

GAFF

Stern backed out towards the exit, all the while peering at the commander's face in disbelief, as if looking for signs of insanity. Because nothing but insanity could explain the decision Fraiser just made.

Tref, spreading his arms and legs in a clownish manner, turned around and headed for the door, grimacing and parodying a marching step. At the door, he shouted so that not only Fraiser, but also the crowd standing in the reception room, would hear it:

“Will be done! Because the commander said: Nada¹! And since Nada, then it is necessary!”

And in addition he sang: “So-o-old us out for a ho-o-oe. . .”

Fraiser grabbed a tablet from the table and threw it with all his might at the singer. Tref didn't attempt evading, deflected the flying object with a deft movement of the elbow and in the same second pointed his index finger at Fraiser, mimicking a pistol.

“Bang!” he voiced a comic shot, maliciously grinned and disappeared.

In the doorway immediately appeared Gaff, a small man without color and odor, who served under the commander as an orderly, chauffeur, cook, adjutant, body-guard, bayan² player, astrologer, doctor, quartermaster, messenger, translator from Ukrainian and, most importantly, a patient listener to the many hours of Fraiser's silence, whenever he decided to relax and slowly drink narzan³-diluted vodka, without glass-clinking, without saying a word and without getting drunk.

“The Deputy Head of Rear Services, the Deputy Head of Technology, the Chief Financial Officer, Nada, a messenger from Cherkes, Pavlenko and Windbreaker,” he listed those waiting for admission.

“Who is Pavlenko?”

“Some Svetlana Pavlenko. The Mayor of Horlivka.”

“I didn't call for her.”

“She came by herself. There was a shelling yesterday. A child was killed. Three houses burned down. The people, she says, are worried. Either, she says, drive away the Ukrs, so we're not affected. Or go away yourself, so that the Ukrs have no reason to bomb us.”

“A mayor that says such things should be sent from the mayors directly to the basement. . .”

“It's not what she says. She says, it's what the people say.”

“The people . . . The people should go serve in the army. When it comes to whining and begging for money, they're the first, but when it comes to going to war, you won't find anyone. . .”

¹A woman's name that is a homonym for “it is necessary”

²A Russian type of accordion

³A brand of mineral water

“So, she says, the father of the child who was killed, he’s in the army himself, a Hero of Donbass. He, this father, was also killed a month ago. Posthumously. You awarded him. The title of Hero. Called Krylov, maybe you remember, he fought one-on-one with a Banderovian tank. Destroyed both it’s tracks with grenades. But the tank, wasn’t weak either, shot off Krylov’s legs, so he bled to death. And then his child yesterday...”

“Yes, I understand, I understand... this one was killed, that one was killed... What does this Pavlova want from me?”

“Not Pavlova, Pavlenko. She doesn’t want anything. She says what the people want. That you, Comrade Commander, expel the Banderovians.”

“How am I going to drive them away? It’s impossible. There’s a truce between us. The Potato Armistice. Doesn’t she watch the news?”

“Honey, Comrade Commander.”

“What honey?”

“The Honey Armistice. The Potato one already ended two months ago. It was concluded so as not to disturb the farmer’s potato planting. And now it’s the Honey one.”

“Why did they conclude Honey one? In order not to interfere with honey eating?”

“No, sir. On the occasion of the Savior of the Honey Feast Day⁴. In the apiaries, honey is being prepared now. So, in order not to hit any of the apiaries or maybe scare the bees away, I don’t exactly know why. The Contact Group decided upon it.”

“So, let this Pavlenko appease the Contact Group then.”

“Yes, sir. So I’ll tell her.”

“So you’ll tell her. The meeting with the Deputy Head of Rear Services, Deputy Head of Technology and the Chief Financial Officer will be postponed for tomorrow, same time.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Let the messenger deliver everything to you, and you will report to me tomorrow, if it’s not too urgent.”

“Yes, sir. And if it is urgent?”

“Well, then immediately.”

“And how to understand, Comrade Commander, if it’s urgent or not?”

“You will understand somehow.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Let Dancer come in.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Go.”

“Yes, sir. What about Nada?”

“And why did she come?”

“Not saying anything.”

“I did ask her not to come here. Let her wait at home. I’ll be back early today.”

“Yes, sir. Can I go? Yes, sir.”

⁴An important Orthodox Christian holiday with pre-Christian origins, celebrated on the 14th of August

“How daft he is, after all!” - Fraiser thought with admiration and gratitude about Gaff when he left to follow the instructions he received. He was always vaguely attracted to stupid people, in their company he was able to rest his mind and soul. The rare, slow, dull thoughts emanating from idiots, their uncomplicated and therefore unscary tricks and desires, their obstinacy towards trifles combined with their indifference and compliance towards lofty and important matters inspired him with hope for the realization of the noble goals of war. Indeed, as far as he knew and understood the history of mankind, in order to someday be able to live in those ideal utopias for which wars were and are supposedly waged, in all of these Atlantisses, Cities of the Sun, Fifth Monarchies, communisms, areas of joint prosperity, eternal worlds and global democracies, it is necessary not only to defeat the enemy, but also to become quite a bit more stupid while you're at it.

Like many professional destroyers, Fraiser secretly dreamed that in place of the lousy lodgings and lives that he wiped from the face of the earth, new beautiful cities and citizens would someday rise. He dreamed of endless identical straight streets intersected at right angles by other equally endless identical straight streets, one of which, the cleanest and brightest, would, why not, be named after him. Not “Fraiser Street”, of course, not after his call sign, but after his real, as of yet top secret name. But someday the time will come, they will be declassified and rewarded according to their merits. He imagined himself being a well-fed, tidy old man at a meeting with the inhabitants of this street: stupid obedient schoolchildren questioning him about the glorious military past, their stupid teachers and parents joyfully nod to the beat of his one-dimensional replies. But sometimes a heavy disbelief came upon him, he recalled that for a million dumb individuals suitable for utopian happiness, one intractable individual, with a crooked smile or a wry sparkle in their eyes, would be enough to make the fragile utopia collapse.

“Then what’s all this for?” Thought Fraiser, looking at the burning houses and crying women, sometimes thought.