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THREE.



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I - MAN

MAJOR

The Blues could no longer deceive him, to convince him that he has a choice. The magic inside him was pushing further into his soul, dragging the last remnants of good to the surface - only it wasn't enough anymore. He has become completely empty, and will need to try some different treatments for his troubles.

There was only one way left.

Until tonight, he hoped he wouldn't have to search for Sandra. The reason for this was as practical as it was selfish: if he fails, he will be left with absolutely nothing. If only he had another option — just a hint of an alternative — that will give him purpose if he fails, it would stop him from waiting.

Luckily, he had nightmares.

The drugs did not remain in his body after he woke up, trembling, from the afternoon nap. Perhaps the holiday spirit reacted badly with him; perhaps it would become easier if he could resist until February. He had a thousand maybes swarming in his head. Finally, he made a decision: give up and run away. There was no escape.

He will go mad.

If he has not already.

"Would you like another drink?" shouted the bartender.

He has known the bartender since coming to 'Krigla'. He always worked the late shift, always wearing the same shirt. He never asked for his name, yet they still became friends.

He was thinking about whiskey. How it would go well with the song that was playing. But it was too expensive. He liked to drink the same booze, nothing else. His wallet could survive two or three glasses, but he still needed more. Much, much more.

"Give me the homemade one!"

"Plum? Or pear?"

"Pear."

Brandy is better than whiskey, in every way but one: it was not whiskey. It doesn't sit well with the Blues, and he can't live without it. Good thing he stopped believing in perfect moments.

It was going down his throat like fire. It was gross. Only once did he drink one worse. It was among the snow covered hills. He remembers the winter sun, and the frost in his nostrils, and the light that was reflecting on the bottle. The memories were returning, as he was wandering...

"Man, who can drink this shit?"

Oh, come on, Major, don't be so harsh. It's good, it's better than nothing."

He was looking at this kid, and he suddenly felt sorry for him. His uniform was big, and he was bent to one side from the weight of the rifle on his shoulder. The others were also mainly kids, but this one was the smallest.

"What do you know about brandy, kid? You haven't even tasted life yet," he asked out loud, but later regretted it. He was tired, and he had had enough of everything, so he started making mistakes. One should teach morals to soldiers, and he was doing the exact opposite.

"He has no clue — same as us. But, who cares about it, Major?" Dugi said. Dugi was almost seven feet tall; it would always get them into trouble when they were sneaking up on enemies. Branko died yesterday and everyone was upset about it. That is why he allowed them to stay one more day in the village. That is why he allowed them to drink that brandy. They were so honest to report it to him, so he did not have the heart to forbid it.

"Where did you find this bottle?" he asked them.

"The third house from the top. It was the last one left. They left it to us when they were running away, so we can have it for the New Year!"

He was looking at Darko Bogović and he was wondering what he was made of. He was giving him a hard time, more than anyone else. He was a young man without any emotions, a man of war. He was aware of men like him. There are plenty of them in the Balkans, more than enough. Some people are simply born with that killing instinct inside of them. And they just wait for the opportunity so that it reaches its maximum. He felt that Darko still hasn't reached his maximum, and he was hoping that God will take him before he will have a chance to live up to see it.

"Are you sure the village is empty?"

"We checked everything, Major, every single house. There aren't even corpses left."

Where could all these people be? He knows this environment well: there is no cave capable of hiding hundreds of souls. They would freeze in the woods after a couple of days. This village had been empty for a lot longer. There were no signs of fights, no traces of missing people. They must have been taken away and buried somewhere.

Now, we are doing it, too, he thought.

Last month, he spoke to Potonjac — a good friend; a big, old soldier — through a safe connection. A grenade blew off his foot. They exchanged only a couple of words, but the things that the old soldier didn't say were more important. It wasn't going well, no.

"Don't get drunk, we must go before it gets dark. Is that clear?"

"Clear!"

He left 'Krigla', because he would have thrown up for sure. Not from alcohol, but from the nerves. He's always had a sensitive stomach. The brandy brings back the bad memories. It's best to think of Sandra.

Sandra. The rocker girl. A shame to his father, the General Marko Babović. He remembers all the times his friends described her to him while they were in the barracks. The way she dresses, the way she puts on makeup, her ass, tits, behavior and everything else. He admired the General. But also felt sorry for him. The military is like a family: when people start saying bad things about you, it travels far. It was difficult to blame him. It's the worst when you get backstabbed by your own child.

Then, all of a sudden, he met her. And his opinion of her changed completely.

She stopped him in the corridor.

"Excuse me, I'm looking for my father. General Babović"

"I think he left for Kragujevac this morning."

She had a sad look in her eyes. She looked differently; not how his friends described her. She was an angel.

He started the conversation, as if in a delirious state, aware only of his need to stay in her presence as long as possible. Luckily, she didn't stop

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