Dear Arvids,

When I was a kid, reluctant to sleep, you sat by my bed and told me all these fantastic stories. Stories of old, which happened in another continent in another time. I’m not sure you realized the little seeds you planted in my imagination back then, but they stuck with me. By the time I finish this book, you may be too old to read it. But, don’t worry, I will sit by your bed and read it.

Yours,

G.M.

The day dawned clear and serene. The sun was bright as amber, the sky blue as young maidens’ eyes and the top of trees swayed with the sound of distant German artillery.

If not for this occasional, low tum of German howitzers, localized around 12 miles south, the forest would be in complete silent. An inattentive wanderer would barely spot the soldiers – dressed in their Russian brownish uniform – face-down in the floor, still as statues. No order of silence had been given, but no men dared to break that stillness silent of the morning.

The 2nd Rifle Regiment, formed recently with the local factory workers from the Latvian city of Riga, had spent the entire morning digging trenches, although the result of their work had been no more than a few, half-meter deep, holes in the ground which they had to lay if they wanted protection. The 9th German Army had advanced, always with sinister speed, crossing the frontier with the provinces of Lithuania into Latvia. Since late-1914 they had pushed the Imperial Russian Army further and further into its homeland, and this very morning were swallowing allied units into the south. The artillery the 2nd regiment was now falling on the head of some poor bastard, and would soon be falling on theirs, in that calm and serene forest.

Tum. The artillery barrage was rhythmic, a clock reminding each men of the duty they will soon have to fulfil. They were not more than factory workers, farmhands, and craftsman – some too young enough to have beards, some too old enough to have hair. Most never touched a gun before, but still they fashioned themselves as soldiers, warriors of their land – the same land they now lied face-down - protecting their home against the German crusader, as their ancestors had done in the 13th century.

Each of those men used their silence differently. There, lying behind those small mounds of earth they dug, some prayed, others gazed the endless corridors formed by the trunks of the conifers, looking closely to spot any incoming German boche. No man dared to break the silence, except for a young lad – carrying two boxes of ammunition – running between the trenches and trees. He just came back from the Headquarters with the last supplies the 2nd would receive before the attack.

“God bless ye, Kris”, whispered the sergeant as he pushed the soldier that lied by his side to make space for the newcomer, and Kristaps was quick to lay down. Each gathered a few magazines from the wooden crate and stuffed their pockets. “Any idea on who’s getting the beatin’?”, the soldier by his side asked as he lighted up a cigarette. He had to decide whether to keep the extra magazine or the cigarettes in his pocket.

“Must be 1st Regiment”, answered the sergeant. “and don’t let Wilks catch you doing that.”, he chuckled as he saw the soldier light up his cigarette. “it affects combat readiness”

“Aye, combat readiness”, repeated the soldier, in a monotone, slightly mocking, fashion. “Why bother”, half-chuckled the soldier, “I think the damned bastards in the 1st Regiment getting shelled by the boche are having an easier time than us with Wilks. Poor bastards…”, he put his cigarette in his mouth, sometimes his hands shook. “Know anyone from the 1st, sarge?”

“Nay, don’t think so.”, answered the sergeant, trying to sound uninterest, “Do you, Kris?”. Kris did not want to be dragged in the conversation between the soldier and his sergeant. It was eerily uncomfortable for him to speak of their comrades in arms this way. Every man wants to look tough, his father often said, and he somehow knew deep down that every soldier in that forest was just as scared as him, but each faced the calm before the storm in his own way.

Yes, he wanted to say, I do know some bastards getting shelled at the 1st regiment. They are my friends. But what was the point? Is the fact that he has a friend in the 1st going to change the fact that they are getting smashed by the Germans? Is his response going to stop the mockery his trench colleagues? Why bother, he repeated with the monotone fashion of the soldier in his head.

But he also wanted to say that it was a queer day for war. He had ignored the conversation of his colleagues to observe the treetops. The majestic green conifers of the forest – the aptly named Riga pines - framed the blue sky above them, and they danced and shook with every tum of the German artillery. The fresh air of morning sometimes breezed through the tight corridors of trees, carrying the fragrance exhaled by the falling leaves in that brownish ground below. It seemed too calm and beautiful, too still, and serene for war. No. He wanted to say it was not a day for war, it was a day for picnics.

He remembered the Saturdays of his childhood, when his mother woke up early to bake and his father left to cut trees. His father would come home by lunch smelling of pine and wood, and they would all sit tight together in the small wooden table at their home and lunch. Him, mother, father, and his brother. Oh, his brother. They would play after lunch while father slept, and mom took the bread off the oven. They would pack their homemade breads and homemade jelly in a small checkered blanket and head off into the forest near his home. They would sit wherever was comfortable and spent the evening together… “Know anyone, Kris?”

“I…”, Kristaps said after some moments of silence. His answered was not directly to any of his trench colleagues, as he still stared the sky. And for some fleeting seconds, he imagined himself like a child again. It all reminded him: the forest, the pines, the brownish dirt, his brother. “How queer life has changed…”

Tum, answered the German howitzer. The thundering sound of artillery seemed ever so close. Some place south of that forest, some poor bastard of the 1st regiment had his arms and legs blown – and the day looked awfully fitting for a picnic. What happened to those days? It wasn’t long ago; he was 16 years old that autumn, barely the age to be a soldier. He still had time, time to go home, time to spend with his father, with his mother. 16 years old. He was still young… was he?

Tum. Turum. Turum. Turumturum. It was not a German shell that answered him this time, but a rapid trotting that echoed in the forest. Kris tried to lift his head up from the ground, but the sergeant held him. “Horse!”, the sergeant tried to murmur to the men in the trench, but his tone was audible. “No movement to the right”, the soldier next to him uttered trying to hold the cigarette in his mouth, while checking the surroundings with his rifle, “ours or theirs?”

Turumturumturum.

“Ours or theirs?!”, the soldier asked again. “How would I know?” uttered the sergeant, “Kris, watch the tree line to the left”. “I think it’s…”, Kris started to say.

Turum. The figure of a man mounted on a horse emerged from the indistinguishable tree lines and stood right before the men in the trench, the horse stopped a few meters from their small hole. The rider, who wore the same brownish Russian imperial uniforms, gasped for some air, and recomposed himself.

“Friendly…”, he gasped for more air, not only him but the horse seemed exhausted. He lifted a small piece of paper with his arm. “Is this the 1st Regiment?”

The sergeant rose from the hole in the ground and stepped forward, placing his rifle in his shoulder. “Sorry lad, this is Riga’s 2nd”

“Sarge…?”, the soldier by Kris’ side seemed uneasy. But his voice was muffled by a distant, strong tum of German artillery.

“Bollocks,” exclaimed the rider, “they cut off our comms. Who’s your commanding officer?”

“Ol’ Wilks, he is. But you can find the 1st regiment heading right this way…”, the sergeant moved his arm with an open palm towards the south side.

The soldier right by Kris’s side dropped his cigarette. “Sarge!”

Too late, Bang. A bullet cut the rider’s chest. The sarge stepped back clumsily before jumping back in the hole. Another bullet just hit a tree right beside him. “Boches!”, he screamed, but his voice was muffled by the sound of the machine gun in the rear lines opening fire to the invisible enemy in the forest.

The rider was still half-mounted, with his bleeding chest, but the deafening sound of guns scared the animal, which rode and jumped the trench, fleeing from the shots. The rider fell face down. “They must have seen or followed the horse!”. Pieces of wood and leaves and the fleeting bright traces of bullets filled the forest. “Eyes on the trees!”

“It must ‘ave come from the right”, said the soldier, but so far none of the men in the trench could distinguish trees from Germans. Kris tried to get up, but the sarge held him.

Kris froze in place. The rider, face-down in the ground, tried to lift his body up, but blood flowed from his arms and face into the ground. He fell.

“Kris, no!”, ordered the sergeant, but the deafening noise of bullets, officers' whistles and explosions made the order inaudible, and if Kris did hear it, he would not obey. He jumped from the trench and rushed to the fallen rider. He turned the man upwards and pushed him to their half-meter dirt mound.

“Su… Surrounded”, blood dripped from the rider’s mouth as he was dragged across the muddy ground of the forest, “they are going to be surrounded…”. As soon as they reached the trench the soldier pushed both into that small hole in the ground.

“Bastards!”, the sarge dropped his rifle and started pressing the rider’s chest, blood pumped up. “They hit him good.” The sergeant pulled the small, now bloodied, paper from the rider’s hands and gave it to Kris. “Keidann, keep this”. The sarge called him Kris as a friend, Keidann, that was an order.

Whoever had followed the horse was now retreating. Or waiting. “They must be recon checking our line”, said the soldier, shooting whenever he saw movement in the trees, “they didn’t hit us full yet”. “Keidann, legs”, said the sarge, as he held up the rider from his arms and shoulders. “When we hear silence, we run”. The machineguns had stopped and only a few bullets were being exchanged by the men in the trenches. So far, the fighting was slowing down after minutes of starting.

Silence.

“Hold the line”, said the sergeant, as he and Kris and the sergeant rose to carry the rider to his hospital.

[To be continued]

(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 forests. Markuss Keidann rode the train in the opposite direction. Most trains went to the frontline full of soldiers, like cattle for the slaughters – the trains back came empty.

Markuss spied through the small metal bars that made a window in his makeshift train and cast a ray of light into the dusty interior of the train. He saw the mud and dirt become the green and yellow fields of inner Latvia. It was no means luxurious voyage: his wagon carried supply crates and wounded soldiers back. 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), and he was not a crate – it could be his officer uniform, partly ripped from shells, or the two flowers he carried on his lap: one for his dead father, the other for his dying mother.

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

It was strange to hear quiet again – specially considering he was not more than 100 kilometers from the front – but he felt good for the first time in a while, and while he waited for his ride, he appreciated the green trees and the blue sky and the pastures. It was peace, how short it was. 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 and started laughing, and both hugged. “It’s good to see you, kid. Altought 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 got”, laughed Keidann, and both man climbed the wagon to make the journey to his’ uncle home.

“Second lieutenant, heh?” said Uncle. “your father would be proud of you.”. That was true. “The beard fits you well”. That was 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 resemble 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 wits”, his uncle punctuated.

(Talk about why her mother is there in his uncles house: the war)

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 a different world since he left the trenches. The girls walked around with baskets of eggs and weath, lighting enjoying life and the sun, and laughing between themselves. “Let’s visit the lake”, some of them were planning. For a moment, Markuss thought that this was a place where existed no worries. 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 you keep spirits up?”

“It’s hard.” Markuss sighted 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 weath of the surrounding field from the grass inside. The house 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.

When they reached their home, her aunt ran to greet them. Her arms seemed stronger than her husband’s, for the hug Markuss got almost suffocated him. “Oh dear,” she said, “it’s so good to see you.” She passed her hand in his dirty cheeks, “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?”. It was then that his aunt realized the flowers he carried were not 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. It had his fathers name, however it was the first time he ever saw it.

“Purvas Purenes”. Markuss looked at the small yellow tulip-like flower in his hand. This flower grew around the lakes and rivers of 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 and contemplated. “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-yet-dead mother. “I wish your brother was here”, but Markuss did not respond.

“I told your mother about Kriss”.

“You shouldn’t,” Markuss said,

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

“Can’t spare her pain? Have some mercy, she’s already weak!”, for the first time since the station, Markuss raised raise his voice.

“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. “and she is stronger than you think. She carried your father all the way to here”.

And both men went silent until lunch.

Soup, bread and a glass of milk. It was simple nourishment. Some would call it poor, but for Keidann it was the best thing he ate in months. While his regiment cook gave his best to get some spices (don’t ask him for what price), army food was far from being great, or nourishing.

His aunt had bought a beautiful sausage, which were being rationed by the army, for she had been keeping it until her son came home, but since the army wouldn’t give him a break, she shared it with her nephew. “Dear, would you like some?”, his aunt asked, while cutting him some pieces. He didn’t even need to answer. 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.

“How long are you staying with us?”, she asked.

“4 days.” Markuss said, while taking another spoonful of soup. He was starving.

“What?!” She almost dropped the knife and his uncle stared in disbelief.

“The germans are mobilizing their reinforcements.” Markuss took a bite in his bread and used the rest to wiggle around in the air, as demonstrating battle plans. “they are going to arrive by winter. We are already outnumbered almost 2 to 1, by 1917 they will have 4 for every 1 of us. And bye-bye the chance of ever seeing home again.”

(explain the history of Latvia, and why the germans want to get to st. Petersburg thorguh Latvia).

It was weird. The whole day Markuss felt a little unease ever since he showed his license to his officer. For months it was the thing he wanted the most, but now, it seemed weird. Every conversation felt fake, or unearned… until he talked war.

“And they are planning to attack the germans before this?” His uncle asked with intent.

“Rumors. But aye.”

“But can’t they just give you some more time off? Christmas is still far from here!”. His aunt protested. If it was up to her, she would march to Russian high command herself to give her nephew a few extra days. “You could really use some time to relax”

“And we could really use another extra hand.” His uncle said, looking at his callous hands holding bread. “since your cousin is gone”.

Markuss would not argue, but before he had the chance, a door opened to a dark room, where quickly a girl in red stripped dress came out. She seemed as one of the girls they had passed by in the fields. Markuss had figured it was in that room his mother awaited him.

“She’s awake now, m’lady”, the girl said, making a small head nod and using her hands to lightly lift the tips of her dress up. She stared at Keidann in both curiosity and sadness.

“Oh, thank you my dear Laura”, his aunt said, hugging the girl. “She’s helping us take care of your mother, Markuss. Now, while we talk to her, would you like some lunch, dear?” His aunt said as she seated the girl named Laura. Laura didn’t even have to answer.

Keidann left his lunch almost immediately, altought he was not sudden, and went into the dark room. The sunlight hit the window curtains, filling the room with a tern yellow glow. The air there was colder and the silence quieter. He could see the shape of his mother in the bed. He approached while his aunt await at the doorstep.

*Promise me, Markuss*. He didn’t remember how much time he spent there, he hugged and talked to his mother, maybe even cried, but he only remembers these words. *Promise me you’ll get your brother back.*

His mother smiled faintly and her green eyes, like two jade pearls, were attentive, altought she spoke with difficulty. Her gaze seemed to reflect the distant memories of staring at a night sky in winter.

(continue)

*Promise me you’ll bring him safe*.

And he did.

No matter the cost.

(in the next chapter, talk about the 4 day stay, talk about the terrier?)

(Oh mother, where you’ve been?

You look so worn and so thin

Oh father, where are you?

And all the dreams we pursue?)

The Burning Church

There, on top of a small hill surrounded by the wheat fields of Courland, stood a gigantic Oak tree whose brown trunk and green leaves contrasted with the white-painted boards of the baptist church behind it. The Oak tree stood like a silent sentinel of the land: it had seen the times that land was filled with other Oaks like it, now it stood alone.

Four children played under it: the brothers Markuss and Kris Keidann, and brothers Anna and Gustavs Anderman. The Oak tree had seen their birth, it had also seen their ancestors. It had seen the German crusaders and missionaries when they invaded, many centuries ago. It gave shade to many Curonian soldiers tired. It saw many marriages, it also saw many funerals.

It saw the first Keidann’s take their name, after the germans won the war. The germans settled on the land, constructing palaces and solars, while the ones - old pagan soldiers like the first Keidann - became peasants.

It saw Markuss' grandfather - a woodchopper like his father, and his father before him - took down the last remaining oaks to build that small baptist church. The germans didn’t like it, but they respected the Keidann family enough to allow it. The Keidann family were always the faithful keepers of that temple, painting the white boards, cleaning the benches before service, cutting the overgrown grass from the small cemetery.

It had also seen the Anderman family arrive: the church was new and small, only the Keidanns and some local families attended it regularly. Old Keidann had been the temporary preacher, but he had only the basics of education. When he died, the congregation called for a trained preacher, and Riga sent them one: Pastor Anderman.

It was the Keidanns who received the Andermans when they first arrived in the village, Aizpute. They had provided lodgement and their house in the center, and soon became friends. Anderman was the pastor but the Keidanns were their faithful right hand. And so Mr. Keidann and Mr. Andermans kids were raised together.

Markuss Keidann, the oldest - but no older than 12 - liked to imagine great knights and wars of the past. He ran through the wheat fields imagining where his ancestors lived. He liked to believe he was the heir of a line of great kings and warriors of Curonia - a thought his father, a simple woodchopper - did not often agree with. Anna Anderman was almost as old as Markuss, and she liked books better than people. She often sat near the tree reading books as big as her, reciting out loud the stories of the past, which the other kids would recreate, but often found herself frustrated when they did not follow as she instructed. Gustavs, her brother, often emulated Markuss, although he was not as old and big.

Kris - Markuss’ brother - however, was often aloof of the chivalric battles of the others. He wandered around the church, looking for branches and cute things. He liked music not swords. Kris - for all of his good heart - was not very popular with other kids.

(his father always picked him up to help work)

The Oak was a silent observer. It saw the kids play, it saw the kids fight, and if God willed it, it would also see them marry, but their lives would change fast.

(expand)

The year was 1905, until now it had been a normal year for them, for country kids cared little about the wars and politics of the adults in the cities, but even them could tell it was a queer year. Strikes had begun all over the empire, and workers stopped working - and the hotspot of these rebellions had been their native provinces in Latvia. The Latvians marched in streets, chanting for justice or bread or better rights.

(expand)

(talk about local people? The mailman, the milkman? The school teacher? Specially the church janitor. Etc? and their mother being a local leader and teaching them to love literature, etc…)

(it was winter and the church was preparing this year’s celebrations. Talk about the choir, mother, father and the violin.)

(talk about the discussions of wether there would be a Christmas this year and how this concept terrified markuss (who did not understand) because of the revolutions).

In a winter day, as they they were bringing the Christmas tree, they find a man shot in the street. His father tells Markuss to go back home, but Markuss stays, is found by the officers and asked the whereabouts of the Anderman home. He tricks them and runs to tell them.

He arrives early enough to tell the pastor about the attack and he goes to the church (he could escape, but he decides to go to the church, because he did nothing wrong and he will help defend legally those persecuted).

(talk about how the pastor was receiving invitations to go to be a pastor riga)

After a few minutes, the officers arrive having been told the correct directions after being tricked. The violence is starting in the city. The officer realizes Markuss tricked them and hits him with his cane, leaving his scar. He falls down and Ana stands up to protect him, and when he would hit her, a soldier calls our “sir?”, he realizes and stops. A soldier by his side later helps markuss up and tells him he was brave.

Markuss goes back home and Anna and Gustavs stay with them, and in the next days the violence escalates in the city as it falls into total war against the government. His father stays to protect them and his mother decides to leave (his father protests) to help pastor and lady andermann in the church hospital.

One night, they awake to see the glow of the burning church. It was the Cossacks. His father rushes to save her wife. And while pastor and his mother survive (but is hurt), ana’s mother dies.

In the aftermath, many people are killed, including the church janitor, as the Cossacks round them up and execute them in firing squads. Although keidann doesn’t know this. The pastor decides to move to Riga.

Ana never saw her mother again. And soon Markuss did not see Ana again.

?? (Army Man)

It is 1914, almost 10 years later. Markuss is working with his father chopping trees and etcetera. It’s his birthday and it doesn’t seem his father remembers this. They talk about Kriss going to Riga to study violin at the conservatory. Markuss gets angry and his father surprises him by teaching him to shoot. He asks about Ana and markuss is dismissive. Markuss tells him he will be going to the army sooner, as they are mobilizing, and they discuss the brewing storms of war.

“One shot is all it takes. The rest is just bad marksmanship”. His father told him. Markuss decides not to shoot the dear, but practices still with the trees. They still talk about Kriss and how the father might not let him go, as he is afraid to lose him, and talks his failiures as father.

Markuss and his father go together to Liepaja to register him, and his father is proud. In training he is a very good sharpshooter and obeys the orders, but is mocked by being well educated and is in place to become an officer, but is frequently bullied by another man. He receives his weekend leave after some months only to find that his father not only has let kriss “escape” (his father even reveals he personally took Kriss to the inscription, as he did with keidann) as he also gave him all his inheritance money. Markuss is furious and tells his father that war IS COMING and he will go to it.

Markuss leaves home and goes back to Liepaja to return to the army training, only to see the bombing of Liepaja.

Cap 2+1 Augustow?

Wilks

Cap 3 (4) The City of the Giant

Kriss goes to Riga

Cap 3+1 (5) Fighting in southern Latvia.

Training 2 and officer school. They are sent to fight in the south.

Cap 4 (6) Evacuations

Father dies

Cap 5 (7) Jelgava

They fight in Jelgava. They win but Markuss receives the news he cannot go home. Wilks goes to his superior and demands to be put in the Latvian Rifleman.