(start of the prologue)

And just like that, he disappeared from the woods into the smoke of battle.

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A few weeks later, not far from there, another trail of smoke crossed the forest. Markuss Keidann rode the train in the opposite direction. Most trains went to the frontline full of soldiers – like cattle to the slaughter, they came back empty.

Markuss spied through the small metal bars that made a window in the makeshift wagon he was in and cast a ray of light into its dusty interior. He watched as the mud and dirt became the green and yellow fields of inner Latvia. It was by no means a luxurious voyage: his wagon carried supply crates and wounded soldiers back into the countryside. He felt observed; maybe it was the strange fact he was not wounded (except for a scar in his cheek, but that was older than the war), nor was he a crate. It could be his officer uniform, partially ripped from shells, or the two flowers he carried on his lap – one for his father, living among the dead, the other for his mother, dying among the living.

The train made a quick stop in a small platform north of Wenden, where stood a single brick construction. A few soldiers rattled in the train as they loaded or unloaded crates just for the train to part again in a few minutes, heading further north away from the war, leaving Markuss alone in that quiet station.

It was strange to hear quiet again – especially considering he was not more than 100 kilometers away from the front – but it felt good for the first time in a while. As he waited for his ride, he appreciated the green trees and the blue sky and the pastures. It was peace, however short it should be. In the dirt road slowly strode a wooden wagon, with a familiar rider. The first familiar face in years.

His uncle got out of the wagon and for a brief moment both men stared at each other. Maybe it was disbelief. “Coronel Keidann!”, his uncle saluted him after that moment of acknowledgment and started laughing, as he opened his arms and stepped in for an embrace. “It’s good to see you, kid. Although we may need to change you before your mother sees you”, he said, looking at a hole a shrapnel punched in his shirt.

“It’s second lieutenant, for now,” Markuss said with a smile. “And I brought extra clothes with me”, he said, moving his small bag from his shoulder into the wagon. “How many?” asked his uncle. “The only other pair I’ve got”, laughed Keidann, and both man climbed the wagon to make the journey to his uncle’s home.

“Second lieutenant, heh?” said Uncle. “Your father would be proud of you.”. That was true. “The beard fits you well”. That was a lie. Markuss sat by his side, stooped, looking at the horizon. He was young and his beard was faulty and unkept, but in contrast to the dirty rags he sported as a uniform, it looked good. Combat active officers had the privilege to skip routine inspection, because Russian Imperial inspectors were either late or dead. “You look like the spitting image of him.”

Markuss was silent, contemplating the fields, the trees and the sky.

“I sometimes worry you have got all the genes of your father. It does make me a little sad”. And that was true: Markuss resembled little his mother or maternal uncle, except for his greenish eyes. “Maybe,” Markuss said slowly, still looking at the horizon “but then I’d have your ugly mug”, and both laughed. “At least you got your mother’s wit”, his uncle punctuated.

It was spring, and the fields were beginning to grow with life again, but Markuss saw no men working in the fields. He saw old people and girls. It felt like this a different world since he left the trenches. The girls walked around with baskets of eggs and wheat, lightly enjoying life and the sun, laughing among themselves. “Let’s go to the lake”, some of them were planning. For a moment, it seemed to Markuss as though where no worries existed in this world. They looked at him with curiosity, before smiling and continuing their daily walk. Markuss felt out of place.

“You don’t see that a lot”, Markuss said.

“Girls?”

“Smiles”.

(Markuss thinks about his cousin)

“And how is it?” Uncle asked, after some silence. “The war?”

“Brutal, bloody, dirty and full of mud.” Markuss looked at the horizon again - he seemed small, stooped in his seat. “It’s months of uneasiness followed by seconds of horror.”

“But do you keep your spirits up?”

“It’s hard.” Markuss sighed before throwing a half-smile. “but I try. I wish I still could go back home. I wish none of this had happened.”

“So do all who live to see such times,” His uncle said. He did not know war, but he knew hard times. “but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.”

(revise)

They reached a wooden house on top of a small hill. A small cobblestone wall separated the wheat of the surrounding field from the grass of the house’s yard. It was small but full of life; the family old terrier slept and the cattle grazed, and a big trail of smoke and delicious smell came from the chimney.

At their sight atop of the hill, his aunt ran to greet them. Her arms seemed stronger than her husband’s, for the hug almost suffocated Markuss. “Oh dear,” she said, “it’s so good to see you.” She held his dirty cheeks in her hands, “you look so much like your father. Now let’s come inside, I have made luncheon for our travellers”.

“Honey, would you mind if we…”, Uncle said, slightly tilting his head to the right. “before we ate?”. It was then that his aunt realized the flowers he carried were not out of courtesy. “Of course, my dear, please. I’ll be inside”.

His uncle took him to the side of the house. Beneath a tree stood a small gravel rectangle, with a stone on top. His father’s name was carved in it. How strange it was to see a name so familiar in such an impersonal stone. It was the first time he ever saw it.

“Purvas Purenes”. Markuss looked at the small yellow tulip-like flowers in his hand. This type of flower grew around lakes and rivers in Latvia, and recently Markuss had discovered they also grow in muddy trenches. “A resilient little flower. I saw it outside my trench one day. A shell almost…”, he stopped himself as an effort not to bring the shards of that shell into the conversation. “It’s a reminder of home for a man buried away from it. He would have loved it” he said, as he placed it above the gravel. “How long has it been?”

“Almost one year now… ” his uncle placed his hand on his shoulder. “Can you believe it?”. Markuss was silent again, contemplating the flower he would give to his not-dead-yet mother. Life is odd – it’s resilient enough to burst amid trenches, but also so fragile that it threatened to leave her mother at every sigh. “I wish your brother was here”. Markuss did not respond.

“I told your mother about Kriss”.

“You shouldn’t have,” Markuss said,

“It’s been a month already, Markuss. She deserves to know.”

“Can’t you spare her the pain? Have some mercy, she’s already weak!”, for the first time since the station, Markuss’ voice was more than a mumble.

“I spared her the truth.” His uncle answered. “It’s noble, Markuss, to protect those you love, but a man can only carry so much in his shoulders, and you’re doing no good by not telling them the truth.” He continued. “She is stronger than you think. She carried your father all the way here”.

And both men went silent until lunch.

(continues)

(and for a moment, that small wooden house, on a small hill north of Wenden, so many kilometers from home, seemed the most wholesome place in the world)

They went in once more at the small wooden cottage. His aunt hadn’t stopped working since they left her to her affairs. She kneaded firmly but gently the dough that were to be the next morning’s bread. The smell of sausages and buttery potatoes greeted Markuss and for a moment filled the absence of the hug the frail arms of his mother could no longer give him, but he so direly needed. As his aunt noticed they had come back, she said, “Oh, please come and seat, Markuss, you must be so hungry. Look at you…”. He couldn’t withstand pity. It felt like failure – the shadow of not being able to protect the ones he loved, and the reason his uncle’s words pierced him through.

But for a moment he wished to shake it all off. He asked for a bit of fresh water, wishing it would wash down some of his guilt. As he watched his aunt make bread as the future image of those girls back in the wheat fields, time seemed to slow its pace. The sun started to engolden, its light stretching through the small window atop the table at which they sat. He reached out with his hands to let it be touched by the ray. Now time briefly stopped. This place, estranged from the world that ached in war and illness, although so distant from his home, was the closest he’d ever get again to feeling like he had returned to it.