

## STUDIO

Next morning the commander immediately drove from the banya to the headquarters without having breakfast, so as not to run into Nada. He decided to ignore her until she calmed down. He thought that she wouldn't be able to hold out against such a blockade for two days, she'd surrender, and everything would be again as it was, until he grows tired of it. And then he could maybe let her go. Although... she knows too much, might be better to not let her go, but send her back to the laundry... we'll see then.

He had to give a speech. Having finished the operational meeting, he went down from the situation room to the press center. There, Dancer was already busy in the small studio, bustling girls scurried from corner to corner, dropping papers from branded army folders, a bored cameraman and his one-eyed camera looked at each other with disinterest.

"Where's the text?" - asked Fraiser. The girls froze, the cameraman, on the contrary, moved in, preparing to shoot.

"It's ready, ready, Comrade Commander," Windbreaker jumped up, picking up a large sheet from one of the girls on the go and handing it to Fraiser.

"So," the commander moved his lips, reading half aloud. - "Screws five by thirty, one and a half kilos, one thousand four hundred and six rubles... what the fuck?!"

The sheet was crumpled and thrown at Dancer's face. He caught the paper with his mouth and hand, unwrapped it and panicked:

"I'm sorry, Comrade Commander. I'm so sorry, that's not it, it's an estimate for repairing the press wall. I beg of you, forgive me!"

He grabbed another sheet from another girl, glanced at it briefly:

"Here, here is the text of your speech!"

Fraiser took the paper and sat down at the table in front of the camera.

"Don't record yet," he barked at the cameraman and began to read aloud and edit the text. It was evident that he was dissatisfied, he scribbled and crossed things out, read and re-read, scribbled again. Windbreaker, looking at how his work was being ravaged and destroyed, thought in a panic: "Someday he'll have me shot, surely he will, I just hope not today." Tonight they were supposed to receive their field rations, and since morning Dancer was languishing and longing in anticipation of the hardtacks and especially the beef with peas that he came to like here for some reason. For fear of thinking about death, he kept thinking about food. He himself did not expect that his large, as it seemed to him, personality, his generously gifted, magnificent soul would simplify and shrink under tough conditions to pure bestiality. He didn't want any victory, he did not desire anyone's blood, and not even fame anymore, but only food. In any army, in general, always and at all times there's more or less hunger, either from poor supplies or from chronic stress. And there are always individuals in its ranks who are extremely obsessed with food, scabby stray dogs of war, who

seem completely out of place in the war, but who nonetheless for some reason appear in any war in a small, but constant amount, only thinking for days on end, even when starting an attack or hiding from shelling - what else could I eat tonight.

“Well, let’s begin, start rolling,” said Fraiser. A girl in camouflage went over his face with a powdered soft brush, making the commander somewhat resemble a terracotta idol. The operator “started rolling”. Windbreaker, staring at the commander with bulging eyes, calmed down a bit and continued to think about field rations. Fraiser, glancing at him not without malice, speculated: “Certainly he’s not thinking about business, this unmilitary ass, and not even about women, but, I suppose, about some beef with peas, they’ll recruit all kinds of trash into the army, and then I’m supposed to wage a war with them somehow, oh, this country is lost.” And he was right, and started reading the speech.

## SPEECH

Each year, the commander recorded an address to the new recruits. A motivational video with his speech was sent to the training camp, where volunteers who had passed pre-selection were transported before being sent to the front. Those who had already signed the contract, exchanging their name for a call sign and their life for death. There weren’t enough volunteers, however, so the scouts forced additional people, whom they blackmailed or for whom they exchanged the prison term for a term at the front, and if there weren’t enough still, they lured in the mentally ill - both harmless fools and dangerous maniacs. For the most part, people came here for the money, although there were romantics, and patriots, and just merry fellows who came to fight not out of spite, not out of need, but out of carefreeness.

The training was very hard, so after ten days almost all the arrivals became discouraged, some asked to go home, others tried to flee, or to lay hands on themselves, or to kill the officers. But under the contract, as the head of the camp with the call sign Gestapych<sup>1</sup> said, there was no rewinding, the path went only in one direction, where smoking and puffing, clutching a man with its steel jaws, holding him to the fire like a cigarette, and spitting him out, having sucked him out, like a crumpled cigarette butt, another plain, non-world<sup>2</sup> war awaited them. Therefore, at this difficult moment, the recruits were cheered up through speeches of the heroes and champions, whose example was to inspire the young and prove that not everyone in the war is maimed or dies, but on the contrary, many people benefit from it, it brings wealth, and titles, and honor.

Fraiser was such a hero. He was repeatedly invited to speak live at the camp, but he shied away, putting them off with video recordings. In them, he rather dryly and succinctly urged to honor the memory of the founding fathers of mixed

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<sup>1</sup>shortened form of Gestapovych, i.e. combination of “Gestapo” with the typically Slavic suffix “-vych”, which is used in forming male patronyms, and also common for surnames

<sup>2</sup>pun, world and peace are written the same in Russian, so it can mean both non-World War, i.e. minor war, as well as peaceless war

martial arts Bruce Lee, Rick Blume, Dana White, to abide by the rules, to take an example from the legendary MMA fighters, to be worthy of the oldest and so far the best military-sports promotion company UFC.

Of course, the commander could say many more interesting things. After all, he sincerely loved MMA, with great respect for the mission of the UFC, for which he worked. He admired the incredible take-off of his home company, which began about a hundred years ago as an entertainment sports show, and has now become an influential political, and, in a sense, religious organization.

## **HISTORY OF MMA**

Once upon a time, the viewers became bored of boxing, sambo and karate, they wanted to see something a little more brutal. This is how mixed martial arts arose, where all the most aggressive and spectacular of different styles came together. It turned out much bloodier, the success was phenomenal, but over the years, the audience began to get bored again. Normal sports could not compete in terms of violence with the cinecomics about superheroes and series about psychopaths. The artistic taste receptors of the spoiled and satiated mass consumers were stuffed with hot and spicy content. To stimulate them, it was necessary to make the show more and more hardcore with each new season.

The UFC, with the help of influential patrons, gradually expanded the limits of permitted brutality through athletic commissions and legislative structures. First of all, 12-6 elbows and hitting the back of the head were legalized. Then they got rid of the gloves, following the principle of “bare knuckles”. Then it was allowed to hit the groin and break fingers. Later, the usage of sticks and weights was lobbied. Finally, in the crucial year of 2033 they legalized the use of combat knives and equated killing in the ring with a knockout victory. The personal data of the fighters began to be classified, they were deleted from official databases, and the assigned nicknames, tags and call signs were registered only in the fighting championship, so the athletes acquired a different, incomplete personality, so as not to be responsible to society and the state for any death and so that no one would be responsible for them.

Further, the transition to firearms was inevitable. The octagons were replaced with spacious pavilions made of armored glass. Increasingly, not single fights were practiced, but group competitions. In 2042, the mayor of the devastated Venezuelan municipality Paramayo offered the UFC to rent his town for a month for a decent fee for fighting sports groups of up to three hundred people each, armed with small arms, armored vehicles and light artillery. One group was supposed to storm the village, and the second to defend it. Upon request, the promotion was supposed to provide the locals with tents for living in safe surroundings for the duration of the match. Spectators could continuously watch the live broadcast, and the most desperate and curious - to rent houses and apartments in the town to watch the competition live and in close proximity. They were given white armbands and baseball caps so that, if possible, they

would not be shot at.

The UFC accepted the offer, and the first ever sports war took place. The match was watched by two billion viewers. Several thousand extremely expensive tickets for seats within the town itself were also sold. Ninety-six fighters, fifty local residents (not all moved to the campground) and seven spectators were killed. The outcome of the match caused a wide discussion. Humanists and human rights activists demanded to ban the inhumane sport. UFC supporters, who also called themselves human rights defenders and humanists, called for protecting the freedom of physical expression. Rallies and petitions under the motto “Stop MMA!” and, conversely, “For the free development of sports” were held around the world. Some governments banned mixed martial arts or imposed restrictions. Others, on the contrary, gave this business additional benefits. It is unknown who would have won, but then the so-called War for the American Inheritance broke out. Cambridge historians proclaimed it the Third World War, but this name didn’t take root, since it wasn’t that similar to the previous two, it grew too quickly from simple street riots into a nuclear conflict and did not last long, so most major powers simply didn’t have time to physically get involved.

## **ETERNAL PEACE**

The cultures of the USA and the European Union had radically changed by the middle of the twenty-first century. The old communities, to whom was attributed the authorship of Western civilization, known as WASPs, French, Germans, etc., were replaced by new, non-stop demographic flows and migration waves brought from the south. Washington and Brussels, in a desperate attempt to save an endangered traditional identity, jointly announced a plan to establish a single Euro-American United States of the North Atlantic. This ill-conceived step provoked a cascade of ethnic uprisings. Former minorities, long ago and not always noticeably having turned into actual majorities, demanded the formalization of their dominance and the transfer of power to them. And if Europe almost immediately surrendered to the immigrants from the Maghreb and the Levant, then in the USA the Whites briefly and unorganizedly resisted and were not yet completely defeated when the Blacks and Latinos clashed among themselves in the struggle for power. The Euro-Americans had to hide in ghettos and reservations. The African Americans who dominated the north of the country demanded complete submission from the Latin Americans who prevailed in the south. Latinos, with their characteristic audacity, refused to obey the blacks. In this environment of decay and chaos, both sides gained access to nuclear weapons. It is not known which of them launched first, but an exchange of volleys of strategic missiles between the north and the south of the United States took place. The Russian army, having spotted the launches and taking them for an attack on themselves, began to launch “retaliatory” nuclear strikes. Fortunately, not the entire Russian arsenal was used, when it became clear that there was only an internal civil atomic war in the States and that there was no attack on Russia. Moscow stopped the counterattacks, international

mediators joined. Multilateral negotiations took place, the one-day apocalypse stopped.

Vying for the great American inheritance, the Negroes and Latinos stopped to fight out of fear, dividing the USA fraternally into two Half-Americas and transferring strategic weapons to the control of a special international commission.

Only about thirty million people died, significantly less than in the Second World War, and that would be okay, but the nuclear misunderstanding brought much more unpleasant consequences. The calendar started to deceive. Suddenly an ordinary Thursday would stretch out for a week, preventing the sun from setting and the night falling, then in the middle of January there would be brutal heat or some usual wind would begin to blow from a completely different direction and bring some strange, never-seen before clouds, teeming with wriggling hissing lightning and rabid birds who lost their orientation. Communication outages were everywhere, all routines were disrupted, humanity lost its rhythm.

It turned out that the almost simultaneous operation of several tens of high-power nuclear charges in a relatively small area slightly moved the Earth out of orbit. Like a spinning top that lost its balance, the planet rocked slightly, its movement became uneven and, as it soon became clear, unpredictable.

After a couple of months of observation, scientists called the new orbit of the Earth pre-chaotic, believing that the observed increasing instability in the future will transform into a chaotic trajectory, after which a disruption either inwards the solar system, to the incinerating center, or beyond, into the cold and gloom, would be inevitable. There were also those who assumed that our “sweeping” planet would be intercepted and swallowed by Jupiter, or that it would just collapse from its orbital rocking. In all cases, the outcome was the same, a universal human brainstorming session on the search for ways of salvation was announced, and a conference of leading states that established the Global Salvation Council was convened. Since it was clear that the Earth would not tolerate another such shaking, the Council first proclaimed a universal, inviolable and eternal peace on the planet.

## **PEACE MEASURES**

A proclamation, of course, is an unreliable thing, and peace had to be enforced with medical methods. By that time, genetic engineering and bio-cybernetics had reached quite high levels. The Global Council took advantage of their achievements, not only lifting the ban on the use of certain technologies, but also forcibly introducing them.

Total genetic vaccination was carried out with a drug that develops an immunity to war in a person, reduces aggressiveness to acceptable values and starts the body to produce new hormones of humility and good-heartedness that were not previously found in nature and were called L-Tolstovian in honor of the theoretician of non-resistance to evil. The pacifying vaccine was given to

everyone, without exception, without fail. Evasion of vaccination was punishable by imprisonment up to life.

In about five years, humanity had changed. Not only wars, but also fights stopped. People now even quarreled slowly and politely. The atavistic need for conflict and violence was fully satisfied by watching action movies and sports events, reading detective stories and historical lore. Men and women, everyone changed even outwardly - mellowed out, let themselves go, their bodies became softer, wider, warmer and sweatier, their faces rounder and squishier, their eyes gentler and narrower, the laugh deeper and lower, and when laughing, both womanly and manly lush breasts fluttered equally.

Human beings, as it were, distanced themselves from each other, became mutually dispassionate and indifferent, and this indifference served universal harmony better than any love. Less curiosity, less interest, less bad and good intentions, less emotion was shown towards ones peers, and humanity stopped boiling and splashing over the edge, calmed down, lay down and moved only in a relaxed and balanced way.

Other side effects also appeared, however. Gradually, it was noticed that the libido was decreasing. But since it was decreasing in all and approximately equally, no one seemed to complain. Society became calmer, lazier, but even more flexible: labor productivity did not grow, but voters in the elections strove to vote for the current government over and over again to avoid the stress of change. Governments, having discovered such an unexpected benefit, even more actively enforced the pacifying medication, so that people would not be upset by the declaration of economic growth and competition as obsolete priorities, politically incorrect vestiges of the sweatshop system and unbridled exploitations of nature and man.

All routine mental tasks were finally turned over to artificial intelligence, peoples indulged in well-deserved idleness, it was the beginning of possibly the last, but no doubt a golden, age. However, the AI, created by emulating and transferring the functions of the human brain to a machine, acquired, along with these functions, the inevitably associated specific features of the purely human psyche, namely, a tendency toward religiosity and theft. Machine algorithms and neural networks that controlled finances, security systems, government orders, trade, education, healthcare and transport deceived and robbed people and extorted bribes from them. Corruption of artificial intelligence had reached truly superhuman limits. People, however, did not suffer too much, because they forgot how to resent and rebel, they preferred to joke and laugh about everything that revolted them before, they were ruled by comedians and wise guys, good mood and all kinds of positivity were hte biggest values.

## **INCURABLES**

Human affairs are good, and they are not that far from perfect, as the pessimists seem to think, not that far, but still far away.

Gradually, it became clear that the vaccine does not work on everyone. Scientists could not explain this unpleasant phenomenon, they only came up with a name for it - syndrom of nonspecific asocial resistance, SNAR. The International Institute of Clinical Snarology arose, consuming huge grants on researching the problem and developing a universal means of personal pacification, designed to be effective without any exceptions, but no solution was found.

For a thousand vaccinees, an average of one and a half to two abnormally resistant organisms, for unexplained reasons, were immune to this useful drug. They remained aggressive, their hearts accumulated malice in the old way and needed violence to spend it. They loved the old, wild, assertive, selfish and sacrificial love. They did not consider simple survival, the avoidance of suffering and death and the notorious "success" as the main meanings of life, on the contrary, it seemed, they were looking for risk, fear, suffering and death. These incurable renegades huddled in packs and terrorized the fat herds of well-meaning citizens. They were caught, vaccinated again, sent to prisons, in which the guards were the same outcasts like them, but this did not help. Re-vaccinations did not work, and they scattered from prisons, becoming ever more brutal, ever more dangerous.

Then the responsible people remembered the pre-war disputes around MMA. The Global Council transformed the UFC into the UFC Center for the Adaptation and Utilisation of Heroes (that was the politically correct name for the freaks who were not capable of producing L-Tolstovian hormones). The center started organizing commercial local sports wars, recruiting the incurable fighters to participate in them. They were paid good money, and honored as heroes and champions, and allowed to kill each other. Competitions were held in several divisions - flyweight, featherweight, lightweight, welterweight, middleweight, light heavyweight, heavyweight - depending on the power of the war. The power was determined by the maximum allowable number of deaths. Fraiser was the champion in the welterweight division, that is, he waged wars with a capacity of 15-25 kilodeath (from 15.000 to 25.000 deaths). The types of weapons and equipment permitted for use in each division were selected in accordance with the permissible scale of casualties and destruction. Refereeing and rule enforcement was carried out by international observers.

Each self-respecting country supplied several teams of fighters both from the practical necessity of disposing of its incurable heroes, and from considerations of sports and political prestige. It was also a big business. Normal people enjoyed watching it live and on demand, how abnormal people mutilate, torture and destroy each other. Spectators united in patriotic fan clubs, cheering for their own and collectively sublimating the last remnants of an almost exhausted belligerence. The couch potato patriotism, which which resulted in the sacrifice not of your priceless but someone else's cheap life, and you only paid a few dollars or thousands of rubles for viewing, because of its accessibility and safety, became rampant and widespread, holding nations together from the inside. Large states dispersed the bad energy of the masses in small conflicts in foreign territories, thus

avoiding a direct collision between themselves. Clubs and national teams of the Chinese Confederation and both Half-Americas, the United European Emirates and the Russian Union fought for the championship, carefully controlling costs, expending mostly morally obsolete, unimportant human and technical material. The eternal peace finally became a reality thanks to a war controlled and applied in homeopathic doses.

The regions chosen for the destructive matches were either abandoned or poor, whose residents and authorities were ready to suffer temporary inconveniences of the armed conflict for several months or years. Otherwise there were some cases, albeit rare, where the percentage of those immune to the vaccine was significantly higher than the average on the planet and where the population itself decided to willingly participate in the bloodshed. Special types of travelers flocked to the places of lethal competitions, fulfilling non-combat tasks in the combat zones: instructors, journalists, roving officials, extreme tourists, doctors, thieves, prostitutes of all sexes, traders, writers, movie directors, professional selfie-makers, philanthropists, crazy people, popes - so in general, peaceful people, but eager to stick their nose into any trouble.

The so-called memorial wars, which reconstructed battles of the past, were in fashion. The weapons, uniforms, ideology, tactics of long-standing battles were copied more or less accurately, which allowed the use of outdated, and therefore not too dangerous military technologies and at the same time encouraged the public to study history. If necessary, decorations were built - mock-ups, and sometimes literal replicas of buildings and structures, symbolizing the times of past events. Commonplace details, and everyday speech of the corresponding era were reproduced. The fighters were required to show not only combat, but also some acting skills, they took drama lessons to look more convincing in the roles assigned to them, and extra points were awarded for artistry. Primitive old-school posturing in the style of early MMA masters, such as McGregor or Jones, was not enough now, realism and psychologism, the ability to fully get into the role were appreciated.

Fraiser, a fighter far from ordinary, distinguished and authoritative, has already managed to successfully participate in two memorial wars - the "Afghan" and "Chechen" - and now defended his league title in a match repeating the events of the civil conflict in southeastern Ukraine 2014-2024.

## **COULD TELL**

The commander could tell how hard it is sometimes to be a hero in a world where heroism is considered weird or even a dangerous disease. How unbearable it is, after breaking through the ranks of the enemy, having lost comrades in arms in the battle, losing half of your own life from wounds and fatigue, deafened, blinded by fire and hoisting the victorious flag over the city, you suddenly remember that you are just a clown, a freak who is shown to onlookers for money, only part of the props of the global show business, a line on the balance sheet of the

UFC Center in the “expenses” section.

He could tell how he hates fat men and fat women, far from here, in spacious quiet cities, in spacious quiet living rooms staring at computers and handhelds to watch you drown in the fire and shit of war. Slobs, drinking beer and eating sausages while with their voices of eunuchs discussing your mistakes, missed blows, cursing you when you lose. Fat women, whose eternal “peace” is paid for with your meat, bones and blood.

He could tell how he despises this “eternal” sterilized world and how joyful it is to be a reject, how much he likes the novel “The Stranger” and the movie “Alien”, how affectionate death is and how much he needs her and is intoxicated by her proximity.

He could tell how incomprehensible to him is life for the sake of prosperity and success, how he himself was most often driven by despair, often anger, sometimes love but never - by a desire for success.

He could speculate on whether Caesar, Pushkin, Napoleon, Gogol were “successful” people. Do the March Ides, the Black River, St. Helena and the second volume of “Dead Souls” fit into a success story? Why are broken lives so fascinating and cause a desire to imitate them? The champion loses his belt, shocked by the unexpected overhand. A crown knocked down by a sword flies from the king and hangs on a hawthorn bush. God, not finding anyone stronger than himself, anyone capable of crushing him, ascends himself to Golgotha and sacrifices himself to himself. He could have said how he loves Russia, to tears, to blood, to a fever in his head, as he knows that he will not be able to physically endure it, if, God forbid, voluntarily or involuntarily and even in the smallest share he would cause the defeat or dishonor of his native empire.

There was a lot that Fraiser could tell the volunteers, a lot he could speculate about, but he didn't. He knew: it's not necessary, most of the recruits are simple guys, not inclined to reasoning, people from the outskirts and roadsides, who don't trust verbosity and eloquence. Therefore, having read, as always, one and a half sheets of motivating tidbits and inspirational platitudes, the commander left the studio and went out into the courtyard, where, on his orders, a light gazebo was built from thin fresh boards in which they established a summer office for working in the open air for some time, the pleasant time while the acacias bloom.

## PROCESSION

A person who visited the Donbass in May knows that the Donbass isn't the black coal of mines, the black rock of slag heaps, or the black smoke of the flagships of ferrous metallurgy, but an all white flowering acacia. Wherever you look, wherever you go - for kilometers and kilometers, acacias and acacias, blooming and blooming.

That year turned out to be especially May-heavy, it was already the fifth May

of the year — there were advantages to the calendar mess — and again white clouds of flowers swam along all the roads and streets, and people sighed not without joy, and the bees started flying, surprised to collect a sudden harvest of honey, light, warm, the color of May light, which can only be made from acacias.

They bought out Minus and now they carried him in a fresh coffin through the city in a straight and seemingly endless street, both sides of which were lined solely with acacias, behind the billions of flowers there couldn't be seen any shops, any balconies, any windows, any antennas, any cars, any advertisement signs, as if everything was happening not in the city, but already in paradise.

The coffin was carried on the shoulders by Stern, Tref, Chort, Cherkes, Gloom and Badshot, behind the coffin went Nada and another ten thousand military, paramilitary and non-military people. They moved without music, silently. Oncoming people also fell silent at the sight of the procession and, after thinking for a while, joined it. By the time they reached the theater, where the eulogy was planned, there were already some thirty thousand people.

Fraiser watched the broadcast of the funeral, sitting under the acacias in his commander's gazebo. "Bitch," he thought about Nada. "Bitches," he thought about everyone else.

As usual, when shit happened, Sam appeared, whispering on the go either a report or a denunciation:

"They staged a demonstration, Comrade Commander. Practically a protest march. Disguised as a funeral. Rather, a *démarche*. A *Fronde*. Records of the wiretapped eulogy speeches and conversations in the crowd will be provided to you immediately as they become available. Here are the first ones. Already available. You can listen to them. They are mostly silent. But how they are silent, comrade commander! A bad silence! All the same ones! The Old-timers! The First-enlisted! They just won't calm down. Could it be a rebellion is ripening?"

"Are you asking me?" - yawned the commander.

"Not at all. This is not a question, but a suggestion."

"A false suggestion. There will be no rebellion."

"Is that so... Well, God forbid, God forbid." - The special officer looked deep at the interlocutor with suddenly icy eyes and, after a significant pause, added: -

"In that case, allow me to take a leave?"

"Go ahead."

"Yes, comrade commander." - And Sickle-and-Hammer instantly vanished, disappearing into the blooming alley.

"Bitch," Fraiser thought after him. He sat under the acacia trees and, like a samurai under the blossoming sakura, reflected on the transience of life. Not his. But in general. Then he called:

"Ga-a-aff!"

"Here, comrade commander," the faithful servant immediately responded from behind him.

“Ah, here you are. . . Well done,” said Fraiser, without turning around. - "You know what, go to the theater now and tell Stern that we need to talk. Let him gather all the guys: Asp, Psycho, Tref, well, everyone who came to my house then about the Minus thing. When we decided about the buyout. Tell them to gather at the officers club. And tell them that I'll come there too. We need to talk, tell them. The commander, of course, say, did not like Minus. But, say, he still considered him a brother. A brother in arms, in war. And all of them, say, I consider brothers. And do not bear a grudge. And want to come to an agreement.

## **THEATER**

The building of the former regional, and now the Bolshoi People's Theater, was not chosen for the farewell ceremony with Minus by accident. On the first day of the first entry of his company into the city, on that already distant first year of the war, he, as a creative and sentimental person, first of all asked where the theater was, and only then - where the savings banks and jewelry stores were. Having sent a squad after the money and gold, he himself with a small group of fighters immediately went to the theater. Having caught from the orchestra pit a director shivering from the horrors and deprivations of wartime and having asked his name, he urged him: “Shouldn't we try our hands at our dear William Shakespeare, Boris Leonidovich!?” The defeatist director mumbled in response that the theater had never played in the big leagues, the maximum they staged was Sukhovo-Kobylin, and they didn't receive any funds for a long time, and that the troupe survives only from the income from the theater's buffet. “Cheer up, Leonidych, there will be funds for you! Collect the actors. Tomorrow at twelve zero-zero rehearsal. We'll do “Hamlet”. I'll play the Prince of Denmark! ”

Indeed, funds were found (in the savings banks and jewelry stores), the theater came to life, and after four months the premiere took place. Performances were rare, irregular, since Minus was often distracted by the war, and did not want to share the role of Hamlet with anyone. But every time there was a full house, and the director, and the actors, and the audience, especially the actresses and spectators, admired Minus with adoration and delight, and Minus himself admired himself, and if not all, many were happy.

Now, in the middle of the Hamletian scenery, between the gloomy walls of the cardboard Elsinore, against the backdrop of fake knightly banners with red dragons made from sheets of tapestries, in the center of the stage, where, in the end of the play, there used to be Minus depicting the dead protagonist, and Fortinbras would say over him: “Let four captains bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage,” Minus lay again, but already truly dead, and Stern, standing at the casket and crossing himself, muttered: “Lord have mercy. . . the kingdom of heaven. . . and so on, and so on. . . ”

Nada sat in the middle of the first row, fiddling with her purse. Her eyes would overflow with tears, then dry up to their lifeless hazel bottom. People trailed

along the aisle in a sluggish fashion, climbed the stage, examined the fancy coffin and the carefree face of the deceased, then went down and hesitated near Nada, nodding at her, or even sometimes offer their hushed condolences, as if she were a dead widow. She mechanically, without distinguishing who was in front of her, suddenly started whispering: "I knew, I knew that they killed him, but until they brought him back, I couldn't believe it, hoped that one the news it wasn't he that was killed, but someone else that just looked like him, they were mixed up or they faked it on purpose for deception, but how they brought him, I recognized — it's him, it's him, poor thing, poor thing..." Then she fell silent for a long time, watching the strangers who kept walking past with a confused look.

From behind the curtains, Gaff entered the stage, approached Stern and spoke to him quietly, hotly and quickly. Stern answered and turned his head, summoning his associates. Psycho, Gloom and Tref rose from the hall, joined the conversation. After some time, everyone began to nod and shake hands. Gaff ran offstage, returned with a huge wreath with a black ribbon, on which was written in silver: "For a brother from a brother - For Minus from Fraiser", he leaned the wreath against the coffin and patted the dead man on the shoulder. Just now noticing Gaff, Nada hastened to him: "Can I speak to you for a minute?"

## DIVINE WIND

While Gaff was busy with the errand, the commander held a meeting with the rear officers, read and signed papers, called the commander of the southern area and warned that he would come to inspect the situation at the front line tomorrow, although he actually planned to visit the front line in the north, about what, of course, he wasn't going to warn anyone.

The weather changed dramatically, May was over, it became rapidly colder, it started snowing. A heavy cloudy wind rolled around the city, picking flowers from the trees and driving lightly dressed pedestrians into the houses.

Fraiser threw on his overcoat; he didn't want to move from the gazebo to the gloomy headquarters building. He watched snowflakes interspersed with acacia petals pouring on the cars in the courtyard. He thought: "Where might Gaff be?" He was already getting angry at the adjutant's sluggishness, when he suddenly emerged from the cold waves of the wind, ran to the gazebo and reported:

"Comrade commander, the servicemen have gathered at your order. Expecting you at the officer's club in full force as you wanted."

"Is it really everyone? Everyone who came to my home back then?"

"Exactly so, Comrade Commander, every single one. Will you order a car?"

"The car? What for?" - Fraiser wondered.

"You said you want to talk to them. On foot in such weather... The club is not so close. If on foot, in such weather..."

"You know what," the commander interrupted, "you take some reliable guys. Slug, Ginger, a couple more guys. And you yourself. Take machine guns, with

full clips. Grenades. The task is to blockade and destroy. Everyone who is in the officer's club."

Gaff was dumbfounded, for the first time in his life, not responding to the commander with an instant "Yessir".

"Do you understand? Hello?" Fraiser smiled, snapping his fingers in front of the frozen face.

"Understood. Yes sir. . ." - Gaff woke up.

"When you're done, immediately call Sam. Not to me, but Sam. Although he took his leave, he didn't leave. He's in his apartment. Waiting it out. Sensing. You will inform him that in the officer's club the old-timers gathered to remember Minus, got drunk, quarreled among themselves and killed each other. That you and Slug saw all this disgrace with your own eyes. And that you can testify. Go now. Follow the order. What are you waiting for?"

"There's something. . . else," the adjutant hesitated. - "Nada."

"What about Nada?" - Fraiser tensed up.

"She was also in the theater. She came to me by herself. She asked to tell you that she apologizes for yesterday. And asked to give you a gift. Here." ##  
GIFT

Gaff took out from his pocket a small box wrapped in motley gift paper tied with a scarlet satin ribbon with a bow.

Fraiser gestured to put the present on the table and leave.

Left alone, he thought: "What was to be shown. She wants to reconcile." He knew that he could not forgive her. Not because of the words about the funeral boat, but because of the fact that she ran after her Minus just as he "returned" to the city.

He grinned, untied the ribbon, unfolded the paper, opened the box. Saw an explosive device.

At the headquarters they heard a terrible dull bang. The guard jumped up to see what happened.

He looked and shouted: "The commander was killed!"

## **DEDICATED TO**

unholy warriors, imperfect heroes, the invincible Romans of the Third Rome, brothers and sisters alive and fallen, with love and without hope of forgiveness. . .