FATHERS

Fraiser went out onto the porch. Slug was lighting up with Tref on the bottom step, Frost was sitting on the railing, pointing his machine gun at Cherkes, who in turn was pointing his machine gun at Slug. Gaff managed to insert a cartridge into the chamber in the hallway and readily stood at the side and slightly in front of the commander. Two BTRs and four jeeps blocked the street, Stern, Badshot, Asp, Psycho, Slav, Radiola had arrived on them - in short, everyone, everyone was there.

Along the road swayed tall, slender and spread out like poplars, swarms of midges. The sun, leaning towards the sunset, suddenly bounced back from the horizon, turned around and began to rise back up again.

“Hullo, Fathers. What’s the occasion?” - Fraiser menacingly greeted the crowd.
““You seen Minus?”” - came from the crowd.
“Yeah.”
“What now?”
“Psycho, are you talking for everyone here?”
“Well, yeah.”
“If you want me to answer you, address me properly.”
“You wish!”

They were silent for a moment, considered it, but decided not to kill each other right away. A more flexible visitor emerged, Radiola. He continued the conversation:

“Comrade Commander, allow me to address you!”
“Go ahead.”
“The army is aware that you forbade to save Minus. The army is aware that you have his woman. The army sees that the Ukrs finished off Minus. And that his body was allowed to be desecrated. The army believes that you, comrade commander, are in the wrong.”
“Who is the army? You maybe? Or Psycho? Or you, Stern? Or you over there, yes you, you, why’re turning away? Are you all the army?”
“The common soldiers, too, are with us on this issue…” shouted Psycho.
“Of course, the common wankers… There is no issue here…” Fraiser growled.
“No woman has anything to do with this. If anyone else says anything about Nada, I’ll fuck him up on the spot. And about Minus, I explained everything in great detail to Stern and Tref. They’ll tell you. Isn’t that so, Tref?”
“Explained, all right, but not really explained.” - Tref came up to Fraiser, stood next to him and addressed the crowd. - “Maybe I’m stupid, but I don’t understand shit. You explain it directly to the people. They are smarter than me, perhaps they will understand.”
“You understood everything, Tref, and everyone else understood everything, too. That is all!” - The commander put a heavy hand on Tref’s shoulder and pushed him away. - “Go, Tref, go, do not tempt sin.”
“And what’ll happen if I don’t go?”
“You’ll be riding to Voronezh with a bag on your head…”

“Okay, okay,” Badshot interposed, a puny golden-toothed guy who enjoyed considerable authority despite his unimpressive frame. “Stop butting heads, guys. You know what, commander, buy out Minus from the hohols with your own money; didn’t want to save him when he was still alive, so at least save his dead body from disgrace. And we’ll consider you’ve redeemed yourself, and acknowledge it, huh?”

“I would buy out Minus anyway, without all your gatherings and advice, Badshot. No matter what, he was ours, you can’t leave him to the Ukrs. Disperse now. I’ll buy him out,” Fraiser promised, and, throwing one last hellish glance across the crowd of commanders, as if he had two wide open snake mouths in place of his eyes, he returned to the house, where Sickle-and-Hammer, who through some back door had managed to sneak into the house, awaited him in the billiard room.

“I heard everything. You are right. Tactically, the decision was right. Strategically wrong though,” said the counterint officer. “You’re right about the buyout. There’s no other way. But it’s a mistake to agree to it under pressure from the commanders. That is, I understand that it’s pointless to try and press you, or even counter, as they say, productive. But these simpletons, they’re fools after all, they’re already discussing among themselves how dashingly they managed to press you. Now there’ll be talk that they forced you, rather than that you decided to do it yourself…”

“Only the old-timers were there, as I understand it? Only from the first enlistment? Only the fucking honored and legendary ones? None from the later enlistments, right?” Fraiser asked himself, Gaff and Sam.

“You have sharp eyes, comrade commander, like a hawk. Indeed. Only from the first influx. The new ones, they’re docile, there are many more of them, and they do not like our trailblazers. If there’s any reason, they’ll get rid of them immediately,” Gaff confirmed.

“Indeed,” added Sam. - “Only the founding fathers of the militia, only these Makhnovists¹, the last, as they say, of the Mohicans and Chichimecs. Delusional, spoiled attention whores. Always blogging, protesting…”

“We must end them,” the commander breathed out.

“What did you say?” Asked Sam.

“Did you not hear right?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Well, that’s fine too.”

“I agree, Comrade Commander, it’s better for me not to hear this,” Sam smiled. “You shouldn’t, comrade head of the special department, look so slyly and smile, like some…”

“Like the Gioconda²,” Sam finished the sentence for Fraiser. - “Sorry for interrupting you and putting in a word. I did it just in case you were planning to say something coarser, something offensive, which would have made us enemies

¹An early 20th century anarchist movement in the Ukraine, name after it’s leader Nestor Makhno, read more: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Makhnovia
²An alternative name for Da Vinci’s Mona Lisa painting
forever... The Gioconda, however, is an academic term, an intelligent one. No offense, comrade commander, there's no offense, so we're not enemies.”

“They dispersed,” Frost reported, appearing at the door. - “Everything’s clear around the house.”

“Gaff, go connect to the Ukrs through the zero channel, we need to talk with Vinegar, say it’s urgent,” ordered Fraiser. “Frost, accompany comrade Sam to his car. And find Nada.”

“She’s in the garden, Comrade Commander.”

“What is she doing?”

“Collecting flowers.”

“What kind?”

“Lilac, jasmine, chamomiles and stuff like that.”

“Mood?”

“She’s singing.”

“Happy songs? Or sad?”

“Neither, Comrade Commander.”

“Okay.” - Fraiser was again surprised by her ability to maintain a weightlessness of the heart despite all the heaviness of external events.

“The connection with Vinegar is established,” shouted Gaff from the communications room. In this nook under the stairs special transmitters buzzed and winked with green and red lights. From here it was possible, if absolutely necessary, to speak with the Center, even with its Chief. From here also the so-called zero channel for communication with the enemy worked, installed without the permission of the Center and bypassing the official negotiation formats.

BUYOUT

Vinegar, a red-skinned man, kind of fat, kind of young, but already having gray hairs and time spent behind bars for smuggling before the war, now however a fighter and accomplished lieutenant general, who did not abandon, but rather expanded his smuggling business alongside the war, commanded the Ukrainian troops, held the front opposite to Fraiser. They got to know each other indirectly at the very beginning of the conflict, when Vinegar was still a company man in a Banderovian dobrobat3, and Fraiser was the ataman of a sotnya4 of pseudo-cossacks. Back then Fraiser blocked off some two dozens of Ukrops5 on Saur-Mogila6 and methodically finished them off with a mortar. Vinegar’s company was sent to break through the encirclement and rescue their own. Vinegar, however, could not break through Fraiser right away, although he fought valiantly. Not managing to break through, retreating behind the landing

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3Banderovian: Ukrainian nationalist movement, named after its former head Stepan Bandera; dobrobat: short for dobrovolniy batalion, i.e. voluntary battalion

4ataman: Cossack leader; sotnya: literally “hundred”, a unit of the Cossack regiments, comparable to company

5Ukrop: lit. “dill”; derogatory term for Ukrainians

6a strategic height in the Donets ridge, formerly a focal point of intense fighting during WWII, as well as fights between Ukrainian and DPR forces in 2014, resulting in the destruction of the WWII memorial placed there, read more: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Savur-Mohyla
and having caught his breath, he sent a corpsman to the Moskals\(^7\) with a note and a bag. The bag contained bandages, analgesics, hemostatics, and a large plastic bottle of drinking water. The note addressed to Fraiser contained a request to let the unarmed corpsman through to the surrounded Ukrainians in order to give them the medicaments and water.

Fraiser was astounded by such audacity, but he let the corpsman through and, in the end, handed him a grease-stained paper parcel: “That’s from me, there’s salo\(^8\) and bread.” He ordered not to shoot. He waited until the corpsman with the heavy bag climbed up on the grassy slope to his own, and only after that he quietly said: “Fire!”

Then they fought again, Saur-Mogila changed hands six times. When Fraiser himself turned out to be locked up on the damned mountain, when he and eight of his not-quite-cossacks were about to die from thirst and the Bandera artillery that was firing constantly, when the shell-shocked Badshot already saw the Archangel Michael appear from an explosion cloud, who was about to bestow upon him the rank of Yesaul\(^9\) of Christ’s Cavalry, then suddenly things got a bit better. The shelling of the western slope stopped, and on it from the Ukrainian side an ATV with a white flag appeared. It almost drove within ten meters distance of the trench housing the raving Badshot and threw a large bag in his direction, screaming: “Don’t piss yourself, katsap, take it, it’s not wired.” In the bag were water, bandages, blood sausage, vodka. And a note: “To Fraiser from Vinegar. We do not forgive evil, but we remember good. Die, but not from hunger and thirst.”

Since then, they did not lose contact. Rarely, reluctantly, but they talked. Exchanged prisoners, settled incidents at civilian checkpoints, and, taking into account the realities, adjusted the contact line, which was drawn up between them somewhere far away on a crumpled map by some people who had never seen Dokuchaevsk, Kalmius, or the unnamed pond in the marshy lowland, on the site of which, according to the thought of these distant strategists, there should have been an advanced base for international observers, for example. .

Sometimes they were also forced to trade each other this or that thing, whenever the supply services failed.

Gaff, crouching, stepped out of the communication closet, freeing up the only stool in front of the microphone for his boss.

“Hello, hohol,” said Fraiser, sitting down in the stuffy corner.

“Hello, katsap,” said Vinegar. - “You upset about Minus?”

“You guessed it. You’re acting inhumanely. Behaving unorthodoxly”

“What?”

“Why such mockery? What’s this gibbeting for?”

“I can’t see, what’s the expression on your mug right now, Fraiser? Serious? Or

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\(^7\)derogatory term for Muscovite, or in the wider sense a Russian person

\(^8\)salted unrendered pork fat, a popular Eastern European food, particularly associated with Ukraine

\(^9\)a rank in Cossack units
not?"

"Let's just drop the mova\textsuperscript{10}, okay? You haven't even really learned yourself how to speak it yet. Don't make me laugh."

"Yes, my mova is nothing to brag about, no doubt," the Ukrainian guffawed. -

"Do you know how we say "pivo"\textsuperscript{11}? You won't believe it! "Pyvo"! I swear! What kind of bullshit is that, huh?"

"Return Minus," Fraiser wasn't listening.

"Grease my palm."

"What do you want?"

"A million dollars, a Buratino\textsuperscript{12} with full ammunition and an instructor. Plus two tons of buckwheat. I'll return the instructor in a month."

"Come on! Minus isn't worth that much."

"Minus might not be worth that much indeed, but the revolt of the old-timers would cost you more."

"Don't listen to gossip."

"This isn't even gossip, but intel."

"I don't have a Buratino. You well know that this weapon is prohibited by the international observers. I'll give you a hundred thousand dollars and a centner of bay leaf."

"But you do have a Buratino, you do. Maybe, of course, you're not even aware of it, but I'll help you out. It's located in the Green Village. Badly camouflaged. Tell them to drive it somewhere far away. Otherwise, who knows, one of my drones might break the armistice. And you'll be offended."

"We don't have a Buratino. Take the bay leaves. I'll throw in another twenty bulletproofs for your lads."

After half an hour, they struck a bargain: two hundred thousand euros, fifty new bulletproof vests, seventy assault rifles, two hundred magazines for them, forty boxes of ammo, half a ton of pea concentrate. It was customary to sell or trade weapons to each other in this war, somehow no one thought that the buyer of the weapons would use them on the seller in the end, if Fraiser, for example, were told this, he would probably just shrug his shoulders: "Well, he'll use them, so what, if not these, then he'll use other weapons, what's the difference."

"You'll receive everything in three hours in the same place as usual, in the Singed Grove near the Dry Stream," the commander said. "Bring Minus there. But clean him up beforehand. I won't accept him dirty. Your guys spat all over him. And the face. Fix his face."

"Clean him up... Maybe I should steam him in a hammam\textsuperscript{13} as well?.. Okay, I'll clean him up. He'll be just like new. My superiors spotted our place in the

\textsuperscript{10}literally "language" in Ukrainian, originally referring to the Ukrainian language, however nowadays can also refer to the broken Ukrainian, often mixed with Russian, spoken by Ukrainian nationalists despite their lack of proficiency in it

\textsuperscript{11}a TOS-1 multiple rocket launcher mounted on a tank chassis, nicknamed Buratino, i.e. Pinocchio, for it's big "nose"

\textsuperscript{13}Turkish bath
Singed Grove though, that sucks, so let’s go to Veselovka, at the water pump, it’s safe there now,” said Vinegar.

“Okay. I’ll send Slug. And you?”

“Viy,”

“Okay. They already know each other, I think.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“End of communication.”

\[14\] Viy: name of a demon from Ukrainian folklore, popularized by Gogol’s novella of the same name