

FIGHTING

On the way

And just like that, the charming music stopped. Private Ludii took advantage of his seat at the edge and nearest to the back of the truck. He stuck his head out cautiously and looked around.

The convoy was stopped near a meadow. Directly behind Ludii's truck, a shepherd sat in the thick shadow of a large oak tree, flute in hand. An officer towered over the flutist with a pungent air of rotund authority. Behind the large man, a clutch of soldiers in brown clothes and soft caps milled about.

And then there were the sheep. No longer tranced by the music, the meek beasts rubbed anxiously on each other and spilled around aimlessly and soon the milling brown men found themselves waist deep in white fleece waters.

Somebody barked something. Fellow recruits crawled out of the trucks and Ludii found himself on the verdant ground soon enough. They were a stream at first, then a fan, and then jagged phalanx, then a clang of chaos. They spoke in curt, sharp ending sounds. Idle rifles hung drooping from their shoulders. Full gear, metal helmets, cherry wood flasks dangled around their waists. A few other officers appeared. They had a lighter middle, a solitary pistol and a pouch with maps.

The officer kicked the shepherd in the foot. "What's your name, man?"

The shepherd looked up.

"Are you a Pomak?"

The shepherd looked away.

“Christian?” The large man turned and summoned another officer with his index finger.

The officer trotted up.

“Major, sir? How can I assist you?”

The shepherd got up and spoke. “I’m a shepherd, sir. I see to the sheep.”

“Good for you.” The major wiped his neck. His breath wheezed. “We need a lamb. Maybe the whole flock. The troops need to eat, right lieutenant?”

The other officer nodded vigorously.

“On whose order, sir?” The shepherd asked.

“The taxing authorities,” snorted the rotund major as his lieutenant let out a roaring laugh. “Word is, shepherd, you have not been paying your dues to the pasture wardens.”

The major bent his large brows to his lieutenant and spoke in whisper. The junior officer nodded and doubled back to the waiting men. The major turned back to the shepherd.

“Who holds the village?”

“Today? I don’t know.”

The major stared at something in the hazy far. He made an inclusive sweep with his hand.

“Well, we have the mountain. It’s only a matter of time.”

He adjusted his sagging belt and let his right hand rest casually on the beautiful handcrafted holster encasing his side arm. He flicked the holster guard loose and held onto his pistol.

Then like a shadow slipped form the nether realm, the large man floated silently up to a bleating little lamb. Without delay, he whipped the gun out and sent two precise bullets through

the meek head of the animal. Blood spat in a crimson round and landed on the lolling relatives of the lamb. The corpse fell with the tiniest sound.

“My tender dinner.”

The lieutenant came back bearing a waterflask. The major took it and drank from it. A long drink. While the mouth drank, his eye shot up to the sky. There was a tiny object flying through it.

A whine, growing louder with time, arced over the cloudless firmament. A projectile hurled from some invisible canon. As it came upon the meadow, the whine became a shriek and it furrowed headfirst into the sea of sheep and soldiers. The sheep flew skyward disemboweled. Brown-clothed flesh followed, thinly ripped. A cataract of slow smoke crept from the ground. Green grass lifted to the heavens clumped with brown earth. It rose just in time to mop up the dropping blood and tissue and guts. Men’s ears popped. The few remaining sheep scattered blind from the shock, bleating the while.

“We are under attack!” Ludii heard their sergeant yell. “Into the ditch, take cover.” And so he did, and so his fellow recruits did. God, Ludii sighed, we haven’t even gotten our uniforms.

The major looked up from the ground he had instinctively dropped to. He spotted a brown soldier with batons in his hands. Flags of various colors were attached to the batons’ ends.

“The signal. Give the signal, idiot!” The major shouted.

One more mortar roared and sent its dreadful stone. And couple more joined in the choral. Then another couple. Then, a rain of shells came upon the hapless meadow.

The soldier found it in himself to rise to his feet. With exercised motion, he waved the proper signs, blowing the warning whistle the while. From his batoned direction, the surviving men heaved in formation, hugged the upturned tract and pointed their weapons at the village

directly below from where the mortar whine seemed to come. Another swing of the flags. The working ends of the automatic rifles cackled with 7.62 millimeter spit. The few green men, the officers of the squadron, cupped their handguns and fired, as well. The batons flew again. Out of the wall of trees and shrub, behind the mossy arras, rose a chopped grumble and ominous stutter. Through the green curtain, in the hatching effort, burst a host of cubic and sharp-edged monsters.

Out they poked, muzzled and crept. Out they came, trampling the boughs and the branches and the beech and the oaks in their way. They crawled out halfway and stopped. The signs had ceased as the signal giver, at the whistle of another mortar arc, saw his body parts scattered in no peculiar formation.

“Somebody pick up the batons! Somebody keep on signaling!” The major shouted above the din.

Private Ludii felt a sense of heroism come over him and his belly filled with a warm buzz. Perhaps he could run over and pick up the batons and carry on in the dead man’s stead. As he deliberated on that, another soldier scurried out and tried to pry the sticks from the rigid fingers of a severed hand. Ah, what thrill, thought Ludii. Battle, chaos, heroism.

The volunteer gave up trying to free the batons, picked up the lot, severed hand and all, and began waving. Light-armored, all-terrain vehicles bore out in full glistening glory. Their small caliber canons trained at the offensive village shimmering a few kilometers down from the meadow. In their tow emerged the mid-range artillery surrounded with brown soldiers who busied themselves to unhinge, unlatch and unshutter the tow-hooks, magazine locks and the open ends of the guns. Pulling and pushing at opposite ends, the soldiers turned the big canons round and trained them down the slope. Five-shell trays nestled at their feeding valves. The stems and the attached batons swished through the air in a downward slice. The guns fired in unison.

Voom, vooom, vooom. Their long green muzzles sprang back ready for the next round. The major's squadron had recovered from the surprise attack and now returned fire.

The new recruits lay huddled in a nearby ditch. Their sergeant had told them to lie low. But a fury had begun washing over recruit Ludii. His blood boiled and cried for action. Oh, to hell with lying low, he yelled. The fight, the fight's the thing! He rose to his feet and ran out on the meadow. He grabbed a rifle from a dead soldier and let out a battle cry. A whine came falling from the sky. It dumped on him like a deafening melody. Ludii fell to the ground. The world swirled around him. He saw the sky above and the birds flying away scared and the clumps of reddish brown earth. Then, the face of the shepherd hung above him and Ludii noticed the man's deformed jaw. Hm, Ludii thought as he was passing out from the mild concussion, did somebody hit the poor fellow with a blunt object shattering the bone, which then fused back together the wrong way? Then, Ludii had a thought about this thought. He wondered about the precision and directedness of his conjecture. Does he know the shepherd? Has he met him before?

Ludii did not much remember being helped back to the truck or the ride to his unit's advance post up by the town of Belkovo, deep in the southeast. He did remember a bit of the week thereafter. It was an extended adventure in lying on the hospital bed convalescing. Then, sitting on the hospital bed, convalescing. There was also a bit of walking around the hospital bed, convalescing.

The Last Month

The large canvass tent served as the impromptu headquarters of the illustrious 7th Mechanized Infantry Brigade under the feared 3rd Bulgarian Army, which also happened to be the sole combat-ready wing of the whole Bulgarian military potency. Inside the tent, on a flimsy tin chair sat Private Ludii, one of the Army's newest recruits, and, like a starved man, waited and waited to get it, get it all, all of it, in one swallow. In front of him, a procession of boring men with paper folders and shuffling voices and papercut fingers and stupid glasses took their turn to talk about minutiae and what Em had not the slightest desire to know. Places for eating, eating order, haricut timetable, munitions checkout points, munitions list, watch duties and watch lists, how to draw water from the wells, flask checkout points, live ammunition checkout points, sleeping barracks and sleep order, bunk lists and uniform checkout points and hours, lists of uniform composition, de-licing hours and location of points.

Private Ludii looked at his watch for the tenth time since he walked in, his draft papers in hand, not a full ten minutes ago and tapped on his knee with impatience. Come on, how much longer does he wait?

Of a sudden the hall grew quiet. No yawning or bored whisper. Ludii could see the top of the head of a man walking up to the front.

“Is this Him?” people asked. Is this the man they all have been waiting for, the legendary warrior and Brigade captain, a true leader and a fierce and merciless commander?

The man strode up to the pulpit and laid his two bare palms on the flat surface. His mouth was shut tightly. His long pale face betrayed no emotion. The bottom hairs of his thin moustache swayed ever so slightly in the breathing wind coming from his thin and absolutely regular nose.

He surveyed the gathered ragtag bunch, some still in their civilian clothes, and lifted his hands. The silence, if one could imagine improving upon perfection, grew tenfold.

“I have no papers in my hand.”

Somebody chuckled. Everybody else covered their heads. The captain smiled out of one of the corners of his thin mouth. The rest of his pale face betrayed no joy.

“Yet, by order of these very hands, by the fist I may throw forward at some time in the future, you or somebody next to you, may soon die.”

Nobody chuckled. Everybody covered their heads even more.

“I am actually not given to heroic rousing words.” The man smiled again, this time with his entire face. “I just like to open with a thunder like that to get your attention. Now, what will follow is a long speech. Perhaps too long for your young and restless minds. The speech will be vivid and engaging. And it will be said by me. This is weird, right, and doubly so because I am known to most for being taciturn, not verbose. And so one could say such speech will be out of character for me. But what is character, men?”

There was a pause. The "men" were feverishly figuring if this was a real question or a rhetorical frame. Thankfully, the captain picked up talking.

"Character, they speak of it in lowered awe. Character, they sing of it. But the other way of saying it is by using another simple word. Fear. Character is consistent cowardice. It is timid inaction when your fancy can conceive of every great act. It is being a fool, for the fool is consistent. The fool is ruled by opinion and past stupidity. Or past heroism, which is quite the same. And it is the fool who is gripped by cowardice, the fear of stepping over a line drawn with air, drawn by the dunces around you, self clothing with shackles. Consistency, predictability – the vile bane of whatever is, whatever can be human, only human. Character is the sound of

black holes sucking the infinite variety of your vast universe down to a singularity, which is the dread of living like a man, not a predetermined dog. If you think you've come here on the basis of character, you, men, are not at all, but dogs you are. You will see what I mean."

He motioned to an invisible minion and soon a big map was brought in and rolled out behind the commander. Then a long thin pointer was brought to his hand.

"I am told that most of you have come from abroad and some of you are students and all of you are young. I don't know why you came back. Perhaps the old fire heart did not want to simmer out abroad, quiet like a voice in the desert heard by not a living soul. To quote the poet. Or perhaps it was plain boredom with your nice capitalistic lives. Maybe you came for the action. Maybe, your heads are so full of useless and in the end immaterial knowledge that you no longer know which end is up in the rifle of life. Sorry, that was a mixed metaphor. I think I meant the stairway of life. You live inside of them, the heads, I speak of, and never peek out. You are lost in your own inconclusive, meandering ways. Your mind's a labyrinth, but you have no kind woman to drop you a thread and lead you outside. And even if it did, even if you were led outside, well. Outside, I'll tell you, friends, outside such winter rages that it can snuff you out like a young precocious bud in a surprise April blizzard."

The captain made to bundle up by raising the stiff collar of his green jacket.

"And so, you see the issue. It is so dark, damp, lonely and complicated in your own heads and yet so cold damp and alienating outside that you don't know what to do, how to live. You crave simplicity, a feeling of potent rightness to anchor your uncertain educated minds. That is why you are here. Because death is out there for all of you and you have now accepted it, you will paradoxically never feel more free and more determined. Now, some of you have seen places I will never see; most of you know things I will never know. No matter, the blood that

buckles to be shed is simple and runs in all of us. When I rise tomorrow and bid you storm the foes in the midst of their bullet hail, all of you will follow and run to glory. And why would you do such stupid-seeming thing? Because the poet said, Whoever perished in the defense of the rightful, the true, his home and liberty, and all that, his nature shall bewail in every form and sing his song till time itself decays. And nothing else matters. Young as we are, we have lived enough to see how each thing goes the way of everything.”

“Oblivion, decay, ruination and death. Living guarantees this. Dying here, for your sweet country, or for your dirty, corrupt country, or for whatever, makes it count. Though you’re pale now from holding your pens and watching television, it is no disgrace. There will be blood on you, yours or your neighbor’s. I guarantee this. And that is why you have come, though too smart for your commanders and too affluent for these barracks. To see the blood and to finally hear it rise majestic in your vessels. You may see it tomorrow, or you may see it the day after. But whenever you see it, as your life seeps from you on your final patch of grass you will sigh with relief because it will not have been in vain. At that great point, you will say, oh, how I thought with my learned head that life was a misshapen broken up river that led to nowhere, or a silly joke, or sickness unto death, vast illusion, a momentary flash of light in the thick unremitting dark, or some such high-bred thought, and now I see how wrong I was. And you will die happy and smiling.”

“Of course, a lot of you will not be so fortunate. A lot of you may not see it now, but in ten years or in twenty years, maybe even forty, and then only as a vague feeling. You will be in a coffeehouse on a walking cane, or in the ward on a catheter. You will be alone and old and just as dying and that is when it will come to you. I have been dreaming a prodigious dream, you will then tell yourself as you stare at your coffee or the liquid in the tube. It was a dream of living,

when all I wanted was a life of death, back in the war, back on my allotted plot.”

The captain cast a slow look around the seated men. Some fidgeted under it, some stood transfixed and others lowered their heads. Ludii looked him straight in the eye and smiled. The officer smiled back.

“Remember this, you dreamers. Remember me then. Now, you wonder, when will I shut up. And what the hell is with this map behind me! My deputies will tell you all about it. Operational minutiae. Mission, the Army’s tactic, as much as needed. The lay of the land. How to tell the Turk from friendlies. All that. I will see you later.”

The stern speaker stepped down and marched out with eyes lowered. In his stead, a collection of other uniforms gathered. Mess sergeants, non-coms and one senior lieutenant took the still warm stage and began reading out from a list, pointing to the map and spewing out words of movements, tactics, drill locations, class schedules and food rations. The machinery of war began producing its effects on the enlisted. Some thought of running back home, some cried, some grated teeth. Ludii sat largely free of emotion, his gaze stuck to the podium. Looking at him, an outside observer would say he was where he wanted to be.