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The Leader

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(excerpts)

(...)

Soldier: Good day! Would this be the camp?

Khim: Gypsies always live in a camp, my good man.

Soldier: I know, I know...

Khim: We have nothing to hide. Our camp is open to everyone, just like a meadow.

Soldier: So, would you be the voivode?

Khim: Yes, my good man. I'm in charge of the camp, so ask me.

Soldier: I have to register you. *(takes out a folder)* Tell me your name... How many of you are there in the camp?

Khim: I am Khimbasha, I belong to the Bulibasha clan. We are celebrating the birth of the hundredth inhabitant in the camp. The hundredth! Come, rejoice with us.

Soldier: *(smiling)* Well, if I may, I would prefer not to share in your merrymaking... Listen instead to the order *(reading)*: "In the name of His Majesty: in the interests of national security, to prevent disturbances of the peace and to maintain order on both the German-Romanian front line as well as in the hinterland of our glorious troops; in view of the constant protection we bestow upon our subjects and for the benefit of the people, I hereby issue my command, as follows: Every Gypsy caravan wandering within the territory of the country shall move to the remote areas designated by the authorities, where all Gypsies shall live and work from now on. Violation or refusal to comply with the order shall be punished by execution by fire squad!"

Khim: *(bitterly)* We've never hurt anyone...

Soldier: *(interrupting him)* Let me explain! I have been ordered to accompany you to your destination. The order shall come into force once it has been read... I have read the provision... Now I shall put it into force.

Khim: We have a sick baby... We have to take her to town, to the doctor. A newborn baby... otherwise she'll die.

Soldier: Let me explain! The order states: "Insofar as the camp or a separate group of Gypsies should come within one kilometre of a large or small inhabited settlement, they shall be shot dead without warning." Pack up your tent, voivode! Orders apply to everyone.

Blind Woman: There won't be a hundredth, voivode, there won't!

SCENE 2

Near the Gypsy camp. The voivode and Naur are standing next to a disintegrating wagon filled with broken carts and discarded household objects. The Gypsies have carried all their rubbish to the garbage hill. Ferdik sits with a bowed head next to the wheel. Enter the Soldier, who is a Guard from now on.

Guard: You people have found quite the place for your garbage dump! Right under the noses of the villagers!

Khim: It's a closed area, Guard. You can't find a better place for garbage.

Guard: I won't defend you if anything happens. I will spend the night in the village, and we move on at daybreak.

Khim: Wait! Whenever you look at us, a coldness seems to emanate from you... As if from a tomb.

Guard: *(without raising his gaze)* We are all mortals.

Khim: You're right.

Guard: *(smiling)* If you happen to be thinking of killing me, I'm telling you in advance, it won't get you anywhere. If they find you without an escort, you're all doomed. You can't even flee from me. If I'm not with you, people will shoot you just for fun. Explain this to the others. Well, I'm off.

Khim: Wait! *(the Guard stops)* The day you came, we celebrated the birth of the camp's one-hundredth inhabitant, my granddaughter. She died tonight.

Guard: *(looks at the voivode for a long time, then pulls out an ink pen and crosses out a name from the list. He rubs Khim's thumb with the tip of the pen and presses it next to the crossed-out name.)* We leave at dawn. *(exit Guard)*

(...)

The women scatter. Enter the exhausted men. All flop down to the ground, wherever they are, finally able to rest. Naur sits with his back against the wagon, fiddling with a piece of barbed wire.

Khim: Is the food ready?

Blind Woman: Just wait a little, I'll bring it soon. *(leaving)*

Khim: *(gives Naur the jug from which he just drank water)* Leave that barbed wire, Naur. Rest instead.

Naur: You asked me to make a carving of our camp... All hundred of us... and to make it from oak wood. But how? Seventy-two of us are left. And who invented this barbed wire? I'd like to see his face, and see inside his heart. I'd rather draw something nice, lots of plants, sunshine... And sausage! *(surprised by the reactions of the men)* All right, and bread, of course.

Khim: We have other things to think about now, Naur.

Naur: You planted the idea in me. That's why it's on my mind.

Khim: There will be happier times, you'll draw then. *(goes to Alimut)* You'll be working with Naur tomorrow.

Alimut: Alright. I won't be much use to him anyway.

Khim: Steady on, son.

Uzhvor: Khim, you have the strength of an ox, but we're ordinary men. Why the devil did you offer to do this woodcutting work? *(all pay attention)*

Khim: *(hands over the water to Uzhvor)* Drink some water, it'll do you good.

Uzhvor: It won't get any easier, Khim. Neither for us, nor for the ones we buried along the way. If you want me to go join them, then take this and sprinkle it on my grave, so the grass will grow.

Khim: Stop whining.

Uzhvor: No, voivode. You owe it to the men: tell them why you volunteered us for such hard labour. Maybe you had a purpose in mind?

Khim: (*firmly*) Yes, I did. I want to buy time, so that our camp is sent to “the remote areas designated by the authorities where all Gypsies shall live and work from now on” as late as possible. I’m afraid we’ll have only one job there: digging our own graves. And if we have a chance to hold that off for even one day, I’ll take it. Maybe one day won’t be enough to keep us alive. But sooner or later, this lost world will have to come to its senses!

Uzhvor: (*conciliating*) By the time that happens, my bones will be lying among the stumps.

Blind Woman: Men, come to the big campfire. We’ll serve whatever we have.

(...)

Guard: Voivode, I’ve just explained the order to the local authorities. You don’t have to chop wood anymore. The camp has lingered at the logging site for a week, and I’m going to be late.

Khim: Though you and I tread different paths in life, goodness must pave the way of every wanderer.

Guard: Goodness has been slashed in half with a bayonet. (*points to his rifle*) Whoever holds this thing in his hand is the one who decides what is good. Fear controls people. These are the times we live in, there’s a war going on.

Khim: Again, you look as if you could see dead people before you.

Guard: Are you afraid?

Khim: I worry about those who’ve entrusted me with their lives.

Guard: Everyone only worries about their own lives. Well, enough clever talk. We move on at dawn tomorrow. (*exit Guard*)

Khim: (*after thinking for some time*) Hey, men! Come here! (*men enter, running*) Be quiet, listen to me now. You know our food reserves are nearly used up. We have to decide what to do next. I’ve been thinking for a long time, a very long time. Here’s what I’ve come up with. We have to slaughter our horses.

Uzhvor: Well, you really had to think a lot to come up with something like that. Are you scaring us, voivode, or is there something you're hiding from us? What will we do without horses? Should we pull the wagons ourselves?

Khim: Without horses it will be much better. We'll pull the wagons slowly, looking at the countryside on either side, nature all around, the forest and fields... And if the Guard is in such a hurry, why, he can hop onto his horse.

(...)

Khim: *(gesturing towards the gun)* Strength doesn't lie in this thing, Guard, you ought to know better.

Guard: *(roaring)* You're lying! You're always lying! That's where the strength is, in this gun! You're in the dark ages, voivode, you don't know what's going on in the world. These days, if you're holding the gun, you're God.

Khim: Stop screaming! As for us being in the dark, it's true. Now I regret that we Gypsies have only been living our own lives, now Time has punished us. It's a good lesson for us. And I don't believe you that a new God has been born. Waving a gun around doesn't make you God. A God like that wouldn't last long.

Guard: Do you know where I'm going to take you now? Do you know the meaning of "the remote areas designated by the authorities where all Gypsies shall live and work from now on"? They're gathering up all the Gypsies into one place where they can be quietly destroyed.

Khim: I know. *(brings his face up close to the Guard's face, speaking harshly)* You're not going to do that, you hear me? You won't do it!

(...)

Uzhvor: I want to talk to you, Khim! *(Everyone freezes where they are and waits.)* I'm leaving the camp, Khim.

Khim: *(after a short pause)* You do know that no one can leave the camp without my permission, right?

Uzhvor: I'm leaving! I don't want to share my fate with all of you. These are times when everyone has to take care of themselves.

Khim: *(Pondering)* After all... Why shouldn't you leave? You're a spry and clever lad; you might even escape the sad fate. *(He turns to the others)* Why are you all silent? *(Shouting)* Hey! All of you! Run, run while you can! Ferdik! Why don't you try your luck along with them? Maybe you won't get shot...

Ferdik: I might escape the bullet, Khim... But there's nowhere to run from eight hungry children, I can't let them die...

Naur: Don't talk like this, Khim!

Khim: *(to Uzhvor, very seriously)* Well, the women who've buried their husbands along the way, who will protect them, Uzhvor? And if work suddenly turns up, because things can change any day, and maybe we'll get out of here, where am I going to get an extra set of arms for the job? Where, I ask you?

Uzhvor: You'll be fine without my help, voivode.

Khim: Aren't afraid of the contempt of the others? Anyone who leaves the camp steps into the void. He will never be mentioned again, and no children will bear his name... Failing to pass on one's name to the next generation is to kill the name of one's father and grandfather. You'll become a nobody! And die a nobody!

Uzhvor: I don't want to think about what's going to happen after I die, voivode. I want to live now. And I'm going to live the way this rotten world does. I'm going to rob anyone who has the slightest bit of food – young or old, or crippled, or a weak woman. Everyone! It's the only way to survive in this filthy world. And the sooner I get started, the better. I've made up my mind, voivode. Whoever's with me can come along!

Some people step out from the group and join Uzhvor. The voivode silently looks at the others.

Khim: Who else wants a good life? Maybe you?... Or you?... And why don't you go? *(He grabs one of the men by his shirt. Softly but fiercely)* Don't you understand that in my camp, so long as I'm alive, no one can rob or kill anyone? Sure, it might be the fastest way to fill your stomach... Are you even listening? Go! Go stuff yourselves! Gorge yourselves like pigs. Don't care about anything else! Like making your wife proud of you or gaining your friends' respect. All you'll have deal with are fear and curses... But your bowl will be filled with food. You can fill yourselves up until you faint, and then you can shit and keep shitting all around and drown in your own filth. Fine. Run. Go stuff yourselves! Why are you staring at me like that?

First Gypsy: *(in an apologetic tone)* We're worn out, Khim, that's why we wanted to leave. *(one by one, the others follow him back, but Uzhvor remains on his own)*

Uzhvor: You want to become a saint, voivode. But people like that live in the heavens, not on this sinful earth.

He slowly walks away, exit Uzhvor. The Guard, after having watched the entire scene, can't stand it anymore: he throws down his gun, rips the epaulettes off his uniform and hides. Only Alimut notices this and picks up the gun.

Second Gypsy: *(jokingly)* My brain has gotten as skinny as my stomach...That's why I believed his words... and this one here *(points to a third Gypsy)*, he's so stupid, he thought I was smart! *(laughs uproariously)*

Third Gypsy: Now I have the brains to remember what a fool you are. From now on, I'd rather go smell the mare's ass than listen to you.

Naur: They play a game in the city... shooting each other full of holes. That's what your heads are like...

Inhabitants of the camp burst into laughter. The camp has stood the test, and it has opened them all up and recharged them with new energy and power. Everyone gets behind Naur in the circle dance. While dancing, Alimut tries to get his father's attention. The voivode finally notices Alimut.

Khim: What happened?

Alimut: *(pulls the gun out of the bushes)* The Guard's rifle!

Khim: Where did you get it?

Alimut: The Guard threw it down, then he ran away...

Khim: He's deserted! *(he starts looking for him)*

Naur: *(ripping the gun out of his hand)* This is freedom, Khim! And what a rifle he's left behind. Tell the whole camp to come here, Khim, let's announce the good news.

Khim: Stop, Naur! We're lost! Don't you understand? While this guard was with us, no one hurt us, but without him, the first sentinel will shoot us. Just because we're Gypsies.

Naur: We'll stay in the woods, no one can find us.

Khim: And how will we feed the women and children? With what? Grass and leaves? Without the guard, we don't have access to any village.

Naur forcefully drives the rifle into the ground.

Alimut: I'm too young, it is not up me to talk to you about this...

Khim: Speak.

Alimut: Something's wrong with our lives, Father, if the first hurricane can tear us out of the ground. Either the roots are rotten, or the trunk is weak.

Khim: (*shouting*) Now we have to look for the guard. You run that way, Alimut. (*to Naur*) And you over there... We have to bring him back no matter what, find him and bring him back. Otherwise, we're lost!

They run in different directions, Alimut finds the Guard.

Alimut: Here he is, Father.

Khim: Guard!

Guard: Voivode, I am neither Christ nor Judas, but a simple man. Do what you like but leave me alone.

Khim: Every man has both Christ and Judas in him. And everyone can choose his god.

The Guard climbs out of his hiding place and picks up the rifle.

Guard: (*shouting*) Tomorrow at daybreak we move on!

(...)

Guard: Where would you go, Naur? You can't even shoot... You'll get shot at the first corner.

Voices From The Crowd: Don't let him go, Khim. He's gone mad... He never was in his right mind... They'll kill him right away... He's lost his mind... Don't let him go, Khim... Men! Don't just stand there!

Naur: Back off, or I shoot.

Everyone jumps back.

Khim: Naur, you've always been a strange man. You saw what other people couldn't. You heard what others were deaf to. You, who has always accompanied the setting sun with your eyes, and tried to persuade us to watch the daybreak with you, you want to kill? It's nonsense, Naur, nonsense!

Naur: My mind is completely intact, Khim. It's never been clearer than it is now. I'm going to go where they're fighting, join them, and I'm going to sow death. I'm going to spread it all around, left and right. And nothing will stop me: neither the steel monsters on earth, nor the machines in the sky. Nothing! Get out of here. Khim, you stand back, too!

Naur's mindless certainty in his own truth convinces everyone that nothing can stop him.

Khim: *(tired)* Let him go. *(on his way out, Naur turns around)*

Naur: Voivode! I've figured out how to draw our camp of 100 people. Like this: a young Gypsy woman sprawled out on the ground, with braids the colour of resin, trampled in the mud. She hasn't even had a chance to cut the umbilical cord of her newborn child, because a soldier's bayonet has already nailed her chest to the ground, and milk is pouring out from it... Maybe someone will draw this one day...

In complete silence, the people of the camp accompany the departing Naur with their eyes.

Khim: Cry, women! Cry! Yet another man has vanished from the face of the earth.

(...)

Corporal: Nobody move! Hands up! (*Gypsies put their hands up.*) A camp?

Khim: Yes.

Corporal: I'm hungry.

Khim: Sit down with us. There's a piece of bear meat for you.

Corporal: I don't have time to talk with you. Stand up! (*everyone stands up*) Leave the food there and step back. (*everyone steps back except the voivode*)

Khim: Listen to me! There are people here, too. We were also born to this land, and we should also have our place under the sun. Even if you shoot all the people in the world, you can't eat more than what your stomach can hold. If you deprive others of the sun, it won't give you any more warmth. So why don't you sit with us? Let's share our wealth and our poverty.

(...)

New campsite. Khim is sitting by the campfire. He is no longer the energetic voivode he used to be. Enter Alimut.

Alimut: Where are the others, where have they gone?

Khim: They went to the village. They say they're giving out food. They went to look around. The guns in the West have fallen silent, a new power has come.

Alimut: (*looking at his father*) While this hell was going on, nothing could break you, and now that there's nothing threatening us, you've collapsed. (*Khim is silent*) I'm not used to seeing you like this, Father.

He walks over to his father and tries to throw a playful punch at him. Khim won't play along. Alimut pushes his father a second time. Khim doesn't move. The third time, the old lion gets into the wrestling match. But soon he gets out of breath and lies down on his back. He's unwell.

Alimut: What's wrong, Father? Hey, Dad...

Khim: Don't be afraid, son, I'm not going to give up yet. I want to reveal the secret to you, how to live just enough so that you're not a burden to anyone. You have to create your own continuation. You can look at life in many different ways. Some people see it as being planted in a deep pit. And what do you see from there? Just the hems of people's clothes, and how they relieve themselves. Others seem to stand on the ground with both feet, but they can only see what their height allows. But as soon as another person gets in front of them, they can't see what's behind him. This man is already an obstacle in their eyes. You can only see what's really going on when you climb a high mountain... Do you get it? It's only from high up that you can see that all the people in the world live in one big camp. They're like a giant river flowing forward with their lives. And every little man's life runs into all the others, into a big sea together. And every single life in this stream is sacred. All of our blood must flow into this common sea. You carry my blood, and your children carry yours. Our grandchildren and great-grandchildren pour our lives into the distant sea of all people, and that makes the sea swell even more... Understand that... I believe that my life flows into the sea of life.

Alimut: You've seen so much evil, Father. Why do you think we only have good things ahead of us?

Khim: You too, Alimut, will have a lot of unpleasantness ahead of you, but better times are coming. What was it like before? Two people fighting, the third one lives his life. That's how we Gypsies used to live, on the sidelines. It won't be like that anymore. We have to share in other people's sorrows. In that way, our problems will also be shared by others. And I feel that that time is coming. Don't miss your chance, Alimut. Look at it from the mountaintop.

Alimut: You're right, Father. (...)