He slowly trodded through the cabins, sometimes squeezing himself in the corridors with his army uniform and his bag on his shoulder, appreciating what future that train would bring him. His eyes met the most wonderful cast of different people: lawyers in their seats, revising notes, rich women luxuriously clad, holding neatly their umbrellas in their laps. Mothers and their daughters, looking at the horizon - the green fields opened before them. The bright sun came through the windows, and the working men covered their faces with their flat caps to sleep and snore to the sound of the machine. Markuss felt proud, it was his first time away from his beloved Courland.

He found a place to sit at a table across another uniform-clad young soldier, whose face was covered by a book. “Good day, sir. My name is Markuss, what is yours?”, he said innocently, but received no response. Not to bother the flow of people in the corridor, he sat down and tried again: “Good day, sir. ”.

He noticed the young soldier barely moved both times. Except for his finger moving the page. Markuss stared at the man in curiosity, maybe he hadn’t heard, maybe he was a veteran whose hearing was long lost in battle, or maybe the literature was so immersive he forgot the outside existed. The book he held was somewhat worn and brown, as was his hair, ash brown, like an oak in winter. Markuss could not make the title and thought it was wise to just stay silent, but it would be inadequate to sit without properly making his presence known.

“Good da-”

“I heard you the first time.”, the voice came from behind the book, but the man barely moved. Markuss now realised the silence was the way urban folk often signalled they did not want to talk. But his curiosity made him insist.

“Sorry, sir, I thought it would be awfully inadequate if I hadn’t assured you I was sitting at your table. And not to be unkind, but I wager an answer would be appreciated”.

“Well, I just couldn’t exactly find an answer to you, or rather, what you meant.”

“Sorry, sir, I don’t think I follow”.

“I wondered whether your ‘good day’ was a pathic expression, or a factual statement of the day. That is, whether you wished me a good day, or meant you felt good this day, or rather to express that this day was good, whether you or I felt it or not?”

Markuss thought that was the queerest question he ever heard. He had indeed been smiling the entire morning in the train - and he felt it was a good day, but it was a *factual* good day: the sun shone and the smell of the flowers in the field grew so strong it disputed with the dark coal coming from the train. “Maybe all at once? I hadn’t thought very thoroughly, I must admit.”. Markuss felt an air of malicious satisfaction from the book and silence fell again. The urban folk had won, but he was not about to give up.

“In fact, now that I think of it, it must be to wish you a good day - whether you want it to be good - for if it was a mere factual description of the day, I’d have saved us both the time and let you figure it out for yourself, and a look outside the window would have confirmed it.”, he looked at the fields, “I think words must then carry the truth, the unerring truth. So now that I have decided which meaning I intend, I say again: good day, partner, my name is Markuss, what is yours?”

Markuss turned his head again and found that the book was a little lower than before, and he could finally see the young soldier. He was almost pale, and his eyes were a greyish shade of blue, icy and cold - and they studied him slowly, as if instead of the book, they read him. Like a wolf about to strike.

“Well, my day is good, *thank you*. Or it was, *partner.*”. For the first time, Markuss noticed the man’s subtle accent.

“Sorry to have interrupted, then. As I sayed, a simple answer would have sufficed, but I wager that must be some good literature - and I can’t criticise a man from loving a good story.”

“Sorry to disappoint you then, but I’m not one for fictional stories or literature.” The man said, closing his book and placing it on the table. Markuss finally read it: Notes on *The Art of War by Napoleon Bonaparte*. The man continued, “I read because a man with a scant vocabulary will almost certainly be a weak thinker. The greater one's vocabulary, the greater one's awareness of fine distinctions and subtle nuances of meaning - or *truth*, as you’d believe. I think words can be used in a better manner than creating tales or stories that never happened. I think we have enough moral tales to teach and impress children. I’m more of a man of direct facts. Such as the fact that the word *good* in your *factual* *good day* can mean an awful lot of things. The sun might still be good for you and I appreciate the window next to our table but it can still be a curse for the farmer in drought. So maybe words can’t carry truth, or if they do, truth changes. I learned that from a young age. I don’t work with truth, I work with facts. There is sun, that’s a fact, whether he means good or bad is not for me to say. Facts require words to be conveyed properly. The more precise a man is, the more precise his thinking. Knowledge of things and knowledge of the words for them grow together. If you do not know the words, you can hardly know the facts. And another fact was that you didn’t interrupt me, It was I who didn’t want to interrupt you.”

“And I shall thank you for not interrupting me, if that was the case, but I must still ask what you mean.” Markuss said.

“Never interrupt your opponent when making a mistake. That’s Napoleon. Not to be *unkind*, as you said, but if you’re going where I think you must be going, then you and I will soon be opponents, as there are too many eager applicants and too few positions. And your mistake was revealing too much of yourself, without discovering much about me. ”

“I’m going to the war school to be an officer, as you already guessed. And if we are to be opponents in the future, it is not me to say. But it does not impede us from being friendly before or thereafter. My name is Markuss Keidann, and I have nothing to reveal, as I have nothing to hide.”, Markuss sat comfortably in his seat and stared at the man. He had his elbows on the table and closed his hands together.

“Yes, it does not impede us from being friends, although forgive my *unkindness* again, but I do not think we will be. It is quite possible we will not be in the same regiment, and if we are, we possibly will follow different paths after the process and never see each other again. So excuse me if I don’t see much to gain from a friendship set to end. But I wouldn’t expect one like you to understand.”

“You do have a very queer concept of *unkindness*. For a man dedicated to facts, those last words carry something else than just them. Although, not being as educated as you are, nor as direct and factual, I must ask *why you are helping me?* I think you’re mistaken when you say I revealed too much of myself but gained little from you. I noticed for a fact your accent, are you a northerner by any chance? Definitely spent your time in any urban centre. And for a man who started this exchange rather quietly, I must say you do carry yourself talking. What is it that you’re trying to demonstrate? If you do not consider me a worthy opponent or worthy friend, then why the long monologue? Is it for your ego?”

“And so are you mistaken yourself, Markuss Keidann - a southern man with his southern manners. Curonian, nonetheless, although not from a city, and I cannot phantom what small village you must have come from”, he said monotonically, “you do not know me, yet I spent my life around the likes of you. You never wondered the meaning of your words because you were never punished for it. Whenever someone like you says something wrong, it is the task of the likes of me that have to distort it to the best meaning possible. Whenever someone like you makes a mistake, you’re *taught*, not *punished*. You were never *interrogated* by the police, you were *asked*. Proud, arrogant men could always live your life in the blissful ignorance of your privilege. What is it that you seek in the army? to transform your requests into orders?”.

“No.” Markuss said with a smile, he had just made his opponent trap himself in his mistake. “When I was but a boy, a commander left me this scar and he would have left many more if it was not for a common soldier standing up. Since then, I’ve dreamed of being that soldier. I’m more of an honest man than you think”.

His answer seemed to have disarmed the young man with the book. And for a minute silence reigned as he reconsidered the information. “It’s true that I may have misjudged you, Markuss, and I’m sorry for it.”, the man said, “In return I’ll be kind to alert you to something I have learned after many years: where we are going, friendliness and kindness will not get you far. It is rather good to start thinking about the meaning of words. When your superiors use a word, it will mean just what they choose it to mean - neither more nor less”

“Thank you. Although you misjudged me, I cannot say I did not enjoy talking to such an intelligent man, even though we were on opposite sides. So to answer your first question, maybe the meaning lies in whatever the listener might want it to be, fact or not. Maybe now you could answer a few of the questions still left?”

Markuss saw the self-contained smile of the man, who extended his arm over the table for a handshake. He answered just his name: “Wilks”