

## HOLY FIRE

Windbreaker, as a well-known man, was entrusted to the care of the no less famous militiaman Radiola, whose exploits the writer had already heard about for a long time. Radiola turned out to be a dwarfly man of gigantic courage. Shreds of red hair were sticking out from his tiny face in all directions; it was impossible to distinguish which of them was a mustache, which an eyebrow, which a bang, and which a beard. He broadcast with an opaque baritone into a radio tuned to the frequency of the enemy: "Ukrops, Ukrops, this is Radiola, can you hear me? I fucked your mouths, Ukrops! Separatist Radiola speaking, also known as You're-All-Fucked. . . Run home, cocksuckers!"

Glancing from below at the bulky figure of the writer rising above him, who seemed a little puzzled by such non-literary speech, Radiola explained, turning off the radio:

"As always, before the battle, a bit of trash talk. For psychological intimidation of the enemy. Now, some fifteen minutes of preliminary bombardment, and then we'll go in for the attack. . .

"Come on, don't piss yourself, Macaron!" He added, addressing a lanky soldier who was entrenched in the roadside dust, nervously chewing on an extinguished cigarette.

"Yes, it's easy for you to say," the soldier answered muffledly, looking at the ruins of the terminal, "you're small as a cockroach, no one will fucking hit you, but I'm a meter ninety-six tall, just when I stand up, the Ukrops'll start shooting at me, I'm visible from everywhere, and then this fucking steppe, one sticks out here like a Vodka bottle on a table. . . You just keep me around as a target to distract the fire from you, I know it. . ."

"Eh, Mac, blowing smoke, as always. But today I'm kind. Look what fine camouflage I got for you there," Radiola pointed his radio at Windbreaker. "Look how big this guy is. He'll go first, and you follow him. He's four times as wide as you, no one will see you behind him, just bend down a little. Will you go first, fella?"

"I will," Windbreaker wanted to answer cheerfully, but for some reason he gloomily kept silent. He was sweating, his body was slowly disintegrating into large drops, and with his body his soul was also flowing somewhere downwards, into his socks, and the old trophy "Merkel" that had been given to him became slippery from the sweat and started sliding out of his trembling hands. He marveled at this unexpected incapacity, and suddenly terribly wanted to go back to the television studio so that everything he saw here would turn into a picture on a monitor, and he would concernedly, but not without irony, discuss this picture with his similarly loud-mouthed, but actually, very friendly political conversationalists. "Oh, a 'Merkel'! A cool rifle, I always wanted one," looking at Windbreaker, Macaron cheered up. "Hey, big guy, let's switch. You don't need this rifle, you don't even know how to shoot it, most likely, huh? And even if you know how, you won't have time. Just when you peep out from behind the shelter, the Ukrs will blow your balls off at once. Give me your 'Merkel', and I'll give you some

‘Doshirak’<sup>1</sup>, two large boxes, huh?’

It became crystal clear to Windbreaker that here, and for a hundred kilometers around, no one, if anything were to happen, would feel sorry for him. Not only the enemies lurking on the other side would not feel sorry for him, but his so-called allies, whom he so admired, for whom he proclaimed toasts at patriotic banquets, wouldn’t give a single damn either. It was the first time he found himself in such a place. There, in Moscow, in other peaceful cities, people were not very kind either, but there was at least a mother and emergency doctors always in reach via phone, who are obliged to rush in, sympathize and give a pill if, God forbid, something turns out to be wrong with your balls. Specifically the balls. He was particularly struck by Macaron’s prophecy about the blowing-off of his balls. At this very moment he did not wish for such a development of events at all. Well, of course, you can give your balls for your homeland, but maybe not all at once, and, for example, under anesthesia. But here everything is so crude, some morally obsolete product of a bankrupt defense enterprise will fly in, bang, not even explode properly, because it’s a dud, but it’ll be enough to leave only a wet stain in place of the bright young writer. Radiola will look and ask: “What is this greasy stain? Did somebody spill fuel oil?”, And Macaron will answer: “No, no, they killed the fatty.” - “What fatty? That fat guy?” “Yeah.” - “Ah”. And that’ll be all.

It turned out, however, somewhat differently, somewhat better, although not totally well either.

Radiola changed the frequency and shouted into the radio:

“Hullo, holy fathers, monks, can you fucking hear me? Enough sleeping, the Uniates and Filarets are waiting for the holy fire. Come on, burn it down!”

“Lie down here, big guy,” Macaron invited Windbreaker, clapping his palm on the dust to his right. “Don’t worry. It only hurts the first time, and then you’ll like it. I’m talking about the war. What were you thinking about? Just kidding, okay. Lie down, open your mouth, shut your ears. Monks - they’re the mortarmen. The battery is placed at the monastery, so he calls them that. Now they’ll strike. Preliminary bombardment. . .”

But instead of a roar the writer was suddenly surrounded by an unbearable deafness, a blustery brown wave of clay swept over him, delivering directly in front of his eyes a round face, on which, as it seemed to Windbreaker, the lips were still moving, finishing the long expression “preliminary bombardment”. Reflexively, as he’d catch a ball thrown to him in childhood, Windbreaker caught with two hands, swaying and dropping the “Merkel”, Macaron’s head. Shocked, he did not hear any of the mine explosions nor the frantic yell of Radiola:

“What are you, holy fathers, fucked in the head??? You’re fucking striking us! Yes, us, us, who else! Macaron’s head was blown off! What, it’s not you? It’s you, fuckers, you. . . What distance? What position? Yes, the hohols<sup>2</sup> were

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<sup>1</sup>A Korean brand of instant noodles, one of the most popular in Russia

<sup>2</sup>Derogatory term for Ukrainians

in this fucking position yesterday, yesterday. We pushed them out this night. They moved back to the gray zone. Now we're in this position. This night, I'm telling you. You didn't fucking know, bitch! And who should know? Where, where?! Some two hundred meters further... You understand, bitch?! Should've understood earlier..."

They corrected the fire, then went in for the attack, while Windbreaker still stood in the same place, holding Macaron's head in his hands. The deafness gradually began to pass, but then his legs started twitching. He stomped about, as if dancing, until finally the orderlies crawled up to him. They couldn't take the head away from him. So, with the head in his hands, he was brought to the infirmary. Pumped full of sedatives. He dreamed of Professor Dowell<sup>3</sup> and St. Denis<sup>4</sup>, shouting at each other: "Where, where?! Some two hundred meters further... You understand, bitch..." While he was sleeping, the head was taken away and buried.

The treatment was long. His hearing recovered, although not fully. For example, he completely couldn't hear the sounds "sh" and "o", and also was unable to pick up any sound above the G sharp of the first octave at all. But somehow he adapted and understood everything. But his legs, they could not be tamed, they were constantly twitching, and everyone began to behind his back, and often even openly, call him Dancer, he was offended, did not respond to this frivolous term, patiently correcting the offenders and repeating: "I am Windbreaker."

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<sup>3</sup>Referring to Professor Dowell's Head, a 1925 science fiction story by Russian author Alexander Belyayev

<sup>4</sup>A 3rd-century Christian saint who was martyred for his faith by decapitation