

VASYL
SHEVCHUK

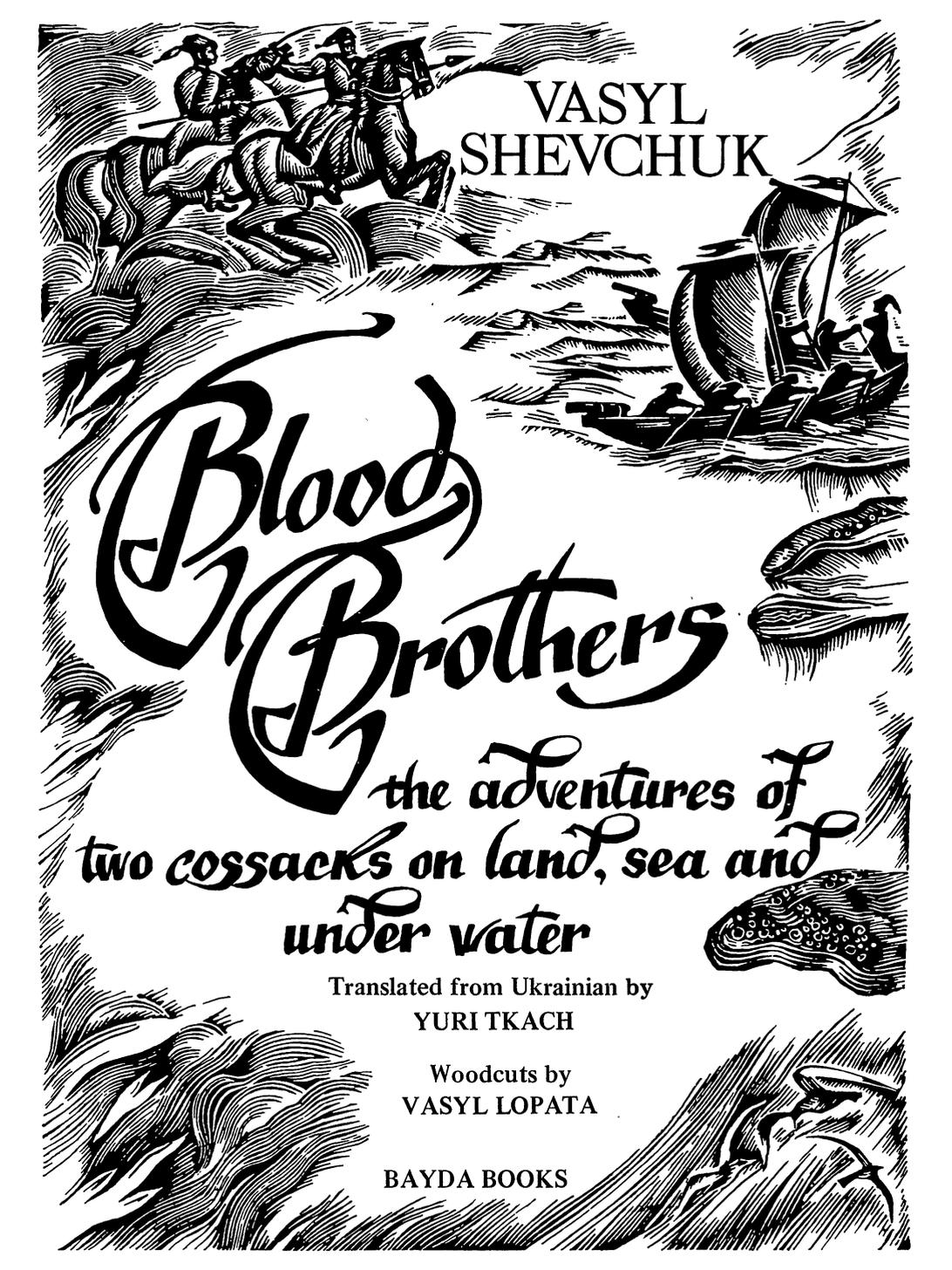
Blood Brothers



*Blood
Brothers*

Also from Bayda

**Behind the Curtain
Because Deserters Are Immortal
Across The Bridge**

The background of the cover is a detailed woodcut illustration. In the upper left, a group of Cossacks on horseback is shown in a line, moving across a hilly landscape. In the upper right, a large boat with a single mast and a large sail is on the water, with several figures inside. The entire scene is rendered in a high-contrast, black-and-white woodcut style with fine lines and cross-hatching for shading.

VASYL
SHEVCHUK

Blood & Brothers

*the adventures of
two cossacks on land, sea and
under water*

Translated from Ukrainian by
YURI TKACH

Woodcuts by
VASYL LOPATA

BAYDA BOOKS

Bayda Books,
30 Fairway Rd.
Doncaster, 3108 Australia

First edition 1980

Pobratymy first published in the Ukr.SSR 1972
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Printed in Australia by Stockland Press
Typeset by Rabelais Typesetting

Cover design by Olia Kohut

FICTION

ISBN 0 908480 03 2

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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

Vasyl Shevchuk was born on April 30, 1932 in Barashi, Zhytomyr Province, Ukraine. His parents were farmers. In 1950 he entered Kiev University to study Ukrainian philology. From 1955 to 1961 he worked on the editorial board of *Pioneriya* magazine, then as script editor at the Dovzhenko Film Studio in Kiev, and later as editor-in-chief at *Dnipro Publishers*.

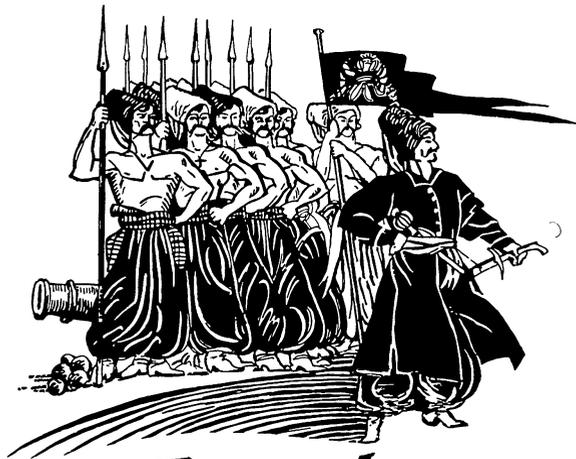
His first poems were printed in *Youth Almanac*. Apart from several later collections of poetry and children's stories, he is also the author of a biographical novel about the Ukrainian philosopher Hryhoriy Skovoroda, *Forerunner* (1969).

In this translation a short history of the Ukrainian Cossacks has been included as a foreword, to give the English-speaking reader a background knowledge to the events taking place in the book, and an understanding of the political situation at the time.

In translating the names of towns and people of Turkish or Polish origin, I have attempted to keep to the spelling of that country. Certain Ukrainian and Turkish words were transliterated, rather than translated, so as to give the book a more exotic flavour, or because there was no corresponding equivalent in English. Where they first appear, such words have been explained in a footnote and also appear in a glossary at the back.

I would like to thank everyone who helped with this book, in particular: Lilia Titar for translating the ballads, Graham Hirst for editing the text, and anonymous friends for generously contributing their spare time. Also my special thanks to Oliya Kohut for her invaluable help in the production of this book, and to everyone whose financial backing has allowed the Cossacks to ride again, thank you.

Yuri Tkach



Foreword



THE EMERGENCE OF THE COSSACKS

Some fantastic theories have been advanced about the origins of Ukrainian Cossacks, tracing their descent from the Sarmatians, a warlike people of Iranian origin, or the Khazars, a tribe of Turkic origin. Not until recent times has it been possible to show that the Ukrainian Cossacks actually evolved from the local population, and for centuries fought not only for justice, but also for the survival of their people.

After the massive Tatar invasion of the 13th century, the population along the middle reaches of the Dnipro in Ukraine almost disappeared. We know of settlements only as far south as Cherkasy. Further south stretched the desolate Wild Steppe. During the 14th and 15th centuries, while Ukraine was under Lithuanian rule, this borderland was fortified with primitive forts consisting of earthen mounds and ditches, which nevertheless were successful in keeping back the enemy.

The terrible onslaught of the Tatars in 1482 and later, devastated Ukrainian territories as far north as Chernihiv, and from then on the Tatars were regular visitors each summer, taking booty and men, women and children to sell at the slave markets of Crimea. Because the authorities were unable to protect them, the local population had to organise their own self-defence units, which eventually evolved into a military organisation, the forerunner of the Cossacks.

In spite of the constant dangers, the Wild Steppe was too rich in natural wealth not to attract adventurous men, and the population slowly increased. The most attractive region was below the forty kilometres of rapids along the lower reaches of the Dnipro. Below the rapids, where the Dnipro divided into countless branches, the armed groups of hunters and fishermen who ventured from their winter settlements in Kaniv and Cherkasy, found their richest pickings. Defending themselves against the Tatars, these men adopted all the methods of steppe warfare, often even attacking Tatar hordesmen who had ventured into these territories. Gradually this area began to be known as Zaporizhia, literally 'the land below the rapids'.

At the end of the 15th century these unruly frontier men were so numerous that they already constituted a separate social class and were called Cossacks. The word is of Turkish origin and means a free, independent man; it was also used in the 15th century to describe Tatar hordesmen used for sentry

duty in Kafa and other Crimean colonies. Thus, by adopting the methods of the Tatar warriors, the Cossacks also adopted their name.

The most famous of the early Ukrainian Cossack leaders was Prince 'Bayda' Vyshnyvetsky, who was appointed by the Prince of Lithuania in 1552 to fortify the island of Khortytsia below the Dnipro rapids, a task he did so thoroughly that the Tatars could not capture it. This fortification served as a prototype for later Cossack camps, called *siches*. By 1580 there already existed a fully-established Sich in Zaporizhia, a haven for Cossacks who found life in the towns too confining.

In the Sich the Cossacks led an ascetic life in plain wooden huts, obeying leaders they themselves elected. In the Cossack brotherhood all were equal, even the leader, who while holding dictatorial powers, lived and dressed like the rest. Eventually those Cossacks who lived at the Sich became known as Zaporozhian or Sich Cossacks. Though subject to strict rules, the Cossacks were voluntary warriors. The presence of women, even the wives of visiting envoys, was absolutely forbidden. Constant danger and a life of privation developed among the Cossacks a contempt for luxuries. Only horses and valuable arms won in battle could give pleasure to a stern Zaporozhian Cossack.

The commander of the Sich was called a *koshovy*. All Cossack elders were elected at a council, where each Cossack was entitled to vote. Once elected, a *koshovy* had absolute power and his orders were irrevocable. The Sich army was composed of regiments, each of which was divided into smaller units called *kurins*. Each *kurin* had its own barracks, and elected its own leader, a *kurin otaman*. At times of great campaigns or strife the Cossack council elected a supreme commander, called a *hetman*, whose power encompassed all Ukrainian Cossack formations.

By the end of the 16th century Zaporozhian Cossack numbers had swelled to tens of thousands due to an influx of refugees from Ukrainian territories now under Polish rule. The new Cossacks, coming from the peasant class, brought with them a spirit of opposition to Polish oppression. The mass of peasants, unable to leave their farms, now began to look to the Cossacks as avengers of their mistreatment at the hands of the Poles.

By the last decade of the 16th century, a difference had become evident within the Cossack ranks. On the one hand there were the well-to-do Cossacks who possessed rich homesteads far from the steppe, in the settled areas under Polish control. More conservative and more loyal to the authorities, they

were known as Town Cossacks, as opposed to the unruly Zaporozhian Cossacks of the steppes.

Fearing the increasing power and autonomy of the Cossacks, the Lithuanian, and later the Polish government made several attempts to pacify the Cossacks by enlisting them into special paid border units, but these plans failed due to a lack of finances. However after 1572 a permanent force of Registered Cossacks was established, these being recruited mainly from among the Town Cossacks. These men were absolved from paying taxes and were paid an annual allowance by the Polish government. The size of the Register was limited, and these Cossacks in effect became Polish soldiers, fighting on Poland's behalf.

For the Ukrainian people the Orthodox rite was intimately bound up with their national culture, and the Roman Catholic rite, which the Poles were trying to foist on them, was seen as a form of religion which would inevitably bring with it Polish national and political influences.

Therefore the union of these two churches into the Uniate Church in 1595 brought with it a decisive resistance from the Ukrainian gentry and peasants. The Orthodox Church was declared to be illegal, and was persecuted by the Poles. Thus the Zaporozhian Cossacks were forced to become defenders of the Orthodox rite as well, and relations between them and the Registered Cossacks soured.

In the second half of the 16th century the Zaporozhian Cossacks began to launch attacks across water and land. The extent and size of these campaigns can be judged from the fact that they penetrated not only into Crimea and Moldavia, but also reached distant Istanbul, the capital of the Turkish Empire.

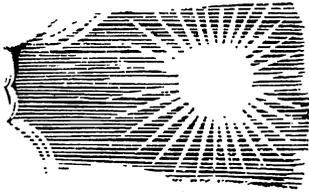
The Polish government was far from delighted with these independent military exploits, as it tried to maintain peaceful relations with the Turkish Sultan, and sought ways to control the Cossacks. Not until the Cossacks had incited the peasants to open revolt in Polish-occupied Western Ukraine in 1596, did the Polish government take active measures, sending an army which slaughtered a large number of the rebellious Cossacks led by Loboda and Nalyvaiko. Alarmed at the threat posed by the Cossacks, the Polish government declared them to be outlaws and fruitlessly undertook to destroy the Zaporozhian Sich.

The Zaporozhian Cossacks rebelled against the Poles countless times, and Registered Cossacks slayed their polonised officers and joined in the fight

against Polish oppression. The man who finally succeeded in uniting the Ukrainian people against the Poles was Hetman Bohdan Khmelnitsky; over a hundred thousand men gathered under his standard in 1648, when he announced a war to liberate Ukraine from Poland.

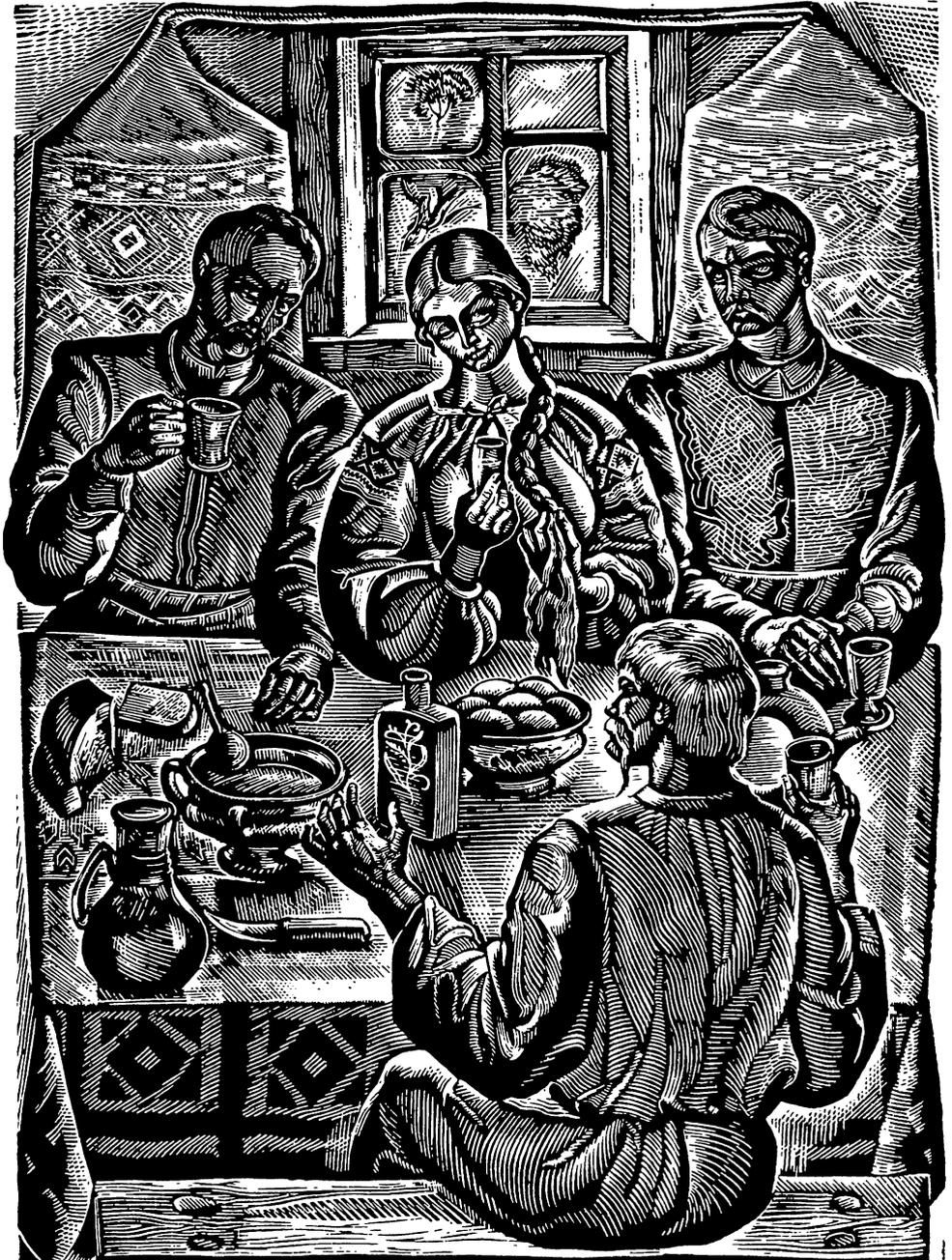
Ref.: Doroshenko, Dmytro, *A Survey Of Ukrainian History*, Trident Press, Winnipeg, 1975.

THIS BOOK IS A PIECE OF HISTORY,
A SMALL, THOUGH
COLOURFUL PAGE OF GLORY
WITH WHICH THE HEROIC
ZAPOROZHIAN ARMY
COVERED ITSELF AND ITS PEOPLE.
THIS BOOK IS A SONG TO THE EXPLOITS
WHICH THREE CENTURIES AGO
AMAZED THE WHOLE OF EUROPE.
AND IT BEGINS
WITH EVENTS WHICH TOOK PLACE
IN THE SPRING OF THE YEAR
ONE THOUSAND SIX HUNDRED AND TWENTY-NINE . . .



Chapter I





The horse was tired. The rider tugged lightly at the reins, glanced at the walls of the fortress which hid the horizon from view and made for the steppe: the Polish gentry had fresh horses and if he was spotted from the tower he could be caught. To them a Zaporozhian Cossack was equal to a bone in their throat . . . He could have waited for the boys and gone in their company. It would have been safer. But would he have dared to visit Khutory then? No. The cossacks would have laughed at him . . .

The steppe was green with young growth. After the warm spring showers the tall grasses were reaching up, straining towards the sun.

The cossack reached for the old, battered kobza* slung across his back, dropped the reins and touched the instrument's strings. The kobza shuddered and sighed to his words:

*Come my pretty maiden, pray how dost thou fare?
Hast thou forsaken erstwhile thy love fair . . . ?*

The brown horse raised its head in alarm and neighed. Riders were racing across the steppe to overtake the cossack. Ten, perhaps twenty . . .

Swinging the kobza across his back again, Nepran grabbed the drooping reins and urged the horse into a gallop.

“Help me out now, friend!”

Looking back, he turned into the sun and flew straight towards it, so that the Poles would be blinded. This hasty retreat both depressed and galled him. He itched to draw his sabre and to cut into the crowd of soldiers, so they could taste the sharpness of a Sich Cossack's sabre.

Nepran shielded his eyes from the sun and saw a dense oak copse in a valley ahead. The copse would be his escape.

* A kind of lute with eight strings.

An old road wound along the valley floor. The horse turned onto it and ran faster now, with greater ease. A shot exploded above them. The cossack drew the horse into the thick of the copse, lay against its neck and stopped behind a hazel bush.

The soldiers flew past.

Nepran patted his brown steed, lightly dug him in the sides with his heels and set off at a trot in the opposite direction.

Try and catch the wind in the open steppe! There has never been a Polish nobleman born who could bar the way for a cossack to the Zaporozhian Sich.

* *
*

He stopped the horse on a rise. Below, flooded with sunlight and the white blossom of cherry trees, a tiny village nestled against the warm slopes, like an infant to its mother. The cauldron of a pond sparkled in the willows. In the field on the far side of the pond was the white figure of a ploughman behind a pair of tawny oxen slowly pulling a plough.

Was all this really true, or was it an apparition, a sweet dream in the stone room overlooking the blue Bosphorus?

He had been away two years. Uliana would be grown up now, in her prime, and the boys were probably storming Siryk's house like cossacks boarding a galley. They were justified. She was a beautiful girl. A blonde plait down to her waist, large blue eyes; graceful, slender, cheerful . . . He should have asked for her hand in marriage then.

He sighed deeply and smiled: the sea would have played at the wedding then, the otaman* would have given the bride away, the Turks would have been the match-makers, and the nuptial bed would have been the floor of the tower overlooking the Marmora Sea in Istanbul.

Smoothing his black moustache and cocking his grey lambskin hat, he galloped down towards his beloved.

He itched to take the kobza in his hands and to cry out for all the world to hear about his imprisonment, his escape, how he had returned to the bright stars and calm waters of his native land! God, is there greater bliss on this earth than freedom?

* A cossack leader.

From far off he saw Siryk in his yard, in blue cossack pants and white shirt. Siryk looked up at the visitor but did not recognise him. Still the same strapping old gunner! He had lifted a heavy gate and was fitting it to the fence.

“Good health to you, father¹!” said Nepran, approaching.

“Good health to you too.”

“May God help you!”

“You could help yourself.”

“That I could.”

Nepran dismounted and put his shoulder to the gate.

The old man nailed the hinges on, then looked once more at the visitor and exclaimed:

“Petro, is it really you?”

“It’s me, father, it’s me!”

“But the shorthairs² got you,” Siryk said, unable to believe such a miracle.

“Couldn’t hold me,” the young man replied, resting his hands on his hips.

“Escaped?”

“Naturally.”

“Now there’s a cossack for you! Want to become kurin³ otaman or *sotnyk*⁴?”

“Better hetman⁵ to start with.”

“Why not? You’d leave Chorny⁶ for dead.”

“No,” sighed Nepran. “My tongue’s too small to lick the Poles’ backsides . . .”

“Perhaps!” Siryk smiled.

“And where is your daughter?” asked Nepran, and began to remove the bridle from the horse’s mouth, as if he didn’t care what the old man’s reply would be.

“On the common, singing *vesniankas*⁷,” announced Siryk and grew sullen. “Go inside, I’ll tether the horse and give it some oats.”

Petro was glad: she hadn’t married.

In the front room he filled a wooden mug with water and drank his fill.

1. Venerable term used when addressing older people.

2. Derogatory term for Turks.

3. Cossack company. The Zaporozhian army consisted of 38 kurins.

4. Cossack captain.

5. Cossack commander-in-chief.

6. Hryhorii Chorny – hetman of the Registered Cossacks 1629–1630.

7. Pagan songs sung by maidens to celebrate the beginning of spring.

It was good water. Everything was good here. Everything reminded him of the short bliss he had known before that ill-fated naval campaign.

The house was filled with the fine scent of herbs. The stove was decorated with roosters and flowers. Plates, chalices, and jugs stood on the sideboard. On the end of the table lay a high white bread . . .

“Have you been free a long time?” Siryk asked, walking in. There was a note of alarm in his voice. Petro sensed this, but ignored it. He lay his kobza down on the bench.

“No, father. Just a month. I regained my strength at home and then left for the steppe! At the Sich they probably think I’ve been stewing in hell for some time . . .”

“In heaven, in heaven, my boy,” the old man hugged him. “Whoever dies for his native land is blessed in heaven.”

He took two chalices and a jug of horilka¹, and invited him to the table. He filled the chalices and raised his.

“To the health of all good people and the death of our enemies!”

He placed bacon and fish on the table, and sliced up some bread.

“Cut many Turks down while escaping?”

“Not one. I bought my freedom with a song.”

The old man filled the chalices again and moved up closer to the visitor.

“We were tied up at Kilia,” Nepran began his story. “The Turkish galley had been tossed about on the sea a great deal, and everyone was sound asleep: the janissaries², Turks, and slave oarsmen. Only I and the janissary Atish, who was on guard, were awake. The night was warm, peaceful, starry, just like our nights . . . I was seized with such grief and sadness! To avoid crying I sang about my mother and my native Ukraine. The janissary’s heart responded, something inside him stirred, long forgotten, almost erased by long years of indoctrination. He listened and listened, then removed my chains. Without speaking a word, he dressed me in his clothes, handed me two pistols, and a sabre, and made me tie him up . . .”

“You should have escaped together!”

“He wouldn’t. I asked him . . .”

Siryk sighed and wheezed: Tatars had once taken his wife and son captive.

1. Ukrainian vodka.

2. Soldiers who were taken as children on raids into Christian lands and brought up as Turks.

Finally he spoke sadly:

“My boy, there are so many of our people suffering everywhere. If you were to collect all the blood, sweat, and tears shed by these tormented souls, there would be enough to fill a sea . . .”

“Not for much longer, father!” Nepran said.

“Have you heard anything definite?”

“All of Ukraine is seething. Hundreds are walking and riding to Zaporizhia. They don’t want to be treated like cattle.”

“And Taras¹, is he sitting quietly at the Sich?”

“Yes, he’s sitting down, but when he rises, he’ll have all the Poles trembling!”

Laughter and the sound of voices reached them from outside.

Petro’s heart missed a beat. It was her, his angel, who had appeared before him during the hardest days of his captivity, giving his soul strength and guarding it from despair . . .

A moment later a slender dandelion figure appeared in the doorway. Her sparkling blue eyes grew wide open:

“God, Petro!”

She rushed towards the visitor, but stopped half way, blushed and said:

“There were rumours you’d been killed by the Turks . . .”

“And you worried yourself sick? I’ve been resurrected, so you wouldn’t pine away with grief . . .” Nepran said reproachfully: behind his dandelion stood a fellow dressed in summer cossack attire whose head almost touched the ceiling.

“A good day to your household!”

“Greetings, Mykola,” Siryk said sullenly. “This is Zaporozhian Cossack Petro Nepran. And this is a relation of ours, Cherkasian Cossack Bodnia.”

“No relation at all . . .” Mykola growled, becoming embarrassed. “Unless I become one . . .”

He came up awkwardly, shook hands and sat at the table.

“Child!” Siryk began to fuss. “Maybe you could find something for us to eat?”

Uliana ran out.

Nepran sullenly studied the Registered Cossack who was examining the beautiful jug. He was an imposing young man, exuding health and vitality, as

1. Taras Triasylo, hetman of the Zaporozhian Cossacks at the time.

if he stood in life's tumult just as firmly as he stood on the ground. He had large grey eyes, full lips, wide nose and bushy blond eyebrows.

"Which kurin would you be from?" Bodnia asked.

"Irkliyiv."

"He's just returned from captivity," the old man added. "From Turkey."

"Taken in battle, or at home?"

"In battle, out at sea. The Mussulmans¹ tore us to shreds."

Mykola cleared his throat. Then said gloomily:

"Serves you right . . . Why go out on that damned sea? Causing trouble, beating about like crazy . . ."

"If it wasn't for us Sich Cossacks, you wouldn't be carrying a sabre."

"Really!"

"You'd be ploughing fields for a landlord."

"The hetman himself gave me this sabre."

"If it wasn't for the Sich and Zaporizhia, there wouldn't be a hetman."

"The Zaporozhian Cossacks did not elect him."

"But they'll unseat him."

"Really!"

"Enough of your bickering, boys," Siryk stepped in. "Child, let's have another jug!"

There was already enough to eat and drink on the table. Nepran hadn't even seen it appear.

"Sit down too, Uliana," he said, catching the girl by the arm.

"I've eaten . . ."

"Sit down, daughter," her father gave his consent. "It's not every day we have such respected visitors in our house."

Uliana sat between the two young men, opposite her father, covered her eyes with her lashes, then furtively raised them and stole a glance first at Petro, then at Mykola.

Nepran felt sad. He took his kobza from the bench, brushed his forelock² out of the way behind his ear, and began to sing:

1. Moslems.

2. The cossacks shaved their heads, leaving only a lock of hair in the middle.

*A cossack went a drinking,
A drinking and carousing,
While his black steed waited;
To the stable railing tethered.*

The song penetrated deeper and deeper into Petro's soul, touching his very being, stirring that indestructible force which had given birth both to him and thousands of other knights with forelocks, knights who endured hunger, cold, and savage death at the hands of the enemy, but refused to lay their weapons down, did not relinquish that most precious thing of all – freedom . . .

By the time Nepran had finished the song and quietened the strings with his hand, Uliana was crying softly.

The old man spread his arms out, unable to express his enthusiasm. He filled the chalices. The Registered Cossack blurted out:

“Our men sing better. Now our standard bearer . . .”

“Your standard bearer sings with a foreigner's voice,” said the old man sharply.

“He's got his own . . .”

“Then why does he side with the aristocracy and Koniecpolski[†]?”

“Because he's aspiring to become an aristocrat himself,” added Nepran.

“You want the Poles to govern the land and our people to remain peasants?” Bodnia frowned.

“Better to be a peasant than a turncoat . . .” Nepran began.

But Mykola did not let him finish.

“We protect the people from the gentry, while you hang about the Zaporozhian Sich and sow conflict throughout the state!”

“And who stopped the hordes?”

“The Illustrious Crown Hetman.”

“If it wasn't for the Sich and the Zaporozhian Cossacks, your Illustrious Hetman would have been in hell long ago, boiling away in a cauldron of tar. Remember Khotyn, Tsetsora*!”

“You're traitors, rogues,” Mykola argued passionately. “When the Poles wave *zloty*^o before you, you slaughter the Tatars and Turks, and if they don't offer anything, you butcher your own brothers, the Poles.”

† Polish magnate who was crown hetman of the Polish army at the time.

* In the battle of Tsetsora (1620) the Turks routed the Polish army. At Khotyn (1621) the Polish army defeated the Turks only with the help of the Zaporozhian Cossacks.

o Polish currency.

“And for which sins has the Lord sent us such kinsmen? Dishonour, death, and slavery – these are the things your Polish gentry has brought to our land, and you’ve hung out your thick lips, waiting for the bones they throw you from their kitchens! You whine and fight to lick their boots . . .”

“May my forelock fall out if I don’t get up now and take off this insolent fellow’s head!” Bodnia grasped his sabre.

Nepran stood up.

“Boys, come on now, for God’s sake!” The old man stood between them. “Uliana, my child, ask the guests to eat! We’ll have another chalice or two and sing some songs.”

Uliana gave the Registered Cossack a sharp look and he grew quiet, pulling his head into his shoulders. Nepran raised his chalice.

“To the health of the father and his daughter!”

“Drink in health, dear visitors,” Siryk bowed.

Without looking at the Zaporozhian Cossack, Mykola drank the toast too.

“Here, have some bread and bacon,” the old man entreated them. “Or some aspic . . .”

“Yes, have some aspic to cool down† . . .”

“Petro!” the old man stopped him.

Uliana sputtered with laughter. Bodnia sank his teeth into a chunk of bacon and savagely attacked it. He did not speak any more. He sat with a scowl on his face, eating and drinking a lot, but angrily, in silence.

Nepran was drunk, not so much from the alcohol as from the presence of the girl. She was sitting beside him, laughing, caressing him with her blue eyes. He was so delighted that he was ready to embrace the whole world, to sing all the innumerable songs in his repertoire, and even ask Mykola’s forgiveness, if he had perchance offended him. The misfortune of his native land burned and ached inside him.

They stepped outside as it was growing dark. A warm evening was creeping over Khutory; the air was filled with the fragrance of blossom, grass, freshly-ploughed land, the heavens and stars, which had appeared here and there in the sky . . .

“Shall I make your beds in the house or on the hay in the barn?” Uliana’s voice came from far away.

† In Ukrainian the word for aspic is *kholodets*, derived from the word *kholod*, meaning cold.

“A cossack’s bed is always with him — he lies down where he stops, and where he lies down he falls asleep . . . ” said Nepran.

“We’ll put them both in the barn,” Siryk said, carrying out two sheepskin coats.

“I’ll sleep in the orchard under the apple tree,” Bodnia said.

The old man shrugged his shoulders and without a word went slowly to the orchard behind the house.

Uliana disappeared in the barn.

“Before sunrise we’ll ride out into the steppe and let our sabres decide which of us is to beat a path here,” said Mykola.

“As in the song: for one there will be a new coffin, for the other a young maiden?” laughed Nepran. “Who’d have thought that Polish hirelings have such noble customs . . . ”

Bodnia grabbed his sabre again, but seeing the girl emerging from the barn, he went off to the orchard.

Nepran watched his powerful figure disappear and imagined how Bodnia fought. He had an arm like an iron bar. When this fellow hit, he cut in two . . .

“Are you ill, Petro?”

“No, I’m fine, my dearest,” Nepran stepped towards the girl. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been in your house and I haven’t seen you for a long time . . . ”

“Is it very frightening there?”

“Where?”

“In captivity?”

“Very . . . There’s nothing worse than slavery.”

“How did you survive?”

“Through hope.”

“I feel so sad, even a little afraid . . . ” the girl whispered.

Nepran embraced her.

“Has this Cherkasian been visiting here long?”

“Since about Christmas. I didn’t think you were alive anymore . . . Are you angry?”

“No.”

“Kiss me . . . ”

The night, the moon, the sky, the whole world was witness to how eagerly he had awaited this moment, these lips, eyes, and hair, this sweet breath! If it

wasn't for the Cherkasian fool and his ridiculous duel, he would have been the happiest man alive, dead, or yet to be born . . .

He held the girl lightly and kissed her on the cheek, as a brother kisses his sister. She sighed and laughed: "You're like monks at the Sich . . ."

"Yes, we're monks. And our god is freedom."

"Then the kobzar* must have sung about you, when he sang in our yard:

*Our brave lads from Zaporizhia
A score year or more, no woman they saw;
Till a stork they spied in a marshy waste.
Said the otaman: "There's a lass to my taste!"
Said the osavul¹: "I'm fit to be her swain!"
Said the kosovy²: "To marry her's my aim!"*

It was witty and almost true. Nepran hadn't heard the song before. It must have been a new one. Songs appeared like mushrooms in autumn. The people had taken a liking to the cossacks, stirred, become thoughtful, and created songs. Something was gathering and multiplying on the long-suffering earth of Ukraine . . .

"Do you hear me?" the girl was screaming. "Someone must have cast a spell on you!"

"I'm a Sich Cossack."

"Then go to the Sich and kiss it!" Uliana ran off.

Nepran walked towards the barn; there was neither malice nor fear in his soul, nor a desire to kill his rival. Still, he felt anxious. He stopped from time to time and listened to the darkness . . . as though before an approaching battle . . . Intuition? So what, he had to die sometime . . . Well, let the sabres decide.

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Hardly had he closed his eyes, than he was woken.

"Time to get up," Bodnia's voice called from the dawn greyness.

"Even the devils don't box this early," Nepran mumbled angrily.

"You can sleep it off later."

"In the other world?"

* A wandering minstrel.

1. Cossack deputy-hetman. Acted as a kind of Minister of Internal Affairs in the Sich.
2. Chief of a cossack camp.

“Perhaps . . .”

“God, how tedious these Registered Cossacks are! My head is simply splitting . . .”

“We’ll have a nip. I’ve got half a quart.”

“Ah, now you’re talking!” said Nepran, and sat up. In the darkness he found his sabre, pistols and kobza, got up and went outside. “Are they still asleep?”

“Aha.”

“Don’t stamp your boots so loudly, you’ll wake them up and they’ll raise hell. Saddle your horse!”

“I’ve already saddled yours too.”

“Really?”

“They’re under the birch by the pond.”

“Listen, Bodnia, spit on Chorny and be my orderly.”

“Rattle away, I’ll rip your stupid clapper out today.”

“We’ll see, said the blind man . . . Have you seen the priest?”

“What for?”

“To confess your sins and receive communion. If you die without repenting, your soul will become an owl and forever fly all over the wide world, screaming like a goat.”

“May my whole forelock fall out, if it’s not yours that screams.”

The pond was still asleep. Covered with a blanket of fog, it sobbed quietly, as if unable to wake.

The cossacks’ horses heard their masters approaching. They raised their heads and pawed impatiently at the ground. Nepran’s was brown, Bodnia’s a dappled red.

“You’ve got a fine horse there.”

“No worse than yours.”

“Let’s exchange.”

“It’d be a waste of time. One of us will get both . . .”

“I’d quite forgotten. How terrible – better I’d not seen your red steed.”

Mykola made no reply. He put his foot in the stirrup, and was in the saddle in a flash.

“Whether I want to or not, I’ll have to kill you . . .” Nepran continued.

“Catch your bear before you sell its skin.”

“I’d make mince meat of a whole horde of Tatars for a horse like that!”

The Cherkasian sat firmly in his saddle and pressed close to the horse.

“Mount up and let’s go, you prattler!” he said.

“No need to hurry. Saint Peter’s probably still asleep, and there won’t be anyone to let your innocent soul into paradise.”

Mykola whipped his horse hard and tore off into the steppe.

Nepran followed him. At the top of the hill he stopped the horse and gazed down on Khutory for a long time, at Siryk’s house, enveloped in blossom white as milk. A gay silver morning dawned in the east . . .

Bodnia was admiring a gully with a small spring and nightingales. When Nepran rode up, he offered him a wooden flask:

“Here, have a swig.”

Petro refused.

“Sich Cossacks don’t drink before battle.”

“I’ve already had a drink,” the giant said, spreading his arms out.

“Then let me have it, or you might tell God I attacked you while you were drunk.”

After swallowing twice, Nepran handed the wooden flask back, and said with a sigh:

“Pity there’s no Catholic priest nearby . . .”

“Why, are you Catholic?”

“Eh, I’m not thinking of myself! I’m worrying about you.”

“I’m Orthodox.”

“Exactly . . . You won’t be able to find your way into the same fold as your Polish friends. If you were a Catholic you could soon be exchanging kisses with the Polish nobility which we sent into the other world near Kurukiv Lake* . . .”

Baring his sabre, Mykola yelled out:

“May my . . .”

“Forelock fall out!” Nepran finished, and pulled his sabre out.

Steel crashed against steel in an explosion of sparks. Nepran’s horse reared. Hiding behind it, Petro fought back Bodnia’s strong attack and unexpectedly chopped the Cherkasian’s hat away. Bodnia stared, wide-eyed.

“I sliced the heads off two janissaries that way!” Nepran said.

Recovering, mighty Bodnia flashed the whites of his eyes, gritted his teeth and set upon the Zaporozhian Cossack.

* There was a fierce battle here between the cossack and Polish armies in October, 1625.

Nepran evaded the blow. He turned his horse away to the right and laughed:

“Come and be my orderly, I’ll teach you to use a sabre!”

Mykola was wheezing like a blacksmith’s bellows. God had given him strength without measuring it out. Had Mykola been endowed with as much agility, Petro wouldn’t have stood a chance this time.

“The horse, cover yourself with the horse!” Nepran called out when the Cherkasian rushed at him again. He was just able to deflect Mykola’s frightful blow with a back stroke. “Now that’s better!”

“Shut up!”

“Let me talk my fill before my eternal silence . . . You’ve a heavy hand. I fear I’ll appear before God’s throne halved, and until they sew me up . . .”

The sabres crashed together and flashed in the first slanting rays of sunlight. The strong, hot horses reared and the adversaries suddenly found themselves face to face. The Cherkasian’s eyes were wild with rage.

Riding apart, they were ready to rush at each other, but both noticed a third rider descending into the gully from Khutory. He was not astride his horse, but hung from the saddle, one foot stuck in the stirrup.

“I’ll intercept the horse, you catch it!” said Nepran, and sheathing his sabre, took off after the strange rider.

The stranger was a cossack, his pitch black forelock touching the ground.

As Nepran blocked the horse’s road into the steppe, it turned right, but Mykola had caught up to it in the meantime. Another moment and the reins were in his hand. Nepran lifted the poor fellow up, tore his blood-soaked shirt off, and under his shoulder-blade, opposite his heart, saw a black wound. He had been stabbed, in the back.

“Poles, Mykola!”

“Or Tatars!”

Bodnia dismounted, took the dead man from his horse and lay him out on the ground in the flowers, covering his face with a kerchief.

“Look, there’s a fire over there!” he said, seeing smoke rising.

“That’s Khutory!”

Setting their horses into a gallop, Nepran and Bodnia flew into the flat steppe. Smoke covered half the horizon. It rose from the gully and spread across the whole steppe. It looked as if the cloudy sky had fallen on this corner of paradise . . . And Uliana was there somewhere.

They stopped, astonished, on the rise: all the houses were ablaze. There was not a soul about. The village looked as if it had died out, the last person having set alight the thatch roofs.

“Powers in heaven!” Nepran whispered, pulled at the reins, unsheathed his sabre and galloped down towards the raging swirl of flames.

Uliana’s house had almost finished burning. Pots, plates, and clothes lay strewn everywhere; someone had been looting in a hurry.

“Look for the old man and his daughter!” Nepran told Mykola. “Perhaps they’re lying dead somewhere.”

They rode around the burning houses together but found no one.

“Taken captive. By the Tatars!”

“Could have been Poles,” said Nepran. He was searching for enemy bodies or something which would help him identify the enemy and find him in the boundless sea of the steppe. But there was not a thing. They had taken their dead or thrown them into the fire . . .

“Over here, Nepran!” Bodnia called from the pond and beckoned with his hand.

Near the willows lay a Tatar sliced in two.

“Budzhak slave-traders!” Nepran yelled out. He pictured the Tatars driving their captives along the Wild Steppe, his Uliana looking back through tears of suffering and despair, imploring him to rescue her.

“We’ll give chase! Massacre the damn spawn!”

Bodnia raced off after him.

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It was a furious, uncontrollable race following the Tatars’ trail. All day long Petro and Mykola mercilessly pushed their horses. Any moment now they thought they would see the evil plunderers on the horizon and be able to hit them in fierce revenge, but as the day progressed there was just the blinding sun, partridges, bustards, and waves of grass rolling in the wind. Nothing more. The Tatars seemed to have disappeared into thin air. Near the river Buh the trail spread out in all four directions.

The horses were tired. The riders yearned to rest in the shade . . . Suddenly Nepran saw a moving black speck on the reddish horizon.

“Tatars!” he yelled out joyously.

Bodnia put his hand to his forehead and studied the horizon for a long time.

“It’s them all right,” he uttered at last. He straightened his shoulders and said: “I’ll dent my sabre yet against Mussulman heads today!”

The desire for battle was transmitted from the riders to the horses, and they skimmed across the evening steppe, flashing past bushes of sloe and lanky catran. The moving speck grew larger. The horde was moving west, towards the cover of the sun’s last rays. Like black shadows they raced across its red disc. Suddenly they stopped and made towards the two daring cossacks.

“Hold tight, Mykola!” shouted Nepran to the Cherkasian and pulled a pistol from the holster near his saddle.

Mykola flashed his sabre. The horde stopped again. In a moment it was racing to the left, in the direction of the river Syniukha. Nepran grew alarmed. There was something incomprehensible in the enemy’s actions, and this was the worst, the most dangerous thing. Why were they dashing from side to side? Were they afraid or up to some trickery? Or maybe someone had cut off their retreat to the south?

“Probably Zaporozhian Cossacks!” Nepran pointed with his pistol into the distant evening redness. “See how the Tatars are pulling from side to side!”

The sun still blinded the cossacks’ eyes, and so they couldn’t study and count the enemy. They rode into battle so recklessly as if every bush and every wisp of feather-grass could turn behind their backs into cossacks at any moment and aid them. There were probably a hundred or more Tatars. The ground hummed, the horses snorted and roared, the wind whistled in their ears. Very soon now the two would slice into the enemy lines, the first shots would sound, sabres would flash lightning.

Flooding the horizon with blood, the sun set into the feather-grass. And then Nepran realised that the chase was in vain, that they would not free the unfortunate prisoners.

“Halt!” he yelled to his friend and stopped his own horse. “It’s only a herd of wild horses.”

Bodnia spat angrily on the ground and threw his sabre into its sheath.

“Look for a needle in the hay now . . . Night is a cossack’s mother, but it’s by no means a Tatar’s stepmother.”

Nepran remained silent. The last sparks of hope of saving the girl from

captivity were fading. His sorrow was so great he was ready to chop at the blackthorn with his sabre, to scream aloud, to blame himself for everything that had happened in Khutory. While the stupid billy-goats struck their horns together, the wolf had entered the fold . . . This always happened: where two fought, a third profited.

The herd of ashen fiery-eyed horses soon disappeared in the falling darkness. Their rumbling faded. Everything was quiet.

Nepran yanked at his horse, which was feeding on the grass, and set out slowly across the steppe.

“We’ll spend the night in the gully by the river Syniukha,” he said, turning round to Mykola.

Mykola rode behind him, head hung low and shoulders drooping, as if he bore a heavy rock on his back. He was castigating himself for having flashed like powder, called a duel, and lost Uliana . . .

Nepran slowed his horse down and rode beside him.

“Suffering?”

“What a girl she was!”

“Did you love her?”

“Aha.”

“Me too.”

Mykola glared at him again, his hackles rising, ready to fight for his beloved again.

“Do you want another fight?” Nepran asked, teasing him. “We’ve lost the Tatars anyway.”

“Get lost!” Bodnia growled back, wiping the sweat from his face.

“Now she’ll belong to some Turk . . .”

“Shut up! My soul’s aflame already. Can this really be the end? Can’t we find her and win her back?”

“We can.”

“How?”

“Ride into Crimea, take Kafa*, as we did with Sahaidachny, and free all the slaves and Uliana with them.”

“The two of us?”

“There are willing men in the Sich.”

“But will they agree to come?”

* The main slave market was in Kafa (now Fedosiya).

“They’ve really duped you, those hetman’s servants,” said Nepran. “Nothing makes a Zaporozhian Cossack happier than to give people freedom!”

“Then let’s ride to the Sich now!”

“We’ll rest the night and then set out . . . ”

“We could peel off fifty miles overnight!”

“On tired, hungry horses?”

All the way to the gully Bodnia remained silent. When they stopped and let the horses go to pasture, he fell on the warm earth, thumped his fist down with grief and moaned:

“I’d rather be lying slain on her doorstep than this! Forgive me, Nepran . . . ”

“And you me for my sharp tongue.”

“Until I free her, I shall know no joy on earth! If only I was more reasonable . . . ” Bodnia chastised himself.

“Don’t fret,” Nepran helped him to his feet. “As long as there are cossacks, and you and me, the enemy won’t rejoice!”

Mykola embraced Petro and said fervently:

“Be my brother!”

“And you mine!”

Nepran removed his sabre, and rolling up his left sleeve, cut the tanned skin.

“Let’s have some horilka.”

Mykola handed him the flask and took his sabre out too. He cut his arm and squeezed some blood into the flask. Shaking it up, Nepran took several gulps, poured some onto the sabre’s blade and gave the flask to his friend. Bodnia did the same.

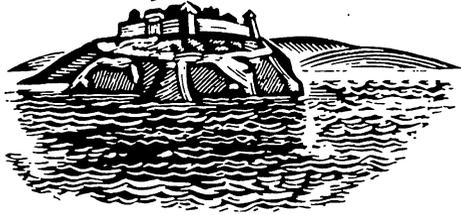
“Forever!”

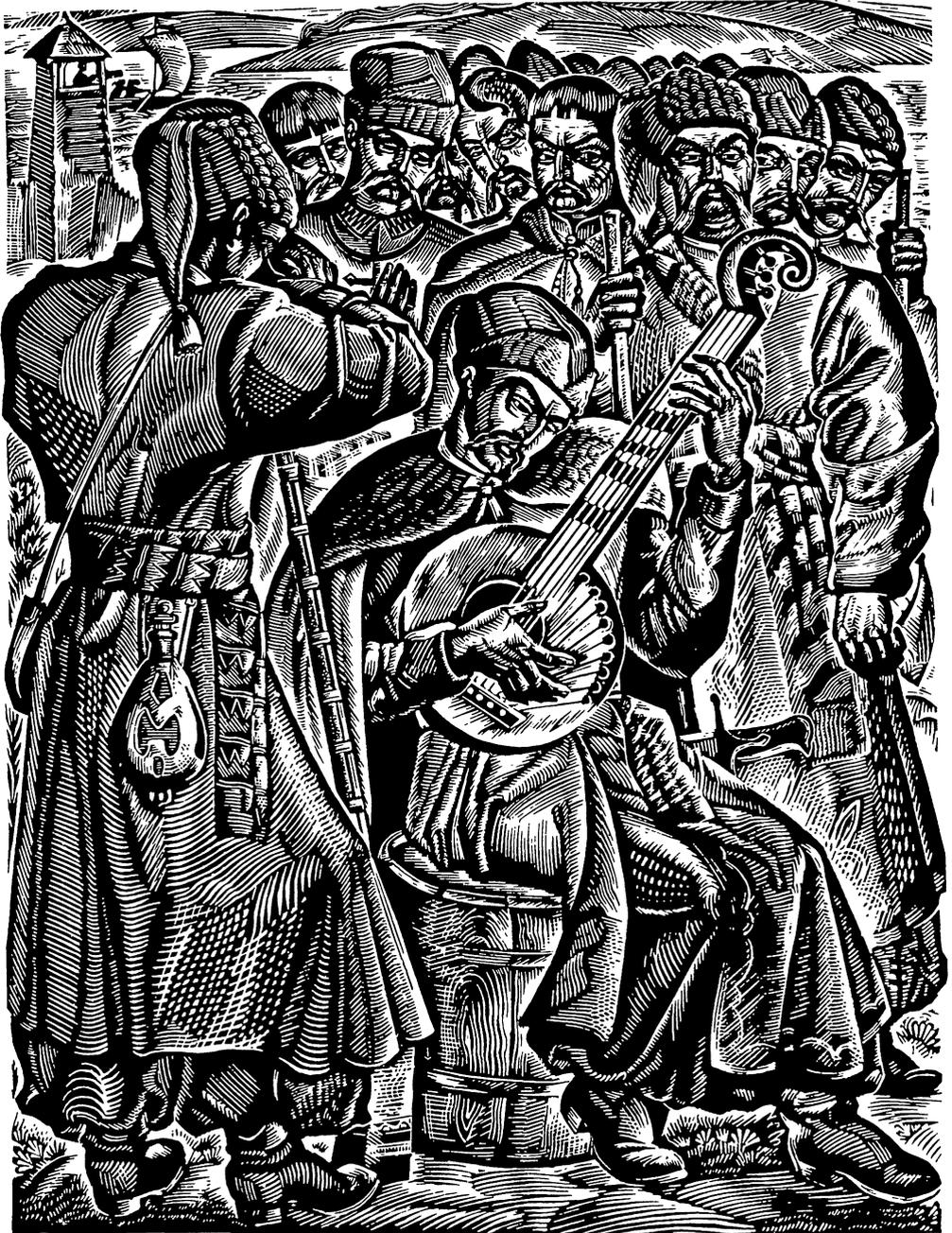
“Yes, forever!”

The cossacks embraced again and kissed three times. And went to sleep as blood brothers now.



Chapter II





Jt's said not without reason that whoever lives a year in the Zaporozhian Sich will be a Zaporozhian Cossack till his death.

Seeing the Sich from the steppe, Petro Nepran almost burst into tears. He slowed his brown steed, so that Mykola wouldn't see how deeply moved he was, and checked the impulsive joy of his meeting with the steep-banked island looking somewhat like a cossack's hat, where he had once tasted freedom, equality and battle friendship whilst still a moustacheless youth.

"So this is the Cossack's Mother?" asked Mykola.

"Verily. He isn't a cossack, who hasn't been at the Sich . . ."

"You don't say," Mykola stopped his horse and immediately grew dark. "Who am I then?"

"My blood brother."

"And only that?"

"No," Nepran said, unable to miss a chance to provoke the young man. "You are a *candidatus in zaporozhias*, as we used to say in the Brotherhood School."

"Stop swearing, you devil's son!" Mykola boiled over with anger.

"Am I swearing? I only said in Latin that very soon you'll enter the Zaporozhian knighthood."

"I can still turn back . . ." Bodnia said sullenly.

"And Siryk's daughter? And our march on Kafa? Or maybe you're afraid?"

"Petro, don't try my patience, because . . ."

"My forelock will fall out?!" Nepran roared with laughter and said peaceably: "Don't be angry, I'm only joking to dispel my grief. My soul is aching . . ."

“We’ll find them and free them!”

“You can’t find everyone and you can’t free everyone. Ukrainians are in slavery everywhere, some here, others across the sea. And we’re fighting like dogs. If we had unity, or concordia, as the Romans say, we could raise a free cossack state!”

Nepran rose in his stirrups and pointed with his whip:

“There, see those willows, and the hut and tower nearby – that’s the crossing.”

He bent down, whistled hard and galloped towards the Sich, unable to contain any longer his excitement at being back, wanting to step as soon as possible on the sacred cossack soil where he had long ago become just a sad song.

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The island was crowded as always. The Sich was like a spring: no matter how much it was ladled, it was always full. Marches, battles, epidemics – nothing was able to drain it, to reach the bottom.

Nepran studied the tanned faces of the Zaporozhian Cossacks, but found no familiar brothers. It was hard to believe that everyone had fallen in battle, although he feared just that . . . Finally he could stand it no longer, and stopping by one of the blacksmith’s shops, asked an old artisan:

“Have we had a plague here, father?”

“No, bless the Lord, there’s been nothing for five years.”

“Where have all the boys gone then? We’ve crossed half the island and I haven’t met one old friend with whom I felled the Poles and the Turks, and with whom I ate fish-broth.”

“When men prepare for a long journey, horses are shod and no one sits on the hearth,” the old man said and took a sabre from the forge. He raised his hammer and white sparks flew everywhere, the steel rang hollowly.

Nepran moved his kobza into a more comfortable position and turned his horse towards the gate.

“Where’s the koshovy?” he asked the Sich schoolboys, who were practising archery by aiming at a wooden spoon driven into the green slope of an embankment.

“In his hut.”

Looking to see that Mykola had not lagged behind, Nepran tugged at the reins. He was sure that something was brewing, that the cossacks would be striking somewhere. The turbulent Sich was quiet, like a mighty forest before the storm. No one was drinking or playing music, or showing off their strength or expensive clothing taken from the Mussulmans. Petro couldn't remember it ever being like this, though he'd been at the Sich since his childhood, except perhaps when they prepared to go with Zhmailo* against Koniecpolski . . .

Koshovy Taras Triasylo recognised Nepran. He embraced him, rejoicing at the meeting, and asked him to the table.

“And who's this with you?” he glanced at Bodnia, who had remained in the doorway, not daring to enter the otaman's hut.

“My blood brother. Come here, Mykola!” Nepran called him, and explained to Taras: “He's from Cherkasy, from the hetman . . .”

“An envoy?”

“No.”

“Tired of crawling?”

“I didn't crawl,” Bodnia answered.

“Then why are you so downcast, brother?”

“From grief, Master Koshovy . . .”

“Longing for Cherkasian dumplings?”

Mykola suddenly frowned and lay his hand on his sabre.

“Father, don't tease this bear, because he hisses straight away!” Nepran said. “See how his eyes burn like a wild horse's . . .”

“And a cossack like you sat by that old *baba*^o Chorny!” Taras exclaimed enthusiastically. “Wild horses die in captivity . . .”

“Captivity is worse than death,” Nepran added.

Taras was deep in thought and pulled his moustache.

“Father, the Tatars took some people captive near Lysianka. Give us some cossacks, help us free them!” Nepran stepped towards him.

“I've heard,” the koshovy said, knitting his bushy grey eyebrows.

“The Registered Cossacks sit in fortresses with the nobles, and meanwhile the Tatars plunder the Volost[†] unpunished.”

* Cossack hetman in 1625.

o (Ukr.) Old woman.

† The countryside.

“Raise a campaign, Otaman.”

“You won’t catch them, it’s too late.”

“We’ll storm Crimea, take Kafa, free the Christians. Just give us the men or lead us yourself.”

Taras was silent for a long time, pulling at his luxuriant moustache, and then spoke humbly:

“I can’t boys. Though I’d love to . . .”

“Fear God, father,” Nepran spoke in a trembling voice. “They’re not strangers to us, they’re fathers, brothers . . .”

“Loved ones,” added Mykola.

“I know,” said Taras. “All of Ukraine is bound up, the leather has eaten into our hands . . . But we can’t attack Crimea yet.”

“Then call a council, father, and we’ll gather the willing,” Nepran would not budge.

“No. I won’t,” the koshovy said firmly. “There is more important business. Build up your strength. When the time is right, I’ll call the council.”

“Being crafty, Master Otaman? You seem to have changed while I was trying Turkish meadow-sweet.”

“You mean my hair’s turned grey?”

“That’s nothing. You’re acting slyly, like a Polish nobleman.”

“When you live with wolves, you must act like a wolf.”

“Maybe it’s better to fight them?”

“There is a right time for everything.”

“From time immemorial we’ve always fought the enemy everywhere!” Nepran burst out.

“We’ve reached the hilt now . . .”

“Well, are we riding against Kafa or not?” Mykola interposed.

“No,” the koshovy snapped.

Nepran realised that this was his final word; the blood boiled inside him and rushed to his head.

“Sit here like ground poppy seed then. You’ve become a pack of weaklings, gorged yourselves fat and become covered with silver thalers like a dog’s tail with burrs!”

Without saying goodbye, he ran out of the hut onto the Sich maidan*, waited for Mykola who plodded out after him and suggested:

* A parade ground.

“Let’s slip down to Crimea by ourselves! We’ll dress up as Turks, find Uliana and rescue her!”

“Do you know the way?”

“As well as I know the way to the tavern! We’ll leave in the morning. In the meantime we’ll replenish our supplies of lead and powder, and get ourselves some Turkish clothes.”

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When the strong summer sun grew weary and lay down to rest in the Tomakiv swamps, the Sich was buzzing like a beehive. From the pastures, fishing grounds, and hunting reserves the famous Nyz^o warriors returned home. Because it was rather crowded and stuffy in the barracks after dinner, the cossacks scattered across the whole island. Here and there fires began burning, their light snatching moustachioed faces and weapons from the darkness. Kobzas and psalteries rang out. Here and there the bolder cossacks were dancing, singing in time and whooping. Laughter, stamping, and voices rang out, like unfettered freedom making merry; gentle as a child, fierce as a storm.

Wolfing down a sheat-fish, Nepran and Bodnia went out onto the moonlit Sich maidan. The heavenly silver moon had risen quite high now and was shining so brightly one could read a book by its light. Embracing one another, the cossacks huddled in small groups around musicians, sang songs and remembered fallen comrades, tossed each other jokes. Some had already fallen asleep here on their cloaks or zhupans*. A cannon fired over their heads would not have woken them.

“Well how do you like our Zaporozhian Sich?” Nepran asked his blood brother.

“Everyone’s so merry . . .” Bodnia waved his hand.

“And what did I tell you?”

“You said the Zaporozhian Cossacks knew no better bliss than to fight for freedom.”

“That’s the honest truth!”

“Where is it then? I can’t see. The Tatars are herding their prisoners to

^o Territory along the lower reaches of the Dnipro River where the Zaporozhian Cossacks settled.

* Coats made of wool.

Crimea while we're prancing about, sleeping, and competing to see who can crack the funniest joke. They're buffoons, not cossacks!"

"You heard with your own ears — the koshovy won't let them go."

"You said there was freedom here, that the men decided matters by voting!"

"Everything in due course, Mykola."

"While we're sitting idle, the Tatar princes are selling slaves all over the world."

"To strike, you need to take a swing."

"Windmills swing around too . . ."

Offended by such cruel slander on the Zaporozhian knighthood, Petro came up to a group of Sich Cossacks roaring with laughter, drowning everyone else out, and asked:

"Would any of you fine young men like to pay the Khan a visit?"

The cossacks grew quiet, then one asked slyly:

"You're not the Khan's eunuch, are you?"

"No. I'm Nepran from Irklyiv Kurin."

"Go on! He's been living it up two years in the other world."

Nepran recognised Orendarenko Tymish, who had saved him at sea from the raised sabre of a Turk.

"You've hit the bulls-eye, Tymish! It's lonely with the Lord, so I've come back to the Sich to take you with me so we can drink horilka together from golden heavenly chalices . . ."

"Holy saints!" Orendarenko crossed himself, and even his forelock rose on his head. "Is it really you, Nepran?"

"As you can see, it's me. And this is Saint Mykola*," he nodded towards Bodnia.

"Petro, have mercy on me," Tymish begged. "Take someone older who is unable to hold a sabre in his hand any more. I still need to tear at the Turks a bit more, my brother, and leave good fame behind me in this world."

"Why aren't you fighting the enemy then?"

"I'd go now!"

"Then go and saddle your horse, Tymish!"

"The koshovy won't let me."

* Mykola is Ukrainian for Michael.

Meanwhile word had spread around the Sich that Petro Nepran from Irklyiyiv had returned from the other world, and slowly the whole maidan filled with cossacks. Some scoffed, others believed the rumour, but all wanted to catch a glimpse of the cossack who had fallen in battle and had now suddenly reappeared, alive and well. And in the company of a miracle-worker. The fact that Saint Mykola was in cossack clothes did not surprise the brotherhood one bit, for how else could a saint dress, after meeting even a single Zaporozhian Cossack?

“While you’re waiting for permission, Tymish,” Nepran thundered, “the Tatar hordes have crossed the Inhul Steppe almost to Kiev and taken slaves, burned our villages, plundered our native Ukrainian land! Is this not a disgrace, brothers?”

“It’s a disgrace!” the crowd agreed.

“Here we lounge about, drinking mead, trampling the Sich soil with our dancing, while the Mussulmans are auctioning off our fathers, wives, and children beyond Perekop. And below the Rapids, our people groan, in chains, unable to cry out or even sing songs about their bitter misery! It’s not frightening to die in glory, but it’s frightening to live ingloriously. How long will we bear our disgrace and dishonour? We are good, calm, gentle, meeting generously, with bread and salt, every visitor and foreigner who detests us fiercely for our candour. Damned fools, that’s what we are! As long as we are in servitude, we have no right to kindness and goodness! To us these are a luxury for which we pay dearly in sweat and blood . . .”

“He speaks the truth!”

“We’re dying!”

“To war, brothers!”

“Silence! We can’t go on the Khan yet!” Taras yelled, running up.

“Afraid, Master Koshovy? Lay down your mace and go to the four winds!”

“To lay it down is no great effort. My concern is not with myself, but that you don’t lose your hot heads in vain!”

“Hold onto yours more firmly!”

“To Crimea! To Kafa!” Bodnia bellowed, his voice echoing throughout the fortress.

The maidan grew quiet. Then a clamour spread through the crowd and erupted in laughter. Instead of yelling out “To Crimea! To Kafa!” after Mykola, the famous Nyz warriors began to argue whether the heavenly saint had opened

his mouth when he shouted, or merely trumpeted the words out.

Meanwhile the koshovy got up on an empty barrel and began to gently entreat the men:

“My good, brave lads! Does it befit us to quarrel and intimidate the reasonable, wise heads of our otaman fathers, forcing them to raise an army against the Khan? If our enslavement was only in Crimea, we would have won it back long ago. But it’s bearing down on us from all sides and we need a strong force to break the enemy’s back. Wait! There will still be battles, there will still be opportunities to pour out your hot revenge on those who strive to destroy our nation, our religion, and our tempestuous cossack freedom! It is I who am telling you this, brothers, your koshovy, Triasylo. You know for certain I don’t wear a sabre for decoration only; you wouldn’t have chosen such a man as your otaman.”

“Be healthy in your reign, father!”

“Shake the enemy like a pear tree!”

The crowd seethed with agreement, completely forgetting the two travellers from the other world. Music started up again. Triasylo was lifted up and carried off to the tavern to drink the incident away . . .

Nepran stood dejected and watched silently how quickly and fearfully everything he had strived for with his honest, inspired speech had fallen apart. It seemed the cossacks were almost ready to follow him to Crimea and Kafa. And then suddenly they yielded and obediently followed the koshovy. He couldn’t understand, couldn’t grasp why it had happened, even though he thought he had known the cossacks’ temperament since he was a boy.

“Well! Well!” he heard Bodnia’s words behind him.

Nepran regained his composure, drew his kobza from behind him, ran his fingers over the strings, and sitting atop the barrel from which the koshovy had spoken a minute earlier, bawled into the crowd:

*Oh, on a holy Sunday
And early in the morn,
Oh, 'twas not the cry of the eagles grey,
'Twas the poor slaves
Moaning in hard Turkish slavery, hey!*

The crowd became silent and pressed around Nepran. Nepran knew the power of singing and knew the hearts of the famous Nyz knights. Pausing till the maidan was quiet, he continued to sing even more passionately, so that

shivers ran up his own spine.

*They raised their hands
And clanked their chains together,
Beseeching and imploring the merciful Lord, hey!
“Hey, send us, oh Lord, a light rain from heaven,
And a wild wind from the Nyz,
To raise a fast wave on the Black Sea
And tear this galley from its anchors, hey!
For this Turkish slavery is more than we can bear . . . ”*

Nepran sang the ballad as if it was about his own fate. For hadn't he entreated the heavens for rain and a strong wind from the Nyz, because death in a storm was better than life in chains? His whole back was in scars from the meadow-sweat and the whips, and his soul ached for calm native waters and bright stars.

He ran his eyes over the men and suddenly a warm languid wave inundated his entire body from head to foot; the Sich Cossacks, fearless life-long warriors that they were, wiped the tears from their eyes . . .

“To Kafa! We'll free the unfortunate prisoners!” Mykola yelled out again.

Like white gulls the cossacks' sharp sabres rose glinting in the silver moonlight.

Triasylo was saying something, trying to explain, but no one listened.

“Lead the way, Nepran! We'll free them!” The menacing words echoed through the Sich.

Nepran bowed in all four directions, thanking the men, swung the kobza behind him and raising his hand, yelled out:

“We'll leave in the morn tomorrow!”

* *
*

As dawn approached, a boy from Kaniv Kurin ran up and called Petro Nepran to see the kosovy.

The sleepless night had sobered the cossack, forcing him to reflect on the march on Crimea several times — it only seemed an easy thing to be an otaman. But an otaman was always in the public eye: if he was intelligent, he could be seen a long way off; if he was a fool, he could be seen even further.

The moon had waned. A church and some towers stood black in the

pre-dawn twilight. Horses neighed in the steppe beyond the river. Heavy dew weighed down the guelder-rose which Petro had once planted.

Nepran straightened his back, filled his lungs with air and breathed out noisily. He nestled his face against the leaves. Astringent, cold and wet, the leaves took away his lassitude as if by magic and inspired his thoughts. Now he could soberly face the *koshovy*.

Triasylo met him outside, offered his large hand and said affably:

"I wanted to go for a walk around the island. I find it boring on my own, so I called for you . . ."

Nepran shrugged his shoulders and set off beside him. He was wary, ready to fight back if Triasylo tried to stand in the way of his march on Crimea.

"You're a good orator!" the *koshovy* praised him when they passed through the gate. "Taken the power from me before I could blink twice . . ."

"Father, you're still the *koshovy*," Nepran consoled him. "I'll just nip down to Crimea and back."

Triasylo pulled at his moustache.

"To nip down is no trick. The art is in being able to return . . . Take Doroshenko* for instance, he was as smart as they come, and yet he left his head in Kafa."

"Are we to fear the Tatars then, father? To sit quietly in the Sich and let the hordes pillage Ukraine?" Nepran asked angrily.

"That's not the point, Petro. A war isn't only fighting. One smart man can defeat a hundred, sometimes even a thousand men."

"I don't recall seeing men like that."

"Well I've seen them, brother."

"Where?"

"Yesterday, here in the Sich. I've worked hard all year to gather brothers around me, checking the wanton heads, and you came and suddenly destroyed everything . . ."

"But I'm not doing it for myself, father . . ." Nepran mumbled despondently: he did not want to anger the wise old *cossack* leader.

"If you'd done it for yourself, we wouldn't be walking here so prettily, cooing like pigeons," the *koshovy* said, tugging at his moustache again. "Still, you'll never make a *koshovy* or a *kurin otaman*!"

"Why's that?" Nepran smiled.

* Mykhailo Doroshenko – hetman of the Registered Cossacks 1625–28.

“You’ve too hot a heart. And your head’s like March weather. The ability to make men mutiny, to raise anger or revenge in their hearts — is a gift from God. But this is not enough. What flares up quickly, dies away quickly. If our misfortune was even a little lighter, then maybe you could destroy it with your fiery anger. But as it is . . . Look about you with a sober, searching eye, Petro. We’re in the grip of such a strong vice, that we will be lucky if we can break free in a hundred years.”

“Are you bidding me to sit tight, father, and to wait for the right opportunity?”

“No. I want you to break out, to demolish, to shatter.”

“But I’m demolishing!”

“Good. But you’ve got your hands on the wrong place, my son.”

“Where it hurts.”

“You must grab at the weakest spot, where you can break the whole trap at once.”

“I’m a Zaporozhian Cossack, father, and I’ve a good sabre!”

“Don’t get excited and angry,” Triasylo stopped him. “Watch the sun rise . . . Nowhere does it rise so beautifully as over the Dnipro in the Steppe . . . Opening its merry eyes like a child . . .”

“Have you any children?”

“I did . . .”

“Where are they?”

Triasylo frowned, the reverie left his face.

“I lost my son to the Mussulmans. After the Tatars took him captive, his trail went cold. The brute Laszcz, the royal guard, tortured my daughters to death . . .”

They came to a deserted spot. Amongst the oaks and wild pears spread a meadow woven from the silks of grasses and flowers. In the dark luxuriant treetops the spring nightingales were finishing their songs, lively cuckoos hurriedly counted off someone’s years, broke off, then started again. Turtle-doves trumpeted from the darkness . . .

Taras stopped Nepran in the middle of the clearing and said almost in a whisper:

“We’ve conceived a good plan . . . For the whole of our land and all our people. We can’t wear the heavy yoke of foreigners for ever . . .”

“You want to shake the Polish crown?” Nepran asked.

“Ts-s-s!” the old leader uttered and looked about. “No, not to shake it. To break the chains completely and give people freedom, strong wings for Ukraine, honour and glory for the cossacks, and a lesson for all time to our enemies!”

“Will we have the numbers?”

“Yes. We’ll raise every town and village . . . We’ll inject hope into the hearts of the cossacks and the peasants, give them weapons, and strike together. Either we’ll break loose with all our martyr nation, or we’ll die in a bloody slaughter, and our honest eyes will no longer see disgrace and dishonour!”

“When shall we begin, father?”

“When the time is right.”

“You’re playing the fox again!”

“You want me to announce it all over the Rzecz Pospolita^o? You think the Polish nobility hasn’t its own eyes and ears amongst us?”

“That’s reasonable.”

“Till then we must be secretive, brother,” Triasylo sighed, “Like a river in spring . . . and then we’ll crack the ice and break our banks . . . !” He tugged sharply at his moustache, as if wanting to tear it out. “So that’s why we can’t march on Crimea today,” he added forcefully.

“You want to use the Crimeans against the Rzecz Pospolita?”

“No. Our campaign last year stands in the way of that. If we were to win, to take the capital of Crimea and install Shahin-Giray there . . . ”

“You believe the horde won’t stab us in the back when we raise the Volost?”

“If the Sultan calls for the Tatars, they won’t.”

“So the Sultan is preparing a campaign?”

“And why not. Doesn’t Khotyn pain him?”

“Have you heard something?”

“Of course I have.”

“That the Turks want to attack Poland?”

“No, on the contrary. That they don’t intend to for the moment.”

Nepran grew silent, straining to grasp the thread of the conversation, to untangle this cunning wicker-work, but was unable to fathom Triasylo’s bent,

^o The Polish Empire.

the future relations between the Sich, Crimea and the Porte[†]. He finally gave in.

“I can’t seem to grasp your language, father.”

“Everything is simpler than the simple,” the kosovsky said, looking around. “We’ll strike soon, however not into Crimea, but straight into the heart of the Porte, Istanbul. The Sultan will be angered and inasmuch as the cossacks are subjects of Poland, he will threaten the Rzecz Pospolita and begin a new war, or at least station his army on the borders of the Porte and Rzecz Pospolita. King Sigismund will have to gather his units and cover Poland with them . . . and then, Nepran, our time will be nigh!”

Moving a step closer to the kosovsky and brushing his forelock behind his ear, Nepran appealed:

“Take me on the chaika* too, father! Let me light my pipe from the embers of Istanbul and again see black Turkish galleys, damned by God and man, engulfed in flames!”

“And what about Crimea and your beloved?” Triasylo asked.

“You already know about my beloved . . .”

“That’s a kosovsky otaman’s job. I must know everything.”

“We won’t attack Crimea, and I’ll free my beloved, God willing, with gold plundered from the nobles!”

“A true cossack’s words,” Triasylo said. “Go and stop the men, but not a word to anyone about our conversation!”

“I’m not a small boy, father . . . And will you let us go to sea?”

“Who is ‘us’?” Triasylo squinted.

“Me and my blood brother, Mykola.”

Taras waved his hand:

“All right. Find Khmelnitsky and tell him I sent both of you to his aid.”

“Thank you!”

“Holding onto his Damascus sabre, Nepran left Triasylo and ran off to stem the cossack tide he had initiated.

* *
*

In the kurin they had had a quick breakfast and the cossacks who had

[†] The Ottoman (Turkish) Empire.

* Chaika – a cossack boat, lit. means ‘seagull’.

the day before elected Petro Nepran as their otaman were preparing for the long journey; they filled horns with powder, sharpened their sabres and cleaned their muskets.

Nepran's blood brother greeted him with a reproach:

"And where the devil have you been? People are coming for advice, and you know quite well that an army without an otaman is like a hive without a queen! Orendarenko had to split the brothers into hundreds; he wanted to get some emblems and flags, but the koshoivy disappeared somewhere . . ."

"How many volunteers are there?" Nepran asked, not knowing how to placate his fiery followers.

"Fifteen hundreds!"

"Not many."

"We'll gather more in the steppe and from the fisheries along the Dnipro. Tymish says there are swarms of cossacks there."

God was witness to how difficult it was for Nepran to abandon everything for the sake of which he had hurried to Zaporizhia with Bodnia. There were several thousand riders! With a force like that he would have certainly freed his beloved from captivity, and with her hundreds, maybe even thousands of other unfortunate slaves . . .

"I've changed my mind," he announced mutely with despair. "We shouldn't go on Crimea."

"My, my!" Bodnia put his hands on his hips. "Had too much to drink this morning, or have you gone off your head?"

"Neither! Our road does not lie to Crimea today . . ."

"Nepran, you have no tsar in your head now," Bodnia drew closer. "May my whole forelock fall out if I don't give your heathen sides a beating!"

Nepran did not move a step. He stood ready to accept the cup of punishment, to atone for his unintentional sin before Mykola and the whole Sich brotherhood. He knew what he was taking on when he had agreed to pacify the cossacks' ardour and to cool the kasha* which he had cooked.

It was this which stopped Bodnia: a cossack does not touch defenceless people. He lowered his anger-filled fists, not knowing where to hide them, and asked:

"Petro, quickly tell me that all this is only a joke, that you deliberately . . ."

* Wheat porridge

“Do people joke about such things?”

“You’re speaking the truth . . . ” Mykola flared up again. “Just wait till I call the men together, let them behold their otaman who crawled away without having smelt powder!”

“Stop, you foolish head!” Nepran stopped his friend. “We can’t go on Crimea. There is other business.”

“To drink mead and horilka, and eat dace?”

“No, to fight the Turks!”

“Where? Here in the Sich?” Bodnia jeered.

Nepran put his finger to his mouth and looking around, said softly, so that no one apart from his blood brother could hear:

“We’ll soon be hitting them at sea, in the Porte or the capital itself.”

“You’re not barking lies, are you?”

“A cossack isn’t a dog, Mykola. He speaks the mother truth. And if he doesn’t want to tell someone the truth, he’ll silently spit in his face.”

“When are we setting out?” Bodnia whispered, for the whole fortress to hear.

“I don’t know. Soon. The chaikas aren’t ready yet.”

“And what about Kafa and Siryk’s daughter? We swore . . . ”

“God willing, we’ll find and rescue her . . . All of Ukraine is in slavery.”

Mykola listened wordlessly, without laying his eyes on his blood brother, then looked him sharply in the eye and said:

“Lead the way to Crimea or Warsaw, only don’t stand here like a rock!”

“Tell Orendarenko to settle everything, and we’ll go to the Meadow* to look at the chaikas.”

“But what will he tell the boys?”

“That the Khan is waiting for our attack, and so it doesn’t suit us now . . . ”

“My, you’re a crafty fox,” Mykola drawled and threatened him with his large mallet of a fist: “Just wait, your craftiness will lead you to receive Communion with this consecrated Host yet!”

* *
*

* Lowlands along the Dnipro River near the Sich.

They roamed the Meadow by boat for almost half a day. The blood brothers couldn't hear the splashing of their oars, for so many orioles, cuckoos, hoopoes and nightingales plied the undergrowth about them. Oak, aspen, willow, and reed merged into a unity, hiding the sun and the sky from view. Straits, bays, lakes, inlets were so numerous and so entangled that even Nepran steered the boat several times into dead-end backwaters. No wonder the Turks feared the Meadow, like the devil feared incense.

Towards nightfall they came out onto open water and saw a sight which made Bodnia drop his oars. Along a gently sloping sandy beach stood a swarm of chaikas; fires burned among the oaks in the meadow; half-finished boats bared their white ribs. Hammers rang out, sharp axes clapped, shouts and exclamations filled the air. Like devils in hell, Sich Cossacks prowled about bare to the waist in this rumbling confusion. Permeated by smoke, fried in the merciless summer sun, they looked like the Arabs Nepran had seen in the Porte on several occasions. Something painful and ticklish shifted in the cossack's chest and he stood up. Nepran threw out his arms, as if wanting to embrace everyone on shore, and shouted:

“Poohoo! Poohoo!”

The boat-builders straightened their swarthy backs and waited in silence for the unexpected visitor to reach the shore.

Nepran moved to the bow of the boat and rested his foot on the board, ready to jump onto the first chaika and to run along it to the cossacks, among whom were probably many of his nearest and dearest friends. Feverishly he ran his eyes over the crowd to seek the familiar faces of his friends. But there was no one. Were there none here either?

Meanwhile the boat cut into the black flock of chaikas and progressed towards the white sandy shore along a narrow corridor between the strong tarred boats.

Nepran adjusted his kobza, which clung to his back like a sweetheart, looked around at his blood brother, and stepped ashore.

Nearby on a long thick hull recently hollowed out from a strong linden, sat Bohdan Khmelnitsky, with whom he had gone to sea two years before. He was dressed like everyone else, in pants, and was barefoot. Sucking on a short pipe, he studied the visitor.

“Good health to you, Khmel . . .” Nepran whispered emotionally.

Khmelnitsky raised his eyebrows, then knitted them again and suddenly

hurled his pipe to the ground:

“Nepran, my falcon, is it you or your spirit?”

“It’s me and my spirit – the kobza!”

Bohdan ran up to him. He hugged him and held him close for a long time, as if fearing the cossack might vanish. Then holding Nepran at arm’s length, he looked into his eyes and kissed him awkwardly three times.

“He’s risen from the dead, boys!”

Nepran looked around and saw about him so many familiar smiling faces that he couldn’t believe his eyes and rubbed them with his hand.

“Are you all alive and well?” he asked, lost for words.

“Yes, we’re alive, Nepran!” the brothers roared and moved like demons towards a sinful soul.

“At least wash yourselves, brothers,” Nepran bellowed, guffawing. “You’ll have me as black as a boot!”

“We’ll let you wash for us all – it’ll be cheaper.”

“Stepan! Vlas! Prokop!”

“Oho-ho-ho!”

Familiar eyes, smiles, noses, forelocks, and moustaches appeared from all sides. He moved from one embrace to another. The cream of the Sich had gathered here, those who had faced the enemy in combat many a time, and now prepared to look death in the eyes again.

Bohdan called Mykola.

“My blood brother,” Nepran introduced him to the cossacks. “Fierce in appearance, but gentle as a calf . . . ”

“Petro,” Bodnia said with a sullen look, “shut your blubbering mouth or I’ll silence it myself.”

The brothers’ jaws dropped:

“There’s a calf for you!”

“A bull from the Orel pastures!”

Mykola drew his sabre.

“Enough!” Khmelnitsky intervened. “Hide your toy, child, we bury murderers alive here . . . ”

“He’s only joking, Khmel,” Nepran said, jabbing Mykola in the ribs. “Isn’t that so?”

Mykola only grumbled involuntarily.

“How about a cup, brothers, in honour of this meeting?” Khmelnitsky

asked.

“Or even two!” the warriors replied in chorus.

Bohdan waved his arm and a good band of volunteers hurried towards the shed where the barrels stood. Soon they rolled one out and set about the bung. As if on purpose the bung had swelled too much, and in their despair the cossacks brought out axes and keleps¹, as well as hammers and chisels.

“Give it a good hit!”

“You’ll break the barrel, fool!”

“Try the other side, boys!”

“Stepan, you’ll be so fagged out you won’t want any mead!”

“Here, let me!”

Their clamour filled the Big Meadow.

Mykola watched indifferently, then snorted, spat, and pushing through the merry crowd, stopped face to face with the barrel. The boat-builders immediately grew quiet, looking to see what would happen next. Mykola grabbed a nosatka², in his left hand, and with his right took hold of the stubborn bung, extracting it easily from the barrel.

The crowd sighed and grew quiet, enchanted by the stream of mead.

Bodnia filled the nosatka to the brim, replaced the bung, slowly wiped his mouth and fell on the mead like an oxen to water. Raising his head, he kept tilting the nosatka more and more: it contained no less than half a bucketful.

The Sich Cossacks swallowed hard. Finally one of them could stand it no longer and said affectedly:

“Boys, this little calf looks like it hasn’t been watered for several days!”

“Like a calf sucking at the udder.”

“Bang a hoop on his belly, so he doesn’t burst.”

Having finished drinking, Mykola let out a moan, wiped his moustache and smiled.

“Keep that up and I’ll push the bung in even deeper. Then you’ll be running around the barrel like sinners around Heaven . . .”

Khmelnitsky took Nepran aside, lit the pipe already in his teeth, and asked:

“Will you go to sea with me?”

1. War hammers.

2. Large copper ladle into which drink from barrels is strained.

“That’s why we’ve come here . . .”

“Nepran! Khmel!” They were being called. “Hurry up, there’s only a drop left at the bottom!”

Mykola approached them with the nosatka, followed by the cossacks bearing mugs and other vessels . . .

Nepran did not drink much – he wanted to savour the day, to experience it deeply, to remember forever the joy of the meeting, the brotherly friendship. Giving his mead to Bohdan, he wandered among the men, becoming as inseparable from this sacred brotherhood as flesh from flesh and blood from blood; this joyous peace, unfathomable to outsiders, this giant people who had been given a hard life.

“Nepran, how about a song! A song!”

A place was cleared for him under an enormous oak and he was allowed through.

Moved to tears, Nepran lay the kobza against his breast, lit by the low evening sun, surveyed the cossacks and touched the strings. They reverberated with their familiar dear voice, rang out and splashed forth with a cascade of sound. Past battles, galleys, the grief of captivity, escape . . . A moment later a word rose from his lips, the word which on the slave ship had spawned a song. Then he had used it to pray to the heavens, the winds, begging salvation, freedom, or at least death. But now the old song, a piece of a slave’s soul, was the wailing of others, unfortunate slaves still suffering from Perekop to Egypt, cherishing the hope of seeing their native land at least once before their death.

The Zaporozhian Cossacks listened in mournful silence. The branches of the old oaks and poplars dissolved into the grey murkiness of evening. Fierce chaikas floated onto the pink sky with anger and revenge.



Chapter III





The morning after Kupalo^o, Tymish Orendarenko arrived from the Sich with the order to set out. Bohdan Khmelnytsky summoned the boat otamans and the island awoke from the slumber of waiting. The cossacks and their chaikas had been ready a long time, but an expedition was no hike; each man had to know whether his sabre was sharp, whether his muskets fired well, and whether there was enough lead and herbs. Then there were the sails, oars, cannons, cannon-balls, anchors, and barrels of millet, water, dough and rusks . . . The long summer day flew past in hard work like a single minute.

In the evening there was a hush. Three hundred chaikas were buffeted on the lakes, straits, and gulfs, by the Horishniak*, and tore like hot stallions at their sound hemp ropes. The Sich Cossacks ate their beloved fish soup, *scherba*, in silence and said their farewells to the Big Meadow, the Sich, and their native land. There had never been an expedition from which all had returned.

While eating, Nepran drifted home in his thoughts, to his mother; to the Brotherhood School in Kiev; to Khutory, where his Uliana had grown up and flowered . . . He had been on expeditions on chaikas many a time, taken cities and boarded galleys, he'd had a good whiff of gunpowder, suffered through heat, thirst, captivity and slavery. Yet he had no regrets and was not afraid of plunging into the hell of storm waves, of sea battles, and attacks on Turkish towns and forts. People hold freedom in sanctity, and when one fights for it there are no wounds, no death . . .

“Is it big?” asked Mykola.

“What?”

^o Ancient Ukrainian festival celebrated on June 24.

* The North Wind.

“The sea.”

“Of course.”

“Like the Dnipro in flood?”

“No, much bigger. Like the sky.”

“Really? And does it create waves?”

“Yes.”

Mykola grew quiet and pensive. He was not afraid of the enemy, of bloody combat, and encounters – he had been through all that before. He feared the sea, unknown, wild, too immense to see or comprehend.

“It’s an endless plain!” Nepran said, spreading his arms out. “No shores, no bushes – just water and sky . . . ”

“Boys!” Tymish Orendarenko, now a chaika otaman, ran up. “Hurry, Khmel is calling for you!”

They jumped to their feet and hid their spoons.

“Where is he?”

“On the otaman’s chaika.”

“Are we leaving already?” asked Mykola sadly.

“No. At sunset.”

“We won’t lose our way, will we?”

“Don’t fret, lad. The cossacks have never lost their way when paying the Mussulmans a visit!”

“We know the way well,” Nepran added. “We’ve been plying it seven hundred years!”

Khmelnitsky puffed on his pipe and watched the Zaporozhian Cossacks carefully raise the light underwater boat and carry it up planks onto the enormous chaika. He had his sabre strapped on and wore his old lambskin hat. Two pistols glistened behind his blue belt.

“Careful, careful!” he moved towards those carrying the cunning cossack invention. “If the skin is pierced, it’ll sink!”

“We’re taking care!” one of them said.

“It’s not the first time we’ve had to do such a delicate job . . . ”

Spying Petro and Mykola, Bohdan set off towards them:

“Ready?”

“Yes.”

“Nepran, have you been in an underwater boat before?”

“Once. In the Bosphorus. When we took Buyukdere.”

“Good then,” Bohdan said, relieved. “There’s a toy for you.” He nodded at the boat which the boys had already laid to rest in the chaika. Choose yourself a comrade . . . ”

“My blood brother.”

“Agreed. Will you go under water?” Bohdan asked Mykola. “You won’t be afraid, will you?”

“Is it dark down there?”

“Yes,” Khmel smiled into his moustache. “However, when you emerge from the sea and light a fire under the Turk’s very nose, it’ll become as bright as day.”

“I won’t be afraid, father!” Bodnia said triumphantly. “Nepran and I . . . ”

“Sound the trumpet,” Khmelnitsky said to his aide. “Board the chaikas! Hurry!”

The Big Meadow resounded to the trumpet’s call and became alive with cossacks and chaikas. Swift cossack monoxyles* slid down inlets, straits and old river beds, soon to emerge onto the expanse of the Dnipro, to raise their sails and to surge forward on the wings of the breeze to the sea, into the unknown.

They sailed all night. In the morning they hid in marshes on the right bank near Tavan and Kazikerman^o, so that after resting the day, they could pass the Turkish forts under cover of darkness. Posting sentries all around, they breakfasted on dried fish and rye gruel and lay down to sleep – some in the boats, other on the grass under the willows. They fell asleep at once, tired from rowing all night.

However, Khmelnitsky could not sleep. As a precaution, he sent scouts in all directions. Nepran could not sleep either. He lay in the shade on a bed of grass and gazed into the sky. One after another clouds sailed past like gulls . . . Bunching up into something large and black, the silent horde flew over the steppe . . . Herding captives . . . Long rows of girls stretched out across the hot infinity, and the sky shed blind rain on their tears . . . Suddenly he saw his sweetheart in the wailing crowd. He sat up, and then fell back again, realising it was all a delusion, a hallucination. Cossacks lay asleep around him, chaikas rested in the reeds . . .

* Boats hollowed from a single log.

o Turkish fortresses on the Dnipro River, now the sites of Kakhovka and Beryslav.

He wanted to fall asleep, to forget everything if for only a minute, to dispel the sorrow and expel the guilt which burned his conscience, and chided him for not going to Kafa after the slave traders. But he could not dispel the guilt. He closed his eyes and tried in vain to fight off the oppressive thoughts. Then he opened his dry, sleepless eyes and again gazed into the sky. Now it seemed it wasn't clouds flying past in sad flocks, but the souls of poor galley-slaves, all the slaves who dreamed of freedom while in captivity, who returned to their native land in their thoughts. There were countless numbers of them! They came and came, bunching into black thunderclouds, rumbling thunder, flashing lightning, tearing the world apart with their fiery anger . . .

Two scouts, wet from head to foot, ran up to Khmelnitsky's boat. The enemy must have appeared nearby.

Nepran lay a while longer, awaiting the first sound of alarm, but, hearing nothing, rose and went to where the otaman's insignia fluttered high on the mast. There was silence all around. Bohdan and a dozen seasoned old cossacks were sitting in a circle under a large oak and seemed to be napping too. However, when Petro approached, Khmelnitsky nodded for him to sit down and said sadly:

"They've closed the way for us."

"Did they bring in galleys or set a *gard**?"

"No. They've locked the river with a chain."

"The chain stretches from Kazikerman across to Tavan."

"Nice work! So what do we do now?"

Bohdan shrugged his shoulders.

"Take Kazikerman by storm and unchain the Dnipro . . ." he said after a short while.

"That's unwise, Khmel, because we'll stir up the Crimeans and the Turks too soon and expend a lot of energy on nothing," replied old Schyrytsia, who had been on every sea expedition since Nepran first breathed in the salty sea air.

"Steal up at night and break the chain with keleps," another cossack suggested.

"They'll blast you with every cannon they've got and send you to the crabs for dinner."

"Lift the chain."

* Net stretched across river to catch fish.

“Submerge it!”

“Drag all the boats across overland.”

“Get help from the Sich.”

“And several hundred horses to pull the chaikas . . .”

Nepran remembered the Inhul Steppe late in the afternoon and the drove of wild horses, which he and Mykola had so thoughtlessly taken for Tatars . . .”

“What if we were to float logs onto the chain?” he thought aloud.

“Eureka!” Bohdan exclaimed.

“What for?” Schyrytsia asked sullenly. “Think they’ll break it?”

“They’ll at least create a disturbance, and the Turks will fire on them and break the chains themselves. If not, we’ll help them when their powder supply runs out,” said Nepran.

“Tie two logs together and put up masts.”

“And tie on all kinds of jingles.”

“Rattle, clatter, bang! Then we’ll drift quietly past in the darkness . . .”

“Thank you, Brother Petro,” Bohdan embraced Nepran. “Wake fifty men, fell some oaks and create a diversion for the enemy!”

“You’ve got a smart head, son,” Schyrytsia drawled, looking Petro in the eye. “You’ll end up with a *pernach*^o, if not a hetman’s mace . . .”

“I’d rather have my kobza!” said Nepran, rising.

When it grew dark they rowed out of the marshes onto the open water of the Dnipro, and forming themselves, precipitously set off down the river. The water carried hundreds of chaikas in almost total darkness, the oars cut the water in unison; from behind, the sides and the front came the breathing and resolve of thousands of warriors, who scorning death, plunged into the unknown, sure that they would defeat the enemy . . .

Suddenly the oars froze. The otaman’s boat turned left and stopped in the reeds. The other chaikas followed suit, except for the ten towing the heavy logs with masts. These turned around in the current and let the dummies pass. Oars shuddered and fell onto the black water like wild ducks, and slowly the river became clean and glassy smooth.

No one talked, all listened to the Dnipro, the night, the crickets chirring loudly in the steppe. They awaited the thunder and hell; there were more than enough cannons on Kazikerman, the earth shuddered when they fired.

^o Colonel’s baton.

Silence. The lapping of waves, the whisper of reed panicles, the alarmed shriek of a swamp bird . . . the gentle rustle of grasses . . . Someone talking, worrying whether everything had been done properly, was silenced and became quiet . . .

“Maybe they won’t find their mark?” Bodnia asked in a whisper. He was more nervous than anyone else. Standing, with a sabre in his right hand, he was ready to storm the fortress, or even the chain which had so vexedly foiled their plan.

“Where else could they go?” said Nepran. “They’ll find their mark.”

“But they might hit shore somewhere.”

“And the current?”

“It’s Turkish . . .”

“It’s ours! You’ll see for yourself how nicely it carries cossack chaikas. Ts-s! I think I can hear a rumble . . .”

“You’re hearing things.”

The sky was suddenly ablaze with flashes. Again and again . . . There came the explosion of muted thunder.

“It’s gone, it’s gone, Mykola!” Nepran exclaimed. “They’ve fallen for it!”

A joyous murmur swept the reeds where the chaikas were concealed and died away. The Sich Cossacks sat up and listened to the familiar music of cannons and grinned into their luxuriant moustaches. The Turks were blasting away with every cannon! Victorious knights! Now they would send the sultan a letter claiming that they had drowned the cossacks like puppies, while the cossacks followed on its heels. Good-day, Mister Mussulman! Expecting us, you son of a devil?

“Had we leapt before we looked, we’d have all been dead by now,” someone said.

“That’s what an otaman’s for.”

“We haven’t got pumpkins on our shoulders either.”

“Quiet there, or the Turks’ll hear us!”

“Brothers, look, look, the otaman is giving the sign!”

“Man the oars!”

Slowly the din died away. One after another the cannons became silent, until finally all was quiet.

“Forward! Forward!” the word spread from the otaman’s boat.

Without any fuss the boats entered the river’s strong current in twos, and

without raising masts or sails, raced downstream towards the sea.

Kazikerman melted in the darkness and the smoke. They had put up a good fight, now it was no sin to rest and praise Allah for helping His sons win such a victory. The faithful could sleep soundly, for the gate protecting them from the *urus-giaours** was strong and dependable.

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Kazikerman was only the half-way mark, and only one of several gates to the sea. The Sich Cossacks moved carefully in the darkness, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. It wasn't fear which forced them to be stealthy, but a reluctance to do battle prematurely, to waste their reserves and strength before reaching the Porte.

Even so, the Turks were waiting for them. Near Ochakiv, galleys stood strung out across the river, blocking the mouth completely. Though it was approaching the crack of dawn, no one was asleep on the vessels or in the fortress.

Petro and Mykola saw everything with their own eyes: stopping the chaikas several versts[†] from Sterlnycha Spit^o, Khmelnitsky called for them and ordered them to creep up closer to the fortress to discover what was happening there.

The bad news staggered everyone. There was nowhere to hide in the estuary to sit out the treacherous day. And the Turks, probably alerted to the arrival of 'visitors', had sent patrols along the banks, and perhaps even lay in wait for them.

Bohdan called a council of the elders and the seasoned cossacks. He kept the blood brothers by his side too, so that all could hear from them what new misfortune had befallen them.

"We are strong, Khmel!" Orendarenko said fervently. "We'll raise all our sails, lay on the oars and hit the slave ships so hard, they'll break into splinters!"

"Board the galleys!"

* Rus ie. Ukrainian infidels.

† One verst equals about two-thirds of a mile.

o Spit jutting out to sea opposite Ochakiv. Now called Kinburnsky Spit.

“The estuary is narrow,” others thought aloud. “We’ll be packed tightly together; there are over fifty cannons on Ochakiv. And just as many, if not more, on the galleys . . .”

“Is it the first time we’ve had to fight?”

“We’ll smash them and the cannons will become ours!”

“And how many men will fall here?”

“Senseless death is a grave sin,” Khmelnitsky said.

“Return the *pernach* and take up the priest’s spinkler instead, Khmel!”

“I’ll take Ochakiv first and then the sprinkler,” he replied sternly.

“What next! Good people, why do we need Ochakiv?” Orendarenko kicked up a row. “What possible use is it?”

“Nepran, take six hundred boys,” Bohdan said decisively, “ten each from the chaikas in the middle, and storm the fortress. You’ll approach from the steppe, along the shore. And we’ll help from the water . . .”

“You’ve decided badly, my son,” Schyrytsia interjected. “That’s not what our father *koshovy* sent us to sea for.”

“First we must reach the sea.”

“Then let’s go!”

“We’ll get there. When the attack on the fortress begins, the galleys will change their formation and come closer to help Ochakiv, and then . . .”

“We’ll strike, Khmel!” Schyrytsia caught on. “And break through!”

“And leave us in the steppe?” Nepran asked.

“You’ll frighten the Turks a little while we break through, and then catch up to us further down.”

“We’re not wild horses, Khmel, we can’t catch up to the chaikas.”

“After the Turks pepper you well, you’ll run so fast no horse will catch you!” the cossacks laughed mirthfully.

“We’ll wait for you on the other side of the mouth and pick you all up there,” said Khmelnitsky. “God be with you! Take the *pernach*, Nepran,” he stopped Petro, and handing him the otaman’s token, kissed him. “Frighten the hell out of them, but don’t take the town. The devil needs it now!”

Nepran called Bodnia and jumped into another chaika.

Soon a hundred fast cossack boats left their anchors and made for the walls of Ochakiv in the twilight before dawn. They didn’t raise their sails: the tide swept them along fast enough towards the sea, so fast in fact that a moment’s lingering could have found a cossack among the Turkish galleys.

Petro stood on the leading chaika with the *pernach* behind his belt (without the kobza now, which he had left in Khmel's custody), and studied the fortress walls which drifted out from the distance and whose towers and bastions seemed to be crawling towards him. It wasn't his first assault on a fortress. However, whereas before he had only one worry – to chop well and move forward onto the walls, now he was an otaman, he was entrusted with the lives and fortunes of brothers with whom he had eaten many a pood* of salt. Someone would lay down his head today in the moat, or on the ramparts, or the wall, where the cannons, bows and sabres had already bared their teeth against them. And a grey old mother would wail and grieve, feeling a pain in her chest and a black grief in her heart. A raven would caw in the steppe, ready to gouge out the cossack's eyes, a gull would mew in the Meadow . . .

“Nepran, the shore!” Mykola nudged him.

Petro screwed up his eyes, bared his sabre of Damascus steel, and jumped first into the foaming white breakers.

Without a clatter or a bang the knights with forelocks left the boats silently, dragging hooks and ladders along, spreading out in a terrible wide fan, pressing in on the town from the steppe.

On the walls there was an ant-like commotion as the Turks prepared for battle, several heavy cannons fired from the embrasures and cast-iron balls dug into the dry wormwood, breathing death into the eyes of the cossack ranks.

Nepran looked around to see if everyone had left the boats and whether the noose around the fortress had been tightened, then called out:

“Attack! Ladders in front!”

Six hundred sabres glinted with a dull cold glow and the earth groaned all around; the morning light flinched and fell on the grasses . . .

No, he didn't desire blood, nor death, nor torture. In spirit he was gentle and forgiving. However one thing made him indignant – violence, force and injustice. Ever since the Turks had intruded into the cossack steppe and subdued Crimea and the neighbouring Tatar hordes, there was no peace. Year in, year out khans set out with armies into the vast, once powerful Rus[†], plundering and destroying everything. Ruin, death, devastation. This was the reason Ukraine was unable to rise to her own feet and throw off the heavy foreign yoke.

* One pood equals about 16 kilograms.

† Ancient name of Ukraine.

Having crossed the deep moat and reached half-way up the ramparts, Nepran glanced towards the estuary and saw a sight which should have frightened and saddened him, had everything not been planned in advance: leaving their places in the mouth, the galleys were moving towards the town, anchoring here so as not to be swept out to sea by the current and opening fire on the moat and ramparts, where the Zaporozhians were milling in their attempt to storm the fortress. Just a little longer . . . The chaikas would be attacking any minute now and sweeping the slave ships from their path: then they could retreat. Why were they taking so long? So many boys had already fallen. It was time to end it all! Meanwhile the only escape was to attack. After they came face to face, the cannons would be silent.

“Forward, onto the walls, brothers!” Nepran yelled out and was the first to surge forward. Bodnia wheezed behind him, always a step away from his blood brother.

Crashes, groans, screams, shots — everything merged into the unbroken din of battle.

Despite the hail of bullets, arrows and cannon-balls, the Sich Cossacks kept scrambling higher and higher, falling, rising again and scrambling up.

The moat and the ramparts were covered with the bodies of the dead by the time Petro and Mykola reached the bastion and crossed sabres with the enemy. The first sumptuously dressed Turk who had tried to push away a ladder, fell into the moat. Then a band of janissaries attacked the blood brothers. Nepran and Bodnia drew their pistols, fired, and followed their bullets forward. More and more brothers appeared behind them. Far to the left wild flowing forelocks flashed over the wall. The Turks rushed back and beat a fast retreat into the town.

“May my whole forelock fall out, if I don’t cut up every one of those heathens!” Bodnia strained through his teeth and handled his sabre so well that Nepran began to think that perhaps his blood brother had only been playing with him during their duel near Khutory.

“You mow well, my son!” Schyrytsia called out, reaching the blood brothers.

“Because you pay well, father,” Bodnia answered. “A nip and a dace tail for every three score of Turks! It’s worth it . . .”

“When you become rich, don’t forget about poor old me.”

“Come on, father! You can come and mend my shirts.”

“We’ll live it up!”

“Nepran, the chaikas have struck!” a voice called from the tower where a Turkish flag was fluttering. “Let’s go, let’s go! The galleys are burning!”

“Boys, grab the banner! Cannons into the moat! We’re leaving!”

There were only cossacks on the walls. Looking down onto the town, the Sich Cossacks vacillated a little (how could they leave the nut cracked open!), sighed deeply and began to roll back, taking with them their wounded and the bodies of fallen comrades.

In his generosity, indefatigable Bodnia took along with him some Turk, who was babbling about the vizier, Istanbul, the seraglio and the padishah.

It was a verst, two at the most, to where the boats would be waiting for them. Inflamed by the short, though fierce battle, the cossacks moved quickly. The fortress towers were burning, and the galleys, which had drifted helplessly out to sea with the tide, were like flaming torches; the buildings on the town’s outskirts, nestling among orchards and vineyards, were being licked by flames too. They passed the Horn of Ochakiv and the barely visible tongue of land opposite, between which the last chaikas were passing. Raising their white wings, they flew uncontrollably into the seductive blue sea.

“What if they leave us behind here?” Bodnia asked in alarm, watching a boat which had lagged behind the rest and was now catching up.

“We’ll have a little cry and go to live with our Turkish in-laws.”

“You know what great wives Turkish women make!”

“Come home drunk and she rages at you, and you think she’s warbling her love for you.”

“Mykola drop your sabre and rush off to join your in-laws, you won’t perish!”

“Boys,” Mykola could control himself no longer. “Even though I’m a good fellow, may my whole forelock fall out if I don’t cut off your tedious tongues!”

“It’s not knightly to answer words with steel,” Schyrytsia said. “Afraid of words is he who is wrong.”

“And stupid.”

“And a blockhead.”

“But I can’t help myself, father.”

“Become a *hareem-kiyay*^o.”

^o Eunuch.

“*Harem-kiyay, harem-kiyay!*” the prisoner babbled, poking himself in the chest.

Nepran approached him and asked in Turkish:

“From Ochakiv?”

“I’m from Istanbul! The Sultan’s eunuch.”

“Oho! An impressive bird,” Nepran brightened, hoping to learn something about the Siryks. “And what the devil are you prancing around here for?”

“I was seeking beauties for the Most Illustrious Sultan.”

“Well, did you find any?”

“Of course. Every second one is a beauty in Ukraine!”

“Are they in Ochakiv?”

“No. They’ve sailed.”

“Listen, was there a blonde girl among those unfortunates. Called Uliana. Tatars took her in Khutory near Lysianka . . . ”

“Why unfortunate?” the eunuch became indignant. “They are the most fortunate. They will be able to see the Most Illustrious Ruler with their own eyes, the Vicar of the Prophet Himself, the Ruler of the Universe, and taste his love!”

“Was there an Uliana or not?” Nepran grabbed the Turk by the chest.

“Aman, aman*! the poor man screamed. “Yes, there was a blonde from Lysianka. The Budzhak *murza*† brought her. Like a rose she was!”

“Where is she?”

“Sailing towards the padishah’s embrace. A gazelle like her will captivate the Heart of the Porte and forever become . . . ”

“Enough!” Nepran boiled over and shook the eunuch like a pear-tree. “When did they sail?”

“Tatars are charging us from the steppe!” a voice suddenly rang out.

The Sich Cossacks stopped, quickly formed into a line three deep facing the steppe and cocked their muskets.

The horde approached in a cloud. Every second the rumble of hundreds of hooves grew louder, every second the approaching storm spread, its two wings embracing the east and the west. The cossack ranks curved around so the hordesmen would be unable to slice into them from the side.

Nepran called Mykola and told him to run at once to Khmel and ask for

* (Turk.) Mercy, mercy!

† Tatar prince.

help.

“What, run from the field of battle?” Bodnia asked angrily.

“Hurry, be quick,” Nepran hugged his friend. “You can see for yourself: there are open fields all around, and we have neither walls nor a camp for protection. If we don’t get help, we’ll all die here.”

“And what are our sabres for?” Mykola continued.

“They’ll pick us off with arrows.”

“Better death than . . . ”

“Run, I’m telling you!” Nepran drew his pistol. “Or I’ll shoot you like a dog!”

Mykola spat and raced down to the sea where the chaikas were waiting for them in a quiet spot, hidden by the cliffs.

“Allah! Allah!” the cloud roared savagely, and without stopping, let fly a volley of arrows.

What a ridiculous death: there was nowhere to hide and no way to fight back. The only escape was to rush the enemy and fire simultaneously from every musket.

“Watch the eunuch!” Nepran told one of the boys, moving into the front line, and called out: “Forward. Prepare to fire!”

Treading on the dried-up grasses the cossack ranks surged forward against the hordesmen. Stopping, the front row raised their muskets and fired. They handed their muskets back, took loaded ones and again fired lead into the enemy. There was another volley, another, and another . . .

The Tatars stopped, milling about in several groups, littering the ground with black corpses. And then they rolled back.

Nepran heaved a sigh of relief. Some cossacks had raced off to catch the horses, but Petro raised Khmelnitsky’s *pernach* and ordered them to retreat immediately. He knew the hordesmen too well to think that they would leave it at this and not try anything else.

“To the sea!” he called out. “Quick!”

Without breaking their ranks and closely watching the Tatars, the Zaporozhians moved forward towards the chaikas.

Seeing the youth to whom he had entrusted the prisoner, Nepran asked in alarm:

“Where’s the eunuch?”

“Already kneeling before his Prophet. An arrow pierced his chest!”

“No luck at all, today,” sighed Nepran.

“Tatars, the Tatars again!” Schyrytsia called out.

The Horde flocked from the steppe towards the cossacks like the night. The sun grew dim, the wind blew dust into their faces.

The Zaporozhians were silent. They stood three deep again, sullenly watching the approaching Tatar gloom. Some were whispering prayers, others glanced back at the nearby sea, which not all were destined to reach today.

It wasn't the first time Nepran had experienced such an attack by the enemy, but whereas before he had known the musket and sabre, and cossack friendship, now he was the father, the lives of hundreds depended on him. He couldn't come up with anything to repulse the attack. There was only the hail of lead again.

“Forward, prepare to fire boys!”

He plunged headfirst into the wind of arrows. And suddenly beheld a miracle: the horde stopped, broke up into several groups, grew silent and, after whirling around several times, raced back into the steppe.

Once the dust had settled, Nepran and his cossacks saw their brothers, who had entered the steppe not from the sea, but from the estuary of the Vovcha River and could have checked the Tatars' retreat. Bodnia was running in front of the cossacks, trying in vain to catch up to the mounted enemy. Waving his sabre about, he loped through the field like an antelope, yelling something.

“Watch the boy go!”

“Mykola, leave them be, or you'll get a hernia!”

“Stop him someone, otherwise he'll drive the heathens beyond the Rapids!”

The Sich Cossacks let loose with their tongues. They laughed heartily and merrily, as if it wasn't them who had just now been a step away from death.

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So as not to linger, and yet not leave the bodies of fallen comrades to the enemy, the dead were buried from the chaikas. They were buried quickly, without a service for the repose of their souls, without prayers to ensure that the boys would reach God's paradise: whoever died for his native land was a saint for time immemorial. Lead cannon-balls were tied to their feet and they

were lowered into the sea. They would not find it lonely down there, for the sea had claimed many of their comrades. No wonder this blue stretch, boundless to the heavens, was called the Cossack Sea.

Everyone grieved, but most of all, Petro Nepran. He felt that these cossack deaths were partly his fault too, that he had lacked the ability to bring all the cossacks back to the chaikas. Maybe if someone else had been otaman, the cossacks might not have suffered such losses, the ranks of the glorious Sich knights might not have been thinned.

After the burial was over and the wind carried the chaikas far out to sea, Nepran took a bandura*, sat up front next to the cannon, and touched its strings. They answered, resounding with sorrow, echoing the meadow seagulls on the Dnipro, the cossacks' true mourners. He sang without words, but with his heart and soul, which overflowed with sorrow; and yet there was joy that the unpleasant battle was behind them, that nothing would stop the cossack chaikas now till they reached the Bosphorus.

The route ahead lay flat, wide and free, ruffled only by a strong favourable wind. The masts hummed like kobza strings; the oars quavered as they struck the blue of the sea, raising sheaves of water sparks.

* Stringed instrument with up to 64 strings.



Chapter II





Injury and death were no strangers to a cossack. If he had mourned fallen friends for long and dwelt on every sabre wound on his body, he would never have had time to fight the enemy, or even to eat and sing songs. The wind strengthened, and laying the oars in the chaikas, the oarsmen sullenly took to the rusks and fish. Orendarenko handed the helm to his stocky neighbour, old Schyrytsia, and shouted so all would hear:

“What’s the matter, brave gentlemen? You’ve dropped your moustaches like catfish pulled out of the river! Afraid of the Turks?”

“We’re mourning the boys . . . ”

“This is only our first battle. And our first losses . . . ” the otaman said sadly. “No one knows which of us will return to see our Mother Sich . . . But is this the first time we’ve had to look the Reaper in the eye and plough the blue sea?” he raised his voice, as if he had tightened a string. “Let the Mussulmans worry while they await our terrible revenge . . . ”

“They’ll all get the runs!” Schyrytsia added.

Tymish pulled a wry face, dissatisfied that his impassioned speech had been interrupted. The Zaporozhian Cossacks replied with smiles and turned to Schyrytsia. The old man knew how to tell amusing stories and tales, and was famous for being the foremost wit in the Sich, and there were more wits there than blades of grass in the steppe.

“Eh, this was no battle, boys,” Schyrytsia smoothed his moustache. “Now once we had ourselves a real battle!”

“Was it long ago?”

“No. Fifty, maybe forty years back. When we had Master Kukuveka for *koshovy*.”

“Tell us about it!”

“Without a drop of the strong stuff, it wouldn’t be the same . . .” the old man drawled, screwed up his eyes, and looked at Tymish.

“Anyone who drinks gets thrown overboard!” the fellow snapped angrily, as if the boys didn’t know the old cossack custom.

“So, we were lucky, my friends, to have an otaman with a brain . . .” old Schyrytsia began.

Orendarenko spat into the waves and waved his hand:

“Go on, hurry up with this Kukuveka!”

“Well, seeing as there’s no horilka, I’ll have to do my best,” Schyrytsia sighed. He cleared his throat and began slowly, with restraint, as if he wanted to convey some profound truth:

“When we heard that the Tatars were preparing to march on us, we didn’t wait around for them to enter our yard . . . While they were still beyond the horizon we began preparing for war, making ready to set out to meet them. We raised an army of three thousand or more, yoked two pairs of oxen to a cart, all climbed onto it and rode off . . .”

Smiling into their moustaches, the Sich Cossacks made themselves more comfortable on the benches.

“We rode a day, we rode a night,” the old man continued, “another day and another night, and then we arrived at a place that only the devil’s seen: a forest on one side, a mountain on the other, a river in front, a cliff at the back. If the Tatars attacked, the devil only knows where we’d have hidden. But we weren’t afraid. We unyoked the oxen to graze, dug a large hole and kneaded some dumplings . . . boiled them up . . . ate our fill . . . and lay down stomach up to see if the sky was far away. Our Otaman Kukuveka, he was so smart, he had more brains than could fit in his head . . .”

“Just like our Tymish!” someone called from the front.

“Shhh! Let him continue!”

“Well,” Schyrytsia went on without even a wink, “and either he was so hungry that he ate too many dumplings, or someone had cast an evil spell on him. He was seized with the runs and felt sick . . . Such a disaster in wartime! He moved right away from us, turned his back to the forest and dropped his *sharovary** . . . We were all still lying down.” Schyrytsia knitted his brows, rose a little, without letting go of the rudder, and stretching his other arm before him, exclaimed in alarm. “Suddenly this grubby Tatar appeared from the

* Baggy cossack pants.

forest! Our stomachs sank . . . ” He sat down on the bench again. “Though he was alone, we were still frightened. He pulled out a leather whip from inside his boot and whipped the otaman on the loins . . . It wrapped around him and the tip smacked his lips with a quaver! But he couldn’t see all this business, for he had his back to the Tatar . . . We also had the otaman’s aide, Panko Shkarupa, with us. This fellow was also smart three times over, if not smarter than the otaman himself. He saw what had happened and yelled: ‘Boys, up you get and load the cannon!’ We all jumped to our feet. Obviously you can’t remain on your back while there’s such a commotion. When we rushed for the cannons, we saw there was nothing to load them with even one time ’round: we had left all our ammunition at home. What were we to do? We couldn’t race back home, when our enemy was standing before us . . . But he saved the day here too, saying: ‘Load a dumpling into the cannon!’”

“Ho-ho-ho-ho!” Mykola Bodnia guffawed.

Nepran dug him in the ribs. Mykola let out a moan, spluttered and crossed the reeling boat to join Schyrytsia.

The old man waited a while, scratched his bald head with its small, sparse bush of hair — all that remained of his forelock in old age — and continued:

“We climbed into the hole, scraped out the last of the dumplings, and loaded them into the cannon; brought up some fire and — splutter, flash, ba-bang! The echo droned over the forest. The Tatar saw what was happening and made a run for it . . . He raced into the forest, but the dumpling followed him: he raced up a hill, the dumpling was right behind him: he started clambering up a cliff, the dumpling was on his heels: then he took a running jump and splashed into the river! Swamping the banks . . . ”

After resting a while, the old man ran his eyes over the men who had reacted to his story with discordant laughter, and saw that he had dispersed their sad thoughts a little. So he finished cheerfully:

“We didn’t see it with our own eyes, but he must have been killed. Because for three days afterwards the air was heavy with the smell of burnt flesh.”

“Ho-ho-ho-ho!” Bodnia guffawed again. He was laughing loudly, at the top of his voice, making the chaika tremble lightly.

“Calm down, Bodnia, or you’ll swamp us all!” Nepran said, laughing too at the old man’s tale and at Mykola’s amusing laughter.

“The Turks will hear you!”

“Or you’ll raise a storm!”

Soon after, looking into the distance and at the sails, the Sich Cossacks noticed some alarming changes. Waves were rushing across the sea like white-maned horses, the sun was lost in a grey haze, and the wind kept tearing at the sails with ever increasing strength.

“Tymish, there’s going to be a storm,” Nepran said to the otaman.

“It’s the Turks blowing from Ochakiv to speed us on our way to the sultan . . .”

“Or into the devil’s teeth.”

“He’s busy enough as it is. By the time he settles in all the Mussulmans we sent to hell today, we’ll have passed through the Bosphorus!”

They were sailing last. Before them, like a white cloud, wings spread far apart, flew almost three hundred sail-boats. Such a force of chaikas had never before entered the cossack Black Sea. Taras Triasylo must have taken a good swing against Warsaw, having sent such a force to Istanbul. This excited Nepran, pleased him to see that his native land would rise and throw off its yoke. He feasted his eyes on the chaikas’ unrestrained run, the continuous splash of the oars, and the mute trill of the rigging, which carried the hint of a grim ballad as yet unborn, unsung by anyone, but already in existence, like the freedom which Ukraine was awaiting, and for which they had broken out into this boundless sea.

Night was falling thick and fast onto the sea. From Khmelnitsky’s boat the word was spread around not to stop for the night, to keep together and make haste for the Bosphorus. Like ghosts, the boats melted into the darkness, into the carousing whistle of the wind . . . The solitude, the darkness, and the rustle of barely visible waves brought on a feeling of sadness.

Finally everything was covered with turbid darkness. There was only the boat and the darkness: no moon, no stars in the sky, not one light in the whole world. The impetuous strong wind and the dull roar of the sea, like a . . . No it resembled nothing, this voice of the sea, it had no equal! Rolling, majestic, creepy, it overwhelmed those who heard their first storm, and filled with coldness the souls of those who had already experienced a night duel with the sea. The water boiled and foamed, as if crowded in its giant goblet, as if someone powerful and implacable was squeezing it mercilessly, driving it into obscurity from the shores between which it felt so calm and comfortable. Running high, agitated to its very bottom, it was blind and merciless in its terror and onslaught, in its boundless strength.

Having shipped their oars, the Zaporozhians listened to the depressing bellow and watched the heavy sea which broke against the bundles of reeds secured along the sides, to make sure the waves wouldn't swamp the chaika, on the bottom of which lay the underwater boat. This secret marvel was like a cataract on the eye to Orendarenko's men: you couldn't stand there, you had to be careful what your sabre or musket brushed against, and there were only half the number of oarsmen because of this invention, which was why they were bringing up the rear . . .

Some of the seasoned cossacks were already asleep. Nepran would have fallen asleep too had Mykola not grabbed hold of his shoulder and kept asking if there was worse yet to come, and if they would reach the shore alive. How could he not resist making fun of his friend?

"Anything is possible in a storm . . ." Nepran said. "Sometimes the chaikas are sunk, sometimes not . . ."

"Are they sunk often?"

"Every second one."

"So we could sink too?"

"And what are we?"

"Last."

"And how many chaikas are there in the sea?"

"Three hundred."

"Ye-es . . ." Nepran drawled. "If Khmelnitsky goes to the bottom then we don't."

"What has Khmelnitsky to do with it?"

"He is first, we're the three hundredth, and every second one sinks . . ."

Bodnia was silent for some time, but then said sorrowfully:

"Then we perish."

"Why do you think that?" Nepran asked, hardly able to control himself.

"Where have you seen a leader go down to the bottom and his army get out of trouble without him?"

Nepran smiled. The boy was trembling like an aspen leaf, and yet he could still think straight.

"Don't worry, Mykola," he said comfortingly. "The storm might still abate, and all the boats will be left intact."

"You think so?" Mykola brightened up. "As long as we reach the shore!"

"Which shore?" Nepran feigned surprise. "Are you returning to

Zaporizhia?”

“No, the one we’re heading for.”

“But there’s no shore there.”

“What do you mean?”

“Plain as day. This isn’t the Dnipro for you. The sea has only a shore on one side.”

“It can’t be!”

“But it’s true.”

“What do the Turks walk on then?” Bodnia asked after some time.

“They don’t – they swim.”

“Like carp?”

“Exactly! And they lay roe . . .”

“Hold your tongue!” Orendarenko called out mildly. “Stop pulling the boy’s leg . . .”

There came a cracking sound.

“The sail!” Nepran screamed out and hurried to take down the canvas. Bodnia rushed after him, tripped, raised his arms and fell awkwardly into the sea.

“The ladder and the cord, boys!” Nepran shouted. He knew it was ridiculous, that he probably would be too late to help, but he had to try, even if it cost him his life.

He threw his sabre away and immediately tied the cord around his waist. He fed out the end of the rope and tied it in a knot around a rung of the ladder, which was lying ready beside him.

“Farewell boys!” he shouted. “Take care of my kobza!”

“What are you doing, Petro? You’ll drown!” Orendarenko grabbed him. “You’ll die together with that fool – we can’t wait for both of you!”

“Not with that fool, but with my blood brother!”

He lay on the ladder, grabbed firm hold of the rungs and suddenly felt he was falling. A moment later he struck the water. He kicked his feet about, which pulled him down like a stone, and shouted:

“Bodnia, where are you?”

He listened, but there wasn’t a sound anywhere, only the wind and the splash of the waves. Although there was quite a swell, in contrast to the rocking of the chaika and the whistle of the wind in the rigging, it was quite peaceful here, coldly calm. But for the wet clothes and the realisation that

there was little hope of getting out of this dark grave alive, a cossack could have lived well here too.

“My-ko-la! Bo-odnia!” he called again soon after. If he didn’t find his friend, then why the hell had he left the chaika? Maybe Bodnia couldn’t swim at all and went to the bottom like an axe? But no, he was from Cherkasy, from the banks of the Dnipro! There everyone swam like a pike . . . He smiled bitterly, remembering the chaika, which was probably quite some distance away by now. If the mast hadn’t been broken and the sail had remained set, they would have covered a good verst or two.

He listened, rose slightly on his hands and yelled again. In vain . . . The chaika must have been carried a great distance before he had jumped off.

“My-ko-la! Bo-odnia!” he bellowed into the black emptiness. “Swim this way, My-ko-la!”

He paddled with all his might, trying not to let the waves and the wind carry the ladder further away . . . If only they could meet, then it would be easier to work something out . . . It was easier to die with someone, more joyous, old Schyrytsia would have said. He was a peculiar old man. He had told a story about the Great Flood once, and had all the cossacks rolling with laughter. When the Sich chaplain heard him, he spat, crossed himself and walked briskly off . . . ‘And so the Lord sent a Flood on the earth. The rain came down thick as hands . . . The first day it rained for forty days and forty nights, the second day it continued for forty days and forty nights, and the third . . .’ God, what nonsense entered his head! A man could go insane. Was the shore far away? Maybe there really was only one shore, as he had told Mykola . . . What good was land to them on that side anyhow? There they faced only captivity, slavery and servitude. It was better to die. To let go of the ladder and sink to the bottom. People were born only once . . . When she found out, mother would cry a little and . . . No, mothers did not forget their children! They always waited, always hoped, forever tied to their children by invisible threads. In life and death . . .

“Mykola, swim this way!” he begged into the stormy night. He strained to hear his friend’s reply. But the darkness remained silent. It kept the waves rolling and the cold wind howled from the north . . . Brother Horishniak, the cossack sea wind, was doing his best. In two days and nights the chaikas would reach the Bosphorus! How would they fare in the Porte?

He listened and yelled again.

“O-ho-ho-ho! I’m here, Mykola, brother!”

If he was alive he would hear him. Only the wind. If only it would abate for a while . . .

He steadily gave up hope of ever finding his blood brother in this wasteland, and the less hope he had left, the more he didn’t want to die such a disgraceful death, at the very beginning of the road along which Taras Triasylo attempted to lead Ukraine out of slavery. He wanted to catch at least a glimpse of this great miracle, to see the lucky people break the chains from their hands and their souls. Oh Lord! To have had to wait so long, to have had to fight for every free breath, and now to die so unexpectedly, when one’s hands and heart were needed for freedom, when it hovered, avidly desired, like a star on the horizon!

He couldn’t tell whether it was his crying or whether it was the sea brine making his eyes sting. He rose higher and called into the blackness, as if it was him who needed to be rescued:

“I’m here! I’m here, Mykola!”

“Why are you hollering?” he heard Mykola’s hoarse voice alongside him.

Nepran thought he was going insane. He began to concentrate on the murmur and pain in his head, to the thoughts which would begin surfacing involuntarily.

“Is it you, Nepran?” he soon heard again. He opened his eyes and two rungs away saw a head breathing deeply and quickly.

“Mykola?”

“Yes?”

Out of his mind with joy, Nepran crawled over to his blood brother and hugged him:

“My dear brother, come out and join me this minute! Where have you been all this time?”

“Catching up to your galley.”

“Could you hear me?”

“Of course.”

“Then why didn’t you answer?”

“I was so frightened, I completely lost my voice. I screamed and screamed, but not a sound came out . . .”

Nepran helped his comrade up onto the frail raft, but felt it begin to sink into the water under him.

"It won't hold the two of us," Bodnia said sadly, and was about to slide off, but Nepran stopped him:

"Stay on it and rest a while. I'll get off . . ."

"Hey, this is quite comfortable," Bodnia said after a while.

"You did well to fall in with the ladder!"

"Not like some of us. You plopped in like a baby frog."

"Ah," said Bodnia angrily. "Making fun of me here too? I was stupid to swim towards you . . . Heard you screaming for help. Well, I thought, things must be bad – if I don't hurry up, he might drown . . . Is it far to the shore from here?"

"We're in the middle of the sea."

"Really?" Bodnia asked slowly. "Will the chaikas be looking for us?"

"I doubt it. In such a storm, and it being dark . . . The word has left Ochakiv too. They must hurry to strike unexpectedly . . ."

"So what do we do then, die here?"

"There'll always be time for that . . ."

Mykola grew silent, downcast by the helplessness of the situation.

"Because of you and your tongue I ended up at the Sich and then here!" he said angrily some time later.

"Because of a girl's eyes," Nepran corrected him.

"We won't free her and we'll die ourselves in this dreadful water . . . I told you we should have gone to Kafa."

"She wasn't in Kafa."

"How do you know?"

"I know. The eunuch told me. They put her on a galley together with other slaves and took her to Istanbul."

"To the sultan's harem?"

"You're quick. You've hit the bullseye."

"When did this happen?"

"A Tatar arrow killed him before he could tell me."

"Oh, God!" Mykola sighed. "So maybe Uliana is out on the sea somewhere too, maybe even somewhere close by?"

Before they knew it the storm began to die away. When they realised there was no longer any wind, they rejoiced, and at the same time became distressed. They welcomed the silence, the calm and the warmth which they had yearned for for a long time, but then became agitated that their 'boat'

would now become suspended in this desert, that the chaikas would not be able to travel as fast, and, God forbid, might not beat the news of their arrival to the Porte.

The black mountainous waves were subsiding: they were abating and had lost their roar, moving instead with a gentle, soft rustle, as if they were seeking forgiveness for the rage with which they hurled themselves at the boats in the dark.

It was growing light in the east. The large grey clouds made way for the sun, and crawled away to the south, bringing joy to the dry Pontus Mountains and the whole southern coast, where in summer a cloud was happiness and rain a godsend . . .

Freezing and blue with cold Mykola was resting on the ladder and looked sadly into the distance, which became lost in a haze only a hundred sages* away. Petro was tired too and fought the intense desire to crawl up onto this only shaky firmament. They did not talk. Each thought what the new day had in store for them. Would it bring captivity, hope or death? Or would it be indifferent and leave them at the mercy of the night?

“Listen, I must have a fever,” Bodnia said in alarm.

“What’s the matter, are you shivering?” asked Nepran.

“No . . . I can see a mast in the sky . . .”

“They say that if you think of something that you want for long enough, it will appear before your eyes.”

His heavy boots pulled him down like cannon balls. Raising his left leg Petro wanted to take off this unwanted luxury and suddenly saw the masts too. They stood in the fog covering the sea to the west of the sun. Immobile, sails furled.

“Mykola, you were right!”

“I’m sick?”

“No, it’s a galley, they’re masts!”

Mykola turned over and something clanked.

“Is that a sabre?” Nepran asked hopefully. “Have you got a sabre, brother?”

“What the dickens do you think it is?” Mykola mumbled, unable to take his eyes off the miracle on the sea. “I nearly drowned because of it . . .”

“You’re priceless!” Nepran exclaimed. A desperate thought had already

* One sagine equals six feet.

passed through his mind. "That galley is either deserted, cleaned out recently by our brethren, or it has ridden out the storm and now everyone on board is asleep . . ."

"As long as it's not anything else," Mykola cautioned. "Maybe they're lying in wait for our chaikas . . ."

"We'll soon see," said Nepran, pulling off his swollen boot. "Get back in the water right away!"

Holding onto the ends of the ladder and hiding their heads behind it, they slowly made for the galley with renewed strength!

"They've probably got something to eat and drink . . ." Bodnia dreamed aloud. "Do you know how many cyclopes there are on board?"

"There'll be fifty for sure . . ."

Mykola let out a whistle.

The black masts with sails furled grew more and more distinct as they approached. Soon they could make out the stern and bow, the cannons and oars, and the janissaries who prowled about on deck, putting things in order after the storm.

"There's a swarm of them!" Bodnia said in alarm.

"We'll manage, if we can quietly reach the slaves in the hold," Nepran said. "Give me the sabre! I'm going first. Watch the ladder, so it doesn't knock against the hull. Make it fast to the galley and hurry after me. Throw the scabbard away too . . ."

They came up to the bow, which was deserted. A chain which fell steeply to the water glistened dully. Nepran took the sabre in his teeth and climbed up the chain. He wished for only one thing — to feel the firmament of the vessel beneath him. After that, no power on earth would be able to throw him into the sea. Water streamed from his clothes, and this treacherous gurgle was now Nepran's most dangerous and feared enemy. Quick! Forward, forward! A little more, just a little more . . . He grabbed the side, lifted himself up, leaned over the fancy, painted handrail and . . . froze. There were about a dozen Turks on board. Three were busy repairing a torn sail, two were lazily securing the ropes and rope ladders leading to the yards. A tall thin guard was napping aft. And nearby, four or more men lay asleep . . .

Choosing a safe moment, Nepran noiselessly cleared the handrail and hid behind several barrels.

Soon after Bodnia's wet forelock appeared over the side. Waiting till

Bodnia saw him, Nepran put his finger to his mouth and beckoned to his blood brother. Bodnia rolled over quite adroitly for a giant of his size, and breathing heavily, crawled up to the barrels.

“We must reach that door,” Petro whispered to Mykola, pointing to a hatch in the deck. “There are steps leading down there . . .”

“If only we had another sabre!” Bodnia sighed sadly.

“Sh!” Nepran stopped him, seeing that the janissaries had finished with the rope ladder and were walking over towards the barrels. He crouched on all fours, ready to charge into an unequal battle and clasped the sabre more tightly.

“I’ll draw them towards the left side, and you run along the right side to the hatch,” he told Mykola tersely. “Be careful – there should be a guard down there. Get the keys off him . . .”

The janissaries meanwhile came up to one of the barrels, tipped it on its side and rolled it away.

The blood brothers exchanged glances. Nepran checked the barrels, found an empty one, quietly tipped it on its side and crawled into it. It was a squat barrel, and so he had to roll up into a ball to hide his head.

“Give me a push,” he whispered to Mykola. “And wait till I strike at the janissaries with the slaves . . .”

The barrel rolled slowly towards the hatch. Nepran pressed his hands and knees against the staves, tensed his muscles and seemed to grow into the wood. His head spun from the barrel’s movement and the joy that he had discovered such an uncanny way of reaching the hatch. The galley captain didn’t even have an inkling of what was happening. Though they were surrounded by sky and sea, guests were knocking at their door! Suddenly Nepran felt the barrel slow down, rock back and forth, and begin to move in the opposite direction. Soon it stopped again, moved forward a little and began rocking again, right opposite the janissaries working on the sail. One of them mumbled something, walked up to the barrel and pinned it against the ship’s side.

Nepran grew silent and held his breath. After the assiduous Turk went back to the mast, he carefully tried to make the barrel move. However he met with no success. He only managed to turn the barrel around, so that he could see Bodnia. It was still quite dark and so he couldn’t give his blood brother a sign. As if on purpose, the two janissaries who had taken the first barrel, returned and nearly discovered him and Bodnia. Nepran crouched, ready to

jump out and rush to Bodnia's aid if need be.

"Shall we take this one?" asked one of them, stopping beside Nepran.

"It can stay there for the moment," the other said indifferently. "We'll deal with the ones on the bow first . . ."

They sauntered off and grabbed hold of the barrel near which Mykola was squatting. Nepran had already half crawled out of his barrel, ready to strike at the janissaries from behind when one of them suddenly tripped over something and swore. Bending over, he lifted a thick yardstick. His friend grabbed hold of the other end. They strained and lifted it onto their shoulders.

Nepran let out a sigh of relief and hid inside the barrel again. And then he saw a third figure wearing a queer turban and no shirt hurry after the two janissaries with the yardstick . . . God, it was Mykola! The barrel in which Nepran sat was turned and rolled away by strong, able hands. The barrel stopped opposite the hatch, and Nepran plunged like a squirrel into the dark opening. Bodnia dived in after him. They paused and looked around. On the steps leading into the depths of the galley dozed a corpulent guard.

Nepran signalled Mykola to stay by the hatch, crept up to the janissary and tightly covering his mouth with his hand, sent the fellow to hell. He took his keys and yataghan* and descended into the dark, low hold where the thin frightful slaves crouched in sleep over the heavy oars. Fighting back the choking ball rising in his throat, he touched the fellow on the end and whispered:

"I'm a Zaporozhian Cossack. Quiet . . . Take the keys and first wake and free all those who have seen battle before . . ."

The poor fellow sobbed and, while unlocking his chains, asked:

"Am I awake? Are you real?"

"Hurry up. And don't clank your irons . . ."

The slaves could not believe their eyes. Dirty, overgrown with hair and exhausted, they all wanted to touch the cossack who seemed to have fallen out of the sky to rescue them. And the broad-shouldered giant to whom Nepran had given Mykola's sabre, took it and kissed it.

"Go to the door," Nepran said to him. "You'll find my blood brother, Bodnia, there . . . Wait for me, before you begin fighting."

Those who had been freed took the keys and helped others out of their chains. Soon after, the irons and chains with which the slaves were chained to

* A long Turkish dagger, without a guard and usually curved.

the benches and the oars, lay on the ground. Instead of weapons, Nepran advised them to grab a chain each and ordered everyone to gather on the stairs leading to the deck.

Meanwhile, the unexpected had happened on deck. The captain had left his cabin, stretched deliciously and whooped:

“Which dog left the barrel here?”

He ran up, pushed it with his foot, and seeing Bodnia in the door, punched him in the teeth so hard that Bodnia’s ‘turban’ flew off his head. Without a second thought, Bodnia grabbed the captain around the chest and lifted him high above his head. Then he took several steps forward and threw the Turk overboard. A desperate, frightful scream pierced the galley. A sharp command sounded, then came the tramping of dozens of feet.

When Nepran flew out onto the deck at the head of the oarsmen, Mykola was fighting the janissaries with a piece of broken oar. They had surrounded him like greyhounds around a wolf.

“Hold on, Bodnia!” shouted Nepran, cutting into the janissaries.

The merciless steel of sabres flashed through the air, heavy chains whistled and fell on the heads of the janissaries.

The galley seethed with people. Janissaries appeared from everywhere, some dressed and others half-dressed. There was a volley of shots. Sabres clashed violently.

The slaves grabbed the weapons of the fallen and threw themselves wildly into the thick of the fighting, feeling neither their wounds, nor seeing the death of their friends, who fell onto the wet deck with lead in their breasts.

Fighting off the heavy blows of the Turks from all directions, Nepran broke through to his blood brother and handed him a yataghan won in battle.

Meanwhile, an imposing Turk had appeared from the cabin, holding muskets in both hands.

“Murad-pasha!”

The janissaries surrounded their leader with a wall of bodies.

Surveying the fighting with a cold eye, Murad-pasha raised his musket, took aim, and pulled the trigger.

Mykola let out a scream and grabbed at his head. All that remained of his cherished forelock was three hairs!

Murad-pasha aimed again. But a piece of chain whistled through the air and knocked the weapon from his hand.

Bodnia rushed at the pasha like a lion. Followed by Nepran, the broad-shouldered giant who had kissed the sabre as if it was his own mother, and the frightening band of freed slaves.

The janissaries fell one after another. No one was taken prisoner, and besides they did not surrender. It was life or death! And death was far kinder this time to the pirates in fezzes and turbans who had made war and pillage the goal of their life.

The last to cross sabres were Murad-pasha and Bodnia. There wasn't much room on the bow, so no one could help Mykola, although one of the slaves had a musket trained on the Turk and was waiting for the right moment.

The fighting was dogged. Watching the glitter of the sabres, Nepran kept glancing at the cossack with the musket: he thought he had seen him somewhere before, that they had met . . .

"You Lucifer, stump of the Almighty!" Bodnia hissed through his teeth, forcing Murad-pasha into a corner. "I'll teach you to shoot . . . You should have aimed for my brains, you sonofabitch, instead of disgracing me like this! How can I show myself at the Sich now?"

"Kazaklar-shaitan, fodul-giaour!*" the pasha snapped back.

"Finish him off, Mykola! Or move back and coax him this way!" Nepran shouted. He was anxious that there might be other Turkish vessels in the vicinity.

"Hold on," Bodnia answered. "Just a second . . ."

He made a false thrust, the pasha took the bait and suddenly was left without a head.

"Now that's what I call a real cossack!"

"A falcon!"

"Like Triasylo himself!" the freed slaves exclaimed with delight.

The hero threw down the yataghan, sat down and, grimacing, touched the top of his head.

"Don't fret, son," said the old man with the musket. "Thank God that your head's still in one piece. The forelock will grow back . . ."

Mykola looked up at him: it was Omelko Siryk, Uliana's father!

"Is it you or isn't it?" Mykola asked, affected by such a meeting.

"It's me, it's me, Mykola," the oarsman hugged his saviour.

"Where's Uliana?" Nepran jumped up to Siryk.

* (Turk.) Cossack devil, arrogant infidel!

“I don’t know. I heard they were taking some girls on the galleys which set out with us from Ochakiv . . .”

“Where are the galleys now?”

“The storm’s scattered them across the sea.”

“Where were you headed for?”

“Tsarhorod.*”

Now Nepran was certain that the eunuch had been talking about these galleys. His Uliana was there! He itched to tell Siryk, but was afraid to. It could wait. Why fan the hope, only to let it die again?

He said nothing. Carefully he surveyed the sea and then suggested that they choose an otaman to give the men needed order. They couldn’t stay here forever.

Bodnia immediately called out Nepran’s name, the old cannoneer seconded him, and everyone shouted:

“We want you, Nepran! Be a blood father to us! Lead us to the clear waters and bright stars of Ukraine!”

Nepran thanked them for the honour, as the cossack custom demanded, but refused to sail back north.

“Taras Triasylo sent us out to sea,” he said forcefully. “Three hundred chaikas are flying at this moment towards the fiendish Porte! So how can we turn back from the road of fame and honour?”

“Take us to Istanbul! To join the chaikas!”

They straightened their gaunt, almost black shoulders and felt powerful, having the right now to decide their own future: should they hurry away from here or first look into the terror-filled eyes of the Porte’s capital, and then return to their native land, where it wasn’t so terrible even to die?

First Nepran ordered the enemy bodies to be cleared away. The men grew younger and more cheerful, and eagerly set about carrying out his order. But head bowed and sorrowful, Siryk stopped them. Like a prophet, thin and grey, in rags, he walked from janissary to janissary, turned them face up, and stared into each of their faces. The men watched this strange business in silence, and then someone grew impatient and asked:

“Who are you looking for, Siryk?”

The old man did not reply immediately:

“The Tatars once took my son away . . . These boys are our flesh and

* Old Slavic name for Istanbul.

blood . . .”

The words agitated Nepran. What a hellish scheme these fierce bloody despots had invented! Without risking their own heads, they had devised a way of oppressing a nation with its own hands, creating a cruel brood of degenerates, bastards who were ready to sweep everything off the face of the earth. He who loved his native land, his own mother, could have pity for a foreign land, and a foreigner’s mother, but these slaves were without family or kin and did not know the suffering of conscience . . . And yet, Turkey should tremble, for one day they would turn their malice and yataghans bathed in native blood against it.

Siryk looked at every janissary but did not find the one he most feared to find.

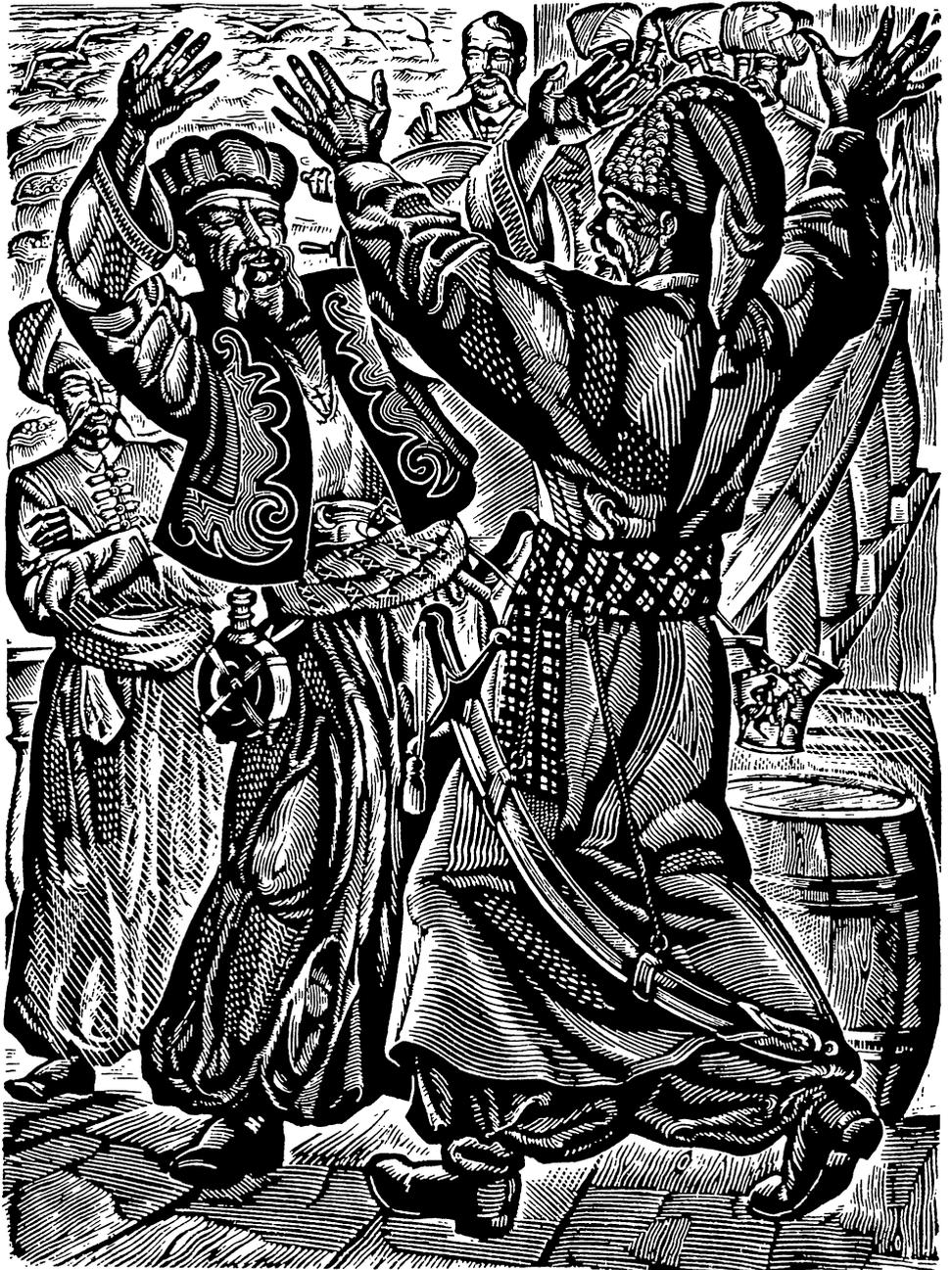
They cleared the bodies quickly, and washed down the blood-spattered deck. Then they all dressed in Turkish clothes and shaved, leaving only their long moustaches and forelocks, had breakfast and hoisted the sails.

Fortunately their friend, Horishniak, appeared again and there was no need to return to the repugnant heavy oars.



Chapter V





That day was a day of rebirth. Escaping from certain death in the clutches of the sea, and having survived a bloody encounter with the janissaries, Nepran and Bodnia felt as if they had been born a second time and had begun a new life. The freed slaves, rid now of the oars, benches and chains, were all over the galley like unrepentant souls, telling of their adventures, dreaming of their long-awaited return to Ukraine. And what dreams they were! Simple, ordinary dreams of men, but so desired, so fervent and so infallible, those of people who knew the true worth of their fatherland, their native land, their people.

Nepran stood, emotionally stirred, at the wheel of the galley and steered it south. At first he was afraid he wouldn't be able to grasp its working, wouldn't be able to manage, but he soon became convinced that steering these awkward vessels wasn't such a complicated business, especially when the wind blew in the right direction. By evening Nepran had grown so accustomed to it, that he was not afraid of the approaching night, even though the sky had clouded over and white horses raced across the sea again.

The sun had passed noon and was slipping lower and lower towards the azure streak of the horizon. Turning red from its long day of toil, it yearned for peace and coolness . . . Like Mykola, who lay spread-eagled on Murad-pasha's carpets and snored for the whole galley to hear . . .

Petro smiled, remembering how his blood brother had suffered because of his wound and how he had kept feeling it all day long, fretting about being as hairless as a Mussulman.

The galley was moving along swiftly. But this was not enough for Nepran. In order to catch up to the chaikas sooner, he had long wanted to send the boys down into the hold to man the oars, to help the sails along, but he did not have the heart to return the freed men into that hell and to cloud their great

rejoicing. He, of all people, knew their sentiments.

Uliana's father appeared and for the hundredth time began to recount how the Budzhaks had captured them:

"I woke up and heard screams and clatter. Jumping from my bed, I raced to the window: alas, it was the Tatars! 'Daughter!' I shouted to Uliana. She jumped from her bed with only her nightshirt on and grabbed the pistol. Lord Almighty, we had to escape, not think of putting up a fight! I tried to overpower her: 'Daughter . . .' 'Let me go,' she shouted, 'I'll shoot myself rather than be taken a slave!' Just then, the Tatars burst into the house, grabbed us, tied our hands and led us out. I looked: the barn was already ablaze and there was no one under the apple tree . . . 'God,' I thought, 'have they killed the boys?'"

"As soon as it began to grow light, we rode off to graze the horses in the valley . . ." Nepran said and looked out to sea . . . How blinding the sun was! The cossacks were smart to attack galleys from the direction of the sun . . . What was that? He put his hand to his eyes and saw several vessels travelling from the sun into the galleys' path. Were they theirs or the Turks?"

"Father," he said anxiously to Siryk. "Quick, wake Mykola and everyone else who is asleep. To arms! There are boats coming towards us."

The alarm roused those who saw only dreams and those who were simply day-dreaming. There were quite a few boats on the horizon, while they were alone. The Turkish clothes and the flags on the masts were only a front. If they came up close, they would start talking and tumble on board . . .

"What's happened?" asked Mykola. He had donned Murad-pasha's turban and looked so funny, that Petro couldn't stop himself from uttering:

"Merhaba, Mister Bodnia!" He bowed.

"Go to hell," Bodnia grumbled with dissatisfaction. "Why have you raised the alarm?"

Petro pointed at the horizon, towards the setting sun.

Mykola shielded his eyes from the sun with his hand, and, squinting, began to study the evening gold flooding the sea.

"Are they Turkish?"

Nepran shrugged his shoulders.

"There aren't enough boats for it to be Khmel. I can only make out ten there, and you know yourself how many he commands . . ."

"Maybe they've become lost in the storm . . ."

“Then why are they steering east instead of south, after Khmelnitsky?”
“P’raps they’re lost. Or crazy.”

“That doesn’t make things easier for us,” said Nepran and yielded his position at the helm. “Hold this toy while I find a replacement for myself.”

When he stepped down onto the deck, the ‘Turks’ besieged him, anxious and alarmed.

“Are they Mussulmans?”

“Where will we go?”

“Run away!”

“Let’s fight!”

“We’ll die . . .”

Nepran raised his right hand:

“Do you know for certain that they are cossack chaikas, that you want to fight them so much?”

They looked at one another, surprised at the question.

“If only they were chaikas . . .” someone said at last.

“Why should we have to fight them?” a giant dressed in tight-fitting short clothes added sullenly. “They are probably Turks, Petro . . .”

“Allah be praised!” Nepran said and crossed his arms on his chest. “What’s so strange about a Turkish slave ship meeting Turkish caiques out at sea? We’ll fire them a salute and part.”

“But we’re not Turks.”

“And what the devil is that?” asked Nepran. “Take a look at yourself.”
And he laughed.

“This is a Turk who has grown out of his sleeves!”

“Will you be able to steer the galley?” Petro asked the giant.

“Of course. I’ve done it before . . .”

“Then go to the helm. And we’ll prepare something to greet our eager visitors with.”

Nepran sought out everyone who could fire cannons, put Siryk in command, ordered the cannons to be loaded and supplies of lead and powder made ready. He set out the other cossacks, assigning each a part of the vessel to defend if the Turks happened to discover their bluff and tried to board the galley. Then he stood under the mast and fixed his eyes on the caiques flying towards them.

A warm evening settled on the sea, permeated with the smell of the sun

and the sea . . . A little longer and they would have caught up to their own boats, with whom they could face any enemy. Uliana was somewhere nearby . . . God was witness to how unwillingly Nepran wanted to die on this clear evening! The others were distressed too. They too were probably troubled by bitter thoughts. They had been freed, almost as if in a fairy-tale, and received weapons, clothes and, most importantly, the hope of seeing their native land soon, their children and wives . . . Indeed, it was easier to fall captive than to break free! Well, if they were destined not to return to the bright stars and clear waters of their native land, then they would fall here on the galley, but never again would they let themselves be taken slaves. They had tasted enough of slavery!

Suddenly there was no sun. Sails appeared in its place on the horizon, flashing like pinkish-white birds, and began to draw closer. They moved in a sharp triangle, like geese in the blue sea of the sky. Against the glow in the west, these foam-white wings enticed the eyes . . . Something began to throb in Nepran's breast and filled his whole body with aching. He wanted to sing, strumming his kobza, and not think about tomorrow, or the next hour when the paths of the galley and those sails would meet. Deep in his soul rose a strange music and rolled into obscurity like the waves of the sea . . .

"They're Zaporozhian chaikas!" someone said cautiously.

He was backed up:

"It's them, it's them!"

"Holy Cross, they're ours!"

"May my whole forelock fall out . . .!" Mykola began, but stopped short, remembering there was nothing left to fall out.

Nepran remained silent. He had realised they were chaikas too, but could not believe such unexpected luck, such good fortune. Besides, he felt uneasy because of the small number of chaikas and the fact that they appeared not in front, from the Bosphorus, but from the side, from Sozopol and Varna . . .

The sail-boats were approaching at a sharp angle to the course of the galley. The oars could be clearly seen, rising and falling in unison. In the bows of the chaikas (that it was them no one now doubted) stood the black shapes of cannons . . . What a wonderful spectacle! Across the boundless red-black-white waves flew ten chaikas with wind-filled sails . . . Someone must have observed these cossack boats from a distance at one time and in rapture first

called them by this name.* You couldn't find a better word . . . They were swift, unbridled, free . . .

"Look, look, otaman!" everyone exclaimed with joy.

Having overtaken the galley by half a verst, the boats headed east and then, turning, came at them.

"What beauty!" Siryk sighed happily. "I flew with Father Sahaidachny like that once too."

"They move well, my word."

"Wonderful!"

"No wonder the Turks tremble with fear when they see our chaikas."

"They would here . . ."

"I can see their forelocks!"

"Look more closely, maybe you'll find Mykola's among them," some witty voice said.

"Hold your tongue, or . . .!" Bodnia growled.

"They're lighting the fuses," Siryk drawled. "They'll probably fire on us."

"What did you expect, old man? When they fire the Turks can't put tooth on tooth! Have you not seen how cossacks fire?"

"Really?" smiled Siryk. "Well I never."

"Well, you'll know now."

"Young man, if you were to count the stars all evening, you still wouldn't count as many as the number of times my cannon fired lead at the enemy," the old man said sedately. "Look, they're firing! What's the matter, have you gone mad boys?" he shouted at the chaikas.

"Fall!" Nepran ordered.

There was a flash and a large cannon-ball rustled over the galley and fell into the sea. Then came the sound of the explosion.

"Eh!" Bodnia exclaimed, getting up, and shook his hefty fist at them. "Where are you firing, you numbskull!"

All the cannons on the chaikas spewed fire and the cannon-balls again flew well over the slave ship.

"Who shoots like that?" Siryk stood up too. "Aim, take better aim!"

A shot whizzed past him, tore through the sail and hit the water too.

The old cannoneer was disgusted. He struck some fire and hastily fanned the fuse.

* 'Chaika' is the Ukrainian word for 'seagull'.

“Step back, boys, I’ll show the sons of bitches how cossacks fire!”

Nepran was too late to stop him. Siryk took aim, pushed the fuse into the powder and stood aside.

The galley let out a moan – the cannon-ball hit the mast of a chaika and sliced off the top.

Nepran tore off his turban and waved it over his head:

“We’re cossacks! Cossacks!”

“We surrender!” Mykola added.

“We can’t hold out against such good shots!”

They must have noticed on the chaikas that the janissaries were strange – with moustaches and hair on their heads – and stopped wasting powder. Coming closer, they surrounded the galley in a half circle.

“Hey, people, who are you?” someone shouted from the chaika whose mast Siryk had sliced off so skilfully.

“Slaves and Zaporozhian Cossacks!”

“Is Omelko Siryk among you?”

“Yes! Yes!”

And then Nepran recognised old Schyrytsia in the cossack chaika talking to them. He recognised the chaika too.

“Boys! Oho-ho-ho! It’s us, it’s us! Nepran and Bodnia!”

The boat exploded with a loud bellow of joy.

They had returned! They had returned from the other world to their own chaika, which in all truth they had not expected to ever see again when they were bobbing about in the black storm waves.

The boat drew closer. As it touched the galley, Schyrytsia tossed the hook of a rope ladder onto it with a deft movement and climbed up, forgetting to put his sabre back in its scabbard. He was helped aboard by Siryk, and after embracing, the two old men kissed three times.

“I knew at once,” Schyrytsia said joyously. “When the mast was sliced off I shouted: ‘It’s Omelko!’ ”

The cannoneer laughed and wept, unable to utter a word. He never imagined while sitting at the heavy oars that he would ever be free of the chains and be back among his friends, and meet so many people dear to him, especially Schyrytsia, alongside whom he had fought on land and sea many a time.

Meanwhile, the Zaporozhian Cossacks boarded the galley. There were

greetings, laughter, embraces.

"I've taken several galleys, but never one like this," Orendarenko boomed happily, embracing Nepran and Bodnia. "Bohdan nearly threw me into the sea because of you. He sent me off to look for you. And to obtain a galley . . ."

"What for?" Nepran asked.

"They've cooked up a plan. They need it for something."

"Well, you've got it now!"

"This one's yours."

"Ah, we won't mind. Pretend you left us in the sea on purpose, so that you could get this galley."

"But how was I to know that Khmel . . .?"

"Well, you could have guessed his wish."

"There are no guessers like that among the Zaporozhians."

"And thank God for that!" Schyrytsia said, coming up to them with Siryk.

"Why were you aiming so badly?" the old cannoneer squinted.

"We were afraid of damaging the ship," said Schyrytsia. "We needed it intact . . . Who's your leader?"

"Well, me."

"Tell them not to throw away the Turkish clothes, Nepran. They will come in useful tonight . . ."

"You didn't come across two galleys like this one, did you?" Siryk asked Schyrytsia. "The girls were on them . . . And probably my daughter too."

"No, we didn't," sighed Schyrytsia. "If we had, we would have known what to do."

The galley moved along like a duck with its brood. Darkness was beginning to fall. And because the sky was covered with a blanket of cloud, they had to strike a light and read the compass from time to time, so as not to find their way into the devil's teeth.

"Where are the rest of our men?" Nepran asked Orendarenko.

"Nearby, twenty, maybe thirty versts away. They're waiting for us . . . and you."

"Is the Bosphorus far?"

"Who knows. The seasoned cossacks say it's a stone's throw away. P'raps we'll pass through at night."

"We can't in daylight — they'll leave us in tatters. And there'll be such a

reception in Istanbul, it will leave us scratching for a long time,” Nepran said. “We took it easy two years ago and were badly shattered.”

“Khmelnitsky knows his business. I have no doubts about him . . .”

Laughter shook the galley. And then came total silence, except for the babble of Schyrytsia’s voice.

“The old man’s at it again. Let’s go and listen.”

Orendarenko waved his hand.

“I’m sick and tired of those lies of his. As soon as he starts prattling, the cossacks hang out their ears and forget about the oars.”

When the otamans reached the bow where nearly everyone on the slave ship had gathered, Schyrytsia had just begun his account of the creation of the world. He spoke slowly, imitating, but not satirising, a priest delivering his sermon from the pulpit.

“It all happened a long time ago, probably in the time of Tsar Tymko, maybe even earlier, when there was still no Earth, only the one Paradise. There was an empty space where the Earth is now. And so, to fill that empty space, God created the Earth. After God created the Earth, he created Zaporozhian Cossacks, then Mussulmans and Liakhs*, so there would be someone to fight, then all kinds of other creatures, and finally the Devil. Before the Earth had solidified properly after Creation, while it was still clammy and disorganised, the Zaporozhian Cossacks had already come to blows with the Devil and were enemies. Their estates were contiguous on the Dnipro swamps. The Devil had gout and was treating himself in the swamps; at the same time the Zaporozhians were out fishing and both exchanged heated words. The Devil argued that the Meadow was his, the Zaporozhians claimed it their own . . .”

“Nepran, I can see a light glimmering!”

“Probably our chaikas,” Schyrytsia said indifferently.

“And what if they’re galleys?”

“What would they be doing in these parts?”

“Probably got gout too,” Orendarenko said angrily, and ordered his men: “Board the chaika, boys, quick!”

“Can I stay here?” Schyrytsia asked.

“All right.”

“I’ve lived out most of my life and never travelled the sea in such comfort

* Poles.

before,” the old man sighed. “Yeah, yeah, a nice little boat. It’ll be a pity to burn it. Eh, Omelko?”

“I’d rather it had burned in the forest! Go below and see how pampered we were . . .”

“Eh, you don’t have to tell me, Omelko,” Schyrytsia drawled. “Petro!”

“Yes, father?”

“How did you take this queen and overpower so many Turks?”

“Their rudder was broken. And they were asleep . . .”

“You’re lucky! I must have fought them close on a hundred years, but I’ve yet to see a sleeping Turk. Except eternally asleep . . . I’m lying, I’m lying! Once in Varna . . .”

Nepran did not listen any more. Ascending to the highest point on the garret, he stared into the darkness, where a distant light flashed on and off. The chaikas were barely visible in the night haze. A favourable wind died down and then puffed again into the white rustle of the sails. The masts, deck and the whole galley shuddered.

“Where shall I steer this thing, Nepran?” asked the helmsman. “Towards that light?”

“Yes.”

“Why the hell is it flashing?”

“One of the chaikas up ahead must be in the way.”

“Perhaps . . .”

Mykola came up.

“Who is that? Ours or . . .”

“Ah, it’s all the same,” Nepran replied soberly. “If they’re ours, we’ll keep going. If not, we’ll take them and send them to the bottom for the fish to feed on, and then keep going. Now there are a lot of us!”

The light drew quickly closer, as if it was travelling towards them.

“Mykola, tell Siryk to have the gunners man the cannons just in case, and strike some fire,” Nepran said. “And not a rustle.”

Mykola disappeared. Schyrytsia grew silent. There was only the lapping of the waves and the fluttering of the sails.

Ahead of them some human voices erupted, something heavy clanked. The light disappeared. A voice floated from the darkness:

“Petro, join the first row, with Khmel!”

Nepran breathed a sigh of relief and sat down on a damp bench. Suddenly

he felt tired. His whole body, exhausted after a sleepless night, craved for sleep and rest. Rubbing his eyes, he saw black masts sailing past, parting and making way for the galley. Here and there friends called out to him, congratulated him . . .

“My, the brigands are glad . . . ! he whispered in his sleep.

He woke when someone shook his shoulder. He sat up and, sensing that the galley was not trembling and the sails not fluttering, asked:

“Why have we stopped?”

“Have you gone deaf?” Mykola buzzed beside him. “Khmelnitsky is calling us!”

Nepran looked up at the sky, stars twinkled here and there. And the moon would be rising soon.

“It’s a bad state of affairs,” he smacked his lips.

“Did we do anything wrong?”

“God Sabaoth. We need darkness now, and He lights lanterns!”

“Strewth! I was afraid we’d get told off for something by Khmel.”

Bohdan warmly greeted Petro and Mykola. He kissed both like blood relatives, and asking them to sit down, for the sea was rocking the boat well, said:

“Good lads! Heroes! I almost wept with grief when I’d heard that you were left behind in that hell alone. This is real cossack mateship! If all of us, all our people, could be such friends and endangered their lives for their comrades, then no one in the world would be able to touch our country!”

He grew silent and pensive, then asked:

“Is it true the two of you took the galley alone?”

“The slaves helped us,” Nepran replied.

“How many crew were there?”

“Fifty, maybe more . . .”

“We didn’t count them,” Mykola added.

“Was there anyone special on board?”

“Murad-pasha. Mykola sent him to hell.”

“Good. But if you had taken him alive . . .”

“Yeah, after the son of a devil shaved my forelock off!” Bodnia rose to his feet. “Now I have to wear a hat, or cover myself with my hand.”

“Wear his turban!” Schyrytsia advised, appearing unexpectedly beside them.

“By the way,” Bohdan said, checking the laughter welling up inside him, “have you kept the Turkish clothing?”

“Every one of us. We were afraid we’d meet some Turks at sea.”

“Great,” Khmelnitsky rubbed his hands. “We’ll enter the Bosphorus tonight, and give the capital some snuff to smell at dawn . . .”

“They’ll be sneezing till Christmas!” Schyrytsia butted in again.

“But so that we don’t get to sniff any ourselves,” Khmel continued, “we must pass through the Bosphorus undetected.”

“The Bosphorus is wide, we’ll get through,” said Nepran.

“And the Buyukdere fortress? It’s narrow there, they’ve got a score of cannons, and one, maybe two hundred janissaries.”

“Let me storm the fortress!” Nepran stood up.

“But quietly.”

“With sabres? What if they start shooting?”

“You must take it using your head,” Bohdan said decisively. “I’ll give you my most courageous men, who are standing by already, and you’ll dress some of them up as Turks, hide the others on board the galley and arrive at the fortress to ask them to open the gates to let you, Murad-pasha, into the fortress because your slave ship has been knocked about by the storm and you could sink any moment. You would have sat the night out on shore, but you have a shipment of slave girls from Ukraine . . .”

“The Turks are fond of such sausages!” Schyrytsia interjected.

“Good,” said Nepran. “But what if they don’t let me in?”

“Then you stand cursing at the gates, while the cossacks surround the the fortress and scale the walls – they’re not very high there.”

“What do we do with the cannons in the fortress?”

“The light ones onto the chaikas, the heavy ones into the sea, so they can’t fire on us on our way out to sea . . . Careful, be patient and watchful.” Bohdan rose and called out into the darkness: “Buyukdere!”

“Buyukdere. . .” the word spread like an echo across the chaikas.

“Go and take my boys, it’s time to leave,” Khmelnitsky said. He embraced Nepran and Bodnia, then let them go.

In the neighbouring chaika Nepran remembered his kobza. Stopping, he shouted:

“Grandfather, did you save my bandura?”

“It’s still in one piece!” answered Schyrytsia. “Do you want it now?”

“Tomorrow. It might get damaged in the darkness . . . Aren’t you coming with us?”

“The sultan is waiting for me! He asked me to drop in for coffee, so I’m deliberating which morocco-leather shoes to wear, so that neither my toes nor my heels show!”

“A merry old man,” Bodnia said.

“He’s from Volyn, like me. Every second man there is a wit.”

“Aw, yeah!” Bodnia was stung. “In Cherkasy . . .”

“They’re all like you?” Nepran asked slyly. “They draw their sabre at every joke?”

“Though we’re like real brothers, Nepran,” Bodnia answered slowly, “if you continue to taunt me, then may my whole forelock fall out . . . !”

Hasn’t it already?” Nepran asked in such an innocent voice, that his blood brother was speechless with anger. He mumbled something, tripped over an oar, and nearly fell into the water.

It was like a mill in August near the galley. Cossacks clambered onto it from the boats which stood in line.

“Brothers, don’t tip over my wash-tub!” Petro called out.

“Nepran! Nepran!”

“Make way for Murad-pasha!”

“*Yavash, agur!*”^{*} Petro said, joining in the fun and climbed a shaky rope ladder onto the galley. There was no room to move on deck, so many men had come on board. He had been joking, but the galley really could sink, unable to hold the weight of the men.

“Ladders away!” Nepran ordered. “Raise the sails! Slaves down below on the oars!”

“Those damned oars are in our livers,” someone said angrily.

“Please, good people, help me reach Buyukdere. We can’t keep up to the boats under sail alone. And take off your Turkish clothes and leave them in Murad-pasha’s cabin!”

“How’s that? Are we meant to go about without any pants then?”

“Leave your pants on, but take everything else off! There will be enough clothes in Istanbul: if you’re not lazy, you’ll be able to deck yourself out in silk and gold!”

Slowly the galley set off. The tight sails came to life, filling with a hot,

* (Turk.) Quietly, softly!

strong tremble, like good horses breaking loose into the open steppe. The oars hit the black water, the sea frothed and bubbled, carrying the fierce avengers towards the rapacious cities of the empire which had stretched out its pampered body, feeding on the blood and suffering of other lands and peoples.

* *
*

Siryk saw the straits first. Soon after midnight he spied two stars on the horizon which flashed, growing fainter and brighter.

“The Bosphorus!”

“Where, where?” the young men became excited.

“There,” he pointed with his hand, “two glowing wolf’s eyes. They are lighthouses, or *feners*, as the Turks call them. Anadolu on the left, Rumeli on the right.”

“They’re side by side! We’ll never get through!”

“It only seems that way from a distance. They are separated by more than three versts.”

“What do they burn? Giant candles?”

“Logs. They light fires on the towers.”

“To see who’s coming into the straits?”

“No, the other way around. So vessels can find the straits in the darkness.”

“They’re smart, even though they are Turks.”

“It wasn’t their invention,” Nepran said. “The ancient Greeks built such fires on their islands.”

“How do you know?” Mykola asked.

“I studied in the Brotherhood School in Kiev.”

“Why didn’t you become a priest?”

“I ran away to the Sich.”

“In vain,” Mykola elbowed him. “You should have stayed behind and burned incense and administered Communion . . .”

“I’ll administer Communion to Buyukdere, and then to Istanbul itself!”

“That’s us!” someone boasted in a thin childish voice.

Laughter erupted.

“Brothers!” Nepran called out. “We’re almost there. Wake those who are asleep! All ‘Turks’ on deck! The rest – down below!”

The Sich Cossacks carried out his orders enthusiastically and quickly. They grew quiet. The stillness filled with the slow splashing of the waves, the whistle of the wind in the rigging, and the measured striking of the oars. The oarsmen rowed with all their might, for even the hardest work done of one's own volition was a festival.

The galley forged ahead of the chaikas by a good verst and approached the shores of the Bosphorus and the two lighthouses on the tall cliffs.

"On our right are the Kiani Rocks," Siryk said softly. "Careful we don't hit them . . ."

"I've passed them a hundred times," the giant at the helm replied.

Nepran wanted to ask what the slave's name was, but the old gunner spoke first.

"All the same, you be careful, Maniunia*!"

"The Sich Cossacks christened you that?" Nepran asked the giant.

"What other devil!"

Passing the rocks on their right, they entered the Bosphorus. The flames on the lighthouses beside them danced about, making the darkness even thicker. Above them was heavy solid cloud, below them water, and steep black forest slopes rose on either side. After the freedom of the sea, the narrow alien straits seemed like a dangerous trap.

The Zaporozhian Cossacks exchanged glances and shifted from foot to foot, comical in their Turkish uniforms. The sons of the boundless steppe felt uncomfortable and crowded in this valley, on this high deck, under this low, sullen sky . . .

"When it comes to fighting, take off your turbans and fezzes, otherwise you'll confuse your own man with the enemy," Nepran warned for the hundredth time.

"So we've heard," grumbled Mykola. "We're not warriors, but actors . . . Shame on you, a cossack in a fez!"

"What's better, Mykola, a cossack with a fez and a head, or a cossack without a head?" Nepran asked.

"The best is a good sabre, a strong hand and a brave heart!"

The cossacks liked his gallant words. Petro too. Were he not the otaman, he too would have yearned to meet the enemy openly. But now every wound and every death would lie on his heart with a burning pain, a heart which was

* Literally means 'Tiny'.

pained enough after the stupid battle in the steppe near Ochakiv.

“Your sabre will come in handy too,” Nepran said. “Don’t think you’ll take the fortress with a fez alone, Bodnia. Unless the girls . . .” And he suddenly remembered: “Where are our girls? Mykola, hurry down! Find coats and anything else useful. So that there are a score of beauties ready for Buyukdere.”

“Strewth!” Bodnia spat out, however he went to carry out the otaman’s orders.

“Is it far to go?” Nepran asked Maniunia. While talking he had missed seeing several landmarks and could not tell where they were.

“There’s Kavak Point. About two versts to go.”

Nepran looked back to see if the chaikas were behind them. He realised that their place was not beside him, however he wished they could be behind his back, like a faithful friend in battle.

The first roosters crowed. High up among the cliffs glimmered a lone fire — someone could not sleep.

“Buyukdere,” Maniunia whispered and pointed ahead at the right bank.

Straining his eyes, Nepran saw towers, high walls raised to bar the way for cossack chaikas to Istanbul. But there was no stopping a storm.

“Is there a jetty there?” whispered Nepran. “Take us to it.”

“And berth there?”

“Of course. Act like we’re Turks.”

“You here, Omelko? Will you tie up the galley?”

“All right.”

Buyukdere rose quickly from the darkness growing before their eyes. The jetty was near the gate tower.

When the galley berthed, there came a voice from above:

“Hey, on the galley, who are you?”

“Murad-pasha!” Nepran answered angrily. “Have my galleys passed through yet?”

“Yes. Towards evening.”

“How many?”

“Two, I think.”

“Praise to Allah! But we’ve got trouble.”

“What happened?”

“The storm knocked us about. We’re sinking!”

“Allah preserve you . . .”

“Ashore everyone! Ashore!” Nepran shouted in Turkish, then whispered to Maniunia and Siryk: “Take everyone ashore. I told them we’re sinking . . .”

They watched in silence from the tower as Murad-pasha left the galley, together with his sailors, slaves and some other strange people looking like women . . .

“Why are there so many of you?” the guards asked curiously.

“We’ve got captives with us. Let us inside, it’s cold out here!”

“I can’t. Wait till the morning.”

“We’ll freeze to death. And these giaours* will run away.”

“Chain them up well.”

“It’s too dark. At least throw us down some wood for a fire.”

“You can’t light fires! We can’t see who’s sailing past towards Istanbul then.”

“Then open the gates.”

“It’s not permitted.”

“Where’s the *yuzbashi*¹? Fetch him!”

“He’s asleep.”

“Wake him!”

Nepran was fuming: having to talk with some shorthair, to beg to be let inside, when all he needed to do was to give the word and the cossacks would splash onto the walls and towers, getting stuck into the confused crowd of *kullukchus*².

“I’m here, respected Murad-bey³,” the *yuzbashi* arrived at last.
“Open the gates!”

“The sultan will hang me.”

“I swear by Allah he won’t! I’ve suffered enough at sea, my galley is sinking, and you won’t help me in the name of the Prophet?”

“Wait till morning . . .”

“When one fires an arrow, one must know where it hits! I will tell the vizier how you treated us! And I’ve got something for him . . .”

“What are you bringing, Murad-pasha?” the *yuzbashi* asked after a silence.

“Girls from Rus.”

* Christian infidel.

1. Turkish for lieutenant.

2. *Kullukchu* – Turkish fortress guard.

3. A high-born aristocrat.

“Really?”

“The devil take you! Am I a dog, to bark at the wind?” Nepran-Murad hollered.

The guards did not answer for a long time. They were probably deliberating, for soon the *yuzbashi* said:

“Wait, we’ll let you in in the morning.”

“The best girl will be yours!”

“You won’t dupe us, will you?” they asked ingratiatingly from the tower.

“Allah is my witness.”

“One isn’t enough. We want two.”

“As it is said, a guest is as meek as a sheep,” Nepran sighed. “They’re yours, the devil take you!”

“And you’ll let me choose them myself?” the happy *yuzbashi* asked.

“You’re an impudent fellow! If you ask for anything else, I’ll order my warriors to attack and take your ugly nest, and I’ll tell the vizier that you’re a giaour and a traitor!”

“Don’t be angry, respected bey. I’m opening the gate!”

Nepran waved his hand and the cossacks moved towards the gate. The ‘janissaries’ came first, followed by a group of ‘female slaves’, and behind them came the ‘oarsmen’, dressed and almost naked, but all armed.

The heavy iron gate opened. Mykola drew his sabre.

“Hide it this minute,” Nepran whispered. “You’ll frighten them . . . Boys, don’t be in a hurry! Come in together, in a crowd. No fighting without my orders. Siryk, when we start, take twenty men and get the cannons on the walls. Mykola, you lead the ‘girls’ to the sleeping quarters.”

“Welcome, welcome, respected Murad-pasha!” the *yuzbashi* came out to greet them. “May Allah lengthen your years! And where are my beauties?”

“Merhaba!” Nepran said, raking him aside to let his army pass.

“The girls are behind the janissaries. Do you want to choose yours now?”

“Of course!” the *yuzbashi* said, and ran off to the group of slave girls, grabbing the hand of the end one.

“Come here, don’t be afraid,” he cooed, feeling her face. “Allah akbar! She’s got a mous . . .!”

He did not finish the sentence, falling dead on the pavement.

“Some lovelace . . .” grumbled the cossack, removing the wearisome kerchief from his head.

Kerchiefs, fezzes and turbans covered the ground, and the cossacks streamed like water into the fortress.

Nepran raced into the low door of the tower. He wanted to close the gate so no Turks could escape from the fortress.

Two guards blocked his way. Lit by the trembling light of a torch, they seemed like giants straight out of *Sheherezade*. Had it been Nepran's first fight in a fortress, he would probably have been frightened and would have retreated. But as it was, despite their frightening figures and yataghans, he saw horror in the guards' eyes.

The sabres struck with a shower of sparks.

"Move in from the back, Yusuf," the Turk fighting Nepran called out.

"Yusuf will be as much help to you as medicine is to a dead man," Nepran said in Turkish.

The Turk froze in amazement. Nepran cut him down, then, without looking further, jumped towards Yusuf. The fellow lost his wits, amazed at his friend's sudden end, and backed away to the exit.

"Throw down your weapon!" Nepran ordered.

Yusuf acquiesced.

"The gate!"

The guard moved sideways towards the wheel, and glancing back at the cossack's sabre which glistened in the dancing light, put his weight to the winch.

By the time the chaikas had reached the fortress, the second roosters had crowed. The cossacks were throwing the heavy cannons into the sea, gathering weapons and carrying booty onto the galley.

The way to Istanbul was open.





Cossack chaikas were faster than rumours. The capital of the Porte was asleep. Rich, proud, confident in its unbeatable strength, it didn't even have an inkling that someone would have the courage to come and disturb the sacred sleep of the Ruler of Rulers, the Viceroy of God Himself on earth. Towards morning, the Bosphorus was swathed in a light fog, and the white towers of Istanbul seemed to float up into the sky, frightening in their grandeur and height.

"Do we take them by storm?" Mykola asked in a whisper. Petro and he stood at the helm of the galley which was at the head of the chaikas, as if cutting a path for them through the fog.

"Why the devil do we need them? It's a tedious and drawn-out business."

"So what do we do?"

"We'll go on a spree over there," Nepran nodded at the right bank of the Straits, where there were white walls too, but three times lower. "There's Galata over there, see? Jetties, merchant houses and the slave market . . ."

"So maybe Uliana is there?"

"Mykola, you'll wake the vizier or even the Sultan . . ." Nepran placed his hand over the fellow's mouth.

"So what? Big deal."

"They'll be angry with you for not letting them enjoy peace and quiet in their own home," old Schyrytsia piped up.

Looking back to see if the chaikas were close behind, Nepran ordered the galley to stop. Nearby they could see the entrance to the Golden Horn – and inside it galleys and caiques.

"Why have we stopped?" Mykola asked feverishly.

"The underwater boats will go first," Nepran said, peering into the grey gloom where the chaikas should have been.

“What about you and me? Where is our underwater boat?”

“Bohdan ordered us to stay on the galley, to enter the cove and set fire to all the galleys.”

“That’s a good deed too . . . But Khmelnitsky will take Galata without us!”

“We’ll make it,” old Schyrytsia said. “By the time they disable the guards and light a few candles to see by in the night, we’ll be finished here and can go ashore too. I once got such a good sabre from a bey here, that the *koshovy* begged me on his knees to swap it with him for anything . . .”

“They’ve gone!” Nepran said, pointing at the hardly discernible posts moving towards Galata. “It’s time for us to act too!”

Schyrytsia ran down to the oarsmen.

Uliana’s father wordlessly embraced Petro and Mykola, struck some fire and walked away down the galley — the long since ready gunners were waiting for him.

Oars hit the water and with a shudder, the galley turned to the right and moved towards the cove entrance.

Nepran had his eyes peeled to the fortress walls, where the Turks could appear at any moment and fire their heavy cannons. His heart became filled with a malicious joy, a desire to wreak vengeance on the city where he and thousands of his brothers had tasted captivity. He awaited the moment when the first explosion or scream would tear the morning serenity, when a red bird of fire would fly into the air, when these slave traders in turbans who brought fire, blood and death wherever they went would begin to scurry about. Prepare the coffee, Sultan, the Zaporozhian Cossacks are coming to visit!

The boats moved together. Water goblins jumped into the bay and swam towards the white walls of Galata. Casting rope ladders with hooks onto the walls, they scaled the bastions and disappeared over the walls.

Meanwhile, the cossack galley had entered the cove and the chaikas poured from the fog — some moved towards the walls the forelocked warriors had scaled, others followed the galley. The shore and the walls on the right bank of the cove were suddenly covered with cossacks.

“There, there are Murad-pasha’s galleys!” Maniunia pointed into the depths of the Golden Horn.

White gulls flew over the cove, together with black, raven-like karakushes. It looked as if the city was shadowed by good and evil, love and hatred,

yesterday's bright happy day, and today's day which would bring retribution.

Some Turks scurried about on the nearest slave ship. A shot was fired. Oh no! Mykola took off his turban and stood at the helm, as if wanting Uliana to see him first.

"Clear out, Mykola!" Nepran called out.

But no! Mykola glared back angrily and drew his sabre.

The enemy cannons could fire on them any moment now.

Nepran ordered Maniunia to pass the Turkish galley on the left and shouted to the gunners:

"Fire!"

There was a roar and a flash. Smoke and screams. The helmsman was too slow to do anything and the Zaporozhian vessel ploughed into one of Murad-pasha's galleys.

A moment later, Mykola had boarded it. The other boys hurried after him, tossing their turbans into the water.

Nepran spat angrily and gave a sign to the cossacks squatting on the deck, packed together like herrings, and drew his sabre too.

By the time they had come to his aid, Mykola had already unchained the happy speechless oarsmen. Water was pouring into the vessel through a large hole in the galley's stern.

"Hurry up! You'll drown!" Nepran shouted. "Are the girls here?"

"No. They're probably on the other one."

"Let's have the hooks."

Several were thrown immediately onto the other slave ship; they tugged at the ropes . . . and fell.

"They're cutting the ropes!"

Nepran called Siryk.

"Singe them a little with the cannons, father!"

"We can do that. We're not stingy with our powder for the Mussulmans."

The hooks and the cannon-balls fell at the same time. The galley quickly drew closer, pistols fired, sabres clashed . . .

There were no girls here either. Nepran stopped in despair, then began looking for a live Turk. One after another, he turned over bodies trying to find at least a spark of life in one of them. But it was useless. The boys had exerted themselves like threshers on a barn floor.

"Where's Uliana?" Bodnia growled angrily, still holding his sabre.

Nepran shrugged his shoulders and went to the group of freed oarsmen from both galleys.

“We’ll ask them. P’raps they’ll know.”

“Yes, they were here,” the captives said in unison. “About fifty of them . . . They boarded in Ochakiv, and were led ashore this evening here in Galata . . .”

“Was there a beautiful blonde girl among them? Called Uliana?” Mykola asked.

“Don’t know. We didn’t get near them.”

Cossack chaikas sailed past them into the depths of the cove where there were several Turkish galleys and a whole flotilla of smaller vessels. Cannons fired on the cossacks from the walls of Istanbul, but the cannon-balls fell like stones into the water, short of their target.

“Ashore! Faster, faster! Burn the galleys, boys!” Nepran ordered, seeing that pillars of smoke were rising all over Galata. He knew of several mansions around here where the beys held their slaves, and hurried there.

The oarsmen were all armed and now their band presented a fierce and frightful force. The liberated slaves were gaunt, overgrown with hair, scantily dressed, and boiling over with fury and a desire for revenge. Like a tornado, they tore into the damned city, ready to wipe from the face of the earth this vile nest of slavery.

Without pausing at the shops and *konaks*[†] of the wealthy Turks, Nepran led his band along familiar streets. The most precious booty of all were slaves — people related by blood. Nepran seemed to split into two. He was running along the narrow streets with sabre bared, and he was also sitting somewhere in a dark cellar, listening to the rumble of battle, catching with his body and soul, with his whole being, the distant shouts, the ringing of steel against steel and that longed-for language, which was sweeter than the herald angel’s song. Less than a year ago he had walked these streets as a chained slave, but now he was bringing freedom to others . . .

“Look, Petro, spahis*!” Siryk shouted in alarm.

Nepran stopped. Riders were charging down the street towards them — at least a hundred men! This was the sultan’s own mounted guard.

“Boys, into the yard, quick!” he rushed first to the nearest *konak* and

[†] *Konak* — a walled Turkish household.

* Turkish cavalrymen.

broke down the old gate. "Barricade the street well!"

"What for?"

"They've got good horses."

"Arabian, they're like the wind!" Schyrytsia smacked his lips.

Carts, rocks and barrels covered the ground, stopping the horses and crowding them together. The wall bellowed a volley of shots, and following the hail of lead, like ghosts from hell, the Zaporozhians spilled out from the yard and house.

Atop shining black horses, Nepran and Bodnia spun around like tops, cutting into the Turks. Taking a score of oarsmen, Siryk closed off the road along which the spahis had come. Using rocks, firing shots or simply pulling the Turks off their horses by their legs, the cossacks became riders themselves. The stone trap was closing in on them. From both ends, where there were no high walls, frightening giaours pressed on them in a solid wall, and there was no hope of remaining alive. The spahis fought to the death.

The battle was dragging on.

"Surrender! Give us your horses and weapons and you are free!" Nepran called out in Turkish.

"True believers, in the name of Allah! Kill the dogs!" a spahi hollered, towering like a mountain over the fighting. He reared his horse and charged towards the Zaporozhian otaman.

Nepran tightened the hold on his sabre and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"Hold on, Petro!" Mykola yelled. "I'll come and help you as soon as I finish here!"

Their sabres struck together with a clang. The horses pranced about, shivering all over, yet accustomed to battle.

"Giaour, damned giaour!" the brave spahi shouted. "How dare you appear before the gentle eyes of the Ruler of Rulers! The Sultan will grind to dust all of Poland and your Ukraine!"

"Run and kiss your sultan in a certain place!"

The fellow's furious goggle eyes almost popped out, a spasm contorted his face. To hear such a thing was a deathly sin!

"Constipated for words?" Nepran asked, and taking advantage of the fellow's confusion, chopped hard with his sabre. "Surrender, you sons of bitches!"

With their leader dead, the bold spahis suddenly lost heart and began to lay down their arms. There were not many left alive.

Well armed, the mounted band immediately galloped off into the heart of Galata, to where the *binbashi*¹, whose slave Nepran had been last year, held his slaves.

“Why did you free the heathens?” Mykola asked, riding beside Petro.

“Because they surrendered.”

“Just you wait till they come hunting us – they’ll repay you.”

“If the sultan doesn’t drown them for shamefully surrendering to the *urus* devils.”

“So it’s from the frying pan into the fire for them!” Bodnia said more cheerfully, and even smiled.

The *binbashi*’s yard was locked. The strong gate did not yield to the cossacks’ shoulders, and so the cossacks had no alternative but to stand on their horses’ backs and to scale the high stone walls. The yard was silent. And only by straining one’s ears could one hear a deep moaning, like the sea before a storm . . .

“Nepran!” Bodnia shouted, and a volley of bullets thundered at them.

Petro felt a bullet whistle past his ear. He jumped aside and hid behind a stone column. The shots were coming from the windows. Two of the cossacks who had scaled the walls were lying dead. Bodnia crept along the length of the building, glancing at the black beam which held the gate closed. Three more boys stood with pistols in both hands near the small windows, where the enemy was lurking.

“Don’t you dare, Mykola!” Nepran called out.

But Bodnia whistled, and as soon as the boys fired into the windows, he raced to the gate, removed the heavy beam and ran across to join his blood brother under the portico.

The gate creaked and moved slowly on the forged iron hinges. Several shots were fired immediately from the windows. But to no avail, for the cossacks had anticipated these gifts, and ran into the yard only after the bullets had thudded into the oak boards of the gate.

“Can you hear the groans?” Mykola asked.

“Yes. They’re probably coming from the cellar,” Nepran whispered.

Bending down, Bodnia wanted to rush out into the open. He would have

1. Turkish commander of a thousand men.

had a bullet in his chest had Nepran not stopped him.

“Let me go! Maybe Uliana’s in there!”

“There’s a gallery of windows there – they’ll shoot you like a quail. Strike some fire, we’ll burn them out.”

“Maybe we should break the door down?”

“It will take too long!”

“Is he a wealthy Turk?”

“Of course.”

“Let me search him!”

“All right, try. I’ll get to the cellar.”

Mykola returned his sabre to its scabbard, grabbed a rock of about five poods, and slammed it against the door. The door fell into the house and Bodnia rushed in, followed by Schyrytsia, Siryk and all who had succeeded in breaking through the enemy bullets.

Nepran raced down to the cellar. Luckily the door was not locked, but when the cossack kicked it open, a yataghan flashed before his eyes. Petro covered himself with his sabre and recognised the slave overseer blocking his way.

“Ah, Mustafa! You weren’t expecting a visit from Nepran?”

“*Aman, aman!*” the overseer grew pale.

“Oh, you haven’t forgotten how you whipped me? The time of reckoning has come!”

He chopped into him and descended the stairs into the black cellar.

“Out you come boys! You’re free!”

The groaning became louder, but no one answered.

Only after he had grown accustomed to the darkness did he see the slaves lying tied up on the stone floor. Their mouths were gagged.

Nepran wanted to say something amusing to cheer everyone up, but couldn’t. Bending over the nearest fellow, he cut the leather fetters binding him and removed the rag from his mouth.

“Thank you, my dear brother! I’ll never forget this . . .”

“Hurry outside and join the Zaporozhians,” Nepran said, freeing the others. He saw familiar faces and friends with whom he had been at sea and fallen into Turkish hands with. It was a sacred moment! Worth all the storms and battles, the blood and deaths they had been through. Happy is the free man, but happier still is the liberator.

Nepran left the horrid dark cellar last, just as the cossack trumpets were signalling assemblage. The Zaporozhian Cossacks, together with the freed slaves, spilled from the *binbashi*'s yard. Some empty-handed, others with booty. Bodnia must have come out best of all – he was carrying a large bag of money.

“Don't worry, brothers, if you worked hard for the Mussulman,” he chatted with the slaves, who were mad with freedom. “Your payment is here in this bag. Out of the goodness of his heart your *binbashi* has paid for your toil as if you were his own sons.”

“And kicked the bucket in his grief!”

Joking, the band moved through the burning, desolate city. Khmelnitsky had been here with the main force.

Mykola stopped his horse and waited for Nepran.

“Will we return without Uliana after all?”

“Perhaps someone else has freed her.”

“We'll turn Istanbul upside down!”

“There aren't enough men, brother. If we don't make tracks in an hour, the sultan will raise such an army that we'll have to leave our heads here.”

“I once stayed a little too long at one bey's place here, and had to catch up to the boats by swimming,” Schyrytsia interjected. “I received a lead gift between the shoulders. If Nepran hadn't come to my rescue, my bones would have long been gracing the bottom of the Bosphorus . . .”

“Turks!”

Ahead, at the intersection of two narrow streets, stood janissaries. How many of them there were it was hard to tell, for they could only see a part of the line which had blocked their path to the Bosphorus.

“What shall we do?” Nepran asked Schyrytsia and Siryk, who stood silently by his side.

“Make a run for the boats!” said the merry old man.

“Which way?”

“Forward. Over the heads of those heathens!”

“Maybe there's a thousand of them . . .” Siryk sighed sadly.

“Well, my good lads,” Nepran shouted, rising in his stirrups. “Let's not shame our cossack reputation! We'll fight our way through or die!” He took a deep breath, touched the horse with his heels and charged at the janissaries.

This was no skirmish, but a real battle. Not expecting to find mounted

Zaporozhian Cossacks, the janissaries were confused at first, and the cossacks cut into their crowded ranks. However, the Turks soon recovered and began to press in from three sides at once on Nepran's army. Brave, though exhausted in chains, the recent slaves fought viciously, disregarding wounds and death. For him who has tasted captivity and walked under the meadow-sweet of the overseer, there is no alternative but to die a free man.

Bodnia fought more courageously than anyone. Though he had never done time on a slave ship and never had to clank chains, he had his own accounts to settle with the Porte. The janissaries had already appraised his blows and tried to steal up to him from behind. But Schyrytsia, Siryk and Maniunia, towering like a minaret, stayed by his side.

Someone behind Nepran screamed and fell off his saddle. Petro turned his horse to the left and just managed to stave off a yataghan. He met his adversary's eyes.

"Atish?!" he exclaimed joyously, recognising the good soul who had freed him from the galley.

Atish winced painfully, jerking his yataghan back . . . Then he gritted his teeth and viciously chopped down a janissary who had crept up to the otaman from the side.

"Thank you!" Nepran shouted to him.

Atish tore off his turban and threw it into the face of his captain, who had rushed up with threats.

Nepran chopped at the captain, retrieved his lambskin hat from his bosom and handed it to Atish.

The battle continued to rage. Steel rang, people fell, coming into contact with it. Brothers by blood fought, and the sly Turk watched, screwing up his ravenous eyes . . .

Suddenly an anxious murmur passed over the battle. The janissaries became agitated and fled into the neighbouring streets.

"Help's coming, brothers, hear?" Maniunia rejoiced, being the first to see the cossacks who had come to help them out.

Nepran stopped the eager ones who had started running after the janissaries: the trumpets sounded a second time – soon the chaikas would be leaving. He dismounted and embraced Atish.

"Boys!" he announced, so everyone would hear. "This is the Atish who freed me from the slave ship!"

“Allah akbar, Allah akbar,” Atish whispered reverently, putting his hands together.

Siryk took off his cross and put it around Atish’s neck. Mykola brought him a horse.

They flew swiftly towards the chaikas. Some carried booty, others were merely glad to have come out alive and well from the labyrinth of Galata’s streets, or to be free. And only three of them – Siryk, Nepran and Bodnia, were downcast. They kept looking back, as if miraculously expecting to see Uliana among the stone houses. She was somewhere nearby, and yet they were unable to find her, to free her! Maybe she had even heard them, seen them, and beaten against grated iron windows like a caged bird . . .

“Why are you so sad?” Atish asked. He rode beside Nepran, so awkward in the saddle, with a cross over his shirt and a Zaporozhian lambskin hat. Nepran sighed.

“Last night Murad-pasha brought my sweetheart here.”

“Murad-pasha?”

“Yes, in his galleys. We burned them. But the girls have already been hidden somewhere . . .”

“And your sweetheart is among them?”

“His daughter . . .” Nepran nodded towards Siryk.

“She’s in the White Tower.”

Nepran stopped breathing. He grabbed Bodnia by the arm.

“Did you hear, Uliana is here, in the Tower!”

“I won’t return to the chaika without her!” Bodnia said decisively.

Petro rose in his stirrups and ordered:

“All those on foot hurry back to the boats! All those on horseback, follow me! We still have some work to do – our girls are sitting in that dungeon!”

There were about sixty horsemen. They raced along like the wind, putting fear into the hearts of the residents of the nearby streets.

They stopped near the tower behind a *konak* surrounded by strong walls.

“There are *kullukchus* inside,” Atish told Nepran.

“Many?”

“Who knows . . . A score maybe.”

“Is the gate strong?”

“Yes. It’s reinforced with thick forged iron.”

“What are we waiting for, Petro?” Mykola asked feverishly, holding his sabre at the ready. “For the bread and the salt which the Turks will bring out to us,” Nepran said, looking around.

He had a lucky thought! Nearly all the Zaporozhian Cossacks were dressed in Turkish clothes. All they needed were turbans and fezzes. And they had forelocks . . .

“Atish, take off your cross and hat, and go and ask them to open the gate. My blood brother will go with you . . . Mykola, seeing as you’ve no forelock . . .”

“Tired of wearing yours?” Bodnia asked sullenly. “My sabre is sharp!”

Atish gave the otaman his hat, hid the cross under his shirt and sheathed his yataghan. Mykola went off with him.

It seemed to take them an extremely long time to cover the stretch from the *konak* to the Tower, and an eternity passed before they were allowed inside. After Atish and Mykola dismounted and disappeared through the impregnable gate, time flew like an arrow. Nepran dug his heels into the horse’s sides and raced to the Tower. Arrows erupted in small clouds from the battlements. But it was too late: soon the whole band was safe. Nepran ordered a third of the boys to remain with the horses and to cover them in case Turkish reinforcements arrived, and rushed inside with the rest, where Atish and Bodnia were already fighting the guards.

At first he saw only faces and sabres in the twilight, but when his eyes had grown accustomed to it, he noticed some Turks huddled together at the top of the steps, fighting back the onslaught.

“Use your pistols, boys!” he shouted, cocked his and fired. The frenzied ringing of sabres, orders, groans and shots – everything joined together into one single din.

The defenders fell one after another and the fighting moved higher and higher up the steps, now covered with bodies. After it had reached the garret and not one live Turk remained, Nepran asked Atish:

“Where are the girls?”

“Down in the cellar.”

They descended into the dungeon and came upon two *kullukchus* guarding an iron door locked with a heavy lock.

The guards fell in a moment. Mykola began to look for the key. Crying could be heard in the cellar. There was banging on the door. Unable to

control himself, he began to break the lock with his bare hands.

Nepran took a torch down from the wall and lit Mykola's work. Mykola took better hold and broke the lock. He yanked the door towards himself, grabbed the light from Petro's hand and called out:

"Hurry out, girls, I've pined for you!"

But no one answered.

"Don't be afraid, we're cossacks!" Nepran shouted, realising the girls could have been frightened by their Turkish clothes.

There was silence. There was only Bodnia catching his breath and the shining eyes of the girls deep in the cellar.

"Is Uliana here? From Khutory, near Lysianka?" Omelko Siryk asked, stepping forward.

"Father!" the cellar echoed and the imprisoned girls rushed out screaming and crying.

They were the last returning to the boats. There were no more shots being fired and the sounds of battle were no longer heard on the Galata shore. Only the smoke billowed into the sky, as if covering the retreat of the forelocked warriors. And from the other side of the Golden Horn, Istanbul fired cannons in fright from time to time.

"The Sultan will have the vizier hanged," Atish told Nepran. "Such shame on the Porte . . ."

"The only way for him to go. He's spilt too much human blood already," Nepran declared, without taking his eyes off Uliana, who was sitting behind her father, holding onto him as if she didn't believe that all of this was really happening.

Atish kept glancing at Siryk's daughter too, even though he and almost every rider had a girl on his horse. He wrinkled his forehead strangely, as if remembering something.

"Have many cossack caiques come?" he spoke again.

"Three hundred!"

"Great Allah! So the janissaries had been sent to certain death?"

"They were invented to stop the enemy's bullets and sabres."

The trumpets blew a third time.

"We won't be left behind, will we?" the newly-born Zaporozhian Cossack asked anxiously, for he did not yet know the heart of his people, nor cossack custom.

“If they did, they’d be sent running from the Sich like rabid dogs,” Nepran said.

And yet they drove the horses faster: they weren’t visiting a godparent, but were in the bosom of the terrible Porte itself, an animal which held Europe and Asia in terror.

The sails had already been raised on the boats. The front ones had even moved off slowly, and those awaiting the horsemen from the city, though impatient, crowded outside the gate which would disgorge their most courageous brothers at any moment.

As soon as Nepran and his men with the freed girls had reached the shore, the last chaikas raised their anchors and set off north.

Istanbul grew silent, unable to believe that this was no ruse, another war game; that these devils from the Dnipro River would be attacking no more.

The cannons were silent too. And the gulls, of which there were clouds, could be heard crying. They and the sullen karakushes had overrun the whole Bosphorus and the cove which was still blanketed in smoke.

Here and there, lively dolphins surfaced from the depths. Curious, they came up close to the boats, and swam calmly alongside them . . .

“A beautiful city,” Bodnia said, looking at a mighty snow-white castle. “What palace is that, surrounded by thin towers?”

“Hagia Sophia, the biggest mosque in the world,” Nepran said, taking his eyes off his beloved who was nestled up to her father and looked in fright at the city which had almost swallowed her forever. She was free, but her heart, her soul, were still swooning there in captivity, inside the White Tower. There was neither a smile nor a word from her, as if in those black days of captivity she had completely forgotten how to smile and talk.

Nepran and Bodnia were engrossed neither in sympathy nor love. They were moving through the Bosphorus and had to be alert every minute ready to fight back if the Turks gave chase. Nepran was otaman again, since Orendarenko had caught an enemy bullet and now lay swaddled like an infant.

“Master Otaman,” old Schyrytsia babbled, “how did you manage to enrich yourself like this? Probably chased after every Turk and asked for a bullet to remember him by.”

Orendarenko knitted his brows angrily. Wiping the sweat from his forehead with his healthy hand, he made his wounded arm more comfortable and grumbled:

“If only it had entered your mouth . . .”

“I would have spat it out,” the old man said, nonplussed. “It’s not a dumpling. It happened to me once too. Without thinking twice, I strained myself and blew for all I was worth at the chest of the Turk who’d fired at me. He plopped to the ground at once and gave up his soul to the devil!”

The Sich Cossacks laughed. Only Atish and Uliana did not smile, and Schyrytsia acted as if he was offended. A bullet was no big deal. Now once he had . . .

“Is it true grandfather, that you once played chess with the grand vizier himself?” Orendarenko asked.

“So God help me!” Schyrytsia exclaimed. “Near Khotyn. We broke into the Mussulmans’ camp and frightened the Turks so much that they put their feet on their shoulders and disappeared who knows where. I looked and saw the vizier’s tent. An eagle was perched on the top, two lanterns burned at the entrance . . . I raced inside — Almighty God, I haven’t seen such plushness in all my life! Everything covered in carpets and gold. And in the middle stood a low chess table set with silver and ivory pieces. I took one look at it, and oh my, two moves and the vizier was checkmated!”

“And what did he do?”

“Took to his heels! Ran two versts and only then caught his breath and changed his pants.”

Slowly he filled his pipe and struck some fire, lighting it, then began a new story.

They passed Buyukdere. The fortress stood deserted, with its gates wide open.

The shores along the whole length of the Bosphorus were deserted too: seeing the terrible cossack force, both soldiers and civilians from the Turkish villages and fortresses hid where they could. If Istanbul itself had convulsed from these fearless warriors on caiques, then why shouldn’t these people hide and wait out this misfortune?

The boats moved under sail and with the help of the oars. They sailed five abreast, almost touching oars.

The Bosphorus was boiling, frothing at the cliffs, and exhausted, crept into calm coves . . .

“Look at the janissary, Petro,” Mykola Bodnia nudged his blood brother. “Why is he staring so much at Siryk’s daughter?”

“Probably has the same ailment as us.”

“Him too, you think?”

“And why not? Think he hasn’t got a heart?”

“May my whole forelock fall out if I don’t throw this heathen overboard!”

Atish glanced at Bodnia, who was red with anger, and asked Nepran: “Has the cossack had too much to drink?”

“No. During expeditions cossacks must be more sober than the Mussulmans.”

“Why is he jumping about then and shouting?”

“Murad-pasha shaved off his forelock and he will feel awkward now with girls.”

“Petro,” Bodnia frowned, “what are you talking about?”

“He asked if there are dolphins in the Dnipro . . . And he was wondering why you had no forelock.”

“May my . . .!” Mykola flew into a rage. And suddenly melted into a smile. “Just keep wagging that tongue of yours . . .”

Atish took no notice of them. Knitting his eyebrows, wincing as if in pain, and wrinkling his forehead, he looked greedily at the girl.

Uliana had already noticed his attentions and, cowering like a frightened bird, pressed closer to her father’s shoulder.

The old man was dozing.

“ . . . I looked — it was a devil,” Schyrytsia continued. “Stood there wagging his tail like a dog waiting for a bone . . .”

Suddenly Atish rushed up to Siryk’s daughter, embraced her shoulders and exclaimed:

“Mama!!”

Uliana grew pale. The old gunner woke up and looked incomprehendingly about the chaika.

“Mama!” Atish screamed, madly kissing Uliana’s hands. “Mama!”

He smiled, wept and endlessly repeated the Ukrainian word from his distant past, a word which had suddenly surfaced in his mind, together with a lovely recollection.

Nepran was probably the first to come to his senses and said to him softly in Turkish:

“You’re mistaken brother . . . She’s only eighteen, and you’re . . .”

Atish did not hear. Weeping, he pressed close to the girl, who couldn’t get

away from him.

Siryk had his eyes peeled to the janissary.

“Petro . . .” he whispered emotionally. “Ask him . . .”

“He won’t listen,” said Nepran. “His mother must have looked very much like Uliana.”

“Uliana is the spitting image of her mother . . .”

“Father, then maybe he is . . .?”

The old man placed his trembling hand on the janissary’s lowered head and called softly:

“Ivas . . .”

Atish shuddered. He froze for a moment, then slowly raised his eyes at the gunner. In those eyes Nepran saw suffering coming through all the tears and joy. God, how difficult, how thorny are paths of returning!

“My dear son, my Ivas!” Siryk called again, his voice hoarse with emotion.

And the janissary responded:

“Tato . . .”

Hiding their moist eyes from each other, the Sich Cossacks turned away.

The Bosphorus stretched out its strong broad shoulders as it breathed more easily and deeply, and the chaikas broke out onto the boundless space of the sea. A bright sun shone at their backs, and a dry warm foehn wind helped them along. The blue cossack field barely glistened with waves and enticed them into the distance, beckoning . . .

The boats were heavy with booty, the sails were filled with wind, and the Zaporozhian souls were full to overflowing with joy.

Being at sea was a step from home.



Chapter VII





The week passed like a breeze. After Istanbul, the cossacks shook Varna, Balchik and Sozopolis, entered the mouth of the Danube and peppered Kilia and Ismail with their muskets.

Exhausted, they stopped for the night. Forty versts from the mouth near Ilanada Island, which was desolate, except for the ruins of some temple.

And only here could Nepran talk Khmelnitsky into letting them unload the underwater boat which stuck out like a hump, and crowded the men in the chaika: Otaman Orendarenko couldn't bear his suffering any longer and was taken away to stay with his in-laws. The boys lifted the underwater boat together, carried it to shore and left it by the water. Nepran had wanted to smash it to pieces, but Schyrytsia stopped him — who knew how they would rest; they had stirred up a hornets' nest and could now be stung. Especially since their chaika and seven others stood on the side from which the enemy was most likely to appear. If that happened, they had firm orders to engage in battle and hold back the Turkish vessels until the other chaikas, avoiding battle, had escaped to the open sea.

Leaving Mykola in charge of the chaika, Nepran took his kobza from under the bench, ascended the cliffs and, sitting down on a white rock, touched the strings. They answered sorrowfully, gently, like a maiden's heart, rumbled like the storm, mewed like native gulls from the Meadow . . .

Oh fate, how far you have carried these boisterous cossack heads! There was probably not a drop of Dnipro water here; these parts had probably never heard a Ukrainian song, except perhaps for mournful slave songs, which tore at the heart and bathed the soul in tears. God, why have you wedged my people between such fierce foes, in the name of what have you sent them so much malice and blood-letting? Give us strength to fight off these subjugators, or

send us death! It is shameful to live in slavery, but worse still to believe that it must be so.

*Oh, the black raven caws, it caws,
In the meadow by the river;
Oh, the young cossack weeps, he weeps,
Astride his jet-black steed . . .*

He fingered the live, responsive strings and poured out his sorrow, the suffering of his people, the burning pain of martyrs —alive, dead and unborn. The sun swooned in the sky, leaning towards the evening horizon, the sea broke sleepily against the rocky shores of the island on which the white columns of a temple, destroyed long ago, rose dolefully to the sky . . .

“Here you are, my dear Petro!” he heard a gentle, mirthful voice.

Nepran turned around and spied Uliana. Like a small white butterfly she moved towards him from the copse of upright columns, and for a moment he imagined they were in Volyn, in his native village on the Usha River. He rose to meet her.

“Look what I found,” the girl said, and stretched out her hand. A circle of gold glistened on her palm.

“It’s an ancient coin. Probably Greek.”

“Petro, is that some kind of ruin?”

“A heathen church, my dove!”

Looking into Petro’s eyes, she whispered:

“My beloved, I haven’t heard your gentle words for so long.”

Nepran’s lungs filled with happiness.

“Because you were kind of . . .”

“I was petrified. I stopped living once the Tatars grabbed me.”

Petro dropped his kobza and hugged his dandelion.

“You’re the best in the world, my enchanting nymph . . .” he cooed, hardly able to hear his estranged voice.

“My love, you came for me all the way to Istanbul,” the girl caressed him.

“I yearned for you so much, I was afraid we would never . . .”

“I would have freed you from hell!”

“I know, I know,” the girl smiled through her tears, stood on tip-toe and kissed him.

The cossack felt as if the sky had been wrapped around him! He passionately kissed the girl’s raspberry lips . . . And when he had regained his

senses, he noticed a strange shadow on the golden disc of the heavy setting sun. Alarmed, he moved Uliana aside and shielded his eyes from the sun.

“Turks!”

Uliana pressed against the cossack in fright.

“God, what will happen here today?”

“There will be carnage,” Nepran said, and told the girl, remembering the role their chaikas were to play in the approaching drama: “Run to Khmel and tell him the Turks are coming!” He hugged his sweetheart. Then held her at arm’s length and said: “Stay with the otaman! Take the kobza and give it to him to mind.”

He said farewell to her in silence, seeing her off with his gaze, and raced down to the boats, where they obviously weren’t yet aware of the approaching Turkish galleys.

Eight chaikas rocked on the blue stretch of sea at the foot of the cliffs. In the distance, where the island was flatter, the others were moored, and the distance separating them could not be measured in hundreds of metres any more, but was so far that one life wouldn’t be enough to reach them.

Nepran looked longingly at their alluring masts and began to descend the steep hot slope to the sea.

“To arms! There are Turks at sea!”

The cossacks jumped to their feet. Oars hit the water.

“Where, where are they?”

“Look at the sun!”

“Yes. . . Learnt from us, the bastards!”

“Where’s the old gunner, boys?” Nepran asked, unable to see Siryk anywhere.

“Khmelnitsky called for them — both Siryk and his son, Sirychenko*.”

“What a disaster . . . Who’ll man the cannon?”

“Me!” old Schyrytsia exclaimed.

“You’d be as good a gunner as a reed would be a whip handle,” Bodnia said cruelly.

“Do you know, you snotty nosed squirt, that in battle near Kurukiv I fired a cannon-ball straight into the mouth of a Polish cannon!” Schyrytsia raged. “Koniempolski himself wanted to see me.”

“To impale you?”

* Literally ‘the son of Siryk’.

“The heck on your stupid head!” the old man fretted.

“Stand up, father, and fire into the very chest of the enemy,” Nepran said. “To battle, brothers! We’ll meet them like true cossacks!”

“That we will!”

The chaikas set out to sea in single file. And when only Nepran’s chaika remained near shore, the thin figure of a girl appeared at the top of the cliff. She hadn’t carried out his order! He looked towards Khmel’s chaikas and saw nothing. She had returned to certain death with them! Oh God . . . Gritting his teeth, he waited for her to run down — they couldn’t leave her alone on the island.

“Why are you here?” he raced up to her. “Did you tell Khmelnitsky?”

“Yes.”

“So quickly?”

“I met Ivas and father half way and entrusted them with your kobza and your words, and hurried back,” she smiled.

“Where to?”

“To you . . .”

“We’re going into battle now!”

“I’m going with you.”

“Get into the chaika,” he gave in, as if passing a verdict. “Mykola, throw the mast away!”

“Maybe it’ll come in useful?”

“Throw it away! Can’t you see how many of them there are . . .”

The galleys came and came. They covered the horizon between Ilanada and the islands at the mouth of the Danube. Standing by the cannon, Schyrytsia counted the galleys on his fingers, lost count, mentioned the devil, and began again. At last he announced that there were forty of them. Five for each chaika! This would be a David and Goliath battle, but probably with a sad ending. One had to die to save others . . . Otherwise all would perish!

Nepran looked again to see whether Khmel and his boys had left the island, hiding behind it from the Turks, and convinced that all was well, called out to the nearest chaika:

“Keep further apart to make it harder for them to hit us. And stall them, stall them!”

His order echoed from boat to boat. The oars worked harder and the chain of boats grew longer. Soon it stopped dead and then all eight chaikas turned

towards the setting sun and rushed at the galleys.

Working the heavy oars or holding their weapons at the ready, the Zaporozhian Cossacks watched the enemy's every move in silence. And when one galley stopped and became enveloped in the smoke of cannon fire, a roughish smile passed over the cossacks' brave faces.

"Mighty brave knights they are!" Schyrytsia said. "Probably still shooting all the way from Istanbul."

"Grandfather, they're afraid of us!" Bodnia exclaimed.

"They've a right to be. They know who they're dealing with!" the old soldier put on airs. "Boys, lets have the steel and flint here!"

The galleys were acting strangely. As if frightened by a handful of cossack chaikas, the Turkish vessels hesitated; some turned broadside to the attackers, while others retreated.

"Look boys!" Bodnia shouted joyously. "They're running away!"

"No," said Nepran. "They can't believe that eight chaikas could attack forty galleys, and think we're up to some military manouvre."

"They're afraid of an attack from the rear," Schyrytsia added.

"Smart boys! If we had struck, we could have destroyed the whole armada!" Bodnia said fervently.

"And how many of our boys would have littered the sea bed?"

"Well, maybe half."

"More. And perhaps it will be just *their* hands and sabres that will be needed in the last decisive battle . . ."

"And us? And our sabres?" Bodnia knitted his brows.

"We must die here, covering those who will free Ukraine from slavery. Then our death will not be in vain, brothers!"

Nepran met his sweetheart's eyes. They had not a shadow of fear or remorse. She held a musket in her hands, and a curved Turkish yataghan hung at her side.

The galleys fired from every cannon at once. The cannon-balls fell nearby.

"Fire, fire, grandfather!" Mykola bellowed.

"It's too early still, it won't make it — our cannon is smaller."

"Row faster!" Nepran yelled at the oarsmen. They leaned on the oars and just in time: several cannon-balls fell near the helm.

Without waiting any longer, Schyrytsia poked a fuse into the powder. There was a cloud of smoke, the chaika shuddered and stopped. The cannon-

ball ripped through the galley's dark side.

"Aha! Aha!" Schyrytsia rejoiced. "See that?"

"Beautiful, father!" Nepran encouraged him. "Mykola, help load the cannon!"

They were firing from the other chaikas too. There was such a din, they must have heard it in Istanbul and in the Sich on the Dnipro.

The distance between the galleys and the boats grew smaller and smaller. The smoke moved east, away from the Turks and covered the cossack vessels. Like a golden cannon-ball, the sun had fallen into the dark water, and night slowly descended upon the sea.

Schyrytsia fired again.

The cannon-balls splashed thicker and closer to the chaika. The whistle, rumble and smoke joined in a hellish mixture . . . Suddenly, with a rapacious rustle, a cannon-ball sailed over the chaika and levelled the whole left row of oarsmen, killing the helmsman and destroying the stern. The chaika began to circle.

Nepran grabbed an oar and rushed to the stern to straighten and steer the boat. He sat on the remaining bench and lowered the oar into the water. The galleys were a stone's throw away . . .

Schyrytsia crawled up, dragging his wounded leg.

"The cannon is gone, Petro," he said, licking his pale, chapped lips. "Jump into the water, all of you!"

"And you?"

"I'll pay the captain a visit. He once asked me to come around for coffee . . . I've got a present for him — a whole barrel of powder . . . Help me to get to it and give me a pistol."

"Farewell, father."

"God be with you!" the old man replied almost inaudibly. "If you're lucky enough to reach the Sich, bow before it for me and tell Taras and the whole army that Schyrytsia died joyfully, for he nurtured the hope in his heart of seeing a free Ukraine from Heaven."

Nepran embraced the old man and kissed him. He called together Uliana, Bodnia and all who were still alive and allowed them to leave the scene of the battle and find salvation in the sea.

The blood brothers jumped into the water with the girl. They stayed close together, for the twilight, which grew murkier by the minute, and the smoke

from the shots covered the sea in darkness. They swam east towards the island. And though that piece of ground was little consolation, it would still allow them to recover their strength, consider all the possibilities of escape and to choose the most likely one.

“We’ll be caught on the island like sitting ducks,” Bodnia said, spitting out the dirty salt water. “Is there a den or cave on the island?”

“I don’t think so . . .” Nepran replied hesitantly, though he knew quite well that the island was as bare as a drum. “There is, however, our underwater boat . . .”

“I’d forgotten all about it!” Mykola cheered up. “Will the three of us fit in it?”

“I doubt it.”

And here Nepran noticed that the cannons were quiet. His heart was broken with grief for the eight lost chaikas and four hundred knights! Some would have accepted death, others would have been taken into slavery . . .

“Then what use is it?” Bodnia said decisively.

“Don’t hurry. It will come in handy. At least two can escape this trap. Perhaps we’ll be able to think of something . . . After all, we’ve got three intact heads.”

“Are we swimming in the right direction?”

“See that star?”

“Yes.”

“That’s the North Star. It’s a little to our left. So the island must be right in front of us . . .”

“There, I can see land!” the girl exclaimed.

Nepran strained his eyes and saw it too: the humpy back of Ilanada loomed nearby.

The cannon smoke was slowly dispersing, the eyes grew used to the darkness, the distance to the island grew smaller, though very slowly. And so hope of rescue grew stronger.

“Mykola, you must have been born in a night-shirt,” Nepran said. “I think we’ve come out of this alive . . .”

The steep cliff of the shoreline grew, covering half the sky. Soon they could hear the waves breaking, and the gurgle of water cascading through the narrow cracks as the sea receded . . .

“Land! I’m standing on rock,” Mykola called out.

“Right you are,” sighed Nepran, touching ground himself.

Uliana stood beside him. She was trembling.

There was a flash in the sea behind them, an explosion rended the silence like spring thunder, and flames rose high above the galley.

Stock still, they watched the flames consume the sails and masts.

“That was old Schyrytsia,” Nepran said. “Glory to him forever. He died like a true cossack. God let us die like him too . . .”

They found the boat by the light of the candles lit for them by the old cossack. It lay on its side, like a fish washed up on shore, one oar-flipper raised into the air, the other partly buried in the loose sand of sea-shells. Everything remained inside as they had left it. The skins and the candles . . . Nepran had only left the compass on the chaika unfortunately!

This discovery made Petro go cold inside. He was ready to return to the chaika for the compass, but it was ablaze together with the galley, or had already gone to the bottom. Lowering the underwater boat into the water, he lit a candle inside it and inspected the outside for holes. Meanwhile he was thinking hard how to reach the coast without a compass.

Uliana was suffering terribly from the cold and possibly the horror she had experienced. Nepran lifted her and sat her inside the boat, where the day’s heat was still trapped and the candle burning.

“I’m afraid on my own here,” the girl whispered. “Come and join me.”

“Just a minute,” said Nepran, searching for Bodnia. He had disappeared. “Mykola!” he shouted, afraid his blood brother had left them so that they could escape.

“Why are you shouting?” Mykola appeared from the darkness which was pierced only in the west by the burning galley. He was carrying a chaika oar. “Here, I found this . . .” he grumbled.

“If only we could find a few more of them.”

“What would happen then?”

“We’d make a raft.”

“Go with Uliana, I’ll stay here. Gather some wreckage, oars . . .”

“We’ve forgotten the compass on the chaika . . .” Nepran said after a short silence.

“What are you whispering about?” Uliana asked from the boat.

“We’re deciding how to outsmart the Turks.”

In the east, behind the island, a glow appeared on the horizon, and dozens

of vessels could be seen on the water.

“All we needed was him . . .” Nepran nodded at the moon, which had poked the edge of its red face from the sea.

Between the island and the coast the sea was so thick with galleys that even the compass wouldn’t have helped avoid them all. It was probably best to travel in the underwater boat on the surface, and to watch out for the galleys. But then the Turks would see them. Unless . . . God, it was the only way out. Let Uliana and his blood brother Mykola travel underwater, while he swam on the surface and steered with the chaika oar while holding onto the boat. It could be fixed to the air pipe and to the handle on the hatch . . .

He explained his plan to Bodnia and the girl. Then took off his silk belt and tied on the helm. He put his sabre inside the boat.

“Well, time to go!” he announced loudly, not worrying whether the Turks heard him or not. “When I tell you, spread out the skins Mykola and let them fill with water. Then begin rowing. Uliana, watch the light so that your journey is more cheerful. And no cuddling,” he added to cheer up the girl, “or the boat could tip over!”

“You don’t say! Where did they dig up this adviser . . .” grumbled Mykola.

Uliana giggled:

“We’ll ask your permission first! With such a merry fellow as our Mykola one can’t be glum even on the sea floor.”

They dragged the boat into deeper water. Saying farewell to his blood brother, Mykola climbed inside and closed the light hatch. Nepran pressed it down firmly so water wouldn’t seep in and took the bung from the opening through which water entered the leather skins. After the boat had sunk into the water, and only the air pipe remained above the surface, he replaced the bung.

“All right, row, Mykola!”

The short oars began to move about like flippers and the boat set off. Holding onto his ingenious helm like a Tatar onto a horse’s tail, Nepran swam after them.

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The strange, unknown coast greeted them with fog and serenity. In the

reeds of one of the arms of the Danube mouth, where they had entered to land inconspicuously, Nepran pulled out the bung and told Mykola to drop the oars and force all the water from the leather skins. Slowly the boat began to rise. When the hatch appeared, Nepran summoned his last strength and pushed the boat with his chest into shallow water. Then he untied his belt and threw the oar into the osier.

The hatch did not open for a long time, and all he could hear was Mykola's angry voice cursing the thrice damned latch. Finally the hatch cracked, tore off its weak hinges, and Bodnia appeared like a newly-hatched chick.

"May my whole forelock fall out, if I'm to get into this coffin again!" he announced, spitting, and smearing soot all over his face.

"Tss," Nepran stopped him. "This isn't the Sich for you."

Mykola disappeared, and in his place, holding Petro's sabre, appeared a strange being which resembled a coal-miner.

"Help me please, Petro," she flashed her small pearl-white teeth.

Nepran drew closer, offered her both his hands and, feeling her hair brush against his neck, carried the girl to shore, crushing the tall dense reeds.

"What will we do with the boat?" he heard Mykola's sad voice.

"Sink it and be done with it."

"Set me down. I want to wash," the girl whispered into his ear. "I'm as dirty as a witch . . ."

"You're the nicest witch in the world!" Nepran exclaimed, throwing caution to the wind.

The girl gurgled with laughter and arching her back ever so slightly seemed to slither from his arms into the warm river shallows.

She bent over, still mirthful, and splashed the cossack with water.

"The Turks will hear us, my fish," he checked her playfulness.

Uliana looked around in alarm.

"Maybe there's no one nearby," Nepran added, "but as they say, God guards the wary."

She smiled again, washed and unplaited her thick blonde plait.

Morning was approaching. The sky grew light in the east, a pre-dawn breeze rustled through the marshes, the birds woke and twittered . . .

Nepran stood mesmerised. The girl's blue eyes, her flaxen hair, which reminded him of his native Volyn, the many-voiced Danube meadow, and the sky stitched with rays of sunlight – everything moved him and a new song was

sown in his soul.

*Softly, softly the Danube's water rushes,
Softer, softer the maid her tresses brushes . . .*

Mykola came up. Clean, but as quiet as a shepherd boy exhausted after a day in the fields. He slid an indifferent eye over Uliana and his blood brother and yawned:

“Friends, I want to sleep. Let’s crawl into the undergrowth and have a good nap. Then we can think about returning to Zaporizhia.”

“Maybe someone will come looking for us?” the girl said apprehensively.

“If anyone comes, they won’t be looking for us,” Nepran said. “It’s easier for two or three to escape this trap. Between us and Ukraine lies the Danube mouth, the Budzhak Steppe, and two rivers. And there are Tatars everywhere.”

“God, we’ll never get out of here,” the girl sighed.

“I managed somehow before. No, we’ll get out! I know the way, and also the language . . .”

“And I’ve got a sabre. I’ll have something to talk to the enemy with!” Mykola added.

Sabres drawn, they walked into the depths of the meadow. It was easy to hide here during the day, and probably easier still to fall into a Mussulmans’ ambush. Therefore, though he was completely exhausted, Nepran kept moving, looking for a place where there were trees, surrounded by water or a clearing. . .

Suddenly he stopped, catching an unusual sound in the rustle of the reeds and the bird calls. He waved at the girl and his blood brother to stop and listened. The strange sounds came from a small stand of trees by a lake. They were different to an animal call or the twitter of birds.

At first he wanted to retreat, but then curiosity got the better of him, and gesticulating to the others to wait for him, he crept forward. The strange sounds died away, then grew louder. Nepran had heard them before, but could not remember when or where . . . He parted a willow branch before him and saw a Turk. Having thrown his coat on the ground, the fellow was dreaming delicious morning dreams and snoring so loudly, they could probably hear him in Kilia.

‘Sound asleep!’ Nepran thought. ‘Like a cossack after a long night in the Sich tavern.’

After creeping up from the other side he made sure that the sleeping Turk was not armed. So this wasn't a trap, an ambush, here was just a plain old sluggard. Or perhaps a fisherman. Nepran spat out the sickening sweet spittle from his mouth and looked around for the boat. It was close by, carelessly pulled out onto the bank and not tied up. And there would probably be fish inside it!

Without thinking twice Nepran pushed the boat into the water, grabbed an oar and paddled off to where the girl and his blood brother were waiting.

"Quick, hop in!" he whispered and stretched out his hand to Uliana. She jumped in nimbly, followed by Mykola.

"Where did you find this tub?" he asked in amazement.

"I took it from a Turk."

Mykola let out a whistle.

"Send its owner to hell?"

"Come on, we're cossacks, not bandits!"

"Did you at least tie him up?"

"What for?"

"He'll raise a din and they'll pursue us."

"He's asleep. And when he does wake up, we'll be far away cooking lunch," Petro said, throwing aside the grass covering a small bucket of fish.

Nepran knew the area well — he had been here before on chaikas with the cossacks, and also on a Turkish galley, so he did not steer the boat blindly to the mouth, but to the northwest, towards the Budzhak or Akerman Steppe.

At midday they stopped among the marshes above the Danube's northernmost branch. Nearby stood the ruins of a tower, a formless pile of moss-covered stone. Beyond the river was the steppe. Foreign, dry, trampled hard by the hooves of Tatar horses, and yet so longed for, for beyond it lay the Bratslav region and Ukrainian soil.

"Collect some dry twigs, Mykola, and we'll cook the fish," Nepran said.

"In a wooden bucket?"

"One can tell immediately how little *kasha* you've eaten at the Sich!"

"Poking fun at me again?"

"Mykola, he's only joking," the girl interjected.

"No jokes, my dear," Nepran said, giving her his sabre. "Here's a knife, the fish — gut them. But leave the scales on."

He went over to the ruins and selected two similar rocks, laying them

side by side on the ground. Then he found four smaller rocks and began to wash them well.

After Mykola had struck a spark and started a fire between the rocks, Nepran emptied the bucket of fish, washed it well and filled it with clean water.

“Gentlemen, now Magician Petro will burn a bucket on some rocks!” Mykola taunted him.

“Bodnia, you’d do better to keep watch so the Turks don’t nab us!” Nepran cut him off. He placed the clean rocks on the flames, stood the bucket beside the fire, and breaking two large forked branches from the willows, asked Uliana:

“Mistress, how’s the fish?”

“Ready. I’m just washing the sabre . . .”

“I can’t stand the suspense,” Mykola said impatiently. “Hurry up and cook it.”

“Just keep watch!” Nepran smiled and began to coo as if he was trying to placate a small child: “Now we’ll throw the fishies in . . . And then the rock. See, it’s almost red-hot . . .”

Mykola’s jaw fell in amazement. Uliana burst out:

“And the water will boil and cook the fish?”

“Whether it wants to or not, it must.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing!” the girl clapped her hands.

“Either has he,” Nepran nodded at his blood brother. “A Sich Cossack can make soup from an axe and get fire from water! Not everyone, of course,” he added, looking at Mykola, “only old, seasoned cossacks . . .”

Mykola mumbled a cossack oath under his breath and riveted his gaze to the bare steppe on the other side of the river.

Nepran changed the rocks. The water exploded with steam and bubbled away. The delicious smell of cooked food filled the air.

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It was hot. The grasses had wilted, the water in the springs and streams had dried up. The high summer sun roasted the land during the day, and at night it was unbearably sultry, dry and every sound echoed over the steppe.

They moved only at night, checking their way with the star on the tip of the thill of the Great Waggon*, as if they were at sea. In the day they hid in forests and ravines, procured food, and slept in turn, careful that the Tatars should not spot them and grab them in their sleep. While still on the Danube, in those amiable marshes, they had decided they would rather die than be taken into captivity. Death lasted only a moment, captivity was forever.

The heat, hunger and thirst disfigured their faces so much that even their own mothers wouldn't have recognised them. But their feet suffered most. When they had jumped from the chaika, they had taken off their boots and left them behind.

On Ilanada Island and at sea it hadn't mattered, and they only remembered their footwear in the meadow. After walking barefoot for several days in the steppe, there was nothing more they wanted than a pair of boots, or at least an old piece of hide to wrap around their bloodied feet. Uliana had become completely exhausted and first had to be helped along, and then finally carried.

Near the Dnister River Nepran left Mykola and Uliana in a small ravine near Trojan's Rampart, and himself slipped off towards the smell of smoke coming from the west, where there was probably a Tatar settlement, or horses were being grazed. He had done good here the year before, and might return with a horse today.

It was past midnight. The Chumak Waggon had tipped over in the sky and was about to tip the salt of dawn onto the earth. The dew, the first to fall in all these days, stung his wounded feet and muffled the crackle of the dry stalks of grass. The moon had set, and only the stars, looking bright and freshly-washed, lit up the boundless night sky, which resounded with loud chirring. The steppe was alive. The steppe breathed of eternity.

Soon Nepran heard neighing and snorting. Baring his sabre, he crept towards the distant sounds. The smell of smoke grew stronger, he heard voices, a throaty exclamation, the pounding of fast hooves . . . The Tatars were not asleep. Probably just returned from an expedition or preparing to hunt for slaves . . . He had come at the wrong time. And yet he couldn't return empty-handed, for his sweetheart and blood brother were waiting for the horses which would save them all.

There was a drove of horses. The herdsmen were sitting in a circle around

* The Great Bear, Ursa Major.

the fire, while their horses stood nearby, tied up to one of three tents. From afar Nepran had focused his eye just on these herdsmen's horses, which were broken in and saddled. Ready to ride. True it would be harder to get them . . .

Nepran crept up against the wind, crawled in amongst the tents and froze just a few steps from the horses. The Tatars were not roused. There were five of them. An old man and four youths; all armed, as if on expedition. They were leading a subdued conversation. Nepran could hardly hear the old man, for the fellow sat with his back to him and had a hoarse, muffled voice. However, the youths had clear, ringing voices.

“. . . That's why our *murza* was furious when he returned from Kilia," the old Tatar rustled softly.

"Well, they lost so much of their goods there!" tossed in one of the younger ones.

"Is it true that Keenen-pasha routed those *giaours* near Holy Island?" another asked.

"Smashed a hundred boats to pieces, and took fifty in battle."

'Skiting no worse than the Poles,' Nepran grinned.

"Pity I wasn't there!"

"He who has no worries longs for his father-in-law's black beard," the old Tatar giggled. "The sultan won't let you wait around for long."

"Why, will we be going on Poland?"

"I don't know . . . There were many rumours in Kilia. Some said an army was already being raised to teach Poland a lesson. Others whispered they would soon be going on Persia."

"Where is it?"

"Across the sea."

"Then why the hell do I need that Persia?"

"Tss," hissed the old man. "Someone might hear you . . ."

"Don't worry, we're in the steppe."

"As they say: one can find ears in the forest and eyes in the steppe . . ."

Nepran crawled in under the tent and fingered the end reins. Then the second and third . . . He listened — the old Tatar was telling about a stallion he had had twenty years ago — and noiselessly led the horses off into the steppe.

He was greeted joyously: his blood brother embraced him till his bones cracked, and Siryk's daughter kissed him on the cheek. Without wasting a

moment they lowered the stirrups (the Tatars adjusted them unusually high) and galloped off in the direction of the Dnister River. The hordesmen would discover their lost horses, would find their tracks and give chase. There were five of them, if not more — some could have been asleep in the other tents.

It grew light. The stars were fading slowly. Bushes of dense sloe stood here and there like Tatar yurts*. The Dnister's waters shimmered enticingly in the distance. The horizon was aglow in the east . . . If they could cross the river, they were as good as home.

The horses were swift, the mind swifter still. Nepran searched for the road to the crossing which he had used to ford the Dnister half a year earlier, but it seemed as if he was here for the first time. He stopped his horse, noticing a familiar hill, and suddenly heard the galloping of horses behind them.

"Tatars!" he shouted, catching up to his friends. "Push the horses for all they're worth! Look for an oak with three trunks on the river bank — there's a good crossing opposite it!"

"And you?" Mykola asked.

"I'll tarry here a while to talk to the hordesmen about this and that."

"Let's escape together!"

"Go!" he said angrily, dug his feet into the horse's sides and headed behind the hill, where a stream had run to the river in spring, and now there were only reeds and sloe. His hope of salvation was the twilight and the thoughtless zeal, with which he too had chased the enemy on several occasions.

The Tatars flew along, stretched out like a pack of wolves. All five of them. After the last one had passed his hiding place Nepran let his horse chase after them, and becoming a sixth member of the pack, drew his sabre. He had chosen a strong horse, or perhaps it had simply wanted to stay in the company of its swift relatives. Whatever the reason, he gained on them. Nepran bent over, riveted his eyes to the enemy's backs and raced his horse, digging his feet into its sides.

Faster, faster! The wide river was before them and the Tatars could easily have reached Uliana and his blood brother from the shore with arrows.

When he was a horselength away, Nepran tugged at the left rein, and rising high on the stirrups, hit hard with his sabre. Without looking around, he rode after the next man.

* Yurt — a light tent made of skins.

The second horseman fell too.

And the third. Followed by the fourth.

The fifth, who had forged ahead some one hundred sages, meanwhile took a bow in his left hand, took an arrow with his right from his quiver and fired it without aiming.

Nepran felt mortified inside — he knew how accurate Tatars were with a bow. He dug hard into the horse's sides and it raced off even faster. Nepran could clearly see his friends hugging their horses' manes and descending to the river's edge. The Tatar stopped on the hill, took an arrow, slowly placed it in the bow, pulled the string tight and fired. Uliana suddenly straightened, froze for a moment in this uncomfortable position, and fell . . .

With a scream Nepran hit from behind. The Tatar dropped his bow and managed to cover himself with his sabre. He was an old hordesman, a seasoned warrior. Petro soon felt the force of his iron hand, slipping away just in time from a lightning-fast strike. This enraged the cossack and put him on his guard. He reared his horse and chopped so hard that sparks showered in all directions.

"Devil, devil!" the Tatar babbled, and turning around, called for help: "Osman, Mahmud!"

"Don't waste your breath," Nepran shouted in Tatar. "They're both dead!"

The Tatar grew wide-eyed.

"Allah-ekber . . ." he whispered in fright and galloped off in retreat.

Nepran raced after him. He stopped his horse beside one of the Tatars he had killed, dismounted and grabbed a bow and an arrow. Taking aim, he sent a ringing pursuit after the enemy. The Tatar collapsed onto his horse's neck, slowly slid off and disappeared in the dried grasses. The horse recoiled, raised its head high, and neighing, galloped off into the steppe . . .

Wiping his sabre in the grass, Nepran raced down to the river.

The arrow had entered her leg above the knee. Blood was trickling from the wound and Uliana lay unconscious, while Bodnia stomped around her, ashamed to touch the girl's body.

"Mykola, she'll die. Why haven't you pulled the arrow out yet and stopped the bleeding?"

"If it was in her arm . . . I'm embarrassed . . ." Bodnia mumbled sullenly.

“She is not a woman to us now, but a blood brother, a comrade fallen in the field of battle,” Nepran said and yanked the arrow from her leg.

Uliana shuddered and began to groan. The bleeding grew stronger. Nepran took off his belt and tightly torqued the leg. He ordered Mykola:

“See that willow? Go and chop some branches for a stretcher, while I go to look for some herbs — there should be some around here.”

By the edge of the Dnister they gave the girl some water, washed her wound, and packing the herbs around it, bandaged it again.

“Where are the Tatars?” she whispered, opening her misty eyes.

“They’re dead,” Nepran comforted her.

“And they won’t come after us?”

“Except on Judgement Day.”

“Was I badly wounded? Will I be crippled?”

“They scratched your leg a little. It’ll heal by the time you want to wed!”

“Are you sure?” the girl forced a smile.

“Here, let Mykola tell you.”

Bodnia only nodded. He was preparing the awkward stretcher and the horses for the crossing of the wide Dnister waters, beyond which lay the lower parts of the Bratslav region, a wild, desolate land. But native.

* *
*

A week later, having crossed the Buh and Syniukha Rivers, they came upon a new settlement. There were only three houses, a shed and a barn, but they brought the hungry, thirsty, tired travellers so much joy! They would have raced their horses to make sure this wasn’t a mirage, but Uliana who had recently left the stretcher and was riding horseback again, could not ride very fast yet.

“Mykola, hurry off and see if there are any people there!” Nepran said, licking his parched lips.

As if expecting this, Bodnia let his horse fly, descended into the ravine where this hamlet was nestled and yelled back.

“It’s empty,” he drew his hands apart upon returning. “I yelled and yelled, not a purr.”

Uliana swallowed and wiped the sweat from her forehead.

“Did you see a well? Even a drink of water would do . . .”

“There probably is one.”

“Heads higher, friends!” Nepran said. “Where have you ever seen such well looked after deserted houses?”

“Think they’re asleep?”

“Not at all. It’s harvest time, and everyone is probably out in the fields.”

“And the children?”

“The children too. This isn’t Cherkasy for you. The hordesmen are neighbours here.”

They rode up and dismounted. Bodnia gathered the reins in his left hand, and grabbed his sabre in his right. Nepran helped Uliana down and sat her on the porch, then strode to the door. It was unlocked, creaking open invitingly, peacefully, and letting the visitor into the quiet, dark entrance-hall, which smelt of grain and dill. Feeling about, he found a cold latch, pressed it and opened the heavy oak door, covering himself with it just in case. He waited a minute, then quickly crossed the threshold. In the semi-darkness of the house he saw a stove, a long wide bench, a small icon in an embroidered towel, and most important of all — a piece of bread and a jug which stood so unspeakably enticing against the wall on a table-cloth . . .

He took off his torn hat. They would live. Blessed be the old Ukrainian custom of leaving food out for travellers!

In the evening the settlement filled with children’s laughter and voices. The reapers returned, bringing the cut rye in two carts, and driving their cattle home.

They were not surprised at seeing the unexpected guests. People like them appeared often. There were thousands of their brothers in captivity in foreign lands, and all strove to escape.

The head of the house near which they sat on the grass, bowed, removing his straw hat, and inquired:

“From captivity?”

“No. Routed chaikas.”

“Out at sea near the Danube?”

Nepran stood up.

“Uncle, where did you hear about our last battle?”

The men surrounded them in a circle. The women meanwhile took Uliana inside to wash her with lukewarm water and change her clothes.

“A relative arrived from the Sich a few days ago and told us,” the man said, taking out his pipe.

“Really!” Nepran was overjoyed. “Is he here? Or has he moved on?”

“Tymish! Orendarenko!” the man called out, seeking his relative.

“They’re near the pasture,” said a small boy. “The cart’s broken down.”

Nepran mounted his horse and galloped off into the steppe.

He saw Orendarenko beside a waggon of rye which rolled along, lop-sided, along a hardly discernible track.

“Poohoo! Poohoo!” he called out, rising in his saddle.

Tymish put his hand to his brow so the low red rays of the sun would not blind him, and holding the arm wounded in Galata, ran to meet him.

“You alive?”

“Yes!”

After kissing, they looked at each other as if they had been parted a hundred years.

“Were there many of you?” Orendarenko asked timidly.

“I don’t know. It was smoky and dark, and there was a hail of Turkish cannon-balls. Schyrytsia told us to jump overboard, and blew up a galley and himself with it . . .”

“Are you alone?”

“No, I’m with Bodnia and Siryk’s daughter.”

“Siryk grieved for his daughter so much. The old man will be overjoyed . . .”

Meanwhile the waggon of rye rolled past them. The old man leading the oxen bowed wordlessly to the Zaporozhian Cossack, slowly put his straw hat on again and staidly continued on his way.

“And how about you? Did you reach the Sich fortuitously?” Nepran asked.

“You frightened the Turks so much, that Keenan-pasha didn’t chase after us.”

“Good, that cossack blood was not spilt in vain,” Nepran sighed. How is it at the Sich? Quiet?”

“The Sich is seething. People are arriving from the country-side every day, half-dead, tortured. They say it’s all Hryhoriy Chorny’s work. He’s become a Uniate* . . .”

* A person of Orthodox faith who acknowledged the supremacy of the Catholic Pope.

“And what’s Taras Triasylo up to?”

“Waiting. Gathering strength. Even the elders don’t know what’s on his mind. The masses are rearing to teach the traitor Chorny and his ilk a lesson but the *koshovy* remains silent and only tugs at his grey moustache . . .”

If it wasn’t for his exhaustion and Uliana, Nepran wouldn’t have waited at all. He would have called Bodnia, obtained supplies and set off for the Zaporozhian Sich immediately.

“When will you be returning to the Sich?” he asked Orendarenko.

“Who knows . . .” the man drawled uncertainly. “My arm hurts and the thrice damned wound won’t heal. I’ll visit my settlement, and might even spend the winter there . . . I haven’t been home for six months . . .”

“I could go back today!”

“Don’t be so impetuous.”

“Perhaps our future fate is being decided right now!” Nepran burst out. “We can’t stay under Poland forever . . .!” and he bit his tongue at once. A moment later he threw caution to the wind: till now Taras had sown such thoughts throughout the land himself.

“What are you getting at?” Orendarenko squinted. “You’ve got a powder keg for a head. We still haven’t quite finished paying for Kurukiv . . .”

“It’ll make us more vicious!”

Orendarenko grew silent and pensive.

“Taras wouldn’t entertain the idea,” he said after a while.

“When the time is right he will. For his native land Taras won’t begrudge his mace or his head!”

“True.”

“Listen, my dear friend,” Nepran said entreatingly, “on your way back to Ukraine, and after Uliana is better, take her with you and leave her at my place in Barashi.”

“And you, are you going to the Sich?”

“I’ll stay here two more days, recuperate after our hungry travels, and then fly back to Mother Sich,” he said fervently. “Orendarenko, I can feel in my heart that the cossacks will rise and tear the chains from their souls, going into battle with the realisation that it is better to die a free man than to live in captivity!”

“You’re a sorcerer, Petro,” Orendarenko cowered. “Your words have sent icy shivers down my spine.”

“Because you’re a cossack, Tymish, and there’s nothing dearer to a cossack than Ukraine and freedom.”

Tymish sighed:

“Damned wound, brother . . . As soon as my arm is healed and I escort your Uliana to Ukraine, I’ll make straight for the Sich, by God . . .”

“That would be glorious!” Nepran said and again embraced his comrade, with whom he had looked death in the eye many a time.

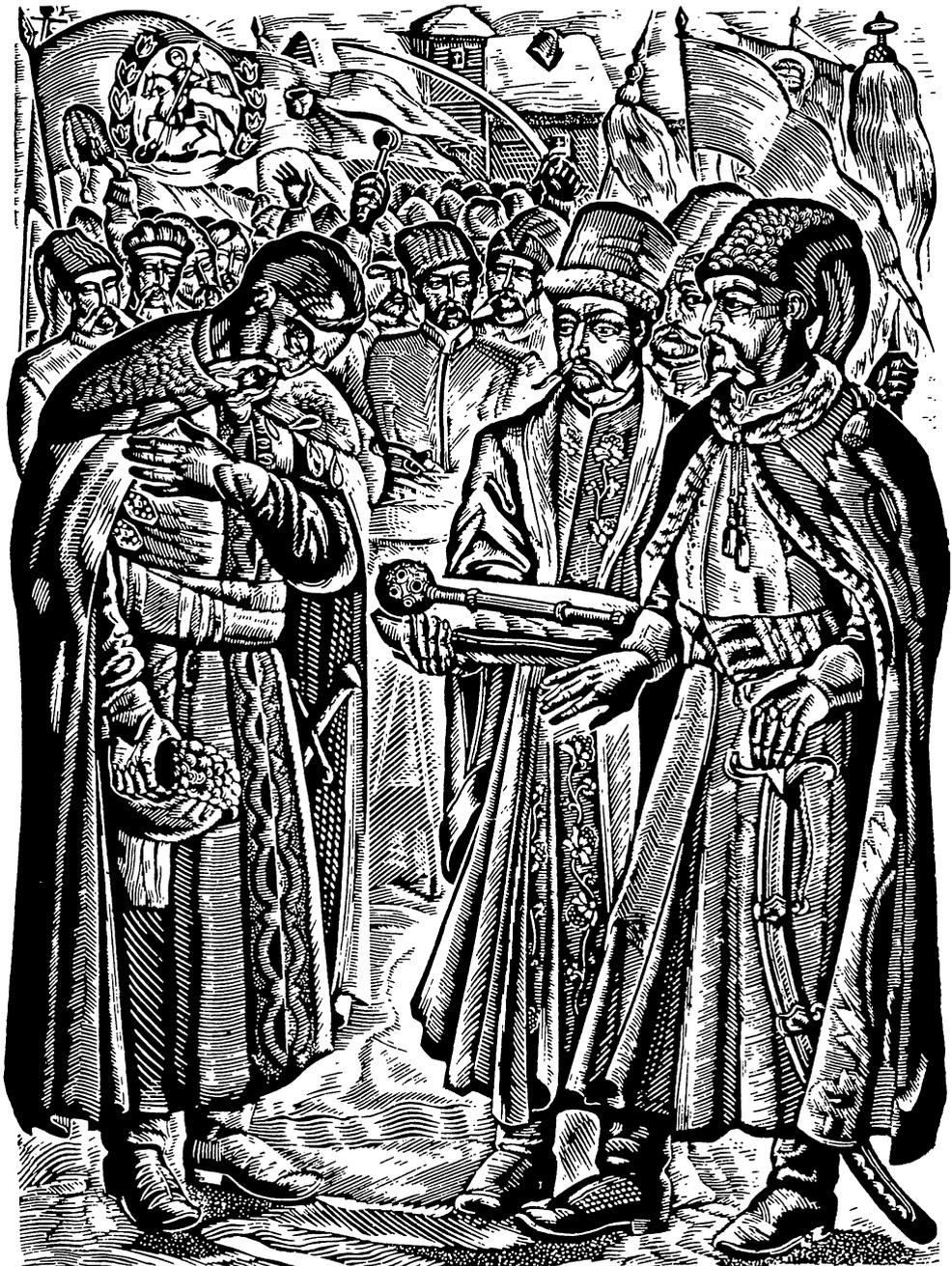
“Let’s go to eat, drink and gather strength,” smiled Orendarenko.

“ ‘The veritable truth, amen’ as a monk in the Brotherhood Monastery in Kiev used to say,” Petro added.



Chapter VIII





Ro matter how Nepran hurried, he arrived at the Sich on snow. Hryhoriy Chorny had stationed strong detachments of Registered Cossacks on all the roads leading to Zaporizhia, so that even a fly couldn't reach those disobedient enemies of the crown. As well, the Polish army, having returned from a war with Sweden, was stationed along the Dnipro River in Kiev Province. It seemed as if the hetman of the Registered Cossacks, and through him Poland too, had learned about the secret hopes which Triasylo nurtured. And the proud Porte was sitting quietly too, satisfied by the promise of Sigismund the Third, King of Rzecz Pospolita, not to allow any more naval expeditions.

With heavy thoughts Nepran and Bodnia stepped onto Bazavluk Island. In winter the island was surrounded by ice. Besides, everywhere, except along the crossing, the island was surrounded by a network of holes in the ice, which served as traps for unwanted nocturnal visitors . . .

From the river, while on the ice, they saw a large crowd near the bank and heard guffaws and cat-calls.

When they drew closer, the crowd seemed to burst open and a completely naked middle-aged cossack came running out towards them. The Tatar horses grew wary, spinning their ears about.

"We invite you into our bath-house, dear guests!" the strange fellow bowed before them, and winking, dived back into the crowd, and then into the black water of a large hole chopped out of the thick ice where five other naked moustached cossacks were swimming.

"Aren't they cold?" Mykola asked in a whisper.

"Sich Cossacks are used to everything," Nepran said and shouted:

"Your bare excellencies, the water isn't too warm, is it?"

"It is a little warm! After one enamoured youth jumped in, it began to

boil.”

“What a pity – I wanted to have a wash . . .”

“Jump in, we’ll cool it down for you!”

Nepran handed Mykola his reins and took his right foot out of the stirrup.

“What’s the matter, you crazy?” Mykola stopped him. “They’re drunk, and healthy as bulls.”

“Hop in, hop in, bully calf!” they called from the water.

“Don’t you try, your tail will freeze off!” others shouted. “The water’s too cold for baby!”

“Leave your tail with your comrade!”

There was so much guffawing, the ice almost cracked.

Meanwhile Nepran rose in his saddle, put his hand to his eyes and froze, staring beyond the river into the steppe.

“Brothers,” he exclaimed in alarm after a short while. “Tatars!”

Drawing their sabres, the cossacks rushed to the crossing to meet the approaching enemy.

“What about us!” the naked men splashed about in the ice-hole. “Help us out, boys, give us a hand out!”

Riding up to the water’s edge, Nepran said calmly:

“Stay in, stay in, gentlemen. When the horde runs up, start quacking at the tops of your voices, so the Mussulmans will think you’re ducks. See you!”

He laughed and turned his horse towards the Sich.

“Where’s the horde?” the men shouted from the crossing.

“Gone to look for blockheads like you!”

Mykola rode beside him, dropping his reins, and choked on his thundering, chesty laughter.

The Sich was unusually crowded. Around the fortress and the outskirts where the school, bakeries, smithies, taverns and other much needed services were located, stood countless numbers of tents. At every step they passed merry groups of cossacks. There were sad, sullen and troubled men too. They looked at the two travellers askance, as if sizing them up or speculating of what use they would be to the army.

The crowds pleased Petro and filled his heart with faith. Though he felt alarm too: in the Zaporozhian Sich no one could be sure of being able to lead this freedom-loving crowd where he wanted. Here, like nowhere else, the wise proverb applied: a pauper today, prince tomorrow, and vice versa. At least

once a year the men gathered on the Sich maidan and decided whom to entrust with power . . .

“Is it always so crowded here?” Mykola asked.

“No. In winter most of the cossacks leave for the Volost – to stay with their wives or relatives, and when the snows melt, they return like migratory birds from the warm regions.”

“So what’s keeping them here?”

“Probably the same thing that brought us here . . .”

“Who do I see, good people!” they suddenly heard a voice beside them. “It’s Nepran and Bodnia!”

On the bridge to the fortress gate stood a score of cossacks, and among them, like a stork among chickens, was Maniunia. He took Nepran off his horse as if he was a child, kissed him while still holding him in the air, and only then stood him on the black bridge.

“We’ve already held your funeral banquet,” he said, happily screwing up his large grey eyes.

“Take the other one off too!” the cossacks spurred on Maniunia.

“I can’t, my belly-button will undo,” the giant said, spreading out his hands.

“Must be your son. See, he sits on his horse like Jesus on a donkey!”

“Perhaps. Girls used to be very generous to me once. Mykola, where are you from?”

“Cherkasy.”

Maniunia became pensive. Then, sighing, he said:

“I always abstained in Cherkasy. A pity, he’s a neat little child! Become my son, if you like.”

“Have you any money?” Bodnia asked sullenly.

“What for?”

“I don’t drink milk any more, it’s horilka now.”

“There’s a son for you. A baby Maniunia!” the cossacks split their sides with laughter.

Entrusting the horses to a boy who was shuffling amongst the adult cossacks, the group strolled towards the source of merriment.

It was a short, though difficult walk for the thirsty men to the tavern. The whole way Nepran kept looking in all directions, seeking familiar faces among the cossacks. Most of all he wanted to meet Siryk and tell him that his

daughter was alive and well. And he also wanted all those who had been at sea to know that he had returned. Without this attestation, without these wonderful meetings he still felt half alive, half dead . . .

“Nepran, why are you shaking your head about like a horse during Assumption Lent?” Maniunia asked.

“I’m looking for Siryk, the old cannoneer who sliced the mast off the chaika.”

“He’s here! Probably still drinking from grief and joy. In Galata he found his son Ivas and lost his daughter . . . Petro, she was left on that grief-stricken island with you!”

Nepran nodded, unable to utter a syllable, moved by the impending meeting with the cannoneer. What if he told him off for sending the girl to his own place without her father’s permission?

“Did she die in battle?” Maniunia asked sadly.

“She’s alive,” Bodnia replied tersely. “She’s in Volyn already, in his village.”

“My, the old man will be happy!”

Mykola ahemed. He had said nothing after Nepran and he had left the settlement on the Syniukha and he had learned that Siryk’s daughter was to go to Volyn. However he probably still wasn’t reconciled with the fact that this blonde fate would pass him by.

They missed Siryk at the tavern. Maniunia sent for him, collapsed onto a free bench and shouted:

“Mead!”

“Brethren . . .!” a voice thundered from a corner of the room. “Don’t drink mead and horilka, for all is the devil’s curse . . .!”

“Our new deacon is full as a frog again,” Maniunia said, sitting Petro and Mykola at the table. “And when he reads the Holy Scriptures,” he added enthusiastically, “there’s no need to go to church — you can hear every word in the kurin.”

“Brethren,” the deacon thundered, sipping from a bucket-sized mug and disheveling his long thick black hair. “For every chalice you drink, for every bottle or carafe of the loathsome alcoholic beverage that you consume, you shall have poured into your gullet an equal quantity of boiling tar in the other world!”

“He sends shivers down my spine,” whispered Mykola.

“The man’s got a good voice,” Nepran added. “Where is he from?”

“Mezhyhirsky Monastery,” Maniunia replied.

“Brethren,” the deacon shook the tavern with his roar. “Muscatel, musulaise, homebrew, horilka, mead and beer are all from the devil! He who drinks will not see God’s Kingdom, just as the Mussulmans don’t see our Sich!”

“Why do you drink yourself, father?” asked Nepran.

The deacon looked at him with a sharp, sober eye and quipped:

“Out of grief. The soul yearns for honour, and yet everywhere I see fierce dishonour! My soul yearns for freedom and plenty, but all around there is captivity and chains! My soul wants to pray according to custom, but it is being forcefully fed foreign prayers and church union!”

The Siryks burst into the tavern – the old cannoneer in front, followed by Ivas dressed in a zhupan and a black lambskin hat.

“My dear children!” Uliana’s father called from the door. “My fearless knights!” And tears gushed from his eyes. “We’ve already held your memorial mass . . .”

“Uliana’s well too, father,” Nepran told him the greatest joy.

The old man buried his face in Petro’s chest. Meanwhile Atish-Ivas shuffled timidly from foot to foot, throwing glances at Petro and Mykola. At last Bodnia stepped towards him and the two former enemies shook hands and kissed three times.

“The Lord has heard my prayers,” the old cannoneer said, now in Bodnia’s embrace.

“That’s what he’s got ears for!” Nepran said, greeting Sirychenko. “Well, how are things, Ivas?”

“Fine.”

“Mastered your native tongue?”

“I remembered everything,” he smiled. “It’s as if I had not been away . . .”

“Your cossack blood has spoken!”

“Thank you for your song. The one you sang last year in Kilia. I felt as if I’d woken from a dream, as if I was reborn . . .”

“Where’s Uliana, boys, what did you do with her?” Siryk asked happily.

“At mother’s,” Nepran said timidly. “She’s with my mother, father . . .”

The old man knitted his brows.

“So, you’ve taken her for a wife then?”

“Not yet. She was wounded . . . But I’ll take her, if you let me have her!”

“When and where was she wounded?” Siryk moved closer.

“Near the Dnister, when we were fleeing from the Budzhaks. Hit in the leg with an arrow.”

“And how is she now?”

“She’s well. There’s only a scar left.”

“Well, if she asks me, I’ll bless you both,” Siryk said slowly and smiled: “Not a bad son-in-law, eh?”

“God grant everybody one like him!” Maniunia agreed. “Come round the table, good people! We’ve a sea of joy today!”

“Come to your senses,” the deacon buzzed again, rattling the window panes. “He who partakes of alcohol on a joyous day, will shed many tears on a day of grief.”

“Quit cawing, priest!” Maniunia barked at him, poured him a ladle of mead and pushed it under his nose.

“All who give with a generous hand will taste the sanctity of Paradise . . .” the deacon muttered, falling upon the fragrant drink.

“Our sanctity is freedom,” Siryk said.

“True. How true it is, boys . . .” sighed Maniunia, probably remembering the slave ship. “Let’s drink to this great happiness of ours then!”

Nepran raised a glistening silver mug:

“To the freedom of our native land! If our nation is in fetters, its sons can know no happiness!”

After they had emptied their first mugs and had a bite to eat, Maniunia said:

“Brothers, I feel so happy now!”

“Now, in the Sich, yes! But go to the Volost, into a town or village, and see the Polish gentry sitting on your brothers’ necks and forcing your old mother into Catholicism! Will you rejoice at your cossack freedom then too?” Nepran asked.

Maniunia knitted his brows and scratched his head, which was graced with a luxuriant black forelock.

“And in the town council, in the court, or with the village head — just try uttering a word of Ukrainian! You’ll be scolded as if it was you who had come into their land, and not they who crawled into your house when bad times had

you up against the wall!” Nepran slowly became intoxicated. “Boys, are we cossacks or wet hens?”

“Brethren,” the deacon rumbled. “Come to your senses! You’ve ruined your nation and yourselves through drinking.”

“Tavern-keeper, fill this priest’s mug to keep him quiet!” Maniunia became angry. “Won’t let a man enjoy a drop in peace . . . When he sears everything with his repulsive words, the horilka stops like a stick in one’s throat . . . And as if on purpose, there are no musicians here either. Nepran, where’s your kobza?”

“What have you done with it, father?” Nepran asked Siryk.

“I gave it to Bohdan, as you requested.”

“Come on boys, whoever is younger among you, go and find Khmelnitsky and hurry back with the kobza!” Maniunia ordered.

Ivas was up first. Holding onto his cossack sabre, he left the tavern. He was still probably rejoicing at his return to his native land, to his people, and every assignment and errand was like a festival to him.

He was back soon, but with Khmel. Bohdan flew in like the wind and embraced Petro and Mykola.

“If only you knew, my friends, how happy I am to see you alive and well!” he said fervently. “Those eight chaikas are like an unforgivable sin on my soul . . .” He saddened and said dolefully: “Only nine survived out of four hundred. Plus you two . . .”

“And Siryk’s daughter makes three,” Nepran added.

“Such is a cossack’s fate,” Siryk piped up. “To die for his native land.”

“But thousands have returned,” said Nepran sagaciously. “And the Sich is strong and ready to fight the enemy.”

“So let’s drink to those who died gloriously and are living it up in Paradise now!” Maniunia raised his mug.

They drank the toast solemnly, in silence. Nepran picked up his kobza.

*Oh, the black raven caws, it caws,
Soaring over the deep valley.
Oh, the young cossack weeps, he weeps,
For sad is his heart and heavy . . .*

He ran his fingers over the strings, enriching them with the grief and sorrow he felt for his fallen comrades, scanned the brothers who were ready to

accept death even today if it would only free their native land and nation from the grip of the malicious enemy, and continued more cheerfully:

*Black steed! Dance beneath me!
Dash my grief to pieces!
Dash this sorrow in a meadow dark
Bring a young cossack cheer . . .*

“Petro, quit singing that song, or you’ll make me cry,” Maniunia said softly. And then exclaimed: “Play us a merry tune! My feet are itching to dance!”

Nepran lay his hand on the strings and when the last sorrowful sound had died away, he launched into a cossack dance.

Maniunia leapt to the centre of the tavern floor and began to dance, squatting down.

*The matchmakers came o’er the hill,
O’er the hill they came, they did.
It seemed as if my way they came,
So I washed and dried my feet.
And there I watched them come until
Past my gate they both did hurry.
Splishity-splash, like a duck,
Back home through the mud I scurried.*

The heavy tables and benches were moved aside and several other cossacks joined Maniunia on the floor. Red and blue *sharovary* swept the floor and blazed through the air, almost reaching the ceiling. The zhupans, embroidered with gold, played in the candlelight, which the tavern-keeper did not begrudge on such an occasion. Weapons glistened. Eyes shone with gentleness, then burned with implacable strength. Forelocks flashed like lightning. And the moustaches, the moustaches!

*The vicar’s wife bemoaned her fate, bemoaned her fate:
“The vicar’s grown a beard so long and that is what I hate!”*

Straightening his barrel chest and cackling like a village rooster, Maniunia circled round and round.

*Out I walk into the street
And stand with arms akimbo:*

*One rushes up with dumplings,
Another with a jug of cream.*

Exhausted, he collapsed onto a bench and bellowed:

“Gentlemen, it’s stuffy in here!”

“Let’s go outside!” the deacon supported him.

“Oho-ho-ho-ho!” the dancers roared in unison and spilled out into the frosty air.

It was just like Christmas Eve. The stars twinkled richly and generously, fresh but already frozen snow squeaked underfoot, and the air was brisk and clear, like bubbling spring water. It was an enchanting night. An irrepressible frenzied strength filled the body, the soul sought open spaces, lofty ventures, love and happiness.

“Boys, I want to wrestle!” Maniunia called out. “Come on, who’ll dare take me on?”

But the cossacks, who obviously knew his strength well, were in no hurry to oblige. Backing away, they left the giant alone in a ring.

“Why don’t you at least try me then, Bohdan,” Maniunia cocked his hat. “Only insects fly into the Sich now, and there’s no one to work out with.”

Bohdan waved his hand:

“I’m no match for you!” And smiled: “Ask the deacon there.”

“Why not! As they say, when there are no men around, even a priest is a man.”

Maniunia grabbed the bearded fellow by the cassock and dragged him into the circle like a defenceless sheep.

“Saints above! Jesus, Son of God, save me from the hands of this Lucifer!” the deacon began screaming and fell to his knees.

The giant filled his lungs with air, grimaced and let the poor fellow go.

“So, no one wants to win fame in a duel?” he asked sarcastically. And let forth a sally of contempt and abuse at the cowards: “Ah, you yapping dogs! Wretched upstarts, filth . . .!”

The cossacks split their sides with laughter. Only Mykola Bodnia stood frowning, looking spiteful. When Maniunia mentioned Cherkasian blockheads, he took off his sabre and handed it to Nepran. Then his pistols. And shouted:

“Shut up, or may my whole forelock . . .!”

Maniunia put his hand to his ear and asked:

“Gentlemen, did you hear something squeak? It wasn’t a mosquito, was it?”

Neither these words, nor the guffawing of the crowd, which continued to grow, managed to stop Bodnia. He unbuttoned his tight collar, angrily threw it to the ground and entered the ring.

“Moo-moo, bully calf,” Maniunia backed away. “Your horns cut through recently?”

Mykola moved towards his adversary in silence. He wheezed and bent his large resilient body more and more, like a panther about to pounce on its timid prey.

The Sich Cossacks watched Bodnia’s every move. Finally Maniunia stopped joking too and took off his hat.

“Cross yourself Maniunia, because the frog will give you its tits here!” the deacon advised him.

“We’ll see, said the blind man.” Maniunia replied, bending his back too and moved towards Bodnia.

They grappled like two bison, raking the snow with their feet, groaning and breathing heavily.

At first the cossacks watched the giants’ contest in silence, but then the excitement grew.

“Maniunia, give him some snuff to smell!” one called out.

“Don’t shame the Cherkasians, Bodnia!” another interjected.

“Stay on in there!”

“Don’t let him grab you by the belt!”

“Bodnia!”

“Maniunia!”

“Oh, you . . .!”

Cossacks came running from everywhere to view this comedy. Soon the whole maidan in front of the bridge and gate was full of people. Alarmed by the large crowd and the unusual racket, the *osavul* himself came running. Seeing that this was no secret meeting or brigandage he succumbed to the enthusiasm of the cossack crowd and shouted:

“Show them what you’re made of Maniunia!”

As if acceding to the elder’s request, Maniunia suddenly lifted Mykola and threw him. The men sighed. However it wasn’t so easy to topple Bodnia. He flew some two sages through the air, but landed on his feet. Again the

wrestlers came together, and again the curious onlookers grew silent, deciding who would come out on top.

“Come on, wind up the show, Mykola,” Nepran said off-handedly, to bolster his comrade’s confidence.

But Bodnia was a painstakingly obedient boy. Furious, he grabbed Maniunia by the right arm, turned around so that his adversary was on his back, bent down sharply and threw Maniunia over his back into the snow.

“I told you to cross yourself,” the deacon ran up, baring his large white teeth.

Maniunia sat up, slowly made a fist and shoved it under the deacon’s nose: “And have you seen this before, priest?”

He stood up and swung his right arm about to see if it was unhurt, and came up to Bodnia.

“God boy! Must be of my seed.”

“Maniunia, how about standing some horilka!” someone shouted from the crowd.

“I’ll stand a whole barrel!” Maniunia replied tersely.

“Enough!” the *osavul* announced authoritatively, raising his token. “You can finish drinking another time. You have to be sober for the morning.”

The *osavul* walked towards the gate, the cossacks milling around him like bees around their queen, eager to learn what adventures the rising sun would bring them.

Bohdan grabbed Petro by the elbow, held onto him for a while, and after the crowd had moved away, said with a smile:

“He won’t tell them anyway.”

“Why?”

“There are too many enemy eyes and ears at the Sich now.”

“Is it something big?”

“The biggest which may ever fall to our lot.”

“Really?”

“Don’t shout like that, Chorny might hear.”

“A campaign?”

“Not yet. The hetmanate*.”

“Who in place of Chorny?”

“Taras . . .”

* The position of hetman.

At the gate they were stopped by the guards.

“Who goes there?”

“Khmelnitsky.”

“Password!”

“Big Meadow.”

“Pass through.”

The Sich was still awake. Only the church and the gunsmith’s shop were dark. Men wandered about on the maidan, someone was playing a lively tune on a psalter† near Scherbynivsky Kurin and the sound of dancing feet drifted through the air. Guffaws erupted here and there.

“It’s time for me. Good night,” Khmelnitsky said. He shook Petro’s hand and held it a moment longer. “If the need arises, you won’t let us down at the Council tomorrow, will you?”

“Of course not!”

When Nepran entered his kurin Mykola was asleep. The candles were out. Only one continued to burn inside a tent made of two sheepskin coats, where some men were playing cards. Petro walked between the two rows of sleeping men, greeting everyone either aloud or with just a nod. There were new men now whom he didn’t know.

Nepran undressed and lay on a free spot not far from Mykola. He couldn’t sleep. Sleep had escaped him and the intoxication with it. He clasped his hands behind his head and his eyes caressed the windows, the old oak beams, the long table and the benches – everything so painfully dear to him and so longed for in his travels. In captivity he occasionally dreamt of these walls and these ordinary, everyday things, and then would feel so bitter and yet festive, as if it had been some important joyous festival. And how he had yearned for this meeting in the Wild Steppe and the Budzhak Steppe, dreaming of this majestic calm, where one could be sure that one was surrounded by friends, by comrades in arms. There was no safer place on earth than this kurin, Mother Sich and Zaporozhia! What would he have done in this hellish world had he not had such a firmament in his heart? He would have perished long ago! And not only he, but all of Ukraine would have disappeared too, badly burned by fire, cruelly hewn by sabres, generously dragged into slavery. As it was, it still stood and fought back. As long as freedom and the Sich lived on the banks of the Dnipro, Ukraine would live too!

† Mediaeval stringed instrument.

He closed his eyes, wishing that the coming great day would arrive sooner. He was certain the day would become a landmark not only in the fate of those who would come out against Poland and the Union, but of all the Ukrainian people, from the Carpathian Mountains to Putyvl.

Nepran was awakened by shots. Thinking someone had attacked the Sich, he grabbed his sabre. Then he heard laughter. Only it brought Petro to his senses. They were summoning the Council!

“Look brothers,” Tymish Orendarenko was splitting his sides with laughter. “Nepran’s ready to race off to Galata to fight the Turks!”

Petro rubbed his eyes, cloudy with sleep.

“Yes, yes, it’s me, my falcon,” the visitor laughed.

“Where’s Uliana?” Nepran asked in alarm.

“In your fortress.”

“Fortress?”

“Well . . . near it.”

“Is she well?”

“Ready to marry!”

“Tymish, don’t say such things, or he’ll leave the Council and run off to get married,” Maniunia interjected, already in the kurin.

“And he’d do well. Boys, what a girl he has!” drawled Orendarenko.

“Nepran, I don’t envy you,” Maniunia said. “You knew who to entrust her to. He’s a lovelace!”

“I didn’t touch her, honest,” Orendarenko pretended to be afraid.

“Yes, tell us another story . . .”

Without thinking twice, Mykola Bodnia marched up to Tymish and grabbed him by the front of his shirt.

“Boys, honest, I . . .!” Orendarenko screamed. “What’s the matter, Mykola, have you gone mad?”

“I’ll kill you.”

“Here’s the Holy Cross . . .!”

The kurin filled with guffaws. Though he had let go of Orendarenko, Mykola stood pouting like an owl.

“That’s enough,” Nepran stopped them. “Mykola, it’s all only a joke.”

“Time to go to the maidan for the Council. They’re beating the kettle-drums!” Maniunia added.

“Why are they summoning the Council?” Tymish asked.

“To honour your return,” Nepran bowed before him.

“Can’t you tell me straight?”

“That we can,” Maniunia cooled him down. “We’re going to throw off the yoke and the slave-driver!”

“Long overdue. During his leadership Taras has stuffed himself with cossack food up to here,” Tymish said, running his hand across his throat.

“Try again!”

“P’raps you’ll say no? He keeps affecting wisdom and uses us like pawns . . .”

“Watch out I don’t twist off your noggin,” Maniunia interrupted him. “Sold yourself to the Polish gentry? Or do you want to become *koshovy* yourself?”

“Don’t get too uptight,” Orendarenko flared up. “You’re in too much of a hurry to twist off other people’s heads . . . Better guard your own. I’ve known men like you who have long been drinking ambrosia in the other world . . .”

“You don’t say!” Bodnia interceded. “May my whole forelock fall out if I don’t . . .!”

Nepran took him by the arm:

“You must grow used to this, Mykola. The Zaporozhian Sich isn’t God’s Kingdom for you: before you can blink twice, the gentry will begin to smell here too . . . God help us to throw off the Polish gentry first, then we can give our own men some snuff!”

The Sich maidan was crowded with people, like poppies in a field, and cossacks kept coming and coming. All dressed in their best clothes, armed with hastily-made or expensive sabres, pistols and muskets. They greeted each other, cracked jokes and asked why the Council was being summoned. There were a few who still hadn’t sobered up; these spoke loudly, telling funny stories or fables and reared to dance . . .

Meanwhile the drummer hit the kettle-drums again, and the maidan calmed down. From the circle around the *bunchuk** and flag set out by the *osavul*, to the kurin in which the *koshovy* lived, a path was freed for the elders.

“They’re coming, they’re coming!” the word spread with a rustle through the army.

* Hetman’s banner with horse-tail hanging from its top end.

Nepran stood on tip-toe and saw the koshovy in the distance. Behind him came the army judge, the chancellor, *osavul* and kurin otamans. As the law demanded, all were without hats and bore the tokens of their positions.

The number of cossacks grew and grew. Soon there was nowhere on the maidan to swing the proverbial cat, and the younger men climbed up onto the kurin roofs and the ramparts, manned until now only by the sentries and the gunners who had fired the cannons, notifying everyone of the Council.

Thousands of men were a real force! And what men they were! There were old heroes here who had fought the Polish gentry under Nalyvaiko and Loboda, and who had taken Kafa with Sahaidachny, and Zhmailo's blood brothers, many of whom had fallen for freedom and their native land, and all those who had been at sea this summer and lit their pipes from Galata's fires . . .

When the General Staff stopped by the flag and bowed, everyone took off their hats and replied with a bow.

Taras transferred the mace from his right hand to his left, tugged at his drooping moustache and said:

"My dear gentlemen, glorious Nyz army! Sons of Ukraine! We have called a council today not so that you can elect better leaders than us and spread understanding among the kurins. The time for that will come. Now the time has come for us to consider who we really are: bandits, as the magnates and the Polish hanger-on Hryhoriy Chorny call us, or heroic children of our people who would rather stand here on guard, face to face with the hordes, than yield to an enemy who even in his sleep dreams of grinding us into dust and scattering the memory of us over the wild steppes of obscurity. The Polish army has returned to the province of Kiev and neighbouring counties. This enemy incursion is equivalent to a knife in the heart of cossack freedom, a knife in the heart of our whole nation. Once again Ukrainian blood is being spilled and one can hear the screams of martyrs. And again our brothers, fathers and grandfathers in the towns and villages are rising to defend their faith, their last remaining right. Our close ones are dying out there; the once glorious and mighty Rus is streaming with blood as the Uniates punish the schism . . .! So how can we sit here in safety, brave gentlemen, and drink mead and horilka?"

"Kill the gentry to the last man!" the cossack warriors answered in a chorus.

Someone disagreed:

“Gentlemen, why jump onto the spit? Why not go on Crimea instead?”

“The gentry!”

“Crimea!”

“To hell with Crimea and the gentry! Let’s go to the tavern instead!”

“Brethren!” the deacon roared. “Stop drinking. For every chalice . . .”

His mouth was closed. The maidan was seething. Fights had erupted in places.

Taras Triasylo raised his mace.

“Speak, Tymish,” he nodded to Orendarenko, who had pushed his way into the ring.

“Gentlemen! Good people!” Tymish announced. “We all truly love our unfortunate land, our souls and hearts grieve for it, for our faith and freedom. Yes, it is hard for us under the Rzecz Pospolita. But if it wasn’t for Poland and our union with Poland, we would find it still harder! Beyond the Dnipro sit the Tatar hordes. The Turks can’t wait for the day when we drive a wedge between our two peoples, for they are itching to lay their hands on all the Slavs.”

“You can’t scare us!”

“Listen to him, he has a point there!”

“Gentlemen, friends, brothers,” Orendarenko continued. “There are several thousand of us, maybe our numbers will even double when we start a rebellion. But this is only a drop in the ocean, a handful, which the Polish king will wipe from the face of the earth with a single strike. Remember the mournful fate of Kosynsky and Nalyvaiko*. Or Vedmezhi Lozy, where we paid in heads for Zhmailo’s imprudence . . . Do you really want to rot in the ground?”

Everything Orendarenko had said seemed to be the truth. Sure the Polish gentry had quelled more than one uprising with blood, sure the Porte was awaiting the opportunity to take Rus into its own hands, sure the Tatars had focused an evil eye on Ukraine from across the Dnipro. And yet, it was all lies! For how could one live having no faith in oneself, one’s nation, one’s future destiny!

Nepran rushed into the circle.

“Comrades! Orendarenko here frightened you with defeats, the Tatars

* Leaders of cossack rebellions.

and Turks. True, there were defeats. But was the blood spilled in vain? Did it not give birth to faith and the certainty that Poland could be fought, that we could break free of its cruel embrace, the embrace of an enemy, not a friend? And p'raps the defeats were due to a lack of this faith among the populace, that this faith could not grow and mature in our souls without the blood and the suffering! He, over here, is afraid of the gentry," he nodded at Tymish, "he's afraid of blood and death. So what are we to do then, await freedom from the hands of His Excellency the King? Or from the hands of Laszcz and Koniecpolski?"

A murmur of uncertainty spread through the crowd. Someone laughed, someone said they would see Judgement Day before the Poles granted them their freedom.

"No one will hand us our freedom!" Nepran said. "It is in our sabres and our souls. In captivity one can live only on hope, and without hope it is better to die!"

"To arms! Drive out the renegades!" Maniunia hollered, cutting the air with his sabre.

"We shall regain freedom for Ukraine!" the cossacks supported him. And the whole maidan shuddered, sprouting a field of sabres.

"Gentlemen, what are you doing?" Orendarenko ran into the ring. "For our disobedience the Poles will . . ."

"Burn down your settlement?"

"Maybe the Poles have made him a present of another one as well?"

"Sold yourself to the Poles, Tymish?"

Orendarenko champed his lips, trying to say something in defence.

"Who'd buy someone like him?" Nepran came to his aid, positive that the man could not have sold out, but simply spoke as he thought.

The cossacks took the joke to heart, and laughing their fill, left the unsuccessful lordling in peace.

"Well then, brave gentlemen, shall we go to fight the gentry? Do I have your wholehearted support in this holy action?" Taras asked.

"Yes! Agreed! Agreed!" the sabres flashed again.

"According to custom, and to maintain law and order, we should have ourselves a hetman in our battle for freedom," the koshovy continued.

"There are two in Ukraine already!" someone yelled from the crowd. "Why do we need a third?"

Bohdan Khmelnytsky entered the circle and requested permission from the koshovy to speak.

“Apart from the mace, we need a head,” he announced, smoothing his short black moustache. “Levko Ivanovych is far too timid and good. And Chorny – extremely vicious and violent. Apart from that Chorny, as you all know, gentlemen, has become a Uniate and has sworn to bring us into the Union, or as his patrons say, to destroy the Sich and the cossacks with fire and sabre.”

“That’s a lie! It’s slander!”

The maidan buzzed and grew agitated.

Then Bohdan stepped to the edge of the circle and grabbed the arm of the deacon who had preached in the tavern the night before.

“Tell them, father, was I speaking the truth about Chorny?”

The deacon looked about him fearfully, coughed and whooped at the top of his voice, so that even the snow fell from the branches:

“All the honest truth, brethren!”

Bohdan said something softly, and the deacon took off his cape, and lifted his old cassock to reveal his bare back, covered in scars and scabs.

“Here’s how the crown hetman enlists people into the Uniate Church!” Khmelnytsky called out.

“Death! Death to the renegade!”

“Hang the judas!”

The anger was so irrepressible and unanimous that the Zaporozhian Cossacks threw everyone who tried to defend Chorny over the ramparts. Here and there sporadic scuffles broke out, the names of cossacks to be candidates for the hetman’s mace were called out and became lost in the hubbub. Finally the passions cooled and the commoners called out in unison:

“Taras! Taras Triasylo.”

Taras wanted to return to his kurin, as dictated by Sich custom, but he was stopped by a large group of respected grey-haired cossacks who asked him if he would be their hetman. Refusing their first two requests, he agreed the third time, and bowed to the army in all four directions. The old cossacks handed Taras a new hetman’s mace and sprinkled muddy snow on him, trampled underfoot, so he would not forget that he had entered princehood from the mud, and would return there if he scorned the Council and his comrades. Taras bowed low and thanked everyone for the great honour

bestowed upon him by the glorious cossack army.

“Be healthy and wealthy, Mister Hetman!” the cossacks yelled joyously. “God grant you a swan’s age and a crane’s call!”

The kettle-drums beat sonorously, welcoming the new hetman.

The army scribe and five of the kurin otamans handed His Excellency the Hetman a red banner, a new gilded *bunchuk* and kettledrums, all brought from the treasury.

Bells tolled triumphantly. The Sich priest emerged from the church and blessed Taras and all his future plans for the good of his country and his people. The elders and the older cossacks entered the church.

Nepran remembered Schyrytsia. His cossack soul would have rejoiced, had it seen the Sich on this day, seen the army which spilled from the Sich maidan, and everything which had happened here today.

He embraced Mykola.

“Brother, our time has come!”



Chapter IX





For two long months Triasylo amassed provisions and prepared the regiments for the forthcoming expedition. The winter was frosty, snowy, and yet nearly every day groups of cossacks and peasants arrived at the Sich, having taken the new hetman's epistles to heart, calling the chained nation to battle. When the warm spring sun appeared, beginning to break up the river ice, and the bravest geese and swans passed over Zaporizhia, Taras ordered the horses to be saddled.

They would be leaving in the morning. On the eve of their departure Petro Nepran was invited to the hetman's kurin.

Taras was alone. He rose to meet his visitor.

"Good-day, good health, Petro!" he said affably. He took him in a brotherly embrace and kissed him. "We haven't met for a long while."

"I was a little late, got held up on the sea expedition, and then in Ukraine. I arrived the day before the Council . . ."

"So I was told, and I heard you in the circle. God bless you for defending me and our deed from the cowards!"

"If I hadn't, others would have . . ."

"I know. But I was overjoyed that it was you, for God forbid lest anyone had you for a foe," the hetman said with a smile. "Have you forgotten the black council when you raised the Sich to go on Kafa, and almost took over my mace?"

"Come on, father . . ." Nepran became embarrassed by all the praise. "I did it accidentally . . ."

"Great!" Triasylo tugged at his moustache. "One day you'll accidentally take over the hetmanate too."

"May the first bullet . . .!" Nepran began.

But the hetman stopped him.

“There’s no need, Petro. I was only joking. I feel joyous and fearful today. We are beginning such a great venture that we might attain eternal fame for it among the people! Or perhaps death . . .”

“Shame is worse than death,” Nepran said. “If we don’t try to break the enemy’s chains while we have such might and strength, our luckless grandchildren and great-grandchildren will damn us.”

“And if we don’t break free and don’t rout the gentry?” the hetman asked morosely.

“Then we’ll fall dead under their feet; they won’t walk over our live bodies!”

“Spoken like a true cossack,” the hetman smiled. “If only everyone thought and spoke as you do . . .”

“If everyone thought the same way,” Nepran said, “our suffering land wouldn’t have spent a day in slavery.”

“Did you see my letters to the peasants and cossacks?”

“I’ve read them on several occasions. They grab at the soul like the epistles of Ivan Vyshensky.”

“Who’s he?”

“A hermit from the Mount Athos Monastery in Greece who branded our Ukrainian aristocracy for treachery and for joining in the Union, and the Polish gentry and priests for hypocrisy and the destruction of everything Ukrainian in Ukraine.”

“If only we had the old monk here now!”

“The old man’s dead.”

“May he rest in peace . . . Bohdan told me how you escaped death and captivity. You’re a sorcerer, Petro! Did you find your girl?”

“In Galata, father.”

“There you are! It seems I’m a sorcerer then, for sending you after your beloved.”

“I’ll never forget it . . .”

Taras stopped him.

“Who knows, brother, whether our life is to be like a swan’s or a mosquito’s . . . Meanwhile, I have a difficult undertaking for you. Sit down!”

Nepran sat at the edge of the table. The hetman remained standing and tugged at his moustache. Did he have some doubts or was he unable to decide whether to entrust the important mission to this seasoned, though not always

demure cossack?

"I'm scared of one thing, Petro," he said at last. "That brother will fight brother. This is the most dreadful of all weapons, and our nation's enemies are taking full advantage of it day and night, inciting one group against another, for they know there is strength in unity, and where there is enmity, there is weakness and savagery. I haven't left the Zaporozhian Sich for several years and have been in neither Kiev nor Cherkasy, because I find it loathsome and frightening so see the number of people who have already become Polonised. With each year this rot grows."

"When the time comes," Nepran said, "they'll remember their native tongue and customs."

"To hell with them, they are the living dead. I'm worried about the Town Cossacks who are still with the hetman."

"You are the hetman, father."

"So long as Chorny has five thousand sabres under his mace, my hetmanate is like a fortress on sand," Taras waved his hand.

"Is this the first time, father? When we go forth into Ukraine all the Registered Cossacks will come over to our side!"

"And if they don't? What if the Poles and Chorny use them to block our path north and make us strike foreheads?"

"God willing, they won't."

"And if He isn't? What if He thinks we've got heads on our shoulders and not pots?" Taras grew angry. He tugged at his moustache and said more calmly: "There used to be a priest in the Sich who loved to say: pray to the Lord, but take care of yourself."

"A smart priest . . ." Nepran rose. "Give me your orders, father. Have no doubts. I'll do everything as you ask."

Taras remained silent and morose.

"It's a dangerous mission. Extremely," he said at last.

"A dumpling is dangerous too, Mister Hetman — one can choke on it."

"We must kidnap Chorny from Cherkasy. Alive!"

Nepran stopped breathing — he had not expected this. He thought he would be sent to the Registered Cossacks with letters.

"What for?"

"So God doesn't have to exert Himself."

"You hope to come to an agreement with him?"

“Good and well if I do, and if I don’t — the Town Cossacks will find it easier to cross over to our side without him.”

“A good plan, father,” Nepran said, thinking how best to kidnap Mister Chorny from his home.

“Any fool can think up a plan,” Taras drawled. “To carry it out is the trick.”

“I’ll do it!”

“God bless you!” the hetman cheered up. “What do you need?”

“Will you give me fifty boys?”

“Take a hundred. Choose whoever you want.”

“With your permission, I’ll go then. I have till morning to choose them.”

“Take the *pernach*.”

“Regimental?”

“You’ll be doing more, Petro, than a regiment can do in battle,” the hetman said authoritatively. “Go now.” And he made the sign of the cross over him. “May the Lord go with you!”

* *
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To find a hundred reckless fellows in Zaporizhia would be an easy matter — especially from the ten thousand Triasylo had rallied! Maniunia, Bodnia and Sirychenko were his first choice. Hearing that he was picking men for a mission, Tymish Orendarenko came running and begged tearfully to be chosen, for he felt ashamed before Triasylo and the men. The last to be chosen in the morning after mass was the deacon, who attached a wide long sabre to his belt and cut his hair a little so the Polish gentry wouldn’t run away in fright.

Giving Bodnia his kobza, Nepran pondered his secret plans the whole way. Back in the hetman’s kurin a simple and daring possibility had occurred to him: stopping the army several versts from the city, he would slip into the fortress with his boys at night, surround the hetman’s house, and stealthily kidnap Chorny. Mykola knew every house in Cherkasy and every crack in the town’s walls.

Taras had approved of this, but suggested he leave fifteen to twenty men with the horses in a small wood or ravine nearby, and Orendarenko with them.

The ground had dried out, the birch trees were wearing their catkins and

the skylarks had arrived by the time Taras and the Zaporozhian Cossacks had crossed the Wild Steppe and Motryn Forest and appeared near Cherkasy. In the evening they camped on a hill near the Tiasmyn River and sent out patrols and scouts in all directions. Soon they knew for certain that Chorny was in the town and had ordered all the registered regiments to assemble there too.

As it began to grow dark, Nepran roused his hundred, and spreading a rumour that they would leave on a patrol all the way to the Dnipro, led the cossacks into the fragrant spring night. The rested horses moved along at a brisk pace. Bridles and weapons clattered. Someone was speaking in whispers.

"Tell them to stop talking," Nepran said to Mykola, who was riding beside him. He passed the word on to Ivas, Ivas to Maniunia . . .

"Do you know the way to Cherkasy from here?" Nepran asked Mykola in a whisper.

"Like the way to the well in my own yard."

"Is it far?"

"Fifteen versts . . . what's the matter, thinking of taking the city single-handed and giving it to the hetman as a present?"

"You guessed."

"By God, you're off your rocker. Taras isn't attacking yet with his thousands . . .!"

"Because he's waiting."

"What for? For us to take the Cherkasian fortress?"

"My, how shrewd you've become!" Nepran said without the slightest hint of mirth. But his blood brother was offended and rode on in silence for a long time.

"Have you been there? Have you seen it?" he asked at last, coming stirrup to stirrup. "I've climbed every tower there and every sagene of the ramparts . . ."

"That's just what we need most," Nepran said. "My hopes rest on you brother!"

Mykola ahemed. He must have liked these words.

"Of course I could get in unnoticed," he said proudly.

"And lead us inside too?"

"Yes, I could do that."

"Good! And you said we couldn't take it."

“To enter is not to take. Watch out we don’t end up like the priest who grabbed the treasure and became stuck to it with his fingers!”

“Never mind. As long as he doesn’t escape.”

“Trust me to get involved with such a crazy fellow,” Mykola grumbled good-naturedly. And suddenly said dreamily: “I feel like smoking a pipe now! With *burkun* weed . . .”

“You do that, maybe you’ll catch a bullet,” Nepran said and asked: “Is there a secluded ravine or a small wood anywhere near Cherkasy?”

“There are enough of those around here. You want to leave the horses behind? Or to say farewell the Christian way?”

“Others will be saying the farewells,” Nepran drawled, pondering how best to remove the guard from around Chorny’s house, to take the man alive and to do it without creating any commotion. “We really need to leave the horses somewhere.”

They rode through a dark oak forest for a long time. Heavy clouds drifted overhead like waves and the moon’s sliver appeared only occasionally for a short moment . . .”

Nepran remembered Uliana. Would they see one another again? He had forgotten to tell her not to show herself to the Polish gentry . . . Mother must have been overjoyed with her arrival, for she was always alone. Father had died in Kafa when Sahaidachny had gone on Crimea. But even before that he was rarely at home. Obviously taken after his son . . .

“Two more versts to Cherkasy,” said Mykola.

The forest had ended. On both sides of the road stretched a large open field.

“Where’s your wood?” Nepran asked.

“Closer to the city . . .”

The first roosters crowed when they turned off the road and entered a sparse oak wood. A perfect place! There was room to leave the horses and they could see all around – the enemy would not be able to ambush them.

“Tymish!”

“I’m here, Petro.”

“Take fifteen men and surround the wood,” Nepran said. “The rest, follow me!”

Quelling the anxiety which always overcame him when he had to lead others into battle, Nepran waited till the cossacks had gathered around him and

spoke for all to hear:

“Brothers, fate has called upon us to strike first! We left the camp not on reconnaissance, but to secretly enter the city and kidnap Chorny. Why do we need this traitor? So he can’t throw the Registered Cossacks against us, so cossack blood is not spilt needlessly. No killing! The guards are to be tied up and gagged.”

“Christ! Christ!” someone exclaimed in fright.

“If anyone is getting cold feet,” Nepran said, “stay behind here, because someone has to tend the horses . . . Understood?”

“Of course.”

“Then tether your horses quickly, take your pistols and sabres, and strap any other weapons to your saddle. Mykola, tell Orendarenko and those on guard with him to look after the horses and to wait for us till morning!”

Nepran took a pistol from the holster near his saddle, slid it under his belt and jumped down onto the springy earth. The horse snorted and touched his shoulder with its lips. Saying farewell, Petro hugged the horse and pressed his forehead to its moist soft mane. Only then did he take the reins and tie the horse to a tree.

As soon as they reached open ground, the moon appeared from the clouds, and the ramparts and tall sharp towers became clearly visible in the distance.

“Where’s Bodnia?” Nepran whispered.

“Here I am!”

“Stay at my side.”

“Afraid?”

Nepran smiled:

“My, we are witty . . .”

“Watch out, Mykola, you don’t send Mister Chorny into convulsions of laughter too soon!” Maniunia piped up.

“Let’s hurry,” Mykola growled in reply. “Wagging your tongues about like spattles . . .”

They crept through open fields, falling to the ground whenever the moon appeared from behind the clouds and lit up the countryside. Then moving through orchards and along hedges they slipped past sentries and guards, passed through the cattle-yard and hid behind a shed not far from the moat.

“Opposite us is a secret passage camouflaged with blackthorn,” Mykola whispered into Petro’s ear.

“Do you want to look for it?”

“No, I’ll go over the top. If need be, I’ll subdue the guard and come out through the passage.”

“What if the door is locked?”

“I’ll break it down. Have you forgotten the fortress in Istanbul?”

“Take care.”

Mykola disappeared into the moat. Soon he appeared on the far side and crawled up the rampart. He was just discernible, and then only when he moved. Nepran and all those who had come with him to the fortress, watched anxiously as their brother stormed the castle alone. Suddenly the moon appeared. The Sich Cossacks stopped breathing, their eyes peeled to the speck half-way up the rampart.

“Be you damned in heaven and hell!” someone cursed, unable to stand such treachery from the moon. As if in answer, the moon obediently disappeared into the clouds again.

Mykola continued his ascent. He paused at the palisade, then quickly straightened to his full height, braced himself and threw his large, but supple and deft body over the wall.

They waited for a long time. Some of the men became impatient and asked to be allowed to go after Bodnia, to find him and if need be rescue him from the town guard, and to grab Chorny on the way. Maniunia fought to be allowed to cross the moat to find the secret passage. Sirychenko wanted to burst into the sleeping fortress, to kidnap the hetman and then to take to his heels. There were those who thought this waiting around for Bodnia and the actual mission itself were in vain. . . .

“Look, he’s come out!” Maniunia exclaimed.

“Where? Where?” The cossacks crowded around him.

“To the right there, above the moat . . .”

“You’re imagining things. Where is he?”

“In the moat already.”

Maniunia crawled down, and soon returned with Bodnia.

“Well, how did it go? What took you so long?” Nepran asked Mykola.

“Damned strong lock. I had to look for a piece of iron . . .”

“Well, is everything quiet there?”

“Sure is.”

“Then let’s go!” Nepran ordered.

The passage was low and narrow, so that only one person could pass through it at a time, and then with difficulty. It was also littered with rubbish. The cossacks cursed, both Chorny and all the Cherkasian Registered Cossacks, under their breath.

‘We’ll have to clean it up when Cherkasy becomes ours,’ Nepran made a mental note for himself.

“The exit,” Mykola whispered.

Nepran grabbed the arm of the fellow behind him and ordered:

“Grab a comrade and stay behind at the exit. Wait for us, and make sure the trap doesn’t close!”

They gathered in the shadow of a wall and then stole off in single file along the quiet dark street leading to the church. Mykola led the way, followed by Nepran, then Maniunia.

Suddenly everyone froze. Somewhere close by a rooster flapped its wings and crowed like the deacon.

“The second roosters,” Bodnia said in alarm.

“We’ll make it in time,” Nepran whispered back, but quickened his pace.

The small street ran into the town square like a stream into a lake.

Mykola froze on the corner:

“See that building with the veranda over there?” he asked Nepran softly. “Mister Chorny’s residence!”

“Where’s the guard? I can’t see anyone . . .”

“They’re in the yard.”

“Shall we go straight across the square?”

“No, we’ll go into the neighbouring yard and strike from there.”

They reached the other side of the square along a laneway. Nepran sent Maniunia with fifty cossacks to positively close off all avenues of escape for the hetman, and with Bodnia and twenty other cossacks entered someone’s tidy yard and paused at the paling fence separating the hetman’s yard from this household. The buzz of voices filtered through the fence. Disaster — the guards were awake!

“People say they’re close by,” a thin youth’s voice sighed in joyous anxiety.

“Rubbish,” someone boomed. “Maybe though . . .Doesn’t take them long, Yurko!”

“Have you been in Zaporizhia?”

“Sure. Only recently. When they went on Crimea with Doroshenko . . .”

“They must be well off there!”

“The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence . . .”

“That’s Nykodym, my uncle,” Mykola whispered.

“Call him over.”

Mykola found a sizeable crack in the fence and called softly:

“Uncle! It’s me, Mykola Bodnia.”

There was a long silence on the other side of the fence.

“Really?” a deep voice answered. “We thought the horde had taken you.”

“I’ve escaped and I’m wounded . . . Come here and help me. I’m bleeding badly . . .”

“Hold on there. Give me the ladder, Yurko!”

There was a rustle of light, almost juvenile steps, and a ladder rested against the fence. The rungs creaked stubbornly and a long hat appeared over the fence.

“Where are you?”

“Here, here I am, uncle,” said Mykola, stood up, and clasped his hand to the poor fellow’s mouth. A moment later the hetman’s guard was on the ground with a kerchief stuffed in his mouth.

“Please stay calm,” Bodnia whispered into his uncle’s ear. “We’ll do what we have to and go. And in the morning you’ll be untied.”

Moving an empty barrel up to the fence, Nepran reached the ladder and climbed over.

“Here, here” Yurko helped him.

Nepran jumped onto the boy, found his mouth and stuffed the flap of his coat into it.

“Lie still and don’t breathe. Not a sound!” he ordered, quickly tying him up with leather thong.

Leaving a third of their comrades behind in the yard, the Sich Cossacks broke into the house, where Bodnia felt at home.

The Uniate aristocrat slept the sleep of a saintly man. A pistol and mace lay on the table by his bed, while his sabre hung in the customary place — at the head of the bed.

Mykola raked everything up, handed it to Ivas, gave a sign to Nepran and the cossacks who had surrounded the hetman’s bed, and bent over His Majesty . . .

Soon after they emerged from the house. Two strong boys carried a log made from a blanket and the hetman. He was daintily passed from hand to hand over the fence and then the cossacks proceeded to make their way around the square.

“Petro, we’ll take those two as well,” Bodnia said, slowing down.

“Who?”

“My uncle and the boy. Otherwise the hetman’s lackeys will kill them . . .”

“All right, get them!”

Mykola raced back.

On the street leading to the secret passage they met Maniunia.

“Hurry up, retreat with us!” Nepran said, then suddenly changed his mind. “Bodnia will be coming in a minute with his relatives. Wait for him . . .”

Near the church they heard steps, which faded into silence . . .

“The guards on patrol,” Maniunia nodded.

“Townfolk or Poles?”

“Our ilk.”

“Leave them alone,” Nepran waved his hand.

His small group with its heavy load reached the rampart without incident, entered the passage and had to halt: Bodnia, together with Maniunia and the others who had besieged the hetman’s yard, had not caught up to them yet. Nepran fretted: Mykola had probably decided to drag along his uncle’s wife too!

It began to grow light. The town would awaken any moment. Or the patrol would discover the visitors in the fortress . . . One thing alone comforted him — the silence. As long as all was silent, the boys were all right . . .

“They’re coming,” Ivas whispered.

Bodnia bounded out of the darkness, leading the two swaddled prisoners.

“Where have you been wandering all this time?” Petro jumped on him.

“I couldn’t get the lad over the fence . . .”

As they passed the last squalid house on the outskirts of town the third roosters crowed.

* *
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A council was called for midday. After the army had quietened down and the prisoner was led into the ring, Triasylo addressed the cossacks:

“This, my brave gentlemen, is the former Hetman Chorny. Last night our boys took him from Cherkasy and brought him before your high court. As you are well aware, we left Zaporizhia not to spill the blood of our brother cossacks and not because we wanted to change hetmans. We left to fight the gentry, to free our native land from Polish fetters and to consolidate a cossack order over the whole of Ukraine, a republic without kings and lords.”

The accused listened to the new hetman’s oratory with a smile on his face. He was stocky, wiry, with a Polish haircut. It seemed as if the Uniate gentleman had not yet quite understood what had happened to him and where he was. Without his mace and weapons, dressed in a *kuntush** off another cossack’s shoulder, the illustrious fellow acted as if the Sich had come to be judged by him.

“Gentlemen, you should realise how funny and comical all this sounds,” Chorny said hoarsely, while Taras was looking for the right words. “Sich Cossacks – renown throughout the world as rogues and bandits – talking of their cossack government and a separate people’s state!”

“Only our enemies think of us as rogues and bandits!” Maniunia yelled out.

“And judases like you!” the deacon added.

The council seethed, the circle suddenly grew tighter.

Taras raised his mace and pacified his fervent army.

“Why don’t you think we can consolidate our own state, Mister Chorny?” he asked respectfully. “Are we any worse than those nations with freedom and authority?”

“First of all,” Chorny said, “those who seek freedom do not steal into a stranger’s home and grab . . .”

“You forced us to, Hryhoriy,” Triasylo stopped him. “By your malicious apostasy, your oath to wipe from the face of this earth the whole of Zaporizhia and all cossack freedoms.”

“Because you are always rebelling!” the former hetman yelled. “Because you spread the plague of disobedience throughout Ukraine! And the Most Illustrious One is angry with you because of your petulance . . .”

“The poor fellow,” someone sympathised from the crowd, “Mister King

* A fashionable styled coat.

wouldn't let him have a proper lick!"

"And he won't have the chance any more. The wretch will die without having received Communion!"

"Eh, Ivan, is that how all the Uniates receive Communion?"

"You make fun of everything," Chorny said through his teeth. "You hold nothing sacred . . ."

"Oh yes we do!" Triasylo interjected. "Our native land, subjugated by a cunning, fierce foe. Our people – sold not once, and not twice for thirty silver pieces! Our freedom! We shall acquire it for everyone! And if not, our bones will be buried in our native earth, and from our bodies and our blood will germinate knives, bringing fear and grief to the enemy!"

"Death to the gentry!"

"Death to the hirelings!"

"Come to your senses!" Chorny shook his arms. "You are going against your brothers! Both the Poles and we are children of the same mother, we've both got Slav blood!"

"You say we are brethren, relatives?" Khmelnitsky asked, moving to the middle of the circle. "I am a brother to you, and you a brother to the deacon who stands over there, despised by our illustrious brothers? And all of us are blood relatives of all those Laszczys, Spehas, Potockis and Koniecpolskis who consider our sensitive and brave people to be wild and disobedient rebels? The whole world knows that the Polish nobility is destroying our wealth, dishonouring our women and children. Everyone is in their service as if they were servants, and there is no one to complain to, for everywhere one encounters only empty words and silly grins. These 'brethren' are only striving to destroy the cossacks! They've decided to take over our order of self-government and choice, and have appointed their officials over us, to give free reign to foreigners and to oppress our people and lead them to annihilation! So this is the essence of brotherhood? Are these the relatives you intend to unite with in a union to last for all time? As for me, the most honest and safest way is for the Poles to feel the steel in their own chests, to have enemies face them every day rather than tractable peasants, a fast trial and punishment for their every injustice instead of servility and submission! Maybe then they too will come to dislike their torture and tyranny, and thinking better of it will grant us our freedom, so that they can enjoy peace at last!"

"Without Poland we will perish, we will be held captive by the Tatars

and the Porte!" Chorny continued in his own vein.

"You are like the dog who has grown used to being kept on a chain," Khmelnitsky said, spitting on the ground, and left the circle.

Hryhoriy Chorny was looking for someone among the cossacks, who eyed the Uniate hetman sullenly. They had never seen a spectacle like this before.

"Well then, brave gentlemen, what do you say we do with Mister Chorny?" Triasylo asked.

"Cudgels!"

"By the throat!"

"Into the Dnipro!"

"Because of me the crown hetman will have your skins three times over," Chorny said proudly.

"Careful we don't strip his off first!"

"And yours too!"

"Brothers!" Taras stopped the hotheads. "We've caught this infidel so he would not cover the Poles with cossack chests. Here he is now, in our midst. Perhaps we should grant him his life, so that he can see the Poles being defeated with his own eyes?"

"Mister Hetman, I fear our immoderate kindness will destroy us!"

"Only the strong can be kind." Taras said.

"As you will, father. Let him live . . ."

"And if he escapes and causes trouble?"

"Let him swear an oath before God!"

"Perhaps . . ."

"Comrades! Father Hetman!" Bodnia piped up. "Let my uncle, Nykodym, whom we brought back together with Chorny, say a few words."

He pushed forward a squat, middle-aged cossack, who stood there rumpling his worn-out hat, then timidly looked at the elders and the hetman, and riveted his eyes to Chorny's face:

"Yesterday he hanged two Zaporozhian Cossacks who had been caught with your manifestos in Kaniv."

Triasylo knitted his brows:

"Are you telling the truth?"

"I swear by the Holy Cross!" the Town Cossack exclaimed, and crossed himself.

The maidan seethed with anger.

“Really? You’ve been there? That’s interesting!”

“And how!” Nepran said cheerfully and smiled. “When you’re running and hungry, thirsty, half-dead, and there’s a wolf-pack of Tatars after you . . .”

Yurko grew silent. But then said enviously:

“You’re lucky, you’ve been everywhere . . .”

“There’s still time for you too,” Nepran consoled him. “Wait till we smash the Poles and return to Zaporizhia . . .”

“You think they’ll let me into the Sich?”

“Of course. Such a fine fellow like you!”

“Really? And I’ll be assigned to a kurin? And be able to go to sea in a boat?”

“Of course!”

“That would be great,” Yurko sighed. “Can you play the kobza too?” he asked a little later.

“Yes,” said Nepran and swung the kobza onto his chest. He surveyed the fields flooded with light morning mist, touching the strings with unaccustomed, almost strange fingers, and began a song he had never heard before:

*In the glades the mist has settled,
Over the steppe the mist has spread.
O where, o where, can the orphan
Find a haven to rest his head?
Once a father, mother had he.
Once a willowy maid had he.
Now in the field he can but see
The graves of his beloved three . . .*

Horsemen were galloping along the road towards them, and among them was Taras Triasylo. As he drew closer he greeted the knights who had secured Cherkasy for him, and asked the *sotnyk* aside for a talk.

“We’ve only done half the job,” he said when they were on their own. “The traitors can’t hunt us now . . . But the Registered Cossacks are still in Korsun with the Poles.”

“You want them all?”

“That would be good.”

“There won’t be enough leather to tie them all up.”

“But we must find a way to reach them, Petro, we must point the way

to our camp,” the hetman knitted his brows. “Rus can’t go against Rus.”

“Have you anything in mind, father?”

“Yes. Take your *sotnia* ahead and send someone into the city . . .”

“Let me go!”

“No. Your face is known to many,” the hetman disagreed. And then inquired: “Who is the boy I saw riding with you?”

“Yurko from Cherkasy. Chorny’s scuttled guard,” Nepran grinned into his moustache. “He’s a fine lad, sincere. And he dreams of the Sich!”

“Send him. Get him to tell them that he escaped from us, that we are thirty thousand strong and growing stronger by the day, that Hetman Chorny has been executed. If they believe him he must find cobbler Stepan Matinka and say to him ‘April fourth, at midday’. Wait for the boy in the woods and return with him. We’ll be waiting in a grove three versts away. Avoid advance guards, sentries and patrols, don’t fight with anyone. Clear?”

“Yes, father.”

“God go with you!”

Nepran galloped off, and having caught up to his *sotnia*, led it past the regiments they had been trailing.

Yurko was overjoyed at the assignment. He kissed his horse on its soft lively muzzle, gave Nepran his pistol and sabre, and cocking his hat, went down towards the Ros River.

“Don’t forget – we’ll wait two days for you!” Nepran called out.

Yurko waved his hand.

On the far bank of the Ros, nestling among the inaccessible cliffs, towered a mighty fortress. Cannon shafts glistened from many of the embrasures, and the hats of the guards could be seen here and there on the walls overlooking the bastions.

“It will be a hard job, brothers, scrambling up those rocks,” Maniunia sighed.

“We’ve taken worse,” Nepran said.

“Yes, but how many will fall!”

“Our hetman’s a miser, he won’t let anyone die in vain.”

You think he’ll come up with something?”

“Already has,” Mykola interjected. “No wonder the boy . . .”

“Bodnia,” Nepran stopped his friend, “even walls have ears, and especially forests!”

“All right . . .”

“We’ll set sentries all round and wait,” Nepran said. “Take turns to sleep and eat . . .”

The day seemed like a year. From the forest they saw new detachments of town soldiers and gentry pass through the fortress gates. They itched to bare their sabres and to slice into this rabble. It seemed like an irreparable crime to sit about and wait while they entered the town and hid behind the inaccessible walls. The whole *sotnia* was restless, and Nepran too could hardly control himself from disobeying orders . . .

The following night, while waiting on the banks of the Ros, Mykola pulled the half-dead Yurko from the river and brought him to the *sotnyk*.

“Were you in the town?” Nepran asked, after the young scout had changed into dry clothes.

“Yes, Mister *Sotnyk*,” Yurko said in a weak, but happy voice.

“And did you do everything as you were asked to do?”

“Of course. It wasn’t hard. I found the cobbler . . .”

“Tell your story later to the hetman,” Nepran stopped him. “How about the Poles, did they believe you?”

“And how! I shed such big tears when I told them about the hetman’s trial, and how the Zaporozhians executed the Illustrious Majesty . . .”

Nepran hugged the boy and said joyously to the cossacks who had gathered to see the swimmer:

“Time to move out, brothers!”

“Where’s my horse?” the boy jumped up.

“Bodnia,” Nepran called out loudly. “Get Yurko’s horse!”

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In the morning, with the rising of the sun, the army was assembled outside Korsun.

Nepran hadn’t seen such a show of strength for a long time. Standing on a rise at the head of his *sotnia*, he watched the Sich Cossacks, peasants, and those Registered Cossacks who had joined the rebels, encircle the mighty town. Everywhere, behind the horsemen and infantry, the transport units stopped and the cannoners prepared their powerful weapons. The hetman appeared

here and there atop a white stallion, making sure everything was in order.

It seemed the battle would begin any moment now, and thousands of warriors, fully prepared, would launch an assault. But surprisingly enough, columns of smoke began to rise from the cossack camp and the delicious aroma of roast meat filled the air, almost as if Triasylo had brought his regiments to Korsun so that they could have breakfast.

“Bread-salt and good eating to you!” a Korsunian wag called out, rising to his waist above the bastion.

“Our own we eat, while under the Pole you sit!” the sharp-tongued Sich Cossacks replied to him.

“Blood of a dog!” came a Polish curse from the tower.

“Really, we didn’t know that dogs and gentry were of the same blood! Eh, sir, let’s hear you bark!”

“A cholera plague on you, you churl!”

“Eh boys, what’s that bedsheet doing on the stake over there?” Siryk yelled, standing in front of his cannon.

“Where? Where?” several cossacks responded immediately.

“There, on the tower,” the cannoneer pointed at the flag flying from the highest tower.

“What’s that painted on it? Looks like a bird of some kind . . .”

“It’s a chook!”

“Why is it so bedraggled?”

“The Sich Cossacks plucked it! They would have eaten it too, but it got away.”

“That’s the King’s standard!” the fortress defenders grew indignant.

“Eh, boys, do you know what material that Polish toy is made of?” Siryk did not relent.

“Probably silk!”

“Just what I’ve been looking for!” the cannoneer said.

“Going to make yourself a pair of pants?”

“Go on. My foot cloths are in tatters!”

Some nobleman, astonished at such profanity, sent the insolent fellow a bullet. It hit the ground short of its mark.

“Hear that, someone’s stomach rumbled,” the cannoneer raised his finger.

“Probably needs foot cloths too.”

“By God! Come a little closer, you churl!”

“Why? Not enough wind in your belly?”

The cossacks split their sides with laughter.

The hetman’s orderly rode up and said something to the jester.

Another shot rang out. This time the bullet plopped at Siryk’s feet.

“So that’s the game we’re playing!” the old cannoneer smiled. “Then please don’t get angry with me, honourable gentlemen, over my present.”

He took several steps back, took the burning torch from his apprentice, took careful aim and fired the cannon. The flagpole broke off and the ‘chook’ fell from the tower.

The cossack camp sighed in a single sound of delight. From the city came shouts and gunshots.

“It’s time,” said Nepran, and shouted: “Brothers, dismount! Forward onto the ramparts!”

Trumpets sounded the attack. The rebels moved in on the city. Cannons thundered in unison, rifles clapped from the walls.

“What’s happened there?” Mykola asked, mystified by the inexplicable commotion inside the fortress.

“The city folk are fighting the Poles,” Nepran said.

“How do you know?”

“Ask Yurko. That’s why he was sent there.”

Yurko glanced at Bodnia, and smiling, ran forward.

Ladders appeared from nowhere and cossacks raced up the walls. The first dead had fallen, someone was screaming, wounded . . .

And suddenly all was quiet on the walls. In the city the din grew louder.

“Gentlemen, our reinforcements!” Nepran raised his sabre. “The Registered Cossacks have come to their senses and have struck the Poles in the back!”

“The gate! Look, brothers, the gate!” Orendarenko kicked up a commotion.

Like a whirlwind, a large crowd of Polish soldiers on horseback burst from the gates, followed by the Town Cossack elders and Polish noblemen. Before the Sich Cossacks could block their retreat, the fugitives had galloped through the cossack camp and disappeared into the forest.

“They’ve escaped!”

“They won’t be stopping now till they reach Bar!”

“Mister Konieczpolski will greet them as graciously as his own

mother-in-law . . .”

Artisans emerged triumphantly from the town, to greet the cossacks and hetman, bearing the tokens of their guilds, followed by Registered Cossacks bearing their flag and *bunchuk*. Trumpets blared. The walls were covered with people.

Brother had not raised a hand against brother!

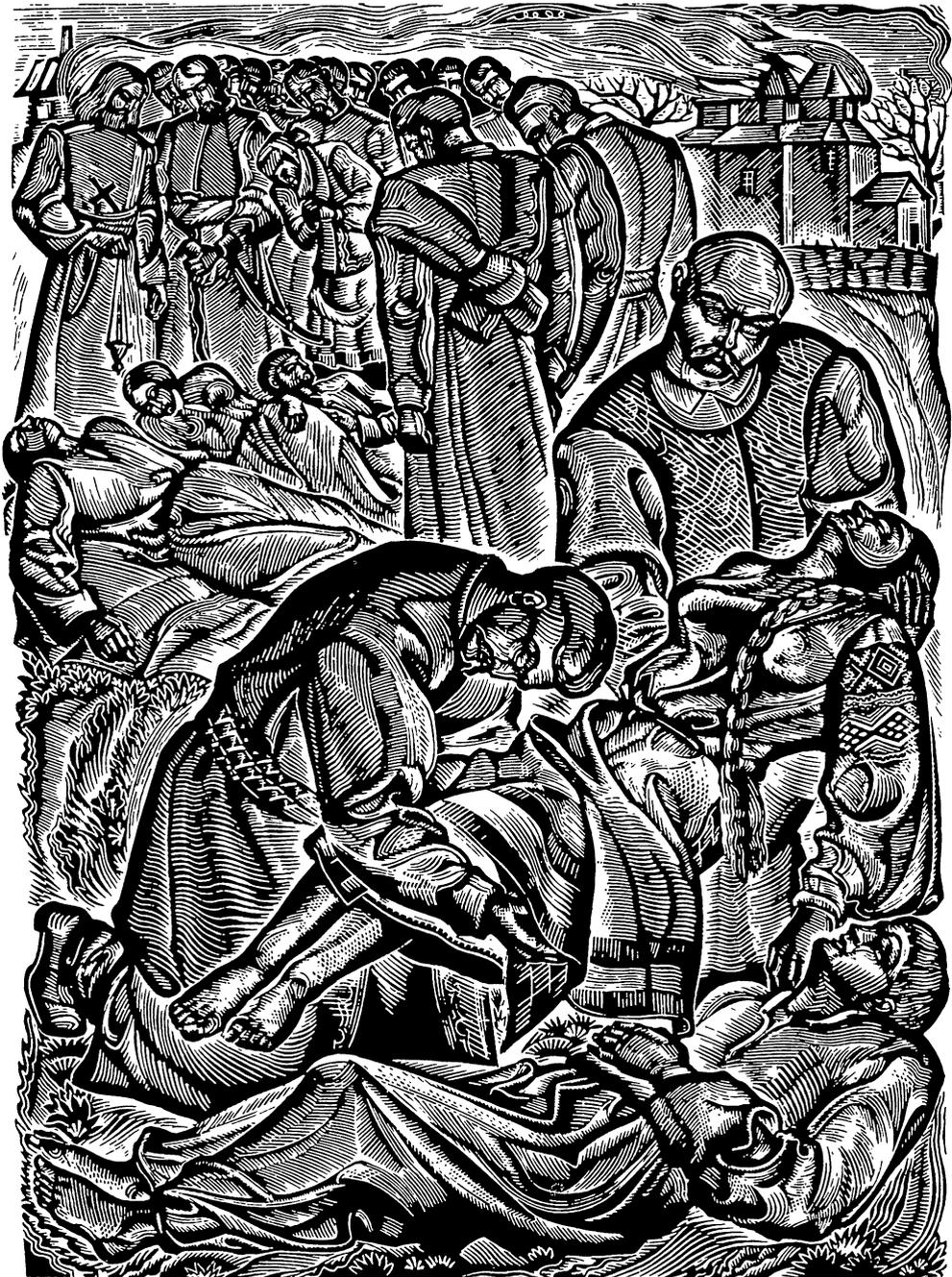
Tears welled in Nepran’s eyes. For years now the sly Poles were setting one against the other, entering people’s souls and hissing that one was a person, and his brother a traitor; destroying one’s past and one’s memory, thereby destroying one’s roots and forcing one to live on straw like an ox, striving only for straw. But this heroic nation, this martyr, remained standing, flaring up from time to time in fierce revenge. God, take pity on their wounds and their tears, help this people to break their chains! Nothing is eternal in this world, least of all our patience! Don’t let us lose faith in You, damning Your simple wisdom on our deathbed.

The hetman accepted the *bunchuk* and the flag, then took the bread and salt, and the key to the city. The cannons fired a salute. To the sound of trumpets and drums the cossack army entered the liberated Korsun.



Chapter X





Like tributaries of the mighty Dnipro, the rebels, armed with whatever they could find, joined the powerful cossack flow. Even the old men who had routed the Poles under Nalyvaiko and Loboda, couldn't remember such an uprising. Each man's heart ached and yet sang with joy, although the crown hetman was raising an army in Bar and would soon be marching on the counties along the Dnipro River.

Soon Kaniv had surrendered. In order to lure the royal army into a trap and to cut it off from Poland, Taras Triasylo decided to cross to the left bank of the Dnipro, and securing Pereyaslav, to wait for the enemy there.

The river was in flood, filling the entire valley, and it was not easy to cross. All available boats, ferries and even rafts, which were tied together here at the water's edge, were put into action. The azure ribbon of the river, laced with the green silk of willows, was speckled with people for two days, however there were still thousands of rebels who had not made the crossing.

Nepran had not received orders to cross either. Since his *sotnia* did not belong to any regiment, he was not sure when to bring his men down to the river. He had not asked about their position in the order of crossing when this had been devised, and now sat around thoroughly bored. On the second day the cossacks began to complain: they had always been in front, like the point of a spear, and now it seemed they had been forgotten. Perhaps they had failed somewhere? But no, Taras had praised them for Korsun, not to mention Cherkasy, and also for the recent Kaniv battle. The cossacks kept pestering their *sotnyk*. Finally Nepran could stand no more and mounted his horse, galloping down to the river where the hetman himself was overseeing everything.

"We are still alive and well, father!" Nepran said, stopping his brown steed.

“Well, praise the Lord for that”, the hetman answered, as he helped to load a cannon into a boat.

“Will we have to wait much longer?”

“For what?” Taras asked calmly.

“Our turn to cross the river!”

“Are you happy where you are?”

“You’re kidding, father,” he grew sullen. “The other cossacks have already...”

“Worried that the water will be blessed in Pereyaslav without you?”

“Father, are we any worse than the others?” Nepran burst out.

“By God, you’re better Petro,” Taras pacified him. “And there’ll be work for you,” he added seriously. “This is only the early morning service. Mass will begin when the royal army arrives here with Koniecpolski.”

He grabbed Nepran’s horse by the bridle, Petro dismounted, and they walked slowly side by side along the crowded bank.

“My heart is sad,” the hetman said after a while.

“There’s nothing to grieve about,” Nepran consoled him. “We’ve taken three cities, our army is growing by the day, our good name has spread far and wide. Ukraine will be free!”

“If only everyone strove and yearned for it.” sighed Taras. “When he comes, the crown hetman will offer to increase the size of the registered army twofold and...”

“Father, have you forgotten about aristocratic pride. Koniecpolski would sooner crack open his noble head, then yield an inch to the peasants!”

“I see you know the Poles well.”

“Because I’m from Volyn. They’re like locusts there.”

“Hold on, hold on,” the hetman knitted his brows, “you wouldn’t be a nobleman yourself, by any chance?”

Nepran was left speechless.

“You’re so hot-spirited, courageous, proud...” Triasylo continued.

“I’m Koniecpolski’s son,” Nepran said angrily.

“But that’s great!” the hetman answered with a grin. “You’ll set out today to meet your father, ascertain his strength and find out if there’s any news of the Turks and Budzhaks.”

“Shall I go alone or with the boys?”

“Take your whole *sotnia*. If your kinsman doesn’t wish to see you, you’ll

have to take one of his men by force and milk him.”

“I’ll get ten!”

“That’s a waste. One decent man is all you need.”

“Has Koniecpolski left Bar?”

“Not yet. He’s sent Laszcz’s detachment ahead.”

Nepran’s heart contracted sharply: he knew this brute, who left devastation and blood wherever he went.

“Let me execute the butcher!” he said, clutching at his sabre.

“Don’t think he travels with a *sotnia*! He’s got at least a thousand men with him.”

“Father, if I could have even half that number!”

Taras, engrossed in thought, tugged at his moustache, then spread out his arms:

“Who knows, how it could turn out... The royal guard is a rogue, the likes of which the world has not seen. And Koniecpolski himself will be right behind him...”

“Father!”

“No, Petro, no,” Taras said decisively. “I can’t throw my men around. We’ll meet the Poles at Pereyaslav, with the Dnipro frothing angrily at their backs.”

Nepran felt crushed. They walked on in silence.

“Come on, cossack, hold your head up higher!” the hetman exclaimed. “Your Laszcz won’t disappear – you’ll meet him yet.”

“All right then,” Nepran said, reconciled to the hetman’s wishes. “May I go.”

Taras shook Nepran’s hand, then hugged and kissed him.

“Take care of yourself, my dear son,” he said gently. “Because I really do love you... Without you, our army is like a grove without a nightingale!”

Embarrassed, Nepran mounted his horse and raced off to join his *sotnia*.

* *
*

Two days later, having passed Korsun and crossed the wide flooded Ros River, Nepran’s detachment came out at a bend in the Hnyly Tikych River between the towns of Budyshcha and Lysianka.

It was dawning. The forest was like a church filled with resounding, enchanting songs. Rock-cherries and wild pears blossomed along the side of the road, and their fragrance made the soul heady, raising it above the world of evil and enmity. Nepran wanted to hold his kobza and sing praises to the world and all this beauty; unfortunately he did not have his music with him – on patrol there was no time to play, and it was also dangerous. Yesterday had been Easter Sunday, and the boys were still displeased that he had not let them drop into Korsun. He thought it best to travel away from the main roads, at night, so less people would know about their movements.

Turning around, Nepran saw that the cossacks were dozing, and the horses were gradually slowing down and nibbling at the young grass.

“Time for a rest,” he thought aloud.

“Long overdue,” Bodnia retorted. He straightened out with a crackle of bones, and took in a lungful of air. “I think I smell smoke... Probably someone roasting meat or making pancakes,” he swallowed hungrily.

“Where? Where are the pancakes?” the hungry cossacks stirred.

“God, how long it’s been since I’ve eaten pancakes!” Maniunia sighed. “I’d get a potful down right now!”

“With stew or cream!” Nepran asked.

“As long as they’re pancakes! Isn’t it all the same?”

“I’d only have them with stew. A warm delicate sauce, with small pieces of meat floating around in it, fried up and fragrant...”

“Shut up, you son of a devil,” Maniunia shouted in despair, “or I’ll fall to the ground and roar for the whole forest to hear: ‘Give me some stew!’ ”

“That would create a commotion,” Nepran said. “The Poles will think it’s an evil spirit and take to their heels all the way back to Warsaw.”

“A great thought, brothers!” Bodnia boomed in agreement. “Come on, fall down Maniunia, and bellow.”

“Eh, eh,” Orendarenko giggled. “We’ll come back and report to the hetman: well, it’s like this, the Poles have all run away...”

“And only left a stench behind in Ukraine,” the deacon added.

“Boys, I really can smell it,” Bodnia breathed in through his nose.

“My word, it is smoke! Something’s burning...”

“Maybe Lysianka?”

Everyone grew silent. They urged their horses on.

Suddenly Nepran noticed that his horse pricked up its ears, snorting

fearfully, and tried to turn to the side.

‘Wolves!’ a thought flashed through his mind. ‘Probably gathered for the corpses.’ He dug his heels into the horse’s sides and cracked his whip.

A frightful picture appeared before the cossacks’ eyes. All that remained of Lysianka was the fortress and a demolished church. The whole town had been destroyed by fire. Smoke still rose from some of the ruins. Sheep and chickens wandered the streets . . . And there wasn’t a person in sight! When they rode up to the first smouldering ruins, they saw a murdered woman in the yard, and beside her a dead girl of seven.

“Tatars,” said Orendarenko.

“No, Poles,” replied Nepran. “The hordesmen would have taken these unfortunates captive . . .”

“Your brothers,” Bodnia tossed in, flashing a bad eye at Tymish.

Further on in the ruins lay an old cossack, sliced in half, a little further on – five maidens dressed in their Sunday best . . .

“Merciful Lord!” Mykola’s uncle crossed himself, having taken off his old hat. Everyone else took off their hats.

The closer they came to the church, the more bodies there were under the fences and in the yards. None of the cossacks had yet seen anything so grisly, though all had been on difficult expeditions and battles. Even Ivas, Siryk’s son, who had grown up amid violence and death, could not remember so much blood ever having been spilled in vain, and so many women and children killed.

Corpses lay piled up on the atrium. The church veranda was black with blood . . .

The cossacks stood in silence and wept. It was eerie in this kingdom of the dead, in this hell created by people who also claimed to wear crosses on their chests and called a mother, a mother, and God – God.

“Is there anyone still living?” the deacon yelled at the top of his voice.

Silence. Not a sound . . . Ravens rose with difficulty from the corpses and, flying low, settled on the far side of the church.

“Brethren!” the deacon hollered. “Brethren . . . !” And tears rolled down his beard.

“Why are you yelling, cossack?” someone called out reproachfully, the voice so eerie it made the hair stand on end.

Turning around, Nepran saw a grey-haired, though not yet old woman.

Leaning on a large spade she looked at the cossacks with an indifferent, deadened look. Swallowing his tears, he asked:

“Mother dear, who did this?”

“Laszcz.”

“When?”

“Yesterday morning.”

“Which way did he go?”

“Towards Medvyn.”

The cossacks made for their horses to give chase to the Poles, but Nepran stopped them:

“Wait! The dead have to be buried . . . Go and dig some pits, boys! And you deacon, will say mass.”

Having sent two sentries to each side of the ruins, Nepran took the spade from the woman and began digging himself. The earth on the atrium was hard and well trampled, even though Lysianka was less than ten years old. He had been present when the first house had been erected here, when the church foundations were laid, and the rampart was heaped up around the fortress.

“Where’s the Polish garrison that was stationed here?” he asked the woman, looking at the deserted fortress on the hill across the river.

“They butchered everyone too. And left with Laszcz’s mob.”

“Straight afterwards?”

“No, in the evening.”

“Faster with those spades, boys!” Maniunia shouted. “Innocent blood is begging to be revenged. Hear me?”

Nepran could not thwart, could not stand in the way of this passion to pay a blood debt. As a leader, a *sotnyk*, he realised that he should appease the men’s passion, and with a sober mind, seek out the crown hetman’s army and learn at first hand all that Taras Triasylo had entrusted him to find out; but as a cossack, a warrior he could hardly check the desire to bare his sabre, to throw orders to the wind, to punish death with death.

It was a frightening and completely pitiable funeral. Neither parents, nor brother, nor sister cried – everyone was buried together. The bells did not toll sadly – they lay cracked in the church ruins. Priests did not conduct mass for the peace of the departed, only the deacon was hardly able to whisper a single prayer, for he could not see the world for all his tears.

“Brethren . . .” he wanted to say something and grew silent, to again

utter the same sorrowful exclamation.

Hardly had they finished banking up the grave mound, when Yurko came galloping up and shouted:

“Mister Sotnyk, I saw some noblemen in the meadow across the river!”

“God Himself has sent us the enemy, so our cossack chests won’t burst from indignation and hate,” the deacon boomed, hurling away his spade and baring his sabre.

Skirting around the orchards and ruins they moved to intercept the enemy patrol, which having come across the devastated Lysianka, paused in uncertainty and then turned back in the direction of Boyarka*. There were almost a hundred of them: half of them soldiers, the rest noblemen.

Joking amongst themselves the Poles slowly emerged into a forest clearing . . . And here a volley of cossack bullets flew at their faces! Rearing their horses and trampling over their wounded and dead comrades, the Poles rushed back into the forest, driven by fear, but here they encountered a hail of lead too. And a moment later sabres flashed from all corners of the clearing and angry horsemen rushed at them like a tornado.

Nepran just managed to save one nobleman whom Bodnia was about to finish off.

“Leave this one alone, I need him alive!”

Mykola grumbled something angrily and dismounted, picking a large tuft of grass and wiping his sabre with it.

The prisoner sat there as white as chalk and was whispering a prayer.

“Scared, you son of a bitch?” Maniunia asked, as he rode up to the nobleman, sporting a new sabre and a musket won in battle. “Was it your group who slaughtered this town?”

“I swear to God the shortest hair on my head isn’t to blame for this,” the nobleman announced, licking his bloodless lips. “It was all the work of Crown Guard Mister Laszcz.”

“Aren’t you from his band?” Nepran asked in Polish.

“No. Laszcz has gone on ahead. We’re with Mister Konieczpolski, the crown hetman.”

“Where’s the hetman now?”

“Probably somewhere near Zhashkov or Stavyshcha.”

“Where’s he headed?”

* Town in Cherkasy Province.

“For Bila Tserkva and Kiev.”

“How many men has he got?”

“Quite a few.”

“How many?”

“Well, they say about a hundred thousand.”

“A Pole can’t take a breath without lying,” said Nepran. “Perhaps there are five thousand with him?”

The nobleman shrugged his shoulders.

“What has the hetman in mind? What’s the aim of his march?”

“When we were leaving Bar the Dominican priests consecrated the hetman’s sabre, and Mister Stanislaw, the hetman, swore he would cut down every schismatic all the way to Muscovy*.”

“What rumours did you hear in Bar about the Turks and Tatars?”

The nobleman’s forehead wrinkled and he said, feigning sorrow:

“I heard nothing definite. Either the Sultan has marched on Persia . . .”

“Or Persia has marched on him . . .” Maniunia added. “Petro, stop playing with him! Can’t you see he’s as stupid as a goose.”

“You’re stupid yourself!” the nobleman snapped.

Maniunia opened his mouth in amazement. Then he gasped, and his sabre glistened in the sun.

Nepran raised his *pernach*, pacifying his friend.

The nobleman’s courage appealed to the cossacks. Tensions eased, and the brothers who had surrounded the prisoner dispersed over the clearing. Petro sent the prisoner to Triasylo, so he could learn all he needed from the haughty nobleman.

However, this was not enough: they knew neither the size of the crown army under Koniecpolski’s mace, nor the state of affairs between the Porte and Rzecz Pospolita. They had learn’t only one thing – where the crown hetman was now and the road he would be taking.

After deliberating and resting a while, they rode off after the enemy, to seize a more important officer.

The Poles had passed through Zhashkov eight days earlier, but no one had heard anything certain about the hetman and his army, let alone seen them. The damned nobleman had deceived them! In fact he must have been from the band of Crown Guard Laszcz, and had obviously lingered somewhere

* Old name for Russia.

or lost his way together with other cut-throats like himself. Just wait, you'll pay for this lie a hundred times over!

Nepran was annoyed. The cossacks either reproached him or laughed at their *sotnyk*, who had been discredited by a lordling.

Fortunately they came upon a small band of cossacks from Vinnytsia who were on their way to Kaniv to join Triasylo, and learned that Konieczpolski was in fact moving towards Bila Tserkva, but thirty versts further west.

The next morning, on the banks of the fast-flowing Roska River, they spied a large military transport which was preparing to set out after spending the night in a meadow. They could see no soldiers around the carts, and the *hayduks** dressed in Hungarian uniforms felt safe, as if they had woken only several versts from Krakow.

"Shall we see what's in those carts?" Nepran asked.

"That we'll do!" the cossacks agreed in unison. "Maybe they've got cannon munitions or gold coins!"

"Either will come in handy!"

"Go quietly and use only your sabres," Nepran said. "There might be soldiers or noblemen nearby. Bodnia, take a third of the boys and concentrate on the left flank! Maniunia, you strike on the right flank! And the rest will attack head-on with me! Another thing: don't hit anyone who won't defend himself, because those 'Hungarians' are our brothers, they're Ukrainian peasants."

Waiting until Bodnia and Maniunia had sneaked up from the sides under cover of the forest, Nepran rose in his stirrups, waved his *shlyk*† to give the sign of attack and bared his sabre.

Charging through the grove which hid the transport from view, the Sich Cossacks dispersed across the flat meadow in a fan, striking from all three directions; from behind glistened the Roska River. Shots thundered in confusion, bullets smacked into the damp earth. Shouts and pandemonium erupted in the transport . . . And suddenly everything grew quiet. Large white flags appeared in several places.

"What's in the carts?" asked Nepran.

"Spears, rifles, cannon-balls . . ." the *hayduks* replied openly in Ukrainian.

"Whose transport is it?"

* Footmen.

† A kind of pointed beret.

“The crown hetman’s.”

“Where’s the hetman?”

“Up ahead.”

“With his army?”

“The last companies passed us yesterday. There are only about two hundred noblemen behind us.”

“Where are they?”

“Carousing at the landlord’s manor in Tetiyiv. They were supposed to set out after us today. The hetman ordered them to guard his carts.”

“And under whose command are you?”

“The hetman’s . . .”

“Would you like to become cossacks?”

“Sure!”

More and more Zaporozhians and noblemen’s servants gathered around the cart beside which Nepran stood.

“Ivas, Yurko,” the *sotnyk* called over the two young men who had been utterly disappointed by such a short battle. “Dash off in the direction of Tetiyiv for a verst or so, then hurry back as soon as you spy the gentry. And don’t you dare miss them!”

“All right!” Yurko brightened, and with a whistle, raced off into the steppe.

Nepran addressed the *hayduks*:

“From now on you’re cossacks. You’ll take this transport to Korsun, which the cossacks have already captured, and tell the commander or whoever is in charge there that you were sent by Petro Nepran . . .”

“Are you Nepran?” an old *hayduk* asked, knitting his bushy white eyebrows.

“And why not?”

“You’re lying!”

“No, really, I’m Petro Nepran.”

“Yes, it’s him,” the cossacks said in chorus.

“The one whose voice resurrects the dead, and gives the living redoubled strength?”

Nepran reddened — he had not heard such stories before, though he knew he was famous throughout the land.

“No, I’m not that one. Though I’ve got the same name,” he said mutely,

trying to cover up. "He's my brother . . ."

"So I can see that you're not him."

"How?"

"You're mangy and insignificant. The other Nepran is tall, strong, and always has a kobza across his shoulder. They say he can kill the enemy with only one finger . . ."

"That's true," Nepran cheered up. "I saw with my own eyes when he struck a Tatar over the head with his little finger, and the fellow tumbled to the ground and turned up his heels!"

"Yes, he's like that!" the cossacks laughed.

"They say he walked across the sea amongst Turkish galleys as if he was on land, and not one Turk could see him. Is it true?"

"It's true, father," said Mykola Bodnia. "I was witness to it myself . . ."

"Well, are you agreed to go to Korsun?" Nepran asked the newly-baked cossacks.

"Agreed!"

"It beats going to Krakow!"

"But first you must help us finish off the gentry who are away feasting, having forsaken you."

"That's possible . . ." the *hayduks* agreed without much enthusiasm. "But how?"

"We'll think of something."

When the intoxicated detachment of gentry came upon the transport after breakfast and saw that it was in the same place as they had left it the day before, the Polish marshal almost burst with anger.

"Dog's blood!" he swore in Polish and raised his whip threateningly. "Those rogues are still procrastinating!"

Blind with anger and alcohol, he took no notice of the fact that the whole transport was strangely spread out on both sides of the road and resembled a long sweep-net.

"Damn these peasants!" he shouted, flying in between the carts. "Where's the leader?"

Nepran, who was standing beside the last waggon dressed as a *hayduk*, bowed low and pointed towards the front cart way in the distance.

The marshal dug his spurs into the horse's sides. His detachment galloped after him. And as soon as the last rider had shot past Nepran, four carts moved

from their places and blocked the road, closing the trap.

Nepran inserted two fingers into his mouth and whistled. At that moment, like a bolt of thunder from the blue, the cossacks retorted with a hail of bullets.

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They caught up to the crown army near Kiev, at the crossing on the Dniπρο.

Although on the last night they did not spare their horses, they failed to reach the river under cover of darkness. As the horizon turned grey they stopped in the Zvirynets oak copse and held council. It was too late to launch an attack, and too close to the crossing to rest, for several thousand Poles and German mercenaries were camped around it.

“Let’s go back some ten versts, spend the day in the forest, and then make the gentry a present as soon as it becomes dark,” said Tymish Orendarenko.

“Maybe it would be better if we struck now,” Mykola murmured.

“Would you last till sunrise?”

“Of course. What’s it to me!”

“The horses have had it. And we’ve been in the saddle twenty-four hours now.”

“It’s like we’ve got sand in our eyes,” the Sich Cossacks agreed.

“We could easily turn back,” Nepran said, having listened in silence, “and sit out the day. But then we’ll arrive in the evening as we have now, without knowing how many of the Polish army have crossed. We need an important nobleman aware of their plans. And they’re always crawling around the crown hetman . . .”

“Maybe you want to kidnap the crown hetman himself?” Tymish asked sarcastically.

“We’ll nab him too. Maybe he’ll know what’s going on in the Polish army,” Nepran said, paying him back.

“Taras would praise us highly for such a feat,” sighed Maniunia.

“And we’d become famous throughout the whole Sich!” Ivas added.

“Then let’s go, Mister Sotnyk!” Yurko called out. “Or he might get away . . .”

The Sich Cossacks cheered up: it was good to see a man unhesitant in a difficult moment and believe in the success of a venture as he believed in the rising of the morning sun.

“What do you suggest we do, Petro?” Maniunia asked the *sotnyk*.

“We’ll find a safe place near the Dnipro from where we can see the Polish army and the crossing.

“That’s dangerous. If they find us, they’ll do us all in, the same way we routed the Poles near Lysianka,” said Tymish.

“That’s true,” Nepran agreed. “If only we could find somewhere behind walls . . .”

“Inside the Vydubetsky Monastery perhaps?” Bodnia thought aloud.

“They’re Uniates.”

“Let’s go to the Lavra, brethren!” the deacon said.

“Quiet! You’ll wake the whole of Pechersk and Kiev,” the cossacks jumped on him.

“How about it boys, perhaps the holy father has a point there?” Nepran asked, warmed by such a brave idea.

“It’s probably full of gentry.”

“The Lavra’s gates are closed to the gentry,” the deacon retorted. “The monks are more skilled with the sabre than most of us realise. And the walls are strong and high.”

“Let’s go then,” the *sotnyk* said decisively. “We die only once!”

“Lead the way, deacon!” the cossacks agreed amicably.

“And watch you don’t make a present of us to the crown hetman and his gentry,” Orendarenko jibed.

In the ravine opposite the gates the deacon whispered for them to wait, and leaving his horse behind, stole off towards the Lavra through bushes of guelder rose and elder.

They waited a long time. It had begun to grow light, and still the damned priest (as Orendarenko called him) had not returned. Perhaps he had been seized by the gentry who may have already overrun the Pechersk Monastery; perhaps he wasn’t able to reach those who had the authority to let them in . . .

They prepared to retreat when the deacon slid down into the ravine, and catching his breath, said in a hoarse voice:

“The gate . . . is open.”

On the other side of the rampart they were met by a monk who showed

them the way.

“We’ll hide the horses in the stables,” the deacon whispered to the *sotnyk*, “and go into the cells. I’ve asked the archimandrite to make sure that no one knows of our arrival.”

“All right,” Nepran said, seeking a vantage point from where he could see the river and the right bank, where the enemy regiments and companies were assembling, waiting to cross the river. “Get me a hood and a skull cap . . .”

“There are plenty of those here.”

“And take me up to that bell tower.”

“Want to admire the gentry?”

“I miss them.”

“Like a cat misses a broom!”

“Quieter there . . .” the monk stopped them.

The cossacks rode into the monastery yard which smelt of manure and hay.

By the time it was completely light Nepran was sitting in the bell tower, watching the crown army crossing to the left bank on rafts and boats. The right bank, where the companies were awaiting their turn to cross, was hidden from view by tree-covered hills.

In despair, Petro struck the bell with his fist, and joined the deacon down below.

“Well?”

“I can’t see this bank . . . Let’s hurry across to that damned hill!”

“What if we come across their scouts?”

“We’ll take sabres and pistols under our robes.”

Stealing along ravines, orchards and small fields which nestled beside the houses on the slopes, they reached the hill which fell in a steep cliff to where the Polish army was gathered. They slipped into the bushes of hawthorn and acacia and surveyed the crowds assembled on the Dnipro bank. The horses, the carts, the people! The entire crown army and all the gentry from Poland and Ukraine seemed to have gathered here at Koniecpolski’s call to teach the peasants a lesson. They longed to destroy not only them, but their nests as well, which were the breeding grounds for disloyalty and rebellion. Encased in steel armour and skilled in the art of killing and destruction, the Polish knights boarded the boats. Hussars with wings were pushing and shoving — so funny and comical, like cherubs sculpted by a dunce. Haughty lords paraded

around proudly displaying the high, upright feathers in their fur-rimmed hats.

And suddenly Nepran spied the hetman. Sumptuous and puffed up, Mister Koniecpolksi stood surrounded by a circle of officers as he watched the crossing. Nearby stood a white tent, and beside it stood the hetman's horse in beautiful gilded trappings.

"P'raps he even sleeps here . . ." thought Nepran aloud.

"What did you say?" the deacon asked.

"See, that's the crown hetman down there."

The deacon looked down intently for a long time, then sighed and said sadly:

"Pity I haven't got a rifle with me!"

"Could you get him from here?"

"I'd manage somehow, with a prayer or two . . ."

"Maybe we could take him alive, deacon?" Nepran asked, sensing how the sudden desire engulfed his whole being.

"You think we could try?"

"If he beds down here, then may my whole forelock fall out, as my blood brother Mykola says, if we don't steal him away like a bundle of straw!"

"The King will be incensed!" the deacon said, squinting his large grey eyes.

"Let him go and bite his own ear."

"That would be a consolation!"

Nepran closed the deacon's mouth with his hand.

"Do you want us both to be impaled while we're catching Mister Hetman, priest?"

"Don't worry, *sotnyk*, those destined for the noose have no fear of the stake!"

"Perhaps . . ." smiled Nepran. And said resolutely: "We'll stay here till the evening to make sure that the hetman stays behind in his tent."

"Have mercy!" the deacon pleaded in a whisper. "What about food and water?"

"It'll do you good to lose some weight. Otherwise no rope will be able to hold your weight."

"Perhaps . . ." sighed the deacon.

As it grew dark that evening, Nepran left the deacon behind to watch His Illustrious Majesty, and returned to the monastery. The plan was simple and daring: they would approach from the river quietly, kidnap the hetman and

any other lord who came to hand, then gallop through the camp shouting ‘Make way for the hetman!’, disappearing in the Zvirynets Forest.

At midnight the deacon came running and reported the Koniecpolski had retired to his tent for the night, but the crossing had not stopped, and there weren’t many soldiers left on this bank.

‘It’s time!’ said Nepran.

‘Lord Almighty, but I’m hungry!’

‘It’ll be easier for your horse.’

‘We’ll give you His Majesty – he weighs about as much as you eat in one meal!’

Joking, they quietly filed out of the cells and headed for the yard where their horses were hidden.

‘There is no cross holy enough for you, you devils . . .’ the deacon muttered, shuffling behind everyone.

The monk who let them out of the Lavra blessed them and wished them success.

They crept along, careful that nothing tinkled. It was completely dark, and every step was difficult, but no one dared wish for the moon to appear to light the path they were taking single file. At half way they dismounted. Leading the horses by the reins, they walked along a terrace on the slope. Below them was the river, above them loomed the cliffs.

About two hundred sages from the crossing and the hetman’s tent, on the flat land they had scrutinised all day long, they quietly waited for everyone to reassemble and mounted their horses again.

Nepran bared his Damascus sabre, and hundreds of other sabres broke free from their scabbards.

‘Tymish and Nykodym, move in from the cliff, so he can’t escape that way,’ said Nepran, realising that canvas did not make a very strong wall. ‘Forget that you have pistols . . .’

There was a hubbub of voices and much movement at the crossing and this allowed them to creep up quite close and even send Orendarenko and Nykodym ahead.

When the two had disappeared in the darkness and the cossacks had set out too, a spectre appeared on the path before them and asked the password. The *sotnyk* galloped forward and struck swiftly with his sabre. He flew out onto the trampled river bank, chopped someone else down, and throwing his

reins to Yurko, rushed into the tent. By the light of a candle he saw the empty bed and a hole cut in the canvas wall facing the cliff. He ran outside through the opening — but there was no one about: Orendarenko and Nykodym must have already grabbed the hetman, who had sensed danger and tried dishonourably to flee.

“Escaped?” Bodnia rushed up to his blood brother, having run into the tent behind Nepran with Sirychenko and the deacon.

Nepran shrugged his shoulders and pointed at the hole in the canvas with his sabre.

“There are more tents nearby,” said Ivas. “Perhaps we could . . .”

“Hurry!” Nepran agreed in a low voice.

After mounting his horse Nepran noticed that the usual order had been upset at the water’s edge.

“Let’s escape, boys!” he called to his men, who had crowded around him, flabbergasted that such a wonderful plan had not succeeded.

They lunged away from the river, skirting the waggons, fires and tents and the same mountain from which it had seemed so easy during the day to kidnap Koniecpolski.

“Make way for the hetman! Damn you, make way for His Majesty!” yelled out Nepran like a real nobleman, and flew past a crowd of Polish soldiers, who made way for the detachment of horsemen hastening into the dark of night.

Behind them they heard disorderly gunfire, loud commands, screams, alarmed voices.

“Is everyone here?” asked Nepran, after they had stopped deep in the forest.

“Seems like it.”

“Where are Tymish and Nykodym?”

There was no answer.

“Damn it!” sighed Nepran. “Who’s got prisoners?”

“I’ve got one here, Petro,” said Mykola. “But he seems kind of dumb. Keeps jabbering something I can’t make head or tail of. Captain, captain . . .”

“We came for the bride and got a pumpkin instead!” Nepran quipped. “He’s probably a German mercenary. We could have picked up someone like him anywhere . . .”

“Shall we dump him?”

“No. He might come in useful somewhere.”

“Where’s Tymish and uncle then?” asked Mykola.

“Who knows. They moved in from the cliff.”

“Perhaps they’ve been killed?”

“We’d have heard the skirmish. And there was no one behind the tent, I checked.”

“Quiet there! Sounds like someone on horseback . . .”

They heard the clatter of hooves along the path. It seemed to die away, and then echoed again through the dark undergrowth.

“Have a look who it is,” Nepran ordered, sensing something bad.

Soon the clatter died away, then drew closer again, and someone said:

“Boys, there’s a horse here without a rider. There’s blood on it . . .”

Mykola silently rushed towards the alarmed voice and fingered the horse’s trappings.

“It’s uncle’s.”

“The cossacks took off their hats.

“Sit the German on the horse,” Nepran said to Mykola. “And tie him down well so he doesn’t fall off.”

“Maybe I should . . .” Mykola wiped away a tear and grabbed at his sabre.

“Don’t Mykola. You can’t resurrect him with death . . .”

Downhearted at their unsuccessful escapade, they set off along the Dnipro towards Kaniv, to cross the river there to Pereyaslav, where the cossack army was stationed.

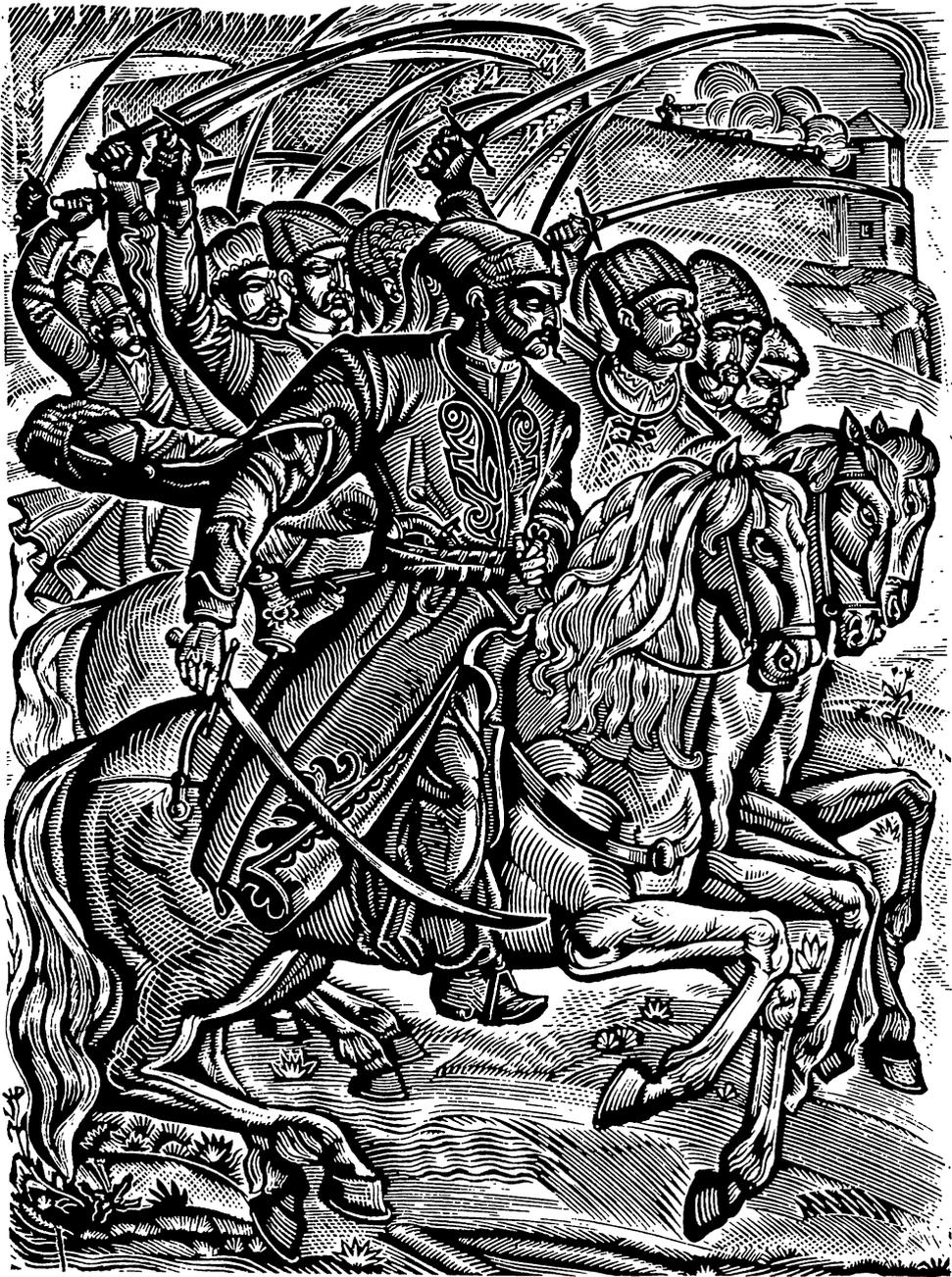
Bodnia kept sighing, weeping for his unfortunate uncle. This pained Nepran, for he felt he was to blame. It had been his own plan . . . But it had to be — this was what war was about. He couldn’t work out where he had gone wrong, where he had miscalculated . . . Perhaps they were betrayed? God, if one couldn’t trust those who had fought at one’s side any more, one would go insane!

He pushed this thought from his mind, seeking dozens and hundreds of arguments to the contrary, but it kept returning, irritating his soul.



Chapter XI





Herr Captain told the cossacks much of what they needed to know and Taras Triasylo was pleased. Handing the German over to Siryk to help with the cannons (the Poles were already near Pereyaslav), the hetman asked Petro to retell the details of the fiasco at the crossing: he too must have thought Koniecpolski's escape from the hands of the cossacks seemed a little suspect.

"Perhaps I made a mistake somewhere, father?" asked Nepran, having told the whole story as it had happened.

"No, Petro. No," Taras said decisively. "I couldn't have done better myself . . . Where's Tymish?"

"He appeared today. Says . . ."

"Call him here."

Soon after, Nepran returned with Orendarenko.

"Good health to you, Illustrious Hetman," Tymish said coyly.

"You've let the Illustrious One slip through your fingers," the hetman growled out angrily.

"I swear by the Holy Cross, it wasn't my fault," Orendarenko said, crossing himself. "Hardly had we reached the place, when Nykodym fell off his horse, and my bay steed tripped and sat on its hind legs. I thought it had been shot and flew out of the saddle. Meanwhile my horse rose to its feet and ran off, dragging me by the foot, which was still stuck in the stirrup."

"They say in the Polish camp that the hetman escaped on a horse," Taras tugged at his moustache.

"It must have been Nykodym's horse."

"No. Nykodym's horse came galloping to us straight away," Nepran interjected.

Tymish threw his arms apart:

“Maybe there were some horses tethered nearby . . .”

“Maybe,” the hetman agreed. “They say a dead cossack was found some distance from the tent.”

“My comrade mustn’t have died straight away and managed to crawl away a bit,” sighed Tymish. And then suddenly knitted his brows: “May I ask, father, if you don’t perhaps suspect me of letting our enemy escape?”

“There is that sin,” the hetman confessed sincerely.

“Then why would have I tramped back here for three days and nights, until I was no longer able to stand on my feet?”

“Because you were certain we would rout the Polish army.”

“Father,” Orendarenko squinted, “you know well yourself, that I don’t believe in miracles . . .”

“Then why are you with us?” Triasylo tugged at his moustache.

“I go where everyone else is!” Orendarenko said pompously. “As they say, in a crowd even death is beautiful.”

“Well, all right,” said the hetman after some time. “Go then, Tymish. Have a good feed, you’ve lost so much weight and almost withered away,” he added more amicably. “We need strong men for what is to come!”

After Orendarenko had left, Taras became pensive, took the mace from the table and slid it under his belt.

“Do you believe him?” he asked at last.

“Yes . . .” the *sotnyk* replied uncertainly. “It could have been as he said . . .”

“Keep an eye on him just in case,” said Taras, fixing a sabre to his belt. “These disloyal thomases could still stab us in the back . . . I must go now. To inspect the ramparts, the cannons and the army. The Poles are on the verge of launching an attack. Come with me, if you like.”

“All right.”

“Where’s Khmelnytsky?” Taras asked, as they walked out through the entrance hall.

“I’m ready and waiting, father,” Khmelnytsky stepped forward towards them. He smiled at Nepran, shook his right hand and fell in beside Nepran.

Pereyaslav was crammed full of people, as if some large annual market was in progress. But there was no hubbub and turmoil. The atrocities committed by Laszcz and other noblemen had caused many of the residents of the nearby villages to seek refuge with their wives and children in the town.

However, all were kept busy: some strengthened the ramparts and towers, some poured lead for bullets or forged spears and sabres, others rode out on patrol and reconnaissance or for food, while others watched the enemy's every move from the towers.

When the hetman walked past he was greeted amicably, no one clamoured before him with requests or complaints, for all were certain that their father would do everything that had to be done, and wouldn't begrudge his own life or blood for them and Ukraine.

And everywhere one looked there were Sich brothers, who had come here at the first call for freedom. And where these Zaporozhian knights appeared the jokes continued endlessly, work flowed like a song and the heart beat joyously.

"Your Majesty, help us!" Maniunia yelled out, as he carried a heavy log with Bodnia towards the ramparts.

"What are you carrying, boys?" Taras asked with a smile.

"A dumpling, Mister Hetman."

"To lunch on?"

"No, we're going to give this one to the gentry to feast on!"

"What if they choke on it?"

"We'll have a little cry and bury them!"

"In that case I'll have to give you a hand," and Triasylo slipped his strong shoulder under the log. Nepran and Khmel followed suit.

At the top of the ramparts they saw old Siryk and the other cannons, who were busy with some large reeds and a giant bow with a long chute. Herr Captain was shuffling amongst them too.

"Good health to you, my brave lads!" the hetman announced.

"God grant you health too," they replied in chorus. The German stood at attention and stared at the hetman.

"Look at him there!" the hetman nodded at the German.

"Like a stake. Hit him with the butt-end of an axe and he'll sink to his navel into the earth," Siryk smiled.

"How are things here?" Triasylo asked.

"Preparing a present for the Poles."

"Is this the flying fire with which you toasted Varna?" the hetman asked Khmelnitsky.

Bohdan nodded. Taras inspected the mighty bow and took an arrow in

his hands – it was unusually thick and empty inside.

“What’s inside them?”

“Five bags of powder.”

“And will it reach the camp from here?”

“We’ll put them on carts . . .”

“Zehr gut, zehr gut,” the prisoner gabbled. “It is a real cossack wonder!”

“How’s the German?” Taras asked Siryk.

“Working like a mercenary.”

“Because we’ve paid him more generously than the Poles.”

“Have you really paid him gold?” the old cannoneer was offended.

“Life is dearer than gold.”

“Let him take all he wants – we’ve plenty of that!”

“Who knows, Siryk,” said the deacon, who had come up, “perhaps we have least of that . . .”

“Have you had a bad dream?”

“Someone is spreading the idea throughout the town that we should make peace with the gentry and strive for our demands with a gentle word and a request, instead of with the sabre, and maybe then the crown hetman . . .”

“Traitors! Damned slavish souls!” Taras boiled over. “Where’s the *osavul*? Tell him to round up these Polish bumlickers and throw them out of the town! Let them crawl off to join the gentry and help them to destroy their people, their faith and their language – everything that holds us in this world. It’s better to meet them face to face in battle than to have them behind our backs.”

Angry and alarmed the cossack hetman proceeded along the wall, glancing at the Polish camp. At last he stopped by an embrasure and called Nepran and Khmel closer.

“Look what’s happening in their camp near the forest,” he said calmly.

Nepran rose higher and cupping his hand over his eyes against the sun, surveyed the boundless enemy camp, which began on the hills on the other side of the river and stretched to the forest some two or three versts from Pereyaslav. There was an explosion of movement near the forest.

“Reinforcements arriving, probably,” he said hesitantly.

“Seems like it,” Khmelnitsky agreed with him.

Taras looked into the distance for a long time, tugging at his long cossack moustache.

“Well then,” he said at last, “you’ll have to race along the Dnipro, Nepran, and destroy all the boats and ferries.”

“I can set out now, if need be, father,” Petro said. “But my hundred men won’t be enough . . .”

“You’ll take four more *sotnias* with you. And make sure that from here to the Desna not a splinter remains on which the enemy can cross the river!”

“I’ll do everything as you command.”

“You’ll leave tonight.”

Meanwhile the turmoil had settled down in the Polish camp. A group of expensively dressed horsemen rode from the forest into the depths of the camp and stopped by the tent of the field hetman, Mikolay Potocki.

“Strange. The Poles don’t seem to want to attack,” said Khmelnytsky.

“Raking together their forces,” Taras growled in reply.

“But new detachments keep joining us every day too.”

“Yesterday evening the Poles routed one of these,” Taras sighed. “And they continue to tighten the noose around Pereyaslav and the rebellion . . .”

“Then maybe we should strike first?” Nepran asked.

“Why do you think I’m sending you off to destroy all the crossings?” Taras said.

“Will you be attacking without me, father?”

“You can’t kill all the Poles in one blow. There’ll be enough left for your sabre too. And you’re not off to pay auntie a visit either. You know how much gentry there is along the river!”

“Smielo Laszcz is in the camp,” said Nepran angrily. “I’ve got a grudge to settle with him.”

“What do you say, Bohdan,” the hetman smiled. “Shall we leave Laszcz for Petro?”

“If he wants him so much . . .”

“There, see how good we are,” the hetman embraced Nepran.

Yurko ran up, out of breath and agitated.

“Your Illustrious Majesty . . .!” he began, gasping for air.

Taras screwed up his face.

“Father,” the recent Registered Cossack corrected his mistake. “They’ve brought two *hayduks* into town who escaped from the gentry with important news!”

“Tell me.”

“I’m not exactly sure. Something happened in the camp . . .”

“Bring those lost souls here!” Taras ordered and went off to meet them. The Poles’ ex-servants took off their hats and bowed.

“I’m no lord, there’s no need to stoop before me,” the hetman said sullenly. “You didn’t come here for this, did you?”

“No, Mister Hetman,” the older man said. “There is an opportunity now to shake the gentry . . .”

Taras knitted his brows.

“What do you care about that?”

“We’re Ukrainians,” the younger one said proudly. And this sounded more sincere and convincing than a hundred words and oaths: a traitor has no pride in his heart towards his people and his native land.

“Good,” said the hetman. “I believe you. Now hurry and tell me the news.”

“Early this morning,” the younger one began hastily, “Crown Guard Laszcz spied a cossack patrol and headed for Pereyaslav, and sent for reinforcements, for there were five hundred cossacks. The crown hetman raised two thousand of his finest horsemen and galloped off to help the guard . . .”

Taras glanced at Khmelnitsky and asked:

“Who did the crown hetman leave in charge?”

“Potocki.”

“Swear, that you’re telling the truth.”

The two men turned towards the old church and crossed themselves.

“Khmel,” the hetman said solemnly, “hurry up and call the regimental commanders together! Run off to Siryk, Nepran, and tell him to have his fiery arrows ready. Our time has come!”

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Everyone had been waiting for this moment. And everyone was ready for the hetman’s call to unleash their sabres and let them decide their fate. It was better to die standing than to live on one’s knees! Without any screams, noise or boasting the regiments gathered at the gates and awaited the signal.

Nepran and his *sotnia* stood in the front rows, not far from Siryk, who was

to frighten the gentry with his fiery dragon. For a moment the cannoneer left his carts laden with heavy bows to join the *sotnia*. He came up to his son, who together with the others would soon be charging the Polish camp. Nepran couldn't hear what the old man was saying to Ivas, but he could clearly see young Sirychenko clamp his hand to his sabre and sit upright, blushing. The cannoneer replied with a smile, embraced his son and returned to his position.

Checking the tears welling up inside him (he couldn't watch people parting without feeling emotional), Nepran ran his eyes over the cossack rows, noting that quite a few men were setting out into battle without sabres, and were only armed with scythes, flails and pitchforks. 'If the attack is successful, they'll obtain for themselves some real weapons,' he thought at once. He remembered Uliana. It was good that he had sent her home. Had she been here, she would have grown grey waiting for her father, brother, him and Mykola to return from battle. God, how difficult it is to set out into battle, but even harder is the wait for those who have set out!

"Why are they taking so long to open the gates?" Bodnia grumbled angrily.

He languished beside Yurko, who watched with interest and subdued fear as the cossack ranks swelled before the big battle. It was Yurko's first real battle. May enemy bullets and sabres pass him by! Behind him stood Orendarenko, deep in thought. What was he thinking about now? Deep in his heart Nepran sensed that Koniecpolski had escaped not without his help. If only he wouldn't betray them now . . . If we had unity — freedom would not be our visitor, but an eternal sun! Further away he saw the black robes of the deacon. His hair had become dishevelled and made him look like a lion. He was whispering something. A prayer? Curses at the gentry? Beside him, a head above everyone else, towered Maniunia . . .

The gates slowly opened and a wide bridge fell across the moat.

"Forward! For freedom!" Nepran yelled, baring his sabre.

The front rows gleamed sabres and poured forth, as if breaking through a dam, across the shallow, calm Alta.

Trumpets blared in the Polish camp, drums sounded the alarm, and on the rampart which protected the army from the river side, cannoneers busied themselves.

"Carts forward!" called out Khmelnitsky.

Tight bowstrings rang out and strange arrows, trailing skeins of smoke,

flew towards the camp. The explosions rumbled away like a disorderly volley, the smoke rose. Meanwhile, Siryk fired another round of fiery dragons and the cossacks raced across after them.

Nepran's hand-picked *sotnia* reached the rampart first and clambered up to the cannons, which had not been fired yet. The cannon crews were quickly overcome and the cossacks immediately turned the cannons in the opposite direction, sending cannon-balls into the crowd being assembled around the hetman's standard. The Poles lost courage and retreated into the depths of their camp, leaving behind dozens of dead.

Like a spring flood, the cossack army flowed into the Polish camp. Bristling with scythes and sabres, the regiments marched on the enemy, which still managed to recover and advanced a detachment in steel armour.

The earth shook and a black cloud of dust covered the sky. Nepran had fought countless skirmishes, encounters and battles, but he had yet to see such carnage. Always army had fought army, weapon struck weapon, but here a hatred had been let loose which had been curdling in the people's hearts for years and centuries, and now rose in a formidable cloud of vengeance. The people had broken free of the contempt, servitude and oppression which had encased them in a clinging fog, and throwing life to the four winds, were ready to shed their blood for freedom, to accept injury, pain and death.

The Poles marched forward. The first hasty shots were fired. Then came the roar of hundreds, and thousands. The ranks hit and mixed together, quenching the cold earth with blood.

Nepran felled a soldier who was pushing at him like a bear, and looked around. His blood brother was at his back. Nearby two sumptuously-dressed noblemen had hemmed in Yurko from both sides. The cossack evaded their blows, twisting about like a wolf in a dog pack, and skilfully, though not very strongly, fought back with his sabre.

"Hold tight, Yurko!" Nepran yelled out and rushed to his assistance. "Excuse me, sir," he said in Polish to the nobleman who had left the boy alone now and was covering himself from the *sotnyk's* blows. "It isn't very chivalrous to fight two against one . . ."

"Cattle can be struck down any old way," the nobleman made a wry face and struck a side-blow.

"Oh my," Nepran fought him off. "I see you're a boor as well, sir. Visiting us and cursing in our house too!"

“I’m at home here, churl,” the nobleman was furious. “Poland lies from sea to sea!”

Meanwhile the other nobleman began to attack Yurko more persistently and the young cossack was hardly able to fight off his blows.

“Pray, you Polish swine!” Nepran yelled through his teeth, and after disarming the Pole with a sharp blow, sliced off his stupid haughty head.

Yurko’s nobleman shuddered and also fell down dead, killed by Yurko.

“Stay closer to me,” Nepran told Yurko, seeking Orendarenko.

Tymish fought gloriously. His sabre glistened like God’s wrath and fell mercilessly, generously sowing death about him.

Nepran heaved a sigh of relief and covered Yurko from a helmeted mercenary.

After the German lay dead at his feet, Nepran saw Sirychenko atop a barrel mincing the Polish soldiers.

Bodnia rushed about the battlefield like a saint in hell. The Poles dreaded him and he had to chase after each one, forcing them to die like knights.

Slowly, as the battle progressed, the Poles rolled back more and more. The sumptuously-dressed field hetman scurried among the Polish army on his white-as-snow steed and prayed to the common soldiers, the gentry and the sullen German mercenaries to uphold their honour, their homeland, their Illustrious Majesty the King, and not show the peasants their backs. In places he succeeded in rallying together the tired, rumped and disconcerted soldiers and drove them forward to aid those who were checking the cossack advance. The battle intensified, the fighters chopped at each other, grappled like wild animals and fell to the ground dead, but still kept the enemy in death’s embrace.

From the north, where the left flank of the Polish camp was located, came the rumble of hundreds of galloping horses intermingled with army cries, and a shudder seemed to pass over the whole battlefield. The Poles were overjoyed while the cossacks tightened their hold on their weapons.

A thousand or more of the hussars who had been out to help the crown guard, had returned.

The crown hetman, riding at the head of his best companies, cut into the cossack ranks. Horses knocked down those on foot, the horsemen in steel armour chopped at the rebels who were armed with sticks and scythes, and had no protection except for their shirts and their courage. This was an uneven

fight. Blood flowed freely. Cossack blood . . .

Taras sent some reinforcements. A regiment of Zaporozhians rushed out to intercept the hussars. The Sich Cossacks were on horses too, and though not in plate armour and helmets, they could cover themselves well with their sabres and knew how to humble the enemy.

The hussars were forced to leave the safe, easy prey and instead accept real combat.

A black cloud of dust hung over Pereyaslav and the Polish camp and gradually the heavy gloom of an approaching thunderstorm thickened. It was as if God Himself had been incensed by the great destruction of His people and had extinguished the sun. A short while later a fork of lightning pierced the whole heavenly dome and thunder shook the hushed earth. It became completely dark. Drops resembling a mother's tears began to fall, and there followed such a splendid May storm, that in a minute all the warriors were wet through.

But the fighting did not stop. Up to their ankles in puddles black with blood, men continued to chop at each other with their last strength. Nepran slay the gentry, painfully gritting his teeth. Behind him fought Mykola, Tymish, Ivas, Yurko, the deacon and all those who remained of his *sotnia*. Only Maniunia had disappeared without trace. No one had seen him die, though Nepran had been witness to the misfortune which had befallen the giant – his sabre had broken. He had wanted to rush to his aid, but a large crowd of Polish soldiers blocked his way. By the time Nepran was finally free of their sabres, Maniunia was nowhere to be seen . . .

“Look, look, Nepran!” Mykola called out, pointing ahead with his sabre.

Nepran rubbed his eyes with his hand and spied Maniunia quite close by – alone, besieged by Poles and mercenaries; the hero was upholding cossack honour and glory with the butt of a long rifle.

“Hold on there, Maniunia!” he shouted. “We’re coming to help you!”

“Boys!” the giant shouted joyously and hit a soldier so hard that his plate armour clanged as if it was empty. “Drive the damned vermin this way and I’ll cudgel them!”

The Sich Cossacks worked hard with their sabres, cutting a way through to their friend.

The rain beat down, lightning pierced the sky, angry thunder crashed. At every flash Nepran looked to see if Maniunia was still standing. The

fellow was threshing heads with his miraculous weapon and screaming aloud. Suddenly he grew quiet, hit the enemy one more time, and then, dropping his frightening iron pestle, collapsed like an oak tree felled by thunder. Lightning flashed again and again, but Maniunia did not get up to laugh into the faces of the noblemen, to show his contempt of death and life in servitude . . .

Trumpets sounded consent, and gradually the fighting stopped. Both the cossacks and Poles were exhausted, the whole field was covered with bodies.

Taking their wounded, the cossack army left the enemy camp, forded the swollen Alta and returned to Pereyaslav.

* *
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Four thousand lost their lives in this bloody slaughter. No one won the battle, no one lost. However the adversaries had seen for themselves that this was only the beginning – the Polish scythe had struck a rock.

Early the next day Nepran counted his men. The boys were sullen and angry – out of a hundred less than half remained, and every second one of these was wounded.

“Where’s Tymish Orendarenko?” Nepran grew alarmed, not seeing him among the cossacks.

“He’s alive. Went off somewhere as soon as it began to grow light,” said Yurko. “Shall I call him?”

“Do you know where he is, though?”

“Probably in the tavern.”

“Or with the tavern-keeper’s wife,” the deacon added in a deep voice.

“Must be pretty, eh?” someone smacked their lips.

The deacon raised his finger and announced, as if delivering a sermon:

“’Tis not a woman, but a multitude of devils gathered under one hood!”

A smile flashed across the faces of the tired, sorrowful cossacks.

“You should go and drive the evil spirit from her.”

“I’m scared. Besides, I’m spent after calling on the Poles.”

“Use your cross!”

“Or a prayer.”

“Prayers and crosses, brethren, will be about as much help here as a censer to a dead man.”

“Take Bodnia with you,” said Nepran.

Mykola measured him with an angry look and turned away.

“I could . . .” the deacon drawled, squinting. “But he’s still a little boy and might be frightened when he sees the devil . . .”

“Is he scary?” asked Yurko, who was listening with his mouth agape.

The brothers burst into guffaws.

Tymish came running up – out of breath and red-faced.

“While you’re joking here a council is being called!”

“Why aren’t they beating the kettle-drums?” Nepran asked.

“It’s being held without Taras’ consent. Let’s go and listen!”

Nepran gestured with his hand and the cossacks spilled out onto the street leading to the church and the maidan. At the gate he stopped Mykola, Yurko and Ivas and said to them, so that no one else would hear:

“Go to the hetman at once. Tell him I sent you just in case there is trouble. Watch over him well, so that not even a single hair falls from his head!”

Without hearing Nepran out, Bodnia rushed back into the yard and returned with three pistols. He gave one to Yurko, and slid two under his belt.

After the boys had hurried off, Nepran went to the black council. Black, because the hetman would not allow it. Taras was a mysterious man . . . Well, he could easily have beaten the kettle-drums and appeared before the men. But no, he was stubborn . . . But then perhaps this wasn’t the time for free discussion, when the enemy was standing outside the city, and even inside there were Polish spies everywhere. What could he have said to the men? The truth? Well then the Poles would have known it by the day’s end! Lies? It didn’t suit a father to talk like that to his children . . .

The maidan was filled mostly with Registered Cossacks and townspeople. The Sich Cossacks had only started to arrive, jeering at the scarecrows, who having hardly sniffed powder, were now immediately gathering to confer how best to convince the gentry to allow them to be servile in future.

Here and there short heated skirmishes flared up between the Registered and Zaporozhian Cossacks, but fortunately no sabres were bared. They fought with their tongues and elbows.

Nepran found his men and together with them began to push his way through to the church porch, where someone had placed a table and covered it with nankeen. Had they decided to re-elect the hetman?

Nearby stood a group of elders — all Registered Cossacks, not one Zaporozhian among them. They were talking about something, glancing at the crowd. Finally Colonel Ivan Kulaha left the group, raised his *pernach*, and after waiting for silence, began:

“Gentlemen, friends, brave lads! It disturbs us to start this business without the hetman and his general staff. They have refused to be present and would not call their own council.”

“Shame!” someone squeaked shrilly, like a young rooster, but he was silenced. The speaker’s boots creaked as he shuffled uneasily from foot to foot.

“We all believed in the hetman and followed his star for a better future for our land,” the colonel continued. “We hoped that our strength would force the Poles into granting us new freedoms or at least restoring the old ones. But the crown hetman, and with him the whole of Rzecz Pospolita, will not concede. As Mister Koniecpolski gathers more and more men around his standard our hopes seem more and more improbable. We lost two thousand cossack souls on the battlefield yesterday, but what did we bring back, what did we achieve for ourselves and our native land? We’ve only succeeded in annoying Poland even more and disturbing the powerful gentry . . .”

“How terrible!” the deacon hollered for the whole maidan to hear, and came up to the table too. “Brethren!” he raised his finger. “If we are to listen to this hero,” he said, poking Kulaha in the stomach, “then we should all be running like prodigal children and asking the Polish gentry to forgive us for rebelling. Haven’t we suffered enough? Haven’t we been promised friendship, brotherhood and equality often enough, and instead received a yoke and treachery? Not one agreement secured with our blood has been made good by the perfidious gentry! I know that you are trusting, kind-hearted, gentle and always ready to waive your rights for the sake of peace. But gentleness and kindness today are equivalent to cowardice and apostasy! Until we free ourselves from the hold of hangmen and foes, death to kindness!”

The maidan buzzed with voices, hats flew into the air, sabres flashed. Despair and exhaustion had vanished.

“Brethren!” the deacon called out. “Yesterday many of us fell . . . May they live it up in heaven,” he crossed himself. “And each of us who broke into the enemy camp yesterday might not have seen this bright morning . . . But I swear before God that I would rather be lying dead, than to have to bow my

head for the right to live on my knees! Amen!”

The Sich deacon’s words touched the people’s hearts. And hundreds, thousands answered like a forest responding to a breeze:

“True!”

“The priest speaks wisely!”

“We’ll die before we apostasise!”

Orendarenko made his way to the table. Clearing his throat and waiting for the crowd to quieten, he asked:

“Tell me, deacon, have you a wife, children, a house? No! Well I have, and so has he,” he said pointing at someone, “and so do half the other men if not more. Am I right?” he addressed the silent crowd. And without waiting for the council’s reply, continued: “We’ve flocked here behind the ramparts, philosophising and displaying our courage, while the gentry wander about our land massacring our innocent children, taking sisters and wives into captivity, like the hordes . . .!”

“He speaks the truth!” Nepran said, approaching the table and Orendarenko grew silent in amazement: he never expected that Nepran, of all people, would understand him and give him support. “He speaks the truth — we’re philosophising! And meanwhile the enemy is destroying our kin, and soul, and glory! To him we are rebels and traitors because we won’t let ourselves be trampled into the ground, because we are striving to resurrect our past glory from the ashes, because we want to be our own masters in our own land! We, brothers, are philosophising and hoping for kindness from the gentry, and meanwhile our freedom is growing weaker, our faith is fading, and our strength is weakening! If our aristocratic brothers really wanted friendship, and not submission, if they thought even a little about our future, they would not venerate all kinds of sycophants and turncoats, who have renounced their people, their language and customs.” He stopped to catch his breath and cast a glance over the sea of heads, finishing his impassioned speech: “Gentlemen, brothers, comrades! You are free to continue to fight or to strive for an agreement. It is your right to choose the future course we are to take, for you are still, today, cossacks. I’ll only say one thing: if we bow and give in to the enemy, we face nothing but grief and misery! Slavery, shame, contempt and despair will fall on our heads and our grandchildren, and great-grandchildren will curse us, for perhaps now, here, in this maidan, we are condemning ourselves and our descendants to eternal darkness!”

Nepran grew silent. There were no words of approval or disagreement from the crowd, as usually happened at cossack councils. The men stood in silence, as if weighing his words, and began to disperse.

"Where are you off to, good people?" Orendarenko fussed about like a brood-hen given duck eggs. "We haven't yet decided what to do!"

"No need to get excited," the deacon stopped him. "After we've cut down the gentry we can assemble and have a chat."

"Only those of us who survive," Orendarenko growled back sullenly.

"Then we'll meet in paradise," the deacon continued, "and empty a glass or two of mead and horilka . . ."

"More like hot tar!" Tymish retorted and dived into the crowd.

"Don't forget, Tymish," the deacon yelled out in a voice which sent shivers down the cossacks' spines. "The greatest sin is apostasy!"

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At midday the hetman's orderly came to fetch Sotnyk Petro Nepran to take him to the hetman's house.

Around a table covered with a brilliant white cloth sat, squeezed tightly together, the military clerk, the *osavul*, the judge, the quartermaster and all the colonels. Taras was pacing up and down the room angrily tugging at his grey, yellowed moustache.

"Sit down," he nodded at Nepran. "Thanks a lot for sending your boys, Petro," he pressed his hand to his heart. "They arrived just in time," he flashed an angry glance at the elders, who did not raise their heads. "The gentlemen colonels wanted to take the mace from me by force . . ."

"That's slander, a malicious lie !" Ivan Kulaha jumped to his feet.

"A lie you say, brother?" Triasylo tugged at his moustache.

"They came to ask you along to the council."

The hetman tore his sabre from its scabbard and stepped towards the table.

"See how blunt it's become?" he shoved it under the colonel's nose. "They asked me so vehemently, that my sabre just held out!"

"No one gave them orders to do that, they acted on their own initiative . . . Go and ask them."

“We’ve asked them already!” Triasylo said stiffly. Nepran’s boys didn’t leave their old brother in the lurch.”

“And if you had come to face the crowd, maybe your crown would have fallen off?” asked Kulaha.

“No, it wasn’t because of that,” the hetman knitted his brows. “The gentlemen elders’ intentions were bad.”

“So, we might have had a new hetman . . .” Kulaha drawled. “Wasn’t it you who said that power doesn’t appeal to you?”

“My, you’re a fox!” the hetman said with a smile. And suddenly he looked stern and his eyebrows hid his eyes. “It’s not the mace I value, but the deed for which I’ve sacrificed so many years, and for which, if need be, I’ll sacrifice my life. If it hadn’t been bawlers and cowards who called the council together, but instead those intrepid warriors who face death bravely, seeking a way to defeat the enemy completely, I would have been the first to be there . . .”

“And your mace?”

“I would have handed it over with joy, had I known I was giving it to a smarter man, and not for the degradation of my people, but for an even greater, relentless yearning to free them from captivity!”

“I don’t think we can break free now,” sighed Kulaha.

“We will!” the hetman said, hiding his Damascus sabre. “A nation like ours can’t live in chains . . .”

“Yesterday it was reduced in number.”

“And what about the gentry? Even this morning, when you wanted to get down on your knees before the Poles and sacrifice your hetman, Zaporozhians cut to death over five hundred Polish soldiers near Burzhany!”

The elders bent their heads even lower. Only Petro and Bohdan looked the hetman in the eye. Triasylo was majestic in his unquenchable faith for a better future for his long-suffering people. Solid, tall, grey, with eyes like lightning, dressed in a simple *zhupan*, with a plain sabre, he was the epitomy of cossack strength and steadfastness in the continuous tourney with enemies.

“But there are countless numbers of them,” Kulaha piped up again. “And every day fresh reinforcements keep arriving from beyond the Dniipro.”

“They will all fall here,” the hetman said resolutely. “We are Ukraine! God is with us, because we are fighting for truth!”

“But we can’t overcome Rzecz Pospolita.”

“Koniempolski isn’t Poland.”

“The whole state is behind him though.”

“We’ll cut him off. And smash his armies.”

“You think we can encircle them?” Kulaha asked. “We haven’t the numbers.”

“We’ll manage. I’ll burn all the boats, ferries and everything else on which they might cross the Dniro!”

The colonels and elders cheered up. Though they weren’t the cowardly type, not all had enough confidence and faith in themselves and their nation, they could not grasp the might which had been scattered by hundreds of years of slavery.

“Who will you be sending?” two asked at once.

“Petro Nepran.”

“With his fifty surviving men?”

“No. I’m giving him five hundred of my best horsemen, to create such a commotion the length and breadth of Ukraine, that when the Poles realise there’s nothing left, not even an old wash-tub in which to cross the Dniro, their blood will congeal in their veins. Then we’ll strike together, and in a few days there won’t be a nobleman left on this bank of the river!”

“We’ll clip Poland’s wings,” Bohdan added.

The colonels and elders rose to their feet and began talking all at once:

“We’ll show those Poles!”

“A good idea, father!”

“They’ll wet their pants when they realise they’re trapped!”

“We’ll pay them back for all our defeats and grievances!”

“And we’ll set up our own republic, a free cossack state, on the enemy’s bones! But a republic without gentry or king!” said Bohdan.

The elders smoothed their hair and stood to attention, as if they had entered church.

Taras tugged at his moustache and asked:

“Well then, gentlemen elders, is it worth accepting death while executing such a deed?”

“Yes!”

“Will your hand or heart shudder with indecision?”

“No!”

“Do you have faith in this old man?”

“That we do!”

“Then may fate be kind to us!” the hetman dismissed the council. “Go and prepare your army. Don’t speak of our intentions and sow the seeds of faith and unity among the men, so that they may ripen into the choice grain of fellowship, or concordia, as Khmel calls it . . . Nepran, you’ll leave the town tonight!” he ordered Petro, so that everyone present could hear, as if wanting by such a gesture to make all the colonels and elders participants in his future expedition, in his failures and successes.

Nepran was the last to leave the hetman. He made all the necessary arrangements, sought advice and said farewell. His heart beat with astringent alarm and involuntarily he embraced Taras and kissed him.

The town seemed wary, waiting in anticipation. After yesterday’s difficult battle and today’s ‘stupid council’, as the deacon had christened it, no one knew what would happen next, but the thought must have crossed everyone’s mind. Strengthened the day before by a single passion, a single desire, the cossack army was divided today by an invisible, though perceptible rift. Doubt was like water wearing away at a dam . . .

The orchards were blooming. Everywhere one looked the trees stood gentle-white, as if a fairy-tale flock of swans had descended on the town. A bee buzzed over the blossoms. And the air smelt of honey . . .

How magical and superb the world was! How simply the wise Lord had arranged everything on earth, everything that is, apart from humanity. Did You become emaciated, did You become flippant, Lord, when You created the crown of nature? See how brutal Your likeness has become! Brother going against brother, chopping, shooting, stabbing and torturing, only to prove his ridiculous right of superiority . . . Lord, when Ukraine is free I’ll throw away my irksome sabre, and taking up the kobza, will sing praise to the sun, the trees, the flowers and bees – to everything earthly and eternal as the heavens and a mother’s word . . .!

Like a mirage, his mother appeared before him. And then Uliana . . . His heart beat faster. He stopped outside someone’s yard which was drowning in cherry blossom, closed his eyes and watched his sweetheart’s every move. She wore a sabre, just the way she had near the island when the patrol chaikas sailed towards certain death. The wind caressed her hair, her eyes were full of resolve . . .

“Look how full the *sotnyk* is,” someone said. “Sleeping like a draft horse

on its feet.”

He heard laughter, then quick heavy steps hurried past.

The mirage disappeared.

War had everyone in its firm grip. And the way to happiness and freedom was through suffering and wounds, death and blood.

It began to grow dark. Two or three hours remained. At about midnight his detachment would leave the town and melt into the warm darkness.



Chapter XIII





Triasylo gave them three days in which to complete this mission. The road ahead was long and a mountain of work had to be done. Nepran had no intention of passing cautiously around every Polish sentry and so slipped past the very perimeter of the camp, galloping off in the opposite direction to the Dnipro. Soon after he turned left onto the road leading to Kiev. At dawn, when the high ramparts of Boryspil emerged from the fog, they turned into the forest and raced along for another fifteen to twenty versts, stopping finally in the wilderness near Bortnychi.

Once the horses had rested here, it would be an hour's ride to the ferry crossing.

In the evening the scouts returned from the Dnipro and brought good news: the Poles had amassed boats, rafts and dinghies from all over the country, at Kiev. One strike, and the crown hetman would be trapped, together with his army. True, there was a heavy guard, and the river would hamper their attack too . . .

Nepran summoned the old, seasoned cossacks and soon they devised a cunning way of putting the fear of God into the enemy.

Leaving the horses behind in the forest near the river, Nepran led his detachment along the boggy sandy shore through the rose willows. They closed in from three sides, the fourth being guarded by the black waters of the Dnipro, so that no one would be able to slip out and raise the alarm. On this bank there were probably a hundred troops near the ferry crossing. And on the far side probably as many again, if not more.

In a shallow depression near the boats a fire was burning and they could hear laughter from time to time. The noblemen weren't expecting trouble, they weren't expecting late visitors . . .

"Look at that, will you. Sitting there guffawing as if they were on the

banks of the Vistula,” Bodnia grunted softly.

“And why not,” whispered Nepran. “You aren’t afraid of your own oxen . . .”

“But we’re not oxen.”

“To them we’re all the same – cattle.”

“May my whole forelock fall out . . .!” Bodnia flared up like powder.

Twenty steps remained to the fire. In the clearing Nepran ordered everyone to creep up as quietly as possible and to attack the guards only after he hooted. For this reason he held back Mykola and the deacon, who had outpaced the others, so they would not be seen by the enemy too soon. He had to wait until each flank had reached the river and formed a net around the gentry.

Now they could clearly see the fire and those who sat around it or slept under their fur coats.

A richly-dressed nobleman, twirling his luxuriant cat’s whiskers, was telling everyone an amusing story. Nepran had seen him somewhere before . . .

“Well, I thought, to hell with it, I’ll teach you how to respect a nobleman! I galloped up to him, raised my sabre . . . the cossack turned white and dropped his . . .”

“Guts, most likely, eh?”

“No, his sabre.”

“And you chopped him down?”

“Come on! I’m a blue-blood nobleman! I jumped off my horse and handed Nepran his sabre. Take it, I said, I can’t kill you unarmed. And he wouldn’t. Sat there trembling like an aspen leaf and blabbering something . . .”

Nepran even stopped breathing. Mykola listened too, frowning.

The nobleman haughtily thrust his chest forward, cast a glance over his audience and finished his story:

“His behaviour sickened me so much, gentlemen, that I left the churl shaking, mounted my horse, and flew off to catch up to my company and the crown hetman.”

Nepran remembered: this was the nobleman who had duped him in the forest near Lysianka! He must have escaped!

“They say that afterwards this Cossack Nepran almost kidnapped the crown hetman!” someone said cautiously.

“Nonsense!”

“And that he massacred two hundred noblemen near Tetiyiv.”

“All nonsense, gentlemen, all lies!” the blue-blood nobleman exclaimed in disgust. “He’d be afraid to even come near the crown hetman. The good-for-nothing . . .”

“Is it true, Mister Yas, that this Nepran will ride against a hundred men, laughing?”

“All fairy-tales!”

“That’s what people say.”

“They’re lying! If I were to come face to face with him, you would be able to see for yourself, gentlemen . . .”

“That you are a liar, honourable Mister Yas!” Nepran finished, walking out from the cover of the rose willows.

The blue-blood grew pale. The guards were flabbergasted too. An owl hooted into the night. From all directions the Sich Cossacks charged from the darkness at the Polish sentries and swept them away like wisps of straw in a storm.

“Boys, those who are going on the boats, follow me!” Nepran ordered. “And you,” he said to the deacon who was being left in charge on this bank, “get the boys to find some tar and brushwood and quickly load it onto the boats and ferries! Wait for us; as soon as we set fire to the boats on the far bank, do the same here. We’ll meet in Vyshenky!”

Two *sotnias* quickly hopped into the boats, Nepran walked to the bow of a heavy oak dugout, surveyed the far bank which was barely visible in the darkness, and hooted again.

Slowly the boats pulled out. Oars creaked, the thick water splashed; the wind blew in their faces. Tender, warm and gentle — like the breath of a love-goddess.

And suddenly his heart filled with a song born still on the Danube:

*Softly, softly the Danube’s water rushes,
Softer, softer the maid her tresses brushes . . .*

He remembered his kobza, which he hadn’t held for a long time and which was a good hundred versts away. And yet the strings replied, rolling in waves, mewling like seagulls, tiny seagulls — the cossack’s miserly tears.

*The quiet Danube knows no shore,
The widow's son will wait no more . . .*

He brushed the mirage aside, straining all his senses: the black bank was nearby, and the enemy too. Against the backdrop of mountains and the sky they could already see the tall masts of boats, bows, and chimeric human figures.

“Stop! Who are you?” they heard a voice from the darkness, sounding like the crack of a whip.

“Ours, ours, gentlemen!” Nepran called out in Polish. “The crown hetman has sent you reinforcements.”

“What’s the password?”

“We weren’t given one!”

“I’ll shoot! Turn back!”

“You blood of a dog, think we’re going to fool around? There are churls wandering about everywhere, and he’s sticking to his wretched password like a ram pushing a reed fence . . .”

“I’m shooting!”

“Into your mother’s head!”

A shot exploded, echoing like a cannon discharge. It was followed by another and another. The cossacks could do nothing more than lean harder on the oars. Coming closer, they too fired from every rifle. Jumping from boat to boat they reached the right bank. Fighting flared up and quickly died away . . .

Moving their own boats into the cove at the foot of the Vydubetsky Monastery, the Sich Cossacks set about their task. Everything flammable which they found in the darkness was brought to the water’s edge and thrown into the countless dugouts and boats. Then they struck their flints and simultaneously lit hundreds of fires. The vessels were dry, well-tarred, and the flames shot high into the sky, racing along the bank like a cossack jumping from boat to boat. The Dnipro water bubbled and became fiery black . . .

By the time Nepran and his cossacks had boarded their boats the left bank was ablaze too. Two fiery waves soon met in the middle of the river, striking each other’s wings, and rose into the sky, shedding heavy red feathers. The fast water picked up these radiant feathers and carried them downstream.

“Nepran!” Bodnia yelled in alarm. “The fire is approaching us!”

“It won’t catch up with us,” Petro said sagaciously without taking his

eyes away from the spectacle, which was at once frightening and beautiful, horrific and yet painfully joyous. Now the gentry would be shaken! They would probably see the glow all the way to Pereyaslav. Taras would be rejoicing and praising his eagles . . . And rightly so! This flame could become the banner leading Ukraine to victory. And someone would write in a chronicle: ‘In the summer of 1630 on the banks of the Slavuta* near Kiev a long-standing injustice was razed by the Sich Cossacks, together with countless boats, and Rus rose from the ashes like a strange Phoenix!’

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Thirty versts from Kiev, in Vyshenky, which stood on the same bank as Pereyaslav, Nepran joined the deacon.

It was growing light. The grey choristers were finishing their night-long mass. Cherry trees carpeted the earth with their blossom.

“We’ve got news,” the deacon said, checking his booming voice.

“The Poles begging for peace?”

“No such luck. We’ve caught a monk. Said he was in the Polish camp and was returning to the Vydubetsky Monastery today.”

“Is he a Uniate?”

“Of course.”

“Bring him here,” Nepran waved his hand, and turning to the cossacks who were stretching their legs, ordered: “Sink the boats — the deeper, the better!”

The monk was old, with short-cropped hair. He walked with a staid, sure step, as if he was in charge. His eyes were sharp and intent.

“Mister Otaman,” he spoke first. “I protest! This priest with a sabre for a cross jumped on me and won’t let me go . . .”

“Who are you?”

“A meek monk, sir.”

“Where did you go?”

“To the Polish camp with some merchants.”

“Why?”

“I can’t tell you — I’ve sworn secrecy before God and the Cross.”

* The Dnipro River.

“My, my, how pure we are,” the deacon boomed. “Sold your ancestral faith . . .”

“No I haven’t,” the monk interrupted him. “There is one God and many faiths. The Union is uniting them and reconciling their differences.”

“It is destroying our faith; for whoever gives his left hand, will inevitably stretch out his right!”

“Boys, he’s probably a Polish spy,” one of the men retorted.

“Throw the traitor into the water!”

“Tie a rock around his neck!”

The monk turned white as chalk. Fitfully champing his lips, he begged: “My dear people, I swear by the Lord, I’ve never been a spy. Here’s a holy cross!” he crossed himself in fear, like an Orthodox.

The deacon spat and walked away.

“Why did you see the noblemen?” Nepran asked.

“One way or the other, you won’t miss hell,” the deacon said, returning. “The only difference will be where you receive your suffering: here on earth, or on the other side with the dead . . .”

“Oh, Lord!” the monk lifted his bald head to the heavens, as if God had been sitting there above him puffing on a pipe, watching the monk’s loyalty being tested. “Holy Mary, and You too, crucified Jesus, forgive me this sin. I am alone and weak, and they are many . . .!”

“You can finish your prayers after you’ve told us the truth,” Nepran interjected. “We’ve very little time. And so has God.”

Crossing himself in Uniate fashion, the monk sighed and said mutely, as if not expecting to be heard:

“I was taking money to the army.”

“Whose?”

“The community’s.”

“How much?”

“Eighty thousand.”

The silence which suddenly descended was frightening, almost creepy.

“Who sent it?” asked the deacon.

“The bishop.”

“Where did you get it?”

“It was collected.”

“To help the nobility and Koniecpolski to pay the Germans?”

“No, no,” the monk grew frightened. “For schools! We collected it over several years. And now we’ve taken it to the camp as a present from the Uniates to the crown . . .”

“Judases!”

“Cains!”

“While we spill our blood for freedom, these loathsome degenerates stick knives in our backs!”

The band of cossacks seethed, incensed at such malicious apostasy.

“Let’s march on Kiev and cut out all the Uniates!”

“Drown the clerics and the bishop in the Slavuta!”

Nepran raised the *pernach* which Triasylo had entrusted to him before the mission:

“We can’t go on Kiev! There aren’t enough of us for that. Besides, tomorrow night we must be in Pereyaslav – such is Triasylo’s order.”

Grumbling and cursing under their breaths, the Sich Cossacks grew quiet. The monk sighed and wiped the cold sweat from his forehead and bald patch.

“And where is the money now?” Nepran asked, checking the incredulous thoughts now sweeping through his mind.

“With the treasurer, in an iron-clad chest,” the monk said hastily.

“Where is the treasurer? At the hetman’s side?”

“No, some distance away. Where the crown hetman first made camp after crossing the Dnipro and nearing Pereyaslav.”

“Is the chest full?”

“Almost! It’s filled with gold ducats and silver thalers . . .”

“And the guard? Who’s on guard?”

“Lord Liszczyński himself with the Golden Company – they’ve a large gold circle on their banner. The company is made up of blue-blood lords, all very famous men,” the monk loosened his tongue. “There’ll be a score of Kievan merchants there too, who brought the army provisions.”

Nepran glanced at the cossacks who had crowded around, ears pricked.

“Well then, brave gentlemen, shall we snatch the gentry’s chest?” he asked, already knowing what their answer would be.

“Yes, let’s get it! It’s our money, our blood and sweat!”

“Everyone agreed?”

“Yes!”

“Then have some breakfast and grab some sleep.”

Posting a guard all around, Nepran called a small council of his close friends and the eldest Sich Cossacks.

“What do we do with the Uniate monk?” the deacon asked.

“He could escape and tell the Poles everything,” Orendarenko said. And suggested: “Throw him in the Dniipro.”

“That’s not necessary,” Nepran said. “We’re cossacks, not bandits . . . Deacon, take him with you and entrust him to one of the boys. He might come in handy for showing us some path or leading us past the Polish sentries.”

“Careful you don’t repent later on,” Orendarenko scowled.

“Only those who commit sins repent. We’re granting life to a person, one of the Lord’s disciples,” Nepran smiled, and becoming serious, said to everyone: “Boys, here is an opportunity to leave the Polish army without a farthing. We know for certain where their treasury is, and we have enough men and the time to get it. But how? Without any more casualties . . .”

“Do it quickly,” said Tymish. “We’ll leave the horses in the ravine, sneak into the Polish camp and knife the guards in silence, then grab the money and flee. We’ll escape across the Dniipro and sit it out while the gentry go crazy looking for us.”

“Agreed,” several voices replied in unison.

“I agree too, only . . .” Nepran said. “After grabbing the gold we’ll take off straight for Pereyaslav.”

“What? Through the Polish camp?”

“Of course.”

“But we’ll all be killed there!”

“If we move alone. But what if Taras strikes at the same instant from the town?”

The silence that followed lasted a long time. Or perhaps it only seemed so to Nepran. At last Bodnia retorted:

“It suits me fine.”

“By God, there’ll be some fun!” the deacon added.

“But for whom?” Orendarenko piped up. “How will the hetman know when to attack? And we don’t yet know whether he’ll agree!”

“We’ll send him a message straight away,” said Nepran with relief, convinced the cossacks had accepted his reckless plan.

“What will you do if it doesn’t reach him?”

“We’ll send two, by two separate ways. If not both, then at least one will

reach him.”

“How will you know if the hetman agrees?” Tymish continued stubbornly.

“We’ll ask him to light two torches on the tower or the wall.”

Tymish grew silent. However when the question arose of who to send to the town, he was the first to volunteer.

“I’ll go, Petro, I’ll go!”

“All right . . . ” Nepran drawled, feeling uneasy because of Tymish’s eagerness. “However, I’d prefer you stay with us . . . I think it might be better to send one of the less experienced men,” he added more resolutely. “Bodnia and also . . . Yurko, say.”

“Send me, I know every bush around here!” Tymish called out, jumping to his feet.

“Then God Himself wills you to stay behind to help our group enter the camp undetected,” the deacon said.

Tymish threw him an angry glare and sat down again, downcast.

“We’ll leave towards evening. But now it’s time to sleep!” the *sotnyk* said, rising. “Bodnia, find Yurko . . . Hold on, maybe it’ll be better if you go in twos. Take Ivas with you and get one of the older men to go with Yurko.”

“I’m off!” said Mykola and raced off so fast that the earth hummed beneath him.

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Night, the cossacks’ mother, was so generous that Nepran’s band almost reached the gentry’s camp without incident. Leaving his band in the ravine, Nepran quietly rode out onto a gently-sloping sandy hill, sparsely covered with pines, and stopped the horse on the crest, from where he could have seen, were it not for the darkness, both the Polish camp and Pereyaslav. The night was damp with blossom and fresh greenery. There was not a star nor a flame. It was as if the whole plain was desolate. In fact tens of thousands of people were living on it at this moment in fear and anxiety. And no one knew which of them would have to drink their last bitter cup, and who would evade death. The aristocratic Golden Company was asleep, Lord Liszczyński was sleeping soundly, and the traitorous merchants too. Meanwhile, Cossack Nepran had

sealed their fate . . .

No matter how hard he strained his eyes into the darkness, Nepran could not see the two awaited lights. Heavy thoughts crept into his soul. Could it be his falcons had not made Pereyaslav, not asked the hetman for help? He imagined the worst, seeing the gentry intercepting the cossacks on open ground . . . What should they do, if Taras did not reply by the time the second roosters crowed? Return to the forest for the day, or maybe attack alone, taking the treasure and then fleeing across the Dnipro like Tatars, holding on to their horses' tails?

He heard the crackle of dry pine needles and the thud of heavy feet — someone was riding up, unable to wait for the *sotnyk* any longer.

“Well, how are things?” the deacon whispered, stopping the horse on Nepran’s left. “Are the nobles asleep?”

“Yes.”

“And Pereyaslav?”

“It’s dozing too.”

“Taras not giving the sign?”

“Can’t see anything . . . We’ll wait till the second roosters crow.”

“Perhaps there aren’t any more left — maybe the nobles have eaten them all?”

“The first ones crowed.”

“True . . . Look Nepran, the moon!” the deacon whispered.

The *sotnyk* raised his lowered head and saw a light. Was it a torch or really the moon?

Another light appeared nearby.

“Taras! It’s Taras, deacon!” Nepran was overjoyed. He looked again to make sure the fiery sign in the sky wasn’t a mirage, then hooted twice and pressed the horse’s sides.

They approached cautiously, warily, sending scouts ahead to dispose of the guards without any commotion. The monk went with them: he knew where the guards were posted, where the entrance to the camp was, and even the password, although it was from the previous day.

The second roosters were crowing when the scouts returned and reported that the enemy was asleep and wide open to attack.

Nepran hooted, and the cossacks unsheathed their sabres. The darkness suddenly seemed thinner, and one could at least distinguish a bush from a man.

The moon broke through the cover of clouds, showering the road, the horsemen and the gentle slopes covered in hawthorn with its cold light, and again dived behind a cloud . . .

It would be a fine day and a bright sun would rise at dawn!

Restraining the ardent horses who sensed an approaching battle and reared to speed the riders along like the wind, the Sich Cossacks approached the camp. Soon those in front spied the sandy embankments, the shafts of several cannons, heavy carts and tents . . .

The deacon crossed himself with his sabre and rolled up the sleeve of his old robe so it wouldn't hamper him in battle. Tymish sat sullen and bristling, still brooding because his plan, which he considered to be the best, had been rejected. How the others felt Nepran had no idea, for he saw only the figures which moved silently behind him in the thinning dawn darkness. The scouts led the way and their backs swam before him like swirling smoke. The monk had been set free and had probably covered some three versts by now . . .

The gates were open. Actually, instead of gates a deep narrow cutting ran into the camp and was closed off with an iron-clad cart. Now the cart stood far to one side.

Checking his desire to give free reign to his horse and sabre, the *sotnyk* passed the rampart and headed into the depths of the fortification, straight for the tent pointed out by the boys who had been here with the monk. The whole band silently poured in after him, surrounding the aristocratic company in a circle of death . . .

Suddenly not far ahead of him Nepran saw someone in white dash off into the night, screaming. Squeezing his sabre harder, the *sotnyk* let his horse go off at a gallop, and was followed by the whole band of cossacks. A minute later the serene sleepy camp was transformed into a hell of screams, groans, clanking of weapons, neighing of horses and the thunder of swift hooves!

Cutting their way through the group of Polish knights who were covering the tent where the treasury was located, Nepran, the deacon, and a third of the Sich Cossacks moved to breach their ranks . . . Fighting was raging everywhere now, tightening the circle around the treasurer's tent. One of the cossacks captured the banner with the gold circle sumptuously embroidered in gold, raised it high above the fighting and before the eyes of the proud noblemen, swiftly chopped it in half with his sabre. Steel crashed against steel in a shower of sparks, the dead fell like sheafs of wheat, horses reared, horrified by the

fire and blood. Brother Slavs were fighting to the death — the Polish scythe had struck a rock.

The last nobleman, probably the treasurer himself, greeted Nepran with gun-fire as soon as he jumped from his horse and pulled back the curtain guarding the entrance to the tent. The *sotnyk* dashed to one side, and immediately another shot rang out. Nepran reached for his pistol and standing opposite the entrance, fired. Then he cut away the curtain with his sabre and dived into the cloud of smoke swirling about the entrance. A candle flickered inside, as if trembling in fright. The nobleman lay on the chest, clutching it even in death.

The deacon, who rushed in after Nepran, dragged the treasurer off and raised the iron-clad lid — gold glistened blood-red from within.

“We’ll be able to arm another five thousand rebels with this money!” he roared, extinguishing the candle. “And Lord Stanislaw Koniecpolski will burst with anger!”

Nepran strained his ears and heard a distant rumble.

“What’s that?” the deacon asked.

“Triasylo coming to our assistance.”

It was time to leave. Who knew how the tide would turn, to whom fate would be kind.

Leaving the tent, Nepran ordered several of the nearest Zaporozhians to take the chest of gold, and mounted his horse.

“Deacon!” he boomed, imitating the holy man’s bass. “We’re off to meet the hetman! Send the chest off after me, and take fifty men and follow it, so the nobility doesn’t snatch our present. Ahead, brave gentlemen!”

Holding his sabre at the ready, he charged towards the east which was already glistening with the newly-born day.

The Polish camp seemed deserted. Frightened by the sudden attack, the troops and noblemen’s domestics raced off in all directions, forsaking the carts and tents.

“Petro!” Tymish caught up to Nepran. “Let’s deplete the aristocrats’ wealth a bit more! There are so many carpets here, reams of silk and woollen cloth!”

“Forward, forward, Tymish!” Nepran disagreed. “Or the Poles will come to their senses and attack us from all sides at once. You know what happens to those who chase two hares at the same time.”

“We’ll be swift.”

“No! See there . . .!”

Up ahead among the carts, still bathed in grey twilight, some solitary figures appeared, and then a crowd of noblemen.

Nepran gave an owl hoot and rose in his saddle to check if the cossacks were keeping up with him, then hugging his horse’s mane, he rushed at the enemy.

The Poles quickly rushed back, then scurried off in opposite directions, taking cover behind the carts.

The mounted cossack force swept the bravest out of the way and without stopping, charged ahead, and cut into the growing numbers of troops, noblemen and mercenaries.

The terror was so great that the Polish army darted about the camp like a mob of wild horses and even the crown hetman was powerless to force his troops to stop the onslaught of the peasants.

A cloud of dust rose ahead of them, they heard the rumble of hooves and the sound of shots being fired — cavalry was coming towards them. Was it the Poles or the cossacks?

The minutes dragged on, the horses seemed to be hardly moving, his hand froze to his sabre . . .

The sun hurled its rays into the sky, and in their light Nepran saw Bodnia! Then Yurko, Ivas and even . . . bless the Lord, Taras Triasylo himself!

“Good health to you, father!” Nepran called out happily, halting his brown steed.

“Did you get the treasure?”

“Of course!”

Taras took off his hat and wiped the sweat away with it.

“Now back into the town we go,” he swung his horse around.

“Maybe we could massacre the gentry now?”

“No. There aren’t enough men.”

Inflamed by their successful impetuous attack, the elders turned their horses around too, stopping and turning back the regiments which had left the town with Triasylo.

Nepran fell behind the hetman to check if the booty was safe. Zaporozhians galloped past him, rejoicing that such a good deed had been accomplished. Petro let them pass, ordering them to return to the city as fast

as possible. Finally he rode up alongside the cossacks carrying the heavy, awkward chest.

“Is it intact?”

“Riding like a lady, the damned thing, our arms are completely numb,” the men grumbled good-naturedly.

“Where’s the deacon?”

“He was here till a moment ago, but then he spied some Catholic priest friend of his and raced off to catch him.”

Behind them they heard shots and muffled screams.

“Boys!” Nepran galloped up to the cossacks bringing up the rear. “Where’s the deacon?”

“He’s been killed . . .”

“Why did you leave him alone?” he asked through his teeth. “Logheads!”

“He wouldn’t let us. Told us to guard the chest . . .”

Mykola and several other men from Nepran’s band rode up.

Polish soldiers on foot and horseback appeared here and there. The helmet of some renown knight glistened gold in the sunlight. To the left mercenaries were preparing to charge . . .

“Rifles in hands, boys!” Nepran ordered, unslinging his own musket.

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In Pereyaslav they were greeted by cheering crowds. Rumours of the treasure had reached the town faster than the chest full of money. Cossacks and townfolk were gathered on the walls and towers. They shouted ‘hooray’ and tossed their hats into the air. The size of the chest grew and grew, until it became so big that it could hardly fit onto two carts — before the army’s very eyes their exploit had become a fairy-tale.

Overjoyed, Taras Triasylo invited Nepran and his whole band into the hetman’s yard. Orderlies and cooks pounded the steps leading into the cellar, and the mead flowed in rivers.

Downing several chalices with the boys, and congratulating them on their victory, Triasylo took Petro by the arm.

“I want to hear,” he said amicably, “how you destroyed the crossing . . .”

They entered his room and sat at the same table at which three days

earlier they had decided to send a detachment to Kiev. Taras moved the chalices closer and poured some malmsey.

“Good work! If only I had a hundred falcons like you . . .!” Half closing his eyes, he knitted his grey eyebrows: “Why are you sad?”

“My comrade was killed in the fighting.”

“Mykola Bodnia?”

“No. He’s alive. The deacon . . .”

“Few of us will live to see victory and freedom,” the hetman said sadly. “This is a great thing we have embarked upon. We’ve started it, and others will finish it. For us there is the fighting, and the happiness of battle and glory, and for them there will be the fruits, and memories of us who defied death and broke the chains of slavery.”

“A pity he died so senselessly . . .”

“Death is never rational, brother.”

“What about in battle, for one’s native land?”

“That is necessary, sacrificial death.”

Taras grew silent, engrossed in thought, then, suddenly raising his eyebrows, he asked:

“Did you lose many boys on the crossing?”

“Not one.”

The old man was radiant with joy.

“And you burn’t everything?”

“To the last stick.”

The hetman raised his chalice, knocked it lightly against Nepran’s, and nodded:

“To your health!”

Slowly emptying it, he casually wiped his moustache with his sleeve and said, leaning back in his chair:

“They say the boats burned so fiercely, that it looked as if the whole of Kiev was ablaze. The news shook the Poles yesterday; and the Registered Cossacks fled the camp like rats from a sinking galley.”

“Because they were scorched.”

“My word!” the hetman cheered up. “And today things went well too!” he added, slapping his palm against the table. “Lord Koniecpolski will have something to scratch his head about!”

“If you had brought out more men, we might have . . .” Nepran began

timidly.

"If, if!" the hetman sat up. "I could hardly scratch those together. The elders are still contemplating how to sell our heads at a profit!"

"Then let's call a council and expose their dishonourable intentions!"

Pacing up and down the room, Triasylo grumbled something under his breath. He stopped and retorted:

"It's too late. The peasants are uneasy."

"Why?"

"The fields aren't sown yet. The Polish troops are destroying the villages . . . And we're stuck on this strip of land, hemmed in from all sides . . ."

"Father," the *sotnyk* said, rising. "Enough of looking over our shoulders. It's time to fight. Let's all attack at once, while the Polish army and noblemen are without ferries and money!"

"What's the matter, are you conspiring with Bohdan?" the hetman asked angrily.

"No. I'm speaking my mind."

"Every day he harps on the same thing – battle, battle . . ."

Taras filled his chalice and drank it down in silence. He stood still for a long time, his gaze fixed on a pale flickering oil lamp. Then he sighed and said:

"Fine. Tomorrow we'll summon all the colonels and elders . . . Perhaps it is time . . . You're clever, you know that!" he quipped, smiling. "A real colonel . . ."

"Father," the *sotnyk* screwed up his eyes. "Who was it who told me last year that I didn't even deserve to be a *kurin* otaman?"

"You've changed, Petro, matured," the hetman said, resting his hands on his hips. "Misfortune is the best teacher!"

"What misfortune are you talking about?" Bohdan asked, entering.

"This *sotnyk* here is complaining that he didn't borrow enough money from Koniecpolski!"

"Well I'll be!" Khmelnitsky answered gaily. "They're still counting, and there's already five hundred . . ."

"Ducats?"

"No father. Thousands."

"Good. By God, that's good, brothers . . .!"

Yurko ran into the room. Without closing the door, he caught his breath

and whispered:

“Nepran . . . Mister Sotnyk . . . the . . . the deacon’s . . . out there!”

“Where?”

“On the rampart . . . in the Polish camp . . .”

Nepran rushed from the house. Yurko caught up to him in the street.

“Is he alive?”

“Yes. They’re torturing him . . .”

He still didn’t know what he would do, how he would save or free his friend. His thoughts swirled, as he tried to remember what had happened in the fields on the other side of the Alta River. He chastised himself for leaving his brother in the lurch during battle, for frivolously believing the words of those who claimed to have seen him die. Why could he hear shots then? Surely they weren’t shooting a dead man? He was alive, he was fighting — alone against hundreds, thousands . . .”

He tugged at his choking collar and raced up onto the rampart. There were so many people on the towers and walls, that it looked as if the Poles were storming the city. Silently people let him pass, and his heart grew cold at the sight he beheld. The deacon was impaled on a stake! The wind tore at his vestments and tousled his black beard and lion’s mane . . . He raised his heavy drooping head and boomed in his thunderous voice:

“Nepran, can you hear me?”

“I hear you!” Petro called out, rising above the bastion.

“Did you lose the chest?”

“No, no! It arrived safely.”

“Glory to God!”

He licked his cracked lips, threw a long sad look at the calm, clear Alta, so close and yet so far, and which he would never touch again, and roared:

“Petro, forgive me for getting into this pretty mess! I saw a bald devil with a cross on his chest. I thought I’d catch him and ask him where the nobleman’s soul can be found these days — in his chest or his heels?!”

A nobleman rushed up to the stake and speared the deacon. A shot was fired from the tower. Another and another followed. But it was no use — the bullets fell short of the camp.

“Thanks, you son of a bitch,” the deacon said with a smile. “You scratched me valiantly. God willing, you’ll be scratched the same way in the other world! Listen, you mangy cyclops, tell your hetman, all the nobles

and the king, and all the Jesuits, that you are all Pilates who have crucified our nation, and that the deacon spits on you!”

He gritted his teeth, fighting for every moment of his life. Again he raised his head and yelled hoarsely:

“Our nation will still rise from the dead!”

The same nobleman ran out from behind the rampart and wielding the spear like a stick, hit the deacon over the head. Blood covered the deacon’s face . . .

A heavy cannon thundered on the tower. The cannon-ball cut mercilessly into a pack of Polish troops. Leaving their dead behind, they retreated into the depths of the camp.

“Nepran, let’s hurry out and bring him back,” Bodnia said.

“It’s too late,” Petro replied, without taking his eyes off the deacon. “He won’t tread primrose any more . . . They set him up out there on purpose. The cannons are silent, but the cannoneers are in readiness . . .”

“Hey, Mister Siryk!” they heard the deacon’s voice again. “You did a good job on those Polish pumpkinheads . . . Fulfill my last wish, brother . . . Let me die honourably too. Don’t begrudge me a cannon-ball, as I didn’t begrudge you wine and God’s Word . . .!”

Turning around, Nepran met with Siryk’s eyes. The old cannoneer stood with arms spread wide apart in confusion.

“Why are you dallying, Siryk?” the deacon asked sorrowfully. “My time has come, I have suffered enough . . . Fire away, father!”

Siryk loaded the cannon, took careful aim, crossed himself and took the wick in his hand.

“Forgive me . . .”

“Farewell boys!”

Nepran closed his eyes.

The tower shuddered with a thunderous explosion.

After the black smoke had dispersed and the Alta and the Polish camp became visible again, everyone on the walls took off their hats.

The old cannoneer burst into tears.



Chapter XIII





This glorious battle began at daybreak. That night Triasylo had withdrawn his regiments from the fortress and positioned them on the left bank of the Alta, not in front of the city, but off to one side, threatening the Poles from the north. Noticing this manouvre, the crown hetman had to reorganise his army, moving the cannons to that flank. An experienced soldier, he did everything quickly and correctly. True, now the city was to his side, almost behind him . . . This was dangerous and he had to be on his guard. But then who left a fortress for a decisive battle without taking everyone who could be spared? And the cossacks had evidently decided to try their luck.

The Poles waited; they did not boast, and avoided charging into battle first: lately their noble arrogance had waned. And with good reason! During the entire war with the Swedes, which had finished last year, less noblemen and soldiers had died than here on this damned field. There was no end in sight to this frightful slaughter!

Taras was in no hurry either. Wits and humorists waded across the shallow, sluggish river separating the two enemy forces, and according to old custom, lured the Poles into battle.

Nepran saw everything spread out before him and could not stand still. Always he had spearheaded the attack, been in the thick of the fighting, and here, probably for the first time in his life, he was kept in the background. Had he been alone, he would have left this damned burrow and mounted his brown steed. But he couldn't leave his regiment. The regiment had to stay in the city and not reveal its presence until a solitary barn far away, between the Alta and Trubizh Rivers, caught alight.

The tower where he stood with his blood brother and the kurin otamans (theirs was a Sich cavalry regiment) was high and lofty, and from here he could

see Taras forming his army, and the Polish camp.

“Why is he delaying?” Mykola Bodnia grew impatient, watching the two stationary armies.

“Probably waiting, biding his time . . .” one of the kurin otamans responded.

“Why?”

“So the Poles leave their camp and cross the river.”

“Fat chance! Can’t he see their knees trembling with fright as it is.”

“He’s waiting for the sun,” said Nepran.

“Why does he need it?” Bodnia shrugged his shoulders. “It’s easy to see who’s friend and who’s foe.”

“The sun will blind their eyes.”

“By God, that’s true!” the kurin otaman who was talking with Mykola exclaimed. “We attacked the Turks the same way in the Budzhak Steppe once.”

He remembered a naval expedition, some half-forgotten battle under Sahaidachny.

Meanwhile the sun rose from the forest like a fire-bird, generously scattering golden feathers of sunshine over everything, and the whole plain suddenly came alive. The trumpets sounded. The army became agitated, like a field of rye before a storm. And the cossacks moved forward. A hundred cannons roared. The earth trembled with the marching of thousands of feet. It looked as if two mighty storms had collided, mingling and shaking the ground, the sky and the world.

“Go down and get ready,” Nepran ordered the chiefs who were shuffling from foot to foot.

Left on his own, he became engrossed in the flashes and noise of battle, looking into the distance, praying for the signal to appear, allowing him to break out into the open field, to bare his glistening sabre and cut into the enemy lines.

Mykola came running.

“Petro, the cossacks are incensed. They’re shouting that it’s treason, and want to open the gate and rush to the hetman’s aid!”

Nepran gave Mykola his colonel’s baton.

“Go and pacify them. Tell them it won’t be long now, that we must obey Triasylo’s orders.”

In the minutes while he was talking to his blood brother alarming changes had taken place on the battlefield. The fighting had crossed to the left bank of the Alta, where hussar wings flashed in the sunlight. From the depths of the camp, where the crown hetman's tent stood, the select detachment of men which had been guarding Koniecpolski the previous week, galloped off to join the hussars.

And just then smoke rose from the barn!

Nepran raced down to join his regiment.

Sabres flashed. The gate shuddered, creaked and opened. Row after row, kurin after kurin, Nepran's regiment poured across the Alta. The Poles retreated, leaving behind carts and cannons. The Sich Cossacks broke into the camp close on their heels, formed into a strong wide line, and shouting 'Hurrah!', rushed the enemy.

Nepran spearheaded the attack. On his right, half a horselength behind him, was Mykola. Followed by Yurko, Ivas, Tymish and all the heroic brothers, with whom he had travelled the paths of war, grief and glory. The earth shook. The wind tore off their pointed hats, ruffled the cossacks' hair and whistled in their ears. The dust rose in a cloud behind the cossacks, shielding the size of the force which had emerged from the city.

Squeezed in from both sides, the Polish army and nobles had rushed towards the forest, but the crown hetman blocked their retreat, and beheading the first three riders, restored the Poles their confidence. Somehow managing to re-establish a shaky order, he sent Laszcz a thousand of his best cavalry and ordered him to cover the camp from the south.

Having disrupted two companies of infantry, the Sich Cossacks met with these hussars. The two lines clashed fiercely. Thousands of steely flashes of lightning flashed in the sun, sowing death and destruction. Horses neighed, warriors shouted hoarsely, steel rang, blood poured . . .

Soon the din subsided, and having dealt with a nobleman who came flying at him like a rooster, Nepran had time to look around for his blood brother. Mykola was fighting beside him, using his sabre slowly and easily, while his adversary twisted about like a snake, hiding behind the grey ribbon of his sabre.

Yurko and Ivas fought shoulder to shoulder. It was a pleasure to watch how recklessly and joyously these two falcons flew about the battlefield. The cossack race had not become extinct, the Ukrainian land had not been

impoverished!

And suddenly Nepran saw the man he had so longed to meet.

“Mykola, there’s that degenerate!” he showed Bodnia, who had meanwhile sent a second hussar to carry firewood in hell.

“Who?” the Cherkasian asked, not recognising the figure.

“Smielo Laszcz.”

Mykola let out a whistle. His bay horse reared up, and he raced off after his blood brother.

Without taking his eyes from the plush helmet of the mounted guard and hardly noticing those who got in his way, Nepran chopped his way towards him. At last two sharp glances crossed like two knives, and the king’s guard rode towards him. With bushy eyebrows, protruding cheek bones and heavy jaw he was a real butcher!

They drew together, sabre crashed against sabre, and spun around in a frightful tangle. The horses snorted, bit, shedding pink froth, steel fought steel.

The nobleman fought in silence, gritting his uneven yellow teeth. When Nepran dexterously swung out and nearly knocked the sabre from the Pole’s hand, the king’s guard growled some profanity, flashed his cold savage eyes, which now showed, apart from contempt and arrogance, a glimmer of fear.

“Find it easier with women and children?” Nepran asked, striking another blow.

“I’ll burn all of Rus! Grind everything into the dust . . .!” the guard hissed through his teeth.

“You might burst with malice yet, sir, and then Rzecz Pospolita will reek from sea to sea.”

“Leave my fatherland alone, you churl!” Laszcz struck Nepran with all his might.

Nepran fought off the blow. He reared his horse and struck a back-handed blow. The nobleman was unable to cover himself in time and with a thin ring the sabre immediately sent the bright gilded helmet flying to the ground. Red luxuriant locks spilled out over the Pole’s head.

“That was the flower,” Nepran said, “and now come the berries. . .!” and he struck again with his sabre.

Whether the horse had lunged, or whether simply Laszcz’s fate had been kind to him, this blow struck the Pole’s armour.

“Shoot the churl!” the royal guard hollered, turning, and took to his heels.

Several rifles fired together. Nepran’s horse tripped, stood still a moment and fell on its side, almost squashing its rider. Five hussars immediately rushed at the easy prey, but Mykola and his friends greeted them with sabres, while Sirychenko caught a hussar’s horse and brought it up to the colonel.

The battle kept flaring up and dying away like a fire being fed with brushwood. Dead hussars and cossacks lay intermingled, the wounded lay bleeding, asking the healthy for help . . .

The sun burned unbearably hot from high up in the sky. Arms ached; even the sabres had become blunt and notched. There seemed no end in sight to this merciless carnage, and it looked as if everyone would fall dead here and there would be no one left to say ‘I won!’.

At midday the crown hetman sent fresh detachments against the Zaporozhian Cossacks who had struck from Pereyaslav and routed the crown guard’s hussars.

Nepran’s regiment flinched and slowly began to retreat. No one knew what was happening on the other side of the camp, where Triasylo was fighting. But here they were powerless — there were no reinforcements, no respite. In vain Nepran charged from one end of the battlefield to the other, begging, shaming, threatening. The cossacks became so indifferent, so tired, that they longed for only one thing — to find water and quench their thirst. The Poles were in no hurry either to quash Nepran’s regiment or to brush it aside. And this caused most alarm. The Poles were probably summoning their strength to strike at the section of the army being commanded by Taras Triasylo . . . Or perhaps they were already being taken for dead?

“Gentlemen, friends, brothers!” Nepran yelled. “Enough of disgracing cossack honour! Where was it ever heard that Zaporozhians are afraid of death?”

He turned his horse and charged at the enemy alone. He was followed by Yurko, Ivas, Mykola. Turning around to see his exhausted regiment one last time, he stopped his horse, unable to believe his eyes. Nearby, on a stallion as white as the blossom of the birdcherry, appeared a wonder-girl. Her plait was like flax, her blouse brightly embroidered . . . It was Uliana! God, how and when had she appeared on the battlefield?

Flashing her sabre in the sunshine, she called out and charged at the enemy.

Nepran felt the exhaustion leave him, his heavy dropping shoulders straightened.

“For freedom!” he yelled joyously.

In answer he heard the well-known cossack whoop. The utterly exhausted horses dug their hooves into the ground, as if they had not been carrying their riders about all day.

Breaking their formidable ranks, the hussars bunched up into disorderly groups. Then they broke into a fast retreat. But it was too late. The battle erupted. Cossack sabres descended like God’s wrath, and neither the armour nor the helmets saved the Poles.

Nepran was unable to fight his way through to Siryk’s daughter. She appeared here and there, chopping away no worse than any of the Sich brethren.

“Did you see Uliana?” he called out to his blood brother, who was fighting at his left side.

“Where, where is she?”

“Up till now she was here with us!” said Petro, seeking the girl in the thick of the fighting. “Unless it was a . . .”

“Nepran!” Mykola suddenly screamed and threw him down.

Petro hugged his horse’s mane and heard an enemy bullet trill over him. He grabbed his pistol and sent a present to the aristocrat who had fired the shot. The fellow reeled. Straightening, Nepran saw that Bodnia had fallen from his horse. Leaping to the ground, Petro raced up to his blood brother and turned him over, face to the sky. Mykola was pale, the shirt on his chest was covered in blood.

“Farewell . . .” he opened his fading, clouded eyes. “I also love . . . loved her . . .”

“That bullet was mine!” Nepran yelled, unable to hide his despair. “Why did you . . . ?”

Mykola breathed in and grew silent . . .

Fighting back the tears which were flooding his eyes, Nepran remembered the place, and mounting his horse, galloped off to catch up to the cossacks who were crowding the enemy. The Poles were retreating, hardly able to withstand the Zaporozhians’ precipitous attack.

He sought revenge! Tears choked his throat, his hand clutched his sabre. Well, beware your terrible judgement and all the suffering of hell!

He charged into the fiercest fighting. And stopped — trumpets blared peace across the fields.

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As soon as the battle had died down, Nepran found Mykola, brought his cold body into the city and buried him in the cemetery near the church. He stood in sorrowful silence beside his blood brother's grave, and after wiping away his miserly cossack tears, went to look for Uliana. She had been in battle, fighting the Poles, urging the exhausted Sich Cossacks on, but had disappeared after the fighting . . .

The city was buzzing like a beehive. The crown hetman himself had begged for peace. It was he who had signalled the assent and had now sent envoys to ask the cossack hetman to meet him as a brother. He had not lost the battle, but he hadn't won it either, having lost thousands of his soldiers and all his cannons. The cossack army was rejoicing. This was victory already! Since Nalyvaiko no one had given the haughty Poles such a beating. Now they would be like chickens and would agree to every cossack demand.

However, despite all this, Nepran's heart was heavy. He couldn't accept that Mykola had died, that his trusty friend would no longer be at his side. And Uliana . . . Where had she appeared from and where did she go? If he had not seen the girl with his own eyes, he might have thought it was a hallucination . . . But this 'victory' irritated him most. The Poles were begging for peace and agreement. They would agree to anything while they were trapped. This wasn't a feud or a fight. This was war! Real, irreconcilable war, the goal of which was liberation and demarcation. Where there was no lasting equality, there could be no peace!

In a quiet corner near the cathedral he met Yurko. Yurko raced up, out of breath.

"Mister Colonel, the hetman's asking for you!"

"What's up?"

"I'm not sure. Probably because of the envoys sent by the crown hetman. Taras told them to go to hell, but the Registered Cossacks stopped them and raised a commotion."

Nepran hurried off. Here was the eternal evil of Ukraine — quarrels, the

attempts of each person to do only as he himself pleased! And enemies profited from this. Shame, disgrace! Even sheep stayed close together. And these were people. Lord, can't you see our trouble? Take mercy on us and send us unity! We have enough bravery for two nations.

So many people had gathered around the hetman's residence, that it was almost impossible to squeeze through. The muffled buzz of voices prevailed as though this was a market-place. Here and there fights broke out, there was yelling – the hothead cossacks couldn't talk calmly. More and more people rolled up, hundreds, some injured in battle, asking what all the rumpus was about.

Nepran saw Orendarenko, who met the new arrivals and tried to convince each of the value of peace and the benefits which could be drawn from Koniecpolski.

"Beating your own drum again?" Nepran boiled over. "Afraid you'll be left without a whip and the gentry's benevolence?"

"Why, can't I express my own thoughts?" Tymish frowned.

"Sure you can. Tongues have no bones. But . . ."

"What?"

"You must have some pride too! To give the Poles a good beating, and then to go to them the next day begging alms?"

"Not alms, but rights and freedoms, and not ask, but demand!"

"Here is the only language with which we can convince those cruel foreigners to get the hell out of here!" Nepran said, unsheathing his sharp sabre.

"They've received reinforcements."

"When?"

"An hour ago."

"But we burned all the boats and ferries!"

"They made new ones."

"How many were there?"

"Probably two thousand."

"Two isn't twenty . . ."

"Quiet! Triasylo's come out!"

Slowly the maidan grew silent, ready to hear the hetman's words.

Taras slid his mace under his belt, tugged at his moustache, and raising his bushy grey eyebrows, said sharply, without the usual words of greeting used on

such occasions:

“Do you want me to make peace with Poland? You want me to go to the gentry, and bowing low, ask for freedoms?” He ran his eyes over the crowd and proudly tossed his grey eagle head. “I’m no beggar, nor a subordinate. I’m a Sich Cossack and a hetman of the Zaporozhian Army! As long as the enemy continues to prowl our God-given land, land on which our forefathers lived and died, there can be no peace. Peace is not concluded between master and slave, but between two leaders or two states. We still have to fight for our state, to secure it in battle, paying for it in blood, suffering and life itself . . .”

“The Poles are frightened now, they’ll agree to anything!” Colonel Ivan Kulaha called out, standing on the porch to the hetman’s right, pouring the proverbial oil into the fire.

“Will they grant us complete freedom?” Taras asked.

“I don’t know. Probably not. But they should, they must, increase the number of Registered Cossacks!”

“And forgive us our disobedience!”

“They’ll let us return to our homes!”

Shouts erupted from all corners of the maidan, and everywhere one looked there were only peasants and Registered Cossacks.

“Where are the Zaporozhian Cossacks, Yurko?” Nepran asked in despair.

“Taras sensed disaster and left them in the camp on the Trubizh River.”

“Well then, brave gentlemen,” the hetman said bitterly. “I see our fruit of liberation hasn’t matured enough yet . . . Go then and ask. Perhaps Mister Konieczpolski will take pity on you.”

He turned away, looked sorrowfully at the raspberry-red sky, the colour of their flag, where the hot summer sun had set behind the blue horizon, and went back inside the house.

Orendarenko suddenly appeared on the porch.

“Who shall we send to Konieczpolski?” he shouted.

“You!”

“Kulaha!”

“Kolenko!”

“Petro Nepran!”

“Khmel . . .!”

The maidan became alive. Jokes and laughter filled the air. Someone even broke into song . . . They were like children, these cossacks and peasants, who

had been forced to rebel because of the oppression of the Poles, and now sought peace at any price.

In the dark Nepran went to see the hetman. Having sent everyone away, Taras had turned to the bottle.

“What do you want?” he asked angrily.

“The ambassadors are going to the Polish camp in the morning.”

“I know.”

Taras poured himself another chalice and emptied it. He was obviously trying to make himself drunk, but the strong cossack liquor had no effect on him, and this made him angry.

“Father,” Nepran asked, “perhaps Khmel and I shouldn’t go . . .?”

“No, you should,” the hetman fell back in his chair. “You are still young, you will live a long time. Go, listen and watch the judases sell freedom and their native land! There will still be battles, great anger, suffering and rivers of blood will flow, for neither the gentry, not even God Himself will take pity on us and free our country, allowing us to live as we wish. Look closely, for you’ll still have to weed our fields in the future. Without purity, unity and a unanimous desire for freedom we shall not see victory. Nurture the spirit, uphold the sacred flame of longing, respect the faith of our forefathers, and don’t stoop so low that your children will forget their origin, and their language and customs. Without this we shall die. A nation dies when its spirit dies.”

He had another drink, wiped his lips and moved a chalice across to his visitor. Nepran did not take it.

“You’re singing a sad lament, father,” he said, facing the hetman. “Almost as if you were contemplating leaving us . . .”

“I’m old and worn out,” the hetman answered sadly. “This was probably my last flight . . . Taras’ wings have broken, my brother . . .”

“Lies! Since when has a cossack given in to misfortune? We’ll show them. We’ll raise a bigger army and the whole of Ukraine will be behind us!”

“I believe you. It will happen, it must happen. Such a nation can’t live as servants forever.”

“We’ll strike again!” said Nepran.

Triasylo forced a smile, groaned as he straightened his broad shoulders, and suddenly wilted.

“You think I will get up again?” he said sadly after a while and tugged at

his long, drooping moustache.

“Father, let Koniecpolski grieve! He came galloping here on a stallion, but he’ll crawl back on all fours. They say he prays every night to the Most Holy Young Lady to bring him out alive.”

“It makes it no easier for me. I can feel it in my bones, that before the roosters crow again, I’ll be kissed and renounced three times, like Christ . . .”

“Don’t worry,” Nepran said. “My regiment won’t let anyone wrong you.”

“Where is it?”

“Here, around the town.”

Taras became pensive.

“Take my regiment, the treasury and everything else, and move to the camp with the Zaporozhian Cossacks,” Nepran said.

The hetman stabbed him with an evil glance:

“Run away?”

“Yes. It’s better to run away intelligently than to die a stupid death.”

Taras said nothing, tugging angrily at his moustache, then raised his cold, wise eyes and said quietly:

“All right. I’ll take fifty men. The rest can stay here till the morning. Make sure Kulaha and his boys don’t surrender the town to the Poles during the night.”

He rose, slid his mace under his belt and called for the orderly.

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Clouds had blown in during the night and the morning was grey and overcast. The wind dispersed the smoke of countless fires and the smell of fried onion and bacon. The dead were being buried in the fields, and sorrowful singing drifted across the walls.

After breakfast the cossack ambassadors set off for the Polish camp. They rode fine horses. Everyone was dressed in clean, new, expensive clothes. They had searched half of Pereyaslav to find a rich outfit for each man, for they didn’t want the enemy to laugh at their plain uniforms.

On the other side of the Alta they were met by Koniecpolski’s emissaries, who led them through hundreds of murderous stares into the depths of the camp, where behind two rows of strong iron-clad carts stood the tents of the

crown hetman and the noblemen who were with him.

“His Illustrious Majesty has become very cautious,” Nepran said to Khmelnitsky.

“Your work, Petro,” Khmel smiled. “That dark night has become impressed in their memory!”

“They’d rejoice at their visitor, were they to recognise him.”

“Like a dog at a cudgel!”

Orendarenko, who was riding up front with Kulaha, threw them a devil’s stare — such a pompous entourage, such important ambassadors, and these bandits were mocking Mister Koniecpolski himself.

“Eh, Tymish, why are you all puffed up like an owl on a beam?” Nepran asked.

“He’s going visiting,” Bohdan replied instead. “His Illustrious Majesty might let him kiss his hand or allow him to lick his boots . . .”

Tymish remained silent, as if he hadn’t heard, and only the back of his neck grew crimson with anger.

They entered the hetman’s encampment. Beside the hetman’s tent, on either side of the entrance, stood two soldiers holding their sabres at the ready. Only the curious (those whose haughtiness allowed them!) watched the arrival of the ambassadors from the churls and bandits from afar. There was silence. The horses could be heard biting on their bits and snorting.

After the cossack ambassadors had dismounted and given their horses to the hetman’s servants, a sumptuously-dressed moustached nobleman appeared.

“Gentlemen,” he said warmly. “His Majesty is waiting for you.”

The first person Nepran saw when he entered was Smielo Laszcz. The fellow recognised his ‘godfather’ too and drew his sabre. Laszcz was restrained.

The crown hetman rose from his chair and replied to the ambassadors’ greeting with a slight bow. He was still quite young, tall, stately, with a resolute, authoritative gaze.

“Which of you is Taras Triasylo, or Fedorovych?” he asked after searching the cossack faces.

“His Majesty the Hetman is unwell and was unable to come,” Kulaha said demurely. “Both he and our army have empowered us to hear your terms, Your Majesty, and to decide whether to agree to them . . . or not.”

Koniecpolski exchanged glances with the royal guard.

“Impale them all, and be done with it,” Laszcz hissed through his teeth.

“If we don’t return in three hours, then those noblemen you sent yesterday and all the prisoners, and there are quite a few well-known persons among them, will pay for us with their lives,” Kulaha said.

“Good,” the hetman smiled. “Let’s sit down and talk. God willing, we’ll reach an agreement. We’re not strangers — children of the same mother . . .”

“This mother is a stepmother to us,” Khmelnytsky said.

“Because you’re churls and rebels,” Laszcz interjected. “Stirring like devils in hell!”

“If we didn’t live in a hell we wouldn’t stir,” Nepran tossed in a word of his own.

“What do you want?” the crown hetman asked proudly.

“Only one thing — freedom,” Bohdan said, taking a step towards him. “As long as you have us on a leash, don’t expect any peace. We aren’t oxen to carry a foreigner’s yoke in silence. We had our own state and we’ll have it again.”

“Traitors!”

“We’ll hang you all!”

“Grind you into the dust!”

“Smelly peasants, cattle!”

The noblemen grabbed their sabres. Koniecpolski stopped them by raising his hand.

“Most Illustrious Hetman,” Kulaha took the floor. “Please don’t be angry with our young knights. They have hot heads . . . We are all children of the Rzecz Pospolita and His Majesty the King, God grant him health and long life . . .”

“You speak intelligently. What’s your name . . .?” the hetman asked amiably.

“Ivan Kulaha.”

“Here’s what we want, Master Ivan. Give us all our cannons back, return the prisoners, and return to your homes.”

“What about the Registry?”

“It will remain at the same strength.”

“That’s not enough.”

“How many do you want?”

“Twelve thousand!”

“Seven!”

“Well . . . ten.”

“Seven and a half.”

Nepran felt painfully sad. He wanted to escape from this market-place, where people were trading with his country’s future and his nation’s freedom. What were those couple of thousand to them? They weren’t even free, but became Polish soldiers, made to go where they were told, and ordered to fight whom the nobles wanted. Had they dreamed of this, had they travelled the sea all the way to Istanbul and fed the black earth of Pereyaslav with their blood for this?

They agreed at eight thousand. Though two of them were to be stationed in Zaporizhia, to put fear into the hearts of the Sich brothers.

Then talk turned to the hetman and the elders.

“Triasylo is our hetman!” Nepran called out, enraged at such insolence.

“Triasylo is not a Registered Cossack,” said Kulaha, screwing up his eyes like a cat eyeing bacon, “and therefore cannot be hetman.”

“And he’s also too hot-headed and arrogant,” Tymish Orendarenko added.

“Cossack, where have I met you before?” the crown hetman asked him, wrinkling his narrow forehead. “The voice sounds familiar . . .”

“Near Kiev, at the ferry crossing, Your Excellency,” Orendarenko said with a smile and drew closer.

Konieczpolski’s face twitched slightly, his eyebrows came together and shot up.

“He’ll be hetman!” he pointed at Tymish.

Orendarenko caught the hand and kissed it.

Nepran closed his eyes, no longer able to look at such shame. God, and this designing snake had always been at his side, biting furtively and causing mischief! He was shaking all over, fighting off the strong desire to unleash his sabre and to bring judgement here to this traitor. As if in a fog he saw the crown hetman float before his eyes, the noblemen too, and Ivan Kulaha, who was after something for himself . . .

He recovered only after mounting his horse and taking a deep breath of fresh Dnipro air.

“Hold on there, Brother Petro,” Bohdan whispered to him. “The scum always floats to the top when the water stagnates.”

“I’ll kill him . . .”

“And you’ll die yourself.”

“I don’t care.”

“And exchange your life for God knows what?”

“What do I need it for, if this is the end we’ve come to!”

“Petro, this is only the beginning. The end will come when we throw the last intruder onto the rubbish heap.”

Word of peace and an agreement immediately spread like wildfire among the Polish soldiers, and the cossacks were no longer riding through a silent camp which was awaiting the outcome of the meeting. There was real revelry. No one even glanced at them, as if they were invisible ghosts. The gentry had regained their senses and now the cossacks were no longer a fierce enemy standing on the other side of the Alta, only a large gathering of good-for-nothings, worthless men whom they could soon herd into stalls like cattle.

Nepran’s regiment left the city early that morning. Triasylo had departed the evening before and was waiting in the camp on the Trubizh.

This was the end to their hopes. The sacrifices, blood and suffering had been in vain . . .

Nepran glanced at the newly-appointed hetman who rode so proudly up ahead, and fury choked him, his whole body shuddered.

On the other side of the river he nodded to Khmelnitsky, they turned their horses onto a barely noticeable path which ran along the left bank along the old ramparts, and galloped off into the steppe where the Sich Cossacks and those rebels who disagreed with this disgraceful peace had been waiting for them, in a separate camp, on Tatar Hill for two days.

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Again their road stretched towards the Nyz, the eternal Sich, faithful as one’s own mother. Quietly, without fuss, the regiments left the camp and set out on the road to Helmiaviv. On horseback and on foot. The wounded were transported on wrought iron chumak carts.

Taras Triasylo, and with him Nepran, Khmelnitsky, and a score of colonels and kurin otamans who had not deserted their hetman, saw everyone off first and only then departed themselves. Actually, Nepran’s regiment was waiting for them in a nearby ravine and brought up the rear, in case Orendarenko or

the Poles should suddenly attack.

“Have you taken all the cannons?” Taras asked Siryk, who was riding beside the hetman.

“Of course,” the fellow replied uprightly. “Every one except those left behind in the city.”

They rode in silence for a while. Then the hetman stopped his stallion and said to Nepran:

“After things have calmed down we’ll send the money we grabbed from the Poles to the Brotherhood School or to Iov, the Kiev Metropolitan. So cossack children can study.”

“Good,” Nepran nodded.

Triasylo continued on his way. In the last two days he had become so haggard and stooped, seeming to have grown smaller. He had become silent, engrossed in his own deep thoughts. Everyone who was near him could see the hetman was not overjoyed, not at all . . .

Adjusting the strap of his kobza on his shoulder, Nepran saw Yurko and Ivas. The young men were sitting in their saddles, looking so dignified and restrained.

“Well, how are things?” he asked, waiting for them to draw closer. “Your cossack determination hasn’t flagged, has it, boys?”

“No father, there’ll be enough left to spite all our enemies!” Yurko said cheerfully.

That ‘father’ made Nepran feel bad — he must have aged, the turbulent year must have left its mark on him.

“How come you two are always together when I see you?”

“We’ve become blood brothers,” Ivas said.

“When?”

“This morning.”

“As soon as we left the city,” Yurko added.

“That’s good, very good, boys!” Nepran exclaimed dreamily. “If we were all to become blood brothers and all pulled in the same direction, no force on earth could hold us in slavery.”

“Then why don’t we?”

The colonel shrugged his shoulders.

“Probably because not everyone has discovered that it’s better to die a free man than to live in slavery.”

“True,” Ivas sighed.

Something of Uliana suddenly flashed across his face. Quelling a cold pain in his chest, Nepran asked:

“Ivas, did you see your sister?”

“When?”

“Yesterday.”

“Why? Was she here?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps I imagined it . . .”

They passed through a razed village. Everything had been burnt down: the houses, sheds, fences and trees. Half-dead hungry dogs wandered like shadows among the sullen black ruins.

Devastation and grief . . . This was all that remained of the hopes they had nurtured all of their lives, hopes which had been a star in the darkness for them, and for which they were ready to accept death without hesitation . . .

In the evening, after they had reached the fork in the road past Khotsky, where one branch veered off towards a crossing on the Dnipro, the cossacks from Kaniv and Chyhyryn decided to return to their homes, to heal the wounds received in battle, put things in order and regain their strength.

Khmelnitsky brought his horse to a halt at the fork and sadly removed his hat.

“Farewell, Mister Hetman, and you, Brother Nepran, and you too, brave gentlemen! Thank you for your bread, salt and friendship!”

Taras rode up in silence, embraced Bohdan and kissed him. Nepran did the same. He wanted to say something, but was unable: who would have expected that their most heroic and important expedition would end like this!

“Don’t lose heart, brother,” said Bohdan. “Fate can’t be a spiteful stepmother to us forever!”

Petro smiled, hugged his comrade closer and freed him from his embrace.

“Good luck, Bohdan . . .”

Khmelnitsky frowned:

“What luck can there be . . .”

“You’ll marry and forget the Sich!”

“Never!”

He bid farewell to the others and rode up to Petro again:

“As a Greek poet once said, to be completely happy a person must have a homeland!”

Having said this he waved his hand and, without putting his hat back on, rode off towards the west and the high mountains of Kaniv, behind which the evening sun was setting.

The army rode on and on. Slowly the heat of day subsided and the dust of June grew heavy with dew. The road was pounded by thousands of feet and hooves, and it groaned as if it was alive.

They rode in silence, as if they were dumb. Not a song, not a joke, not even a conversation. The crimson flag was not fluttering in the wind – they had hidden it so as not to shame it with their retreat . . .

Frowning, the hetman suffered in silence. It was hardest for him; all of Ukraine would hold him responsible for his deeds.

It seemed as if the invisible souls of all those who had died at sea and in Pereyaslav were moving with them, and it was their sorrow which was making the steppe grasses wet.

Nepran could feel Bodnia beside him, his horse, his stirrup. Behind him rode Maniunia, a head higher than all those around him. The deacon was saying something, and old Schyrytsia was giggling uncontrollably, as if someone was tickling his sides . . .

Black ravens were heading in a cloud towards Pereyaslav. Heavy, glistening, creepy birds.

Nepran took his kobza, touched the strings, and all the sorrow and thoughts which had embittered him swelled in his chest, attempting to break out and escape. He did not pick and choose, didn't try to find the best and most appropriate words. Someone else was singing for him. Singing with his lips, his lungs, his soul:

*Oh, the black raven caws, it caws,
In the meadow by the river;
The young cossack weeps, he weeps,
Astride his jet-black steed . . .*

He let his fingers play the strings, capturing their warm sound, and surveyed the steppe and the sun, whose crimson fire had eased into the black of night; he rested his gaze on the hetman, amazed.

Taras was as black as a burnt stump and down his cheeks, down his long grey moustache rolled bloody tears.

GLOSSARY

- bandura – stringed instrument with up to 64 strings.
- bey – (Turk.) a high-born aristocrat.
- binbashi* – (Turk.) commander of a thousand men.
- bunchuk* – (Ukr.) hetman's banner, with a horse-tail hanging from its top end.
- chaika – (Ukr.) a cossack boat.
- chumak – a man who travelled with oxen teams to Crimea to bring back salt and other goods to Ukraine.
- giaour – Christian infidel.
- harem-kiyay* – (Turk.) eunuch.
- hayduk* – footman.
- hetman – cossack commander-in-chief.
- hetmanate – the position of hetman.
- horilka – Ukrainian vodka.
- Horishniak – the North Wind.
- janissary – a soldier who was taken as a child in raids on Christian lands and brought up as a Turk.
- kelep – war hammer.
- kobza – a kind of lute with eight strings.
- konak* – a walled Turkish household.
- kullukchu* – (Turk.) fortress guard.
- kobzar – a wandering minstrel.
- koshovy* – a chief of a cossack camp.
- kurin – cossack company.
- maidan – square, meeting-place.
- monoxyle – boat hollowed from a single log.
- murza* – Tatar prince.
- Muscovy – old name for Russia.
- Mussulman – Moslem.
- osavul* – cossack deputy-hetman. Acted as a kind of Minister of Internal Affairs in the Sich.

otaman – a cossack leader.
pernach – colonel's baton.
pood – one pood equals about 16 kilograms.
Porte – the Turkish Empire.
Rus – ancient name of Ukraine.
Rzecz Pospolita – the Polish Empire.
sagene – one sagene equals six feet.
sharovary – baggy cossack pants.
Slavuta – the Dnipro River.
sotnia – unit consisting of a hundred men.
sotnyk – cossack captain.
spahi – Turkish cavalryman.
Uniate – a person of Orthodox faith who acknowledged the supremacy of the Catholic pope.
urus – (Turk.) Russian, ie. Ukrainian.
verst – one verst equals about two-thirds of a mile.
Volost – the countryside.
yataghan – a long Turkish dagger, without a guard and usually curved.
yurt – a light tent made of skins.
yuzbashi – (Turk.) lieutenant.
zhupan – coat made of wool.

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