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MASTER

VERSION 1.1



www.masterversion.net



[PREFACE]

Let's start with the most important thing: explaining the premise of how this book came to be. Master Version 1.1 was written by a Lithuanian author at the time when russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was rolling into its third year. This war left the whole world shell-shocked, but in our neck of the woods—Eastern and Northern Europe—it imparted the heaviest emotional toll. Footage from bombed cities in Ukraine, reports on the number of people killed and injured, meeting and interacting with refugees who had to drop everything to escape the horrors of the invasion, has long become our daily routine. From our point of view, there are no “sides”—only the aggressor and its target.

For someone who's not as involved in this war as us here, this book might seem one-sided, even permeated with “excessive” contempt towards russia. It is done on purpose to convey the general sentiment of our region.

This brings us to a second thing that might jump out at the reader: russia, russian, putin are not capitalized. It's not something that was invented by the author, but is rather a universal way of expressing passive anger and disdain toward the aggressor and its leader. This tiny token of defiance is used in our daily lives, even in semi-official communications. Replacing this custom with grammatically-correct capitalized terms would've been inconsistent and damaging to the authenticity of the book's mood.

Finally, the nuanced use of the word “russian” deserves a separate explanation. “A russian” means “someone who lives in russia (and is therefore a cog in the aggressor's machine)”. It in no way relates to members of russian-speaking communities across the world. We'd never say “a russian” to define a person from London, Kyiv, or Vilnius, for example.



(1)

Afternoon | September 27, 2028
Ukraine

Beeeeeeep, beep, beep, beep.

A long signal and three short ones—broadcast directly into the nerves in my ear by an implant—jerk me out of a deep sleep. In situations like this, I’d sometimes ask myself: where am I, or who am I? Not this time. In sync with the first signal, the drug delivery module administers a dose of modafinil. I’m fully awake by the time the last beep fades. They say the effect is similar to cocaine, just with a tad less euphoria.

I know I’m on the third floor of a crumbling five-story building. All structures in the gray zone are either already collapsed or in the process of collapsing. Some are literally falling apart as we speak—set off by something as minor as a gust of wind or a loud sneeze (true story).

I’m lying on a moldy mattress in what seems to have once been an angsty teenage girl’s room. It looks like she tried to bury her rosy childhood beneath posters of EMO bands I’ve never heard of. Five youths, decked out in hussar uniforms, glare down at me disapprovingly from a *My Chemical Romance* poster. Riiiiight, who are you to judge?

My drones, currently on watch duty on the roof, have identified threats. Three beeps—three potentially dangerous intruders. I slide down the visor of my helmet. Part of my view is now taken up with a video feed from the surveillance copter¹ Magpie.

Having detected a threat, Magpie ascended to an altitude of a hundred meters, aimed its camera at the interlopers, and began tracking them. The drone’s propellers make so little noise that it’s virtually undetectable from the ground.

Three figures are creeping through the territory of a kindergarten, adjacent to the yard of my building. I switch to thermal vision. Based on their heat signature, they’re obvious gavriks²—low-level,

1 Four-propeller drone.

2 Russian slang for “pal” or “buddy”, used in a belittling way.

unregistered trespassers. The first one isn't wearing a helmet (Barehead), the second is grossly overweight (Fatty), and the thuggish demeanor of the last one clearly identifies him as the group's leader (Top Dog).

An encounter with such a low-level enemy may not qualify as premium content, but it's better than nothing.

[Start live]

Master—a name Ukrainians bestowed upon me years ago—pops up in the Warvid.Zone live streamer list. Nearly half a million followers receive a notification: it's on!

My guests are loitering behind a white brick wall of what used to be a gazebo. The rock dust slates that served as its roof have long been shattered to pieces. I wish my new friends would get cancer from all the asbestos, but somehow, I doubt they'll last that long.

Magpie's video feed makes it perfectly clear: there's a quarrel underway.

The dudes stop the arm-waving and start shaking their hands: rock-paper-scissors, or more like their russian equivalent—"vas ki chi," although they're probably calling out "po morskomu"¹! Top Dog, in validation of his superiority, claims the first win and steps away. Fatty and Barehead go at it again. The latter, grossly annoyed, kicks the wall of the gazebo. The kick is successful: a loose brick comes off and lands nearby.

"Got owned, huh?"

The loser angrily pulls a bottle-sized object from his backpack and stashes it in a concealed pocket of his jacket, a space that was probably intended for bottle storage by design. He accepts a helmet from Top Dog—it curiously resembles one from WW2—tinkers with the attached camera, and puts it on. Fuck, how am I supposed to call him now?

[Scan video signal frequencies]

[Signal found]

[Decoding]

1 Sailor style.



A POV¹ video feed from Barehead (nah, I'm not changing his nickname) pops on my visor. I listen in on their comms:

"Don't piss yourself, Ginger (fine, I can use two names)—there's nobody there."

"Go fuck yourself, Lard." (I almost got it right)

"Beat it already."

"Yeah yeah, going."

Barehead, a.k.a.² Ginger, pokes half a head out from the gazebo and looks around. He covers a few meters to the kindergarten's fence, then clumsily rolls over the top. Breathing heavily, he trots to the nearest stairwell of the building I'm in; mine is the one furthest away.

Should I wait for my guest to arrive? Probably not—my stream's spectators aren't *that* patient.

I grab my Daniel Defense rifle. Hunching to avoid being visible through the windows, I run to the end of the hallway. I exit to the stairwell, and descend while watching Ginger enter the first apartment and check its rooms one-by-one.

I stop at the bottom, just near the exit.

My larger drone, Crow, is up in the air with Magpie, but just a bit higher—analyzing the area at a wider angle. I'm not watching Crow's video—there's no need for that yet.

[Video feed on]

Three barely transparent windows obscure the real view—a disgusting, snot-covered green wall in front of me. Someone armed with sharp objects and markers has left a treasure trove of information on it: *Толик—пидор*³ or *Я ♥ Лена*⁴. I might get to that later.

.....
1 Point of view.
2 Also known as.
3 Tolik is a fag.
4 I love Lena.

I sit tight for a half-minute.

"Ground floor—empty. Going up."

Reports Ginger.

"Move your ass."

Top Dog urges him on.

Showtime!

[Manual mode]

I guide Crow a bit further behind the enemies and make it drop to just a few meters. The prime subjects of my attention are now directly in its crosshairs. I urge the drone toward them.

From this close, the gavriks finally hear the sounds coming from the approaching Crow (hint: it's not "caw") and begin to turn toward it.

[Fire]

A heavy metallic dart is launched from the drone by an electromagnetic impulse. It covers the distance to Top Dog's head in a fraction of a second, punctures his lobe, and lodges itself in the back of his skull.

For a moment, he wears a perplexed look that says *What the fuck was that?!*, then hits the ground and establishes a direct connection with whatever gods he used to pray to.

Right after the shot, I make the drone lurch upward, perform a loop, and then hang in place. Fatty is now on the run. Unfortunately for him, as he tries to steal a glance back, he trips over the brick Ginger dislodged earlier and nosedives into the mud. His huge ass is a perfect target—no body armor down there.

[Fire]

A dart in the soft tissue of an ass isn't what you would consider a serious injury, but the poison it's tipped with paralyzes in ten seconds. In less than a minute, Fatty is in full cardiac arrest. An unhealthy lifestyle kills.

I'm back to Ginger's feed. He's tentatively sniffing an open jar. Not good, it seems; someone's picky. There are more jars lined up in the cabinet—this should keep him occupied for at least a couple of minutes.

I run across the yard and jump over the kindergarten's fence. Using a shrubbery for cover, I reach the gazebo.

Top Dog is still clutching a small brown box in his left hand. It has two buttons—a standard-issue Chinese initiator.

Hand it over; it's mine now. I press the [Arm] button: a green LED lights up. Next to Top Dog's right hand rests a phone broadcasting Ginger's feed. No thanks—I'm already watching that movie.

Barehead carries an enormous open jar to the window, chomping on a pickle.

"Guys, I found some cucumbers. Fucking delicious!"

He sticks his find through the window, only to see Fatty sprawled on the ground below. Involuntarily, his hands let go of the jar. Bummer; what if they were actually good?

"Sorries, Ginger."

I press the button.

There was a good reason an RPG round was tucked in Ginger's pocket. It's a well-known live-bait tactic employed by gavriks: one unfortunate soul goes scouting the territory while his pals watch the feed on a phone screen. The chances of a lone blockhead surviving an encounter are abysmally low. The plan is that whoever makes the kill will also search the victim. At that point, they detonate the concealed grenade, potentially damaging the adversary. One final use of a dead friend's body. It sounds macabre, but the survival chances of a gavrik in the gray zone are pretty slim as it is.

The explosion is captured from different angles by both of my drones. The head, detached from the body, whirls out the window, its helmet camera still rolling. It draws a high arc in the air. At its peak, the centrifugal force separates the head from the helmet. Both objects hit the ground at roughly the same time. The helmet bounces a few times, rolls, and comes to rest at a perfect angle for

the miraculously still-functioning camera to focus on the slightly dumbfounded face of Ginger Barehead.

And the Academy Award for Best Cinematography goes to... Barehead. *Post mortem.*

[End live]



[2]

On October 24th, 2024, russian führer-wannabe-peter-the-great, issued the order to attack Ukraine. The early days of the war looked grim. It appeared like the nation might get crushed by the sheer force of the adversary. Against all odds and predictions of many, the valiant descendants of Cossacks mobilized, put up a fight, and drove the invaders out from large swathes of the occupied territory. The *second army in the world*¹ had to retreat embarrassingly, leaving behind both their personnel and equipment. At that moment, it seemed like the victory for Ukraine was within grasp.

Unfortunately, during the lull in fighting due to the harsh winter of 2023, the russians dug in, fitted themselves with dragon teeth², and amassed personnel and weapons. A Ukrainian counter-offensive launched in the spring of 2023 failed. The western military aid was too sluggish in arriving, meanwhile the russians learned their bitter lessons. Consequently, the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine Valerii Zaluzhnyi had to acknowledge that the situation resulted in a deadlock.

Over time, the simmering conflict saw a diminishing role of traditional weaponry—artillery, tanks, and aviation. The distance between infantry front lines was growing, while the gray zone—a no-man’s land nobody had a fair grip on—expanded to tens of kilometers. A new form of combat emerged—drone warfare. Ultimately, the units operating in the gray zone were primarily small teams of drone operators.

In 2024, the Western nations were still bickering over military aid, which was consistently being interrupted. The aggressor had their own problems, too—equipment stocks were dwindling, meanwhile the sanctions, albeit slow to being imposed, were just

1 A narrative from the russian propaganda of their armed forces being second only to the U.S. Since their shameful failures in Ukraine, the slogan became somewhat an object to mockery.

2 A fortification consisting of concrete cones, used to halt or slow down the advance of tanks and other heavy machinery.

starting to make a dent. At the end of the summer, ZSU¹ invaded russia and captured a significant portion of land in the Kursk region.

In 2025², a cease-fire negotiation led to a conditional truce: an immediate ban of medium and long-range rockets, as well as withdrawal of the heavy artillery. The ever-expanding gray zone continued to serve as the area of operations for drone teams from both sides.

Since the onset of the war, footage from surveillance drones, and later from the FPV¹ drones, gained massive popularity on social networks. The videos typically showed spectacular explosions caused by drone-released ordnance, destroying enemy soldiers or equipment worth millions. However, most social networks began clamping down on such content due to its extreme cruelty.

In 2025, a Warvid.Zone project was launched—a Youtube-TikTok clone, dedicated exclusively to visual material from the warzone. It came with all the essential attributes of a social network, including followers, likes, and comments, but none of the shackles on graphic content. Project owner—unknown. Its servers were scattered around the world’s most obscure countries.

The first users to experience success on the platform were agents-editors. They would buy raw footage directly from soldiers, edit it, prop it up with music and commentary, then release it via their own channels. By the end of 2025, Warvid boasted a staggering five-million users. With all of them paying a monthly fee videos were effectively being converted into profits.

However, the biggest break for the new network came with the introduction of live streaming. Soldiers with popular channels were offered free equipment—a level IV ballistic helmet with an

1 Armed Forces of Ukraine.

2 This book was written at the end of 2024. Events described from this point on are the result of the author’s imagination.

1 First Person View.

integrated communication system, two cameras (one regular and one night-vision), as well as a Starlink internet uplink, hooked up to both the helmet and drone cameras.

There was no shortage of those who wanted to sign up, and the army brass turned a blind eye to the activity—can't say no to a free helmet and a Starlink. Before long, live-streaming soldiers took over the agents in popularity. At the end of each broadcast, the editors, and in some cases even AI¹, would transform the raw footage into dazzling mini-movies that would continue to gather views and generate additional revenue for its creators.

When the project managers decided to make the income information public, all hell broke loose. Each streamer had a counter, indicating their proceeds, and the ones from the Top 10 were raking in as much as 200 thousand dollars a month.

Warvid was swamped with applications to join its streamer ranks.

There were only two main requirements:

- Actual combat experience or a completed military education.
- An applicant must travel to Ukraine on their own, as well as enlist in its foreign legion or another military unit.

Suddenly, ZSU experienced an influx of highly motivated recruits.

Eventually, russians came up with their own flawed but functioning Warvid clone. In the spring of 2026, something very significant happened that would later change the course of this war—the russian counterpart, along with all of its users, was incorporated into the original Warvid.Zone. The move stirred up a whole storm of outrage—*How is this possible? They're the aggressors after all*—but was outright ignored by the still *incognito* project managers.

Shortly after, a new set of rules was revealed:

20% of streamer's proceeds are to be collected and held in escrow by the network. Those funds are to be released only when a person decides to permanently leave Warvid.

1 Artificial Intelligence.

If a streamer was captured by someone from the opposing side—whether working alone or as part of a team—they would immediately forfeit their accumulated money in favor of their captor, provided they released the hostage and supplied video proof of the whole experience.

Upon their release, the captive's right to live-stream would be suspended for six months. While their previously created content could still generate revenue, all of it would go to the captor.

Besides this main rule, there were a few others:

- Teams could not exceed 4 persons.
- Hostages could not be tortured.
- Injured hostages must be provided with necessary medical assistance.
- Upon release, the captive must be allowed to reach a safe zone.
- Etc.

The rule changes transformed Warvid into a real-life *Battle Royale* or *Fortnite*.

By 2028, most of the soldiers operating in the gray zone were Warvid members. The rest were mockingly called gavriks.



[3]

My name is Martynas. I'm a 49 year old Lithuanian.

As a volunteer fighter, I've been involved in the war for Ukraine since 2014—mostly in reconnaissance and diversion units. During those years, I did what I had to do: I manufactured explosives, mined roads, installed traps, blew things up, fired Stingers and Javelins. However, my primary focus was on drones—scouting, dropping grenades, and flying suicide FPVs. Over time, I got very good at fixing and improving them. The modifications I came up with have been adopted in mass production of drones by Ukrainian and Lithuanian manufacturers.

Ukrainians gave me a new name—Master (Майстер)—not only in recognition of my technical expertise. With hundreds of fly hours under my belt—both in combat and in simulators—I was second to none in this particular art.

I'm a member of Ukraine's streamer legion. Commanders pass down assignments to me, and I see them through. I stream, but I'm not in it for the money—I got more than I need already. All my Warvid profits go towards Ukraine's restoration efforts.

On March 12, 2028, a russian explosive-carrying FPV drone crashed through the window of the cellar we were holed up in, killing two of my teammates. The section of my left arm was torn off below the elbow. I lost consciousness and would have surely bled to death if not for the automated experimental tourniquet that ultimately saved my life.

The war had ended for me—or so I thought.



[4]

July 5, 2028
Vilnius, Lithuania

X @eatontusk:
Hello, Master. I have a proposition.

[5]

July 6, 2028
Over the Baltic Sea

“Your Margarita, Mr. Master.”

A flight attendant, bearing a striking resemblance to Margot Robbie, offers me a tray with a meticulously prepared drink.

Besides the flight crew, I’m the only passenger on a Gulfstream G650ER Eaton sent to pick me up. The view outside gets a bit dull after crossing Scandinavia, and a few more margaritas later, I’m fast asleep. By the time I wake up, we’re somewhere over Canada. For lunch, I order a burger and a cola, which feels fitting since I’m heading to America.

With an hour left to go, I hop into a luxurious shower, shave, and change into a fresh set of clothes. I’m ready to meet the world’s richest person.



[6]

July 6, 2028
Fremont, California, Brainlink corp

Brainlink corp., just one of Eaton's many endeavors, was working on something what futurologists were calling the next stage in the evolution—a human-computer hybrid. Its primary objective was quite noble: restoring mobility to disabled people by replacing signals of damaged nerves with digital ones. Nonetheless, there was little doubt that Tusk's long-term goal was far more ambitious—enabling interaction with computers, phones, and other devices directly from the human brain. After several years of testing the technology on animals, the company began implanting the first brainlinks in human volunteers in 2024.

The patients learned to control computer mice and keyboards using just their mind. Unfortunately, not everything was going smoothly. A few failures led Brainlink into a slew of lawsuits. Eaton announced a suspension of new implants while a much more advanced version was being developed. The company went quiet.

The meeting with the billionaire lasted just three minutes. He conveniently freed himself from useless small talk and other formalities by announcing that he had Asperger's syndrome. That suited me just fine—I feel like I might have a bit of that myself.

“You're getting a new arm—just like the Terminator. It's controlled via our next-generation brainlink. The best part, though, is that you won't need it to operate your drones or other devices. Frankly, arms won't be necessary for that anymore—you'll use your new brainlink to issue commands directly from your brain. Isn't it the most fucking awesome thing ever?”

After a bit more babbling about future potential, Eaton turned me over to his scientists:

“They'll explain everything. I have to take off. Bye!”



[7]

“Atari Hunter, CSO¹.”

The name, a slightly darker skin hue, and straight black hair alluded to some form of Japanese heritage. However, just like the iconic namesake computer brand, the scientist had no connections to the land of the sakura.

Her parents—both Americans and avid console computer fans—met in 1984 at a gamer event. They named their daughter Atari. The traces of Native American roots in her father’s lineage may be reflected in her appearance. If I’m being totally honest, she looked just wow. Even a faint scar, partially concealed by an eyebrow, looked more like a curious tattoo or a quirky makeup style than a sign of an old injury.

Brainlink V2 fundamentally differed from its predecessor. The hole for the electrodes connecting to the brain was no longer being drilled in the vertex area. It was now discreetly located behind the ear. The number of electrodes increased from fifteen hundred to almost ten thousand. They were now connected to the auditory nerves as well, enabling two-way audio communication with a computer and eliminating the need for a screen. Almost all of the ear cartilage was replaced with an artificial one that housed a microcomputer and a battery. The two magnetic charging contacts were disguised as stud earrings.

The new hand had five fingers, which was about the extent of its similarities with the metal Terminator hand that Eaton had promised me. I guess the designers of this model were inspired by newer films.

Atari slipped a computer-connected glove onto her left hand. The artificial hand sprang to life, flawlessly mirroring her gestures without any noticeable delay. I would have loved to give it a try myself, but, coincidentally, I lacked that specific appendage.

1 Chief Scientific Officer.



“We’ll print the artificial skin to match your skin tone—nobody will be able to tell the difference.”

After the laboratory, I was kicked over directly to lawyers. The essence of the agreement was conveniently laid out in a TL;DR¹ section: they would install a brainlink and a hand, and I would agree with all the possible consequences, including death. By the time I reached page two, I realized I was already scanning for an [Agree] button.

“What are the odds of success?”

“We estimate those at 95%, but...”

The probability of everything working out well in a war is likely less than 5%.

“Acceptable.”

Medical evaluation, surgery, and mastering the new devices—it took me a full two months.

Eaton himself arrived to see me off:

“Are you happy?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“So, what’s next?”

“I’ll... BE BACK.”

“I was expecting that answer.”

He chuckled and left.

¹ Too long; Didn’t read.



[8]

Afternoon | September 27, 2028
Ukraine

I search the bodies and backpacks of the two dead gavriks. Several MREs¹ (no thanks, I don't eat that russian crap), and two power banks: one empty, the other almost full. I stash the latter into a pocket on my tactical belt.

Fully juiced batteries are likely the main prerequisite for surviving in the gray zone. Everything relies on a source of energy: transport, drones, cameras, Starlink, helmet visor, electronic jamming device, brainlink, and yes—my robot hand. Wall outlets don't work here, and the Ukraine-controlled territory is way too far.

The afternoon nap was not just for recuperation—the fold-out solar panel is set up on the roof, charging batteries. I take off running toward it. Warvid doesn't reveal coordinates of the unfolding action, but anyone can easily deduce the precise location using basic AI image analyzer. I'm sure that in an hour or two this place will be crawling with russian streamers and even more gavriks. It's time to put as much distance between myself and here as possible.

I quickly drop into the bedroom to grab my backpack before heading to the top floor, where the rooftop access ladder is located.

I'm gathering my things when Crow's video pops up: four quad bikes are approaching from the North.

Distance: 2.2 km²

ETA³: 2:35

Shit, that was quicker than I expected. Those gavriks must have been used as bait.

I can manage four, but the rest who will surely follow shortly are bad news. This location is compromised, so fuck it:

[Start live]

1 MRE: Meal-ready-to-eat—military field rations.

2 2.2 km = ~1.4 mi.

3 Estimated time of arrival.

Taking several steps at a time, I reach the ground floor. Parked in the hallway of apartment No. 3 is a custom-made electric mountain bike—my sole means of transport and main battery guzzler. I slam the powerbank in: battery level: 43%; approx. distance: 33 km¹. One can live with that. I push the bike out into the stairway.

ETA: 00:23

There goes my chance to slip out undetected.



1 33 km = ~20 mi.