\*\*Memory\*\*

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...There was a bright flash, followed by complete darkness. From it soon emerged peculiar mysteries, in which he was a participant. And when he regained consciousness, his roommate, nicknamed the Speech Therapist, who had suffered language problems after a stroke—speaking some words backwards, as if reading from right to left—would always inquire:

- So, what did your subconscious throw at you this time?

- I was a master craftsman in ancient times. My name was Tabor, and the demon Karan stole my memory.

- Tobor—a robot.

- No, not Tobor, Tabor.

- Ah, all the same... A man without memory is a bio-robot.

...An echo of despair flew over the cliffs of the dead valley:

- Rudana-a-a!... - Tabor shouted with all his might. He, a descendant of the hereditary blacksmiths who had come here in search of iron ore, sat exhausted on a stone boulder. He had traversed the whole rocky ridge but found no sign of the girl... Then he noticed something colorful on the rock. He climbed up and found on a stone outcrop, like a step on his path, the lost colorful ribbon. He pressed it to his lips. "You're here! I will find you!" he whispered hopefully. Beyond the rock's outcrop in the stony monolith, he suddenly noticed an entrance to a cave. A long stone descent through a multilevel underground labyrinth led him to a palace. Massive wrought-iron doors opened silently. The radiant, exquisite hall he entered was stunning with uncreated decorations of unseen beauty.

- Why have you come here, boy?

Tabor turned sharply and saw near the majestic throne of the lord of the underground realms, the demon Karan.

- I am Tabor, a blacksmith from the lineage of craftsmen. I'm searching for iron ore, and it seems I've found it in your domains.

- Why do you need iron ore?

- My people are in great distress: the lands are exhausted, the settlements ravaged, and our neighbors are predatory and greedy. So we must find something to cultivate and defend the land against the horde.

- Do you know what awaits the mortal who dares to touch the secret of iron ore?

- No.

- Iron ore will take your youth and strength and ruin your soul. You will not be able to love those you love. Is it worth such a risk?

- It’s a choice without a choice… It's worth it, - replied Tabor, pulling out his beloved’s ribbon. - I am looking for a girl named Rudana. Is she with you?

- You are not mistaken, craftsman, she is here, - after a tense silence, the demon replied, - but are you not asking too much? If you need iron ore, you should not think about anything else. As for Rudana... She will not be able to live among people. And I warn you: if you wish to return to the earth, you must leave here what I desire.

- I want to talk to her! - Tabor took a desperate step forward, but the cold, motionless gaze stopped him. Karan struck his staff on the floor, and the walls and ceiling began to sparkle with the metallic sheen of iron ore. Then the enchanted Tabor obediently bowed his head.

- You must undergo a trial. Only then will you be admitted to the sanctum of the underground world—this iron staff, - said Karan. - A touch to it reveals the secret of iron ore. But I emphasize again: before returning to earth, leave here what I desire.

- I agree.

- Then come to my workshop. On the rock, you promised Rudana to make an adornment before which all the gold of the world would fade. You have the opportunity to fulfill your promise. But you must harmoniously combine the magical sources of the underground world: the changing play of gems, the fiery glow of gold, and the cold strength of iron. If you disturb the sacred harmony of this triad, you will remain here forever. So create your harmony, master.

"I will show you the way to the surface, Rudana. We will see the sun again, our endless steppes and the picturesque slopes of Slavuta," the blacksmith whispered after prolonged intense work, holding in his hands a spiral metal blank that still required engraving and artistic carving, to be adorned with precious stones.

...At the appointed time, on the stone elevation lay an adornment of unprecedented beauty. It was so strikingly perfect that even in the cold eyes of the demon, alive sparks of admiration flared up. Karan began to examine it, and at some point, his gaze became sarcastic: in the complex weaving of the adornment, he discerned the precise scheme of his underground labyrinth. This was a guide for Rudana to lead her out of the underground captivity.

- Hands capable of creating beauty can also destroy it, - Karan finally said in deep thought, not taking his motionless gaze off the pectoral. - Hands capable of creating life can also annihilate it. Hands capable of creating good can bring about evil... Is it not so, master?

- I completed the task. Allow me to give this to Rudana. I want to say to her...

- I believe, all that you wanted, you have said here, - Karan cast a glance as if a knife, picking up the pectoral and proceeding to the exit, adding from the threshold. - When the sun rises, you will receive what you came here for.

All night Rudana did not take her eyes off the adornment, and suddenly it sparkled with all the facets of the gems, inviting her towards light and freedom, showing where the exit was. And Rudana went, holding Tabor's stunning creation in front of her, like a saving lamp.

From the underground palace thundered the voice of Karan:

- Your time has come, master! You have become the chosen one of iron ore. But before you touch the timeless secret of the underground world, answer, do you wish to return to the earth?

- On earth, I am needed by people, and here I myself will not be needed. I want to be among people.

- Well, you have made your choice. Come and place your hand on this iron staff. But remember the agreement: you must leave something for me.

The young man looked around as if saying goodbye to something dear to his heart and resolutely placed his hand on the top shaped like the sprawling crown of a tree. A blinding flash illuminated the hall, and a terrifying rumble rolled through the underground chamber. Under the quartz chamber, bright blue flames lit up the crystal handfuls of hands, and fiery drops poured into the silver Lotus flower, which also flared with a bright blue light.

At the same instant, on the rock where Rudana was already waiting for Tabor, appeared an old gray-haired man. His face and hands were covered in deep wrinkles, with cold emptiness glowing in his eyes. Following him appeared Karan as well. A dreadful guess pierced Rudana's being. In deep sorrow and despair, she rushed to the old man, but he indifferently passed by, concentrated on something that completely possessed his soul and mind. Slowly descending from the rock, he walked unheeding, further and farther across the cracked earth of the dead valley towards the morning sun. And on the rock, two figures stood for a long time, watching him go: one dark, like the demon, and the other bright, like a candle—Rudana.

...A gray-haired blacksmith somehow reached the half-ruined settlement on the bank of the Slavuta. The abandoned forge came alive — the fire was lit, and the resounding voices of the hammer and anvil spread through the vicinity. Where this old man was from or how the iron was gotten, he himself did not remember. Nor could he explain—it was mute. That's what he was dubbed. No one would recognize in the unfortunate Mute the handsome and clever Tabor, whose mysterious disappearance with Rudana was narrated by their kin, who soon themselves ended up captive by the horde...

No one knew where and how this man obtained iron, and many considered him to be dabbling with the dark arts. Yet, he knew his trade well — forging sickles, plows, axes, and other tools. In weaponry, he was unmatched: these swords, battle axes, and spears later earned such fame that people from all over the river's great valley came to the Mute. Even the general from the grand prince's entourage arrived with an invitation. But the confused blacksmith merely spread his hands, implying, torture me as you will, yet from here, I will go nowhere.

...Mute continued to work in his forge. The villagers were grateful for his golden hands and calm demeanor. They no longer paid attention to his oddities. Let him conjure as he pleases, as long as it's not harmful. And so as not to be left without a blacksmith when the old man departed this life, they assigned him an apprentice, the orphan Ingulitz.

Ingulitz saw how Mute worked at night, forging and reforging some spiral-shaped object. Obviously, something wasn't satisfactory to him, so he often tossed the unfinished piece into the corner and immediately took up a new billet. As if recalling some long-forgotten form, bending and arranging various circles and spirals, attempting to combine them into a bizarre weave. One midnight, something began to emerge. Mute's eyes sparked with inspiration, his face in the fire’s reflection brightened and blossomed with a smile. The metal billet transformed into an object of extraordinary beauty and power. When Mute completed his creation with engraving and carving, Ingulitz whistled in admiration. It was a true wonder. For some time, the master admired the adornment as if trying to solve some riddle, then took out a ribbon from the corner, and trying to say something, muttered something unintelligible until, from the depths of his mute soul, a painful cry erupted:

- Ru... dana… Rudana! - he cried the name several times and, letting his iron poem fall from his hands, collapsed unconscious to the floor.

Regaining consciousness, the Mute spoke. He told the villagers his story, about himself, Rudana, Karan, and iron ore. When the crimson sun set the quiet waters of the Slavuta aflame, the soul of the old blacksmith united with the ancestors' souls.

The tireless, talented hands returned Tabor's memory and speech. But lost youth and love...

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...After the battle for Izium, the ambulance sped towards the receiving room of the Dnipro military hospital. The on-duty doctor, who moved with the grace of a leggy heron, requested the patient's details and started tapping her long fingers on the official computer's keyboard, where the ambulance doctor had already transmitted the initial examination information of the wounded combat commander Bohdan Koval. She ordered a series of tests, including an MRI of the brain. The verdict was clear: an urgent surgery was needed.

...As they wheeled Bohdan down the dim corridor on a gurney, he imagined that people were standing and praying on either side. Not just any people, but his own: those whose portraits hang under embroidered towels as a sign of grateful memory. Those who created Ukrainian life on their land. It seemed as if family photos, taken at weddings and celebrations, came to life. Close and distant ancestors in Ukrainian national attire and simple peasant clothes, in Cossack dress and military uniforms, all moved past and through him, like a film strip threading from the past into the future, with him as one of them. Surely, this was a portrayal of memory about the Ukrainian era that must not vanish—but only flourish and serve as an example for others.

After the surgery, visions began to visit from a place where a deadly battle rages. In his essence, a grain of eternal truth about the phenomenon of human memory matured, on which, essentially, life is held, like on a pivot. A human without memory is a bio-robot, as the Speech Therapist so aptly put it. And without historical memory, a bio-robot is a people. And by and large, it is for that very historical memory that the war with those twisted, rootless is waged. It is for this source of truth, valor, meanings, and generational values, which singularly satisfies the thirst to be oneself and do one's own thing in this world, that his comrades are presently fighting and shedding blood for.

...Dr. Dana Danylivna, a blue-eyed beauty with thick red-hair bound in a colorful ribbon to keep it out of her face, was writing something at her desk when a call came. She looked at the monitor, smiled happily, and responded:

- I congratulate you on the return of your memory, Bohdan. We're discharging you today for a further rehabilitation course. What? You're inviting me to a restaurant? I'm afraid, that will have to wait. But to offer a hand and heart can happen right here in my office. I'll listen to your heart at the same time—to check the sincerity of your feelings. And the hand—useful for a blood pressure check.

A sturdy, handsome major entered the office quickly, with a massive bouquet of roses and a gift. Besides the ring, the case contained a choker styled as an antique. Bohdan fastened the ornament on his beloved’s slender neck, blinding with its brilliance, and both briefly glimpsed themselves as slightly different in the mirror.

A smiling ambulance doctor appeared a minute later, cheerfully announcing that he was ready to witness the significant event of two hearts reuniting and to take a photo. For memory's sake, one that should not be lost again.