is that? It's an army. Let them learn to shoot and hide. And to lie still with their eyes wide open. It will save their lives... They won't defeat the enemy with their antics with prehistoric rifles.

"Grish, tell me, what are we doing here?" – Misha asked, sitting down next to him on the steps.

Thoth apparently thought he was being tested for ideological suitability and replied along the lines of, "We are fighting for freedom, our cultural heritage, and we..."

– Give up the propaganda. We are Unit 14, not the KPM (Makah Propaganda Committee; its task was to agitate the people working for the chumas, including calling for rebellion). You tell me what *you* think."

"Я?... Sorry, I don't know, Comrade Captain. – During this answer Misha made such a face that one could think he was talking to a person who was completely distant from everything that was going on. – Honestly, I ran away from the factory, because I was afraid that next time I could not stand it, when the plagues begin to throw up the volume of smelting, and scream. We rarely met the norm, after all. I wouldn't have been able to withstand a couple more blows".

It was dangerous for someone like him to continue his revelations – almost all his gestures showed that he was ashamed of something he wanted to tell, but couldn't. Misha interrupted because it wasn't the first time he'd seen it. He knew that this was what his subordinate wanted to reveal, and that it would be better if he did it without coercion.

The rebel wandered back through the camp, replaying what Ranierov had told him in his head as if it would never come out and be forgotten.

Natalya Koshkina, a senior lieutenant from the sanitation department, ran into him. She was only twenty-five years old, but she was a good judge of character. One glance was enough for her to realize that help was needed: "Mish, why are you so glum?"

When she said such phrases, adding her marvelous facial expression, the mood lifted by itself. Not everyone in the group liked her, but she held no grudges and always tried to be supportive when she needed it. It seemed alien to her not to help because of an unfulfilled relationship. "Even if there were no war now," she said to those who didn't quite understand her.

– we wouldn't survive without each other. We're here to help others."

Though Misha didn't like her position entirely – "Really, how can you help, for example, Ranierov?". He respected her and could never even afford to argue with her.

– It's nothing, it's nothing.

– You didn't have lunch, did you?

– No, I didn't have lunch.

– Then I, uh.

– No, no, Natasha, don't. You don't have anything to eat.

– Do I have to talk you into it? – she asked sincerely and a little resentfully.

– Natash, I really don't want to – Misha hasn't eaten anything in almost 24 hours, but "taking" food from anyone, much less her, would be a crime.

– Stop it. I know you haven't eaten anything.

– Oh, come on. It's no big deal.

– You haven't eaten, and I'm missing a whole pot of soup. Let's go!

– Uh, I, uh.

After that she was tired of arguing and persuading this altruist, and she took him by the hand and dragged him to her house.

The Maquis changed their location at least once a week, and it was rare for anyone to set up a place to live while in any neighborhood. This was in no way true of Koshkina.

Entering her house Misha didn't understand what was going on: everything was so wellgroomed and cozy. And the most interesting thing was that it was impossible to say why. Maybe because of the towel with the image of a tiger hanging on the wall, maybe because of the tablecloth with roses and big, the size of a fist, ladybugs on the table, and maybe just a rag for shoes at the entrance. A lot of these wonderful little things can't be called luxury in any way – it's more like the humanity of the soul, that's all.

Natasha walked to the clay tile in the far corner of the room. Her movements were strikingly appealing to the eye. Her footsteps were soft and yet very confident. It was as if everything around her was coming to life.

Her military uniform didn't spoil her in the least: black full ankle boots, dark tights, visible only at the knees, and then a green skirt and the same tunic. Black hair in a thin braid in the back.

Seeing all the beauty around him, Misha stood only and cleaned his shoes to no end, not taking a step away from the door.

Turning around the hostess smiled, "So what's stuck in there?"

– I'm just

– Just get out of here.

And for good reason: in addition to everything else, the soup turned out to be exorbitantly delicious. Soup with cabbage and potatoes and everything. Just like the real thing. Just like they used to make it.

Natasha sat next to him, waiting for something. Maybe a compliment. Maybe something more. It was as if she didn't show it, but it was obvious she needed it. The warmth of the person next to her. That was what she wanted most of all right now.

And it was necessary first of all to add warmth to her heart. And then he noticed that he was not eating from an ordinary plate, not from an aluminum plate like everyone else's, but from a wooden plate painted with red paintings, as if the Old Slavonic traditions had been resurrected from nowhere.

– Natash, I didn't notice something right away... These are such beautiful plates.

Her mouth turned up in a smile, but it was obvious that it wasn't what she was expecting,

"Really? You like it? It's khokhloma."

"It's very pretty. Do you carry that with you?" – Misha realized at the same moment that he had asked a disastrously stupid and inappropriate question: during the Maquis crossings, they were allowed to take only the necessary things, but this was just an instruction – you can, take as much as you want, just don't dare to fall behind; it turned into a reproach.

"No, I found it here," Natasha responded so friendly to the question that the tension eased itself. Now he wouldn't have to feel like a stale censor.

Misha decided to smooth over his intemperance entirely, "It's a shame you don't wear them. They're wonderful plates." As soon as he said it out loud, he realized that he had said something nonsense. And he was so incomprehensible to himself that he blushed.

She seemed to like it. She turned her eyes playfully away, turned her head slightly to the side, and opened her mouth slightly: "Did you notice anything else?" She wanted to add, "The way I look at you," but a woman always expects that she doesn't have to say it herself, that a man should notice it himself.

It didn't get to Misha, "I guess not..."

– Mish, what will you do when the war is over?

The presence of the war had no effect on the relationship between the strong and beautiful halves of humanity: they loved, married, raised children... Natasha was a very beautiful girl, and

many people tried to court her, but serious relationships did not work out, because she wanted first of all understanding from a man, and even somehow believed in fate. She looked at everyone and realized that she hadn't found the right one yet. Time did not stand still, at her age many people had already given birth and raised not even their first child, but she was still a girl.

And the whole point was that she didn't know what she wanted at all. On the one hand, she didn't want to be with just anyone, but on the other hand, she didn't know for herself what "not just anyone" meant to her. What should she compare it to? She'd never been with anyone, seriously. She'd slept with a few guys, but she hadn't really gotten any joy out of it, and then what? That was the "next thing" she didn't understand at all. All guys had the same thing in their heads, but there must be one who would understand her. Though at the same time again it should be understood that "all men are bastards"... But this is also stupidity: not all of them are bastards... I mean, well, there should be the one who... who... who... who what? Here this very stupid circle was closed again: what should her ideal guy be like? In order to understand what he should be like, she would have to be closer to him. And how to be closer if she wasn't sure...? She'd been puzzling over all of this for so many years now, as soon as she got her period. And during her period itself, she didn't realize what was happening to her at all. During this period her desires and at the same time her misunderstandings were growing at the same time. She wanted something and wanted it very much, but it was unclear what it was. It was such a strong feeling that sometimes it seemed to her that she did not need anyone at all. But just at the moment when she started to think in this way, her desire would change dramatically again, and she would want to find her only one again. And all this constant throwing to extremes led her to believe that it would never end at all. And if she could put an end to it, that would be half the problem, because when she saw Misha, her head started to think in a completely different way. She liked him, but she didn't know what to do about it. It seemed like she wanted to be with him, but maybe it would only last a couple months and then it would be over. And she was scared of breakups. She was terrified of it. That's why she didn't want to start anything. So she was always walking around, trying to wait for something from him, not realizing what it should be. And at the same time, when she began to think about him, she periodically wanted to see something "bastard" in him, or wanted to accept something unique and favorite.

The whole thing had run through her head hundreds, if not thousands, of times. In the end, she wanted to see him again, to wait for something from him that she didn't know. But she knew for sure that in doing so, he must be crazy about her. She didn't understand what kind of attitude she had towards the person she loved, when he had to be literally "captured", but she just couldn't do it without it. And she understood perfectly well that it was a kind of mockery of him, when she wanted to be with him, and he wanted to be with her, and they both knew it, but she acted as if she didn't quite understand him, as if she didn't understand what was really between them, and he was making a pitchfork that it was the right thing to do. It's almost an Amazonian approach: "I love you, but I'll torture you", and yet again it's unclear why. On the one hand, she wanted to "test" him: if he would tolerate it, then he loved her; on the other hand, she wanted to know how much he should tolerate it, so that it was really considered to be a test, because it always seemed that "it wasn't enough" and "we should see more". But even this was not enough for her thinking, because when she began to think again about what she wanted "as if at all", she again realized even more what she wanted, and then she began to think about Misha again, and that she really loved him. In general, she tried not to use the word "love" in her thoughts, as it seemed to her that it would be a wrong expression of her state, but nevertheless it sometimes slipped in, and exactly when she was thinking about him. And on the one hand she liked it very much that it slipped through, it even made her feel better, but on the other hand... on the other hand... she started to be drawn back to that stupid "other" side... but the further the word "love" sounded more and more often, and she began to realize that one fine moment she would say to herself the answer to the question "With him?" the word "Yes".

The situation with Misha was similar. Lately, he knew what he wanted. He had enough girls, and each of them didn't understand him, didn't want to understand him, and couldn't do it.

It drove him crazy, and that's why all the breakups.

So at the moment his greatest desire was to act more carefully, if only to avoid bringing the matter to a scandal.

Natasha didn't want to be hurt, but he couldn't answer the question: victory was not around the corner, but over an entire ocean.

"Well, I don't know. – I didn't have to make it up here. – I'd go on a bender. Go on vacation... Get married..."

– Is it all connected? Is it just one thing at a time? Or do you have to pick one?

If earlier in the figurative expression Misha stood in the swamp up to his ankles, now up to his shoulders: now, what to answer. He would want to go on a bender after all this. And even now he wouldn't mind such a thing, if only he had something to do.

– Shit, Natasha, I don't know! What makes you think I'll even live?

– I'm just saying. I'm just asking. On a binge, on a binge.

A second of silence crawled through the room like a snail.

– I'm sorry, Natasha, I didn't mean to.... – It's nothing, I was just asking.

I... I'm sorry, Natasha... I'm really sorry. – Misha began to think that it was time to apologize thoroughly, because at least while he was doing it, he would at least postpone the awkwardness, which for the last minute had settled in his throat and began to make all words hoarse, except those that asked for something.

And Natasha noticed it well. Now she could see that she had almost completely finished this guy, and that if things continued in the same way, he would just give up on her – it was too hard for him to play such games. Now it was time to take things to another level.

On the table between them was a plate empty of soup, a good excuse to sneak up on her darling unnoticed. Natasha stood up from the table with the words "I'll put the plate away", walked around to his side and reached out her hand to the plate, stopped, and then slowly moved her lips to his. Generally there's some difference between those actions that one does "just for something" and those that one does because one is "drawn to do them" or maybe "it's bad to wait to do them". Such actions are somehow differently done: and the brain somehow seems not quite in control of them, and the colors change in the eyes, and even the air becomes different. All of this was happening to Natasha now, as her lips moved to his, and it seemed to her that she could feel nothing else but his lips.

Metropolitan

Triangular darkroom. A triangular dark table. A Black Stone pattern on each of the three walls. The surroundings are dark and there is no room to breathe.

There are two dark figures on each side of the table – six in total. Each is wearing a black robe with a hood and a white fang on his back. This is the religious council of the Empire, the Sacred Sejm.

Religion of plagues on the sacred book "Zhakh". In its essence it was no different from the philosophy of the concept of humanity of the "Axial Time". But a number of generations of the holy church rewrote it, making changes in its favor and to strengthen the spiritual power. Earlier, even before the appearance of "Zhakh", polytheism was accepted in the plague state, and the church, as an independent organization, did not exist. All rites and rituals were performed by the priests of temples, who were not related to each other.

After the emergence of the Zhakh, the church also appeared: all the temples were united under one umbrella. Since then, the spiritual authority increased its pressure on public life and state affairs many times over. Any significant issue could be solved only with the assistance of the high priest and the Holy Sejm.

Twelve years ago the Holy Sejm approved the decree of the high priest-patriarch SilanZhakh. It dictated the infallible authority of the head of the Church of Plague (Nevrokh, the High Priest), his exclusive rightfulness as heir to the teachings of the Zhakh, and the sole interpreter of the will of the Black Stone.

This meant increased influence over all events, both church and non-church, to destroy witches and sorcerers and to counter heresy. This branch had wide powers in judicial proceedings conducted by the middle priests. After the Silan Jah, the Secular Sejm ceased to be secular, and the active branch of the Inquisition received a new breath of air, gaining the right to investigate heresy and witchcraft, while removing the state apparatus. This was the new principle of the law of the Grand Inquisitor Torquedoch.

Subject to trial:

Perpetrators of false notions about the holy church

Those guilty of practicing witchcraft and divination

Anyone who has been excommunicated and has not sought reconciliation

The harborers and intercessors of heretics

Those who resisted the decrees of the Inquisition

Lawyers, notaries and jurists who defended heretics

Anyone who refused to take the oath required by the Inquisition

Anyone who has died in open and alleged hereticism

Anyone touched with heresy by word, deed, or composition.

What atrocities they did to scrape out the "truth", some absolutely sophisticated steel hooks and claws, wires, bayonets – about 60 items in all. And since each accused belonged to any of the 6 categories, only things of his category could be applied to him.

Each item or method could only be used for 6 minutes – although this article was often ignored, explaining that something was used incorrectly or not completely. There was even an unspoken competition among the executioners for mastery of the various tools and the ability to make the "guilty" consent with a particular item.

By the way, the whole system was based on consent. The Church did not need to kill someone and thereby make a martyr out of him, even though he was a heretic. They wanted him to live. Of course, first admitting his guilt and repenting, but living. Because this life then was an additional testimony not only to the rightness of the Church, but also to its eternity in the life of the plagues.

Hierarchical system of division of the whole organization of the Church according to the system of 360 degrees – 60 for each priest-metropolitan. Here everyone tried to excel, but as a rule the first and sixth had the worst results. Their field included checking for heresy among the employees of the state apparatus. What was the "inconvenience" of the provisions: the secular authorities, the army and the SChK took care of their employees. Almost no one was caught for "witchcraft" there, and in the case of heresy one could recant without being tortured and in frequent cases, with the mediation of big bosses, not to suffer too much.

The quality of the work of lower ranking priests in high and critical hazard areas was put up for discussion today.

The topic of the meeting was announced by Uginoch, in charge of Sector 180 (the "hard labor" sector, as it was called by all those who stood behind the backs of the priests and saw the price of the Inquisition; under its watch was everyone whose condition was rated below normal, which was more than two-thirds of the entire Empire): "High Priest-Patriarch Nevroch, direct successor to Grand Inquisitor Torquedoch has expressed his concern in the affairs of the Church in the conquered territories. The Church has weakened in those areas, and there is no sign of a possible increase in its importance. High Priest Nevroch requests that action be taken."

Most of the priests believed in the necessity of the Holy Inquisition, and regarded it as the mainstay of the justified supremacy of the Church. Posing the question from the side of the threat of weakening influence pressed on ambition as much as on principle.

The conquered territories themselves were mostly government employees, so in this case the Inquisition of the State Apparatus of Shiroh (60th degree) and Samoh (360th degree) had the most workload.

"I tried to send six inquisitors to the Indian Colony. – Metropolitan Priest Katoch (300th degree) stated. – But the broz only authorized two. How can I destroy heresy when even the local authorities prevent me from doing so?"

"Our phase is running at full capacity, but most of the suspects have connections at the top. They are being taken into protective custody and we can't put them on trial," Shiroh had nothing more to say. He knew he would soon be replaced by another.

There began a verbal attack on everything and everyone in attendance.

We're being obstructed by the BCC. We demand the introduction of a special investigation. The inspections should be carried out with great intensity and scope.

– I believe that the level of corruption in their ranks has reached a dangerous level. We need to act covertly.

– I suggest using an unspoken resource.

– Seconded. – Me, too.

– Seconded.

– Utilizing an unspoken resource is a good time.

– So, I'll give the High Priest a suggestion for the use of an unspoken resource. – summarized Uginoch. – And I recommend you, Metropolitan Priest Shiroh, to personally go to the troubled territories and follow the process of the Inquisition. No local official will be able to refuse you a visit.

Shiroh tried to nod understandingly and even say something in conclusion, but he didn't have the energy to do so. The only thing he was thinking about was what would help him keep his place.

A wide gray stone. Dust and dim light all around. And turns that don't end.

This is the way to the cells of the Inquisition, where suspects, convicts, and anyone else who had anything to do with breaking the rules of Silan Zhah await their time.

Tomorous senseless footsteps and the same face. This is Metropolitan Priest Guzoh

(120th degree) of the Sacred Seim. In his phase, the Inquisition dealt with the middle ranks of the Empire – laborers mostly. Strangely enough, heretics and sorcerers were the least among them in

percentage terms. This consequence came primarily from the fact that the peculiarities of their labor did not allow for a "week of repentance".

"Penitential Week" was a period declared after the arrival of the inquisitor, for voluntary confession of heresy. During it, informers also came forward, pointing out a particular plague. The informer had two options: repentance and accusation. More often the first option was chosen, because in case the plague was acquitted (and this could happen if he had connections, including with the church, for example, if he himself had previously successfully denounced), the denouncer himself was subjected to investigation.

Guzoh had moved closer to the cameras and could now hear the moans coming from there. The large number of turns was necessary for this very reason – to drown out the sound.

A black-robed guard, impressive even for a plague, stood at the entrance. His eyes were devoid of anything that could be called emotion, and his ears no longer discriminated between painful cries and the sound of footsteps; to him, everything was the same and differed only in volume. He bowed slowly and dryly.

Behind him were two rows of cells, where they sat long and hard before what they were about to undergo. After that was the torture chamber itself.

No one looked at the one who entered that room – all three of them: the inquisitor, the suspect and the notary lived in "their" worlds.

The Inquisitor, an old plague Katankhr, had not been able to be in this room for a long time. The acrid stench all around, the same questions that not many answered at all and even fewer answered positively. But though he dreamed of being an inquisitor for the Week of Repentance, this job seemed just as important to him.

Suspect Tishinhr, a worker at the arms factory, realized that no matter what he did, the life he had before his denunciation would never be the same again. He didn't understand why plagues like him were allowed to say where the truth was and where it wasn't, why they called

themselves "saints" and why one had to agree with them. He believed in the Zhah, prayed every day, asking for strength from the Black Stone, and believed that it was up to the chum himself to do the work of faith. Tishinhr knew. That if he confessed, they would let him live, but he could not do that: he would be caught a second time and the result would be the same.

Notary Uninhr, a longtime law school graduate, saw the whole arrangement. If a suspect confessed, the least he could face was public shame followed by "forgiveness". The so-called "pardon" among the church bureaucracy consisted in the fact that on specified days, which were usually about a hundred a year, for three to seven years the plague was required to attend church and participate in special processions, seeking reconciliation with the ecclesiastical authority.

And if he doesn't confess, he will continue to be tortured and burned at the stake tomorrow.

The suspect was lifted up a meter, then released and caught near the ground. The ropes tied to his paws dug into his skin. Inside, everything jumped. Consciousness blurred. And began to feel a little nauseous.

Guzoh looked around: blackness and emptiness, the acrid smell of malice and fear, two torches illuminating the chamber so that only a few glints reflected in his eyes.

"And that's us, the Inquisition," Guzoch thought. – Only the devil is not afraid of us..."

Prefect

Many things have changed at the mine, including the way of eating. Within a month, a canteen with 50 seats was built. It had only been in operation for three days, and not everyone had time to get used to it; a table, a bench, a special room – it all looked not so much strange as questionable.

Nekrasova sat down in her usual place, in the middle of the room by the wall, and stared at her plate, where pasta and some chicken were floating in a yellowish broth.

Lena Bagrationova sat down next to her. She was also in a bad mood, but seeing the combination of muscle tension on Nastya's face, she thought that he was doing even worse.

"Nastya, what's wrong?" – Lena had a knack for getting the right demeanor at the right moments and pitching perfectly ordinary questions with the right tone. Now it was silly for her to be as sour as she really was.

"No, nothing," Nastya turned away slightly, and at the same time with that she confused all her sad thoughts, only her mood remained.

– I can see that. You're not wearing your face.

– You know, on you, too.

After these words Lena inwardly gathered herself definitively and put this result on her face – it turned out to be very good.

– Not really.

Nastya looked at her, wanting to check it out: lively eyes added by freckles, red hair tied in a braid – and indeed, there was a face.

– All right. You're wearing, uh.

– There you go!

– What am I seeing?

– That things aren't as bad as they seem.

– Yeah. It's worse than that.

– Oh, come on, man! As if punishing yourself with something will make anyone feel better.

Nastya turned away, "It's my fault." – In what?

They fought over me.

– I know.

– You know?

– Yeah. What's the big deal? They fought over you, but what could you do?

– I don't know. But since they're me.

– Nast, just because they both love you doesn't mean they will listen to you.....

– What if I did?

– How could there be a "suddenly"? Didn't you tell them that – Told you... But I really don't like them... Both of them.

– Here we go. What else did you tell them?

– That... no matter what they do, I can't love any of them. I told them that to each of them individually.

– So what are you blaming yourself for?

– I don't know...

She really didn't know what to blame herself for. And Lena didn't know, but she felt that if she were in her place, she'd blame herself just as much. It's part of life. And not everything in life is logical.

In the far corner sat the prefect and his deputy. Both were hoping for good things, but at the moment they could only wait, preparing for bad things to happen.

Kostya Rich approached their table, concerned and anxious, "Gavi, I..." "Have a seat," Horus interrupted him without raising his eyes.

Kostya sat down and clenched his hands under the table, "Gavi, I don't know how to say it. It's impossible! I can't imagine what it's about... I knew that their relationship wasn't okay, but to go to this extent..."

– It comes down to this.

– Gavi, I don't know.

– Are you so worried about what Stoloff said?

– Yes, Gavi. Honestly, yes.

– And you're not worried for nothing.

"Yes, not in vain," thought Kostya, looking at his heavy stony hands, "I know you had a son die. I'm sorry, but almost everyone here has had someone die. And one of the children died too... And I have one too... I only have my wife left. I don't want to..."

– Don't be crazy. Nothing's gonna happen to your wife. Look... I'll tell you right off the bat. I don't want to kill those two fools. But I know they'll fight again, and I'll have to do it... The power to control others is unexceptional. If they break the rule, they'll pay for it with their lives.

– Gavi, they're just still young...they don't know...I've talked to them...I don't understand what they have.

– They'll fight anyway..." said Gora and thought about what he had been thinking about last night, "People are most united when they are protecting something they can't survive without. Then they are together. Then they can only support each other.

There was a rumbling sound, and the lights worn in the surroundings flickered and fussed. And everyone rushed to the mining and slaughtering sector.

The ceilings next to the stratum were held up by wooden and steel beams more than two meters high. One of them collapsed, the other tilted. The earth fell on everyone's heads.

Keeping his face firm and composed, Hora entered the sector. There were already four people on one side of the beam, three on the other, and among those three, two of them were the ones who had recently fought. They stood shoulder to shoulder, pushing as hard as they could. Someone was setting up another one next to them. Some were holding the ones that hadn't fallen off yet, while the rest were watching for another row of footholds. Two catfish piled up here completely and two partially.

And the light was flickering, and the earth was falling, but only the commanders were shouting loud orders. This is the mystery of the miners' resilience. When there is no confidence in the possibility of survival, when there is not enough air and it is dark around, something that sits deep in the soul of those who "live" underground is triggered.

Discipline works. Everyone knows that their commander is experienced and wise, that he has lived many years and is still alive, which means that he feels the Motherland, which he will not part with. And if you want to survive, you have to listen to him, no matter what happens.

Faith works. This is a very ancient meaning, because "in the trenches everyone is a believer". Everyone believes that everything will work out, that they will be able to withstand, and if not, then thank God – they are exhausted and it is time to rest in paradise, having left this hell.

It's the spirit that works. It's a strong, free, miner's spirit. It moves both hands and feet, and it doesn't let your eyes blink from the dust. It sticks in your head and says one all-moving word: "Forward!".

Gora squeezed between all of them and pressed into the very center of the beam. He had to move it forward almost half a meter to get it upright and into place.

For a moment it seemed that everything was falling apart, that it was time for this land to take away half a thousand of its sons. But no – all as one, as a single gust of wind, tearing down everything in its path, as a mighty sea that wanted to take an island far away from the big land, as a long-dormant

volcano spewing lava, as an 8848-meter mountain standing on both legs. This is power, and nature herself is happy to see her children inspired by it.

All moved forward, and the beam moved, and Nature smiled, proud of those who do not fail her and endure her trials.

Kostya stood next to Gora, out of breath. His face was badly twisted from exertion, but happiness peeked out through the rest. His voice was quiet, but confident and satisfied: "Now they won't fight, my friend. Now they know what friendship means."

And then he remembered that Hora had gone out of the block that night, and before that he had ordered a change of posts in the mining sector. He'd been gone for hours, and he'd come back out of breath. And now his eyes looked special, as if no one could know what he now knew.

You couldn't mistake that look for anything else... Calculating, purposeful, intelligent....

Gora smiled slightly with the tips of his lips and, with a nod to Kostya, headed for the exit of the sector.

Masha

It's been another half a month.

Today Masha got up earlier than her grandparents and sat down on the bench by the porch.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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