

Vladimir Anderson

Struggle

Retribution

in the Twilight



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Struggle. Retribution in the Twilight

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The fourth part of the Struggle saga "Retribution in the Twilight", where intrigues, conspiracies and confrontations take a new unexpected turn. The Mountain makes an agreement with Cobra, their union is a powerful weapon for both of them. But the confrontation between the BSS and the Inquisition threatens to escalate into a full-scale war, which will also involve people. The newly created system of self-government of the prefect is forced to undergo new tests of strength, while the Maki movement, the last bastion of freedom, threatens to split and fade into oblivion as a non-viable organism. In Retribution at Twilight, the stakes are high and the decisions have profound consequences. Join this epic adventure where power, betrayal and the fight for survival intertwine in a story that will leave you hanging on every page.

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Struggle. Retribution in the Twilight

Tarantula

The Hiwi didn't strike him as anything special. Good warriors who had found their place in the land and now clung to it. It was foolish to blame them for fighting on the same side as the Plagues, or for attacking the Maquis so mercilessly. Their place is their place. And it's pointless to deny it. Someone had to take it. And the fact that they have done it well is something to be learned from them rather than to be blamed for it.

That's why the prefect sent him here – to learn more about how to take his place. A place under the sun, not underground. It was safe to say that the miners had taken their place underground... And, strange as it may seem, Tikhomirov felt that there was more than enough room under the sun.

And it was not only the preserved buildings in which to occupy a place, but also, obviously, the production facilities that could be used to supply these places. Now, when Tikhomirov calmly walked the corridors of the Cobra base and saw on the one hand the abundance of weapons and various equipment, and on the other hand – the occasional idleness of those people who surrounded him, it seemed to him that in general, the life of people in the presence of plagues, probably not too much different from what was more than a century ago. It was the miners who got it, and those who work in the production of the plague empire. But for the rest of us, it's very different. It seems that it's not just the Kiwis, but the Maquis as well, who live differently...

The Maquis were always complaining. Whenever you asked them anything, they would start talking about how the plagues were always pressing them, how they always had to hide somewhere, constantly retreating and generally barely making ends meet. But in fact, no one touches them beyond Bakhmut. And even more than that, the plagues and hivis themselves are afraid of their possible attack and are looking out for them, so as not to miss an unexpected blow.

The miners didn't know anything about chiwi. And it turned out that the whole idea of people in the plague empire was a handful of survivors in the enterprises, who only do what they can to meet the production norm.

And it turned out that the world was much more multifaceted than that. And certainly not black and white, as one might have thought at the beginning.

Still. How many weapons the Kiwis have. Machine guns, which you don't often see around the tents, and grenade launchers, and even armored vehicles. And it all looks very fresh... Actually, the document they'd once gotten from Shinhra, where a certain "Coyote" reported that the Imperial Army was fighting so poorly, didn't seem to be some kind of fiction. And if it was embellished, it wasn't too much.

I'm also wondering how this whole thing is organized. A couple hours ago, Cobra went to see Raven, who is the leader of the group. But even that level of "in charge" doesn't mean that everyone obeys him. It's more like he's coordinating them. And that's evident from the way Cobra marveled at the subordination of everyone and everything to the prefect personally, and especially people who can subvert on command with themselves. They have two grenades per person, and that doesn't always work. But with us, everything works, and with one, and the first time.

All that said, the system the Prefect is implementing is going to be far more resilient to change than the one the Kiwis have now. The only flaw is that if you take away a top commander, you replace him with another. You might lose skills, but you don't lose the system. But at the Mountain, except for him no one like him can not be put, no matter how much you want to ... And then Tikhomirov had an interesting idea. An idea how to make the unreal real only in the minds of other people. And

even though even now it was of little use, but in the long run, if something happened to the Mountain, it would be possible to save the whole system....

Now Gora himself hardly gives orders anymore. It's either Tikhomirov or Rich, depending on what the order is about. The prefect spends most of his time in his office planning. He doesn't even have time to check anything anymore. His world becomes so abstract that all his subordinates

begin to treat him more like a symbol than a concrete leader. And although there are occasional moments when he gets personally involved and shows his determination and steely character, these moments are becoming fewer and fewer. And it's getting to the point where one day there won't be any at all. No one will see the prefect, but will only follow his orders. That's why you can imagine the possibility that if something happens to the Mountain, his business won't die. He will forever remain in his office to give orders that must be carried out...

And then it is his, Tikhomirov's, units that will be of particular importance. Security, Assault, and GBI. And they were clearly missing one more. Enemies are not always overt, fighting openly and with weapons in their hands. And the case of the change of power in Squad-14 is clear proof of that. Khmelnitsky missed the whole conspiracy that deposed him, and it's strange that he survived at all. No one would expect such favors at the mine. The people there are too used to blood, cruelty, and even ruthlessness. Too long have they watched the methods practiced by the plagues. It's too deep in their souls. And so to miss the plot, not only for the Mountain, but also for Tikhomirov, would mean the fatal end of all achievements.

We need our own counterintelligence. Our own SMERSH, which will identify in advance those who can stab in the back, which will do everything to keep the system running like clockwork, which will take in their hands all the threads of control over life in the mines. Especially since the speed at which this autonomy is expanding is clearly beyond anything imaginable before. Everyone used to dream of some stability, now they dream of big changes that can bring new territories and enterprises.

There was the sound of some kind of movement from the entrance: clicking, banging against the floor, stomping. Cobra and his guards had returned from a short trip. He'd been gone an hour and a half, and from the looks of it, nothing good had come of it.

When he saw Tikhomirov, Cobra nodded toward his office, and he went there himself.

There was no one inside, not even the girl who usually typed something on a typewriter.

Cobra poured tea for himself and a second mug for Tikhomirov before sitting down in his general's chair:

– Looks like you were right about resource sharing....

Tikhomirov had already taken a sip of tea and felt it warming his brain. It was strong enough, though not bitter, as it was with the tea the miners brewed for themselves, calling it chifir. And it was cooked quite differently – boiled in a pot, not infused in a kettle like this one.

– Of course... What else is there to share? But I still think this division looks a little different than just "give me this and I'll give you that". – replied Tikhomirov, sipping his tea and thinking that it would be better if it were miner's chifir, to which he seemed to be accustomed.

– You mean it's easier to change the hand holding the cards rather than flip those cards between each other?

– Yeah, sort of... You have an enviable place, so to speak. And you've set it up pretty well... I'm pretty sure you've got a lot of other things besides this base. And if that's the case, then there's a lot of people to displease with your existence... And now I would think about what once happened to Khmelnitsky in his Unit-14....

– I understand that you have already taken care of such questions at the mine. – Cobra smiled, clearly pleased to have such an interlocutor with him, intelligent and not competing with him in anything. – We'll have a look at something new... Let's go.

They left the office, went to the far end of the corridor, then down the stairs to the first floor and down to the basement. It turned out to be a large parking lot, now also divided into separate rooms. Still without numbers on the doors, which were aluminum barriers. Behind the one they entered were two men looking at the severed human heads lying on the floor. There was plenty of blood, but apparently the heads themselves had not been severed here, or else it would have been stained not only inside the room, but would have leaked out.

One of the head examiners approached Cobra:

- Only two have been identified...
- As expected..." replied Cobra. – Leave us...

When Cobra's two handmaidens came out he pointed at the lying heads with his hand and continued:

– See those heads. Thirty-two to be exact... Someone interrupted the Bravo team when they were guarding the approach to the Deez sector from the industrial pipe, and then fired mortars at us. And your patron pointed out at the time that 80-millimeter mortars were too heavy for the Maquis to carry that far... But what surprised me more was not that, but that someone had gotten so stealthily close to the Bravo group that not a single shot had been fired. And during the whole time they were interrupted, too... Their heads were left for us not far from an industrial pipe with a stick buried nearby, to which a still-living snake was nailed. It's clear that it's a message to me. You can still move, but you can't do anything... Someone knew too well when they acted. Too quiet, too stealthy, too sure and too aware of everything. And then he withdrew just as quietly... While the shelling was still going on, I ordered to change the frequency, and on the spare frequency I had already told the neighboring units to go around the attackers' position from both flanks Then I

switched to the old frequency and heard a familiar voice from there, which announced to me that they knew all our moves and it would not be possible to take them Of course, we did not take anyone, but only found booby-trapped corpses without heads What do you think about this story?

– Obviously whoever interrupted Bravo's group knew them personally. Just why didn't they report seeing someone, even if it was their own.....

– Yes. That's the question I was most concerned about. And now we know the answer to it... See these heads," Cobra pointed to the severed and mutilated heads of people.

– Yes, you are.

– Only two of the Bravo group are actually lying here. The others are so disfigured that they are unrecognizable. But we have our own methods of doing this. And not everyone knows about them. We measure the skulls of all the fighters so we can distinguish them if they die. It is most likely that at least in some form the skull will be preserved, so it is more likely to be recognized... Whoever did this didn't know about this trick of ours. And hoped to remain anonymous Well,

almost. Because the answer to why Bravo Team didn't report someone arriving is that no one did.

It was Bravo's group that fired on me, having previously killed the two who didn't want to be involved, and having prepped the bodies of the apparently dead Maquis beforehand. That's where all the awareness and confidence in their actions came from. And that's why the voice was so familiar, though he tried to change it. It was Bravo's group commander...

– Looks like we need to pay more attention to our own safety. – Tikhomirov smiled a little this time. He was pleased that he had thought of SMERSH himself before he heard the story.

Masha

It's a very strange feeling when you get used to something no longer being the same in your life. When someone is gone, someone you never imagined life without. When that someone used to fill all the space in your life, and now they're not there at all. And this feeling of continuous emptiness in a place previously filled all the time, on the one hand, makes you stop feeling anything, and on the other hand, makes you sometimes look at everything too detached. It's as if there was never any of this before. It was always empty.

That's how Masha started thinking about six months ago. And now that the baby was born.

Her baby and Raphael's baby, she had a new life. And that life filled a void. This boy filled that void. And strangely enough, he slept most of the time.

He was almost a month old now, and he was still sleeping quietly, only waking up occasionally to drink his mother's milk. And then to sleep again. And it was very surprising,

because she herself had seen how newborn babies scream at night when they were teething, how they did not let everyone sleep, and only absolute fatigue does its job, cutting off to sleep the working somas.

She remembered Raphael hugging her and the baby screaming somewhere nearby. It was probably not only because he was teething, but also because there was nothing to eat. Everyone was still sleepy, and those who were exhausted did not even hear the crying, while those who were not so tired continued to listen to the baby's cry, sometimes grumbling a little about it.

Raphael thought then of what might still be lacking in someone who had just begun to see the world with his eyes and hear its sounds with his own ears. Such a small creature would certainly lack the connection between the movement seen by the eyes and the sound that would correlate with it all. He had read about an ancient toy for children, called the most important among others-the rattle. The next day he made one: a small wooden ball on a stick and with bits of charcoal inside.

Each time he swung it, the charcoal hit the walls and made a sound.

The child liked the toy very much. Now he rattled it half the night and then slept quietly. Not to say that the crying was louder than the constant beating of the coal against the wood, but it was easier for everyone. Everyone knew that it was easier for a child to grow up that way, so he could at least feel that there was something under his control – a little rattle made by a slave.

Masha dreamed that one day she and Raphael would have a child of their own, who would also rattle a toy like this, growing up and becoming independent. A person should be independent, that's when he or she could feel alive.

If she had thought then what those words meant to her husband. That he wouldn't be able to accept that their life was one big ordeal with no choice in the matter. That he would want to change that. Including at the cost of his own life. And that the only thing that would come out of it would be to lose him to her. And now his son was starting his life without even seeing his father.

Masha thought about it, and she didn't have an exact answer for what she would do if she knew ahead of time what she knew now. That he was gone. Would she have been able to keep him from that? Or would all her words have been nothing to him? She didn't know the answer to that question. All she knew was that he was no longer alive. And that his son would someday grow up and start thinking like him. She didn't even doubt that... But what would the world be like when he grew up?

The dreams she'd been having lately were jarring in their harshness, their omnipresence. She felt that she was dreaming on the threshold of the changes that awaited everyone. And it concerned above all the fact that the plagues would lose their power, granted to them by the Black Stone...

How exactly, she did not understand. And it didn't even occur to her what the plagues could lose, what they were using now. What could their great relic even give them now? It opened a portal to Earth for them. It jammed all human electronics. But now that they've conquered humanity, what do they need from all that the Black Stone has given them? Open another portal for someone else

to invade and conquer the Chumans? To turn on electronics that no longer exist, and no longer even have people capable of using them to their full potential?

Masha didn't see any answers to these questions. But the very feeling of coming change seemed as real as the sun rising every morning. It just had to happen...

But the dream made it unmistakably clear. It was the same dream now. A clear field without any armies as before. No thunderstorms or rainstorms. Just light clouds blocking out the sun so it wouldn't bake. And Raphael so calm, standing beside her. Very close. And watching her with his faithful, peaceful eyes:

– My love, you will know the secret for sure. But first you must wait for her. Natasha.

Without her, this secret is too dangerous for you. And it's better for you not to know it at all than to know it alone... Wait for her. Wait for Natasha.

Masha woke up every time she heard that word, because she realized that her arms and legs were twitching – she was trying to reach out and hug him in her sleep. To hug her beloved husband, because she missed him so much. To hug him and tell him that their son had been born healthy.

And ask him what name he would like to give him.

She wanted to do all this, and at that moment she realized that she was asleep... That's how she woke up every night, feeling next to the peacefully sleeping infant, who now seemed to fill some void in her, still leaving room for Raphael.

– I miss you so much. – every time Masha whispered aloud. – How much I miss you every day.....

Metropolitan

The church's railroad train arriving in the Deese sector was not just luxurious – it reveled in that word. Even the carriages of the rank-and-file novices-and those destined for the punitive drill of the "unspoken resource"-were decorated with silk, varnished oak wood, and in places gilding.

Guzokh could imagine that such a thing might be in the Metropolitan's own wagon, but to see it in the rooms reserved for the fighter monks was already astonishing.

Well, at least it became clearer why the chief of the punitive borax Ruminhr so easily believed Guzokh's story that he was given in charge of this borax on the personal orders of the patriarch, and to doubt the words of the Metropolitan – is not allowed even in thought... All this was supported in fact also by the desire of the chums from the borax of the "tacit resource" to live rather than die in a stupid shootout with the SSchekists.

Obedience is in their blood. So they obeyed. The Metropolitan. Albeit a different one. But it doesn't matter. They have no responsibility when the plague with such a high dignity has it.

The train was now moving back to the Korsa sector. Guzokh wanted to keep his unit away from the captured Samoh as a last resort. He could really massacre if given the chance. Especially now that his slippery mind games had failed so miserably.

Before departure, of course, the railings were removed from the roof of the metropolitan carriage, so that it would not differ from all the others. And by his personal order Guzokh allowed to pass through the chambers of the central carriage in both directions. And himself calmer, and to get their favor to himself – let them see that he was not a stranger to their presence, and once again ready only to bless for a holy cause, especially if it concerned his personal security. Exactly so.

Now this drill is his personal security, not some punitive operations, for which both the Imperial Army and the SCK have enough forces. And let them deal with it by his own decree.

How foolish were those who decided that the Inquisition should be carried out by the hands of the Inquisitors. It's not their business at all. It's their business to judge, to pass judgment. But others can carry it out. And on the one hand, this will whitewash the executors from the gravity of the decision, and on the other hand – will not waste a single drop of blood and sweat of the clergy ... Guzokh became directly disgusted with Nevrokh's approach to understanding the role of the holy

Church in the modern world. He wanted to substitute himself for the given, to become the head of everything and subordinate everyone to his will, including the Central Committee of the Empire ... What absurd stupidity. What an unprincipled departure from the essence of the holy Church, which presupposes wise counsel for rulers. Advice that cannot be refused. Advice that is given as if by the Black Stone itself. As opposed to the heavy words and orders that the current patriarch wants to enforce.

He doesn't deserve to be a patriarch. From the moment he stopped understanding the importance and advantage of soft power, capable of controlling the completely heterogeneous subjects of the Empire. He emphasizes brute force, which, while destructive in nature, will only do irreparable damage to the reputation and influence of the Holy See.

That is why they are so caught up in luxury, because they think too much about the strength and rigor of their beliefs, which must be extended to other minds. Therefore, for them, material things have become the main foundation on which they stand too shaky... And it would not be shaky if the strength of beliefs were held on the sure proof-grounded word that passes from mouth to mouth by itself. Without any pressure. When the plagues themselves want to tell each other the truth that they like, and that they will want to see everywhere.

The "unspoken resource" is a tool to shut the mouths of the irrepressible... But you can't shut the thoughts. They will remain. And will continue to spread like a plague from one to another at a rate faster than the real plague. And unlike the real plague, completely untreatable.

Just look at Samoh and what he's gotten himself into. To openly provoke in front of witnesses an official of not just the Empire, but the SCK itself. Weaving intrigues on the fly, in the

office of the head of the entire sector... And it's amazing that such things sometimes worked out... Although it's not so surprising when you find out that the deputy commander of the Korsia sector was in fact a full-fledged member of the Church, not the SCK. With such nefarious methods, one can really believe in one's own infallibility... Though what it leads to... Self-confidence... Careless self-confidence that has one tiny end.

They were now passing the section of road that the Maquis had recently blown up and the miners had hastily repaired. They had been shot at, and the Kiwis had had some kind of strange conflict. In general, of course, these Kiwis have become completely detached from reality, the reality that was even some 30 years ago, when they performed only security functions, and their numbers were so small that there was no thought of forming large units of them. Not like now, when they are doing the most dangerous and bloody work for the imperial army and the S.S.C. combat units.

Guzoch learned all this from a confession five years ago, when one of the veterans of the JFK needed help in easing his fate before he passed away. It happened at one of the defense plant security conferences. Guzoch was there, of course, on business for his favorite worker-chums. And one of the speakers had a heart problem, like a heart attack. He wanted repose for his soul and immediate confession, which Guzoch, as a clergyman of the highest rank nearby, provided.

The SSchekist told him of the complexities of his apparatus and how he had done nothing on his own to save the true foundations of the Empire, which was rotting from within and decaying like a human corpse. As he said, the Hiwi now made up the main fighting force of the JFK, and in some cases even the Imperial Army itself, rapidly approaching it in numbers. It was an experiment at first, but the effect was so striking that it was quickly adopted as a practice, and after only a few years of use, the balance had shifted dramatically. The commanders of the imperial ministries were constantly reporting to the top about successful operations to suppress the Maquis and establish links between the disparate parts of the empire with minimal casualties. Human casualties, of course, were of no interest to anyone, but no one thought that such practices would only multiply the influence and role of the Hiwi in the vital processes of the Empire. In some instances, the Hiwi leaders themselves set the price for completing tasks, and given the balance of power, the price had to be paid – imperial

officials were addicted to this means of solving problems like a drug. The dying SSchekist didn't give the exact numbers, but it was hundreds of thousands of fighters. All he asked was to be forgiven for the criminal inaction of this cancerous tumor against which he dared do nothing.

And so Guzokh looked at the surrounding space and saw that people were starting to do what they wanted. Blowing things up themselves, fixing things themselves, deciding for themselves when someone would or would not pass by. After all, he had gotten to the Deese sector so quickly because the prefect had let him through from the Korsia sector via his underground route. So that's it, the Metropolitan is let through by the man who runs the entire faction. Running it, mining it, developing it. All by himself and his own resources. Only paying the proper fee to the Empire.

Apparently, those who were involved in calculating resource extraction, production management and transportation also paid attention only to numbers. Which, obviously, suited them. And what it could threaten in the future, apparently, they did not care about, since it would not happen in their time.

No one but the Church seems to care what happens to the balance of plagues and people in the Empire itself. After all, the Church is the only one who cares how many of the living believe in the Black Stone and how many don't. Humans are not capable of believing in it. Plagues do. And that's where the Church sees the difference – the rest of us don't. The rest of us only see the difference in production, speed of delivery, shipping and sabotage losses and who gets rewarded or punished for it. This is the sense that the patriarch should have noticed. The sense of the main linchpin of the plague state. And if he had done so, like all the past ones before him, he certainly would not have allowed such decay in the Imperial Army, or in the SCK, or anywhere else. And he just counted his influence figures like everyone else.....

The Empire deserves a far better patriarch than Nevroh. And than most of those who came before him. The Empire only deserves to live if it is healthy. And the only health it has is faith in the Black Stone. Which humans may well believe in as well. And the Prefect has shown that this is not only possible, but necessary to preserve the Empire.

Prefect

Gora was pleased with himself. It had been a long time since he had felt that he had calculated all the moves so correctly. And there were many. And an even greater number of variations of them. To persuade Cobra to leave a passage for Samoh and his punishing drill, which they would not fail to take advantage of. Let Guzokh pass through the underground pathways to allow him to subdue that storm. And, of course, to convince the Metropolitan of his total allegiance to the only true faith on Earth, the faith in the Black Stone.

And surprisingly, as time went on, he began to realize that he understood the language of the plagues. And of different plagues. Gora was more than sure that plagues are different like people, from different races, nations, and that he should not have understood them all at the same time. But no, that was exactly what was happening. And now it was not even a secret to him why the plagues themselves had no problem with it – they too spoke one, apparently, some unified plague language.

How far this would go was yet to be seen, but Guzokh was not opposed to extending the autonomy of the Mountain to neighboring factions if the people who would fall under his command also believed in the Black Stone.

For her part, Ananhr was not against it either, as long as the nominal subordination of the other factions' sectors was left to the JFC, and the Hivi would provide ground cover for those facilities.

This was a very successful mechanism for expanding the prefect's influence. It had been practiced first in the Diza sector, and then in the entire Donetsk-Makeevka grouping. From the point of view of the Empire's development, it should not have hindered anything, but it was obvious that such a situation would not suit either the High Priest Nevrokh or the Imperial administration represented by Bluh. But both problems were more than solvable.

Lately Gora had changed his attitude to the word "problem" in general. Now the word did not exist for him at all in its usual sense. Now he had only the words "issue" or "situation", which could be important, urgent, inconvenient, dangerous, paramount, critical, extraordinary. None of these are problems. They were tasks that needed and absolutely could be solved.

And scrolling back over some of these issues, such as Samokh's attempt to get into the mine of the Korska sector, when the man of the Mountain blew up the elevator with him, and the stairwells became inaccessible through smoke and periodic gunfire – all of these were just deliberately calculated moves according to a certain already calculated combination. And before, he would have considered all this a suicide....

Power. That's what gives you a completely different awareness of reality. And adjusts this reality to himself, not the other way around. But Gora himself understood perfectly well that it was not worth mentioning that he was first and foremost a human being. Capable of being wrong, deluded, and self-righteous. Those three traits in general were his most dangerous enemies now, and not at all plagues, chivi, or maquis. Now that his resources and capabilities were counted in units of a completely different order than before, it was these three enemies that were now prioritized. By virtue of their stealth... They were impossible for him to calculate. Whether he wanted to or not. But the same mind that was supposed to calculate them was itself the object of their use.

You can't see yourself. All this groundless talk about a mirror is just talk. No mirror can reflect you as others see you. Because you are the one looking in the mirror. And Gora knew this very well... That his time would come to overestimate his powers, to make mistakes, and even to go completely crazy. And no one will tell him about it. Everyone will also wait for his orders and report back to him. Because he has already built a system where his decree is equal to the law. And breaking the law is punishable by death. He has already built a system where everyone around him,

seeing him without a mirror, will be silent if something goes wrong with him. After all, when he is the law, it means that without him there is no law.

Minister

Donghr was a very old minister and very experienced. He had once had victories that not everyone can dream of. Military victories, career victories and the victories of his personal life. His wife wanted more – a life that could be called beautiful, and she got it. And for that, Donhru had to steal from the coffers of his own ministry. Systematically and mercilessly, because his wife's appetite was growing, but the treasury was not getting bigger. And it all came to the point where there was more on paper than there actually was in reality.

Of course, at some point this became known to Zakinkhru, the then head of the SCK, who was in charge of anti-corruption measures. He was also systematic and ruthless, but not to his wife's appetites, but to his own career appetites, which were much more important to him than corruption itself. Therefore, when he thought that Donghr, who was afloat but in his power, was much more profitable for him than the next prizes for uncovering financial frauds, he chose the first option without delay... And he was promoted thanks to the assistance of Donghr, who began to periodically surrender his former associates to him.

Zakinhr eventually became the head of the Slavic Column's JFC, while Donhr continued to be its minister. For a while this suited both of them, but as of late, Donghr began to realize that he couldn't bury himself forever. And this was especially true after that conversation with Bluh, when the latter had spoken so harshly about his current position and the fact that pieces of his influence were so easily slipping out from under his nose. Yes, of course it was said under a hop, but you can't argue that it was wrong. You can't argue that it's some kind of arrogance of an arrogant official

– it's a normal tool of self-preservation, when you realize that either you move up, gaining something new, or you lose what you've already gained and go to the point where at best you give up

your authority, and at worst – keep company in prison with those whom you yourself easily helped to get there.

Bolotnikov

"First find the chums, with whom you can still fight in the Diza sector" – these words kept looming in Major Bolotnikov's mind day and night, until they turned into something more substantial. He himself was already thinking over the options when the ally of Gor, who had led an entire group and given the miners new opportunities, and, most importantly, had already eased their current fate, would become not only not an ally, but the most dangerous enemy. The Jackal had once told him about it, even showing some gloating about it. He is no longer alive, but the prophecies seem to be coming true, and becoming even more terrible than expected. But for that I must see for myself.

Shakal said that the area around the surface sectors was now guarded by hives, and since that was the case, it was at least possible to look at them. He could take one of them and have a heart-to-heart talk with them, as he'd done before. Maybe something new will come to light.

Bolotnikov took a horse and rode all night and then all day and by roundabout ways reached Bakhmut. Here, he was well aware that the Khivi dwelt, holding this town as a hub – several roads ran through it in different directions, and, controlling it, one could be sure that no one would throw any serious units to their flank or rear in any short time.

It took him another half a day to get quietly around this town and move on toward Deese, and before he reached about ten kilometers he settled down for the night. It was warm now, even at night, and after such a journey his strength was running out, so he was almost at once at his services.

He dreamed of miners and chivis and Maquis. In a big, dark hall. They were moving around, forming some kind of demonic circle at wild speed. But surprisingly, they didn't bump into each other at all. And even though they all had different clothes – the khaki field clothes of the Maquis, the specialized "kink" of the Kiwis, and the black and gray work clothes of the miners – it was impossible to tell who was who. They moved so fast. And what's more, as the observation went on, it began to seem that there was no difference between them all, that they were all the same.

Completely the same, and even their clothes, which had blurred so much that they looked like tattered multicolored rags. It no longer seemed that they were different people. They were all doing the same thing, circling around the room in a single rhythm, not bumping into each other, clearly wanting the same thing, and certainly not interfering with each other at all. It was even somewhat surprising – how could they move at such speed, maneuvering between each other and at such speed, and not even hit each other. It was as if they were being controlled by someone else, calculating each one's route in advance.

How much did they want it? And did they want it? And who is the one who controls it all? It can't be otherwise – they weren't wrong, they were acting according to a single plan that someone had worked out. And that's exactly what they were all happy with.

Bolotnikov tried to force his way through to pull someone out and ask it, but he was immediately pushed away, just as coherently by everyone who could reach. And so, looking at him fiercely, continued their movement. Then he tried to shout to someone, asking what they were doing, why they were doing it, and who commanded them. Some of them looked at him angrily, but most of them just kept on doing what they were doing.

Then he took out a pistol and started firing it at the ceiling, shooting the entire clip. That didn't impress anyone, and he tiredly slumped to the floor. Everyone seemed to be really happy with what they were doing. It looked like his attempts to find out something were just a void in their much more real lives than the one he wanted for them... And then someone banged hard next to his right ear.

Bolotnikov woke up instantly. It was his horse, not far from him, pounding its hoofs. It snorted a little more and looked at him strangely. He must have said something in his sleep.

He had slept all evening, and it was already night. It was just the right time to inspect the positions of the chivi and look out for chums there, if they were still there, of course.

He covered the next ten kilometers quite slowly, telling himself to move as quietly as possible, in reality realizing that he just didn't want to see and accept the truth right now. When the industrial pipe showed, he got off his horse and tied it to the nearest tree. Now he moved even slower and even more quietly.

It has to be the Kiwis first, he knows that. They patrol the territory on their own, without the help of anyone else, like the Imperial Army plagues or the SCK, whom they obviously hate. And they're great at hiding, oddly enough, much better than the Maquis. They were so good at it, in fact, that it wasn't quite clear why they hadn't already identified all the rebels and killed them one by one.

Maybe they don't really need it? Really, what are they going to guard and do if there's no Maquis? A final defeat wouldn't suit them... Or is he idealizing them too much? And their abilities in general... At the same time, it's time to check it all out properly....

– Listen, quietly..." someone said in a whisper from behind. – Put your hands up.

Holy shit. How's this? Going to investigate, get a tongue, interrogate, learn something new. And this. Right at the entrance, they took him like a lousy sheep... How professional. Not shouting, but whispering and careful. They know that many people have this defense reflex to try to kill the enemy faster than he kills you. It's just automatic. While there is still a moment, and the invader himself does not want to shoot yet... And then whisper. Just to convey the humble message that we have to surrender. No shouting, no noise, no surprises.

Bolotnikov raised his hands slowly, still even hoping that it might be someone from the Maquis even and other units who decided to make a sortie for a new diversion:

– I'm my own– Relax.

– One of our own, of course, how could it be any other way.

The enemy began to step carefully around him, barely shuffling one foot after the other, and at last appeared in front of the major. He was rather gloomy-looking, small, low, somehow unevenly built and stooped, but with some very shrewd eyes:

– You look familiar, fine.....

– Of course you did. I used to guard the Jackal. Till they started moving him.

– A jackal?

– The jackal, yes. The one who was an SSchekist bitch....

– I know who you mean. Everybody knows who he is.

– All the chivvies know. That's what I'm saying. I'm telling you, it's mine.

Slouch was silent. He was already looking at Bolotnikov a little differently. He was thinking something of his own at that moment:

– I don't need to hear about the Jackal. What's your unit?

– What about you? So I told you. – Bolotnikov knew very well the braggart nature of the hivi, and how they did not like to share unnecessary information even with their own. Who knows, maybe he'll take them for his own after all.

– You don't want to take a bullet?

– Everybody gets caught at some point. Not everyone's gonna be a rotten ass in the process.

Hearing this, the slouch seemed to smile a little and even relaxed a bit, but in essence it meant nothing – he held his AK-74 still firmly and aimed exactly at the center of the major's solar plexus:

– I agree... Well go that way... Penalized....

Bolotnikov turned slowly in that direction and, keeping his hands up, walked in the direction indicated. There seemed to be no chance of escaping – his escort had deliberately lagged behind by six or seven steps, so that there would be time to shoot, both in case of an attempt to escape and in case of an attempt to seize his weapon.

– Do you know who the jackal snitched to? – Bolotnikov suddenly had an idea of how to fix or at least change the situation.

Slouch was silent and only breathed back occasionally.

– He knocked the plagues from the SCK. – Bolotnikov replied, turning his head slightly and noticing the enemy out of the corner of his eye.

– What?!

– Yes, yes, to the chums from the SCK... – the major stopped and turned back a little. – He said he had no choice....

– What fucking choice?! These bitches snitch! Did he get a bad fucking meal here?

– He wasn't complaining about the food, you know... He was in the shit and he wanted to get out of it. You know, everybody protects your own skin more than somebody else's.

– So what? BCC's gonna help him out?

– You see, it didn't work. But somehow he wasn't too upset. He wouldn't even smoke. He said I smoked mine a long time ago...

Slouchy laughed and lowered the machine gun altogether:

– That asshole gave me the smokes. We used to be together. Only he went upstairs, and I didn't think I'd say anything. You know, he's a brave guy without epaulets. He's braver than a lot of fancy men. It ain't my thing to chase rank. But when we were young, he bet me a carton of cigarettes. And that was expensive for him. Very expensive, bitch. Ha-ha-ha. So he got upset. And he says, "I'm not fucking smoking anymore." Like he can't afford to buy any more. And then he quit altogether... And here's this dandy who says he's already smoked his own. Ha-ha... Well, on the other hand, at least he didn't completely deceive you. I was the one who fooled him with that block. Ha-ha-ha-ha.

He laughed so hard, folding himself in half sometimes, that he involuntarily came closer and closer. And at some point it finally seemed that it was possible to take advantage of it. Bolotnikov rushed forward and sharply raised his fist upward, hitting him squarely in the apple of his eye. The stooped man fell to the ground... That's what happened, and the Shakal helped him....

Swampy tied the hands of the Hivi fighter with his own belt, then took the laces off his boots and tied their feet together. Then he examined his pockets, and there was nothing particularly interesting or unexpected: ammunition, two F-1 grenades, ammunition, a Makarov pistol, cigarettes and a notebook, which contained debts, apparently card debts, judging by the fact that there were tambourines, hearts, crosses, spades, as well as the names of games opposite the surnames: goat, borax, preference. It seems that the Jackal not only lost to him, but lost at katran, that is in a game where cheats know each other, and play on who will cheat whom better. Logically, after such a defeat, he stopped smoking altogether.

Still, it was time to see what was near the sector. This time the Major moved more cautiously, and several times he spotted hives in secluded places, carefully avoided them, and continued on toward the main administration building. It was getting closer and closer. The moonlit night perfectly illuminated the outlines and some silhouettes of the moving objects around the largest structure.

Finally, he was ready to look through the binoculars with full confidence that he would find the plague, when he noticed that the binoculars were broken. On the one hand it was broken, and on the other, apparently, the lens inside was deformed, because when he tried to look through it, only darkness appeared. This is not good. It had all started to go wrong somehow, back when he'd been taken captive for a few minutes by that slouchy guy. It would be dangerous to come any closer right now – he'd be in plain sight as he approached the mesh fence that enclosed the sector from the rest of the world. And there's a way back. And all this for what? Just to see? No, it's too risky.

Bolotnikov looked a little more at the silhouettes in the distance, tried to recognize them as plagues rather than people, more inclined to believe that they were plagues. And moved back. At least there was still a bound slouch who could still tell something. At least he should know something

about the plagues – are they still in the administration with Ananhr, or is it just the people led by the Mountain?

Although, of course, it should be recognized that Zubrilov was already right about something. After all, now he met first of all the hewis, not the plagues. And even if they guard only the outer perimeter, it does not cancel the fact that people are already involved in all this. The hewi are covering for the prefect. That's a fact. And there's more than enough of them around. Then it's just a question of the speed at which their relations with each other will gain momentum... The two companies that were here and ambushed the railroad trains were also eliminated by the Hiwis. And the speed with which they did it may well indicate that Gora helped them in some way... He's no longer in alliance with us. He's at best playing a part, and at worst he's actually part of the plague empire, not going to do anything about it because he's already happy with it. Here are two possibilities, and one is cooler than the other.....

Bolotnikov in such thoughts finally reached the place where he had left the bound stooped man only 30 minutes ago. Or did he think this was the place? No, it looked like that, and even there was a shoelace lying there... He came closer, bent down and there was a long shoelace from his shoe....

– You fucking ace of diamonds..." he heard from behind, and the major immediately lost consciousness.

– Penalty Major Bolotnikov..." he heard from somewhere far away, and the rebel opened his eyes. He felt the cold steel on his hands, and the fact that he was chained to the wall with his hands tightened behind his back. The room was quite dark, but there were two men in front of him of good visibility.

– You see, he woke up right away. – he said to the stooped man who had just stood next to him.

-

Where did you put my debt notebook? – The slouchy one asked at once.

Bolotnikov blinked and honestly tried to remember which way he'd thrown it back after

looking at it, but failed:

– I don't remember. I threw it away.

– Fucking somewhere..." the slouching man grumbled, but it was even a little odd that he wasn't as upset as he was supposed to be at such a loss. – What do you need it for, anyway? You looked at it, saw that it was nothing interesting, and put it back... Or did you see your debts there?

– My debts are not here..." the Major replied somehow sadly.

– We know that without you... Okay, we've been talking too much... – said the first, and apparently the main one of them. – Tell us why you came to us. Did you want to kill someone? Blow up what? With what? Who else knows you're here? Where are you from?

– I came to see the plagues, that's why I'm here.

– Chumov? You know, kill whoever you want. Ananhr?

– No... Not to kill. Looked at the chums. The two chiwis laughed a little.

– There's no arguing about taste. – said the slouchy one to his commander.

– Well? Did you see it? – asked the chief.

– I don't know. It was far away... I wanted to see that they were guarding something here.

Not just the chiwis. It hurts us to think that the Mountain is no longer our ally, but the chiwis'. And the more plagues I saw, the less doubt I'd have about the Mountain... And I didn't see any plagues....

Bolotnikov began to understand the Jackal, whom he himself had interrogated. He held himself in a completely different way than he did now. He held himself firmly, confidently, without regret. Even though he told him what he knew, he did it without fearing anything. But now he was very embarrassed that he was not even under torture to tell everything like that... But he could not help it. He didn't fully feel like a Maquis anymore. Not only was he a penalty, but those Maquis who were not penalized were not his friends in most cases... On the other hand, what could he hide? He has no combat data for a long time, plans and guidelines of the Maquis command, too. The fact that Detachment 14 is now in Severodonetsk in most of its composition is probably not a secret for anyone for two months already. So what's he got to hide? Given that they all recognize him so easily, including the fact that he's a "penalty officer", it's more likely that they can tell him something new, rather than he can tell them....

– So upset, then... Is that all you came here for? – The chief asked.

– Anyway, yeah... Maybe the tongue was thinking of taking it and questioning it... Well, it didn't quite work out....

– Yeah, not really... I'd beat you up, you know, for nothing... The fact that you don't know shit is written all over your forehead. Not to mention the fact that you can be trusted with penalties... But someone wants to talk to you now, and this someone doesn't like to be tortured for no reason... When he gives the command, then we'll do it. Until then, no. – The chief waved his index finger negatively from side to side a couple of times and finished his tirade, probably because he heard the sound of footsteps from afar, which Bolotnikov now heard as well.

A moment later, the man they had been waiting for appeared. With a guard, of course. He was a very cunning-looking officer without epaulettes, with a shaved head. His eyes were definitely very intelligent, and when he looked at the major, it seemed as if he could see right through him.

– They say you interrogated the Jackal, comrade Bolotnikov. – came closer and said the bald man.

– He was interrogated... We ambushed him while he was being transported... He was taken alive. I talked to him myself before I handed him over.

– Were you already a penalty officer then?

– I was.

– And how did he behave in this interrogation of yours? – The bald man smiled slightly, and it was obvious that he understood Bolotnikov's feelings, and how he could compare himself with the Jackal at this moment.

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