

Vladimir Anderson

# Struggle

*Taste of power*



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18+

# Vladimir Anderson

## Struggle. Taste of power

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### **Аннотация**

The third part of the "Struggle" saga. Under the control of the Mountain the entire group "Donetsk-Makeyevka", consisting of seven mines. And now he has his own armed formations at his command. But the situation is complicated by a sharp increase in the confrontation between the SCK and the Inquisition, two powerful organizations, each of which seeks to subdue the entire Empire. With each step, the plot gets steeper and steeper, revolving around mysteries and power struggles. Gore must make a difficult choice, and the fate of the Empire depends on it. This book offers incredible twists and turns of events, searing mysteries, and dramatic decisions. Join this epic adventure where power and betrayal are closely intertwined in the struggle for the future of the Empire.

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# Vladimir Anderson

## Struggle. Taste of power

Metropolitan

The room in which Guzokh had been staying for the last month was not cramped, even though there was almost no space. It was more than modestly furnished: an oak bed, an oak table and chair, and only one chair. There were a few kerosene candlesticks and a large panel with a picture of the Black Stone on the entire wall.

Guzokh remembered the times he had spent in his cell when he was still a novice in the seminary. He had been studying the ancient rules of the Zhakh and the Silan-Zhakh code, which was still in its infancy and which was destined for a great future.

All the priests had great expectations of how their lives would change when Silan-Zhakh was introduced universally. It would mean the consolidation of the Church's role in all areas of plague life. Then the Holy Inquisition would be able to hold weeks of penance unannounced and more than once a year in the same place, and the guilty could be mercilessly destroyed. In addition, the priest-patriarch and priest-metropolitans will not be able to refuse to visit any place in the plague empire, and no service will be able to prevent an inquest made personally by any of them. Only 7 plagues will be able to wield such power, but still it is a sure step towards fixing the supremacy of the Church. And then

we can breathe a sigh of relief that we have finally nipped heresy in the bud. Before it spreads to us all.

Guzokh remembered his prayers then, and piously believed that if he was ever honored to become a Metropolitan Priest, he would certainly not miss a single heretic, and would uphold with dignity the sacred foundations of the Zhakh faith, the belief in the omnipotence of the Black Stone.

Neuroch, now a priest-patriarch, had been a year older than he was, and was characterized by two complementary traits: a tendency to persuade with emotion, and an ability to hold the strings of leadership in his hands. In Guzokh's opinion, however, he did not fully understand the foundations of the faith, but he knew the Code of Silan-Jah, with its new administrative rules and regulations, by heart.

It did not seem strange at the time. Indeed, the Black Stone gave some people the ability to understand the faith and interpret it with reason, others to convince them of its correctness, and others to put it down on paper. The Black Stone gave some of them the ability to understand the faith and interpret it with reason, others to convince them of its correctness, and others to put it on paper.

In time, they even began to rise together in their careers, and Guzokh was even the first to become a metropolitan, and then he helped Nevrokh in this. It seemed very important to him that someone could persuade when real arguments didn't work, when someone simply didn't want to listen to you... Neurokh

always had to listen. It always turned out that any conversation, even knowingly useless, turned into a passionate dispute, where Nevroh brought the situation to the boiling point several times and, thus exhausting the opponent, tilted everything in his favor. It was very useful and effective.

Neurochus was given the position of metropolitan priest in charge of the SFC and the higher administration. And at this point he argued and debated. On almost every occasion, trying to sway those around him to allegiance to the new code of Silan-Zhah. But his activities during the weeks of repentance among the SCK looked very strange. It seemed incomprehensible to Guzokh even then. How could you conduct such purges of heresy and not punish almost anyone among the layers of the plagues entrusted to you. It was the lower ranks or those who had already been accused of embezzlement who were at risk. All the powerful rhetoric about a holy campaign against heresy in the SCK for the good of the Black Stone turned out to be a blatant eyewash, at least that's how Guzokh saw it.

He personally knew some of the chums in the SCK apparatus who deserved at least close scrutiny and interrogation because of their open rejection of Silan-Jah in particular and the Jah faith in general. It was as if they didn't consider Jah to be anything important in their lives, much less guided by its principles in general. And Nevrokh had no questions for them. And even his predecessor in one of the cases punished the head of the SCK of the whole column.

And soon Nevrochus became priest-patriarch. The previous patriarch announced that due to his age, he could not fully fulfill his duties and appointed the one who, according to him, deserved it most of all, as he was watching over the sobriety of mind and sanity in our most important circles of the SCK and higher administration, that is Nevrokh... There was nothing to be done about it. Moreover, Guzokh could not oppose such a decision, and then not support Nevrokh in the approval of the patriarch, because once he himself had nominated him for the place of metropolitan. He could only hope that, having become patriarch, he would no longer flirt with someone else on the side.

Now, when Guzokh was in the Krito sector of the Donetsk-Makeyevka group and saw how he was ostentatiously received by the SSK and quietly surrounded on all sides by its agents, it began to seem to him that he had once very much underestimated Nevrokh. The Sceekists would never have allowed him to become patriarch, being unsure if it was to their advantage. And when he showed that he would play by their rules and got his place, he started his already hidden war for power with the SCC. All the same hypocritical and despicable, but hardly anyone could think of anything more effective.

And as it happened, Guzokh himself was to be one of the bargaining chips in such a war. On the one hand, it didn't really hurt his feelings – after all, one should always be prepared for something hard when dealing with religion. But on the other hand – it wasn't for Neuroch to decide who to trade. In reality, he's

not even worthy of being a priest, let alone a patriarch. He's too overbearing and has absolutely no faith in what he professes publicly. And now Guzoh was already afraid that in time the Church would simply become a new SCK just under a different banner.

The door to the room opened without knocking and Samokh entered. I didn't expect to see him here and now, but on the other hand, when in the whole group "Donetsk-Makeyevka" there were only SCKs left from the chums, it would be logical to assume the appearance of the metropolitan, who is responsible for them.

Samoh closed the door behind him and stared glumly at the décor: the furniture, the blacksmoked candlesticks and panels.

–There's no place to sit down. – Samoh grinned. – I see you're used to it, Brother Priest Guzokh... They couldn't spare me.

–You think too much about material things. – Guzokh saw these open taunts, and they did not offend him at all. – Have you come for a week of penance?

Samokh laughed. And in his laughter and especially in his eyes, it was obvious that he had known for a long time that the deadline for the new week of penance was not yet at hand, and that Guzokh obviously could not have known about it when he had come here. It's all planned out. He's definitely playing along with his patron. And it would be strange if Nevroh put someone in his former position who is not loyal to him. And now his own hands will clean up what he didn't clean up himself, now completely unafraid of the consequences. In case of what

happens, he will simply appoint a new metropolitan and will exterminate heresy and everything dissenting in the SCK with renewed vigor.

–Who needs it, this week? No..." Samoh replied. – I'm not here for that. You can keep this private method to yourself... I'm just passing through. I came to see an old friend.

Guzokh was almost twenty-five years older than Samokh, and certainly never considered him a friend. He hadn't seen him in action yet, but the rumors were unequivocal. Samokh hit his opponents rarely, but he hit them hard. Only when he was sure of his complete superiority. A very suitable method against special services.

–So why do you need a more luxurious place to stay than mine if you won't even stay here?

–Because those low-born, empty creatures from the SCK shouldn't even think to behave with me as they please. – Samoh snapped at him. His voice was full of hatred for everything

that not only met, but could even meet on his path. – And you, Honorable Brother Priest Guzokh, should think about that....

After such a heated tirade, his breath cooled a little, he looked again at the panel with the image of the Black Stone and, without turning to his interlocutor, continued:

–How many heretics have you found here?

–Heretics? There's no working class here anymore. Only men work in the mine. The plagues of the imperial army are firm in their faith. And the CCC is already in your charge.

–No one, then... Okay, okay... Let's see how Neuroch likes it.

–Of course we will see... But still I will remind you, my dear brother. That we serve our faith, Zhah. – Guzokh smoothly pointed his hand at the panel. – And our most holy patriarch is but an elder brother.

Samoh stood and tried to sizzle him with a glare. But Guzokh went on:

–It is our sacred duty to strengthen the chums in the faith, not to punish them in vain. It is more profitable to bring back to the Church than to exterminate them. And all those who might stray in the sector of Crito I have firmly established in their faith. Except for the brothers of the CCC, who are beyond my control.

The last word was literally a counter-attack. He, who had just boasted of his courage, could now boldly take on a task with a result worthy of him, and, so to speak, set an example of "proper" work, if there was reason to do so. This made Samoh even more angry:

–You have thought it out well... Good... But you will see how to deal with them

"correctly"... And think very carefully, very carefully. How will you repeat these words when I find the heresy you've overlooked!

–If you find the heresy that I have overlooked, I will be eternally grateful to you, my dear friend... Of course, if it really is heresy and not someone's speculation.

Samoh left the cell, slamming the door. Then came his loud

footsteps and a distant scolding at one of the guards.

This is how Guzoch once envisioned Nevroh. The one who would passionately fight the most hidden dangerous heresy in the BCC. Fiercely, openly and implacably. It would seem that this should now be a closed gestalt, but it was nothing of the sort. Neuroch has simply found a hothead and an executioner who will tear and thrash until he is sewn up like a rabid dog, legal or not. The CCC has many methods. And they are clearly more cunning at this point.

Since they have thought of an extraordinary step to hand over the entire Donetsk-Makeyevka group to the people in order to remove all opportunities for inquisition, they will not go backwards now for sure.

Still, it's very interesting to see who they've entrusted it all to. They call him Horus, and he is now the prefect of the seven sectors. I wouldn't think of making any agreements with him, but nobody ever thought of making agreements with the Hiwi. And now it's a force more powerful than the Imperial army. Things change, things change. And certainly, what needs to be changed is the patriarch with someone who is worthy and strong in his faith.

# Bolotnikov

-Does anyone take this seriously at all? – Bolotnikov looked at Khmelnitsky, still quite calm. He was really uncomfortable at the thought that Ranierov had not been decimated, and that he and his penalty battalion were one step away from something more dangerous.

-Who cares about that? – Khmelnitsky replied, looking at a poster hanging on the wall with a skull in a beret, their new symbol for a punitive unit. It was pasted on so that the real emblem, the attacking falcon that had once been used to make the trident, was not visible underneath.

-Yeah, of course not. All I cared about was where the informant would be found. Who the informant would be found with. And who that informant will be is a tenth question... But still. Are you sure we got the right guy?

-Sergei, I don't know... All we have is our speculation and information from the Mountain. That Raniere's a jackal is already known to everyone. And the only thing that doesn't add up is his behavior, which doesn't fit the behavior of an informer, who should be quieter than water, lower than grass. But you know... It's quite possible that that was his tactic. He'd get caught, he'd be like, "am I stupid to put myself in harm's way?" So what we got from The Mountain is still out there.

And it looks like nothing's gonna change in the next three

days...

The fact that there was an informer in Squad 14 had long been known to the top brass, but the rank and file were fully convinced that there were only friends around. And when Ranierov was sent to the brig, where he had been many times before for drunkenness, most of them had no questions about the reasons. But they did not keep him there longer than three days, and at the end of them it was necessary to decide whether to accuse him officially and tell everyone the truth in order to bring the case to execution, or to let him go as an innocent man, if there was not enough evidence of his guilt.

At the mention of the word "jackal" Bolotnikov immediately recalled his recent conversation with a man who bore the same name. The jackal from Khivi had said that soon Gora would have new mines at his disposal, which meant that his influence would grow disproportionately more than before. He'll be treated very differently. And it will lead to very different results. It is not clear when it will happen, and what the Mountain knows about it. And from this it may follow, whether he has not intentionally leaked to us the one whom we would be glad to kill ourselves, just to make it look the most credible. Like, I did you a favor, acted honestly and in proportion to my strength, so now you do something for me.

And what could the Mountain demand now? They were already doing nothing that would interfere with him in any way. Their sabotage operations were only directed against the plagues

and their infrastructure. Though... Things were changing. If people began to set their own punishments and rewards, then the infrastructure must change eventually. And yet the Mountain is silent. He didn't say anything about the recent raids, and especially about the explosion on the outer communication lines, which temporarily stopped the transportation of coal by the shortest route.

Should the Mountain care about that or not?

–Vitya, I have my doubts..." Bolotnikov said. Such behind-the-scenes games were not for him at all, but it was already clear that if he did not participate in them, defeat was inevitable.

Khmelnitsky looked at him questioningly.

–Vitya... About Zubkov, we would never have thought he was such a rat....

Khmelnitsky wrinkled his face – and understandably so, it concerns him most of all:

–No, we never would have thought–

–Gora leaked Ranierov to us. And the facts only point to him. There are no other candidates. No one who has family left at the mine. No one who would have run away in the last few years... At the same time, I know a few people who might fall into this category. I don't have the data he does, of course. But it doesn't add up. We've had a lot of people defect to us, and no one else has any living relatives left in the mine?

Khmelnitsky stood silent, unblinking. It was unclear whether he liked such words or not.

The major continued:

–Remember that girl. Maria. The one who escaped from the mine six months ago, and they asked us to find her. We didn't. That's what we told them. But that doesn't mean she's dead. And her father, by the way, is a deputy foreman... We have another candidate who escaped from the mine, leaving her family alive. I'm not saying anything about her, but Gora said clearly – he has no other options but Ranierov for the role of a snitch... How can you be so unambiguous?

–Sergei, you know... you're fucking with me. – Khmelnitsky said calmly. – I'm sick of defending this asshole. Tell me straight, do you think that Ranierov does not deserve the death penalty for what he did?

–What does that have to do with it? If he deserved to be punished for his past, then he should have been executed.

–I should have. But they didn't. And then they regretted it, but it was too late.

–So now we're supposed to execute him for something he didn't do? And let the real informant walk free? And snitch on us all he wants?

–One. Raniere deserved it a long time ago. Two. A real informant, if there is one, will only relax if we catch him. And then he'll be easier to catch. Three. If you want to do your lawyering, you and Zhivenko should do it together. He fucks me up as much as you do. And fourth and finally. I'm no longer the commander in chief here, I'm just the commander of a

punishment unit. If I wanted to do something, I don't have the authority to do it. Zubkov got his way, so he's the one who's gonna have to deal with this shit.

All short and to the point. Yes, possessing exactly these qualities Khmelnitsky once became the leader of "Detachment 14", and then also absorbed the surrounding independent units, making "Detachment 14" the largest among all the Maquis of the Slavic Column.

Dima, Misha Zhivenko's new deputy, rumbled into the house. Since the recent shooting and the capture of the prisoner from the Khivi, he had only become more active in moving his legs and moving his brain more actively, as if he had been given a second life to make things right. Now he wasn't even out of breath, though it was obvious that he had been running from afar:

–There was an ambush. Near the Deese sector.

–An ambush? – Khmelnitsky waggled his eyebrow in surprise. They were preparing an ambush, counting on the fact that the plagues would begin to repair the recently blown up roads, and thus it would be possible not only to postpone the repair work, but also to inflict new damage in manpower.

–Hiwi. They discovered our positions, and attacked at the same time... Only nothing came back, ten men.

Ancient Roman military rule – "If an ambush is detected in time, you can do more damage than what those who were preparing the ambush were going to do. And so it was. Two companies were lost almost entirely. And where the Maquis

positions were particularly strong. This goddamn Deez sector is a tricky one.

# Prefect

There's no such thing as too much power. No, there's no such thing as too much. And you especially realize that when you get more. Gora had thought about these things a long time ago, when he had been pondering the structure of the Chum Empire. It seemed to him that everyone there reveled in power and had no conscious ability to stop. Back then, he had considered that a weakness. Now he considered it a weakness that they couldn't hold power properly, especially in one hand.

That's the most important thing. One goal, one head, one leader. There was something about that slogan. Something long forgotten, but eerily similar. But that doesn't matter. What matters is that he's got it all now. And he knows how to handle it.

Gora walked along his office. It was now much richer than it had been before: a cabinet at the entrance with machine guns, ammunition, and grenades, a second cabinet in the corner with documents and clothing, a nightstand near the desk where he kept his current necessities, a large flag with a crossed axe and pickaxe under a large white fang on a black background-the new symbol of the Prefecture. On top of that, he had another room cut into the depths, where he now slept. Three of Tikhomirov's security detail were always on duty near the entrance.

Tikhomirov already had three subdivisions: a "security" unit for the safety of individuals, a GRB (rapid response group) to

prevent possible riots or attacks from outside, and an "assault" unit for possible future occupation of new positions. How to use the assault team hasn't even crossed my mind yet – the plague will give as much as they give. But still I wanted more and wanted to take it by force. It was only important to wait for the time to do it.

Yeah, none of that existed just three months ago. And now there are seven mines in subordination, and the paths between them, and the infrastructure on the surface, and even has its own army, although very hidden from prying eyes.

Hora realized that if he had not once surrendered the Bulgarians before their revolt, if he had not come with a bow to the plagues, and nothing like this would have happened. But even that was not enough. It was necessary not only to prove his loyalty to the plague empire, it was also necessary that it was convincing.

There it is. Power. And it must be held not with strong hands, but with a far-sighted mind. That's the only way it can be solid and lead to something. When it's done strategically. Then you can be sure that it won't evaporate the next day or slip through your fingers like sand. You're only sure when it's strategically calibrated. And those fools who once held it by brute force didn't realize one simple thing – they could quietly succeed in front of ordinary people, but inside the system it doesn't work. Only calculation works within the system.

So far, only Tikhomirov understands that. This is what his son Rafael should have been. Intelligent, calculating, restrained. And not a stupid strong-willed romantic who wants a better life for

his family and rushes headlong into new obstacles. How did it end? There is no Raphael now...

And there is power. And there will be more. You just have to get the math right.

This morning he received a letter. A very strange and equally interesting letter. It was from a plague, apparently a priest of the Church, who introduced himself as a faithful adherent of the Zhakh faith, as he called himself:

"To Mr. Prefect.

I am writing in your Russian language so as not to waste your time on translations.

Congratulations on your new acquisitions. The six new mines are very valuable and will do you good service, I'm sure. And for my part, as a staunch adherent of the Jah faith, I have nothing against it.

Moreover, I am even ready to support this decision. And in the future, if we succeed, I am ready to give you disproportionately greater influence and territories under your control. You understand the territory I'm talking about.

As my contribution to our long term relationship and first step, I will give you a small gift.

I'll help you keep your place and your current, I'm not afraid of the word, gains. With a kind word.

Which you won't be without in the next few days.

The good word is in the information you will receive in this letter.

Metropolitan Samoh will be raiding one of your subordinate sectors the other day. Not the one you've settled in personally. But a neighboring sector. He's trying out his forces, so to speak.

Neither the imperial army nor the SCIU will offer him any resistance.

But his ultimate goal is right next to you. And a week or two later, he'll show up with a raid on you. Believe me, he's not interested in you personally. He's after the high-ranking plagues of the CCC. But when he deals with them, you can be sure that your achievements will be nullified soon and everything will go back to the way it was before.

Now you are aware of the danger ahead of you. I have no doubt that you will find the right solution and come out of all this victorious.

Upon reading it, burn this letter. And I hope that my help will make you from a human prefect to a Mr. Prefect respecting the holy faith of Jah."

He didn't burn the letter, of course. How could such a thing be burned. It might still be useful, and there were a thousand ways of doing it... The person who wrote it was evidently very much afraid that it might fall into the wrong hands. So much so that he didn't even write it in the plague language. That nice remark that he didn't want to waste a person's time translating is nothing more than a basic digression to confuse.

And it is particularly interesting that it seems to be, indeed, someone from the highest circles of the plague Church. The

confrontation between the Church and the CCC was no longer a white spot in the architecture of the plague empire. It permeated all areas of the plagues and over time became an increasing problem in maintaining stability.

From the material received from Shinhra, Gora saw several denunciations within the structure of the SCF on the activities of individual members reproached for collaboration with the Inquisition. This was all the more significant because the nature of such denunciation contained as high a degree of disgust at what had been done as the importance of stopping it. The SCF must have been very wary of the Inquisition, and apparently lacked a full-fledged plan of action.

As for the humans, the people of the Church, much less the Inquisition, were understandably not accountable at all, which was most likely why the Mountain Prefecture had expanded so much in the past few months. The CCC feared the Inquisition more than they feared the people.

At the same time, the priest who leaked such valuable information to the Mountain with this letter is obviously playing for the SCK in this case. It's still hard to understand his motives, but it's certain that the current Samoh raid won't play into his hands. Maybe it's a matter of personal animosity, maybe it's some far-reaching plans, but one thing is clear – the information about the Inquisition's swift act against SCK in the Diza sector is reliable.

And there can't even be any doubt that the local target of the

Deez sector is Anankhr.

Gora has over the past six months well studied and realized how Anankhr is an important bird in the SCK hierarchy. In all likelihood, she is someone's protégé with high hopes for the future. At the same time, it was highly likely that she had family ties somewhere in the highest circles of the imperial administration. This was evidenced by the fact that female chums were simply not assigned to similar positions, and this was an obvious exception. To assume that this exception was born of personal qualities rather than connections was too unrealistic. 1 in 100, if not 1 in 1000... No, it was obviously some kind of connection. And that's also why the Inquisition wants to strike here, getting a valuable hostage.

There was a knock on the door:

–May I?

It was Konstantin Bogaty, now as deputy prefect he was in charge of production in 7 mines, fulfilling the specified norms exactly on time.

–Yes, come in, darling.

Rich walked in and stood almost at attention. He had long been uncomfortable when he entered this room. As time went on, his gaze became the same as it had been when he used to look at the plague-wardens.

–Gavi, it's done. We met the deadline. – Rich was instructed to organize a drilling rig at one more mine, and at two others to prepare them for work in case of need. Now the miners did not

work with picks and shovels in the face sector – now everything was done by diesel-powered machines. And it was not a problem for all seven mines to submit production figures, and the free hands were used for new repair and construction works or in Tikhomirov's units. Actually, half a thousand of his fighters now seemed not such a luxury – it looked like it was time to create local units of territorial defense.

–Is the second route holding the load?

–Yes. It's even stocked up. There's enough capacity there even if we double the supply.

The second route is the same route that the Mountain once advocated to Cobre. That they had to use it, that it created difficulties, that they should use the outer transportation route and it would save a lot of time and resources. This was not quite true, of course.

All this time, Gora had ample justification for extending the second and even third underground routes as well. It was true that transportation along them was a bit longer and more inconvenient than along the surface routes, but thanks to the latest construction work to expand and optimize the routes, the prefect was able to organize a coherent system of communication between sectors and, most importantly, to fully control the timing of this communication according to the chart of the routes: the travel time from one mine to another was not only prescribed on paper, but also exactly fulfilled.

–Let's take a walk. – said Gora and left the office.

The people around him tried to hardly look at him as he passed by. They tried to be more on the case, doing good. Some might think it was out of respect for his authority, some might think it was because of the tangible benefits and good that Hora brought to everyone, but in reality it was all about fear. People now feared him more than they feared the plagues, not knowing what to expect next. From the plagues they always knew what could be and in what case – the only difference could only be the degree of punishment for provinces. But they had not seen logic in the prefect's behavior for a long time.

He could punish for something that was not done on time, or he could forgive for a gross mistake, and publicly. It was an approach to management that no one could fit in their head. And that was the Gora's intention. After all, in his logic, the reaction to something followed not only on the basis of the deed, but also on the basis of the personalities of the actors, as well as the situation. And the main thing in making the final decision of each individual case lay not in the plane of justice or some rules, but in the area of how his decision would affect the state of others.

Gora knew very well that he was controlling people, not machines. That something verified in the rules does not always work in the human mind. The logic of the mind in reality adjusts to reality, but it is always worth understanding the vector of this reality. And, only by following this vector, it is possible to manage people effectively. Efficiency – this is what all the prefect's efforts in management were subordinated to.

They had reached the starting point of the second underground path from the Diza sector. A large tunnel now with two tracks. There were cradles on the sides of the tunnel, which could be closed with a steel plate. Two men from Tikhomirov's security unit were on duty at the very entrance. The tunnel was heading toward the Krito sector, and the travel time was now an hour and a half, instead of the three and a half hours it had taken before. Somewhere along the way was the same "plague cave" in which Raphael had once died. His body still lay buried there, and Hora had not yet dared to go there in person again. Yet then, something in him had twisted or broken. When he saw his dead son. When he had no family left. Though... Maybe he'd still have a grandchild... The thought made him try to stir something alive in his chest, but no more. There's no life there anymore – there's only combinations and decisions.

– Mr. Prefect," came from behind. Tikhomirov. With a letter of some kind. It would have been an interesting life if letters meant so much. You used to get something, usually from the Maquis, and sit there sad, but now you get one and seriously change your future plans.

The letter was from a chiwi:

"Get up to the surface and take the job."

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The elevator was working better now, too. In fact, it was no longer just an elevator, but a full-fledged freight elevator whose speed had been increased several times. There were

several people who operated it alternately. Each man had an F-1 grenade. In such a confined space, in case of an explosion, there could be no survivors. And the setting was one – to blow up with whomever the prefect ordered, and when he ordered. That's what it sounded like to those who had to carry it out. Although in Gora's mind the phrase sounded with the ending "if ordered".

Gora had only been to the surface once as a prefect. He didn't want to look out over the wide expanse of land and realize that somewhere in the distance his daughter-in-law and grandson, who might soon be born, must be alive or dead. And his home was underground after all.

–Oh. What people..." Cobra announced. Beside him stood the same heavily armed fighters as last time. Apparently, the others were covering the perimeter without fear of what might happen inside it. The men of the Mountain, not so heavily armed, were looking at the Hiwi with a little interest, perhaps trying on their image, and at the surroundings, trying to see where the others might be hiding. Though in such darkness and lack of lighting, it was unlikely that anyone could be seen.

–That was fast. – The Mountain nodded his head. – How many were there?

–238. And the seven ran away. – smiled Cobra. – That's a good haul all at once... They were preparing an ambush, apparently, for chums who wanted to fix the road. Well, we weren't gonna fix the road. We don't need it... That's why we saw through the ambush in no time... They are weak, of course. They're used

to doing everything by the book, but when it comes to business, they don't know what's what... Well, are you satisfied?

–Quite pleased. – The prefect looked around, at the mangled railroad platform with the roof collapsed on it, at the crumpled railroad tracks and the occasional human body, which had apparently been blown apart by the explosion. – You work fast.

–You bet! Brave guys know what they're doing. – Cobra smiled again. – Well, now it's your turn... We've freed these routes. Do what you want with them... We're interested in your underground routes. We want to use them for our own needs.

No wonder they asked for it. It's the most valuable resource he has at the moment. Using it, the chivi can move their units in unnoticed. And launch new strikes against the Maquis, eventually changing the status quo in the Donetsk-Makeyevka grouping. Everything is quite expected, except that the question remained whether they know that the underground routes are thoroughly improved or just trying to take what they can. It will be very useful for the future to know the answer to this question.

–You can refuse us, of course," Cobra continued, smiling again. – But, you realize we'll be a little offended, so to speak.

–All I need is to know your travel needs in advance so I can prepare everything... These routes are already taken, and to fit you in I'll have to cancel some of mine... That's not a problem, but I need to know in advance. You give me a day's notice, you get the route. If you don't, you don't get it. That's the first condition.

Cobra smiled. He could see that he was dealing with a very

difficult man, one who should be respected first and foremost. And he was obviously better to have among friends than enemies.

–You're cunning, Prefect. Cunning. – Cobra smiled again, though not as smugly as before. – Your condition will do.

# Commander-in-Chief

When the new commander of Squad 14 was informed of the near total destruction of two companies near the Deese sector, he was more surprised than upset. He had lost many times more in operations, but never had it been such a surprise... And at the same time, when he had lost men in the past, he had gotten the worst of it from Khmelnitsky... That brainless shirtless guy who thought that he was at the mercy of the sea....

He had once gathered more and more units around him, made Unit 14 the largest, but that was his only merit. He couldn't command or strategize. Not at all. Just a few instructions to plug a hole or prepare a new raid. Nothing. Absolutely nothing on the scale of the plagues.

Zubkov was sick of it. To follow these rotten orders as long as something was not jeopardized. This "as long as not" was the Achilles' heel of his leadership. That was how Zubkov was able to lure to his side the three supreme judges, and part of the special forces headed by Seversky, and individual commanders who wanted something more than just hiding in holes from the empire.

And the judges didn't come cheap. The first one was easier. All he had to do was find a good-looking whore for his intimate pleasures. Younger and with serious experience. There was not much choice, but he had to convince her that the best candidate

was 15 years younger than she really was... But, in fact, without glasses he wouldn't be able to see it anyway.

The second one was a little more complicated. He's the one who gets the plague money. I wonder how exactly he's going to spend it. Buy land and titles from the empire? Or buy what?

Actually, it doesn't matter so much when he's already agreed to it, having received his own.

But the third was the most difficult – he wanted two battalions for personal use. Well, we managed that too. Although a bit pathetic to give such a mediocre combat forces, but the goal was worth it. In short, he still did not mention the quality of these battalions, so he received the most slag from the long-joined "Detachment 14" and already decayed battalions № 210 and № 240. The names were still with numbers, from the good old days, when they tried to attribute a bigger number to themselves to make it seem that there were probably as many units as well.

Seversky did not have to be persuaded for a long time, especially since he himself hinted that he was ready to get even with Bolotnikov and any of his friends. And it was enough to convince him that Khmel'nitsky was his old friend. And at the same time to push the idea that

Khmel'nitsky himself was extremely weak and ineffective in the leadership of "Detachment 14".

Of course I'm weak. If he wasn't weak, he wouldn't have overlooked all these preparations. And in general, it would be worth thinking about – what if all these developments were

made not by him, a patriot, and the enemy plague? What then? The whole army would have developed... He is an old fool. Khmelnitsky. He expected that everyone around him supports him and considers him almost a father. Well, not many people turned out to support him. Now they're sitting together in their penal battalion. That's where they belong. Although, it must be admitted, so far they've been quite successful. And one of them, the Jackal from the chiwi, turned out to be a big shot. He's told us so much already.

Of course, first of all, he told that he had told a lot of things to Bolotnikov, who had already taken him prisoner. Still, we should be careful with him – you'll give them impossible tasks, and they'll do something to solve them... But the Jackal himself told a lot: and about the confrontation between the SCK and the Church, and about new opportunities of Zheleznov in the grouping "Donetsk-Makeevka", and about how much they know about "Detachment 14". The latter was especially striking – it turns out that the Kiwis have their own informant among the Maquis. And this is the same as the informant of the chums. And whether it's the one they found thanks to Zheleznov. It's Ranierov or not.

It's hard to say. Zubrilov had already become confused by all these informants in the last six months. Especially since he personally leaked some information to the plagues. Like in the case of Kremenchug. This party was too favorable for him. And it paid off! To sacrifice a little to seize the initiative...

But as for the rest, it was no longer him. A lot of information, including the fact that he had become Commander-in-Chief, was not spread with his knowledge, and some real informant of the Chum or the Kiwi still existed in his Squad 14. A real one, or several.

Ranierov had been pointed out by the prefect. The data he had provided left no doubt that Ranierov had every reason to snitch to the plague, and given his character, it should have been a matter of course. But now the situation had changed dramatically – Zubkov, now in charge, did not benefit from anyone leaking anything without his knowledge. Whether it was one person or several, any leak was now only to his detriment. And given the speed at which all kinds of information was spreading, it was becoming dangerous.

Raniere or not? It made absolutely no sense at all to execute an innocent man, even though it was that type. He had more than once added fuel to the fire of the conflicts around him, which in reality amused Zubkov greatly. As Khmelnitsky, gnashing his teeth, could not do anything with him. But now at the top is no longer Khmelnitsky. And new antics of this inadequate will not lead to anything useful. We have to get rid of him somehow anyway. But it should not interfere in the search for a real informant.

Zubkov noticed that after only half an hour he no longer doubted Ranierov's innocence, and considered what was happening only from the point of view of political reality. He

really liked this feeling... For so long it was necessary to adjust to someone, to tolerate frankly stupid decisions and eat someone else's orders, regularly trumping the military salute. Now it was different. Now he could decide whether to execute this man or not, based solely on his own personal decision, and no one else's...

But it's still worth thinking about and weighing the pros and cons for now. It was quite possible that this soup might come in handy in the future. Zubkov looked at his surroundings: a large oak table and the same strong high-backed chair, a minibar filled with various alcoholic infusions, a lacquered sideboard with a collection of guns inside and, of course, the flag with the image of an attacking falcon on the whole wall. Actually, to be fair, it should be noted that it was Khmel'nitsky's merit... Not those stupid proudly standing eagles and warlike archangels, but an attacking falcon. That's the way to do it. Attack and take the prey at a strictly controlled moment, and not sit in place, clutching swords, scepters and other paraphernalia of monarchs in their paws. Grab the prey on the fly – that's what you should do! And any fool can rest on his laurels, looking at his possessions... Maybe that's why they lost everything to the plagues in the beginning, because there were too few miners and only sitters around. Were they all hatching eggs? Golden eggs, if they were so confident... But they were useless when it came to the apocalypse.

And yet, what we have now in the dry remains. Zheleznov

gaining strength in the Donetsk Makeyevka group. Apparently covering him are the Kiwis, who have just covered two companies at once near the outer transportation routes of the Diza sector. How connected were the two phenomena to each other? Zubkov wouldn't think of Zheleznov realistically considering defecting to the Chum side, based on the current situation, but he would do so himself. Why wouldn't he, in fact? The Heavies are good cover, much better than the Maquis. The plagues are no longer a hindrance, but rather a help. Life's pretty much back to normal. Why continue a war and help the Maquis? No reason at all. It will be even more convenient to weaken them so that they do not interfere....

Zheleznov himself could have set up the Maquis to fail in the Deese sector. Theoretically he could, but the timing doesn't add up. You'd have to plan it in advance to make it go off now. A couple months to prepare, no less. And back then, a couple of months ago, Zheleznov had only one mine and no Heavies... He needed the Maquis then. Could he be thinking about going somewhere else? He could have. There's nothing to stop him. But he couldn't do it. It's too dangerous. Sure, he's a high-stakes gambler and he's not afraid to bet high, but still. It doesn't seem right. He can't risk it.

It's not him. It would have to be too complicated and complex for it to add up. He clearly didn't expect this kind of success with the chiwis himself. Which begs another question: how did they get so lucky? In the past, they haven't allowed themselves such

independent operations without the authorization of the Chums, and especially not without the authorization of the Imperial Army. And this looks exactly like that. Why did they suddenly get so brave and start operating on their own? This Jackal keeps pointing to the CCC and the Church, that they're in the middle of a fight.

Maybe that's why the Kiwis are getting active. Higher the stakes, higher the payoff.

Yeah, the Jackal told me a lot of things. Maybe I should have hit him harder. Would he have told more then? What else could he not have said? I'll never know. We'll never know now. And we'd better wait for some kind of expertise from Schwarzenberg, he's taking a long time to sort out his autopsy....

Zubrilov's head was already full of thoughts that becoming a chiwi himself would not be as bad as it seemed before. But only thoughts. He understood perfectly well that he would not be able to run and jump in front of the plague administration. He couldn't share his hard-earned power, blood and sweat, with anyone. He didn't have to work so hard to take the throne and swear oaths to someone else... Even though the Kiwis looked very attractive now.....

Zubrilov looked around the room again, then stretched out on the back of a chair and pulled out a map. The main forces of Detachment 14 were now located in the area of Severodonetsk. It was supposed to move the main fighting to the Donetsk-Makeyevka area, but after the obvious complications

with the Kiwis in the Deese sector, there were doubts about the correctness of such a move. We should stay away from them... Although the guys won't really understand how we can easily retreat after such a loss. They might think we're weak. No. We should do a couple more surgeries. Something small and subtle, but very painful. And make sure it's in places where honor has recently been sullied... And then go deep. So that everyone will think it was meant to be.

The chief took the telephone receiver and called the chief of the special forces to him. It's a convenient thing to have, after all – unwind the wires all over the area, and sit there and talk without interference. But the old man was so stubborn – he didn't want to install it. He kept sending everyone to run away. He said we should talk to people in person. Well, then he would run and call everyone... Actually, now he's running. He's had enough with his traditions and complexes. Let him eat shit according to tradition...

The new head of Special Forces walks into the office. His hands are bloody to the knuckles.

Shouldn't have trusted the Jackal in the first place. Maybe more would have been learned.

–Lieutenant Colonel Seversky has arrived on your orders.

–Have a seat, Lieutenant Colonel... There's a case for you...

In the Disa sector.....

# Inquisitor

The Korsya sector looked quite typical for the new realities of the Donetsk-Makeyevka group: there were no more plagues at the mine itself, armed men were on duty in the tunnel, and the administration of the plagues sat on the surface. Samoh didn't think this was something incomprehensible – the SChK had done everything to keep the power of the Inquisition from spreading in this area. At the same time, they could not leave it entirely to chance, and a chief from the SChK was still present.

There was an elevator leading to the surface as usual. However, it was slightly different from what Samokh had seen before. This one had a cabin one and a half times higher and moved more smoothly, and most importantly – faster. That even surprised him – could it be that humans had perfected such a thing? Of course, all this was not from a good life, but the result was obvious – people worked more efficiently when they were not so tight as before in the framework of unconditional obedience. I even had a fleeting thought that the SChK's foray into autonomy was not a move against the Church at all, but a gesture of pragmatism... No, nonsense, of course. They care so much about the speed and volume of coal mining...

Also, the man who operated the elevator was interesting. Especially his eyes. Everyone in the mine now had eyes more alive than before in Samoh's opinion. But this one's were

sparking a little. As if he knew something that no one else was supposed to know. The eyes of a man a little detached from his daily problems, and ready at any moment for some desperate action. It was even a little frightening. And it was especially frightening that probably no one else noticed it. People are becoming dangerous. Let go of the leash just a little, and they snap. The careerists from SCK don't understand such things, they think they're invincible....

On the surface, Samoh was met by an officer from the SCF who was as friendly with him as the one in the Crito sector, eventually assigning him a two-room apartment:

–Our arrival is an honor, Metropolitan Priest Samoh.

–I understand, Colonel. – Without looking at him the inquisitor replied. – Have we fully prepared the tracks and platform as we requested?

–Of course, Your Eminence. We're ready for you now.

–All the better. The train will arrive in half an hour. – This answer clearly surprised the SSchekist, but he said nothing, and Samokh continued. – Take me to your patron.

The patron of the local SCS sat in a substantial sized administrative building formerly used by the civilian administration of the plague empire. To the former decoration special services added a little luxury in the form of paintings on the walls and a bust with the image of their founder Dzarinhra, the plague, who five hundred years ago spent half his life in prison for trying to overthrow the current government, and

after the revolution was released and invited to create a new body of state security. At that time, the SCK was still called GUCHK (General Directorate of Black Stone), but over time, this name was definitely said to change, too pompous it looked. The methods of SCK changed from exemplary to ruthless even earlier.

–What an honor! – Bazankhr exclaimed, waving his hands in a majestic manner. It was not the first time Samokh had seen this colonel of the SCK – he had once watched Bazankhr drinking with someone at a reception to celebrate the millennium of the Imperial Ministry of Transportation. He had been very cheerful and talkative on various offbeat topics then. Apparently, someone had once taught him not to talk about work matters while drunk. – We would be blessed to have your blessing for our service, Metropolitan Priest Samoh.

–That's not why I'm here. – answered Samokh. – But if you insist, of course I'll give my blessing. A little later... In the meantime, tell me, Colonel. Are there many doubts in the souls of your subordinates?

–There is no doubt when all time is spent in service to the Black Stone. Our employees pray regularly, which gives them strength. And your visit will only strengthen them in the fulfillment of their difficult duty.

I haven't seen any church buildings to pray in. – The inquisitor said, looking around.

–Oh. We have a chapel, which was recently consecrated by one of your clergymen who passed by our location. I've forgotten his name..." said Bazankhr, smiling sweetly. He was obviously lying about both the chapel and the passing priest, which couldn't be the case, but it was impossible not to make up a lie on the fly. He had just been caught in a certain kind of violation of the Church's rites – it was forbidden to pray by oneself without any presence of the Church. Either a proper plague, with a holy right and privy to the mystery, or a place suitably arranged and consecrated, was required.

–Show me that chapel. There I will conduct a prayer service for the good of our cause.

–Of course. I will personally show it to you. – Bazankhr pointed to the door and moved forward, but before he left, he suddenly turned around and said loudly to his deputy. – Oh, and, that errand I said earlier needs to be done urgently. While the priest-metropolitan Samokh and I are in the chapel.

They stepped out into the corridor and moved toward the stairs. There were more and more paintings of warlike plagues, in armor and with cold weapons, striking their enemies.

–Colonel, what is this urgent errand that you need to do on my arrival? – realizing that it was obviously not a short walk, Samokh asked.

–Oh. Of course, improving security measures upon your arrival... You know, there is no such thing as too much security, even though we recently defeated another Maquis battalion in the

Diza sector... Your safety is especially important to us.

Samokh had heard about the incident, but according to his sources, it was a Hivi group fighting there, not the JFK. And Maquis casualties were counted as two companies, not a whole battalion. But you can't catch me by the hand about the Hivis, because everyone knows the role of the KFOR in the organization and management of these units. And whether it was a battalion or two companies, you can't prove anything at all – according to the papers, the KFK will reflect the number in a specific figure, and next to it they will add the corresponding Maquis unit, and in this case it will be possible to say that the battalion was not full, and the retreating soldiers just took the bodies of their killed comrades with them – by such simple arithmetic it will turn out to be a battalion instead of two companies.

They went up to the third floor and went in the opposite direction. They reached the end again and began to ascend to the fourth floor. Bazankhr was clearly in uniform, but the six novices accompanying Samokh were already a little out of breath.

In the end, on the fourth floor we reached the middle of the building, found the right door, and then it turned out that the key was somewhere on the first floor:

–How ridiculous. – Bazankhre was indignant. It's all right. I'll get in touch and the key will be brought to us. He pulled out a walkie-talkie and spoke loudly into it:

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