

Orest Maltsev

THE
YUGOSLAV
TRAGEDY

*To the 27 million Soviet and Russian
men, women and children who died
for our freedom.*

*To the heroes of Leningrad
and Stalingrad.*

To Arso Jovanović.

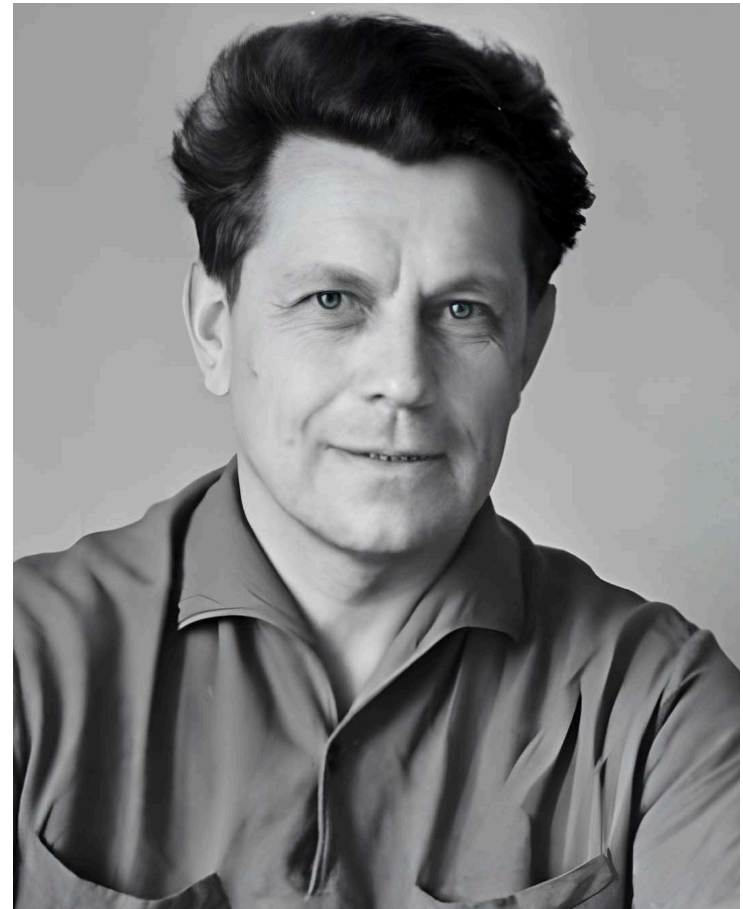
*By decree of the Council of Ministers of
the USSR, Orest Mikhailovich Maltsev
was awarded the Stalin Prize, second
class, for the year 1951 for his novel
“The Yugoslav Tragedy.”*

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OREST MALTSEV



ARSO JOVANOVIĆ

CONTENTS

PART ONE	1
PART TWO	87
PART THREE	225
PART FOUR.....	413



PART ONE

1

November... November 1943. But what date is it today? Once again, I woke up with the thought: could it be the seventh today, the day of our Soviet holiday, the October anniversary? Before the war, on this late autumn day, I used to march through the festive streets of Moscow in a noisy column of students; reflections of red banners trembled on laughing faces, red, blue and green balloons soared overhead, followed by shouts, music and songs... From the tribune of the Mausoleum, Comrade Stalin waved to us with a smile.

Even though all of that is now far behind me, left somewhere in the distance, back home, November 7 will inevitably come! And I so wanted to recognize this day, to mark it somehow amidst the monotonous dark days of captivity. I would tell my new comrades — fellow prisoners in a German concentration camp in Yugoslavia — about this great holiday, and together we would dream of that happy, peaceful time that would surely return to the people.

Lying with my eyes closed on the hard planks in the barrack, where we, the newly-arrived, were kept isolated from the other prisoners, I tried to reconstruct the lost count of days in my memory. I had lost track since the moment I was concussed and captured during the Germans' eighth or ninth counter-attack at the Aul bridgehead beyond the Dnieper. We crossed the Dnieper on the night of September 29. The enemy exerted all its strength to prevent our division from reaching the right bank. But we made it, despite the furious shelling of the crossing — clinging to the roots of trees hanging from the steep slope, climbing up, digging in and holding on as if we had become roots ourselves, sinking deep into the soil. The light-green aspen bark darkened from the scorching mortar explosions; bullets and shrapnel pierced and shredded the trunks, stripping away all branches and twigs... But the Germans did not crush us, did not throw us back into the river. We held our ground and advanced further.

By evening, we had taken the village of Auly and fortified ourselves on its outskirts, in front of a field of unharvested corn. The Hitlerites brought up reinforcements, deployed an armoured train, and unleashed the fiercest artillery and mortar fire upon us. Shells howled, heating the air. Mines whistled dully as they flew. The earth trembled violently, colliding with metal and spraying fire. Smoke from explosions obscured everything around. Our trench felt like a freight train racing through fog, its cars shaking and swaying from side to side. It seemed that any moment now, the trench walls would close in like giant jaws and swallow us whole.

The wave of fire rolled further toward the river, and ahead of us, shrouded in smoke, appeared dense rows of counter-attacking troops. The Germans advanced at full height, apparently confident that everything living in front of them had already been wiped out. We met them with volleys. The

Hitlerites fell, tumbling into heaps, but they kept coming, as if blindfolded, as if pushed forward by blows to the back of the head. Then we leapt onto the parapet and charged with bayonets. We drove the enemy back to their trenches by the railway tracks, but there, almost point-blank, the armoured train fired its guns at us. I remember the last thing: the hiss of a shell at the end of its short flight and the black explosion, tinged with a blinding yellow flash, that knocked me down.

When I woke up, I was lying in viscous, cold clay that reeked of burning. Above me, long corn stalks with dried, broken leaves drooped, with a murky grey, low-hanging sky visible through them. Not a single shot, not even a rustle, could be heard. Where were my comrades? I couldn't tell whether it was still the evening twilight or the dawn of the next day. The brown corn leaves swayed gloomily above. I couldn't understand why both those light leaves and the murky sky seemed so heavy, hanging low, ready to collapse and crush everything... The air was thick and stifling. Dense waves of suffocating heat drifted over the smoke-filled ground. And an eerie, deathly silence reigned all around.

With great effort, I lifted my heavy head from the clay and looked around. Dead Germans in grey-green uniforms lay scattered across the field, resembling crushed lizards. Next to me lay the lifeless body of a Soviet soldier. I recognized him as my orderly. He lay with an outstretched, stiffened hand reaching toward me. Maybe he had tried to drag me to safety but never made it. Where was my company? Why was I alone here?

The fear that seized me at first grew stronger. To escape it, I began crawling forward, convinced that our regiment had advanced. I crawled mechanically, consumed by the need to get away from this terrible, unnatural silence. I had been deafened by the explosion and did not hear the two German

soldiers running up behind me. They pounced on me from behind, apparently shouting something. It was terrifying to see their gaping mouths and hear no sound. They drove me somewhere, then threw me into the back of a truck, and along with other slumped, silent prisoners, took me to a station, where we were shoved into a freight car with iron bars on the hatches. And I realized — I was a prisoner.

...The train started moving. A fresh breeze came from somewhere. Spotting a hole in the wall of the car — probably made by a bomb or shell fragment — I pressed my face eagerly against it.

Dawn was breaking. The transparent night air swelled with a smoky, bluish-grey mist.

Groves, fields and meadows, ravines and willow-lined streams slowly drifted past. I saw ruins with soot-blackened chimneys, burned orchards, villages that stood silent, as if frightened by their own emptiness, windmills sticking up like black skeletons on the hills.

Wounded Ukrainian land! Ahead lay foreign soil, the unknown, captivity. Who knew if I would manage to escape, to return to my own? My company would keep marching westward with the division, from one frontier to the next — from the Dnieper to the Bug, from the Bug to the Dniester, from the Dniester to the Danube or the Prut — and in the end, they would reach victory and peace. But what about me?

The last letter I sent home was on the eve of the Dnieper crossing — a letter full of confidence and optimism about the coming battle. Now my family would wait a long time for another message from me. My mother would worry, cry and eventually receive a brief notice: “Missing in action”... How were they now? My father was probably up to his ears in work, taking care of things on the collective farm. After returning from the Dmitrievsky forests, where he had fought

as a partisan, he must have been overwhelmed by what he saw in our little village near Lgov. He had written to me recently that there were no machines, no horses, no oxen left on the farm; the arable land was neglected and overgrown with weeds. What could they do? Even with shovels, they had to reclaim the land, grow grain, support the front. The collective farmers had found a wrecked seeder in the field, repaired it, gathered abandoned horses, nursed them back to health. From the ashes, the people were rebuilding their happiness, their well-being... Would I ever return to my native Kursk land, see Moscow again and walk through the old park at the Timiryazev Academy?

Thus I thought, overwhelmed by deafness, staring despondently through the hole in the wall of the freight car. A milky mist rose from the ground and dissolved into the clear morning sky. The train was moving uphill. From the lowland, where a small arched bridge stood, came the damp scent of autumn and the strong aroma of meadow grasses. The fog gradually lifted. The sun slowly emerged from the distant ravine, and the bright morning light spread over the deserted fields, where unharvested, sorrowfully drooping ears of grain stood and sunflowers rotted at the root.

Suddenly, I thought I heard a faint rustle and hum. I tensed. The noise grew louder, becoming clearer, more expansive. I strained to make out the sounds. It was the rhythmic clatter of wheels, the creaking of the freight car's loose joints. It was the clanking of buffers, the whistles of a locomotive. My hearing was returning! And at that moment, a sharp, anxious thought pierced me. My heart clenched. I quickly felt for the hidden pocket sewn inside my tunic — my fingers brushed against the edges of a small, hard booklet. It was intact! I sighed in relief. My Komsomol membership card was still with me.

A ray of sunlight slipped through the gap, illuminating a corner of the freight car. A moment later, it vanished. But it left behind a warm, stirring sensation of life, and I involuntarily smiled. Those sitting beside me, grim and silent, looked at me in surprise. Like all my unfortunate comrades, I saw the future as bleak. But I refused to accept it.

“We’ll escape,” I said loudly. “And if we can’t, we’ll fight. No matter where they take us, we are Soviet people — we won’t break, and we won’t be disgraced.”

The others shifted closer. Conversation started. And now, as we looked out through the hole at the world beyond, it was no longer oppressive despair that weighed on our minds, but anger and desperate determination to break free — no matter what.

...The freight car kept swaying and rattling. Sometimes, we stood for long stretches at sidings.

At first, I tried to keep track of time by the alternation of day and night, by the number of times we were fed — the German guards tossed us a small loaf of bread for six men once a day and brought a bucket of water — but soon everything blurred together in a haze of half-sleep, half-delirium.

Weakened by hunger, I could barely reach the hole anymore to gulp fresh air and catch a glimpse of the outside world. The land was unfamiliar. On a narrow beet field, the uneven rows of hand-sown crops stood scrawny and pale. Nothing like home, nothing like the fields in the Kursk region. My father used to squint with pleasure, looking at the endless stretch of lush, bright-green beet tops spreading to the horizon. He would pull one at random from the soil, swollen with rich roots, and weigh it in his hand — “This one must be two kilos at least!”

And the threshing here! A barefoot peasant in tattered linen trousers drove a pair of scrawny horses, barely taller

than calves, dragging a thick log over the sheaves... At a railway station, two black oxen, replacing a shunting locomotive, hauled a freight car along the tracks with the word “Romania” painted on its side.

So this was foreign land, the world beyond our borders! Another time, I pressed my face to the hole when I heard a deep rumbling. The spans of a railway bridge flashed past, greenish-murky waves churned below, and in the distance, a mountainous shore, cloaked in golden autumn forest, rose in terraces toward the clouds.

“Guys, I think we’re crossing the Danube,” someone standing by the hatch said.

“Maybe they’re not taking us to Germany?” another asked hesitantly.

“The Balkans!”

“That wouldn’t be so bad!” my neighbours perked up.

“If we end up in the Balkans,” I thought, “then we’re lucky — it’s at least closer to home!”

Another night of endless jolting passed, and in the morning, the freight car door screeched open. I saw forested mountains, wreathed in mist, and inhaled air that felt unusually fresh and pure. I asked a guard in German where we were. He was in a good mood and grumbled:

“*Sudslawien!*”

Yugoslavia! In our regiment, that word was spoken with special reverence. Reading the brief newspaper reports about the heroic struggle of the Yugoslav partisans, we had always felt with them in spirit. That’s why it seemed like a good omen that I had ended up in Yugoslavia.

Our train was brought to the town of Niš in southern Serbia. A small town, nestled in a basin by the Nišava River, which flows into the Morava. Its streets were narrow and winding, surrounded by old forts... The nearby sloping moun-

tains, cut by ravines and covered with forests, rose sharply to the east, their bare peaks gleaming in the sunlight.

The thought of escape never left me as I looked around, trying to take in every detail of my surroundings. We were placed in an old Turkish fortress. Many of us found our graves here, in the grim Čele kula tower, which still bore the memory of Janissary atrocities. I will never forget the soldier from my regiment who, recognizing me, involuntarily cried out, "Is that you, Comrade Lieutenant?" The Germans heard him and began interrogating him: "Who is the lieutenant?" He died under brutal torture but never betrayed me. Others perished from starvation and disease. Those who could still stand — including myself — were fed for a time with a mash of cornmeal. Then, we were loaded onto trucks and taken to the Dresden concentration camp near the town of Bor, where we were divided into groups and strictly isolated — no Russians were allowed to stay together.

...Now, lying on my bunk and piecing together the chain of events, I tried to guess: what date was it today? My comrades didn't know either. "We were transported for over a week," I thought. "I spent about ten days in Niš, and now it's been nearly two weeks here. That means November 7 must be close. But has it passed yet?"

From the yard came the creaking of wheels on gravel. I knew what it was: the black wagon with the white cross — the death cart — taking another victim "to freedom"... to a ditch near the camp.

I opened my eyes. The windows, secured with double iron bars and rusted wire mesh, were beginning to take on the faintest blue hue. Any moment now, a guard with a dog would burst in, shouting, "*Aufstehen! Schnell!*"* — and the bells would start ringing, shrill and relentless, tearing people

* Stand up! Quickly! (German in the original).

from their brief, deep sleep. We would be lined up in a column and marched off to the copper mine, the stone quarry or the road construction site.

Beside me, Aleksa Mušić snored, arms crossed over his chest, his tanned, grime-cracked hands resting on his chest, mouth slightly open. The curly hairs in his long, tangled moustache and beard stirred with each heavy breath. As if always ready to jump up and leave, even in his sleep he never removed his short zipun of homespun cloth or his opanak shoes — rawhide moccasins strapped to his feet with leather thongs. Mušić was in my work group. When he found out I was Russian, he had stayed close to me from the moment I arrived at the camp. I learned Serbian from him and picked it up quickly — the words were so similar to Russian! Over time, we came to understand each other well. He told me that he had escaped from nazi camps twice. The first time, the police caught him in the village of Bela Reka with his sick wife. When he escaped the second time and returned, he found nothing but ashes where his house had stood. Near a charred plum tree was a mound — his neighbours had buried his wife there, tortured to death by the SS. Perhaps from that moment on, Aleksa's deep, dark eyes had burned with that feverish, grim fire. He was caught again before he could reach the partisans and was thrown into the most feared concentration camp — Dresden.

...The door slammed shut, the bells rattled and clanged. Morning had begun in the camp.

2

The day was cold and muddy. Low, ashen clouds had gathered tightly, hiding the sun. A dreary drizzle fell incessantly.

Lined up at attention on command, we stood in the mud,

not daring to move, while in front of us, clad in a black cloak with the hood raised, paced Schmolke, the Frontfuhrer in charge of Todt Organization camps in the Bor region. This short, stocky man with bulging, yellowish-white eyes addressed us with a moralizing speech every three days, like clockwork. No weather deterred him. On the contrary, he seemed to enjoy bad weather — rain and cold made him especially verbose. It gave him genuine pleasure to watch the suffering of the soaked, shivering prisoners in the biting wind. A provincial Nazi Party speaker in the past, no doubt, Schmolke still needed a patient and submissive audience. The Volksdeutsche* police in dark-olive greatcoats ensured we listened to the Frontfuhrer with “eager attention” — an additional form of torture. Once, an Italian prisoner, shivering from the cold, pulled up his collar and yawned. A policeman kicked him in the stomach with his heavy boot. The Italian gasped weakly and collapsed. His comrades shielded him to prevent further beating. Guards with submachine guns rushed in and drove the “rebels” to the barracks for punishment.

Schmolke went on speaking. He drilled into us that we were soldiers of the great military-construction army led by the long-revered genius of the German General Staff, Fritz Todt, that this “genius” had built the strategic autobahns that carried Hitler’s armies both westward and eastward, and that any disruption — no matter how minor — of Todt’s plans would be punished with severe and merciless retribution.

But no matter how much Schmolke threatened us, no matter how exhausting the slave labour in the quarries was, no matter how horrific and hopeless our situation in the camp seemed — where the only “release” came in the form of a black wagon with a white cross — my friends and I firmly be-

* Ethnic Germans who lived in Eastern and Southeastern European countries before the war.

lieved in a better future. As I gazed at the fog-draped, forested mountains, I often thought: one way or another, we would escape to those green peaks, join the partisans and take part in their fight.

Aleksa Mušić had already pointed out to me, more than once, a nearby mountain peak to the west, completely covered from base to summit in thick, dark forest. He spoke of it with a special significance:

“Crni Vrh!”

At first, he hinted cautiously, glancing around, that our only real option was to go there, to the Black Peak. But as he grew to trust me, he secretly confided that in the forest at Crni Vrh and along the Zlatovo ridge, a partisan brigade was stationed, awaiting orders from the Supreme Headquarters to attack Bor. A faint smile softened Aleksa’s grim face when he spoke of it.

How fiercely he hated the Bor mine, which, in his lifetime, had never truly belonged to Yugoslavia! It had always been controlled by foreigners. Before the war — the French. The Americans had come and gone. Now the Germans had stormed in. The French director was replaced by a German — Dr. Krebs. The masters changed, but life for the workers never improved. They toiled deep in the mine shafts, standing knee-deep in dark blue, toxic water, breathing poisoned air. Aleksa’s son, Srećko, had worked in the mine for just two years before his face turned pale and a hacking cough tore apart his lungs. He died. And the sulfuric gas spewing from the copper smelting plant poisoned the air for miles around, killing vegetation and leaving the land barren. Only in spring did a few stunted bushes of reddish rue push through the grim, bald hills.

“In the Soviet Union, Nikolai, everything must be different, right?” Mušić would ask. And after listening to my

stories, he became even more trusting, more open.

One day, as if revealing a great secret, Aleksa told me that he was a communist and that he had an old, loyal friend — Nedeljko, a miner.

They had met before the war, back when Bor's copper mines belonged to the French industrialists. It happened like this: one day, peasants from the nearby villages, together with the miners, armed themselves with stakes and hunting rifles, and marched on the mine. They planned to storm the office and drive out the foreign owners. Mušić and Nedeljko walked side by side, encouraging each other. But their fervent desire to reclaim their land was not realized. The Yugoslav royal gendarmes, protecting the foreign concession's property, met the rebels with rifle fire. Nedeljko was shot in the leg, and Aleksa took him to his home in Bela Reka. From that day on, their bond was unbreakable. They continued to meet even under the occupation. These secret gatherings stirred in Aleksa a newfound confidence in his own strength. A dream that had once been vague now called him toward a clear purpose. He became a member of the underground communist organization at the mine. Together with Nedeljko and other comrades, Mušić sabotaged the Germans in secret. The communists were tightly organized and well-hidden. The Germans knew that equipment was frequently breaking down, that accidents on the transport lines were increasing, but no matter how hard they tried, they couldn't find the culprits. It became harder and harder for the enemy to export copper from Bor. Nevertheless, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia was apparently dissatisfied with the work of Bor's underground cell. They sent in a new leader, Blažo Katnić. However, despite his strong credentials, he had little experience in underground work. Before long, the police captured nearly the entire communist group in Bor, and the

Gestapo took Katnić.

Nedeljko and Aleksa fled to Bela Reka, waiting patiently for their moment. In the evenings, when dusk blurred the outlines of faces, people would gather at the edge of the village, near a low stone fence that could be easily climbed. Hidden beneath his coat, Nedeljko carried a small flashlight, its beam skimming across a sheet of paper, illuminating the words: "Soviet Union, Stalin..." The people clung to this hope, just as their grandfathers had during the Turkish yoke, when they would climb the mountains at sunrise, stretch their hands to the east, and tell their children and grandchildren: "There — there is Russia!" And so, in 1941, in days even harsher than those under the Turks, the message spread from mountain to mountain, from village to village, like an echo of thunder: "The Hitlerites have attacked Soviet Russia! The Red Army and the entire Soviet people are heroically resisting the fascist invaders." This news called out to people, awakening their strength and their will to fight.

"It's time to go," Nedeljko said to Aleksa.

They ambushed two gendarmes on the road, disarmed them and fled into the forest. There, eight more men joined them. And in July, having learned how to handle weapons, the partisans launched their first attack: They blew up a tunnel on the Zaječar-Paraćin railway, scattered the German guards and returned victorious to their safe house in the Zlot region. By August, their detachment had grown to ninety men.

The operations were growing in scale. The mine in the Bolevač *srez** was mined and set on fire, three railway bridges were blown up, and a locomotive with its wagons was derailed. After that, three hundred new fighters joined the detachment. Among them was none other than Katnić, known for his unsuccessful underground work in Bor. Now he bore

* A county or district (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

the alias Kraguj — Hawk. He recounted how the Gestapo had tortured him in a Belgrade prison and how he had escaped, eager to take part in the people's uprising, which by then had spread beyond eastern Serbia to other regions of Yugoslavia. Everywhere, the rallying cry was: "Together with Soviet Russia, we will fight against Hitlerism!"

Schmolke and Krebs fled Bor in a panic. The partisans, united into two large detachments — the Bolevač-Bor and Krajina units — were driving the occupiers out of eastern Serbia. Nedeljko and Aleksa never parted. They listened with enthusiasm to Kraguj's fiery speeches about the Serbian people's struggle against the "evil genius" — fascism — and its lackeys, the Nedić collaborators. He proclaimed that this fight would bring their youth even greater glory than the battles their ancestors had waged against the Turkish hordes. But reality turned out differently. The German punitive regiments, supported by the Serbian fascists — the *Nedićevci* — launched a counter-offensive. The enemy had learned the locations of the partisans' safe houses. One by one, the detachments were encircled and suffered defeats. In the villages, all the homes of partisans were burned, their families imprisoned. The Hitlerites threatened to execute the women and the elderly unless their husbands and sons returned from the forests.

Fighters scattered to their homes; some went over to the Chetniks, whom the Germans did not pursue. The detachments shrank, breaking into small groups. And then, a command came from Tito's headquarters: both partisan units were to be disbanded. Kraguj explained that eastern Serbia lacked the right conditions for sustained resistance. He advised the partisans to return home and wait for the Party's next call. Those who listened to Kraguj ended up hanging from the gallows in Bor or were shot. Others, like Aleksa, who was

caught by the gendarmes at home, were sent to Todt's labour camps. But Nedeljko remained in the mountains with his fellow miners.

That winter, while working at the quarry, Aleksa took advantage of a heavy snowfall and escaped into the forest. But his search for Nedeljko was in vain — the partisans had vanished without a trace. Instead, the mountains were crawling with fascist agents. Aleksa had no choice but to return to Bela Reka in secret. There, he learned from the peasants that Nedeljko had not surrendered, had not stopped fighting. He set fire to grain depots that the Germans were preparing to send to Germany, destroyed railways and sabotaged supply lines. But the winter forced his small detachment to take shelter in a cave somewhere in the mountains. It was impossible to move far — the enemy could track them by their footprints in the snow. They must have lived holed up in some damp burrow, tattered, filthy, surviving only on whatever they could find in the winter forest. Aleksa hoped to find the partisans in spring. But someone betrayed him, and once again he was thrown into a concentration camp — this time in Dresden. And what became of Kraguj? Rumours said that he was now a political commissar in the Proletarian Division. He had risen through the ranks. The partisans who had survived the brutal winter of 1941-42 had now formed an army. There were many of them. As the saying went:

*"Dlaka po dlaku — to je belača,
Zrno po zrno — to je pogača,
Kamen po kamen — to je palača,
Kap po kap — to je Morača."*

*[Hair by hair — it's a fur coat,
Grain by grain — it's a loaf,*

*Stone by stone — it's a palace,
Drop by drop — it's the Morača river.]*

So it was with the partisans — warrior to warrior, they had become an army. According to Aleksa, an entire partisan brigade was stationed near Crni Vrh. It was in direct contact with Tito and part of the corps commanded by Koča Popović. They said he was a clever and cunning commander — educated in France, a poet, even a philosopher of sorts, but most importantly, he had fought as a volunteer in Spain with the International Brigades. That meant he was a hero and knew the art of war.

“A hero!” Mušić would declare whenever he spoke of Popović. “But why is his brigade doing nothing? Why?” He would sigh, glancing toward Crni Vrh during work.

...We were forced to work from dawn until dusk. The road that had once been carved through the dense forests — running from Belgrade through Požarevac, down the Mlava valley to Zaječar — no longer satisfied the Germans. They were in a hurry to widen it; they needed another direct automobile route to Bulgaria, to the East. Mušić expected that the partisans would destroy this strategic highway sooner or later. He was certain that German transports would never make it past Crni Vrh. He believed that the narrow-gauge railway we were building from Bor to Žagubica would also be blown up, and that Schmolke and Krebs would fail to ship copper to the Kostolac docks on the Danube. But the partisans remained silent. Why were they delaying the attack on Bor? Were they waiting for the Germans to fortify their position even more? Mušić couldn't understand. Rage burned inside him. When would the people avenge their plundered and barren land, their fallen sons, their widowed wives and tortured mothers? When would they finally drive out the accursed invaders?

Mušić didn't know the reason for this inaction. His impatience tormented him. His pickaxe slipped from his hands. A guard noticed and lashed him with a whip. Mušić shook his fist behind the guard's back and gazed despairingly at Crni Vrh. He avoided my questions and fell into sullen silence, as if blaming himself for our long-unfulfilled hopes.

A few days ago, Schmolke transferred several groups of prisoners from road construction to the mine — including ours. We were ordered to immediately start excavating Tilva Miku Hill, where copper ore had been discovered. Germany desperately needed copper.

While working near the mine, Mušić kept glancing around furtively, as if waiting for someone. When he got the chance, he spoke briefly with a lean man in a wide-brimmed hat who passed by with a shovel on his shoulder. After that, he seemed noticeably calmer.

That night, I awoke to an unusual noise. The prisoners were crowding at the windows, excited. The glass was bathed in a deep red glow.

“The Germans are burning! Now that's what I call action!” voices murmured.

Mušić was at the window, too. With a satisfied smile, he turned to me and said:

*“Gledaj, družo Zagorjanov, dobro! Kako oni, tako mi.”**

The German supply depot near Tilva Mika Hill was ablaze. The flames mingled with the glow of molten slag, dumped from railcars down the embankment. The fire rose over Bor like a billowing sail. Clouds, their edges blackened with smoke, seemed to swell with blood.

Mušić watched Crni Vrh's dark silhouette, illuminated by the bright red glow, and murmured something to himself. I

* Watch closely, Comrade Zagoryanov! As they do, so do we (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

understood — the underground communist resistance at the mine was active again. Mušić and that miner in the wide-brimmed hat were connected to them. The fire — was it a signal for the partisans to attack? But the night passed, and the partisans never came.

3

I never got the chance to mark November 7 in any way. When Aleksa, at my request, found out the current date from a miner he knew, it turned out that it was already mid-November. The complete ignorance of what was happening in the world weighed heavily on me. What events were unfolding beyond the barbed wire of our camp? What was happening now in the Soviet Union, in my beloved Kursk region, in my native village? The carpenters were probably already hammering away on a new street. And my comrades-in-arms, my company? They must have advanced far beyond the Dnieper by now, and perhaps Moscow had already saluted our division in triumph. And me? Escape! How could I escape?

Winter arrived. Sparse, wet snow fell, melting into the mud. The murky sky and the earth merged into one damp, sodden mire. The weak sun, low on the horizon, spread into a pinkish blur. A sharp wind blew. Rain mixed with snow no longer absorbed into my waterlogged rags. My boots were completely worn through, my feet were wet and freezing, and every step was painful. Under heavy guard, our column was led to the quarry.

There were six of us who stuck together in our group of prisoners — Mušić and I, the Czech actor Evžen Laušek, short and stocky, with a small round head on broad shoulders and a constant mischievous smile on his fleshy face; Nikolaus Pal, a timid and frightened watchmaker from Budapest, extremely

thin, with a sickly yellow, swollen face; and two Italians who had refused to fight in Yugoslavia for Mussolini's foreign interests — wonderful guys, but completely different from each other. One of them, Enrico Marino, from northern Lombardy, a fair-haired man with rough farmer's hands, was serious, stern, rarely smiled and spoke little, but when he did, it was always weighty and to the point. His large dark eyes shone with an astonishingly tender yet restless fire, as if he carried within him some unattainable dream. The other, Antonio Colaccione, a fisherman from Naples, with a narrow, swarthy face and burning black eyes, curly and dark-haired, was full of boundless optimism and an infectious, cheerful spirit. He could lighten our mood with just a gesture or a change in intonation. When he improvised, mimicking Schmolke, we would silently double over with laughter, careful not to be overheard by the guards. His uniform, like Enrico's, had long since turned to rags, and all that remained of their former legionnaire grandeur were their hats with feathers. Yet Antonio draped himself so skilfully in a tattered grey blanket, fastening it at the neck with a piece of wire, that it seemed as if he did it out of sheer vanity, to add a touch of style.

The six of us clung tightly to each other, and whether going to work or returning, we always walked in two rows in the column.

Nikolaus Pal always walked hunched over, burying his nose in his upturned coat collar. That was how I remembered him — in that same dreary posture. Yellow stars, like those on all Jewish prisoners, were sewn onto the sleeve and back of his worn-out checkered coat. From time to time, he coughed violently, gasping and wheezing for air.

Laušek supported him by the arm. It was hard to imagine how Pal could have survived this forced labour without Laušek — strong, resilient and never discouraged. They had

been imprisoned together in the Budapest fascist prison on Margit Korut, and since then, Laušek had become Pal's pillar of support. Here in the camp, he carried Pal's tools and often, while striking his pickaxe into the limestone rock, would say, "In the end, we're improving the road for ourselves. One day, we'll walk along it through Belgrade — you back to Buda, and I to Prague. And we'll say, like King Richard in Shakespeare, 'Hail, native soil!'"

At a crossroads stood a post with a Serbian inscription: "To Berlin — 1,608 km." Laušek winked at me.

"And then — on to Berlin together..."

Antonio Colaccione exchanged knowing glances with us and nudged Mušić with his elbow. But Mušić saw and heard nothing, lost in thought. He walked with his head low and raised it only once, to glance at the mountain range and mutter briefly:

"Crni Vrh!"

"Black Peak again! When will it finally wake up?" Enrico Marino said irritably.

"Yes, it's time for that Black Peak to remind everyone of itself. Everyone is waiting, but it remains silent," Laušek drawled.

"Then the time has not yet come," Mušić replied meaningfully.

"It's already winter," Nikolaus Pal murmured mournfully, tucking his blue nose deeper into his collar.

A few soldiers rolled past us with a massive coil of barbed wire.

"Fortifying again!" Antonio noted sarcastically. "Fortune will soon smile upon us!" he added unexpectedly. "Don't despair, actor! The partisans will play their role!"

It was obvious that the partisans were close, that they were threatening Bor. The Germans and their Todt Organiz-

ation police, made up of Banat and Srem Germans, were trying to turn Bor into an impregnable fortress. They deepened the ditches around the weather-darkened wooden barracks, wrapped the entire settlement in yet another row of barbed wire, and at road junctions and quarries — where filthy, starving prisoners toiled — they erected concrete bunker towers, monstrous growths on the landscape, with machine-gun barrels protruding menacingly from their embrasures. The beds of all mountain streams were blocked with "hedgehogs" and felled trees.

"Do you know the way to Crni Vrh?" I whispered to Aleksa.

He gave me a searching look but, after a pause, finally answered:

"I do."

That night, shifting closer to me, Mušić said:

"Today, Nikolai, you asked about the way to Crni Vrh. You're not planning to run to the partisans, are you?"

"And why not? If the mountain won't come to Mohammad, Mohammad will go to the mountain," I joked.

Mušić understood.

"And what about you? Are you thinking of escaping again?" I asked him directly.

He smiled into his moustache.

"It would be best if all six of us did... And we have the chance. But for now, not a word to anyone."

I don't need to say how overjoyed I was. Finally!

Mušić met with his miner friend two more times. Everything seemed to be in place. Soon, we would be free, with the partisans!

I didn't ask Mušić who was helping us. It was clear — the underground communist resistance. When my friends found out about the escape plan, none hesitated, not even Nikolaus

Pal, the weakest among us.

“We’re a company, *signori*. Fortune will smile upon us!” Colaccione said hopefully.

On the first pitch-dark night, we carried out our plan.

A raging wind howled across the roof, tearing at loose sheets of metal, sending snow whistling and moaning through the cracks.

When the barrack fell silent and the guard at the door, submachine gun in hand, began nodding off, I got up and, holding a heavy stone I had hidden under my jacket during the day, quietly approached the latrine bucket standing in the corner near the door. The guard glanced at me but said nothing — it was a routine matter...

Meanwhile, Laušek also got up from his bunk. Pausing in the aisle, he suddenly stiffened unnaturally and, with true actor’s skill, began silently performing a scene of complete madness.

The submachine gunner stared at him in astonishment. At that very moment, sneaking up from behind, I struck the guard hard on the back of the head with the stone.

Together with Mušić, in the dimly lit corner, we stripped the unconscious guard of his greatcoat. Everything was done silently and swiftly.

Wearing the German greatcoat and carrying the submachine gun, Mušić boldly stepped into the yard, and we followed behind him. If anyone in the barrack woke up, they likely thought a guard was leading five prisoners out for a night interrogation.

The night was pitch-black, with a raging blizzard. The gusty wind swung the massive electric lanterns on their poles. Broad, pale streaks of snow swirled through the air across the yard. It was impossible to discern anything in this chaos of light, darkness and snow.

Mušić had learned from his friends at the mine about the existence of a concrete sewer pipe leading from the camp to a ravine. In the yard, near the kitchen, there was a well connected to this pipe. The entrance was sealed with an iron grate.

We didn’t take long with the heavy lock. Mušić had brought along a thick steel rod. He slid it through the lock’s shackle and snapped it off. Lifting the grate, we descended one by one into the well using the iron ladder. Mušić went last, securing the grate above him. Everything had gone smoother than we had expected — we had braced ourselves for anything.

The pipe was wide enough, but nearly half-filled with dried kitchen waste and various filth. We crawled forward in total darkness. Thick cobwebs clung to our faces, making it difficult to breathe. I moved first. Behind me, coughing constantly, crawled Nikolaus Pal. His cough echoed ominously through the pipe. The place was horrifying — a long, foul-smelling dungeon, seemingly endless.

Then, suddenly, the air grew fresher and a faint breeze drifted in from somewhere. The slippery, soap-like walls of the pipe sloped downward. I slid along it almost effortlessly until I hit a coil of barbed wire blocking the exit. I tried turning my back or side to it, but Pal, pressed from behind by the others, pushed against me hard. The pressure forced me out like a cork, along with the barbed wire. My face and hands were scratched and bleeding, but what did that matter? We were free.

The pipe had led us into a deep ravine, by the shore of a swift, unfrozen river. We quickly washed our hands and faces as best we could and shook off our filthy clothes.

“Now where?” Laušek asked quietly.

“Follow me, comrades,” Mušić said with a note of triumph in his voice, adjusting the submachine gun slung across

his chest.

He led us hurriedly toward Crni Vrh...

4

Zagoryanov and his comrades were already far away when chaos erupted in Bor.

Frontfuhrer Willi Schmolke, shaking his fists, raged back and forth across his office in the former French hotel. He repeatedly summoned his subordinate officers from the Dresden camp, shouted, issued orders, stomped his feet. Finally, exhausted, he collapsed into a chair, brooding over the recent chain of events.

The supply depot had burned down... At the Majdanpek camp, three Russian prisoners and ten Serbs had escaped — right from the mine itself. Less than two days later, partisans attacked Majdanpek, where copper was also mined.

And now, just last night, at the Dresden camp, a guard was found unconscious. Six prisoners had vanished!

“And among them — another Russian!” Schmolke thought furiously. “Now we can expect even more trouble! What to do? Increase the camp guards? Order more guard dogs?...”

A siren blared outside the building. Schmolke flinched in alarm and looked out the window.

A yellow, desert-camouflaged armoured vehicle had pulled up, bristling with submachine gunners. A short-legged colonel in SS uniform stepped out.

A moment later, the colonel was at the office door.

“Heil Hitler!” he raised his arm in salute and fixed Schmolke with such an intense stare that Schmolke involuntarily rose from his chair. “Here are my credentials.”

Schmolke hastily scanned the imposing document bear-

ing the name Colonel von Goltz, signed by the chief of the Gestapo intelligence division. Warily, he gestured for the visitor to take a seat.

But von Goltz demanded to see the mine director, Krebs, immediately.

“I have an urgent assignment,” he said, casting a contemptuous glance at the Frontfuhrer.

Schmolke’s heart skipped a beat — had rumours reached Himmler about the “business ventures” he and Krebs had recently undertaken?

When Krebs arrived, the first thing von Goltz requested was the mine’s financial report for the past year. Schmolke and Krebs, who had long considered themselves the absolute masters of Bor’s industrial empire, usually operated as a team, ensuring mutual benefits and personal gain. Now, however, they were truly afraid — had von Goltz been sent by Himmler’s office for an audit? Meanwhile, von Goltz asked for a mechanical calculator and, right there in Schmolke’s office, began rapidly spinning its handle, crunching columns of numbers like an expert accountant. His knowledge of the Bor mine’s wealth was so precise that Krebs could only marvel.

This mine, von Goltz declared, was one of the largest in Europe. Its copper smelting plant had once produced about 45,000 tonnes of high-purity electrolytic copper annually — twice as much as the famous Rio Tinto mines in Spain. Of course, he admitted, Bor lacked the vast ore reserves of North America or Katanga in Africa. But Bor’s pyrite ore, von Goltz asserted, had outstanding qualities — first, its purity, with few impurities of lead or tin, which were difficult to remove. Second, and more importantly, it contained gold and silver.

“Let’s calculate,” von Goltz said, quickly turning the crank on the calculator. “If Bor’s copper, as precisely determined, contains 30-40 grams of gold and 100 grams of sil-

ver per tonne, and if the plant still produces at least 40,000 tonnes per year...”

“What are you saying!” Krebs threw up his hands. “Forty thousand! This is wartime! The partisans are sabotaging us!”

“You blame everything on the partisans just to cover your own incompetence!” von Goltz raised his voice. “Understand this: we desperately need copper — for our war factories, our front lines, our fight against world communism!”

The colonel’s ashen cheeks trembled.

“Extract it from the ground while you still can! And no technological upgrades! No wasting funds on charlatans who sneak into the mines disguised as ‘chemists’ and so-called ‘scientists’!”

Krebs turned pale — he sensed a veiled threat directed at him.

“There’s no room for improvements,” he protested. “The laboratory doesn’t even have a microscope.”

“And why would you need a microscope?” von Goltz sneered. “The copper is right under your nose, practically on the surface. Or do you plan to discover hills and mountains of copper ore using a microscope?!”

He returned to his calculations, spinning the calculator handle again.

“So, even if you shipped at least 20,000 tonnes of copper to Germany last year, that still means you extracted gold alone — not counting silver — worth...”

Von Goltz named an impressive figure.

“According to your own records, it comes out to much less,” he added irritably, flipping through the accounting book.

“Did you find an error?” Schmolke peered over his shoulder.

“This ‘error’ is worth half a million marks!” von Goltz

barked. “Where did you put them?”

He familiarly patted the breast pocket of the now completely flustered Krebs.

“Did you stash them here, my friend?”

Krebs turned crimson.

“No, no, you must be joking, Herr Oberst. There must be some kind of misunderstanding. I...” He furrowed his brow in concentration, struggling to find an explanation.

In reality, Krebs was stalling for time, trying to grasp what lay behind von Goltz’s crude familiarity. After a brief moment of thought, he believed he had figured it out.

“Why waste energy on trivial matters?” Krebs offered a sycophantic smile. “There is always a way to prevent any unwanted complications.”

“Very well! Enough! I got carried away,” von Goltz said, shifting to a more conciliatory tone. “Let’s discuss the broader situation.”

Settling comfortably into a chair, he gave an encouraging nod to the thoroughly rattled Frontfuhrer.

“Herr Schmolke, you look like you’re worth no more than a couple of marks, as our enemies, the Yankees, like to say. What’s the matter?.. Want a cigarette? It helps calm the nerves. Are you worried about the situation on the Russian front? The Italian front, on the other hand, has reached what I would call a complete standstill. Did you hear on the radio? Dwight Eisenhower says that the advance on Rome is ‘disappointingly slow.’ And personally, no one here is bothering you. And yet you are still unhappy!”

“No one?” Schmolke exploded. “What about the partisans? What about Majdan...” he cut himself off mid-sentence.

“You seriously think you’ll be attacked by the Yugoslav savages?”

The tone of von Goltz unnerved Schmolke — was it irony?

Mockery? He realized that losing his temper and speaking too candidly could do more harm than good. So he composed himself and began explaining the situation more calmly.

"We live here, Herr Oberst, like in a besieged fortress. These damn partisans get more information about us from the local population than we get about them. They infiltrate our camps. The partisans know every corner of this place. They could be at our doors at any moment. There's a whole brigade of those cutthroats in the mountains!"

Schmolke quickly turned to the window, where the forested mountains loomed in the distance.

"Over there!"

"I see, I see," von Goltz smirked sarcastically. "So that's why you've wrapped yourselves in five rows of barbed wire.

"And not without reason..." Schmolke blurted out. "Just yesterday at dawn, we barely repelled their attack on Majdanpek. It's close to Bor. And if I hadn't been warned..."

"And who warned you?" von Goltz's narrow eyes locked onto Schmolke. "Who?" he repeated in a sickly sweet voice.

Schmolke remained silent.

"Well?" von Goltz asked even more quietly. "Did you read my credentials? Who?"

"A certain influential person."

"Name?"

Schmolke glanced at Krebs.

"Not now..." he muttered.

"Fine," von Goltz agreed and continued in his previous mocking tone. "Whatever people say, Bor is quite peaceful and relatively safe. And it will remain peaceful and safe," he repeated with emphasis.

"Are you certain of that?" Schmolke and Krebs exchanged glances.

The colonel smirked.

"You're rather slow to catch on! Do you think it would occur to Tito to do anything that might harm American interests?"

"What do the Americans have to do with this?" Krebs asked, puzzled. "Bor is ours.

"For now, it is ours," von Goltz confirmed. "But unfortunately, we are only temporary masters here. The mine belongs to an anonymous joint-stock company. Its shareholders used to gather in Paris and divide their dividends, and their general director — well, he's been sitting in New York all this time and still sits there now. He holds the controlling stake in the company; and I wouldn't be wrong in saying that even now, this director continues to profit from our war with Russia. Understand? Bor is ours, but the Americans are still financially invested in it, and Tito knows this well."

"That's a matter of high politics, my friends. Tito won't touch Bor."

"Let's hope so!" Schmolke sighed with relief, delighted that the official discussion was over.

"Herr von Goltz, please," the sweaty Dr. Krebs fawned. "A friendly dinner after a serious business conversation will restore our strength. And we will, of course, arrange everything to our mutual satisfaction... I'll see to it right away," and he headed for the door.

"Now, I can share something with you about a certain 'influential person' — codenamed 'Kobra' — who has a rather intriguing biography," Schmolke quietly murmured to von Goltz, taking his arm...

After dinner, as soon as Krebs discreetly slipped the colonel a small pouch filled with something heavy, von Goltz hurriedly took his leave, refusing to stay the night, citing urgent business.

Schmolke stepped outside to see him off. The swirling

snowflakes made his eyes swim; the porch steps seemed to sway beneath him — the alcohol buzzed in his head.

Von Goltz saluted Schmolke carelessly in response to his farewell gestures.

“To Belgrade!” he barked at the driver.

A few kilometres outside Bor, at a crossroads — one road leading through Požarevac to Belgrade, the other to Zlot, in the Mlava River valley — stood a solitary kafana* called “The Three Bears.”

At the time of these events, the place rarely had visitors. The roads were nearly deserted. Now and then, elderly peasants from nearby villages would drop by to sit over a glass of plum brandy and pick up bits of news from the occasional traveller. Sometimes, partisans would slip down from the mountains under cover of night — the Mlava valley was a key German supply route.

The yellow armoured vehicle rolled up to The Three Bears late in the evening.

Von Goltz climbed out of the cab and ordered the sub-machine gunners in the vehicle to let no one enter.

Inside, the kafana stirred with alarm.

A gaunt, ragged peasant took one look at the German colonel on the doorstep and instantly fled, leaving his half-finished drink behind.

The tavern keeper trembled behind the counter.

Only one customer remained at his table — a man in a sheepskin coat, with a ruddy face and bristling moustache.

“Cold water from the Mlava!” the German demanded, tossing his canteen onto the counter.

The old tavern keeper wordlessly hobbled toward the river.

Left alone with the ruddy-faced peasant, von Goltz sat down at his table.

* A tavern or small eatery (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

The man raised his sharp, piercing eyes to him.

“Speak. Quickly,” he said in German.

And von Goltz wasted no time. He relayed everything he had learned from Schmolke and Krebs about the Bor mine and its smelting plant. He revealed the identity of the man known as “Kobra” and shared certain details of Kobra’s background. He only omitted one thing — the personal gift from Krebs: the pouch of gold ingots.

“Congratulations, Colonel.” The “peasant’s” thin, sinewy fingers drummed on the table. “This is your first investment in a solid enterprise.”

“I hope so, sir,” von Goltz grinned. A sly smirk flickered across the thick folds of his face. “In that case, I’d like to make another deposit and increase my capital in such a solid bank.”

He pulled a small paper square from his breast pocket, placed it on the table and gave a meaningful wink.

“What now?” The “peasant” asked indifferently, his eyes locked on the scrap of paper.

“Information on certain members of the new Yugoslav government, gathered by my agents.”

“Hand it over.”

But von Goltz firmly covered the paper with his palm. The other man, pretending to reach for the bottle of šljivovica, poured them both a drink and muttered through his teeth:

“Is this your payment request?”

“Yes. And it requires an *akcept*,”* the German said slowly, lowering his head, sweat beading on his brow.

“Fine, I’ll mark it in my debit column. It’s a pleasure to deal with someone who understands cashless transactions.”

With a snap of his fingers, von Goltz slid the paper toward the “peasant,” who snatched it eagerly.

* A note on an invoice indicating it has been accepted for payment.

“That’s all for now,” the colonel wiped his sweaty forehead with a scarlet silk handkerchief and took a sip from his glass. “By the way, sir,” he added with relief, “Bor is worried. Your planes often fly over the mine on their way to Romania, where they are likely bombing something.”

“Perhaps...”

“Oil fields?”

The man in peasant clothes shot a quick glance at the German.

“You are very curious.”

“The question is — won’t they drop bombs on Bor?”

“Don’t worry, Colonel. We’re saving Bor for ourselves.”

“I tried to make that clear to Frontfuhrer Schmolke.”

“Now, let’s get to business. Our next meeting will be in Dalmatia, in Sinj, just before your departure for Berlin, sometime at the end of the month. In Sinj, I assure you, you will be able to welcome the New Year in peace. A quiet place!” the man in the sheepskin coat said.

“All the better,” the colonel said, genuinely pleased. “The garrison commander in Sinj, head of a regiment from the Oak Leaf Division, is a friend of mine. He’s taking his regiment to Russia... Would that interest you?”

“I don’t envy him... But that’s beside the point. One more investment from you — your list of secret agents operating in Yugoslavia.”

“I’m compiling it... on Himmler’s orders, sir,” von Goltz noted, as if to emphasize that his work was also an official duty of his own accord.

“I don’t care what you do for your boss. Carry out my assignments, and you’ll have solid grounds to feel secure about your future.”

Von Goltz bowed his head in submission.

“So then,” his companion continued, “let’s remain strictly

business-like, Colonel. Let’s do our business. That list — it’s your gold reserve, your currency. With this currency, you’ll be in a strong position. Bring the list to Sinj and hand it over there. We won’t forget such a service. At any moment, if you need it, you’ll have free access to us. I trust you understand?”

Von Goltz nodded silently and stepped away. The door creaked as the tavern keeper entered, handing the German visitor a canteen wrapped in a wet cloth.

The SS colonel took a sip and left.

The armoured vehicle rumbled down the road toward Belgrade.

The ruddy-faced “peasant” paid for his šljivovica, thanking the innkeeper in surprisingly clean Serbian. Then, pulling his fur hat low over his brow, he set off down the road toward Crni Vrh.

In the forest, two kilometres from The Three Bears, a group of well-armed partisans waited for him with horses.

5

...We walked through the night and half of the next day, trekking across a dense, snow-covered forest along winding trails, twisting like the path of a bird, skirting around massive trees felled by storms.

The frosty air nipped at our faces. In sunlit clearings, the snow sparkled with a dazzling brilliance — painful to look at. The trees stood motionless under the frost, creaking faintly in their deep sleep. Occasionally, the silence would be shattered by a squirrel darting from fir to fir or a startled bird rustling its wings.

At times, it felt as though I wasn’t in a foreign land, but back in the familiar pine forest near my childhood home in Konopelka. The only difference was — there were no moun-

tains there. Even the redpolls I recognized — they were just like ours, tiny, smaller than a sparrow, brown, with crimson-red rumps, lively and cheerful. They perched deftly on birch branches, shaking the snow loose as they pecked seeds from the catkins. In the thorn bushes, plump bullfinches whistled softly, pecking at the last remaining berries. We ate those dark-blue, tart berries too, savouring their frosty freshness. Digging through the snow at the base of trees, I found honey mushrooms.

“Poisonous,” Mušić spat out the mushrooms. “We don’t eat those. Try this instead,” and he offered me some sour-bitter root that made my jaw clench.

Nikolaus Pal stumbled along, glancing nervously at every sound, fearing the Germans were on our trail. Yet when we warmed ourselves by the fire, he was the first to thrust his frozen hands toward the flames, even as he grumbled that the smoke might give us away. Evžen Laušek chuckled.

“Not quite the same as a Sunday stroll up Gellert Hill, is it, brother?”

As we pushed through the underbrush, Laušek always held back the branches carefully so they wouldn’t snap into Pal’s face.

The Italians would rush ahead, start the fire and be the last to leave the smouldering embers. Shivering, like all Southerners, they suffered from the cold more than we did.

“Well? Are we there yet?” Laušek asked impatiently.

“Just a little further, friend,” Aleksa replied.

“You say there are a lot of partisans?”

“A whole brigade!”

“Excellent!”

“Fortune smiles upon us!” Colaccione beamed.

Aleksa pressed on tirelessly, leading us deeper into the Homolje mountains. In his light *opanci* — the traditional

Serbian shoes, poetically called “the wings of the highlander” — he glided silently from stone to stone, his muscular legs gripping the slopes effortlessly. Meanwhile, we slid and fell.

I had already formulated our plan. First, I told my friends, we would go straight to the partisan brigade commander and explain everything we knew — where the weapons depots were in Bor, where the explosives and uniforms were stored, the locations of the SS guard posts and barracks, how the bunkers were arranged, where Frontfuhrer Schmolke lived and where mine director Krebs resided. Aleksa knew all of this... Then we ourselves would lead the partisans into Bor.

Everyone agreed with the plan.

Antonio and Enrico broke into song, their voices deep and resolute, singing a harsh yet beautiful melody in their native tongue:

*“E per la patria nuova noi combatterem,
Siamo, italiani!”*

*[And for the new fatherland, we shall fight,
We are Italians!]*

We didn’t understand the words, but their meaning was clear. Even Nikolaus Pal perked up, marching energetically, swinging his arms to the rhythm.

It was already evening when Mušić joyfully exclaimed:

“We’ve arrived!”

He pointed to opanak tracks in the snow.

A mix of joy and anxiety surged within me. Soon, I would see these people I had thought about so much. How would they receive me?

Colaccione took a deep sniff of the air and grunted in satisfaction. The scent of smoke. The tracks led us toward the

rocky cliffs of Crni Vrh. Here, the forest was thick with bluish mist from numerous campfires.

“Some camouflage!” Laušek shook his head in disapproval. “Like gypsies, no perimeter guard at all. Anyone could just walk in...”

But at that very moment, a stern voice rang out. A sentinel, standing with a rifle beneath the shaggy branches of a fir tree, had spotted us — though none of us had noticed him.

“Stop! Who goes there?”

“Our own!” Mušić answered confidently.

We explained who we were and where we had come from. The sentry listened with curiosity. Three more partisans approached, one of them the head of the field guard. He ordered us to be searched, confiscated our weapons and only then allowed us into the camp.

“Well, look at that! There is security after all. First impressions can be deceiving,” Laušek joked, clearly satisfied.

Along the windward side of the clearing, felled trees had been stacked, reinforced with pine branches like a barricade. In the middle, a large fire crackled, sending sparks swirling into the dark-violet evening sky. Thawing snow dripped from the treetops. The partisans sat silently by the fires, smoking, feeding the flames with more logs, stirring the embers to make them burn hotter. They were dressed in whatever they could find — coats of various shades, styles and materials, capes made of rawhide, shawls and woolen tunics. It was as if warriors and civilians from several nations had gathered here in shared hardship, mixing their clothing together. But one thing was the same for all — on their caps or shaggy hats, red stars gleamed.

Seeing us, the partisans jumped to their feet.

“Who are you? Where are you from?” questions rained down.

“From Dresden,” Laušek answered.

“Escaped?”

“Yes.”

“This one’s Russian,” Mušić said, pointing to me, then asked, “Is Nedeljko, the miner, here? Do you know him?”

“We know him, we know him!” several voices responded.

“Over there, by that fire.”

A crowd of us set off toward the distant fire.

“Nedeljko!” the partisans called out. “Come, meet your countryman and guests!”

Pushing aside branches from the barricade, a young man with a sickly look stepped toward us. This was the miner Nedeljko, the one Mušić had told me so much about. The friends embraced. Together again!

News of our arrival spread quickly through the camp. Everyone knew who I was and who my companions were. Partisans approached us from all directions.

“Rus? You are Russian? *Zdravo, brat!** Welcome! *Kako si?***”**

They looked me over, examined my clothing, as if I had fallen from another planet, where everything was different from this world. They were especially surprised to see that I wore a German Todt Organization jacket, ordinary tarpaulin boots with worn-down heels and a pilotka cap just like theirs. But the metal buttons still clinging to my tunic — protective-coloured, embossed with raised red stars — immediately convinced them that I was a man from the socialist world. One loose button was ripped off in an instant and passed from hand to hand. By the firelight, they examined it with greedy admiration, as a numismatist might study a rare ancient coin. Some even bit it to test its authenticity... The harsh,

* Hello, brother! (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

** How are you? (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

bearded faces were lit with joyful smiles.

"Kako si? Kako si, brat?" a thin, bony-faced fighter with smiling, light eyes asked insistently.

*"Pa dobro.** Now I'm good," I answered in Serbian.

The fact that I spoke their language caused cheers to erupt, and the smiles grew even broader.

Someone wrapped their arms around me, squeezing so tightly I nearly suffocated. Someone kissed me firmly on the lips. Someone clasped my hand in an iron grip and refused to let go.

The thin fighter rummaged through his worn satchel and pulled out a small piece of young cheese.

"Eat, please. Eat, brother."

We were seated by the fire on sheepskins and offered food — flatbreads, dried plums, roasted corn. I could barely keep up with the questions — how I ended up in Yugoslavia, how I escaped, where the Red Army was advancing, how Soviet people lived, where I had studied, whether I was married.

I could hardly breathe from the excitement. There was so much warmth and sincerity in this welcome, in their child-like curiosity, in their pure faith in all that was good, progressive and bright.

But I didn't forget our plan and reminded my companions about it.

"There really are a hell of a lot of you here!" Laušek realized. "So why are you just sitting around? What's the hold-up? Why aren't you attacking Bor?"

"Nedeljko, why aren't you going to Bor?" Mušić repeated the Czech's question more sternly.

The miner shrugged.

"No order. How can we go?"

"We've been sitting idle for a whole month," another

* Well, alright (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

fighter added.

"Well, that's something!" Laušek exclaimed.

"That's impossible," Colaccione scoffed. "What kind of army are you, then? What is your headquarters thinking?"

"Who knows?" Nedeljko spread his hands. "We have everything — rifles, machine guns. I even made a grenade myself. We could attack right now, but there's no order. Look here — isn't it good?"

He turned to me, showing a metal cylinder packed with TNT, a detonator cap attached.

"So, you're saying there's no order? But in Bor, there's an entire warehouse full of real grenades — and it wouldn't be hard to take them. What's keeping you here?" I pressed.

The fighters eagerly explained their situation to us. The delay wasn't on their end. They were ready to storm Bor at any time — day, evening, dawn, or even earlier, "before the dawn has shown its face." In their impatience, one night they nearly advanced on Bor themselves when they saw a wild blaze rising over the mining site. But... the command held them back, explaining that there was an order from the Supreme Headquarters instructing them not to touch Bor, as the mines, shafts and factories were national assets that would be needed after the war. The partisans protested, and with good reason — if their property was in enemy hands, then all the more reason to reclaim it as soon as possible. At that time, ten Serbs and three Russians — brave and reliable men — managed to slip into the partisan camp from Majdanpek, further stirring up the troops. The Russians went directly to the corps commander, who had just arrived at the brigade, and persistently demanded an assignment. At first, he refused, but then he gave permission for the two best battalions to attack Majdanpek. The partisans set out, but near the mining site, they ran into an ambush — SS troops and Chetniks armed with sub-

machine guns. Many brave fighters, communists, lost their lives in vain. In the desperate battle against the fascists, the three Russian warriors also fell.

“Things are bad,” the fighters muttered. Nothing to boast about. They didn’t like Homolje at all. They talked about how in nearby Kruševac province, the partisans never let the fascist authorities rest, day or night. The traitor General Nedić — the same man who had surrendered Belgrade to the Germans and organized a puppet government, a police force and his own Serbian Gestapo — was now complaining in public appeals that “the province has become a living hell.” He was pleading with those hiding in the forests and mountains to stop their attacks. And yet here, at Crni Vrh, the partisans had been sitting for weeks in one place, ambushing German convoys in the gorges like old-time hajduks,* freezing, falling ill, waiting for something — waiting for winter to come, but for what exactly, no one knew.

“It’s the same for us, brother,” said the thin fighter who had given me cheese, his voice rough.

He looked exhausted — his sharp, bony face, stretched tight with dark skin, his light eyes feverishly gleaming with dilated pupils.

Nervously tugging at the tip of his long nose, he explained that he had arrived here with a courier named Korchagin from the First Brigade, stationed near Livno in western Bosnia.

“With Korchagin?” I asked in surprise. “A Russian?”

“No. That’s the codename of our company’s political commissar, Jovan Miletić.”

“We hoped to receive orders here... orders to advance on Sinj,” the fighter stammered.

“And you didn’t get them?”

“No. Nothing.”

* Anti-Turkish guerrilla fighters from the 16th century onwards.

“There you have it!”

A murmur rose around us.

“Hmm... A grim situation,” Colaccione said thoughtfully.

“So much for fortune smiling on you,” Marino teased.

“Brother!” the gaunt fighter suddenly called to me, waving his hand. “Come, let’s go to my friend Korchagin. He’ll be glad to see you. He loves Russians. He’ll tell you everything.”

I was eager to learn about the frontlines, the latest victories of the Red Army, what was happening in the world. A political commissar would surely know all the recent news. Together with Laušek, I followed the partisan fighter. Our companions stayed by the fire.

6

Near the cliffs, next to a large tent guarded by sentries, several makeshift shelters had been built from fir branches. The partisan leading us slipped into one of them, motioning for us to follow.

Inside, by a small heap of embers, dusted with blue-grey ash, a young man, about twenty-three, squatted. As soon as he saw us, he sprang to his feet — short but strong-shouldered, lean yet muscular. His broad frame seemed swallowed up by an oversized German tunic, its cuffs worn thin. I found myself suddenly wrapped in his firm embrace, feeling the brush of his neatly trimmed moustache against my cheek.

“You’re Russian? Yes?”

He pulled back slightly, gripping my shoulders, scanning me quickly and intently, as if searching for proof that I was truly Russian. Then, satisfied, he sat me down beside him.

“What’s your name?”

He spoke almost perfect Russian.

“Nikolai Zagoryanov.”

“Nikolai? I am Jovan — by your tongue, Ivan — Jovan Miletić. Well, sit closer. It’s good we met, Nikolai! I’ve known your name for a long time. Look here.”

He pulled a tattered book from his field bag. On the cover, I read: *Kako se kalio čelik*.

“This is *How the Steel Was Tempered* in Serbian. Your Ostrovsky wrote it. His name was Nikolai, too. I love this book. I always keep it with me. When times are hard, I open it and read. It gives me strength. Now, meet my comrades. This is Đuro Filipović, who brought you here — thank him. And this is Branko Kumanudi... Branko, are you sleeping?”

From the dark corner, a partisan bundled in an Italian overcoat emerged — awkward, stocky, his puffy, shiny face framed by thick curls. Rubbing his sleepy eyes, he grinned broadly and, out of nowhere, said:

“Thank God!”

“We all love Soviet Russia,” Jovan Miletić continued, his voice warm and melodic. “We have since childhood. I want us to destroy everything bad here and learn all the good things from you.”

He tossed a few twigs onto the embers. Flames leapt up, casting flickering light. For the first time, I saw him clearly — this fiery young man, bold in speech and gesture. His attachment to Korchagin immediately won me over. There was something striking, unforgettable about him. His dark-tanned face, clean-shaven except for a small moustache and a faint beard. A high, open forehead, a small, well-shaped nose, slightly pouting lips, thick arched eyebrows and dark brown hair. His eyes shone — deep, determined, unwavering.

Miletić began urging me to come to Bosnia, to his company, to the Šumadija Battalion of the First Proletarian Brigade. Without giving me a chance to think, he solemnly declared that from now on, we were *pobratimi* — blood broth-

ers.

“Like birds in a migrating flock, wing to wing, we will help each other in everything. That is our ancient tradition of brotherhood.

“Rus warriors are brave, they will fight and help us!” he recited, his voice full of conviction.

Excited by our meeting, he only now noticed Laušek, sitting modestly by the entrance.

“And who are you?” he grabbed him by the shoulders. “Also Russian?”

“No, I’m Czech, Evžen Laušek.”

“Czech? Wonderful! All Slavs are brothers! In our brigade, we have people of all nationalities in our country — all simple workers. That’s why we are called proletarians. We are the People’s Front! Đuro here, he’s Serbian — a peasant and a lumberjack. He can plough, sow, fell trees, and carve wooden bowls, spoons and play gusle. He’s from a very poor village, Veliki Cvjetić, near Drvar, where our Supreme Headquarters is now. See how thin he is? The rich landlords stripped the skin from his hands, pasted it onto their own so they’d be tougher. So he left his farm and became a woodcutter. And look at Branko. He’s a Croatian from Sarajevo. He had a little pastry shop there. What do a peasant and a baker have in common? A Serb and a Croat? Before the war, there was a liberal newspaper, *Politika*. I once saw a cartoon in it — two men, a Serb and a Croat, beating each other senseless. Below it read: ‘Two completely identical peoples, in the same language,* using the same words, desperately trying to prove they are completely different nations.’ That’s how things were. But now — look. The struggle has united them. Now they are both communists, always ‘*rame uz rame*’ — shoulder to shoulder. In their friendship, in our friendship — there is the

* In the common Serbo-Croatian language.

strength of the Party!” Jovan exclaimed passionately.

Laušek interrupted:

“Good, loyal words. But...” Laušek impatiently glanced at me. “Maybe we should get to the point? Where is the command?”

“What business do you have?” Miletić asked quickly.

Though he was a “guest” in the brigade himself, I decided to consult him first and laid out our detailed plan to attack Bor.

“They’re waiting there,” I added. “If we act swiftly and decisively, success is guaranteed. We have intelligence on Bor that will be valuable to the brigade commander. We need to report everything to him.”

At first, Miletić was enthusiastic about the plan. But then, as if suddenly remembering something, his expression darkened.

“We could report it,” he said hesitantly. “But should we? I have my doubts. Besides, the brigade commander isn’t even here right now. The corps commander sent him somewhere. The Supreme Headquarters has its own plans for Bor. They probably understand the situation better,” he added with a shrug.

We fell into disappointed silence.

“What’s the overall situation right now?” I finally asked. “How far has the Red Army advanced? What about the Second Front?”

“You mean you don’t know?” Miletić looked at me in surprise. “Ah... Of course, you don’t... Well, I’ll tell you everything! Everything, everything! Sit down, Evžen.”

Laušek settled onto a cut tree stump.

Miletić pulled the woven grass mat over the entrance to the shelter, sealing it shut.

“Let’s talk about everything... the Second Front?”

He spread his hands with a sad smile.

“It hasn’t happened yet. But...”

With a mysterious grin, Miletić dug into his field bag, stuffed with books, newspaper clippings and papers.

“All my propaganda materials are here. A full arsenal. Look!” He pulled out a mimeographed leaflet. “The latest news is very good. Recently, a conference was held in Tehran. Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill met. The Second Front will be opened soon — soon! The dates for operations have already been set. And there’s a declaration on peaceful cooperation between all countries — big and small — after the war. Can you imagine?”

“That means the end of wars!” Laušek exclaimed, eyes gleaming. “By heaven and earth, that is magnificent! May it be so, my dear friends!”

“What else? What other news?” I asked.

“Shh! Do you hear that?” Miletić suddenly gestured for silence.

The wind howled through the forest. The trees creaked and rattled their branches. And in that uneasy, restless sound of the woods, the distinct rhythm of approaching horse hooves could be heard.

“There’s another piece of news for you!” Miletić said. “We have Allied representatives here — an Englishman and an American. They’ve been staying with the corps commander for two days now. The American left for a short trip. He’s probably just returned. They say they’ll help us. Finally!”

“Better late than never,” Laušek remarked philosophically.

“And what about ours?” I asked impatiently. “The Red Army?”

Miletić grinned. He had been saving the biggest news for last.

I hung on his every word, my heart pounding — full of life, full of joy, full of a burning, powerful feeling.

“On November 6, at a ceremonial meeting of the Moscow Soviet of Workers’ Deputies, Comrade Stalin spoke. He called the past year the year of the decisive turning point in the war. The war is now heading toward its final resolution. The Red Army has already liberated two-thirds of its land. It has taken Kiev, Krivoy Rog, and it stands at Vitebsk and Kherson. This year alone, the fascists have lost over four million soldiers and officers — killed, wounded or captured. They’ve lost 14,000 aircraft, over 25,000 tanks and no fewer than 40,000 artillery pieces.

“That’s how things stand, comrade. After their defeat at Stalingrad, nothing can save Hitlerite Germany. Not total mobilizations, not reckless offensives like those at Orel and Kursk... It’s hard on your people, brother! Hitler is throwing all his divisions onto the Eastern Front. But the Russians still advance despite everything. And I think they’ll beat our Western allies to the finish. That would be good — if the Soviet people arrived here before the Americans and the British! We all want that, brother, all of us... our entire nation. Now, look.” Miletić unfolded a map of Yugoslavia in front of us.

Scattered across it, marked in red pencil, were circles.

“These are liberated areas. See how many there are! Here, and here, and there. And here is my homeland,” Miletić smiled, pointing. “Right here on the coast — Split. It’s still in German hands. It was ours once, but we couldn’t hold it. Where we’ve really fortified ourselves is in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We take advantage of the fact that the bulk of German forces are on the Eastern Front. Thanks to you, brother, we are here, fighting, holding on to hope. We’d have even more successes if not for those shaggy bastards — the Chetniks,

the *Nedićivci*, the Croatian Ustaše and the Home Guards. They’re our homegrown fascists. We’re fighting a two-front war — against the occupiers and a civil war. The enemy is everywhere. There’s no front, no rear. We move every day. These circles on the map keep shifting. We strike where the enemy is weakest, then retreat to our own ground — into the forests and mountains. Today we’re here, tomorrow we’re there. The worst part is that we’re so scattered and can’t gather our strength. We have a corps now, but what good is it? One brigade is here, others are in the Sandžak, our First Brigade is in western Bosnia. And the corps headquarters — no one even knows where it is. I had a letter from our brigade commander to the corps commander, and it took us three weeks to find him!” Miletić absentmindedly traced the map with his pencil, then, as if shaking off some persistent worry, quietly continued. “Yes, it’s hard. Our forces are scattered. The Germans surround and destroy isolated units... This autumn, something similar happened. In Macedonia, our partisans, together with the Albanian forces, liberated a large territory. They had plenty of fighters, plenty of weapons — they could have held their ground. But then an order came from the Macedonian Main Headquarters: all units were to spread out into different towns and villages. So they did. And the Germans took advantage — surrounding the towns, cutting them off. Only a few partisans escaped. Some fled to Greece, some to Montenegro. Later, we learned that this order came from Vukmanović-Tempo himself, a member of our Central Committee. It’s hard to believe he could have made such a mistake! Now the Germans are attacking again — their Sixth Offensive. They’ve entered the Sandžak and eastern Bosnia. And we’re still scattered, waiting, hiding like mice in our holes!”

There was frustration in Jovan’s voice.

“Why is this happening?”

“Why? Do I know, brother? We’ve been ordered to tie down enemy forces at points like Bor and Livno, to conduct reconnaissance — that’s it. Higher-level considerations!”

“Still, I can’t understand why you aren’t allowed to attack Bor and stop the Germans from mining and transporting copper. What kind of ‘higher considerations’ could justify that?”

Miletić bit his lip and looked at me intently, as if my question had echoed the thoughts troubling him. Then he stood up and tightened his belt with a sharp tug.

“Let’s go, brother, straight to the corps commander. Popović will see you, I know that for sure, and we’ll sort everything out...”

“Popović? The poet and Spanish war hero Mušić told me about?” I thought, feeling a surge of excitement. Rising to my feet, I absentmindedly ran my hand over my stubbled cheeks and chin. Noticing my movement, Jovan pulled a small, broken-edged mirror from his pocket and handed it to me.

I hadn’t seen my face in a long time. It wasn’t a pretty sight. My skin looked sallow and pale, my cheekbones had become more pronounced. Dark circles had settled under my sunken eyes. My nose seemed even more upturned and my freckles stood out more than ever. Once messy and light, my hair had flattened on its own, almost thinning.

“I could use a shave,” I muttered. “Do you have a razor?”

Miletić had everything: a razor and even soap. As I hurriedly cleaned myself up, he watched in silence, his eyes glimmering with amusement...

7

The low-hanging clouds merged with the forest trees into

a single dark mass, damp and cold. Not a single star in the black sky. Only the crimson reflections of campfires danced among the shadows.

“*To je Rus!*” Miletić-Korchagin declared solemnly to the sentries.

One of them, glancing at me with curiosity, went inside to report. A moment later, we were called in.

We entered a large tent, while Laušek ran back to the campfire where Mušić, Antonio, Enrico and Pal were waiting, eager to tell them what he had heard from Miletić.

Coming in from the forest’s darkness, the bright light inside blinded us.

The tent was lit by lanterns. In the fire pit, limestone soaked in resin smouldered, filling the air with warmth and a pleasant scent. A long table was covered in geographical maps. In the corner, a phonograph spun a record, hissing softly.

By the phonograph, motionless on a stool, sat a man in a fur-lined jacket and laced-up yellow boots — probably a foreigner. He saw us but didn’t move. His prematurely bloated, greyish face, with a jutting jaw, flat cheeks and deep eye bags, was expressionless, vacant. Even the jazzy music, croaking like marsh frogs, didn’t interest him. With his head slightly tilted, he strained his ear toward another foreign officer — a stocky, broad-built man with a ruddy face and bristly, needle-like moustache. This officer, wearing untucked trousers and a khaki blouse with matching tie and epaulets, paced back and forth, puffing on a cigarette, speaking rapidly in German to a dark-haired man hunched over the maps.

I managed to catch only a few phrases.

“It was sheer madness on my part. But the results... more than magnificent...”

At that moment, the officer in khaki noticed us.

He removed the record. The tent instantly fell silent.

“Comrade Commander, this is the Russian, Nikolai Zagoryanov. He escaped from the ‘Dresden’ camp,” Miletić said quietly, addressing the dark-haired, elegantly dressed man sitting over the map.

The man didn’t raise his head right away. It was clear we had arrived at a bad time. For a moment, his sun-darkened, thin, angular face, with a short black moustache and deep-set dark eyes, clouded over.

I realized this was Popović.

“Ah, a Russian?” He stood up. Short, quick-moving, he shook my hand. “I was already informed about you. *Zdravo*. Very glad.”

His voice was warm and welcoming, but a slight unevenness in his tone betrayed a hidden tension.

“Another ally!” he said cheerfully. “Our ranks grow stronger. Well, introductions then. This is the American representative, Lieutenant Colonel* — excuse me, Colonel MacCarver.”

The officer in untucked trousers adjusted his askew tie and waved at me in a friendly manner.

“Captain Pinch, an Englishman,” the corps commander gestured toward the tall, lean man in the fur-lined jacket.

Pinch nodded slightly in my direction.

“All our allies are gathered,” Popović announced loudly, pouring drinks from a flask into glasses. “Are you a soldier or an officer, Comrade Zagoryanov?”

“Lieutenant.”

“Excellent. We don’t have those ranks yet. We’re not a regular army in the full sense, but we’re getting there. For us, the fight — the harsh fight — comes first. The ranks and all the rest will follow. I’m glad you escaped to us. Now you’ll

* In Western European armies, officers are often addressed by the rank one level higher in casual conversation.

fight for the freedom of our peoples. Stay and feel at home — as if in your own army.”

The corps commander narrowed his eyes wearily.

“Comrade Commander,” Miletić addressed him resolutely. “We’re here on business.” He hesitated.

“Speak freely. We have no secrets from our allies.”

“Zagoryanov has a plan for Bor. He suggests...”

As Jovan spoke, his initial confidence weakened. By the end, he was almost timid:

“It would be good... What do you think?”

Popović remained silent, looking questioningly at MacCarver.

Without wasting time, I also tried to justify the necessity of this operation.

“Enough!” the corps commander cut me off. “Another Soviet man in this brigade — another plan! Three of your Russians were already here before you — just like you, they escaped from a camp. They convinced me to attack Majdanpek. I agreed. And what happened? It failed. They died. All three. May they rest in peace. They were heroes — true fighters! But not only them,” his voice grew louder, heavier. “A hundred of my best fighters died too. You don’t want another Majdanpek, do you? And neither do I.”

Jovan gave me a helpless look, as if saying: “See? Didn’t I warn you?”

“As for you,” Popović turned to Miletić. “You’ve completed your mission as a courier. Now, immediately head to Livno. The packet for Commander Perućica is ready. Here it is.” A thin envelope fell onto the table. “That’s all.”

“One more thing,” Miletić said quickly, picking up the envelope.

“Make it fast!”

“Permission to enlist Comrade Zagoryanov into our

Šumadija Battalion.”

“Ah! Already teamed up?”

“We’re blood brothers now,” Jovan smiled.

“All right, all right. Permission granted. So, you’re taking him from us?”

“Looks like it...”

“Well then... if you’re blood brothers, there’s no arguing! One more thing, Korchagin. As a company political commissar, I advise you — keep your fighters disciplined. No reckless actions! And you, why haven’t you drunk yet, my friend?” Popović nudged a glass toward me. “Our rakija. No worse than your vodka. Please.”

“Thank you. I don’t drink.”

A firm hand landed on my shoulder. I turned. MacCarver stood behind me, grinning widely.

“Russian lieutenant! You speak Serbian well. We’ll understand each other perfectly. I’ll learn Russian soon, too.” He patted my shoulder. “I like your plan to attack Bor. I fully support it. Your intelligence matches mine exactly. And just before you arrived, I was trying to convince the commander of the same thing: we need to strike Bor. But what can we do? That Majdanpek disaster ruined everything. As you Russians say: ‘Once burned, twice shy,’ right?”

I began to hope that the American might help convince Popović.

But just as I opened my mouth to speak to him, he, still smiling politely, extended his hand and said:

“We’ll meet again very soon — on the front lines! See you soon!”

“See you soon!” Popović nodded.

There was nothing left for Jovan and me to do but leave.

We headed for the exit.

MacCarver saw us out:

“Goodbye!” he said, tightly closing the tent flap behind us...

8

That evening, Koča Popović had no time to worry about Zagoryanov and Miletić. It had been a restless day for him. Lately, he had been in a constant state of irritation. One of the main reasons for this was that the fighters and commanders of the brigade were eager to march on Bor, but he had to hold them back at any cost. (There were special orders regarding Bor from Tito and Ranković.) He had even come here in person to ensure this. On top of that, Popović was increasingly troubled by the presence of official representatives of the Allied military mission at Crni Vrh. It seemed suspicious that they had followed him specifically to this brigade and had remained here. What did they want? Especially that red-faced American? He stuck his nose everywhere, asking questions, offering advice and assistance. “*Monsieur sans gêne!*”^{*} And yet, not a coward. His reckless trip to Bor, supposedly to “probe German defences” under the pretense of offering concrete help to the partisans — that alone was proof! Popović had tried to talk him out of it, arguing it was unnecessary and pointless. But the American refused to listen, went anyway, at his own risk. Good thing he at least took guides with him. “A reckless man,” Popović thought. “Throws himself into danger as if someone actually asked him to...” The Englishman, Budgie Pinch, was far more cautious. He would never risk his own skin. His main occupation here was endless discussions about the prospects of opening a Second Front in the Balkans (not somewhere else in Europe!); and the grim fate awaiting the Balkan peoples if Britain arrived too late... “He’s exhaust-

* A rude gentleman! (French in the original).

ing me with these talks!”

One thing was clear: As long as these two were here, there would be no peace for even a minute. But why, all of a sudden, had his forces and Bor become the focus of such intense Allied attention? A vague, oppressive unease settled over Popović. Once more, he carefully reviewed a recent order from Tito, which stressed the importance of “studying the listed names of English and American officers to provide them with appropriate assistance when necessary.” Among the many names in the attached list, two stood out at the top: Lieutenant Colonel Sherry MacCarver; Captain Budgie Pinch. This was something he couldn’t ignore. Of course, Popović wasn’t surprised by the presence of foreign officers among the partisans. He knew that as early as last year, a British delegation had parachuted into Yugoslavia, carrying radio equipment and gold. It was led by Major Deakin — an historian, close friend and colleague of Winston Churchill. Through Deakin, direct communication had been established between Churchill and Tito. Of course, only a very select few were aware of this.

Later, another group of British parachutists arrived from Tunisia. Popović remembered how they were driven in on a captured German truck, a red flag fluttering over it. Tito, at the time, was sitting under a tree, examining a map under the flickering light of a lantern, planning some operation. He didn’t even stand up immediately to greet the British (probably to show them how extremely busy he was). But one person was fussing over them nonstop: Vlatko Velebit, a general’s son, dandy and pretentious show-off, who had personally met them at their landing site. “What did Tito see in him to keep him so close?” Popović thought with bitter resentment about the sycophants hovering around Tito. Velebit, in particular, fawned over one of the British officers, a tall, well-built man,

armed to the teeth, with a knife at his belt and a camera in hand! He introduced him as the head of the British mission. The man — who looked like a romantic adventurer — turned out to be Brigadier General Fitzroy Maclean, a Member of Parliament for Lancaster. He had just come from North Africa, where he commanded a paratrooper unit, the “Phantom Column.”

To everyone’s surprise, Maclean immediately struck up a lively conversation with Tito. He knew a few Serbian words, and Tito spoke some English.

Since then, the Anglo-American military mission had firmly established itself within the Supreme Staff of the YNLA.* Radio-equipped mission representatives were now present in all major partisan units. That fall, an American transport plane had landed another group of liaison officers at a small airfield in Glamoč, set up by the British. Naturally, their trips to liberated territories became more frequent.

Just a week ago, Popović had received a radio message ordering him to prepare a small landing strip in the brigade’s area for a liaison plane. And yet, MacCarver and Pinch turning up at Crni Vrh had been a complete surprise. He suspected that the Allies hadn’t come here without a reason. Especially after what happened at Majdanpek...

Popović felt the urge to consult someone. But who? He didn’t fully trust the brigade commander and had already sent him away to the outposts to keep him out of sight of the Allies. He could be frank only with Ranković, but even that wasn’t a pleasant thought. Besides, Ranković was far away. Radio communication was unreliable, working intermittently. Going to him in person? Impossible. Not while the Allies were here.

...Today had dragged on more than usual. Popović was

* The Yugoslav National Liberation Army.

anxiously waiting for MacCarver's return. Meanwhile, Pinch didn't seem worried at all about his colleague's fate. With his atrociously broken Serbian, he chattered on and on about Britain's long-standing, selfless interest in the affairs of South-eastern Europe; his deep love for Yugoslavia; how peace and tranquility filled his soul whenever he looked at the misty shores of Dalmatia and Montenegro ("A scene straight out of a Claude Monet painting!"). And so on and so forth...

Popović found Pinch's monotonous, grating voice as irritating as the sound of a coffee grinder. Inwardly, he laughed at the "refined diplomacy" of this Intelligence Service agent, who clearly believed he was dealing with a simple-minded corps commander...

Popović sighed with relief when the Englishman, tired of his own eloquence, stepped out into the twilight for a walk in the forest. At that moment, MacCarver returned. He burst into the commander's tent, red-faced, grinning. Throwing off his sheepskin coat, he loudly declared:

"Well, commander, everything's in order! I pulled off a fantastic deal! A reconnaissance mission unlike anything in the history of warfare!"

"I'm very glad it ended well." Popović forced a nervous smile.

"Fortune favours the bold, as the Russians say. I'm learning from their experience."

Making sure no one else was in the tent, MacCarver pulled the flap shut and gave Popović a look, motioning toward a stool.

"I'll be brief," he began abruptly, his sharp eyes glinting. "I don't have time to wear you down like my English partner probably tried to. I'll get straight to the point. Do you remember Spain? The romantic pull of exoticism, your father's millions dulling your senses, your hunger for strong

emotions? The Yugoslav Volunteer Battalion, the battles in Madrid, in the Andalusian mountains? And Catalonia, Barcelona, huh? The concentration camp in southern France, where you were interned afterward? The rocky wasteland of Saint-Cyprien, surrounded by three rows of barbed wire, the Senegalese guards in red caps? The cold, windy nights? How you stood in line to fill your mess tin with water from a filthy stream in the corner of the enclosure?"

"Here we go..." Only now did Popović admit to himself that he had been expecting this conversation all along. But he composed himself, tensed every muscle within and lifted his gaze to the American with a look of naive calm:

"I remember very well. Those were hard times."

"Right. And do you remember a certain Willy Schmolke, who ended up in your camp later, under Pétain? His German lessons? The friendship you struck up, which got you safely to Germany — and from there, back to Belgrade?"

Popović's face showed complete bewilderment.

"Schmolke? No, I don't remember."

"And you never met him in Germany?"

"No! I wasn't alone in Germany. I escaped the camp with a whole group of Yugoslavs."

"Using every means available..."

"...with a group that included many of our current commanders: Franc Rozman, Kosta Nađ, Ivan Gošnjak, Petar Drapšin, Dušan Kveder, Peko Dapčević, Danilo Lekić."

"Ah! A cohort of heroes!"

MacCarver immediately jotted down the names in his notebook.

"Who else was with you? Repeat them."

Popović remained silent, looking closed off. He was trying to anticipate the American's train of thought so he could counter the blow when it came. And he no longer doubted

that it would. He remembered Nietzsche's advice: "He who knows when to keep silent is likely a true philosopher."

MacCarver was getting irritated, glancing at the tent flap — Pinch could walk in at any moment.

"Let's cut to the chase," he stepped up close to the corps commander. "I know who the Germans list under the codename 'Kobra'..."

Popović bent over the map, tracing something with his pencil.

"I don't understand what you're getting at. What do you mean?" he asked, his voice still calm.

"Majdanpek," MacCarver enunciated. "Well? You tipped off Schmolke, didn't you? An old friend, of course? You're a fine fellow and a shrewd man..." He flashed a quick smile and clapped Popović on the knee. "Come on, don't hide it from me. What's the point? Even your art is very dear to us."

Popović raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"What art?"

"I read your novel," MacCarver lied. "Brilliant!"

"Ah!" Popović waved dismissively. He didn't like to recall his one and only prose experiment, a delirious surrealist piece he had co-written with Aleksandar Vučo, another millionaire — but one who had squandered his fortune.

"And I know your poetry, too. About cat-green eyes staring at you from every corner and tails. Incredible themes, I must say. In America, you'd have gotten everything for your poetry: fame and money. A true pinnacle of artistic achievement. Schmolke, of course, wouldn't appreciate it. But what he can offer you — take it. He promised to arrange through the Gestapo an exchange: your wife, in Belgrade, for some German prisoner. Well? I know everything!"

"Apparently, not everything," Popović retorted with a smirk, lifting his gaze from the map. "My wife refused to

come to me."

"She didn't dare. And she's wise to reject the Gestapo's services. Or maybe someone else is already kissing her fingers? But be that as it may," MacCarver pressed on quickly, "we need a collaborator of your calibre. It would be interesting to get first-hand insights... There's nothing shameful in it. We're allies, aren't we? So, as proof of your sincerity, you'll write me a small pledge by morning... It will remain strictly confidential. Well?"

The corps commander remained silent, bending even lower over the map.

"A classic gangster grip," he thought. "*Sans préfaces inutiles.*"*

"Your stubbornness won't do you any good," MacCarver said irritably. "Be reasonable."

Popović's face didn't flinch. Only his tired eyelids, swollen from a sleepless night, drooped slightly over his eyes.

"You think you can intimidate me? A cheap trick. Black-mail, in the style of your dime-a-dozen G-men!"**

"Oh-ho! Finally, you're speaking the professional lingo!" MacCarver exclaimed softly, glancing again at the tent flap. "Now we'll understand each other much better. I'm sure you're a man of extraordinary courage. Tito himself spoke of you that way. You'll endure this blow just as well. Though, frankly, I wouldn't even call it a blow. A blow from an ally? A paradox, isn't it? I wouldn't even want to spoil your relations with Schmolke. I don't need anything from you right now... Except a promise that you'll support our program here in the future. A mere trifle for an ally, wouldn't you say? One day, you'll thank me for saving you from the sinking ship of the German empire. You're a prudent man. And don't worry —

* Without unnecessary introductions (French in the original).

** Nickname for FBI "special agents" — the American secret police.

this little change in your fate won't kill your taste for life, for its intellectual and physical pleasures. Don't be surprised, I know everything about you. And I won't pay you in marks or dinars — but in dollars.”

The appearance of Budgie Pinch cut the conversation short. Standing in the entrance, the Englishman glanced around warily. Then he caught himself, straightened up and resumed his usual air of impeccable propriety. True to his principle of never showing too much curiosity, he merely gave MacCarver a slight nod in greeting. Stepping into the corner by the table, he opened his suitcase, took out a toiletry kit and began meticulously combing his thinning hair into a slanted part.

On the surface, Captain Pinch appeared perfectly calm. In the glances he cast sideways at MacCarver and Popović, there was a glint of scornful mockery, as if he understood everything completely and took comfort in his own sense of superiority over the American schemer and his victim. Yet, deep down, Pinch was furious with himself. He had clearly noticed that something had happened in his absence — the commander was in an awful mood. Those red blotches on his face, those tightly pressed lips — they spoke more eloquently than words about Popović's inner turmoil.

“What happened here?” Clearly, the lieutenant colonel had already changed the subject of conversation. But what had they really been discussing just a moment ago? It was obvious that it wasn't about the reconnaissance results in Bor — “No reconnaissance report could have put the corps commander in such a dark, depressed state.”

Pinch was tormented by his thoughts when, unexpectedly, a Russian escapee entered the tent with a partisan. Pinch had no interest in what they were saying or what they were trying to convince Popović of. His mind was preoccupied

with something entirely different.

9

MacCarver pulled the tent flap shut behind the uninvited visitors and smirked.

“Oh, these Russians! Difficult allies...”

“And what are you so diligently looking for on that map?”

He stepped toward Popović again.

“Trying to locate your government, perhaps? By the way, who was recently elected to your PFP — the Provisional Field Parliament — as the builders of the new sovereign Yugoslavia? The captain and I still don't know,” MacCarver lied smoothly. “Always on the road!”

Popović slowly lifted his head from the map and gave the American a long, ironic look.

“If that's all you want to know right now, I can satisfy your curiosity. The chairman of AVNOJ — the Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia — is Ivan Ribar.”

“Ribar?” MacCarver furtively glanced at the densely written document he had received from von Goltz. “Dr. Ribar... Is that the same man who presided over the royal Skupština twenty-five years ago? A link between the bourgeoisie and the king at the time, wasn't he?”

“Possibly,” Popović smirked. “We are not troubled by a man's distant past. We know how to value the present.”

“Quite reasonable. An old statesman will certainly be useful to you. You need such figures — links between the former regime and your new movement. After all, not all bourgeois politicians should be thrown into the dustbin of history. That wouldn't align with the principles of true democracy... Wouldn't you agree? Who else?”

“Ribar’s deputy — Moša Pijade,” Popović replied hoarsely.

Suddenly, he realized he was losing his composure and confidence.

“Ah! That dwarf? I met him in Drvar. He made a fantastic impression on me. Pijade never leaves Tito’s side. They say he translated Karl Marx into Serbian while still in prison?”

These questions both unsettled Popović and oddly reassured him. It meant the American wasn’t just interested in him — he was looking into the biographies of the entire government. “Was this mere curiosity, or something else?” Weighing his options and recalling the French saying, “*Le meilleur est l’ennemi du bien*,”* Popović resolved to resist every trick and provocation from the Yankee to the very end — to be cautious.

“Yes, he is our Marxist theoretician,” he answered dryly.

“And they allowed him to translate Marx in prison? Even let him set up a workshop in his cell to exhibit his paintings?”

“That, I don’t know.”

“Hmm,” MacCarver wouldn’t let up. “His logical reasoning must be so devastating, and the impact of his landscapes so profound, that he turned his jailers into both Marxists and art connoisseurs? Well, in that case, Pijade is quite the asset for your government... and for me. I admire talented people.”

Pinch, pretending to be indifferent and absorbed in his grooming, suddenly spoke up:

“Yugoslavia’s landscapes? They’re magnificent! Practically beg to be put on canvas.”

“Oh, indeed! Mountains, valleys, the coastline... I understand you. To truly test Pijade’s talent as a versatile translator,” MacCarver turned back to Popović, “I’d like him to translate some excellent books by our writers: *The Blonde Ghost* and *The*

* The best is the enemy of the good (French in the original).

Superman. I’d recommend them to you as well. These novels are right up your alley. They’ll lift your spirits and restore your refined taste for life. Right now, you look like you’re worth about two cents, no more... And who was appointed head of the provisional government?”

“Broz Tito,” Popović muttered through clenched teeth. “At the second session of the Anti-Fascist Council, he was elevated to the rank of Marshal.”

“Tito — a Marshal? Excellent! That will flatter him. A title was just what he was missing!” MacCarver glanced at Pinch, then lowered his voice and switched to Serbian, speaking quickly. “These hyenas* hover around Tito like greedy guests around a fat goose. You have to elbow your way in just to grab a bite of the stuffing. Your army already has general ranks, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, but they haven’t been awarded to anyone yet.”

“I’m sure you’ll receive a high rank. Let’s say... lieutenant-general.”

Popović smirked.

“Ah, I see your French temperament kicking in. Your love for beautiful France has clearly seeped into your blood, carried by a hot Provençal current. That same current, I’m sure, will protect you from the dreadful dullness of the north. Your poetic dreams will come true... So, who else is in your government?”

Pinch edged closer to the conversation, listening intently. He rarely spoke. He preferred to listen, think and draw conclusions — such as the training of British intelligence.

“Vladislav Ribnikar,” Popović finally uttered in a faint voice.

At that moment, he realized he couldn’t withstand the relentless pressure of this American, who seemed to be peering

* An American slang term for the English.

into the very depths of his soul.

Just moments ago, Koča had felt in complete control, proud of his steadfastness, his resistance, his unshakable resolve. But now, analysing the situation, he sensed the ground shifting beneath his feet. And to keep from falling, he decided to leave his fate to chance — whatever happens, happens! For comfort, he murmured to himself a cryptic Nietzschean phrase: “But the knot of causes in which I am entangled returns — It will create me anew... I myself belong to the causes of eternal recurrence.”

“Ribnikar?” MacCarver didn’t find that name in von Goltz’s dossier. “Who is he?”

“Before the war, he was one of the richest men in Belgrade,” Popović spoke almost casually now. The hereditary owner of the newspaper *Politika*. He kept a safe house where we hid.”

“Who is ‘we’?”

“Tito, myself and others.”

“I see...” MacCarver jotted something down. “Quite the liberal, this Ribnikar. No wonder he fits in so well among you, like a fish in water...”

Suddenly, he turned to Pinch, who was listening intently, and blew a puff of cigarette smoke in his direction.

“How do you like my Serbian, Captain?”

“I’ve long been impressed by your progress, Colonel. However, I must admit — your pronunciation sounds more like it was learned in a language lab than from a real person. You rattle off phrases like an adding machine spits out numbers,” Pinch quipped.

“What can I say? In our age, technology rules the world, Captain!” MacCarver spread his arms in a mock gesture of resignation, then turned back to the corps commander. Next!

“The head of the Foreign Affairs Department...”

“A department? My, what ambition! And who holds this post?”

“Josip Smodlaka, a Croatian diplomat. He was the royal ambassador to the Vatican.”

“Does that work for you?” Popović’s tense gaze seemed to ask.

“Quite well!” MacCarver answered in kind, without words.

“Go on, go on.”

“Minister of the Interior — Vlado Zečević. He’s an Orthodox priest. Leader of the Democratic Party. He was with Draža Mihailović at first, but later switched to our side with his entire company,” Popović added with a hint of veiled satisfaction, as if to suggest that he wasn’t the only one with a complicated past, nor the only one to adjust his beliefs and actions according to circumstances.

“He was with Mihailović? That failure?” MacCarver laughed. “Quite the opportunist! And now he’s climbed the ranks so quickly...”

There was something pointed in the American’s tone, a veiled encouragement. Tormented by his own self-analysis, Popović recalled another aphorism from Nietzsche: “To love one is barbaric, for it is done at the expense of all others.” And, without waiting for the next question, he mentioned another minister — Sulejman Filipović, in charge of mining and forestry.

“He, too, was a career officer, recently defected from Pavličić’s ranks to ours,” Popović emphasized.

“Mining?” MacCarver interrupted, his eyes lighting up. “Ah, yes... Excellent! That’s quite enough. You’ve just named exactly the person we need most right now.”

MacCarver lowered his voice, speaking quickly.

“Now tell me — where can I find Filipović? He’s in Cro-

atia, correct? And is he a geologist? No? Then perhaps you could point me to some geologists? I ask purely for academic reasons.”

Pinch strained to listen, but the rapid Serbian left him struggling to keep up.

“Perfect!” MacCarver jumped up, catching Popović’s subtle nod. “An unspoken promise... or perhaps a full surrender. As the Latin saying goes: ‘To one who understands, a mere hint is enough!’ What a delightful government, wouldn’t you say, Captain Pinch? Completely democratic! Representatives of nearly every party — both old and new — now have the chance to put their principles to the test. Democracy in action!”

Listening to MacCarver, Pinch brooded. “Wasn’t British intelligence once top-class? After all, it had vast experience in colonial affairs — just think of Lawrence of Arabia. It had its proud traditions, its own method of recruiting people. MI6 had long since taken root in Yugoslavia. Prime Minister Churchill had even sent his own son, Randolph, here for that very reason. It seemed everything was accounted for — yet in this new Yugoslav government, there were few ministers who could serve British interests as faithfully as General Draža Mihailović or the young King Petar.”

“And how does the Yugoslav government in Cairo — the legitimate government — view Tito’s cabinet?” Pinch suddenly asked.

“We’re negotiating with Cairo,” Popović replied. “Our delegation has been sent there.”

“I’m certain,” MacCarver added, his voice smooth, calculated, “that King Petar, if properly advised, will be wise enough to recognize Tito and declare him the leader of the resistance. And the Marshal, I hope, will show enough tact to reach a reasonable agreement — preserving his prestige while

working with both the old bourgeois parties and this boy-king.”

Pinch turned away. Suddenly, he felt hot and suffocated in his fur-lined jacket, tight breeches and stiffly laced high boots. For the first time, he saw before him a master intriguer more perceptive than himself, a far craftier intelligence officer... And he cursed himself for his failure. The problem was that Brigadier General Fitzroy Maclean, head of the Anglo-American military mission, had confidentially tasked Pinch with keeping a close watch on MacCarver. And, above all else, uncovering what exactly had drawn the American’s interest to Serbia. But now, Pinch had botched it. First, he had failed to dissuade MacCarver from his reckless reconnaissance mission, which had struck both him and Popović as nothing more than theatrics and bravado. Second, he had lost track of MacCarver for an entire day. Third, he had missed his return from Bor. And fourth, it was now clear that this so-called reconnaissance had not been pointless. Somehow, some way, MacCarver had gotten hold of key information in Bor. And now, he had effortlessly ensnared the corps commander in his web. “What an absolute fool I am!” Pinch berated himself. “Failing my mission like this! I’ll never get to the bottom of this Yankee’s plans and objectives. What will I even report to Maclean now?” To make matters worse, he had to admit that his “ally” spoke Serbian better than he did — even though Pinch had lived in Yugoslavia before the war as a British overseer at the Trepča mines. “That’s what happens when you neglect the language and culture of the locals!” It was now obvious — MacCarver knew the Yugoslavs well. He had quickly won over Popović. And yet, how dare he be so blatantly dismissive of the Yugoslav king, calling him a mere “boy”? And why was he so fixated on the newly-appointed Minister of Mining? “Mining? Minerals? Mines...”

The realization hit Pinch like a jolt. He felt a wave of unease. He thought of his charming estate on the banks of the Lim River — his overgrown orchard and vineyards, once highly profitable. And now, Pinch could almost see it — the greedy hands of the Yankees stretching toward the Trepča mines, his estate, his vineyards. “Filthy rich devils — that’s why they act so boldly,” he concluded, suffocating under the weight of his own helplessness.

Meanwhile, MacCarver, whistling cheerfully, was already packing his suitcase. A peasant’s outfit, a language learning device with a full Serbian course, a flask of whiskey, a stack of cigarettes, books on Serbian history, classified manuals and guides...

“We take off early in the morning!” he declared briskly. “Pack up, Captain. And for God’s sake — try to show some enthusiasm! I recommend playing tennis. It improves agility, helps you adapt to any circumstances and demands precision in every strike.”

Pinch remained silent, staring at a fixed point. At this moment, he hated the American.

An hour before dawn, a small liaison plane took off from the airstrip near Mount Javor-Mare. Popović, who had come to see the guests off, sighed with both relief and sorrow. He felt a disturbing sense of duality — or even triplicity. He was both glad to be rid of the intrusive intelligence officers and regretful that, in the end, he was once again left alone. He cursed himself for having succumbed to MacCarver’s brazen blackmail yet consoled himself with the thought that he had at least aligned himself with a powerful man, a solid country — the United States, and its great politics, which carried with it the struggle for global dominance. And he, Koča, was now riding the wave of this great politics! He was a man of grand scale! From the abyss into which Schmolke had dragged him

— an abyss from which even Hitler himself was unlikely to escape — fate was now lifting him up once again. He just had to hold on now! Suddenly, with satisfaction, he recalled Paris, a tavern in Montparnasse, the wild intoxication of his past life there, where everything flew by, disappeared in an instant — time, money, fleeting pangs of conscience. And, feeling strangely at ease, to the surprise of his accompanying guards, he suddenly exclaimed aloud:

*“Fait accompli.”**

The liaison plane set course northward — to Croatia.

Pinch was grim, silent, his stomach turning every time the aircraft hit an air pocket. “Where else will this reckless Yankee drag me next? What new hole?”

MacCarver, on the other hand, was in excellent spirits, humming a trendy song from the States under his breath: “The Riot of Healthy Laughter.” The unexpected success had given him wings. Popović was in his hands — of that there was no doubt. A caught claw means the whole bird is doomed. But that wasn’t even the most important thing. He was eager to get his hands on von Goltz’s secret list of Gestapo agents embedded in the Yugoslav Army and Communist Party. MacCarver already knew from reliable sources that such a list existed — and he needed it for the next phase of his unofficial mission in Yugoslavia.

10

...When Jovan and I returned to the shelter, Đuro was already asleep, his bare feet stretched out toward the glowing embers, while Branko Kumanudi sat in the corner like an owl. The blue flames of the charred logs flickered in his round eyes.

* An accomplished fact (French in the original).

That night, I couldn't sleep for a long time. The embers crackled, the air smelled of smoke, and I kept feeling Branko's unblinking gaze fixed on me. Finally, he lay down, but I kept thinking about the meeting with the corps commander and the allies. Flashes of the small, dark-haired Popović with his well-groomed moustache, looking almost French — then the ruddy, cocky and self-assured American — then, like a pale ghost in the twilight, the image of the English captain... "What had brought them all together in this remote wilderness?"

At dawn, the six of us — the ones who had escaped from "Dresden" — left the camp. None of us wanted to stay with a brigade that didn't fight. And Miletić agreed to take us into his Šumadija Battalion in Bosnia. "There," he said, "the fight never stops." Nedeljko, who knew every trail in the forest, volunteered to guide us to the road.

Aleksa Mušić lagged behind, scowling. He was especially bitter that his hopes for the Spanish hero — Popović — had not been fulfilled. He was angry at everyone and disappointed in everything.

"It's all right, brother!" the ever-cheerful Laušek encouraged him. "If not here, then somewhere else... It doesn't matter where we fight. If we didn't get to Schmolke, we'll get to someone else. Life is like the moon — full one moment, waning the next."

"*Dobro, dobro!*" Mušić nodded, a faint smile crossing his stern face.

"And have you heard what's happening in Italy, comrades?" Laušek continued excitedly. "The people are rising up! The new government has declared war on Germany. That's fantastic! A wise jester in Shakespeare once said: 'Don't grab onto a wheel when it's rolling downhill, or you'll break your neck. But when the big wheel is rolling uphill — grab on! It'll

pull you up with it."

"And it certainly will!" Kolaccione chimed in. "Garibaldi's spirit lives on! Enrico, chin up!"

At a fork in the road, Nedeljko stopped.

"The straight path leads past Bogovina..." Then, suddenly, a thought struck him. "You know, that's where we should go instead of Majdanpek! There are mines there — they supply Bor with coal, and they're right next to the forest. We could approach unseen. And the workers are Italians from the Todt labour camp."

"Italians in Bogovina?" Kolaccione perked up. "And they probably still don't know what's happening in Italy? And we're just walking away..."

"Shameful!" Laušek said.

My friends looked at me reproachfully. Clearly, they had no desire to follow me and Miletić all the way to distant Bosnia.

"Roughly how many guards are there in Bogovina?" I asked Nedeljko.

"No more than sixty. Chetniks and police."

"Well then," Laušek interjected, "that's perfect! A single brave soldier is worth five if he acts with surprise. Why not try? Surprise will make up for our lack of numbers."

"No, it's too risky. We don't have the right!" Jovan Miletić objected.

"Why not? Is initiative forbidden? Can't we take revenge for Majdanpek?" I pressed.

"We're short on weapons."

"Then we'll get them there."

"Cicero said: 'When courage leads, fortune follows.'" Laušek proclaimed.

Jovan hesitated.

"We can't act without orders."

“Then we’ll go ourselves. The six of us.”

“And I’ll make seven,” Đuro Filipović stepped forward. Branko Kumanudi looked disapproving.

“Oh, *bolan*,* what a brave one you are!” he sneered at Đuro. Đuro waved him off.

“We don’t need you. You never ploughed a field, never chopped wood — all you ever did was make bonbons!** What do you know about this?”

“What do bonbons have to do with anything, *boga mu*?*** Branko grumbled. “Comrade Korchagin, listen! He’s just picking on me.”

But Miletić wasn’t paying attention. He was deep in thought, torn between the temptation to strike Bogovina and the fear of taking such responsibility. He probably recalled Popović’s warning about reckless “fantasies.” He probably remembered Majdanpek, too. But in the end, he made up his mind. His natural boldness and courage won out.

“*Dobro! Ajde, drugovi, na Bogovinu.***** Lead the way, Nedeljko. After all, it’s not weapons that fight heroically — but the bright heart of a warrior! With you, blood brother Nikolai, I believe in victory!”

Kumanudi stood still for a moment, thinking. Then, making up his mind, he caught up with us.

All traces of gloom had vanished. We talked excitedly about Schmolke and Krebs. “We may not hit Bor directly — but Bogovina will be just as good.” Kolaccione and Marino dreamed aloud about freeing their fellow Italians.

The winding, rocky trail led us into a forested valley.

* An exclamation expressing contempt, similar to “wretch!”

** Bonbons — candies or sweets.

*** By God! (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

**** Good! Come on, comrades, to Bogovina (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

Twisted, mutilated oaks stood along the slopes, their severed branches resembling jagged ploughs. We were approaching Bogovina. Now, we had to slip into the settlement unnoticed.

I had already noticed the cart emerging from the forest, loaded with livestock feed — oak branches still bearing green leaves. Two oxen pulled the cart, urged on by a short, elderly man with a switch. Mušić and I approached him. Bearded, still sturdy, with a copper-toned face roughened by wrinkles, he looked just like an old Russian peasant — except for his unusually curled moustache, with one end twisting downward and the other upward. “He could help us,” Jovan and I decided and walked alongside him.

We struck up a conversation. When the old man learned we were partisans, he was delighted. But when I told him I was a “*pravi*”* Russian — that is, not an emigrant or a local — he didn’t believe me at first. He studied me carefully, questioning me, and then, moved to tears, told me about the first time he ever saw Russians. Back then, there was a war against the Turks. Živko was just ten years old. One day, he was helping his father and brothers harvest wheat in the fields when he suddenly saw three horsemen in white tunics and caps, carrying long lances. They surveyed the land around the village and disappeared. The reapers, startled, abandoned their work. “Who were those riders?” Some said they were Turks; others disagreed — perhaps Arnauts.** “But why no fezzes or turbans?” Just as they sat down to eat, more horsemen appeared in the same uniforms. They rode up and asked:

“How are you, brothers? Are there any Turkish infidels nearby?”

One of the elders, who had once worked in Russia, recognized them: “They’re Russians!” Overjoyed, the villagers ran

* Genuine (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

** Albanians.

to fetch jugs of šljivovica, bread, meat and cheese. Together, they feasted. The next day, a large Russian army arrived. At the front were trumpeters and drummers, followed by soldiers with lances... The village bell-ringer began ringing the bells as if for a fire alarm. The entire village gathered to greet their liberators. A day later, the Serbian and Bulgarian volunteers arrived with their banners, joining the Russian soldiers as they marched toward Knjaževac and Zaječar to face the Turks advancing from the Stara mountains. That was when the heavy rains began. Mud clogged the wheels and wagons got stuck. The horses couldn't pull the cannons. Živko's father watched, then said to his sons: "Hitch the buffalo and go help the Russians." Živko and his older brothers harnessed the buffalo to a wagon, packed a satchel of bread, caught up with the Russians and hauled the cannons up the hill. The soldiers were overjoyed: "Well done, boys, you really helped us. Thank you."

In short, convincing the old man to help us was not difficult.

...As dusk deepened, the oxen dragged the cart past the sentries at the edge of the village, heading toward the centre. As agreed with Živko, he stopped near the "Three Roses" kafana, where the guardsmen from the office usually gathered in the evenings when off duty.

Carefully parting the branches that concealed us, we climbed down from the cart one by one and, posing as revellers, swaggered into the kafana in a rowdy group — Mušić leading the way, his submachine gun hidden beneath his coat, with Miletić and me close behind, followed by the rest.

The large, filthy hall was so smoke-filled that the people inside seemed wrapped in a thin layer of mist. Bearded men, dressed in tattered German uniforms, banged their glasses on the tables, played cards, tossed gold ducats onto the table,

stomped their feet, and off-key, drunkenly bellowed a song about "King Petar." Several men were engrossed in a game of carom, knocking three balls across the table. Laušek and I moved close to the players — positioning ourselves between them and the windowsill where their weapons lay.

At that moment, from the doorway, Miletić's commanding voice rang out:

"Death to fascism, freedom to the people!"

This battle cry had often struck terror into Chetniks. But now, they only hesitated for a moment before bursting into laughter, thinking it was just some drunken joke. But our weapons were already in our hands. Even old Živko grabbed a rifle from the coat rack by the entrance.

Miletić fired a burst from his submachine gun. The Chetniks froze, stunned, then threw up their hands. A few managed to leap out the windows. Screaming that a large partisan unit had infiltrated the village, the rest scattered in panic down the street. Živko stayed behind to guard the prisoners. We wasted no time rushing across the street to the gates of a tall wooden fence. After disarming the sentry, we stormed into the barracks of the concentration camp.

"Come out, Italians!" Colaccione shouted. "Grab weapons — axes, shovels, pickaxes... Take whatever you can!"

"*Evviva la libertà!*"* Marino cried.

Within minutes, the prisoners had armed themselves with tools from the storeroom and rifles from the guardhouse.

Encouraged by news of events in Italy, the Italians threw themselves into hunting down the remaining guards.

Throughout the night, the sky above the mining village glowed red with fire. Mine buildings burned, guard towers collapsed, the camp barracks smouldered. Gunfire rang out — submachine bursts, grenades exploding. Some Chetniks

* Long live liberty! (Italian in the original).

put up furious resistance.

By morning, we had buried Nikolaus Pal and several Italians who fell in the night's battle. We gave them a final military honour — a volley of more than a hundred rifles and submachine guns thundered through the air over their mass grave beneath a towering oak tree. Yellowed leaves rained down from its branches, blanketing the burial mound.

“Farewell, Nikolaus,” Laušek said. “Farewell, my friend,” he repeated, his voice trembling. “Sleep here in peace, beside your Italian brothers in suffering and in battle. If I survive, I will tell Budapest that you died a brave soldier.”

11

...With both sorrow and hope for a future reunion, I parted ways with my friends — Aleksa, Laušek, Colaccione and Marino. They remained here, in the eastern forests of Serbia. That night, Colaccione became the commander of an Italian partisan unit, and Marino its political commissar.

Thus was born the now-famous First Battalion of the Giuseppe Garibaldi Brigade. Serbs from the surrounding villages also joined. Led by Mušić, they marched toward Bor. Aleksa had unfinished business there — and he was eager to settle the score. He convinced Laušek to stay on as his chief of staff and quickly coordinated a joint action plan with Colaccione. This small, independent force already had its first mission — to blow up the bridges on the Žagubica-Požarevac narrow-gauge railway and prevent the Germans from transporting Bor's copper to the Danube.

Marching in their green overcoats, the Italians began singing a tune I already knew well:

“Ogni diritto, questo rispettar farem,

Siamo proletari...”

*[We will make them respect our rights,
We, the proletarians...]*

And overlapping their voices, another song rose — the Serbian partisan hymn:

*“S Dona, s Volge i s Urala,
Visoko je zatrepala,
Na naše kape pala,
Zvezda crvena!”*

*[From the Don, the Volga and the Urals,
High above, it trembled,
And onto our caps it fell,
The red star!]*

Behind the column rolled supply carts. Peasants had loaded their wagons with ammunition from the enemy store-rooms and foodstuffs from the dairy factory intended for the German garrison in Bor. At the rear, on an ox-drawn cart stacked with corn sacks, sat old Živko. Sitting up proudly, he had abandoned his half-collapsed house at the edge of the village and joined the partisans.

We watched until the cart disappeared around the bend of the valley...

Only Nedeljko, exhilarated by everything that had happened and envying Aleksa and his upcoming missions, was returning alone to Popović's corps. How eagerly he would have gone with Aleksa!

Miletić, Đuro, Branko and I rode off on captured horses toward Bosnia. Our friends and all the Italians would have

come with us, but travelling across almost all of Serbia with such a large detachment was unthinkable. As for me, I was determined not to part ways with Miletić.

My acquaintance with Jovan had been brief, but I had already grown fond of him for his intelligence, sincerity, honesty and courage. His friendship was an essential support for me in this unfamiliar land. He could explain many things to me, help me understand what I did not yet know or comprehend. He was my peer, and, moreover, we had sworn brotherhood.

A difficult journey to the west lay ahead. From Bogovina to Livno, where the Proletarian Brigade was stationed, was at least four hundred kilometers in a straight line. But we could not go directly — we had to move somewhat southward, avoiding enemy-occupied towns, travelling through sparsely populated areas, forests and snow-covered mountain peaks, steering clear of encounters with Chetnik bands. I could not stop marvelling at how scattered the corps units were. Jovan shrugged: “Higher considerations!” But then he explained, “It’s all purely circumstantial. It’s hard to regroup.”

After crossing the Radovanska River, we saw something resembling a fortress on a hill. Jovan checked the map: the Krpičevac Monastery. We decided to scout it out — perhaps we could rest there for a while before continuing and clarify our route to Bosnia. At the monastery, ravaged and looted by the Germans, we found only one inhabitant: Hieromonk Joanikije, a frail old man with a long white beard, glasses on a cord and a worn grey cassock. He greeted us warmly, offering walnuts and boiled pumpkin in the refectory. Later, he accompanied us to the wooded mountains of Ozren.

“May the Lord bless you,” he said at parting. “I will wait until Serbia is free. Praise be to Russia — she will protect us from the German yoke and all our foes.”

He waved his hat after us for a long time. I had never expected the first monk I met in my life to be like this!

We descended the western slopes of Ozren. Ahead stretched the broad, open valley of the South Morava River. Along the river ran a railway and the Belgrade-Niš highway.

“That’s a challenge!” Miletić said. “Even on foot, sneaking through this valley is dangerous — we’ll be spotted. And what about the horses? We can’t just abandon them. Hey, boy!” He called out to a ten-year-old child walking nearby with a bundle of firewood on his back. “Where are you from?”

“Where are you from?” The boy eyed us suspiciously.

Jovan, pulling back the edge of his cap, revealed a red star. “I’m a partisan too!” the boy said excitedly, and to prove it, he pulled a flat German bayonet from his belt.

“What’s your name?”

“Timić.”

“Can you lead us through the valley?”

“Of course! Why do you even ask?” His big, light brown eyes flashed with determination.

He shook his black forelock, threw his bundle into the snow and tightened the strap on his old, patchwork jacket. He was from Aleksinac, the son of a railway worker — he wouldn’t let us down. From Aleksinac to Stalac Station, a German armoured train patrolled. Bridges were guarded by paired sentries. Policemen roamed everywhere. They killed anyone who appeared near protected sites. The best route, he said, was along the narrow-gauge railway leading from the main line to the quarries at Beli Kamen. The railway operated only during the day. But if there were sentries on the bridge over the Morava, then he wasn’t sure what to do.

“We’ll handle that,” Miletić said.

By evening, fog settled over the valley. White veils stretched among the black firs, swirling slowly in the needles

and dissolving into the sky. The fog, soft and damp, warmed the ground. Trees began to drip. The snow became softer. Following Timić, leading our horses by the reins, we safely crossed the highway.

The river appeared, broadened by a thickening layer of fog along its lower banks. The silhouette of the bridge's rectangular frame emerged. Leaving Branko with the horses in a ravine, we crept closer to the bridge and took cover behind the embankment near its structure. We didn't have to wait long — soon, footsteps echoed.

I was the first to lunge at a sentry as he drew level with me, striking him hard on the head with the butt of my pistol. Miletić and Đuro tackled the other. Both sentries tumbled down the slope. We gathered their rifles, took their documents and buried the bodies under the snow.

We crossed the bridge quickly. Now, only the railway remained to be traversed. Flushed with success, we couldn't resist — digging out the ties, we pried up a rail with a log. A green light glowed at a nearby siding — the track was clear. By the time we galloped far into the forest on horseback, explosions of shells burst into the night, sparks flew, and the screech of grinding wheels and the crashing of colliding wagons filled the air. Timić, seated behind Miletić, shouted:

“Serves them right!”

“Thank you. You're a real partisan now.” Miletić kissed him.

The boy hurried home — his sick mother was waiting in their cold hut. We, meanwhile, pressed on toward Kopaonik.

We spent the rest of the night and the entire next day climbing the ridge. A narrow path wound along a mountain stream, weaving between rocks jutting from the snow, through jagged granite and porphyry cliffs, among serrated peaks of yellow-green serpentine, bare and sharp as saw teeth.

A blizzard raged. Gusts of wind, like the sweeping wings of a giant white bird, lashed our faces with snow, blinding our eyes. Trusting in our sturdy little horses, in their ability to navigate obstacles, we pressed forward, gripping their tails, grateful that enemy ski troops wouldn't pursue us in such weather.

The horses led us to a cave. Hunched over, we entered. The sharp scent of pigeon droppings filled the air and the echo of underground waters reached our ears.

Branko, striking matches, glanced around fearfully. His round, bulging eyes gleamed like those of an owl glaring from a crevice in the dark corner. Đuro, however, was undeterred. He lit a fire, searched the nooks and crannies, and found a wheel of young cheese and dry bread wrapped in cloth, left behind by someone. Branko, heartened by the sight of food and fire, began rummaging too, but under a pile of rocks and dirt, he unearthed only human bones.

“This was once a hideout for hajduks,” Miletić said. “They fought against the Turks.”

He continued talking, but an overwhelming drowsiness overtook me, and I fell asleep as if sinking into something soft and warm. And I dreamed.

I stood on a seashore. Dull silver waves clawed at the embankment with white fingers. Was it the Caspian Sea? The Black Sea? Or perhaps the Adriatic? A cape, a tower... The air smelled of seaweed and oil. A yellow chestnut leaf drifted on the wind. I walked along the boulevard, then turned onto a narrow, winding street. It led me to a garden. Amidst the dense, fine leaves of pomegranate bushes, pink fruits glowed... A young peacock with a dark grey crest, resembling a hen, wandered along the path, playing with a tiny, russet gazelle. I suddenly remembered: of course, I was in an old quarter of Baku, on Tverkuchasi Street. Here, in a small two-storey

house, lived my battalion's Party organizer, Dzhamil. Could he already be home? I slowly climbed onto the veranda. Clusters of dried grapes, bunches of red pepper and cumin hung from the upper railing. A canary's cage. Just as Dzhamil had described it. Then his mother appeared — strict, dressed in dark clothing. "You are here?" she asked, looking at me with sorrowful, tear-filled eyes. She led me into a room, to a bamboo table where Dzhamil used to study, and for some reason, she showed me a book of Sabir's poetry. I flipped through it... And again, I heard a voice — not the old woman's this time, but another, commanding voice. Dzhamil's voice: "You must endure much, go far." And Dzhamil himself, my friend, stood vividly before me — resolute and insistent. I recognized him and... I awoke, drenched in cold sweat, shivering in an exhausting chill.

I couldn't fall asleep anymore because of the severe headache.

It seemed I was coming down with something. In the morning, I got up, barely forcing myself.

The bright sun shone from the blue sky. Very bright. But its rays were cold, offering no warmth — or was I shivering again? I felt awful.

From the summit of Kopaonik, on this clear, frosty day, we could see far in all directions. Below, the town of Kruševac gleamed white. To the east, the Suva Mountains range stretched in a deep blue haze. Along the gentle slopes, villages darkened here and there like warm birds' nests.

"And there, brother, is Kosovo Polje!"

Jovan pointed south, where the mountains formed a vast basin shrouded in a bluish mist.

"There, at the confluence of the Lab and Sitnica rivers, the famous Battle of Kosovo took place in 1389. As the song goes: 'In this battle, the Serbs lost both their power and strength on

this land.' The Turks defeated our army, and Serbia became a Turkish province for five centuries. Back then, brother, we had no friends, no Russia by our side in battle. But now, all Slavs stand together — a united brotherhood, a great family! Right?"

Many interesting things met us along the way, and every now and then, Miletić and I would get into heated discussions, which Đuro listened to with insatiable curiosity, while Branko followed with lazy interest. One day, we came across a rock that resembled a woman's figure. From the stone folds of her "clothing," thorny bushes sprouted. Jovan told me an old legend. This strangely shaped rock was once a wealthy woman who lived here. She owned vast lands, livestock and gold ducats. One day, a poor woman came to her with a child, begging for alms. But the rich woman gave her only a stone. The widow wept and walked away, whispering, "May you turn to stone yourself." And the wealthy woman did — she petrified, becoming a cliff.

Sometimes, we rested in abandoned mountain chapels, where the faces of Serbian rulers had been scraped off the walls long ago by Janissary knives. Other times, we spent the night in a cave filled with the roar of water and a blue glow, listening to the eerie sounds — like millstones grinding or drums beating. We waited out snowstorms in shepherds' *kolibi** made of stacked stones. We stood in awe before the "sea eye" — a small, luminous, deep lake, where snow-laden trees were reflected sharply, like in a mirror.

One day, we came upon an almost sheer cliff of pink tuff, where high above, in massive letters, someone had carved: STALIN.

I stopped in amazement.

"Look!" I exclaimed in admiration.

* Huts (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

“On Mount Veliki Šator, near my village,” Đuro boasted seriously, “I carved that name too.”

“That name is in every one of our hearts,” Jovan added quietly, with pride.

And we stood for a long time, gazing at the cherished word, immortalized here by some unknown labourer.

Finally, we reached the Ibar Gorge. Sinking knee-deep in the snow, we struggled down a steep descent using a makeshift ladder of intertwined branches, crossed the river, climbed a slope and found ourselves near a village. Dusk had fallen. Lights shone in the houses, the angry barking of dogs, the frightened clucking of hens and the squealing of pigs filled the air. Thinking that it was probably Chetniks and German police from Kraljevo coming to loot the village, we decided to teach them a lesson.

Đuro sneaked around to the back of the outermost house to assess the situation. With the horses, we waited silently for his return, ready to open fire at any moment. Imagine our surprise when we heard Filipovic’s clear whistle and his joyful call:

“Over here! Hurry, it’s our own!”

A few minutes later, we were embracing partisans in a warm hut.

It turned out that a unit from the Third Brigade of our corps had arrived in Lučice to requisition livestock, food and property from peasants hostile to the national liberation struggle. Koča Popović had flown from Homolje to the Sandžak region, and it was necessary to ensure his headquarters had all the supplies they needed.

Half-asleep, lulled by the warmth of the hut, I could still hear Miletić’s heated argument with the unit commander. Jovan accused him of looting the peasants, while the commander defended himself, citing orders. I fell asleep drenched

in sweat, my headache persisting. In the morning, I was too weak to mount my horse on my own, but I kept stubbornly telling myself: “I’ll endure!”

From Lučice, we rode faster. Miletić was in a hurry, worried about my condition. Ahead lay safer areas under Popović’s corps’ control. Some of the troops were stationed in the mountainous, forested terrain between the Ibar and Drina rivers. In winter, neither the Germans nor the Chetniks ventured there often.

Behind us, the soft, rounded contours of the Šumadija Mountains faded away. In their place, a different kind of landscape stretched ahead — harsh, sombre mountains torn by gorges, riddled with chasms and tangled in chaotic heaps. It was here that our unremarkable little horses proved their worth. They navigated the loose, slippery trails with agility, climbed rocky slopes through deep snow, stepped carefully on carved stone ledges, and followed us across trembling footbridges suspended over abysses where sunlight never reached. They forded rivers that roared between towering stone corridors.

My bay horse, Gnedko, moved through dangerous spots with remarkable caution and care. He never placed his front hoof down immediately but held it in the air, eyeing the ground and choosing the safest place to step. This made his gait abrupt, tossing me from side to side until I was dizzy.

At some point, I began losing interest in everything around me. Miletić pointed out Durmitor in the distance — the highest mountain in northern Montenegro. It gleamed ahead, its twin snow-covered peaks standing like a beacon, guiding us toward Bosnia. My friend was speaking to me animatedly, but I barely listened and hardly understood. My head burned and spun, and everything before my eyes blurred.

Suddenly, I saw a large city down in the valley. Evening

had already fallen, and its streets glowed warmly with lights. I shouted, “That’s where we’ll rest!” — and then came to my senses at the sound of my own voice... Another time, during a rest stop, I imagined a campfire. It seemed so close, burning among the low beech trees, with a cast-iron pot hanging over it and people sitting around. I even caught the scent of garlic and mutton. This wasn’t some fantastic vision of a city hidden among desolate mountains — it felt completely real... I rushed toward the fire — and collapsed into the snow...



PART TWO

1

...I woke up but lay still, watching the nurse, Ajša Bašić, a stocky, broad-shouldered young woman dressed in a jacket and trousers made of greatcoat cloth. She sat on a round boulder near the hearth — a square of stones with a pipe running up the wall — and stoked the fire, adding pieces of birch bark. Finally, the water in the kettle began to bubble. Ajša poured in cornmeal, stirring it with a large wooden spoon. When the mixture thickened, she tossed in a pinch of salt and turned her closely cropped head toward me.

“You’re awake, Comrade Nikolai? Breakfast is ready.”

Ajša placed a lump of hot dough into a bowl.

“Eat, comrade, to your health. Eat. This is our *kačamak*.”

The *kačamak* was delicious, especially with milk. Ajša also had a few dried plums and a handful of forest nuts for me; a *pečnjak* — a couple of corn cobs roasted in the embers — was also ready. And after these treats came the “medicine” — tea

brewed thick from spruce needles...

I ate, drank, and all the while, the girl watched me with concerned eyes, filled with a warm, motherly tenderness. How long had it been since I had felt such a soothing gaze upon me?

“What?” I asked, embarrassed. “Do I look scruffy? Have I aged?”

“No, you’ll probably never be an old man! You have a young soul.”

“Why do you think so?”

“It’s in your eyes,” Ajša answered thoughtfully. “Korchagin’s eyes are sometimes cheerful, sometimes somber. But yours are always clear. As if you’ve never known sorrow...”

According to Ajša, they had brought me to the Šumadija Battalion tied to the saddle horn. I was unconscious, suffering from a strange and little-known illness that often occurred in the mountains. The battalion had seen several cases, especially among those born near the coast. It began with a sudden and severe weakness, headaches and delirium, and some died from complete physical exhaustion, sinking into total apathy. Fortunately, in my case, the illness passed quickly and I recovered rather fast.

The forest watchtower, built from thick logs blackened by soot, served as the infirmary ward. A week of complete rest, good food and spruce needle tincture restored my strength. I was already ready to get back on my feet, but Ajša still kept me strictly in bed. She allowed no one into the watchtower except Miletić-Korchagin, though I often heard voices outside the door and saw fighters peeking in through the window. Only one of them was allowed to glance at me through the slightly opened door. He was clearly someone she trusted.

“Who is that?” I asked, curious.

Ajša blushed.

“Petkovski.”

And I noticed that the next time, she didn’t let him near the door at all.

The head of the medical post, Ružica Brković, often appeared — a girl with thick chestnut braids neatly tucked under her side cap, her tanned face glowing with health and the freshness of the forests and fields. She was younger than Ajša, but the fine wrinkles on her forehead, the focussed, determined gaze of her greenish eyes and her firmly pressed lips gave her an air of deep seriousness. She always seemed pre-occupied with something.

Last night, Ružica arrived with a typewriter and a bundle of papers... I learned that she was also the editor of the wall newspaper *Glas Šumadijca*... Ajša helped her put the newspaper together, typing on the machine, drawing. It instantly brought back a vivid memory of my own company’s life — just like this, our editorial team would gather for *Boevoy Listok*...

Squinting with satisfaction, Ružica watched as Ajša’s hands filled the pages with strict, straight letters, as beautiful decorative flourishes in coloured pencil appeared beside the headline. Under an ornament of oak leaves, Ružica placed a poem that brought a bright blush to Ajša’s cheeks. She didn’t even want to type it, but the editor insisted. This was the poem, in my translation:

To Ajša, the Partisan:

She looks like a cropped-haired boy,
Eyes lowered over the page.
Keys clatter in a lively dance,
Leaving a blackened trace.

Silence reigns... not a word,
The typewriter's rhythmic beat,
Then a gentle chime, and once again,
Quick hands fly in retreat.

...Soon on forest glades,
Across our fields and plains,
In smoky huts and taverns,
Stalin's call will ring again.

Koce Petkovski.

"That's our poet," Ružica said, giving Ajša a playful look. "The nurse was utterly embarrassed. We're still missing one article," she said seriously, turning to me. "The fighters would like to know what a kolkhoz is. Please write something, and Korchagin will translate it. All right? The fighters want to know how peasants live in the Soviet Union," she added timidly. "Will you? I'll come by tomorrow."

And so today, after feeding me, Ajša placed the notebook and pencil that Ružica had left by my bedside and then went to the river — to wash the pot, fetch fresh water or perhaps just to give me some space to write.

Lying on the dry fern bedding, warmly wrapped in a *struka* — a wide, homespun woolen shawl. I gazed at the small square window, thinking about how to begin my article.

Beyond the bluish glass, crooked pines with black lace-like needles could be seen, their twisted forms rising against sheer cliffs of the most bizarre and delicate shapes. Above them, the sun was rising, gilding the tree trunks; its slanted rays struck the window, slicing the dimly lit watchtower in half, as if with a freshly planed wooden board. Nearby, the Bistrica River roared as it burst from the depths of a cave. I had grown so

accustomed to the constant rumble of the stream that I often no longer noticed it.

Ajša said that the water in this river, filtered through rocks and stones, was not only pure but also healing. The Bistrica flows into the valley and makes its way toward the Dinaric Alps. And we, too, would soon follow its course — cross the Alps, descend into the valley of the Cetina River. There, near the town of Sinj in Herzegovina, the Montenegrin battalion was fighting, waiting for us to join them in storming the city. Yet we were still here, near Livno, waiting for something in turn. Waiting for what?..

The order that Miletić-Korchagin had brought from Popović had changed nothing for the brigade. Jovan told me that after reading the order, Brigade Commander Perućica had openly expressed his discontent — once again, they were to remain idle near Livno! A strategic reserve for the Supreme Command! Meanwhile, the fascists were advancing in Herzegovina and the coastal regions, in eastern Bosnia and the Sandžak! And, according to intelligence reports, the First German Mountain Division, "Oak Leaf," whose regiment was stationed in Sinj, was preparing for deployment to the Soviet-German front. If no action was taken, that regiment would soon depart for the east in full combat readiness. This had to be prevented... According to Miletić, Perućica had gone to seek clarification from the Chief of the Supreme Headquarters, Arso Jovanović — luckily, the headquarters was not far from here. Tito's command post was located northwest of Livno, beyond the Veliki Šator mountain, in the forested region of Drvar. The battalion was eagerly awaiting Perućica's return.

"If only I could return to the ranks as soon as possible," I thought. "And then, perhaps, I could even find a way back to my own. The partisans would help me... But how should I

write about kolkhozes so that every word is clear to the fighters?”

Such a vast topic was difficult to condense into a short article. There was so much to say. Would it not be better simply to tell the story of how my father had lived and worked in a kolkhoz? To list his possessions and his household, to explain how much he earned for his work days? To describe how he grew wonderful apples and pears in his garden, how he acclimated grapevines and walnut trees to the Kursk climate? And how, as a kolkhoz agronomist, he “raised” a high-yield variety of wheat — how he would proudly show me its sturdy stalk, the heavy, dark golden head bowed under its own weight, holding this mighty ear of grain between his palms as if it were a dear, hard-won living creature...

I had just finished writing when I heard a commotion at the door and a cautious knock.

“Come in!” I called out.

A blond head peeked through the doorway — it was Koce Petkovski. Seeing that Ajša wasn’t there, he quickly stepped inside, followed by a group of partisans, with Đuro Filipović leading them.

“*Zdravo!*” they said in unison, awkwardly nudging each other with their elbows.

“How are you feeling?”

“We wanted to meet you.”

Each of them shook my hand firmly and for a long time.

“They’re all from our platoon,” Đuro said. “And this is our company commander, Kića Jankov,” he added in a quick whisper before jumping up and respectfully giving his seat to the man who had just entered.

At first glance, the commander didn’t stand out among the fighters, except for his glasses and a short, scruffy beard. He was of small stature, stocky, wearing the same coarse

woolen jacket as many partisans, cinched at the waist with a narrow belt. He walked in with a slight limp and greeted me with a warm smile. His eyes, magnified by the thick lenses of his glasses, burned with such youthful intensity that at first, I didn’t even notice the sharpness and sternness of his prematurely aged face, with its wrinkled forehead and deep lines around his mouth. “They must really love him in the company,” I thought, feeling relieved that I had ended up under his command.

Half-closing his eyes and clasping his bandaged leg above the knee, he listened attentively as I answered the fighters’ questions about the lives of Soviet workers, nodding in agreement.

“Yes, yes. That’s right, exactly right. It will be the same here. It has to be!”

Jankov took off his glasses, and his face suddenly took on an angry expression.

“It’s shameful to remember how I once worked as a mechanic at the military-technical factory in Kragujevac for mere pennies, like a Turkish slave. Shameful! We still have so much to learn from the Soviet people. Yes, a great deal, if we want to change everything...”

There was a tremour in his voice.

After a moment of thoughtful silence, Jankov continued:

“I’m from Kragujevac, *družē** Nikolai. From the old Serbian capital.” He spoke slowly, in a slightly hoarse voice, as if carefully choosing only the most necessary words. “Kraguj” means ‘hawk’ in Serbian. People say our city is the Mecca of freedom — it’s where the Serbs first rose against the Turkish Janissaries. They call Kragujevac the cradle of the Serbian revolution: in 1910, it sent social-democrats to parliament — Dragiša Lapčević, a worker, and Triša Kaclerović, a law-

* Comrade (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

yer. Not long ago, our city was called ‘communist’ and ‘Russian’ because a true Kragujevcian never hides his love for all things Russian, for the Soviet Union. And now, Nikolai, I am ashamed of my city — where Chetniks, those vile dogs of fascism, roam freely, killing honest people, mocking women. And Kragujevac endures it!”

The company commander fell silent when the door suddenly creaked loudly.

Ajša Bašić appeared on the threshold.

“So this is how you’re helping me treat our Russian friend?” she said sternly. “He needs rest, and you...”

“All right, all right,” Jankov said placatingly. “Just don’t treat him like you treated me... I stepped on a mine,” he turned to me, “and she wanted to send me to a hospital — to have my leg cut off.”

“Not me, the political commissar,” Ajša objected. “Katnić gave the order. And if it weren’t for wild mint, they really would have amputated it.”

“Katnić? Is that the same one,” I asked, “who led the miners’ struggle in Bor and later became an agitator in the detachment? He used to go by the nickname ‘Kraguj’?”

“The very same,” Jankov confirmed. “You’ve already heard of him? Yes, he’s well known in eastern Serbia. But things didn’t go well for him there, and now he’s abandoned his old nickname — the ‘hawk.’ Our political commissar is also from Kragujevac,” Jankov explained. “That’s why he took his nickname from our hometown. His father owns a kafana there, and he himself used to teach history at the teachers’ institute. He often visited our factory, giving lectures to the workers on Serbian history. That’s where we met. And now, he almost cost me my leg — wanted it amputated! What then? As we say: ‘If your head aches, your legs carry you. If your hand aches, again, your legs carry you. But if your leg aches — you

lie down!...’ And as for your so-called remedies — mint, yarrow and plantain — you better keep quiet about those, Ajša. Don’t embarrass yourself in front of a Russian man! Let’s go, *drugovi!*”*

Jankov let the fighters leave ahead of him but lingered in the doorway before stepping back inside.

“Take this, *družo*, from me... for supplies and ammunition. Get well soon! We march soon!” He placed a small square satchel by my bedside, woven from colourful wool, with tassels on its corners.

2

My *pobratim*, Miletić-Korchagin, usually came to the watchtower in the evenings, after the company’s training sessions had ended, and we would stay together until midnight. He taught me Serbian, and I taught him Russian. I liked the Serbs’ rich and expressive language, which in many ways resembled Russian but sometimes, due to its clusters of consonants, turned into a harsh, guttural speech: “*Crni Vrh, smrt, vrba...*”

Winter was snowy and stormy. On long evenings, we often dreamed about the future and reminisced about the past.

Jovan was interested in everything — my childhood spent on the quiet banks of the Seym, my school years, my arrival in Moscow and studies at the Agricultural Academy, my life in the capital and everything I had experienced during the war.

Lgov was far from Livno — very far! As I told Miletić about my homeland, that distant place seemed to draw closer, becoming even dearer, even more a part of me... Memories of

* Comrades (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

my childhood, forever gone, surfaced in my mind. A deep, shadowy ravine overgrown with thorny blackthorn and tall burdock; the village pasture with a hollow willow tree near the well, where we children played tag and ball games; the quiet, shady backwater of the Seym with its mill, steadily lifting and splashing its wide wheel... One day, I saw a crested bustard strutting importantly along the riverbank. Startled by me, it ran a few steps and then swiftly took flight, rocking from side to side. I remember feeling envious that while it spent its summers here, come winter, it would fly far away to the Crimea, the Caucasus or even farther...

I loved reading about distant lands, oceans, and the adventures and heroic deeds of brave people... I was proud of my fellow countryman Grigory Shelekhov. He was the first Russian to reach North America and explore the Aleutian Islands... Like all the boys in our school, I dreamed of making my own extraordinary discoveries and journeys. Years passed, childhood dreams changed, becoming more realistic. But my love for nature remained, and to truly understand its laws and its life, I left to study at the Agricultural Academy in Moscow.

June 1941. A Sunday morning... After the rain, the old linden trees in Timiryazev Park gleamed bright green and the air was fresh. A boat rocked gently in the still waters of the pond. I sat at the stern, holding Chernyshevsky's novel *What Is to Be Done?* in my hands. Opposite me, her head bent over a notebook of botany lectures, sat my classmate Valeria. That day, we had planned to visit the Botanical Garden to see the blooming *Victoria regia*, the queen of tropical rivers, and in the evening — to go to the Bolshoi Theatre for Boris Godunov.

I felt at peace. Because Lera's gaze was kind, because my grade book already had several top marks, and because my father had promised to buy me a hunting rifle for my return

home on vacation and surprise me with an unprecedentedly high yield of the first-class *kamalinka** wheat he had grown, which, in his words, had turned out “amazingly thick, tall and pure.” A wonderful goal my father had!

And I wanted to be like him — goal-oriented. To be like Rakhmetov in Chernyshevsky's novel — a strong-willed, steadfast person who subordinated every personal matter to one great and noble purpose. I wanted to test my strength in some difficult task, to temper my character, to put myself to the test, just as Rakhmetov had done. Would I be able to endure what he endured while preparing for battle with the enemy? True, I thought, I live in a completely different time, a happy life of work and study. But I, too, have great aspirations and a challenging goal that requires struggle — to become a scientist, a researcher of nature, its renewer and transformer, someone useful to my people.

Suddenly, the boat swayed. Lera made a sharp movement, and fear appeared on her pale face.

“Listen!” she whispered.

Instead of the soft music playing from the loudspeaker in the maple alley, a quiet but resolute, very familiar voice was now heard. Stunned, we tried to grasp the unfamiliar words: “Treachery... Fascists... Bombed Kiev, Zhitomir, Minsk...” With alarm, I looked at the girl, and in her eyes, I saw confirmation of what I had immediately understood, what I had felt: war!

I left for the front. Near Belaya Tserkov, we — young soldiers, who had only recently been preparing for peaceful professions — saw enormous German tanks for the first time. They crawled out of the forest with a deafening roar, and the ground shook and trembled under their heavy advance... I experienced everything: the bitterness of retreat, the pain of

* A Siberian variety of wheat.

losing comrades and the cold grip of death staring me in the face. But even in the hardest days, even when we were pushed back to the foothills of the Caucasus and I, severely wounded, lay on the operating table in a field hospital, I never lost confidence that with the efforts of the entire Soviet people, we would return.

After being discharged from the Tbilisi hospital, I completed a short-term officer training course and became a lieutenant, a company commander in the 223rd Rifle Division, which was being formed in Baku. I gained new friends — Azerbaijanis. With them, I marched the combat path from Mozdok to the Dnieper.

...The Red Army's victorious advance had begun. The offensive spanned 1,500 kilometres from Ordzhonikidze to Voronezh, as well as to the northwest — Rzhev, Gzhatsk, Vyazma.

Our division drove the fascists back, those who had already tasted the waters of the Volga.

The German tanks that had terrified me near Belaya Tserkov we now turned into piles of charred scrap metal.

The blows of the Red Army merged with the struggle of partisans in the occupied countries of Europe, forming a united front against fascism. Battalion Party organizer Enver Dzamil would often, with deep emotion, tell us about the successes of the Yugoslav partisans. We all admired their courage and resilience. We dreamed of meeting them one day.

I crossed the Dnieper as a communist. I hadn't yet received my candidate's membership card at the time, but Dzamil's words had taken firm root in my mind: "Our path is still long... You must be strong enough for much, for far more..."

And yet, if it weren't for Jovan, a man with a clear and noble soul, I would feel much lonelier in this foreign land. But

with him, I was bound by a shared purpose, and together we marched toward it, shoulder to shoulder, heart to heart. This was the beginning of our great battle-forged friendship.

Jovan, eagerly catching my every word, stood by the small window, drumming his fingers on the green glass while watching the slanted snowfall outside. His thick, dark brows drew together, and his eyes gleamed.

"Our thoughts are filled with our homeland," he responded. "You and I think of the same things."

And he softly began to sing:

*"Tamo daleko, daleko od mora,
Tamo je selo moje, tamo je ljubav moja!"*

*[There, far away, far away by the sea,
There is my village, there is my love!]*

He looked at the fir trees stretching along the mountain ridge, reaching up into the very clouds.

"My homeland is Dalmatia! I love it very much. It is beautiful. But Serbia and Montenegro, Croatia and Macedonia are no less wonderful. Everywhere we go, we find comrades. We have friends everywhere! I want all our peoples to live as brothers and sisters in one united family, just as the peoples of the Soviet Union do. I want this very much, very much. I know that sooner or later, it will happen!"

"But why," I wondered, "does Jovan so often seem troubled, lost in thoughts of melancholy? Why does he pace nervously from corner to corner? Why does sadness resonate in his quiet songs? At times, it is as if his strength dims, and in his large black eyes, I see fear and confusion."

I tried to find answers to these questions in Jovan's diaries, which he had entrusted to me. Struggling to decipher his

handwriting, skipping over unfamiliar words, I carefully read through the pencilled notes, which contained only the most essential thoughts...

“...We march along a muddy road, which gradually disappears into the thickets until, at dawn, it vanishes completely. *La Marseillaise!* The old song sings of today’s heroic insurgents in Marseille. According to the latest news, German artillery has been pounding them relentlessly for a full day, yet they still hold their ground. They are holding on! France is moving forward on the same path as us. If only traitors like our Nedić and Pavelić don’t push it off course!”

“...There is no one left in Sekulici. Everyone is in the concentration camp. Many have been killed. The houses are burned. Orphaned children wander aimlessly. The Chetniks have carried out a ‘village cleansing’ against the communists. How many of our comrades have perished! We feel the full horror of war. Our hatred for those responsible is boundless. Nothing can silence this hatred... Now more than ever, we realize how dear our Party is to us. All our thoughts, joys and hopes are tied to it. We will sacrifice everything in the world for it. Mother, beloved, home and youth — all of it has merged for us into a single word — Communist Party!”

“...Another retreat. A cursed silence and sorrow take root in my soul. When will we finally break free onto a wide, open road and march forward without delays? When will our dreams come true, and bright horizons open before our country?”

“...We move along a small stream, through the forest. Struggling, we climb the mountain. Yet today, every effort seems bearable. Bearable! Our Russian brothers are already near Kharkov.”

“...Our paths are uncertain, no one is leading us, the horses collapse, but we cannot afford to stop. The goal is clear!

Forward!... But how many more marches and battles still lie ahead! In the end, though, we will emerge victorious. Because the partisans are extraordinary people, the finest part of the nation. We are allies of the Red Army. We and the Red Army fight together. Ah, when we win, there will be joyful songs, and a new, better life!”

I thoughtfully flipped through the sun-faded pages of the blue notebooks. Misfortunes, defeats, victories, fleeting moments of joy, relentless learning, tireless struggle. And through it all, like a repeatedly echoed refrain, ran the inspired, passionate dreams of the future... Yet I found no explanation for Miletić’s current state of mind in his diaries.

The snow began falling more heavily, completely shading the fir trees. Jovan slowed his pace. Touching my fevered forehead, he gave me an encouraging smile.

...As a very young boy, Jovan learned from the old songs of his grandfather — a fisherman from Split — that the Rus were the bravest people, fearing no one in the world. His grandfather considered the best day of his life to be the one when he first saw Russian soldiers in Kyustendil, who had come to Bulgaria to defend the Balkan Slavs — their fellow believers and brothers — from the Turkish “mountains of spears and darkness of sabres.” That was in 1877. The old man loved to recall his difficult journey from Split to Kyustendil, which he made on foot, crossing rivers and high mountains with only one desire — to see the Russians and shake their hands. He passed down to his son, also a fisherman, and to his grandson Jovan, the sacred duty of honouring the past and remaining loyal to Russia, the elder sister in the great Slavic brotherhood.

Jovan’s father dreamed of a better life for his son, for him to leave the fisherman’s lot behind forever and experience a good life. As the boy grew, his father managed to save some

money through hard work — savings that gave Jovan the opportunity to attend gymnasium.

The young man dreamed of becoming a geographer, a traveller, to see the world, and above all, to visit the Soviet Union. He managed to get to Belgrade, where his father's brother lived, and even enrolled at the university. But after a year, he suffered bitter disappointment. Studying at the *sveučilište** was entirely beyond the means of a fisherman's son. Returning home empty-handed? That was not in Jovan's nature. He decided to stay in Belgrade. His uncle Vuk, who worked as a doorman in the mansion of the wealthy Vlado Dedijer, used his connections to get his nephew a job as a messenger at Fischer's bookstore. Fortunately, old Fischer — a liberal — allowed Miletić to read in his free time. Jovan was introduced to knowledge, so to speak, through the back door. He eagerly devoured books about travels, great discoveries, expeditions, volcanic eruptions and the mysteries of the ocean depths. He especially studied everything that introduced him to the geography of the Soviet Union, its scientists and explorers, and its heroes. The bookstore even had Russian books, through which Jovan taught himself to read and speak Russian. There was not a single Soviet film shown in Belgrade that he had not watched two, three or even four times. He was endlessly pleased that, despite its royal facade, the Yugoslav government was wisely moving towards closer ties with the Soviet Union. Diplomatic and trade representatives arrived in Belgrade from Moscow; high-quality Russian goods appeared in the shops; newspapers published articles highlighting the kinship between the Yugoslavs and the Russian people; street performers and stage singers sang heartfelt songs by Vuk Karadžić, reflecting the Serbian people's deep faith in Russia as the natural protector and guarantor of the Balkan Slavs'

* University (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

national and political independence; publishers released large print runs of translated Russian classics and Soviet novels; and Fischer's bookstore received the complete collected works of Maxim Gorky. One day, in a new shipment of books, Jovan discovered a Serbian translation of Nikolai Ostrovsky's novel *How the Steel Was Tempered* — a book he had already heard about from customers. Jovan read and reread it, feeling within himself the awakening and strengthening of new, bold ideas...

With this book, he would go in the evenings to Kalemegdan Park, where it was so beautiful when the sun, gilding the Danube and the Sava as they merged their waters, set behind the Bežanija sandbank, and the riverside poplars faded into the dusky blue twilight. Darkness fell. The words on the pages slowly blurred into grey lines, yet the image of Korchagin — his actions, passion, will and dreams — continued to completely captivate Jovan. Thoughtfully, he gazed at the waves. The Sava — murky, brown; the Danube — blue. Mountain waters and valley waters joined together and flowed as one towards the Black Sea, where they would meet other Slavic rivers on the vast expanse.

In the spring of 1941, Jovan stopped going to the park, and the bench by the stone amphora, entwined with grapevines, remained empty — there was no time for strolls. Belgrade was tense with unease. Major events were unfolding across Europe. War was raging. Through the city streets, smoking pipes and twirling canes with amber handles, Englishmen strolled with composed dignity. Occasionally, they visited Fischer's bookstore, asking for books and travel guides describing the harsh landscapes of Montenegro and the stunning beauty of the Dalmatian islands. Germans stopped by less often — seemingly good-natured, balding businessmen, teachers, tourists. They assured everyone they met of Hitler's

recognition of Yugoslavia's borders, of his respect for Yugoslav neutrality, and spoke warmly of Balkan unity.

Meanwhile, Hitler's forces had occupied Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania, surrounding Yugoslavia. Events were moving rapidly.

On March 25, Fischer arrived at the store looking grim and distraught. In frustration, he tossed a copy of *Politika* onto the counter. On the front page, in large print, was an announcement that the Cvetković government had signed a protocol in Vienna, officially joining Yugoslavia to the Tripartite Pact with the three fascist powers. The country had been handed over to Hitler's mercy.

Furious, outraged workers, craftsmen and clerks from the city's enterprises flooded the streets. Over the past year, they had grown accustomed to the idea that the government was moving closer to the Soviet Union and welcomed the revival of the historic ties with the great Russian people. And now — suddenly — a pact with the fascists. The people formed into columns and marched toward the parliament building, shouting: "Down with the pact with Hitler!" "Long live Moscow-Belgrade!" "Mos-kva — Beo-grad! Mos-kva — Beo-grad!" The demonstrators chanted loudly, insistently. Among the thunderous outcry, Jovan Miletić's voice rang out.

"And where was Tito at that time?" I asked.

Jovan looked at me in surprise.

"Tito? Back then, hardly anyone had heard of him. The people rose up on their own, you understand? On their own!..."

...Troops were deployed to suppress the movement, but soldiers began defecting to the side of the people. It was beginning to resemble a full-scale uprising. Fearing their overthrow, Yugoslavia's rulers staged a palace coup on March 27, ousting Regent Prince Paul, who supported the Axis powers,

and installing 18-year-old Petar II on the throne. The young king "entrusted" the formation of a new government to General Simović, a figure aligned with British interests. The new cabinet, bowing to the demands of the Yugoslav people to strengthen ties with the Soviet Union, sent a delegation to Moscow to sign a treaty of friendship and non-aggression.

On the night of April 6, a radio broadcast announced that a treaty had been signed in Moscow, in which both sides pledged to respect each other's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity.

That night, Jovan couldn't sleep in his small room. It seemed to him that his grandfather's hopes for a strong and unwavering friendship with the Soviet people were finally coming true.

At dawn, the people of Belgrade were awakened by an unusual roar and explosions. Hundreds of planes circled in the sky. Jovan rushed outside and heard the terrible news: Germany had treacherously attacked Yugoslavia without declaring war.

3

"They rumble, rumble, rumble. All night long, vehicles race somewhere. I can't sleep. It's terrifying. The Germans! They buzz like bumblebees, strutting around with their Aryan noses held high. And yet, they are as doomed as many of us — only their conscience is already stained. I feel nothing but disgust and fear. Who else will they shoot or crush with their Kraftwagens, their motorcycles?..."

Miletić wrote this in his diary in June 1941. He was overwhelmed by everything happening around him. Naturally observant and impressionable, Jovan noticed and remembered a great deal. Something very strange was happening,

for instance, with his uncle Vuk.

Like a proper servant, Vuk cherished his position in the vestibule, between the entrance door and the staircase, just as much as he valued his livery, embroidered with gold braiding. He always tried to stay visible, spoke with admiration about his master — the “great-Serb” Vlado Dedijer — referred to himself as a “great-Serb” as well, and treated various “lesser tribes,” such as Croats, Macedonians, Albanians and Bulgarians, with utter disdain. Jovan was often amused by his uncle’s foolish nationalist arrogance, his pretentiousness, and his obvious imitation of his masters. But then, suddenly, old Vuk took offence, hissed angrily and waved his hands dismissively when Jovan jokingly referred to his “chosen people” in a conversation.

This meant only one thing — Vuk was once again mimicking Vlado Dedijer. “Great-Serbianism” had gone out of fashion after the Germans declared the Serbs a “nation of conspirators,” a “lesser people.” The “higher circles” of Belgrade — yesterday’s fierce nationalists — readily agreed to recognize that the Serbian nation was by no means Yugoslavia’s leading nation, that all talk of Emperor Dušan’s* great-Serbian empire in the Balkans was mere shopkeeper chatter, an impossible dream. Newspapers like *Politika* and *Novo Vreme* urged people to “forget their national past.” The same circles formed a German-approved government under General Nedić — or rather, a police force through which Serbia’s nazi gauleiter, Neuhausen, transformed the country into a supply base for the Reich.

In Croatia, power fell into the hands of the terrorist Ustaše. Their leader, Ante Pavelić, with Mussolini and Hitler’s blessing, proclaimed the “independent” Croatian state, an-

* King Dušan — a conqueror who expanded the Serbian state in the 14th century to the Corinthian Gulf and Mount Athos.

nexing Bosnia, Herzegovina and half of Dalmatia. Copying the “ideals” of their masters, Pavelić and his regime imposed “racial distinctions” in their territories. Signs appeared in cities on trams and buses: “Serbs, Jews and Gypsies prohibited.” Serbs in Croatia found themselves outside the law. Encouraged by the Vatican, the Ustaše and their priests butchered, shot and burned people alive — peasants and artisans alike — only after first forcibly converting, confessing and giving them Holy Communion. They slaughtered more than half a million Serbs, supplying purgatory with countless “repentant schismatics.” They brutally tortured Orthodox priests and ravaged churches. It seemed to them that in doing so, they were avenging themselves for Serbia’s past hegemony, centralism and arrogance. And in turn, they dreamed of a great “Alpine Croatia,” the likes of which the world had never seen — one that would encompass Serbia, Bosnia, Dalmatia and Herzegovina, under either German or Italian rule.

Montenegro became part of the Italian empire on the “legal” grounds that in 1896, Princess Elena, daughter of Montenegrin Prince Nikola, converted to Catholicism and married the Prince of Naples. However, the Montenegrins stubbornly refused to recognize fascist rule so Mussolini’s governor, the blackshirt Pirzio Biroli, unleashed a reign of terror upon the freedom-loving population that overshadowed even the horrors of past Turkish atrocities.

Vojvodina and Bačka were handed by Hitler to Horthy’s Hungarian fascists as a reward for their participation in the war against Yugoslavia and the USSR. As was their old habit, they eagerly set about eradicating the “Serbian element” there.

The occupation of Macedonia was also declared an “emancipation from Serbian oppression.” Hitler tasked the Bulgarian nationalists with “restoring order” in Macedonia, eager to exploit the long-standing disputes between Bulgar-

ians and Macedonians.

Even Slovenia, known for its resistance, was divided. Mussolini annexed its southern part to the northern Italian province of Venezia Giulia and ordered its immediate “latinization,” while the northern part was absorbed into Germany, where the fascists began “restoring the region’s German character.”

With astonishing speed, the old state — the Kingdom of Yugoslavia — was crumbling, unravelling at the seams, being destroyed. The nazis, pitting the nations against one another, enslaved each one separately, “dividing and ruling.” Hitler and Mussolini’s long-standing plan for the Balkans was coming to fruition: to assemble them into a collection of colonial possessions, transforming the region into a vast military stronghold for aggression, a breadbasket and a source of cannon fodder for their armies. The Balkan Slavs, as well as Greeks, Romanians and Hungarians, became mere labourers for the “superior German race.” They were all under the fascist boot, yet amid this mutual antagonism and subjugation, local nationalism — bordering on tribalism — flourished in Yugoslavia as never before.

At Dedijer’s house, people once again spoke of “Dušan’s empire.” With German approval, General Nedić was now openly preaching the ideology of Greater Serbia. When Jovan jokingly brought up these political shifts with his uncle Vuk, the latter sullenly remained silent or changed the subject to life’s hardships, randomly tossing in a few French words he had memorized. But one day, without any pretence, he fiercely cursed both the Boches and their Hitler, as well as Nedić. This meant that the winds in his foyer had shifted direction.

Dedijer’s guests were increasingly speaking Serbian again — reviving forgotten discussions about the unique virtues of the Serbian nation, about Serbia as the “Balkan Piedmont,”

destined to unify all Balkan states into an “integral whole,” just as the House of Savoy had united Italy, and about Yugoslavia’s traditional friendship with the Anglo-Saxons.

Dedijer was now friendly with the Englishmen who hadn’t managed to flee Belgrade and were lying low under the guise of local residents. One evening, staying late at Vuk’s, Jovan spotted a certain “local” English gentleman in the garden — someone he had previously seen visiting Fisher’s bookstore, mainly inquiring about reference books and travel guides on Yugoslavia. Dedijer was strolling with him along the path, switching between English and Serbian. A few fragments of their conversation drifted to Jovan’s ears. Dedijer was lamenting the difficult times. The Englishman, carefully pronouncing Serbian words, expressed sympathy for the oppressed people and offered his assistance to the “persecuted anti-fascist” Dedijer and his friends. He even seemed to promise money and weapons — though, of course, in exchange for certain services...

All of this was so strange!

In anguish and confusion, Miletić pondered what would become of his country and of himself. The Germans had turned the bookstore where he worked into a police outpost. The books were looted and burned. The elderly Jewish owner, Fischer, was taken by the Gestapo to the Banjica concentration camp, from which the Marica — a closed black van — would take prisoners away for execution.

Anything unexpected and terrible could happen to anyone. Jovan often woke up in a cold sweat at night, imagining that a black Marica had stopped outside his house.

He would have fled to Split, to his father, but he didn’t dare leave the city. The orders posted on the streets and the reports from the German Information Bureau constantly spoke of arrests and executions of suspects linked to the “rebels” and

“bandit nests” in Serbia’s mountain villages.

One order from Belgrade’s German commandant, Lieutenant-General Schroder, read: “Last night, a group of unidentified Serbs killed two German soldiers in Belgrade. This morning, by my order, one hundred local residents were executed. From now on, for every German soldier killed, one hundred Serbs will be executed.” The next morning, on that very same wall, beneath that very same order, Jovan read: “Long live the Soviet Union!” “Down with Hitler and his gang!”

Seeing this inscription, Miletić felt like a drowning man who had suddenly surfaced for a breath of fresh air. His heart pounded with joy: the people had not bowed to the occupiers! The people were fighting! With burning shame, he recalled Vuk’s advice: “Stay quiet, don’t stick your neck out, keep your head down — at least you’re still alive, while so many have perished!” Just yesterday, this advice had seemed prudent to Miletić. But now... now, the image of Pavel Korchagin rose before him in all its radiance, and within Jovan, Korchagin silenced Vuk.

He prepared to join the partisans. Everything was ready for his journey: his backpack, in which he placed his treasured copy of Ostrovsky’s novel, his cap, his patched-up tunic and a needle with strong thread...

4

...At first, it was difficult to make sense of everything Jovan recounted. But recalling Lenin’s words about the weakness of the Balkan proletariat, I began to understand why the Communist Party here had been unable to mount a successful struggle against international capitalism and its own chauvinist bourgeoisie, why nationalism in Yugoslavia had

prevailed over the idea of a fraternal democratic union of Balkan and Danubian countries, founded on the traditional notion of Slavic brotherhood. There was no one to rally the people against the invaders, no one to hold the state together. And if not for the example of the Soviet people, who had risen as one against fascism, there would have been no organized partisan movement here. Moreover, the people remembered their past victories — they had driven out the Turks and Napoleon’s hordes before. I had already heard from Mušić about the beginnings of the nationwide uprising. But now, I was especially eager to learn about Jovan’s partisan experiences and the history of the Šumadija Battalion.

...July 13, 1941 — a Sunday. On this day, Jovan decided to leave Belgrade. The city was filled with echoes of the people’s uprising against the occupiers. After June 22, no one could sit idly at home. “Now that our Russian brothers are fighting,” people said, “we are many.” And they searched for weapons. In old Serbia, near Novi Pazar, 5,000 peasants abandoned their farms, united and drove the fascists from their lands. On the border of Montenegro and Herzegovina, in the mountainous region of Trebinje, a territorial centre of the partisan movement had formed. In the remote mountains and dense forests of northern Serbia, remnants of the disbanded Royal Yugoslav Army — soldiers and officers who had refused to surrender — were hiding, preserving their strength. They called themselves Chetniks, from the Serbian word *četa*, referring to the medieval detachments that had fought against the Turks. The Chetniks were led by General Staff Colonel Draža Mihailović. In his leaflets, he claimed the support of England and the exiled Yugoslav King Petar, who had fled to Egypt.

But ordinary people were not rallying to the “royal commander-in-chief.” Peasants and workers were forming partisan

units under communist leadership. The uprising was spreading — not just from village to village, or “nest” to “nest,” but from region to region, reaching Belgrade and other cities. Fierce battles between the partisans and fascist troops raged everywhere. In Montenegro, the partisans fought so effectively that the Italian legionnaires and blackshirts had to request German reinforcements. In Smederevo, an arsenal was blown up; all across the country, trains were derailed, bridges collapsed into rivers, and enemy depots of gasoline, ammunition and provisions burned.

In the Valjevo region, the partisans even managed to print the speech delivered by Comrade Stalin on July 3, which they had heard over the radio, and it quickly spread throughout the country. Jovan remembered approaching a group of young people in one of Belgrade’s alleyways. A tall young man in a worker’s blouse held a thin leaflet in his hands and read aloud. It was Stalin’s speech. Jovan smiled at the memory — how the listeners’ faces had lit up with excitement, how their fists had clenched in determination! “Now the fascists are finished!” someone had exclaimed. “It’s time for us to take up arms,” they had all decided. Stalin’s words — “In this war of liberation, we will not stand alone. In this great war, we will have loyal allies in the peoples of Europe... All the strength of the people to defeat the enemy!” — were repeated like a battle cry by every honest Yugoslav.

Before leaving the city, Miletić wanted to say goodbye to Vuk.

Gestapo officers and policemen darted anxiously through the streets of Belgrade. Their cars sped by, sirens blaring as if racing to a fire. Jovan deliberately took the longest route — down Kralja Aleksandra Street, through Terazije and Slavija Square. He studied the faces of the passersby carefully. In some, he saw a glimmer of hope; in others — fear...

Vlado Dedijer lived in the most aristocratic district of Belgrade — Dedinje, on a hill where the king’s “White Palace” stood. Vuk, who loved to gossip, often told Jovan stories about his master, praising him in every possible way. He proudly called him an aristocrat, a millionaire, a sportsman and a journalist. And the last time they spoke, Vuk had even gone so far as to call him a revolutionary — though that was hard to believe. Dedijer was more reminiscent of a caricatured American boxer: he always wore flashy, ultra-sporty outfits that looked ready to burst at the seams; his ruddy, health-flushed face was set with puffy little eyes, and his neck was thicker than his head.

From Vuk, Jovan had learned some details about Dedijer’s background. His mother had been a close confidante of Queen Maria and led the women’s organization The Voice of Serbian Sisters, which included only high-ranking ladies. Milica Dedijer-Kićevac was also entrusted with escorting foreign tourists on tours of the Karađorđević White Palace. Apparently, she had a particular fondness for dashing Americans — one of whom fathered her two sons, Stevo and Vlado. The elder, Stevo, had lived in Italy since the age of two, where he was educated in an American college before later moving to America. Vlado, however, had studied in Belgrade, called himself a “true Serb,” and led a carefree, high-society life. He had made a profitable marriage to Olga Popović, the daughter of the Royal Minister of Internal Affairs, adding new houses, villas and vineyards to his already considerable real estate holdings.

Jovan approached the mansion behind the tall cast-iron fence, entirely covered in ivy, resembling a small medieval castle, and pressed the gate buzzer firmly.

“Why are you ringing like that? You’ll alarm everyone!” old Vuk snapped, sliding back the bolt.

“An uprising, Uncle Vuk!” Jovan called out cheerfully. “I’m leaving — goodbye!”

“Where are you off to?”

“I’m going to join the partisans, Uncle.”

“The partisans, eh?” Vuk frowned. “Well, well!” He paused for a moment. “Everyone’s going now. My master is planning to go too. Come here...”

The old man, with a mysterious air, beckoned his nephew into the garden and cautiously led him to a window with green shutters. He whispered:

“Look who’s visiting us!”

Through a gap between the shutter slats, Jovan saw several people inside the sunlit hall, where light streamed in through the ceiling windows. Vlado Dedijer was steadying a ladder on which stood a short man with long hair and a large hooked nose, pulling books from the top shelves and examining them. “That’s Moša Pijade,” Vuk whispered. Jovan also recognized Milovan Đilas, a man with a thick, unkempt head of hair, smoking a pipe. He had often seen him with Dedijer, either in a racing car or near the Zanatski Dom restaurant, in the company of a stocky man with an upright posture and a well-defined “Greek” profile. That same man was there now. Dedijer addressed him with particular deference, even lightly holding his elbow as he rose from his chair.

“And who’s that?” Jovan asked.

Vuk smiled slyly, twirling his finger near his nose, which was as purple as a ripe plum.

“Come on, just say it — who is he?”

“Quiet!” Vuk hissed sharply. “Don’t shout. He’s their top man — Tito. He lives nearby, at the home of *Politika* publisher Ribnikar, and comes here for lunch every day. Today, he’s here with friends for some chicken broth. But you keep your mouth shut, understand? Not a word to anyone. Got it?”

Jovan hungrily studied the scene through the window. “And who’s that sitting at the table, looking so grim, like an owl?”

“That’s Ranković. A real hero! Escaped from the Gestapo! Everyone with him was executed, but he played sick. The Germans put him in a hospital, and then — whoosh — he was gone! Oh, he’s a clever one!” Vuk’s finger spun in front of his nose again. “A real trickster! He could shoe a fly.”

“And what exactly did he do? And stop twirling your finger — what’s with that habit?”

“You won’t let it slip, will you?”

“Of course not.”

“He has a German stamp,” Vuk whispered quickly. “And now all his people have German documents — they can travel anywhere they want, no problem. You know what?” A sudden thought struck him. “Wait until tomorrow — I’ll get you one too. You’ll leave the city easily.”

The old man kept his promise.

Two days later, Miletić left Belgrade. He walked confidently, and whenever a Nedić policeman stopped him, he displayed the German pass Vuk had arranged for him with complete indifference. At the last police checkpoint, Jovan merged with a convoy of farmers delivering confiscated food supplies to the German commandant’s office and returning empty-handed to a suburban village.

As dusk fell and he approached Mount Kosmaj, Jovan carefully destroyed the pass and never mentioned to the partisans — neither that day nor afterward — how exactly he had managed to escape the city.

“Why did you keep it a secret?”

“You see, Nikolai...” He lifted his eyes to me and asked, “Would you have believed me?”

I hesitated. A German document... Tito as a guest of the

capitalist Dedijer...

Indeed, the miners and peasants of the Šumadija Detachment would hardly have believed a nineteen-year-old who arrived from the capital with a German pass. They wouldn't have believed that he had seen Tito, who was already being spoken of as a leader. The fighters would have asked Jovan: how could such a prominent Party figure like Tito, in the very midst of the struggle against the occupiers, be living almost openly in Belgrade, in Ribnikar's house, right under the nose of the German commandant Schroder, next to a German barracks? How could leading Party members — Ranković, who had escaped from the Gestapo, Đilas and Pijade — freely walk the streets of Belgrade? And all this while the Gestapo was throwing communists and hundreds of innocent people into prison on mere suspicion of sympathizing with the partisans? Jovan himself had often asked these questions, but there was little time to dwell on them — his new life had swept him up...

5

"That was a remarkable time," Miletić continued his story. "From small local detachments, like a mighty river formed from many streams, the strength of the uprising grew and solidified. The occupiers were driven out of nearly all of southwestern Serbia. The partisans established their own authority in the cities of Loznica, Čačak and Užice. This was the first truly free republic, which they called the 'Soviet Republic.' In Užice, the partisans took over a military factory and got it running. Every day, workers produced 420 rifles and 60,000 rounds of ammunition."

The Šumadija Detachment, where Korchagin fought, was commanded by twenty-three-year-old Ilija Perućica, a fear-

less and resourceful welder from the Smederevo power plant who had participated in the destruction of the arsenal in Smederevo. The political commissar was Slobodan Milojević, an older man who had worked for many years as a miner. He made crude "infernal machines" that the partisans used to blow up German trains, and once even managed to destroy the "Death's Head" armoured train. The fame of the Šumadija Detachment spread throughout the country.

Independent partisan groups and detachments, operating here and there, began establishing communication with one another. The struggle became more organized. What was missing was a unified leadership. That was a time when any bold and enterprising person could become a commander. The people, rising up spontaneously to fight, placed their trust in anyone who stood with them and took responsibility. It was during this period that Tito appeared on the liberated territory, accompanied by his closest aides. Around him, the scattered partisan units began to consolidate. Everyone followed him — after all, the banner of the uprising that he carried bore the words: "Alliance and friendship with Soviet Russia." A supreme headquarters was formed, with Arso Jovanović appointed as its chief. At that point, all of Tito's old Belgrade acquaintances flocked to him. Even Vlado Dedijer declared himself a partisan. He arrived in a cushioned train car with German documents in his pocket. But he soon preferred the comforts of life at the Supreme Headquarters to the hardships of combat. Instead of fighting, he became a chronicler of the marches and battles — he is now writing the *Partisan Diary*.

"Interesting," I remarked. "So, has he become a communist too?"

"Of course! All sorts of people are joining the Party these days. After all, there are fewer and fewer old, pre-war Party

members from the working class. Some were killed and are still being killed in camps and prisons, while others are dying now in battle.”

“That is bad for a proletarian party,” I said, “if it starts accepting people like Dedijer.”

But Miletić tried to explain it away as a matter of “special local conditions,” the CPY leadership’s attempt to create “supraclass unity” in the country. Clearly repeating someone else’s words, he insisted that figures like Dedijer were being accepted into the Party because otherwise, they would have gone over to Mihailović.

“That’s exactly where they belong!”

“You’re wrong,” Miletić objected. “We have a People’s Front. He paused. And yet, strangely enough, ever since Tito arrived, our military successes have become fewer and fewer.”

As he told me all this, Jovan kept mentioning the Chetniks. “Why did we entangle ourselves with them for so long?” he lamented. At first, the Chetniks also fought against the Germans, especially along the Drina River, near Šabac. But then they went quiet. Draža Mihailović ordered his commanders “not to take risks, to preserve the precious lives of Serbs, as our time has not yet come.” Nevertheless, the British only supported the Chetniks from the air, even though London radio officially announced that “Britain and the United States will support any group effectively fighting the Germans.” But that was just words. In reality, the British placed their main bet on Mihailović — the king’s representative — rather than on Tito, whom they barely acknowledged at the time. Mihailović was even made a general and Minister of War in the Yugoslav government-in-exile. The operational affairs of the Chetnik General Staff were handled by the British Captain Hudson. Naturally, Mihailović felt so confident that he even intended to bring all the partisans under his command. It is

said that he met with Tito in some peasant house near Užice.

Jovan struggled to imagine such a meeting. “What could be discussed with the king’s Minister of Defence?” Mihailović, of course, looked down on Tito and tried to persuade him to submit to his authority. But evidently, Mihailović proposed terms that Tito could not accept, and they parted ways. Ranković then went to Mihailović’s headquarters at Ravna Gora. When he returned, the partisans in Užice began gathering weapons, which, for some reason, were handed over to the Chetniks. Soon, rumours spread about a telegram from British Prime Minister Churchill congratulating both leaders — Tito and Mihailović — “on their agreement.”

However, Mihailović deceived everyone. After receiving weapons and supplies from the British and adding the partisans’ arsenal to his own, he struck the partisans from behind — together with the Germans. Because of his treachery, the “free republic” in the Užice-Čačak region ceased to exist. The liberation movement in Serbia declined. The partisans were ordered to return home and wait for the right time. Those who obeyed faced a terrible fate. The Gestapo already had lists of partisans and former communists, and nearly all of them were arrested and executed. But many detachments refused to disband and began retreating alongside the Supreme Headquarters through Zlatibor toward Bosnia.

Perućica’s detachment was the last to leave, departing from its native forests and mountains, where every path and every rock was familiar. The miners left their people, their mines, their towns and villages with a sense of shame, as if they were guilty of something. The locals watched them go with fear and confusion — hope was collapsing.

The detachment stopped to rest in Novi Pazar. There, at a Party meeting, Slobodan Milojević had to endure bitter and angry speeches — communists condemned the leadership for

abandoning their Serbian brothers and sisters to the mercy of the occupiers. The political commissar remained grimly silent. It was clear that he himself was deeply troubled by the defeat and retreat.

In the freezing December cold, carrying weapons and gear on their backs, they forded the Lim River. Serbia was now behind them. The fighters felt a heavy weight on their hearts. Twelve of them decided to return to the Užice-Čačak region to reignite the uprising there. Milojević and Perućica did not try to stop them. But Tito found out. He ordered that the group of brave men be caught and detained. Later, when he arrived with his headquarters in the town of Rudo, where the Šumadija fighters were stationed, Tito told Perućica that someone would have to answer for the attempted desertion of the twelve partisans. And indeed, shortly afterward, several of these twelve miners were executed by order of a military tribunal. Jovan remembers their names: Krtinić, Katoman, Ivašević, Brajević, Škrba. They were accused of allegedly taking money from Supreme Headquarters personnel...

On December 22, 1941, in Rudo, the First Proletarian Brigade was formed. The Šumadija Detachment became one of its battalions. Other large partisan units and formations were also being created. There was talk of strengthening the Party's absolute leading role in the national liberation struggle, of subordination and tightening discipline...

The centre of the partisan movement was shifting westward — to Bosnia, Dalmatia, the Dinaric Alps and the Adriatic Sea. It was said that from there, it would be easier to establish strategic contact with the Western Allies...

Meanwhile, nearly all of Serbia, except for its northern regions, had become the domain of Nedić's forces and the Chetniks. General Nedić himself declared in the newspaper *Novo Vreme* that the Chetniks and his guardsmen were fight-

ing "like blood brothers, hand in hand." Nedić praised the traitor Mihailović for showing no mercy to captured partisans and for competing with the Croatian Ustaše and Catholic priests in carrying out brutal massacres of the defenceless population. To somehow "justify" his blatant betrayal, Mihailović shamelessly claimed in his proclamations that he was supposedly protecting Serbs from extermination: since the SS executed one hundred civilians for every German killed, he argued that they should not kill the Germans but instead target those who, by fighting the occupiers, were effectively signing the death sentence of thousands of innocent residents. A true Jesuit!

By allowing the Chetniks to take control of the villages, the occupiers, with their help, unleashed an unprecedented reign of terror in Serbia. Many villages were burned to the ground as "partisan nests," thousands of people were executed, and Nedić's government deported 300,000 people — mostly relatives of partisans — to forced labour in Germany. So this is how Mihailović "saved" the Serbian people! In reality, he controlled no more than a dozen isolated pockets in western Serbia. The Germans did not attack him there. On the contrary, he actively assisted them in fighting the partisans. And yet, his British patrons continued proclaiming to the world that "Mihailović controls entire regions of Yugoslavia" and that "his forces are waging a successful fight against the Germans."

Even now, Britain continues to provide strong support to the Chetniks.

"What's even more astonishing," said Jovan, "is that the Englishman Hudson commanded the Chetniks as they slaughtered the communists and other patriots in Serbia and Montenegro. But since British General Maclean arrived at Tito's headquarters with his mission, he has, from the very

first day until now, loudly and openly professed his love for us, the Yugoslav communists...”

“How is this to be understood?”

“Take it as you will,” Jovan shrugged. “But listen to what happened next.”

1942... A dreadful and difficult year, especially for Montenegro. At first, everything seemed to be going well there too. The uprising had driven the Italian fascists out of the region, and their garrisons in the cities of Cetinje, Podgorica and Nikšić were surrounded.

Montenegrins fought under the slogan: “Freedom or death with weapons in hand!” Tito sent two Central Committee delegates to them: Milovan Đilas and Moša Pijade. They were given extraordinary powers — to boost morale and strengthen discipline among the partisans. To this end, Đilas conducted investigations into cases of disobedience to the leadership. Many partisans were executed. Meanwhile, Pijade gave lectures in the detachments, illustrating them with examples from Montenegrin history... It seemed that the Central Committee delegates had done everything possible to further uplift the fighting spirit of the Montenegrins, but they failed. In fact, the results were quite the opposite. Among the detachments, which had been formed along clan lines, old tribal feuds unexpectedly flared up. Clashes began, reminiscent of duels and blood feuds of the past. Discipline collapsed. To make matters worse, a rumour spread — with origin unknown and never refuted by Đilas and Pijade — that a revolution had taken place in Bulgaria and that the British had landed in the port of Dubrovnik. “So why keep fighting? The Italians would leave on their own,” they said. But the fascists did not leave. Instead, seizing on the confusion among the partisans, they launched their so-called First Offensive in Montenegro.

Đilas and Pijade immediately issued a directive to the partisan detachments — to retreat, breaking up into small groups of two or three, or to remain behind enemy lines and go underground. But the Montenegrin people, who had stood firm against the Turks and Napoleon, saw things differently. The partisans who abandoned their weapons were branded traitors and were refused shelter. The fascists found it easy to capture and eliminate those who had followed the delegates’ orders. Only those detachments that defied the directive, remained organized and fought their way to eastern Bosnia — where they joined the Serbian and Croatian partisans — managed to survive.

However, things were no better in Bosnia. In January 1942, the occupiers launched their Second Offensive there. The partisans were forced to withdraw from the Sarajevo region. They retreated across the towering, forested Mount Igman through deep snow, in freezing temperatures of minus twenty degrees, carrying the wounded and sick on their backs. The partisan Milica Jovanović, the sister of the Chief of the Supreme Headquarters Arso Jovanović, suffered severe frostbite and lost both her feet. Many others perished during those days. The sick, suffering from typhus in makeshift hospitals, froze to death en masse.

By May, during the Third Enemy Offensive, the partisans retreated even further into the depths of Herzegovina. There, near the town of Gacko, they again suffered heavy and senseless losses. Ordered by the corps commander, they attacked in broad daylight across open terrain with not a single bush or even a stone for cover. Crawling across the plain under direct enemy fire, they tried to shield themselves by holding up slabs of limestone over their heads...

At Gacko, the Šumadija Battalion lost nearly all its fighters. The old partisans — seasoned revolutionaries — were

gone, replaced by young recruits. But without the guidance and direct participation of experienced fighters, they were often unable to deliver decisive blows to the enemy. The old Montenegrin proverb proved true: "Without an elder, there is no strike." The young lacked experience. Yet despite this, these still-untrained partisans were repeatedly given tasks that only well-trained soldiers of a regular army could handle.

Many changes occurred in the renowned battalion. Ilija Perućica was appointed commander of the First Brigade to replace the fallen brigade commander at Gacko. Perućica was promoted personally by the Chief of the Supreme Headquarters Arso Jovanović. The battalion's new commander became Tomaš Vučetin, a Montenegrin journalist and former Party secretary of the Lovćen Detachment in Montenegro. He still leads our battalion today.

The great hero of the people, Slobodan Milojević, was no more. Jovan would never forget him. Milojević had often told the fighters about the Soviet Union and the Red Army. He was deeply devoted to the cause and fiercely criticized command decisions at Party meetings, especially the disbandment of partisan detachments in the Kraljevo, Čačak and Užice regions and the premature shift in partisan tactics.

Slobodan Milojević died under mysterious circumstances. Someone shot him in a mountain gorge, even though there were no Germans or Chetniks nearby...

A new political commissar, Blažo Katnić, promptly arrived at the battalion. He brought special instructions, advocated for the strictest discipline and closely monitored the fighters' behaviour. He had been sent by the Central Committee to "strengthen the army from below"...

6

I sensed that the end of the story was rushed. Miletić didn't go into detail about how the battalion fought afterwards.

"Later, another time," he said, frowning and falling silent.

"He's hiding something from me," I thought. "Why?" The operation in Bogovina and our long, arduous journey from Homolje through Serbia and Herzegovina had brought us very close. Now I had learned about his life and had come to know so much about him. He had quickly risen through the ranks in the detachment: first a regular fighter, then a squad commander, a Komsomol member, a Party member and now the political commissar of a company. I saw how deeply he believed in the new life of his country, in its freedom and happiness. Take away that faith and he wouldn't be able to go on. Yet at the same time, something seemed to be gnawing at him — some kind of heavy doubt. Clearly, a deep internal struggle was taking place within him.

I spent the entire morning thinking about this.

I was pulled from my thoughts by the arrival of Ružica Brković. She hurried into the cabin, replying to someone as she walked:

"Coming, coming! There are bandages here."

Right behind her, a short man squeezed through the narrow doorway. He wore a broad belt with a holster over a new British overcoat.

"Damn it, stabbing myself with a quill like that," he grumbled, wincing and shaking his hand.

Seeing me, he raised his pale eyebrows to his forehead and asked in a loud, high-pitched voice:

"So, you're the Russian? Well, hello there!"

A warm smile flickered on his loose, slightly swollen face.

“Comrade Political Commissar,” Ružica called him over. “Come here, into the light.”

“Political Commissar Blažo Katnić? So that’s what he looks like!” I watched him with curiosity.

Ružica carefully bandaged his bleeding index finger.

“So, you’re Zagoryanov, then?” he repeated, stepping closer to me. “They say you’re recovering? Will you be able to stand soon? Excellent! Well, stay well.” Then Katnić suddenly remembered something. “Comrade Brković,” he addressed Ružica sternly, “you mentioned something to me about an article that Zagoryanov wrote?”

“An article about the life of Soviet peasants. It’s already finished.”

“Good. Give it to me, I’ll review it. Kolkhozes? Interesting. It’s a very relevant topic for our fighters.”

Katnić and Ružica left.

“That was Political Commissar Katnić,” I announced to Ajša when she brought in firewood and placed it on the hearth.

The girl looked at me anxiously.

“He came with Ružica, cut his finger,” I continued.

“Ah...” Ajša dragged out the sound vaguely. “He’s very strict with us...”

“Maybe that’s why Ružica looked so frightened,” I joked.

But Ajša didn’t seem to catch the humour and replied seriously, her expression darkening:

“Life has beaten her down. Her father is a real brute, cruel and harsh. And her mother, Ljubičića, was very kind and quiet. She did nothing but work for her husband from morning till night — served him, took off his shoes, washed his feet, never dared to sit in his presence. And he beat her... She died. He tormented Ružica too when she joined the League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia — SKOJ — wouldn’t let

her attend meetings. But she’s stubborn. She ran away to us. A good, brave girl... Only she’s really afraid of Katnić,” Ajša added. “He’s mad at her for not wanting to cut off her braids. The political commissar is very strict with us,” she repeated. “He says that for the sake of our ideals, we must sacrifice everything, give up all personal attachments. Discipline...”

The wind howled through the chimney. Sometimes it whistled, sometimes it rumbled low and menacingly, sometimes it whined in a thin, mournful wail, as if complaining about the cold. Outside the window, fine ice pellets rustled against the glass, flowing down the frame. In the forest, the trees creaked and groaned loudly. I was surprised at how dark it had already gotten inside the cabin. The frost patterns on the window, which had recently shimmered with golden light, had turned cold and dull blue.

How short the winter days are in the mountains!

The damp firewood barely caught fire, hissing as it burned. Ajša lit a small oil lamp.

Miletić entered quietly, unnoticed. I only saw him when he stood by the window — or rather, I heard him tapping his fingers on the glass as he softly hummed to himself:

*“Tamo daleko, daleko od mora,
Tamo je selo moje, tamo je ljubav moja...”*

We sat in silence for a long time.

“Night is coming soon,” Jovan remarked. “Just listen to what’s happening in the forest!”

The weather had changed suddenly. Snow was falling again, this time mixed with rain, forming a thick foggy curtain, torn apart now and then by white flashes of lightning. Thunder rumbled and boomed in the distance.

“A thunderstorm in December?!”

"It happens often here. Do you hear that whistling?"

"The wind?"

Jovan smiled strangely.

"The *zduhači* are singing."

"Who?" I didn't understand.

"The old folks say that a *zduhač* is a soul that leaves a person's body when they sleep. There's a belief that they are good spirits. They fight for their land too — for its wealth, for the harvest, for its happiness."

Jovan fell silent. He drummed his fingers on the window again and, without turning to me, quietly said:

"There's such turmoil inside me right now that I feel like howling and flying off to God knows where!"

"What's happened to you?"

Miletić looked at Ajša.

"Listen," he said to her. "Go help Ružica with the wall newspaper. I'll stay here."

After making sure she had closed the door tightly behind her, Jovan began pacing the cabin in silence.

"Perućica has returned from the Supreme Headquarters, and with him — Marko," he finally broke the silence.

"Which Marko?"

He seemed about to say something sharp but held back. After a brief hesitation, he reluctantly muttered:

"Ranković. A member of the Political Bureau. His codename is 'Marko,' sometimes they call him 'The Terrible.' He arrived with the chairman of our divisional tribunal, Grombac."

Miletić was clearly troubled, though he tried to mask it with feigned indifference, as if nothing and no one could shake him. But he kept sitting down with an air of nonchalance, then suddenly jumping up as if struck by an alarming thought, his face growing pale. I had never seen him this agi-

tated before.

"Jovan," I said, watching him closely, "what are you afraid of?"

"Ranković and Grombac don't come for nothing," he replied sharply. "They must have found out about Bogovina."

"So what if they did?" I started to say, but Jovan interrupted.

"You were sick," he spoke tensely, "so I kept some things from you. When we arrived here from Homolje, Katnić tore into me as if we had been utterly crushed at Bogovina instead of winning. He didn't say a word about Majdanpek, as if everything there had gone smoothly, but about Bogovina. He said: 'This is disgraceful! Damn you for acting without orders! You won't get away with this. And your Russian friend won't be patted on the head either.' That's how things stand!"

"We acted without orders... But there were ten of us against fifty! We could have all died there, but we won and inflicted heavy losses on the enemy! Plus, two new partisan detachments emerged because of it. Doesn't that justify us? We're not such terrible criminals after all," I tried to joke.

Jovan grimaced in frustration.

"Ah, Nikolai," he sighed, "there's still a lot you don't understand about us. Our discipline... Well, listen. Here are a few facts. The commander of our third battalion was executed for being 'too proactive' — he blew up a bridge on the highway without waiting for an order. Another was shot for calling the battle at Sutjeska a 'disgraceful defeat.' I'll tell you about Sutjeska another time... Girls here are ridiculed and punished if they refuse to wear trousers instead of skirts or won't cut off their braids. Any violation of discipline, no matter how minor — execution. Grombac has no other form of punishment. A machine gunner in our company was shot in front of the ranks by a tribunal order for picking a few plums

from a merchant's orchard. A young political officer was sentenced to death by Grombac for 'immoral behaviour' — he dared to fall in love."

Miletić suddenly fell silent and listened.

Someone was approaching the cabin quickly.

Ajša burst in, soaked from the snow and rain. Panting heavily, she shouted to Jovan:

"Comrade Korchagin!"

"What?" Jovan's eyes locked onto her.

"Marko is summoning you!" Ajša barely got the words out, still out of breath. "They've come for you!"

A heavily armed fighter with a pockmarked face appeared in the doorway.

"Come on! The commander is waiting!" he growled in a hoarse bass voice.

Miletić straightened up, pulled his jacket into place and, forgetting to put on his overcoat, walked to the door.

As he stepped out, he turned back and looked at me as if saying goodbye forever. I tried to give him an encouraging smile, but inside, I felt uneasy.

For a long time, I pondered the strange things I had encountered in this country. What were these savage, terror-driven methods of enforcing discipline among the partisans? Why this cruel, forced asceticism? Something wasn't right here. I waited for Jovan late into the night, but he never returned. Turning toward the wall and trying to lie still so as not to disturb Ajša — who was lightly dozing near the hearth, already deeply troubled — I gradually drifted into thoughts of home. My heart ached with longing. If only I could see my loved ones now... I got up and quietly approached the door. "What if I just walked out of the cabin? Ajša wouldn't notice. And then — onward: through the forests and mountains of Serbia, across occupied Romania, into the Ukraine... From

there, I would crawl if I had to, through the frontline and across enemy lines — back to my own people... Back to my own!"

I glanced at Ajša. She was asleep, her head slumped onto her shoulder. "Leave?! But what would I tell my comrades in the regiment when they asked where I had come from? From captivity? And how would I redeem this involuntary shame of mine? No, I decided — I had to do something here first, to help the partisans in their struggle, to help my blood brother Jovan. After all, we had a common enemy — the fascists. They were in the Ukraine, and they were in Yugoslavia. First, I had to prove myself through my actions, earn the partisans' trust and then they themselves would help me return to my own." This thought made my heart feel lighter. If only we could march soon, fight soon!...

Outside, the wind alternated between a deep hum and a playful whistle, as if a flock of birds were soaring higher and higher, their wings cutting through the air with a sharp, rushing sound...

7

...Ranković arrived near Livno with his personal escort — a whole squad of horsemen, armed to the teeth, loud and arrogant. Almost the entire journey, as he rode alongside Brigade Commander Perućica, he didn't utter a single word. Now, sitting in the brigade headquarters, he remained silent.

Perućica had no idea why Ranković had come to the brigade. This uncertainty weighed on him, making him uneasy. And now, on top of that, a new concern had suddenly arisen. The radio operator at headquarters had just received a message: American Lieutenant Colonel MacCarver reported that he was flying to Glamoč and requested that a landing

strip be prepared. This landing strip, located thirty kilometres from Livno, had been built the previous year by the villagers of Glamoč under the supervision of British Captain Farish, but by now, it was completely buried under snow. Clearing it would require a significant number of people.

Ranković sat motionless, like a statue, his thick red hands resting on his knees, squinting at Perućica. His large, sagging face, with its heavy brow and long nose, was stern and concentrated. He was deep in thought.

The door flew open with a bang, and Commissar Dobri-voje Magdić, a former geologist, strode in briskly. He had just returned from the battalion and hadn't yet seen Perućica.

"Well, is everything settled?" he asked the brigade commander energetically, but upon noticing Ranković, he hesitated. Instead of saluting him, he only gave a slight nod out of old civilian habit.

"Everything is in order," Perućica nodded. "We're moving into Herzegovina, toward Sinj. The Supreme Headquarters has approved it."

"And Popović's order?"

"Revoked."

"That's sensible," Magdić turned to Ranković. "The corps commander back in Homolje doesn't understand the situation here as well as we do..." The cold, piercing gaze of Ranković's narrow eyes unsettled him, and he stopped mid-sentence. More cautiously, he continued: "In the Sinj area, as you know, we have our Montenegrin Battalion. They've cut off the main roads out of Sinj and are monitoring the Sinj-Livno highway. While the battalion is full of heroes, its numbers and firepower are too weak to hold off the Germans if they decide to advance. A German regiment could break through the weak blockade and escape from Sinj. And then it will be sent east — against the Red Army. We cannot allow that.

Arso Jovanović has correctly directed us to consolidate our forces and deliver a heavy blow to this German regiment."

"Reasonable," Ranković muttered coldly. "But what's this petty concern for the Red Army? It doesn't need our help. It has its own objectives, and we have ours. And why are you taking this matter to the Supreme Headquarters, bypassing Popović? Do you think it would be wiser to disband the division and corps headquarters altogether since they're supposedly unnecessary?" His lips curled in contempt. "Rebels..." Then, suddenly, he turned on Perućica. "Well?! Are you going to keep thinking forever?!" When Ranković got agitated and lost his temper, he didn't raise his voice — he spoke slowly, as if the words were getting stuck in his throat. He lisped heavily, his tongue seemingly refusing to obey him.

"I want to consult with you," Perućica calmly turned to Magdić. "Representatives of the Anglo-American mission intend to arrive here..."

"Don't waste time — carry out their request," Ranković interrupted impatiently and glanced at his gold wristwatch with a grid cover — one of the latest releases from a Swiss manufacturer. "Provide the allies with the necessary assistance."

Magdić, not understanding what was being discussed, silently watched both men with anticipation. Perućica quickly explained that at least a battalion would need to be sent to clear the landing strip of snow. This meant that only one battalion — the best one, the Šumadija Battalion — could be sent to Sinj, while the Fourth Battalion would have to remain near Livno.

The commissar paced the room in frustration.

"We can't afford to scatter our forces right before a critical operation," he said firmly. "I don't think the mission representatives are in such a rush. It would be better to receive

them afterward...”

“You are overstepping!” Ranković interrupted, giving a light knock on the back of his chair with his fist.

Magdić involuntarily flinched and stepped toward the window.

“We’ll have to postpone the operation,” Perućica said bitterly, his gaunt face darkening. “Just the Montenegrins and Šumadija fighters against an entire regiment — and a well-armed one at that...”

“It’s more than enough!” Ranković stood up and stared directly into the eyes of the tall, broad-shouldered brigade commander. “I have faith in your fighters, Perućica. They are fine men. Brave lads! Let’s show the allies what we’re capable of, damn it. Act immediately. One battalion to Sinj, one to Glamoč. The Montenegrins are waiting, and our friends from the Anglo-American mission are flying in to help us. Hurry!” And Ranković playfully pushed Perućica toward the door.

“These are the kind of friends we need, Magdić,” he turned to the commissar once the commander had left, “the kind who can send us food, weapons, ammunition and the like. We can’t count on help from the Russians just yet! They have enough troubles of their own. Understood?” Then, suddenly shifting his tone, he added: “By the way, I hear you already have a Russian here?”

“Yes, we got lucky.”

“Lucky?” Ranković gave Magdić a scrutinizing look from head to toe, as if he were seeing this tall, simple-mindedly naive man with the face of a dreamy youth for the first time.

“Listen, commissar, I expect you to rise to the level of your position! Saying that we’re lucky and that we can fully trust this Russian just because he is Russian — doesn’t that mean you’re losing your vigilance?”

Ranković frowned, rubbed his broad, misshapen fore-

head, which widened at the top, and continued in a muddled voice:

“It’s astonishing how unperceptive you can be sometimes, commissar. Yes, we love the Russians, we learn from them — I myself would gladly smash the face of anyone who dares say anything bad about the Soviet people in my presence. But this man was a prisoner of the Germans. A prisoner, you understand? He miraculously escaped from the ‘Dresden’ camp. And you’re already opening your heart to him! Escaping from a camp — that’s not so simple.”

“We know that he was in captivity, that he escaped from the camp,” Magdić replied. “Captivity is a disgrace, even if a man ended up with the enemy while unconscious. But not everyone who leaves captivity becomes a traitor. What’s the point in discussing it? Our own comrades have escaped even from Gestapo prisons, yet we don’t suspect them of anything.”

“Yes...” Ranković gave the commissar a strange look and suddenly averted his eyes. “You may be right. Escaping from the Germans might even be an act of heroism. Such a case shouldn’t necessarily arouse any particular suspicions.”

Ranković began tapping his foot, keeping his eyes fixed on Magdić.

“So. And your Korchagin, is he friends with this Russian?”

“They’re blood brothers.”

“They’ve already sworn brotherhood?”

“Yes.”

A silence fell. Only the faint creak of Ranković’s boot could be heard.

“May I go?” Magdić asked in a hollow voice.

“Wait. Just a moment...”

Ranković sank back into thought. Magdić wanted to leave — to have the freedom to think through all the upcom-

ing changes in the brigade's plans, brought on by Ranković's arrival and the radio message from the Allied mission representatives. He waited impatiently.

At the doorway, a pockmarked partisan armed with a Mauser appeared noiselessly. His long hair stuck out from under his cap in all directions. His small, piercing eyes gleamed like embers beneath bushy brows.

The newcomer gave a slight cough to draw Ranković's attention and said in a hoarse bass:

"Korchagin is here."

"Just a moment." Ranković furrowed his brow even more. Then he stood up and waved his hand. "All right, Gromba! Forget it! Drop the case against Korchagin."

"Understood — case dismissed," the chairman of the corps tribunal echoed, surprised and disappointed.

"Now listen, commissar," Ranković beckoned Magdić closer with his finger. "The tribunal was considering applying certain measures of social protection... I've been briefed on Miletić's case: his actions have, to some extent, undermined revolutionary discipline and the authority of the command. The file contains evidence of abuse of power... By the way, what's the name of that Russian — Korchagin's friend?"

"Zagoryanov..."

"Hmm... Clearly, his influence is at play here. That changes things..."

"I hope you will fairly assess the actions of both..." Magdić began, but Ranković cut him off by slapping his palm on the table.

"Decision made!" he suddenly exclaimed. "Announce, on my behalf, commendations and gratitude to Zagoryanov for demonstrating initiative and Russian ingenuity in Bogovina. And to Korchagin... for skilfully seizing that initiative. We will continue to draw upon Zagoryanov's advice and the

wealth of experience he gained in the Red Army — while, of course, maintaining caution... Understood?"

Magdić's face brightened; a heavy weight lifted from his heart.

"I knew your decision would be just!" he said with a relieved sigh. "Commendation is the right call. Korchagin and Zagoryanov, along with a small group of fighters, accomplished more in one night than Popović's brigade did in a month of sitting idle in the forests near Crni Vrh."

Ranković once again fixed Magdić with a piercing, studying gaze.

"I have another matter that concerns you personally, commissar," he said in the most amicable tone.

"What is it, Comrade Marko?"

"You're a mining geologist, aren't you?"

"Mining engineer and geologist," Magdić corrected.

"Well then, I received a letter from our Minister of Mining, Sulejman Filipović. Do you know him?"

"No."

"Between us, he's not much of a geologist — just a diligent officer, loyal to the cause... But do you love geology?"

"As a student, I took part in mineral exploration, searching for ore and metals." Speaking about his passion, Magdić became animated and felt more at ease. "We have mines that date back to Roman times, like the ones along the Mali Pek River in Majdanpek. But there's still much left undiscovered in the earth's depths. I've walked hundreds of kilometres tracing ore veins, I've found coal by spotting a black boulder washed up by the river. I love this work and dream of returning to it after the war. Even now, I never pass by a sign of ore in the soil. You could say — it's for the future..."

"Commendable!" A satisfied expression appeared on Ranković's broad-cheeked face. "That's exactly what we need..."

Listen, Magdić! As a geologist, as a man of science, you are valuable to us... and to our allies — the Americans.”

“The Americans? Why would they need me?” Magdić asked in surprise.

“Mr. MacCarver will explain all that to you personally, hopefully convincingly enough. He met with Filipović, and Filipović recommended you to him as a specialist. The United States is interested in our country’s geology for the purposes of, shall we say, military and postwar cooperation. Provide MacCarver with every possible assistance, explain everything he needs. It is essential that we strengthen and improve our relations with our Western allies in every way possible. We need this now, and it will come in handy in the future.”

“Only with the Western allies?” Magdić asked hesitantly, waiting for Ranković’s reaction.

“And with the Russians,” Ranković said cheerfully, “our relations are already excellent. Longstanding! Always... Brothers, after all, Slavic brothers! You needn’t worry about that, commissar! That’s all for now... If you manage to establish a solid scientific connection with the Americans, you will later have the opportunity to pursue your passion on a much larger scale. We will have our own independent state, our own major construction projects, like in the Soviet Union, and American assistance will be valuable to us.”

He gave a benevolent smile and firmly shook Magdić’s hand.

The commissar left the headquarters in a state of unease. He still felt Ranković’s persistent, piercing gaze on him and recalled his sudden smile and seemingly flattering proposal without any joy. “Americans... scientific collaboration...” New, enticing yet unsettling and unclear prospects were opening before Magdić. There was something unsaid in Ranković’s words, something hidden in his gaze, as if indirectly encour-

aging him toward certain dubious actions... “Strange man,” Magdić thought, “slippery somehow, not the kind you can have an open-hearted conversation with...”

8

The chairman of the revolutionary tribunal, Grombac, watched Magdić until he reached the edge of the forest, where Perućica was assembling the battalions — one to be sent to Glamoč, the other toward Sinj — then signaled to Blažo Katnić.

The political commissar of the Šumadija Battalion, summoned to Ranković’s quarters, had been sitting for a long time in the dark corner of the corridor, fearfully awaiting what seemed to be an inevitable reckoning for Korchagin’s unauthorized actions in Bogovina and several other similar breaches of discipline within the battalion. To his surprise, the member of the Political Bureau and organizational secretary of the Central Committee greeted him warmly. Ranković invited him to sit beside him, inquired about his health, offered him a cigarette and finally began discussing the general situation. He hinted that the war was nearing its end, that Hitler was bound to lose and that the Soviet Union would win — even without the opening of a second front.

“Of course, they will win,” Katnić obediently agreed.

“And what comes next, hmm? What do you think? After all, you’re an historian by training! You have a higher education. Whereas I was just a village tailor in the past. So explain to me — what kind of situation will develop in the Balkans if the Red Army arrives here? Surely, given our historical traditions alone, Soviet influence will take hold here?”

“That is undeniable.”

“All right. And then what? In which direction will we

develop?” Ranković looked at the political commissar with a smile.

“Towards socialism,” Katnić answered, though not too firmly. After hesitating, he added, “It’s a very popular slogan.”

“I see. So you think we, as leaders, should simply follow behind the moods and desires of the masses?”

“Why follow?” Katnić raised his eyebrows, and his forehead wrinkled into thick folds. “We can walk in step with them!”

“But won’t these masses drag us too far? So far that... it might harm our relations with our Western allies? What then?”

“Hmm. Hard to say...” Katnić lowered his eyes.

“Don’t dodge the conclusions, you sly fox! You understand perfectly well that neither England nor the United States, given Yugoslavia’s strategic position in the Balkans, will allow us to turn away from them and orient ourselves exclusively toward the Soviet Union, as your beloved masses want. And besides, it’s far more beneficial for us to look both west and east — to milk, so to speak, two cows...”

“I understand,” Katnić said thoughtfully, catching Ranković’s train of thought.

“And since that’s the case, we must start anticipating events and thinking about the future now. We must — listen, Blažo, I’m being frank with you — prepare in advance for the independent role that Yugoslavia and our Serbian people will play in the Balkans after the war, in alliance with both our Soviet and Western friends. But geographically, we are closer to the West. And in general, it doesn’t befit us to either trail behind the masses or march in step with them. On the contrary, the people must go where we direct them.”

Katnić listened with his mouth slightly open, utterly astonished at Ranković’s unexpected loquaciousness.

“I agree with a certain philosopher who said that the people are nothing more than a brute animal — it is fierce and wild, but raised in servitude, and therefore, if suddenly released into freedom, it wouldn’t know where to find pasture or shelter and would easily fall prey to the first predator that sought to dominate it. Of course, that’s stated rather harshly, but in general, it’s true. And to prevent this from happening to our people, we must, before it’s too late, curb their blind imitation of all things Soviet and their overly trusting attitude toward every Russian person. This foolish love has gone so far that, believe it or not, Montenegrin ruffians have named their largest variety of potatoes ‘Rusijanka’! What do you think of that?”

Katnić hesitated to respond. “Is this a provocation? A trap?” he wondered.

“You must also understand,” the organizational secretary of the Central Committee continued, lisping more and more, “that we now need to begin organizing our internal forces in the Party and the army... so that later, we can successfully pursue, I repeat, an independent policy. This is a matter of our national honour and dignity.”

“A socialist path of development,” Katnić raised his eyes to Ranković, “while taking into account, of course, national identity?”

“Yes, yes, exactly!” Ranković confirmed. “That’s it... Right now, I am assembling a group of loyal people; with their help, I will advance this cause. I need trusted cadres. I see that you wouldn’t mind securing a solid position in the state or Party apparatus, would you?”

“What exactly would I have to do?”

“First of all, as an historian, it is your duty — this is my assignment to you, a Party directive — to prepare a scientific-political report, or... what’s the word for it...”

“A treatise,” Katnić eagerly suggested.

“Yes, exactly. Try to find facts about historical disagreements between our nations and Russia. Surely there were disagreements at some point, weren’t there? Well, we need to drive out this excessive Russophilia from our people and gradually accustom them to looking toward the West. We need to find ways to shift the attention of our fighters away from the USSR and subtly highlight the merits of our Western friends. Even if those merits are still few, exaggerate what does exist. This should be your method of political education for the fighters. Consider this, so to speak, your thesis for entering the sphere of high politics.”

“I’ll gladly do it. I’ll try to find suitable materials. All my university lectures were based on the concept that...”

“Secondly,” Ranković interrupted, tapping his broad palm on the table, “we need to move to action! Otherwise, all your theory is worthless. Specifically? All right, listen. That Zagoryanov and your Korchagin... They’re like yeast in dough. Blood brothers... Korchagin... That name alone... I just ordered Magdić to announce a commendation for both of them for the operation in Bogovina. Let that commendation stand in the eyes of the battalion. But for you, I am cancelling it. No leniency and no mercy for insubordinates! Understood? By the way, how long has Korchagin been in the battalion?”

“Since the beginning of the uprising.”

“So he survived Igman, made it through Gacko and was at Sutjeska?! In that case, he has seen too much and knows all the tragic pages of our struggle.” Ranković lowered his voice.

A silence followed.

“Tragic pages...” he whispered with just his lips, giving his eyes a sorrowful expression. “Against the backdrop of our successes, they seem almost... unbelievable.”

“Paradoxical!” Katnić eagerly echoed.

“You’re right,” Ranković gave a barely noticeable smile. “Our prestige and authority in the Soviet Union will be shaken if they learn about these tragic pages, even from someone like Zagoryanov, to whom his dear friend Korchagin might carelessly spill something unnecessary... For now, we must stick to our usual declarative policy regarding the Soviet Union. Is that clear? The Soviet people must, of course, be loved and flattered, but we must be cautious about letting them into our house through the back door. And this Zagoryanov, as you can see, has gotten right into the heart of our army. And Korchagin is always with him. By the way, what’s your opinion of Korchagin? Is he talkative?”

“You can expect anything from him. You know me well — I have always been a Serbian patriot, and frankly, his un-Serbian nickname — Korchagin — bothers me. Miletić doesn’t value our Serbian traditions. To him, the Soviet Union is dearer; he wants to take the Russians as an example in everything, even in this so-called initiative... He is generally undisciplined and lacks restraint. I’m surprised that Perućica and battalion commander Vučetin entrust him with such important tasks.”

“Well, as for Vučetin, we’ll see about him later. And Perućica... Perućica is a separate matter. As for Zagoryanov and Korchagin, if they become a bone stuck in your throat — which is quite likely — I won’t be surprised or too saddened if you find a way to remove that bone. Do you understand me?”

“Perfectly,” Katnić replied in a strained voice. “But, Comrade Marko, this is not my method! I...”

Under Ranković’s heavy, unwavering gaze, fixed directly on him, Katnić fell silent.

“What means you choose — that’s up to you,” the member of the Political Bureau continued, even colder and calm-

er. "That's your concern. But you should enrich and diversify your methods. Act with utmost caution. Just as you once did, Kragujj..."

Ranković's eyes, as if piercing straight into Katnić's very core, bound his will, crushing any attempt to evade the dangerous new assignment. Ranković had every reason to speak openly with Katnić, confident that any order he gave would be carried out without question. He knew everything about him.

"Grombac will ensure support from OZNA,"* Ranković concluded, leaning back in his chair and lighting a cigarette.

"By the way, have you read Machiavelli's *The Prince*?"

Katnić nodded.

"Tito's favourite book. There's a lot of wisdom in it, lessons to be learned. All means are permitted! The end justifies any means! Do you agree with that?... Oh, I almost forgot, I brought you a gift."

Ranković rummaged through the pocket of his stylish military tunic.

"Here. A cigarette holder made from reindeer horn. Reindeer live in Russia. A kind of symbol... Understand?"

And Ranković smirked to himself.

Katnić silently accepted the gift, without a hint of joy.

9

...The mountain valley of Livanjsko Polje, crisscrossed with canals and the rocky Dinaric Alps, buried under deep snow, were now behind us. Descending from the steep Kamešnica ridge, we found ourselves in autumn again. Our feet sank ankle-deep into thick, squelching mud, slipping on

* The so-called Department of People's Protection — Tito's intelligence service during the war.

the wet, rounded stones that littered the road. Barren grey fields stretched in every direction. Occasionally, the bright green of winter crops pleased the eye; strips of unharvested corn glowed warmly in the sunlight, while the wind chased uprooted bushes of blackthorn and steppe cherry across the fields.

These landscapes looked desolate. But how many joyful shouts and songs had echoed here! We marched beneath triumphal arches woven with pine branches and grapevines in our honour. Women, elders and children greeted us with pride and enthusiasm: "Our army! Long live the Šumadijans!" They knew we were going to aid the Montenegrins and wished us success with all their hearts.

There was an elevated, almost festive mood in the battalion. Strength was returning to me, and my desire to act grew stronger. I firmly refused the horse that battalion commander Tomaš Vučetin offered me. This tall Montenegrin, with a gaunt face and tightly pressed lips, remained reserved, even stern, with me. Yet, in his remarkably calm, deep-set eyes, there was a glimmer of warmth as he persistently urged me to mount the packhorse.

Jovan Miletić, like everyone else, was lively and cheerful, as if he had completely forgotten his previous worries. I, too, was ready to attribute his recent despondency to excessive anxiety. As I had expected, nothing bad had happened to him. Ranković had not summoned him personally but had conveyed a message of gratitude to both of us through Brigade Commissar Magdić. And yet, that morning, Jovan came to the cabin looking pale, his face trembling slightly. "It's good that you were with me in Bogovina, good that you're here now," he told me in a tone that suggested he believed he would have been held accountable if I hadn't been there. That's how far paranoia can take you!

But now Jovan was happy — everything had turned out well, and the battalion had finally set off on its march. We were heading toward his hometown of Split. He could already imagine the wind carrying the bitter scent of seaweed from the Dalmatian coast. Out loud, he reminisced about wandering with his friends along the sandy shallows of the peninsula, searching for crabs dozing on sun-warmed rocks or gathering seaweed, which was used as fertilizer for potato fields in Dalmatia.

Jovan assured me that I would be enchanted by Dalmatia — its landscapes, its beautiful white-stone houses, its old Venetian architecture, ancient basilicas and monasteries, and its cosy fishing villages overflowing with greenery and roses that bloom three times a year.

“If I survive,” he said, “I will help my people make Dalmatia as happy and prosperous as Soviet Georgia, for example. Right, Kića?” The company commander glanced back with a smile.

“Of course!” he confirmed. “And Bajo and I, when we return to the factory, will also strive to live and work like they do in the Soviet Union. Right, Bajo?”

Bajo, our platoon leader, responded not with words but by breaking into song: “*Eh, Tachanka-Rostovchanka!*”*

He was a metalworker at the same factory in Kragujevac where Jankov had worked. He had listened intently to everything I had told him a few days ago in the forest watchtower about the lives of Soviet people. In the song he loved so much about the *tachanka*,** he expressed his emotions... I liked Bajo from the first moment I met him. His broad, imposing figure was striking in its sheer power, flexibility and fluidity of movement. On his elongated face, with its high and noble

* Oh, Tachanka from Rostov! (Russian in the original).

** A horse-drawn cart equipped with a mounted machine gun.

forehead, his wide, child-like blue eyes shone brightly.

Our platoon had many workers among its ranks. The brothers Radislav and Tomislav Stankov had joined the unit straight from the mines. Their faces were still darkened by coal dust embedded deep in their pores. Radislav, with his thick, curly black hair that barely held his side cap in place, seemed stronger and more resilient than his younger brother. But the frail-looking Tomislav was in no way weaker — he carried the mortar barrel, while Radislav had the steel base plate slung over his shoulder. In one battle, they had seized a mortar from the Germans, recovered boxes of shell, and taught themselves how to fire it.

We also had an anti-tank rifle with a Soviet factory marking. Our young poet, the fighter Koce Petkovski, had recently found it in the forest. He was convinced that Stalin himself had sent the rifle to the partisans, and he guarded it more fiercely than anything.

Marching beside me were my old acquaintances from Homolje — Đuro Filipović and Branko Kumanudi. Đuro, silently glancing at me with a lingering smile, proudly carried the *barjak* — the battalion’s flag, a small cloth patch with a red star sewn onto it, faded, frayed at the edges, riddled with bullet holes. Under this banner, the first partisans had gathered on Mount Kosmaj. More than once, Filipović had triumphantly raised it over enemy positions. Branko, trying not to fall behind, hustled alongside us, rolling along like a ball, always listening in with curiosity to my conversation with Jovan.

“The Cetina River Valley!” said Miletić, pointing into the distance with a happy smile. “There’s Dalmatia!”

We were already approaching the village of Trnova Poljana, where we were to spend the night, when suddenly, shouts rang out:

“Look out!”

We instinctively jumped aside.

A group of horsemen trotted past, splashing us with mud and pushing us toward the ditch. They were all tall, broad-shouldered men, clearing the way for a heavyset rider clad in a new overcoat with the collar turned up, a leather strap from his large Parabellum pistol slung around his neck. His arms, limp at the elbows, loosely held the reins. It was Marko Ranković. I caught a glimpse of his large-nosed face and the sharp, calculating gaze beneath his heavy brow as it swept over the column. His well-bred black horse, with a slightly dished face, moved in a loose, swaying gait.

The fighters straightened their ranks and began to sing. Miletić remained silent. He had assumed that the fearsome Ranković had already left the battalion.

Following the horsemen, we entered Trnova Poljana, where the battalion’s political commissar, Blažo Katnić, had arrived on horseback ahead of us. Something about this village felt familiar and dear to me. Almost every house had slogans painted in red: “Soviet Union,” “Long live Stalin.” Meanwhile, the old coats of arms of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and Italian inscriptions had been carefully crossed out or whitewashed. In front of a stone building adorned with garlands of juniper branches, a crowd of peasants greeted us. A tall, stout old man, dressed in a clay-coloured jacket and trousers, with a red ribbon pinned to his lapel, majestically raised his hand as soon as the riders pulled up and Ranković moved forward. Immediately, the villagers shouted at the top of their lungs:

“Long live Tito! Long live Marko! — Ti-to, Ti-to! Mar-ko, Mar-ko!”

They chanted with such force that their faces turned purple from the strain, repeating the names in a monotonous

rhythm, like a gramophone record that kept skipping. Katnić stood aside, observing the scene like a director satisfied with his work. His flabby face even took on a rosy hue from pleasure. Every so often, he would remove his side cap, with its painted tin star, and rub his balding head. Then, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his breeches, he rocked on the balls of his boots, biting down on the large cigarette holder he rolled between his teeth. Everyone in the battalion already knew that this holder, made from reindeer horn, had been a gift to him from Ranković himself. As soon as Ranković rode up, Katnić darted forward to help him dismount.

We were assigned to spend the night in houses and tiny yards enclosed by stone fences. In a prominent spot, Ružica and Ajša immediately put up the latest issue of the battalion’s wall newspaper. It contained excerpts from Comrade Stalin’s report on the 26th anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution. The entire report, received by radio at the brigade’s political office, had been reproduced by Commissar Magdić and served as the main discussion topic for Miletić and the other company political officers during their political education sessions. One passage stood out, printed in large letters and underlined by Ružica:

“...we must: ...liberate the peoples of Europe from the fascist invaders and assist them in restoring their national states, divided by the fascist oppressors — the peoples of France, Belgium, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Greece and other countries under German rule must once again become free and independent...”

Below this was my article on collective farms.

A crowd quickly gathered in front of the newspaper. Despite their exhaustion, the fighters wouldn’t leave until they had read every word, from beginning to end. Some skimmed through quickly, while others sounded out the words syllable

by syllable before sharing the content with those who were illiterate. In the hearts of these people — reserved in showing emotion — lay a deep love for my homeland, an unshakable faith in the Red Army as their liberator. It is difficult to put into words the proud excitement I felt as I listened to the fighters and caught their warm, trusting glances. For the first time, I truly understood the weight of my responsibility — to represent my great Motherland with dignity in this land.

The battalion's quartermaster, Rakić, called us over for *čorba* — a thick soup with a flour-based roux. Starving, the fighters eagerly dug into their food. Branko Kumanudi had the biggest spoon of all. He always carried it tucked into his belt, like a grenade.

"You'll rip your mouth open with that thing!" Đuro laughed.

"*Boga mu*, no I won't," Branko coughed. "Ah, if only I could go home now — I'd be eating lard and white bread! And this... what is this?!" He disdainfully tossed another spoonful into his mouth. "This is a poor Christmas Eve supper."

"That's right, it's Christmas Eve tonight, the night before Christmas!" Petkovski suddenly remembered. "How should we celebrate?"

"We'll take Sinj — that'll be our celebration," said Bajo. "And we'll take it for sure! We have to... You read what Stalin said: the Germans are in no position to feast now; they're just trying to stay alive."

"And are we in any position to feast?" Branko replied, and in a pleading, almost whining voice, began to sing a Christmas song:

*"Božić zove s Lima:
Donesite mi vina!
Božić zove s planine:*

*'Donesite mi slanine!
Božić zove s rakije:
'Donesite mi rakije!'"*

*[Christmas calls from the Lim:
'Bring me some wine';
Christmas calls from the mountain:
'Bring me some bacon';
Christmas calls from the rakija:
'Bring me some rakija.']*

The fighters smirked at him:

"Keep dreaming."

"Don't hold your breath."

"Here, it's arrived!" Branko nodded toward Ajša, who had just approached. "Bašić brings for *Božić!*" He burst into laughter at his own pun.

Ajša had a few roasted corn cobs tucked into her cap. She handed them out to the fighters she had treated, gave one to me, and the last one she shyly offered to Petkovski.

"For our dear Koce!" Branko snorted. "For his poetry?"

"Cut it out!" Jovan snapped. "Attention, comrades, listen to the latest news!" Then he turned to me and whispered, "That's our Party secretary, Matija Maček."

A tall, lanky man in his thirties was approaching us, holding a piece of paper. He leaned slightly forward as he walked, making it hard to tell whether he was about to bow or if that was just his natural posture.

At last, I had found some trace of the Party organizer. Until now, I had only heard talk about the Party, but whether there was an actual Party organization in the battalion, and who among the fighters was a communist, remained a mystery to me. Even Đuro, usually so open with me, had

hesitated and awkwardly answered no when I had asked him outright, "Are you a communist?" Of course, that wasn't true, and it surprised me. Jovan explained that their Party was not yet operating openly.

Everyone expected Maček to announce something important, maybe an urgent radio report. But instead, when he saw the wall newspaper, he stopped, quickly scanned it, raised his thin eyebrows in surprise, and then turned back toward the stone house. On the front steps stood the stout old man with the red ribbon on his chest, Ranković, and Katnić. Removing his padded cap and nervously rubbing his bald head, Maček said something to Katnić, who then reported to Ranković. We tensed. Ranković and Katnić walked over to the wall newspaper and began reading it. We heard Ranković's voice loud and clear: "Excellent. Just what we need!"

Maček approached us and, in a flat, indifferent tone, called out the names of those invited to dine with the chairman of the local people's committee...

10

The house, with its gallery, tiled roof and decorative chimney, stood out among the surrounding huts like a villa.

Katnić met me and Miletić at the porch and took me by the arm.

"Tonight is Christmas Eve. Of course, we don't acknowledge any of that — religion, as they say, is the opium of the people, and I fully agree with that. We Serbs aren't religious at all, but we do respect traditions. So why not take advantage of the occasion and treat ourselves a little? You must be starving, eh?" He familiarly patted my side. "Oh my, you're skin and bones!"

We entered the room, where oak branches with their dry

brown leaves still attached adorned the walls.

"Sit here, in the place of honour, as our dearest friend and brother. *Pa-da!* By the way," Katnić lowered his voice and nodded toward Ranković, "he approved your article. Well written! The operation in Bogovina, your talent as a writer — all of it speaks well for you."

I felt uneasy under the probing gaze of his yellow-green eyes. What was the need for this hypocrisy? I already knew Katnić's true opinion about what had happened in Bogovina. And as for my article — he had only reluctantly allowed Ružica to publish it in the wall newspaper, remarking to her that "for the fighters, this piece is still like pearls before swine." And now he was praising it!

I sighed with relief when I found my seat beside Jovan, Jankov and Bajo at the long table, close to the exit. Among the invited battalion commanders and political officers, only Tomaš Vučetin was absent — he had excused himself, citing work obligations.

After our usual simple soldier's *čorba*, we were almost taken aback to see before us enormous platters of roasted lamb, chicken and fish. Between the dishes stood wicker-wrapped bottles of wine and jugs of rakija. Plates of dried plums and walnuts gleamed white, while golden flatbreads, decorated with lamb hooves, rounded out the feast — *česnica*,* as Jovan called them. There were even *kolači* — festive bread rolls for *koleda*.** A full spread of Christmas treats!

Ranković sat at the head of the table. Pale and awkward-looking, he seemed even more unimpressive now than he had on horseback. His broad-cheeked face, with its wide forehead and narrow chin, was shaped and coloured like the ace of hearts.

* A flatbread baked with a gold coin inside.

** Slavic Christmas traditions.

Katnić was mixing wine and vodka in a glass for Ranković, doing so with the utmost concentration.

“A hell of a concoction — a cocktail!” he smacked his lips.

Ranković squinted one eye, accepted the drink with a half-smile and, as if amusing himself, peered at me through the glass filled with the reddish, transparent liquid. That chilling, oppressive gaze made me uneasy, and I looked away.

“Comrade Zagoryanov!” Katnić suddenly called to me across the table. “Where’s your glass? What? You don’t drink?” He wagged a finger at me. “Oh, I know your kind! Well, well, in general, we don’t drink either. Strictly forbidden. But tonight... gathered here in a close circle... and in honour of,” as he straightened up, glanced at Ranković and raised his voice, “the liberation of Kiev by the valiant Red Army, as well as the Tehran Conference, gathered here for this modest meal, we raise a toast so that...” He trailed off, catching Ranković’s gaze. “In short, pour him some *prepečenica*,* Korchagin. It’s even stronger than Russian vodka!”

Ranković waited until Miletić had filled my glass.

“Comrades, brothers!” he began in his hoarse baritone. “Let us drink to our comrade, Marshal Tito, who...”

And with forced enthusiasm, he launched into a panegyric about Tito. His voice was quiet, monotonous and indifferent, with words coming out awkwardly, frequent stumbles turning his speech into a mumble. But he finished loudly and with defiance: “*Živeo Tito!*”

Everyone echoed the cheer. The only one who remained silent, as if he hadn’t heard the toast, was a frail old man with a trembling, half-shaved head. He sat unnoticed on a low stool, neither drinking nor eating. Confusion clouded his pale blue eyes. The presence of high-ranking officials, the abundance of food in this time of hunger, the loud toasts,

* Triple-distilled rakija.

the whole chaotic feast — it all seemed to overwhelm him. He clutched his gusle, an instrument resembling a Ukrainian *kobza*, unsure of what to do with it.

The chairman of the people’s committee whispered something to Ranković, nodding toward the old man.

“Ah! Good!” Ranković nodded approvingly. “This is an old custom — to sing of the deeds of folk heroes on the *gusle*. You say he still remembers the Turkish yoke? Even better. That’s fine. Let him sing something for us...”

“About Marko Kraljević!” Katnić jumped up. “About the brave Serbian knight! His spirit still lives on in our army!”

As he spoke, he cast a meaningful glance at his namesake, Marko — Ranković.

Ranković straightened up, ready to listen.

The old man placed the *gusle* — its long neck carved with a bird figurine — between his knees and took up the bow, a curved branch strung with horsehair.

Silence fell...

The bow, jingling with metal rings, drew a deep, lingering note. Dragging the bow across the string, coaxing out creaky, then mournful, plaintive sounds, the *guslar* began to sing in a long, throaty voice:

*“And as long as there are sun and moon,
Marko will be remembered everywhere...”*

At first, his monotonous chanting was dull and somber. He sang of the mighty Marko Kraljević, the Balkan hero, strong and fearless, recounting his glorious feats. Transitioning between high and low notes, pausing now and then to catch his breath, he gradually transformed. His voice grew in power and passion, his dull eyes lit up, staring boldly from beneath his bushy grey brows.

Jovan tapped his fingers to the rhythm of the song, quietly repeating certain lines. The ancient tales and legends came alive before me — I thought of our own Ilya Muromets. The past intertwined with the present... Something familiar and close resonated in the *guslar's* singing.

When he finished, everyone sat in silence for a moment. Then someone asked:

“And how did Marko die?”

“He did not die, my children,” the old man answered solemnly. “He sleeps in a cave, his sword buried in stone, and his horse, Šarac, feeds on moss. Marko will awaken when the stone crumbles and reveals his sword. Then he will mount Šarac and return to save the people.”

“He has returned!” Katnić interjected, raising his glass. “To the health of our Marko!” he shouted, looking at Ranković. “And now,” he turned to the *guslar*, “sing of the one whom all our people love. Do you hear me, old man?”

The *guslar* hesitated, then smiled to himself. His face brightened, and he proudly lifted his head. A trembling yet clear and solemn melody filled the room. The string sang like a human voice. There was a call, a plea and a celebration all at once:

*“Oj, Staljine, ti narodni vođo,
Bez tebe se živet i ne može...”*

*[Oh, Stalin, you are the people's leader,
Without you, one cannot live...]*

The old man's voice carried deep emotion, his words filled with a profound and unwavering love for Stalin and a firm belief in the victory of his just cause. The commanders and political officers hung on every word, every sound of the *gusle*

string — they forgot about their food, stopped smoking their cigarettes and pipes.

When the old man finished singing, loud cries of “Many years to Stalin!”, “Long live the Red Army!” erupted, followed by such a storm of applause that dry leaves rained down from the oak branches decorating the walls.

Suddenly, I noticed a look of unease on Miletić's face. I followed his gaze.

With furrowed brows, staring at the old man, Ranković was gripping his empty glass so tightly that his knuckles had turned white. For a moment, I caught a glimpse of his eyes — there was anger in them. But then, suddenly, he smiled cheerfully and loudly joined in the toast. When the room fell silent, he said:

“Well done, old man. You sang just what was needed, what runs in our blood. Praise. Good.” Turning back to the *guslar*, he clapped several more times.

Jovan gently tugged at my sleeve, and we stepped out of the stuffy room into the cool night air.

He took large strides, staring straight ahead, lost in thought. Finally, he spoke, but it was clear his words weren't about what was truly on his mind:

“What a feast in this small, impoverished village! Where did they even manage to scrape all that together?”

11

...On both sides of the road, by the rocky slopes, low earth huts were haphazardly clustered together, their sagging thatched roofs half-rotted away. The homesteads — tiny patches of land enclosed by stone walls piled with thorny branches — looked more like giant baskets of soil than actual fields. It was like a model of some prehistoric village, the kind

I once saw in a museum!

Miletić gazed around with melancholy.

“Let’s stop by this house, brother,” he suggested. “You’ll see how our peasants live. I think Vučetin is staying here. We can also find out when we’re setting out.”

We entered a hallway reeking of chicken droppings, then stepped into a small, pitch-black, soot-covered room with a tiny window covered in an oxhide membrane instead of glass.

In the dim light, three half-naked children with thin, crooked legs played in a heap of straw on the dirt floor. Their small eyes gleamed with hunger as they cautiously approached us, peering up with wary, pleading expressions on their gaunt, bluish faces.

A fourth boy, about thirteen years old, had just brought in a *badnjak* — a small, slender oak tree with still-green leaves. According to custom, it was meant to be thrown into the fire, symbolizing the light that supposedly appeared in the sky at the birth of Christ. The sapling stood in the corner, and the boy admired it, clearly reluctant to burn it as tradition demanded. When he saw us, he hesitated and shyly covered his half-naked body with his tattered clothes.

“*Dobar dan*,”* a hunched, bearded man greeted us in a sorrowful voice as he rose from the hearth. “Are you looking for the commander? He’s not here. He went to get *čorba* for these little ones. Please, sit down.”

We crouched near the fire. A pot of corn hung from a rope tied to the roof beam, suspended over a weak flame of damp brushwood.

I looked around. There were no benches, no table. Either the peasant never had any, or he had removed them — as Jovan explained, “On this day, the Virgin Mary and righteous Joseph did not use furniture either.” On pegs driven into the

* Good day (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

walls hung wreaths of onions and red pepper pods, a cloth sack and something that resembled clothing. A few pieces of crude earthenware stood on a small shelf. In the corner, wooden planks rested on stakes, covered with a coarse blanket — a bed, the only one for the entire family. And nothing more.

“What’s your name?” Jovan asked the host.

“Vuja Hrstić.”

Realizing himself, he quickly began to apologize, explaining that he had nothing to offer us besides boiled corn.

He offered us water to wash our hands. From somewhere under the sleeping platform, he pulled out a large red apple and placed it in a basin of clean water.

“May you be as healthy, strong and rosy as this apple,” he said.

Vuja Hrstić rummaged again under the platform and carefully brought out a fresh linen towel, embroidered at the ends with red thread. Against the background of a jagged tower, we read the word “Stalin,” and suddenly, the poor hut seemed brighter and more welcoming.

“Your wife embroidered this, didn’t she?” Jovan beamed. “Where is she?”

“The Chetniks slaughtered her,” Hrstić replied hoarsely.

“Why?”

“Because of this towel. We had two like it. This one was hidden, but the other hung on the wall. When they saw it, they grabbed it and shouted: ‘Aha, communists live here!’”

“They stabbed mama with a knife, those shaggy devils. Fascists!” the eldest boy cried out in a high-pitched voice.

He was terrifyingly thin. The firelight from the hearth shone through his protruding ears.

“I’ll show them one day!” he added darkly.

“That’s right,” Jovan said. “On this occasion, shall we

light the *badnjak*?”

“Let’s light it!” the boy agreed.

Together, they took the small oak from the corner and ceremoniously placed it, leaves and all, onto the hearth. A shower of sparks burst up toward the blackened, soot-covered ceiling. The long strands of soot above began to stir.

The children squealed in delighted surprise.

“Many happy years to you,” Miletić said emotionally. “As many sparks as there are here, I wish you that much happiness, that much prosperity and that much harvest in the coming year. So be it!”

“Amen! *Hristos se rodi!*”^{*} Hrstić murmured reverently as he spread out a goat-hair rug before us and laid out a modest feast: boiled corn, chestnuts and wild hazelnuts.

“*Vaistinu se rodi! Vaistinu se rodi!*”^{**} the children shouted, tumbling on the straw and digging through it, searching for the coin Jovan had tossed, laughing and squealing in their high-pitched voices: “*Piju, piju, kvak, kvak! Piju, piju, kvak, kvak!*”

They were calling chickens and geese into the house, believing it would bring more of them in the coming year.

“God willing, God willing,” Vuja Hrstić repeated thoughtfully, then suddenly added: “Only God and the Russians can save us.”

“Well, God has nothing to do with it... But Soviet people, people like him,” Jovan pointed at me, “they truly are helping us. Our happiness comes from them.”

Hrstić gave a weak, confused smile.

“A Russian? A real Russian?”

He didn’t seem entirely convinced that I was truly Russian, but curiosity and hope flickered in his swollen, inflamed

^{*} Christ is born (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

^{**} Indeed, he is born (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

eyes. The eldest boy stared at me, wide-eyed.

“Know this, father,” Jovan continued, “our celebration will come. It is already near. But it won’t come on its own. Do you know what Comrade Stalin said? ‘Victory,’ he said, ‘is not won without struggle and sacrifice. It is taken in battle.’ And we will take it in battle, father — I swear to you on my honour. Isn’t that right, Brother Nikolai? We will win this victory together.”

At that moment, the door opened.

The battalion commander, Vučetin, entered. He placed a mess tin filled with hot *čorba* on the rug and said:

“Well, the table is set. Sit down, little ones!”

The children, their mouths agape, immediately scooted closer to the pot. Only the eldest boy remained standing still, his gaze locked on me.

“And you, Korchagin,” Vučetin said, noticing us, “don’t waste time. We set out early tomorrow. Together with Zagoryanov,” the commander gave me a warm look, “make sure the fighters’ weapons are in perfect order. Just like in the Red Army. Understood?”

All evening, we hurriedly prepared for the upcoming battle. The Stankov brothers busied themselves with their mortar. Koce Petkovski, humming to himself, was oiling the bolt of the anti-tank rifle, making sure it worked smoothly. Others diligently cleaned their captured submachine guns and carbines, most of them rusted and with swollen barrels, voicing their hopes out loud about seizing better weapons in Sinj.

Meanwhile, under the pale glow of the moon, young men and women roamed the village, dressed as apostles and shepherds, wearing sheepskin coats inside out, lamb’s tails on their woolen caps, and fake moustaches and beards made of goat hair. They carried a painting of an infant in a manger and sang in long, drawn-out voices: “Oh, *Koledo, Koledo.*” They

burst into our barn, their gloves jingling with tiny bells sewn onto them.

“Health and joy to you!”

The fighters responded reservedly. They weren’t in the mood for carolling.

“Sit down,” Jovan invited them. “There’s good news.”

He told them how their Russian brothers were crushing the Germans on all fronts, pushing them back closer and closer to the Balkans — the day of their meeting was near! The carolers’ painting was soon forgotten in the corner, moustaches and beards were peeled off, and they sat listening, breathless. Then, in their clear, youthful voices, they picked up the song:

“From the Don, the Volga and the Urals...”

12

Katnić was agitated and frustrated. Things had definitely not gone his way. The dinner had been planned so well, and now everything had fallen apart. When the guests left, he cornered the chairman of the local people’s committee.

“You idiot,” he hissed, tearing the red ribbon from the chairman’s lapel. “Where the hell did you find that *guslar*? Have him compose a song about our leader Tito, just like he did about Marko Kraljević! It’s your responsibility! Understood?”

The chairman bolted from his house, red-faced and scared out of his wits.

Meanwhile, Katnić’s orderly, a curly-haired partisan with mischievous eyes known as Panther, quickly ground coffee beans in a small copper grinder, shaped like a hand grenade. He always carried it in his satchel, along with a *džezva** and a

* A pot for brewing Turkish-style coffee.

porcelain cup for his superior. He then brewed coffee over the fire, filling the air with its rich aroma.

But neither scolding the committee chairman nor the fragrant coffee, topped with a frothy layer, could lift Ranković’s dark mood. He remained seated motionless in his chair, his anger barely visible but simmering beneath the surface.

At last, he muttered something under his breath. Katnić, startled, rushed over to him, signalling Panther to leave.

“Don’t worry,” Ranković sneered.

The icy look in his cruel eyes sent a shiver down Katnić’s spine.

“I’m pleased with your work, commissar!”

Katnić flinched.

“I have nothing left to do but commend you for educating our people in the spirit of boundless love for the USSR, in the spirit of eternal friendship with the USSR, in the spirit of absolute understanding of the USSR’s great role,” Ranković spoke mockingly. “You’ve proven to be just as great an educator as Slobodan Milojević — who, by chance, met an untimely end... I didn’t even expect that the seeds he planted would fall on such fertile soil and sprout so vigorously. That is, of course, partly your doing as well.”

Katnić remained silent, his head bowed. He suspected that Milojević’s “accidental death” was a direct consequence of his attempts to analyse and criticize the actions of the leadership.

Ranković tiptoed to the door and suddenly kicked it wide open. It banged against the wall with a loud crash. Making sure no one was eavesdropping and that the guards were still in the corridor, he sank back into his chair.

“This wall newspaper...”

“I’ll destroy it!” Katnić sprang to his feet.

“Absolutely not! That would give you away immediately!” Ranković leaned in so close their faces nearly touched. “It

reeks of everything Soviet. It's almost touching. No wonder that Zagoryanov feels completely at home here."

Katnić made a dismissive gesture — whether in despair or determination, it was unclear.

"Do you have a plan?" Ranković asked barely above a whisper.

"Not yet, but..."

"Don't worry. I'll handle your battalion myself. The battle for Sinj... I assume your Russophiles won't hesitate to lay down their lives to keep the mountain troops of the 'Oak Leaf' division from advancing eastward into Russia?"

A flicker of fear flashed in Katnić's eyes. Now he understood why only one battalion had been sent to aid the Montenegrins instead of two. "Clearly, they're being sent to their deaths!" As if reading his thoughts, Ranković let out a dry chuckle and said:

"I'll allow you to be a little late. Stay here for now."

Everything was settled. They drank coffee and conversed animatedly, pleased with one another. Katnić shared the details of his upcoming scholarly-political treatise on Russo-Serbian relations, swearing that he would brilliantly defend the national dignity of the Yugoslavs, emphasize the leading role of the Serbian nation and depict Russia's historical role in freeing Serbia from Turkish barbarism as hypocritical.

"Why should we always look to others?" he pontificated. "We'll make sure others look to us. Take a neighbour like Bulgaria, for example... Am I right?"

Ranković nodded absentmindedly, lost in his own thoughts.

13

Outside the windows, the clatter of horses' hooves rang

out, followed by loud English speech.

"The Allies!" Ranković rose from his seat. "Quickly, Blažko,* tidy up the table!"

While Ranković greeted the guests at the entrance, Katnić hastily piled the leftover meat and pies onto platters, brushed crumbs off the tablecloth, and wiped a few plates, knives and forks with his large checkered handkerchief.

The door swung open.

"Honoured to meet you! So glad to have you here!" Ranković said warmly, ushering in Lieutenant Colonel MacCarver, followed by Captain Pinch and Brigade Commissar Dobrivoje Magdić.

"Allies! Our dear allies!" Katnić exclaimed, his face lighting up with a welcoming smile as he rushed forward to greet them.

"Hello! *Zdravo!*" MacCarver gave Katnić's hand a firm shake. "And who might you be?"

"Political Commissar of the Šumadija Battalion, Blažo Katnić!"

"A battalion? Very good!"

"Gentlemen, please, to the table," Ranković invited.

"How delightful to escape the cold snow and grim mountains into the operational luxury of such abundance!" MacCarver boomed, eyeing the remnants of the feast. "Comrade Magdić, sit across from me. I'll need you. But first — let's have a bite."

"Would you like to try?" Katnić leaned over the table. "Homemade."

"What's this? A cocktail!" MacCarver exclaimed in surprise. "Very charming. I see you're a resourceful fellow. Sit down. Badgie Pinch, where are you? It seems they were expecting us here."

* Diminutive of Blažo.

The Englishman didn't respond. Seated on a low stool by the fire, he stretched his frozen red hands toward the bluish flames and grimaced in distaste. MacCarver's boorish behavior irritated him. "How vulgarly he smacks his lips, devouring the lamb!" Pinch was exhausted from the journey and barely concealed his disgust with everything around him. Spending an important holiday on the road, in some tavern...

"Completely frozen, the poor fellow," MacCarver shook his head sympathetically. "Lack of training! My colleague hasn't climbed Mont Blanc like I have, hasn't trekked Ararat, hasn't wandered the Pyrenees. And when did you last come from Drvar, Mr. Ranković? How is the Marshal doing? Not getting bored in his cave? Whose company does he prefer?"

"Major Randolph Churchill," Ranković replied. "He arrived from Tehran."

At last, Pinch spoke up:

"That's interesting. We must hurry to headquarters, Colonel. Mr. Randolph has surely brought a wealth of news and behind-the-scenes stories from the 'Big Three' conference. I miss his anecdotes and verbal fireworks."

"More froth than substance, like champagne," MacCarver remarked in English, with a smirk.

"You're mistaken, sir. Randolph is a true gentleman. Cheerful and witty. The Marshal will never be bored with him. Engaging conversations, chess..."

"As for chess," MacCarver smirked ironically, adjusting his tie, "I've given up that game. It fosters abstract thinking and brain sclerosis. Neither is useful for a sober, practical assessment of things. Besides, players often trap themselves in severe time pressure and precarious endgames they don't know how to escape from." He glanced meaningfully at Pinch. "I prefer lawn tennis. That sport trains and hardens the body... Yes! Have you gentlemen heard about my recon-

naissance in Bor?"

"Popović sent us a report on that," Ranković said. "Congratulations: Tito has promised to award you the Brotherhood and Unity medal. The design has already been drafted."

"Helping you is our allied duty," MacCarver humbly inclined his head. "After Homolje, we visited Croatia, where your mobile field parliament is located. I barely managed to track down Filipović in some shack... Regarding that matter, Mr. Ranković, that we discussed, remember? The minister recommended Magdić to me."

"I've already spoken with him myself," Ranković murmured.

MacCarver moved closer to Magdić.

"Please, sir. Our finest Camel cigarettes." A cigarette case snapped open under the brigade commissar's nose.

Magdić was sullen and irritated. The battalion clearing the landing strip at Glamoč Field had stayed behind to guard the Allies' aircraft and ensure a smooth takeoff in case of more snowfall. It was now indefinitely delayed. But there was no more time to wait.

Perućica had sent Magdić toward Sinj to assist Vučetin and Montenegrin Battalion Commander Radović in coordinating joint operations, but now the Allies had intercepted him en route. The commissar was ready to snap at anyone.

"I don't smoke," he replied curtly.

"Ah! The asceticism of a partisan!" MacCarver laughed. "In that case, try the cocktail. A real delight."

"Of course!" Katnić eagerly filled two glasses.

"Tastes like mouthwash," MacCarver muttered in English to Pinch.

Suddenly, he stood up with a ceremonious air:

"And during my wanderings, gentlemen, I devised a plan for new reconnaissance — this time in Sinj. May I request

your assistance, Mr. Ranković?”

His large red hand with spread fingers slammed heavily onto the table.

“Too late. Tomorrow, two of our battalions will begin the battle for Sinj.”

“A battle? Without prior reconnaissance? Without probing the enemy’s defences? That’s impossible! You, I hope, support my opinion, Captain Pinch?”

Pinch gave a noncommittal shrug. He had decided not to stray from his partner’s side, but he had no desire to go to Sinj.

“There’s no need for concern. The reconnaissance has already been carried out,” said Magdić.

MacCarver spread his hands in feigned disappointment, barely concealing his frustration — von Goltz was waiting for him in Sinj.

“Excuse me!” He pulled a notebook from his satchel and flipped through it. “The First Brigade is stationed in the Livno area, and Sinj is not part of its operational plans.”

“Arso Jovanović’s orders have changed those plans,” Ranković said slowly.

“But... listen, Mr. Marko,” the American locked eyes with him. “In the interest of our shared mission, could the operation be delayed?”

“I can’t. The swift capture of Sinj is of critical importance to us,” Ranković declared, much to Magdić’s satisfaction. “Sinj is a key junction in the enemy’s coastal communications. It sits on the only road connecting Croatia with Montenegro. From Sinj, it’s just a step to Split, a significant port. By taking Sinj, we’ll have a gateway to the Adriatic — and from there, a connection to the outside world, to you, our Allied friends!”

“Yes...” MacCarver pursed his lips. “That’s all true. Nevertheless, as an ally, I must warn you: another reconnaissance mission is absolutely necessary. I have classified intelligence

that I must personally verify.”

“And how exactly do you plan to verify it?”

“Quite simply. I’ll infiltrate Sinj in disguise. I always carry a Serbian outfit. For the sake of our great common cause, I’m ready for anything. I love risk. A noble endeavour, gentlemen!” MacCarver twirled his moustache with a flourish, looking expectantly at Ranković. “I assure you, everything will be okay! And then, the battle — but with certainty.”

Ranković hesitated.

“I don’t know,” he said darkly. “I don’t personally oversee combat operations and am not authorized to make changes. I can only advise you to set off for Sinj immediately. Perhaps you’ll find an opportunity to get inside before the battle begins.”

“Excellent! Fortune favours the bold!” MacCarver exhaled a satisfied puff of smoke. “In the meantime, Mr. Marko, may I request a private discussion with Magdić in a quiet room? Your presence would be appreciated as well. I have a keen interest in ancient crystalline formations and geological phenomena.”

With a disarming smile, MacCarver took Magdić by the arm and followed Ranković into another part of the house.

Budgie Pinch, realizing what was happening, moved to follow, but MacCarver shut the door in his face. Pinch shrugged and smirked wryly — another act of rudeness. Stepping outside for a breath of fresh air, he eventually returned to the hall, where only Katnić remained. In an even, expressionless voice, as if sharing a secret, Pinch began explaining that Great Britain would soon open a second front in the Balkans. The plans for the European invasion through the Balkan mountains, he claimed, were shrouded in secrecy, just as all Allied preparations for the North African landings had been. British ships were already positioned in Italy. Field Marshal

Wilson was merely waiting for the arrival of General Anders' Polish army, which was still wandering somewhere across the Middle East. Anders, it seemed, intended to advance through the Balkans with the British to reach Poland before the Red Army could liberate it.

Katnić listened attentively, flattered that he was being entrusted with the secrets of high diplomacy and strategy.

"You understand, of course," Pinch said with a subtle smile, "what a great endeavour Prime Minister Churchill has planned. We are sincerely and selflessly invested in the politics of Southeastern and Central Europe... We walk alongside you, as loyal allies, toward a brighter future than humanity has ever known. Our duty, believe me, is to serve peace, not to rule over it. The British Isles for the British. The Balkans for the Balkan peoples!"

Katnić nodded in agreement, secretly pleased that his future report would surely receive the approval of his Western friends. Pinch was satisfied with his listener. "No matter," he thought bitterly about MacCarver, "one day I'll slam a Yugoslav door in his face too!"

14

That same night, in the village of Obrovac, near Sinj, a wedding was being celebrated. Since morning, the bride had been dressed in a white gown adorned with sequins, with a Serbian thousand-dinar note tucked in a red celluloid pouch on her chest, but for now, she remained barefoot. She spent the entire day filled with happy anticipation. Her friends read fortunes with playing cards and sang long, slightly melancholic songs. Two of them stood by the door, allowing no one inside the room. Only the *svat* — the wedding representative — was permitted entry, and only after paying the girls a few

dinars to "ransom" the bride. Once the ransom was paid, the *svat*, sweating from his duties, put new *opanci* on Radmila's feet and led her out of the house. From that moment, he was responsible for protecting her, and if he lost sight of her, he would be punished by being handed a broom.

Radmila was greeted at the porch with cheers, laughter, playful banter, violin and flute music. Overcome with shyness, the petite Radmila — almost still a young girl, with heavy black braids entwined with ribbons — found herself flustered to the point of tears as she stepped into the lively, boisterous crowd. Even happiness could not erase the sadness in her eyes. Her parents had recently been killed by the Chetniks of *vojvoda** Đurić, who had come from Split to requisition food supplies. She was left an orphan. No one had ever treated her as kindly as Veljko, a strong, well-built young man — except he had lost his left arm, amputated at the elbow in a partisan hospital. To Radmila, he was the most handsome man in the world. She loved gazing into his eyes, which burned with fury whenever he spoke of his unquenched thirst for revenge, his hatred for the enemies of the people. She loved him for never showing mercy to her parents' murderers, for the fact that the name Veljko Matić was as revered in these lands as that of his comrade-in-arms, the Montenegrin Stanko Turić, of whom people said he could hide "in the leaves and grass" so well that an enemy soldier could walk right past him and only realize it when Stanko "stepped on his neck."

Radmila glanced around. Veljko was nowhere in sight. He was waiting for his bride at his father's house. Tradition forbade him from seeing her on the wedding day! It was fortunate that the ceremony wouldn't be held in a church — that would have required a trip to Sinj, where the Germans were. Besides, Veljko had refused to delay the wedding; he wanted

* Military commander (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

his friend Stanko from the Montenegrin Battalion, stationed near Sinj, to be present.

A horse slowly pulled the two-wheeled cart decorated with paper flowers and embroidered towels, where the *svat* had seated Radmila. A gypsy, squinting with delight and playfully winking, walked beside the wheel, blowing shrill notes from a willow flute. Radmila both heard and didn't hear the sounds — a strange, anxious feeling gripped her chest, a mix of joy, fear and uncertainty about the future. Lost in thought, she rested her head on her hands. A cold wind brushed against her flushed cheeks. From the river, through the willow groves, came the fresh scent of fallen leaves touched by frost. The air swirled with snowflakes, making her eyelashes thick and white. Over the Dinaric Alps, the sky shone a brilliant blue, and the sun's rays, slipping behind the ridge, cast golden streaks down the slopes. It was as if a warm burst of light had entered Radmila's heart — it pounded fast and loud, spreading warmth through her entire body, as if ready to leap from her chest and fly with the wind, sweeping away her lingering unease, straight to Veljko.

At last, they reached the groom's house.

The *svat*, a sturdy old man with broad, work-worn hands, easily lifted Radmila from the cart. At the doorway, she was met by her *svekra* — her future mother-in-law — a frail woman whose tiny face resembled a dried apricot. With trembling hands, as if fearing to entrust the household's well-being to this inexperienced girl, she held out a sieve filled with wheat. Radmila, remembering the *svat's* instructions, scattered the grains across the yard and tossed the sieve onto the roof. Then, a baby was handed to her. She kissed the child as a sign that she would love and cherish her own children the same way.

The bride stepped onto the cloth laid out before her and

entered the main room, decorated with oak branches, thinking only of how quickly this old ritual would end so that the *svat* would allow her to sit next to the groom at the festive table. She longed for the best part to begin — the dancing.

At last, she was with her beloved!

"Meet him," said Veljko. "This is my friend Stanko. I've told you about him."

Veljko's voice carried pride.

Radmila lifted her eyes. So this was the famous *junak** Stanko Turić! Broad-shouldered, tanned, with chiseled features and grey eyes tinged with blue. A striking man! He had come to the wedding with his friend Stojan Podkazarac, another young warrior, but shy and reserved like a girl. His face bore an expression of naive amazement, as if he had never expected to find himself in a house so full of laughter, music, food and wine. He fumbled awkwardly with his hands, which were used to handling weapons with skill but now seemed unsure where to place them. He dropped his fork and knife and blushed deeply when offered a glass of rakija in honour of the newlyweds.

"I don't drink," he mumbled. "We're not allowed to."

Stanko also refused to drink. He had made a vow — not to touch wine, rakija or šljivovica until victory, to suppress any desires that might distract him, even for a moment, from the greater purpose that now consumed his life in these harsh days of battle against the enemy. He and Stojan didn't sing the wedding songs, only listened to them with curiosity.

But when it came to dancing — oh, how they danced! Light as a feather, they lifted Radmila off her feet.

The old violinist, long-haired and grey, at times solemnly dragging his bow slowly across the strings, at times striking them quickly and sharply, called out:

* Hero (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

“Th, ga! A-ah! Uh, ga-ga!”

Sweat poured from his wrinkled forehead. Someone handed him wine. He gripped the goblet with his teeth, tipped his head back and drank it all without stopping his playing.

Stojan and Stanko twirled through the *šareno kolo** with enthusiasm. More than once, even at the frontlines, under the icy wind, they had danced like this to keep warm. More than once, amidst a blizzard, they had forgotten about the storm in the rhythm of the circle dance.

Stojan liked Radmila’s friend, Neda — a lively, quick girl, as slender as a reed. Her black eyes on her sharp, rosy face unsettled him. He slipped away from the dance. Neda approached him. They sat together on a bench in the corner.

“Tired?” Neda asked with concern.

“Yes,” Stojan said, though he could have scaled the Dinaric Alps right then without a moment’s rest.

“Will you drive the *švabe*** out of Sinj soon?”

“Soon,” Stojan answered, suddenly serious again.

“My sister lives there.”

He remained silent, offering only a guilty smile.

“Do you have a sweetheart?”

Stojan glanced at Turić, silently pleading for help.

“What’s her name? Do you miss her?” Neda pressed on, gazing at the hero with admiration and feeling a twinge of envy for the girl who had captured his heart.

Stojan Podkazarac stood up.

“I don’t have anyone yet,” he said quietly, his face burning. “Excuse me, we have to go.”

He stepped over to Stanko. Soon, both Montenegrins warmly wished the newlyweds a long and happy life and were already making their way back to the battalion’s position.

* Colourful kolo (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

** Derogatory term for Germans.

Meanwhile, at Obren Matic’s house, the festivities continued until morning. The *svat*, having “lost” the bride, danced with a broom, and Radmila, now the lady of the house, was the first to present him with a glass of hot rakija at dawn.

15

...Our column had grown longer. A whole new detachment had formed, made up of young recruits and older volunteers. Among them was an elderly man, Ali Fehti, wearing a red fez, a sheepskin *polushubok** and woolen *geksirs***.

He had not forgotten how, in 1914, and even more recently, Serbs and Croats had slaughtered Muslims. At first, he feared that the partisans would follow the same path — “against the Turks.” But now, at the sight of armed men with red stars on their caps, he felt a sense of calm and safety... There were also young women dressed in makeshift trousers, hastily sewn from Italian greatcoats, wearing jackets and sweaters. And there were very young boys, some in *opanci*, others in wooden clogs, wearing old-fashioned *poddevkas**** — *gunjas***** with narrow sleeves embroidered with thick blue cords along the edges — along with padded jackets and half-coats made of sheep’s wool. Tucked into their belts were curved *kosijer* knives, used for cutting shrubs for livestock feed, along with German bayonets, their grandfathers’ yataghans and pistols adorned with silver casings. One boy, short and thin, had armed himself with a long Albanian rifle, rusted reddish-brown but still inlaid with mother-of-pearl. He

* Short fur coat (Russian in the original).

** Semi-riding breeches.

*** Long woolen overcoat (Russian in the original).

**** Traditional Balkan woolen coat (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

carried it on his shoulder with pride. This must have been how the people's militias looked in the past century when they rose up against the Turks.

Hrستیć's son stood at the doorstep, watching us line up with thoughtful, dreamy eyes. Then, with a determined step, he approached Vučetin:

"I want to go with you, comrade commander. May I?"

His father did not try to dissuade him.

"I lost two grown sons in this war," he told Vučetin. "But as you can see, I still have four more growing up. If not for them, I would have gone myself. Let Vasko go. If only this war would end sooner... May Saint Sava and you, Holy Mother of God, protect you," he said, crossing himself and addressing all the fighters. "Give health and endurance to every soldier fighting for golden freedom, to those lying in the snow, freezing and starving. Don't let them fall to the enemy. And if any must perish, let them die as heroes, with honour... Strike the fascists hard, *junaci!*"*

He was not just bidding farewell to one son, but to all the fighters. He was not sending off only his own child, but his entire beloved army.

"*Napred!*"** came the command.

Tomaš Vučetin led the battalion forward, not waiting for Katnić. The company commanders were informed that the political commissar had stayed behind with Ranković on urgent business and would catch up with us soon.

Our platoon was once again at the head of the column. The small, faded flag that had never known a protective cover trembled in Đuro Filipović's hands, fluttering on its short staff like a flame in the wind.

"Do you see? No, do you see this, brother?" Miletić spoke

* Heroes (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

** Forward (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

excitedly, walking beside me. "Today, there are more of us than yesterday, and tomorrow there will be even more than today. That's what a people's army means! Everyone joins us — they believe in us. We would sooner die than betray the hopes of Vuja Hrستیć, who gave us his son. Our banner was brighter and larger when it waved over Mount Kosmaj and in Užice, where we first spread our wings," Jovan continued. "But now it is even dearer to us. For this banner, brother, we will go through fire and water. Our first political commissar, Slobodan Milojević, gathered miners under this very flag at the beginning of the uprising... The first standard-bearer died in Loznica, the second under Gacko. Đuro took the banner, and now he carries it forward and everyone follows him. Do you see how that boy looks at it? He already feels like a partisan."

Vasko Hrستیć skipped alongside us, lifting his head, squinting from the sun and smiling as he gazed at the crimson cloth fluttering above him. From the moment the battalion left the village, he hadn't looked back once. He marched proudly, with a sense of importance, his deep brown eyes — like roasted hazelnuts — shining with triumph on his pale, freckled face.

"Another fighter for his future. He'll give the fascists hell, and the Chetniks first of all! And do you know why he came with us? Because, brother Nikolai, you're with us too. Did you hear what his father, Vuja, said? 'Only God and the Russians can save us.' The fact that he mentioned God isn't so important — that's just an old habit. But as for the Russians, everyone here thinks the same way. Remember Stalin's name on that high cliff? And now we saw it embroidered on Vuja's towel. That name lives in all our hearts. Am I right, Bajo?"

"You're right. Stalin raised us to fight."

"He's far away, but he knows everything and helps us,"

said Petkovski, glancing fondly at his anti-tank rifle. "That's for sure."

"I will see Stalin one day!" Vasko exclaimed in a voice ringing with excitement.

He looked at me with brightened eyes, a deep flush appearing on his pale cheeks.

"When the war is over, will you take me to Moscow, Nikolai?"

In that trembling question, it seemed, lay all the boy's deepest dreams. I put my arm around his shoulders.

"I will. And on a great holiday, you'll see Comrade Stalin as we march past the tribune."

Like a warm, radiant beam of spring sunlight rushing from the vast blue expanses of the Russian plains, hope flickered across the rugged faces of the partisans. They quickened their pace and picked up the song that Bajo had begun.

This song, recently written by Petkovski, spoke of the Red Army — of how it was striking the Germans in the north and west, while "to the south, our heroes stand — Montenegrins and Bosnians," confident that Soviet soldiers would soon come to their aid.

"What a wonderful army we have, brother Nikolai!" Miletic was once again full of enthusiasm. "Just think about it. No formal training, poorly armed, without supply bases, without a rear and yet look how it fights! It grows and it triumphs! No matter what! It endures so much, suffers so much, sheds so much blood, and yet it is always so cheerful, so quick, so full of life! And all of this because we believe in you, in Comrade Stalin... You'll see the Montenegrins tomorrow — those are real warriors! We'll meet with Podkazarac. Have I told you about him yet? Oh, he's our hero! Vučetin will be thrilled to see him! Comrades! They fought together in the Lovćen Detachment. The first partisans in Montenegro!"

I asked him to tell me more about Vučetin. I knew almost nothing about him.

According to Jovan, Tomaš Vučetin also lived in Belgrade before the war. He was the son of a city schoolteacher from Rijeka Crnojevića. As a child, he learned Russian from his father. He graduated from the Faculty of Slavic Philology. Under the influence of Russian literature, especially Nekrasov and Shchedrin, he began to write. His stories and articles were often published in *Politika*, truthfully and unembellishedly depicting the harsh life of the Montenegrin people. However, some apparently did not like them, and Vučetin was dismissed from *Politika*. He could have written on commission, could have spent his time carelessly in bohemian haunts like *Tri šešira* and *Dva jelena*,* or in Hussar Ford, a countryside villa built in the shape of a ship, where everything was arranged like on a pirate vessel. But no! Vučetin was not the type to drink and revel there. He never appeared in the company of poets like Koča Popović and Marko Ristić. Instead, Tomaš lived in a damp basement room, eking out a living by giving lessons, transcribing scripts for actors, and delivering milk and fresh bread to apartments. He translated Gorky and Fadeev. Occasionally, he managed to publish in the magazine *Ostriženi Jež*,** named so because censorship ruthlessly "sheared" the hedgehog, while it, in turn, mercilessly pricked bureaucrats, hypocrites and reactionaries with its satirical quills. In this magazine, Vučetin also published his translations from the Soviet *Krokodil*. He also wrote letters under the signature "Your People's Father Todor," sharply mocking the activities of Todor Topić — a "people's representative" from the town of Leskovac in parliament — who was fat, round, with a big belly and short legs.

* Three Hats, Two Deer (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

** The Shorn Hedgehog.

A hard life took its toll. Vučetin fell ill with tuberculosis and decided to return to his homeland — to the rugged but simple life in the *katuns*,* where the warm breath of the Adriatic spreads across the pastures. The air there was always clean and healthy. Vučetin travelled through villages and mountain grazing lands, talking to people and reading them typewritten excerpts from Nekrasov's poem *Who Is Happy in Russia?* The Montenegrins recognized their own hardships and sufferings in the struggles of the Russian peasants depicted in the poem. Vučetin also showed them a photograph of a Soviet combine harvester working in an endless wheat field. This picture had been given to him as a keepsake by a journalist acquaintance, and people, studying it, tried to imagine how life had changed in Russia under Soviet rule. Vučetin gained many friends. One of them was a student from the technical school in Cetinje — Stojan Podkazarac. Every Sunday, the young man would walk all the way to Rijeka Crnojevića to see Vučetin. Together, they left for the heights of Lovćen as soon as the first partisan rifle fired in Montenegro. When the large Lovćen Detachment was formed, Vučetin became the leader of its Party group. All the fighters loved him. The only one who didn't get along with him was the detachment commander, Peko Dapčević, which eventually forced Vučetin to leave the unit.

I was intrigued — why? It surprised me that such an outwardly calm and seemingly modest man like Vučetin could be at odds with anyone. Jovan shrugged in response. "Dapčević is an important figure now. He commands the corps and all YNLA forces in Montenegro. He's close to Tito. The commander of our corps, Popović, is his closest friend — they were together in Spain. Only Dapčević returned to Yugoslavia later, in July 1941. After being transferred from

* Rural pastoral community.

a French internment camp to Germany, he stayed there for a while, working in Steyr at a weapons factory, was imprisoned, escaped and barely made it back to Montenegro. Tito appointed him to the Regional Party Committee in Cetinje to lead the uprising."

And yet, Vučetin did not get along with him and repeatedly opposed his decisions. For example, there was an incident when the partisans seized the Italian steamer *Skanderbeg*, loaded with food supplies. But instead of making use of this bounty, Dapčević continued requisitioning bread and meat from the starving peasants. The partisans were outraged. In response, he ordered that anyone who dared to criticize the command be executed. Meanwhile, as debates and orders went back and forth, the steamer, along with all its cargo, fell into the hands of the Chetniks.

Another time, Dapčević failed to send reinforcements to 300 partisans who were engaged in an unequal battle against 5,000 Italians in the Lešanska *nahija** sector.

Each time such issues arose, Vučetin fiercely argued with Dapčević. In the end, Dapčević sent him to report to the Central Committee of the Party. Stojan Podkazarac accompanied Vučetin through the ravines and cliffs of the Kom Mountains to Bosnia. However, Vučetin did not remain in the Central Committee, where he had been offered an office job — he left as a regular fighter to join the Šumadija Battalion under Perućica. Stojan joined him as well. Both of them learned from Slobodan Milojević how to make mines, and later, Stojan transferred to the Montenegrin Battalion, where there was no specialist in explosives. Now, he is known as a hero and a fearless saboteur.

"Vučetin will be overjoyed when he sees Stojan!" Miletić repeated. "Stojan is like a son to him. After all, Vučetin

* A region or administrative district.

lost his entire family — the fascists killed them. Now, his family is us, our entire battalion. He's like a father with a bunch of children. He loves everyone, thinks about everyone, cares for each and every one of us. Outwardly, he may seem reserved and business-like, but in his heart, there's kindness and warmth. A true communist! I wish I could be like him..."

The blue, frosty sky, the bright sun, the imminent meeting with the Montenegrins and the proximity of Sinj — everything lifted our spirits.

The battalion marched with long strides, as if soaring forward, intoxicated by the sunlight, the crispness of the road, frozen overnight, and the sight of the battle-worn yet infinitely dear and unconquerable red banner, which Đuro had unfurled and was holding high with a particular sense of pride.

Sinj was already close. The dry, sporadic rumbling of artillery fire could be heard.

Vučetin called me over. We walked along the roadside. His eyes were serious and calm.

"Comrade Zagoryanov," he began, "I plan to invite you this evening to a military council. I'd like to discuss the upcoming operation with the commander of the Montenegrin battalion, Todor Radović, in your presence. I want to introduce you to our partisan tactics and hear from you how a Soviet commander would act in an open battle for a city."

"All right," I agreed.

"I'll provide you with the situational details during our rest stop in Obrovac."

Vučetin shook my hand and hurried ahead. In the distance, where a greyish-lilac cloud merged with the dark brown bristles of a grove at the foot of Mount Visoka, a small town came into view — white houses, red-tiled roofs, the tall Gothic spire of a church. Sinj! A flat valley covered with shrubs and small trees lay between us and the town.

Spreading out, we approached the village of Obrovac. Suddenly, from a frost-covered oak grove, a group of Montenegrins emerged, singing loudly as they marched towards us.

We quickened our pace, and they were nearly running as well. At the crossroads, we met. Swarthy, forever scorched by the sun, dark-haired, with brown and blue eyes, the Montenegrins, both stern and joyful, rushed to embrace us.

"Welcome, brothers from Šumadija!"

"Thank you! Greetings to the heroes of Montenegro!"

"A fortunate meeting!"

"How have you been, Pero?"

"Thanks to God! And you, Mirko?"

The fighters from both battalions greeted each other warmly and loudly.

"I was hurrying to see you, Todor!" Vučetin embraced the commander of the Montenegrins — a tall, lean man with thick coal-black eyebrows, dressed in a worn-out overcoat.

"The struggle separated us," Radović replied emotionally, kissing the star on Vučetin's cap, "but the struggle has brought us together again. It doesn't matter that we are few. The occupiers in Sinj will have no peace."

"Now we are many!" Miletić shouted, breaking into the crowd of Montenegrins.

"There are two hundred million of us and the Russians!" a handsome, blue-eyed man with the bearing of a warrior-athlete boomed in response.

"Stojan! Stojan!" Jovan threw himself into his embrace. "Alive and well?! How have you been?"

"I recently blew up another armoured vehicle. It was heading to Sinj from Knin. And what about you? Why were you stuck in Livno?"

"Don't even ask! Let's sing instead."

Miletić and Podkazarac started singing the Montenegrin

song “In Fortune and Misfortune.” This song spoke of the strong friendship among all Slavic peoples, about how they are always together — in joy and in sorrow.

Suddenly, Jovan fell silent and approached me. The others stopped singing as well. The song gradually faded. The fighters turned towards the mountains, from where a cavalry unit was quickly approaching.

“Them again!” Jovan said quietly. “What do they want?”

The riders galloped right up to us. A pockmarked, large-headed chairman of the corps tribunal, with long bristly hair sticking out from under his cap like a paintbrush, dismounted leisurely, adjusted the enormous Mauser hanging over his belly, and just as slowly walked up to Radović.

“Were you in the village of Obrovac yesterday?”

“We were stationed nearby,” Radović replied, calmly holding the man’s piercing stare.

“Do you have a... Stanko Turić?”

“We do.”

“And Stojan Podkazarac?”

“They are our heroes.”

“Where are these eagles?”

Both partisans stepped forward, looking at the pockmarked cavalryman with curiosity. He cast a quick glance at them, then raised the map case hanging over his shoulder, examining a document under a celluloid cover, and in a hoarse, sharp voice asked:

“Did you celebrate at the wedding of the peasant Obren Matić in Obrovac?”

“We did. So what?” Stojan smiled.

“Did you drink rakija? Dance? Kiss women?”

The men exchanged embarrassed glances.

“Your case was reviewed yesterday by the corps military tribunal,” the pockmarked man drawled, still peering into

his map case. “You got drunk, engaged in disgraceful behaviour, and worst of all, revealed information that constitutes a military secret. By doing so, you violated revolutionary discipline. I hereby announce your sentence. In the name of the people...”

He had not yet finished speaking when two other horsemen, who had dismounted earlier and stood behind Turić and Podkazarac, pulled revolvers from their coat pockets and shot the partisans in the back of the head.

Turić fell silently, his arms outstretched, while Podkazarac only swayed. He remained standing, gripping his rifle with one hand as if to show everyone that this was the only honourable way for a *junak* to die. The astonishment in his wide-open, motionless eyes slowly faded. He collapsed face-first into the snow when the shooters shoved him in the back with their fists.

It all happened so incredibly fast and so suddenly that we only came to our senses when the group of horsemen, casting threatening glances at us, had already galloped away with shouts and whistles. They disappeared, and over the snow-covered field, tinged pink by the setting sun — where just minutes ago it had been so lively and noisy — a sinister, unsettling silence fell.

16

...Jovan and I walked slowly through the camp, occasionally listening to the quiet voices in the makeshift shelters. The people were outraged and shaken by what had happened earlier that day. The names Stojan and Stanko were spoken in hushed, agitated whispers. And it seemed that in those whispers, like in the gusts of wind before a storm, something ominous was brewing. “Why don’t they protest, why do they

endure this?" I thought. I also didn't like Jovan's mood. Just that morning, he had been lively and cheerful, but now he was once again weighed down by a sense of doom. It was as if danger loomed over him once more, as if he was expecting those men in sheepskin coats to return any moment with a new ruling from the military tribunal — this time regarding his self-initiative in Bogovina. I reproached him for his passivity and suggested writing to Ranković about everything.

"It won't change anything," he said hopelessly.

"But why?" I kept pressing. "Why? You say that Katnić is powerless, that Brigade Commissar Magdić can't change anything either... But Ranković is a member of the Central Committee's Political Bureau!"

I passionately argued to Jovan that these excesses had to be fought against, that it was wrong to stay silent and endure everything meekly. He argued back, even trying to justify the harsh measures by saying that the army was still poorly organized.

"Ranković has more pressing matters, try to understand," Jovan said. "And he won't want to discuss this — he trusts his subordinates and believes in their righteousness. Besides, it's too late now, and we have a battle ahead. Nothing can be done about it anymore."

My heart felt heavy. I had now seen first-hand that Miletić had not exaggerated when he spoke about the terrifying sentences of the tribunals, which were carried out immediately. Everything in me rebelled against this kind of brutal discipline — almost a reign of terror — founded not on conscious understanding of the conditions necessary for victory but on fear of severe punishment.

Our nerves were so frayed that both Jovan and I flinched when, somewhere in the distance, a sudden rifle shot rang out. In response, a short burst from a machine gun rattled.

Red and green tracer rounds streaked through the dark sky. A hazy dome of pale light from a signal flare lingered over the outskirts of the city.

Against the grey-blue sky, a thin orange crescent of the young moon emerged, rounded with a soft glow. A bank of bluish mist drifted just above the ground, obscuring the city, erasing the distant horizon, dissolving the sense of open space. The trees seemed suspended in the darkness.

Tomaš Vučetin had pitched his field tent at the edge of an oak grove. During the day, Sinj was clearly visible from here: low stone houses with steep roofs clustered tightly around a towering Catholic church and a squat Orthodox church, resembling a round jar. The town hall, with its circular tower, bore the fascist flag, fluttering like a predatory bird shaking its wings.

We entered Vučetin's tent.

...A small candle flame flickered over a collapsible table. Sharp gusts of wind pressed against the canvas walls, slipping inside and threatening to snuff out the weak light. It wavered wildly from side to side, on the verge of going out at any moment. The uneven glow from the oil lamp illuminated only Vučetin, who sat hunched over his topographic maps on a log behind the table. It seemed as though no one else was in the tent. But I knew that the commanders and political commissars of both battalions were seated in the dark corners — I could hear the short cough of Todor Radović nearby, and opposite me, I could make out the silhouette of Kića Jankov.

The military council was in session.

"We usually operate from ambush," Vučetin said, glancing at me. "We hide behind trees or rocks, stay silent and wait for the enemy. We wait for him in places where he cannot use tanks or artillery against us. We let him come closer and then fire at point-blank range, as we say, right in the moustache

and teeth, and then charge into hand-to-hand combat. The mountains, forests, bad weather and darkness are our most reliable allies... Almost all the towns we have taken were won in night battles. We have already developed our own fairly clear operational-tactical principles, rules and methods of conducting a people's war. Our fighters are energetic, resilient and determined. They have strong military instincts. Time and again, our Russian brothers, with whom we fought side by side in many wars — against the Turks, against Napoleon, against the Germans — have seen this for themselves. And if the initiative and will of our fighters are not stifled, if their energy is not diminished, they are capable of devising a swift, skilful manoeuvre and executing it heroically.”

Vučetin cleared his throat and paused, scanning the commanders with weary eyes.

“Now he's going to say that the operation is cancelled,” Miletić whispered to me.

But I sensed that Vučetin was not leading up to that at all. I also understood Jovan's mood. The dark, open face of Stojan Podkazarac, with his bright blue eyes, kept appearing before me as well. After what had happened, Vučetin's composure seemed astonishing.

Listening to the unsettling rustling of the oak grove, the commander continued in a thoughtful and calm tone:

“But, comrades, we have yet to learn how to fight openly for cities. We lack endurance, persistence in achieving objectives and organization. We do not yet fully grasp the fundamental principles of modern combat. We are not yet able to fight beyond our mountains like a true army. We are still incapable of conducting large-scale battles, long marches and sustained operations. Holding positions, for example, and stubbornly defending them — that is the hardest thing for us. More often than not, we either rush at the enemy or flee

from him. I am saying all this on purpose so that Comrade Zagoryanov understands both our strengths and our weaknesses. But he can see for himself that we are not yet an army in the full sense of the word. For now, we are still a *šetibrz-da* — that's what we call a young bull that strays out of the furrow, ruining it. And we want to learn to fight the Soviet way, the Stalinist way — to strike with skill, not blindly, not by chance. We have already lost too much strength in an uneven and disorganized struggle. And not just because we are poorly armed, poorly equipped and still learning how to fight properly. Sometimes, even when we have weapons and a highly favourable operational and tactical situation, we still suffer defeats. At times, it seems as if the enemy is standing right behind us while we are planning this or that operation...”

The commanders exchanged silent glances. The restless howling of the grove, which filled the tent with unease, became almost tangible.

Vučetin lowered his voice:

“Only the continuous influx of people into our army and partisan units, only the successes of the Red Army — which draws away hordes of Germans and destroys them — only our forests and mountains, these are what keep our movement from being completely crushed, and us from being annihilated. We are losing our best cadres — our communists, our proletarians — too often and too quickly. The Proletarian Brigade, for example, is gradually ceasing to be proletarian in its composition right before my eyes. It's time we learned to preserve our strength. Every soldier is valuable to us — each one is a future builder of the new Yugoslavia. We must learn to win with minimal losses... Keeping this in mind, we need to carefully and thoroughly discuss our operation plan now... So, tell us, Comrade Zagoryanov,” Vučetin turned to me, “how would your commander act if he had to storm Sinj,

where every house, built from rough stone with thick walls, could be turned into a permanent defensive strongpoint? A regiment of the 'Oak Leaf' mountain rifle division is stationed in the town."

"A regiment in Sinj? And we only have two battalions," someone muttered from the dark corner. "And after today, it won't be easy to rally the fighters for such a task. This requires careful thought."

"That's right! Besides, according to old tactical rules, when attacking a defending enemy, you need a threefold advantage in numbers," another added.

A brief silence followed.

"However, no one has given us permission to cancel the operation!" Radović suddenly snapped.

"Allow me to speak as well," Kića Jankov stood up, leaning on a crate.

The harsh lines around his mouth, accentuated by the flickering candlelight, gave his face a bitter expression.

"Wouldn't it be better to wait for our commissar? He was delayed with Ranković and might bring us new instructions. Deciding on the assault on Sinj under these circumstances is too complex and too great a responsibility. That's my opinion."

"That's right," Miletić supported his company commander and turned to Vučetin. "We can't ignore what happened. You should hear what the Montenegrins are saying!" His voice cracked with emotion.

"And what exactly are they saying?" Vučetin asked slowly, with a smirk.

"They're saying that the Serbs have become too full of themselves, that they're deliberately killing Montenegrins. That's what they're saying!" Jovan said harshly. "We can't go into Sinj together now."

"Tell me, Radović," Vučetin raised his voice, "in the face of the enemy, on the eve of battle, can we allow our fighters to be divided? Do our people have guilty consciences that they can be intimidated? Are we not brothers in one united family of Yugoslav nations, that we can be so easily turned against each other, made to distrust and hate one another? I am against delaying or cancelling the battle."

"I agree with you," Radović firmly replied.

Other commanders and political commissars voiced their support.

"Our conscience is clear!"

"They won't divide us!"

"And they won't frighten us!"

Voices erupted from every corner. Many moved closer to Vučetin, surrounding him, making the tent feel cramped.

Kića Jankov, now seemingly without hesitation on the matter, scooted closer to me and said decisively:

"Well then, Comrade Zagoryanov, we're listening."

There was impatience in his voice, and in his eyes, a glint of battle fervour.

"What intelligence do we have on the enemy?" I asked, feeling Vučetin's encouraging gaze on me.

Radović explained in detail. From the locals, he had learned that the Germans were preparing to celebrate the New Year without concern. They felt completely in control here and were trying to enjoy themselves before being deployed to the Eastern Front. Standing guard duty or patrol shifts were seen as a punishment. The regiment had taken heavy losses and was likely awaiting reorganization. Of course, they were well-armed: they had heavy and light machine guns, mortars, a few mountain artillery pieces, and one or two armoured personnel carriers used for mail transport and officer escorts between Split and Knin. The Germans occupied the largest

buildings in town. The regimental headquarters was located in the house with the tower in the main square. There was no continuous line of field fortifications. After the partisans had wiped out one of their outposts, the Germans stopped deploying distant guard posts. Now, they relied only on small checkpoints and security patrols for immediate protection and observation. The outskirts, especially where ravines and cornfields bordered the town, were the most heavily guarded. Inside the town, there were no barricades or defensive positions. Brick-and-earth bunkers were set up only at the exits. The fields along the highway, as well as the highway itself at night, were mined.

I glanced at the map.

“We need to quietly and suddenly make our way into the city centre. What’s the shortest route?”

“Along the highway.”

“The enemy clearly isn’t expecting us from that direction. But what about the mines?”

“We don’t have sappers,” Radović said. “We have sheep and goats. We can drive them onto the mines.”

“That’s just like you, my friend. Always resourceful,” Vučetin said approvingly with a smile.

“Sheep and goats won’t work. That’s not a modern combat method,” I objected. “They’ll only make noise, alert the Germans and ruin the operation. What exactly does the minefield look like?”

Pointing at the map, Radović explained that its depth didn’t exceed ten metres, with the front edge about a hundred metres from the northern outskirts; the mines were tension-activated...

A plan was already forming in my mind — probably the best possible course of action in these circumstances. After hearing everything from Vučetin and Radović, I knew that

we couldn’t count on success in an open battle. I recalled engagements where I had fought with my company against a numerically superior enemy. I remembered our proven Stalinist tactics: surprise, speed of attack.

The situation looked as follows. The Germans’ morale was clearly low — they were being sent to slaughter in Russia. On New Year’s Eve, they would certainly get drunk, celebrate, and be in no state to quickly respond and ready themselves for combat.

My plan for capturing Sinj and destroying the German regiment was as follows:

“The Montenegrin battalion,” I said, moving my pointer along the map, “will take up positions on the northeastern slopes of Mount Visoka, which dominates the surrounding terrain. Securing its right flank near the Musa ravine, it will launch a sudden strike on the village of Budimir and advance towards the Catholic church in the city. One company will be placed in ambush in case the Germans attempt a breakout through the ravine past the water mill towards the village of Pavić. The Šumadija battalion will covertly deploy along the Suhač-Čurlin line and, securing its left flank near Milonović, will strike the city centre from the northeast, using the cleared paths in the minefield along the Sinj-Vrlika highway.”

The task of clearing the minefield fell on me. My second military specialty as a sapper, which I had studied with my company on the road to the Dnieper, was about to come in handy.

“The battalion mortars,” I continued, “will operate directly with their companies. Koce Petkovski with the anti-tank rifle will move with the main Šumadija strike group in case an enemy armoured vehicle or transport appears on the highway. Once inside the city, each platoon will assault its pre-assigned objective. The company political commissars will im-

mediately establish contact with the residents, who will surely assist us. If the Germans manage to entrench themselves in certain buildings, these strongpoints must be blockaded, attacked from all sides and immediately hit with grenades. In extreme cases, the buildings should be blown up or set on fire. We must act boldly and decisively.”

When I finished, someone murmured proudly:

“Now that’s the Red Army speaking!”

I felt a surge of strength and energy and was happy that I could contribute to this battle alongside the partisans.

The war council approved my plan. Vučetin and Radović immediately began drafting the combat order.

17

...By nightfall, a layer of ice had formed over the ground. A strong wind was blowing, sweeping dry snow from the ravines and sending it rustling across the frozen fields. In complete darkness, nothing was visible even three steps ahead.

I crawled slowly, carefully feeling every frozen bump in the ground until my cold-numbed fingers brushed against a wire. Cutting it with scissors, I reached for the mine and unscrewed the detonator. I disarmed mine after mine this way. Fortunately, they weren’t densely placed, arranged in a neat checkerboard pattern, which made them easier to locate.

Behind me, Lieutenant Bajo crept silently with several fighters.

After two hours of tense work, we had cleared a five-metre-wide path through the minefield along the left shoulder of the highway.

Having finished with the mines, we took cover in the ditch near the barrier. The sound of a harmonica reached our ears — it was a patrolman approaching. When he reached our

position, he turned back. Bajo drove his knife into the German’s back. The soldier collapsed with a hoarse groan.

We crawled up to the bunker. The soldier inside stirred uneasily — his last movement...

The way into the city from the northeast was now open.

I returned to Vučetin and reported.

“Comrade!” was all he said, pulling me into a firm embrace.

In the grey, thinning mist, company after company advanced cautiously, keeping to the left shoulder of the Vrlika-Sinj highway. They moved in silence, without firing a shot.

The Sinj garrison, relying on its minefield, on outposts positioned in the most vulnerable areas, and on barriers set up before the ravines, was caught off guard. The alarm signals — the wailing siren, sharp whistles and frantic shouts of the sentries — came too late. Bursting into the city, the partisans immediately stormed the large buildings, surrounding them. The assault began. Grenades flew through windows, followed by fighters breaking into the houses, engaging the enemy in their preferred manner — *prsa u prsa* — hand-to-hand combat. Each platoon had its designated target, pre-assigned in advance. The garrison was split into isolated groups and was unable to put up any organised resistance.

Jankov’s company, rushing straight to the city’s central square, attacked the three-storey building with a tower where the German headquarters was located. But even this building had not been fortified as a stronghold in time. We swiftly seized the first floor, forcing the surviving guards to retreat upstairs. Lights flickered in the windows, silhouettes of half-dressed officers darted about — men who had only just finished noisily celebrating the New Year.

Reaching the upper floor was not easy. A machine gunner

had entrenched himself on the stairwell landing, firing wildly along the staircase. Without letting go of the banner, Đuro Filipović carried three wounded fighters downstairs; two had been killed.

Vasko Hrستیć crawled up to me, crouching low and clutching a rifle he had already managed to acquire somewhere.

“I’ll stay with you, is that okay? Will you let me? It’s not as scary with you.”

“What do we do?” our platoon leader Bajo muttered, pressing against the railing and glancing upward.

Another burst of machine-gun fire drowned out his voice. Clouds of choking lime dust filled the stairwell, plaster crumbled noisily. The machine gunner kept firing.

“How do we take him out?!” the fighters wondered.

“Through the courtyard, from the window!” someone suggested.

It was a sound idea.

“But how do we climb up?”

“By the tree!” Bajo figured. “There are trees right by the wall in the courtyard.”

One of the fighters rushed downstairs. The branches of the old maples reached the roof. Climbing a tree that stood almost directly across from the windows of the stairwell, he waited for the machine-gun flashes to illuminate the German lying on the landing — and fired twice. The machine gun fell silent.

The fighters, knives in hand, rushed from the staircase into the hallway. The Germans recoiled back into the rooms from which they had been driven by grenade blasts thrown in from the street. The final hand-to-hand fights broke out.

“*Hande hoch!*”^{*} came Kića Jankov’s triumphant voice.

Đuro Filipović, his boots clattering, dashed up the spiral

^{*} Hands up! (German in the original).

staircase to the tower, with Vasko and me right behind him.

The flag with the black swastika and golden oak leaf was torn apart by Đuro, trampled underfoot, and in its place, he raised our modest banner, which flared bright red in the dawn light.

“Victory! Victory!” Filipović’s voice thundered over the square.

The fighters below, still firing, looked up and shouted “Hurrah!”

For a moment, it felt as if I were back with my own platoon, among my comrades, as if I had marched with them all the way here, almost to the Adriatic Sea, perhaps to the final frontier on the road to peace.

An indescribable feeling of victory!

Vasko, waving his cap in joy, suddenly tugged at my sleeve and cried out in fear:

“Look!”

From behind the church fence, an armoured vehicle appeared — yellow, likely a former Rommel transport from Africa. Behind it, German soldiers advanced closely, firing their submachine guns in all directions.

The square began to empty. The partisans retreated, seeking cover in courtyards and alleys.

Only the Stankov brothers remained at the end of the street with their mortar. Vučetin, peeking out from a building entrance, commanded them:

“Fire!”

Radislav dropped a mortar shell into the barrel and ducked. A sharp report rang out. The shell shot out with a hiss, followed by another. Pale yellow bursts of flame erupted far behind the German group. Tomislav quickly adjusted the sights, raising the barrel higher.

Meanwhile, Koce Petkovski, positioned behind a pillar,

was firing at the vehicle with his anti-tank rifle.

Encouraged, Vasko pressed his rifle to his shoulder, squeezed his eyes shut and pulled the trigger. The recoil knocked him back slightly. He hesitated, casting an anxious glance at me for reassurance — it was his first shot. I shouted:

“Well done! You got a fascist! Look, he’s lying there! Keep shooting or they’ll get away!”

He pressed back to his rifle.

The enemy submachine gunners’ ranks were thinning. They were being shot at from windows, street corners and doorways.

Suddenly, the armoured vehicle shuddered, veered sharply to the side and crashed into a stone fence. I saw the cabin door swing open, a lifeless driver tumble out, followed by a short, stocky soldier in a crumpled coat and oversized boots, clutching a thick briefcase under his arm. He scrambled over the fence. I fired at him but missed. The German disappeared into the garden.

Deprived of their moving armoured cover, the submachine gunners, firing sporadically, fled in a huddle down the nearest street, where no partisans were present. The street led to a deep ravine overgrown with shrubs...

“Aren’t we going to chase them?” Vasko asked, leaning almost waist-deep out of the tower embrasure. “Look where they’re running — to the ravine!”

“They won’t get far!”

I knew that on both sides of the ravine, Radović’s company lay in ambush.

18

...White sheets hung from the windows of large houses. Down the streets, thick-legged, shaggy horses wandered, their

harnesses clanking. Quartermasters seized them, harnessed them to wagons and began loading supplies onto them. Near the light mountain guns, their shields marked with painted oak leaves, fires were already being lit.

“Our cannons!” shouted the fighters from Jankov’s company.

But the Montenegrins, having settled atop the barrels and carriages, contested the spoils.

“Half and half,” Petkovski ruled. “Brothers share everything equally.” He turned the handles of the aiming and elevation mechanisms, opened and closed the breech, pulled the firing pin lock. Artillery was his passion — just like anything that had to do with technology.

“And will you learn to shoot?” asked Vučetin, approaching.

“I’m learning... Load it? Look how many shells there are! Ready! Rapid fire!”

“At ease!” Vučetin smiled. “You’ll have your fill of shooting when you command the battery someday.”

The commander surveyed the artillery with a business-like air:

“Three for Radović, three for us. No one’s at a loss. Now we’re a proper regular unit — not just in name, but in armament too.”

“That’s what it means to fight together!” the Montenegrins clamoured.

“Exactly! Not with fingers splayed, but with a clenched fist! The Soviet way!... Do you hear that?”

A volley rang out from the direction of the ravine, followed by a chaotic burst of gunfire, then silence.

Vučetin shook my hand firmly.

“Well, that’s that. Just as planned...”

“Where to now?” the fighters asked.

Success had sparked an eagerness to keep advancing.

“To Split!” Miletić insisted. “To the blue sea.”

He was ablaze with battle fervour.

“To Split! To Split!” he repeated, as if his reckless courage could atone for yesterday’s despair and hesitation. “It’s a straight road from here. Thirty-six kilometres!”

The idea was tempting — to aid the Dalmatian partisans in their long and fiercely contested struggle for the port city of Split and the large islands off its coast. To cut enemy supply lines along the coastal belt, to reach the sea...

But for now, trophies needed to be gathered, and a decision had to be made on what to do with the prisoners. They were being rounded up from all directions. The Montenegrins led in a whole column from the ravine. The mountain troops trudged along, collars of their coats and green tunics pulled up, hands tucked into their sleeves. They walked sullenly, casting wary glances around. At the front, stomping in a soldier’s greatcoat and oversized boots, was the very same short German I had fired at when he was scrambling over the fence. Radović had personally dragged him out of the ravine.

“A big shot,” he told Vučetin. “Here’s his briefcase.”

Inside the thick briefcase — what Radović had really been after — were various documents, filled notebooks, maps, some letters and an Iron Cross torn from a uniform.

There was still much to go through. Vučetin asked Radović to take on the role of garrison commander, to set up road-block posts, and to secure the telegraph, telephone and other key buildings. Since Katnić was absent, he ordered Korchagin to organize a rally in the town with the local population.

“Let’s take a walk,” Vučetin took me by the elbow. “I’m exhausted... And besides, I want to talk to you.”

We strolled down the street.

“Recognize him?” I asked.

Coming towards us, leading a group of prisoners, was Vasko Hrستیć. He was both puffed up with importance and a little embarrassed. He was already wearing a captured tunic with four large pockets, which nearly reached his knees, and on his feet, instead of his old straw shoes, were oversized leather boots. The long sleeves of the tunic were rolled up, and it was strange to see the heavy rifle in his thin, child-like hands, which he struggled to hold at the ready.

“Is that really Vasko? Come here.”

Halting the prisoners with a commanding gesture, Vasko approached the commander, standing on his tiptoes to appear taller. He looked at Vučetin anxiously — afraid he might take his weapon away and send him home.

But Vučetin, impulsively pulling him close, kissed him on the forehead. Vasko sniffled awkwardly, blinking his long eyelashes as he glanced around — had the commander just undermined his warrior’s dignity?

“Too bad there aren’t any Chetniks here,” he said defiantly. “I’d show them what’s what! They killed my mother...”

Snapping a salute, Vasko drove the prisoners toward the collection point.

“I had a son just like him,” Vučetin murmured thoughtfully, watching him with a sad smile.

Fires were already burning in the courtyards, flames licking the steep sides of field kettles. Our quartermaster, Rakić, was generously distributing supplies from the German storehouses to the cooks. Montenegrins and Šumadijans sat mixed together around the fires, waiting for breakfast. Their fighting spirit had not yet cooled. Everyone had so much to share! There was barely time to listen, as each wanted to boast: how he had taken down three, chased down five. Around one of the fires, they were enthusiastically singing a song written in the first year of the struggle:

*“Zaostrim kose, pšenica sazrela...
Zaostrim kose, napred!”*

*[Sharpen the scythes, the wheat has ripened...
Sharpen the scythes, forward!]*

Ružica Brković and Ajša Bašić rushed past, their arms full of bandages and packets of various medicines taken from the German medical unit. Kumanudi strode by, laden with trophies: an artillery map case, a canteen in a leather strap, binoculars, a camera.

“Hey, Bonbon! Why don’t you strap a saddle on yourself too!” Đuro shouted after him.

But Kumanudi didn’t respond. Waving his spoon, he was already hurrying toward the kettle.

A deep, excited drumming rang out, summoning the people. A young man in a felt hat with a red ribbon around the crown pounded the drum with such force that it echoed in our ears. Musicians from the nearby village of Obrovac had arrived. An old violinist with long silver hair played with fervour, winking playfully at the cimbalom player, who struck the metal plates with wild intensity. A gypsy in green trousers and a fur vest blew piercing, shrill notes from a willow flute.

People linked hands, took two small steps to the left and one to the right; moving left, they began shuffling their feet faster and faster, lightly bouncing, crouching and swaying, urging each other on with cries of “Hai, hai!”

“Kolo, kolo!”* Miletić shouted. “In honour of mutual love and trust!”

The circle widened, drawing in everyone — fighters and townsfolk, young and old alike. Jovan, leading the dance as

* A traditional circle dance.

kolovođa, performed the most intricate steps: a comical entrechat, an incredible pirouette, at times nearly flattening himself to the ground, then leaping high with joyful cries: “Gaga! A-ah! I-ha!” He moved so lightly and effortlessly, as if the very earth were lifting him.

Everyone joined in song:

*“Oj, Staljine, družo, družo,
Oj, Staljine, družo, družo.”*

*[Oh, Stalin, comrade, comrade,
Oh, Stalin, comrade, comrade!]*

It was impossible to resist such music, such dancing, and such a chorus.

Vasko grabbed my hand and pulled me into the circle. I danced with exhilaration, forgetting all worries, proud that Stalin’s name was cherished across the Balkans.

The circle kept expanding across the square, pressing up against the walls of houses and fences.

“With a dance like this, no one can stand still, but I can’t keep dancing! Let’s take a walk,” Vučetin turned to me as I stepped out of the kolo.

19

...A northern wind blew against us. Dry and sharp as crushed glass, the snow stung our flushed faces.

Vučetin walked with his head tucked down, shoulders raised high, deep in thought. The distance and the wind gradually muffled the music. Soon, even the pounding drumbeats faded. The vast, barren plains, where the wind had swept away the snow, looked bleak and desolate. The sun, bright

in the morning, now blurred into a dull yellow patch in the murky sky. A dusty, ashen coating lay over the brown feather grass, the thorn bushes rustling in the roadside ditches, and the furrowed fields, as if combed by a giant rake.

We had passed the city limits.

Vučetin slowed his pace.

“Do you smoke, comrade? No? Well, I do sometimes.”

He pulled out a small, tightly rolled tobacco pouch, carefully unrolled it and placed a short pipe inside.

That pouch — ordinary, greasy and worn — was something Vučetin deeply cherished. It had belonged to his father, who had received it as a gift from a Russian soldier named Stepan, who had come here to fight against the Turks. The pouch was the only thing Vučetin had left as a keepsake from his home in Rijeka Crnojevića, from his family.

“Let’s sit here, comrade.”

Overcome by a violent fit of coughing, the commander nearly collapsed onto a bench standing beside a stone crucifix.

“You’re unwell,” I said. “We should go back.”

“It’s nothing... It’ll pass. Once the war is over, I’ll return to the mountains, live in shepherds’ huts, up in the pastures. That’s where I’ll regain my health...”

He nudged the yellow leaves beneath the gnarled oak tree with his foot, watching them shift into a flattened carpet. Squinting his eyes, he gazed for a long time at the plaster Madonna leaning at the base of the cross. The wind fiercely tugged at the wreath of red paper flowers on her head; rain had washed out the dye, staining her face as if with blood. On the pedestal of the crucifix, I noticed a barely legible Latin inscription, veiled in green mould. The entire monument, the whole sculpture, exuded a lifeless sorrow.

“I called you here for a reason,” Vučetin finally spoke. “First of all, I want to thank you.” He wrapped his arm around

my shoulders and looked into my eyes with warmth. “From the bottom of my heart! You’ve helped us greatly, Nikolai.”

“It’s my duty, commander,” I replied. “Our countries share a common enemy — fascism. So, in a way, I’m fighting here for my homeland as well.”

Vučetin glanced around.

“We’re alone. I’ll speak frankly...” He hesitated. “Stojan Podkazarac... I never even got a chance to talk to him. He was my student. I loved him like a son. Before the battle, I forced myself not to dwell on the wild and disgraceful thing that had happened, because if Radović and I had given in to the mood of the moment, the operation would have been ruined. The revolutionary tribunal must have had some strong reasons for passing such a harsh sentence on those two Montenegrins. But to carry it out right before the battle, and at the hands of Serbs, no less — that was, to put it simply, pouring fuel on the fire! National strife here is like embers smouldering beneath the ashes — it never fully dies out. Thankfully, the operation wasn’t derailed. I suppose nothing like this ever happens in your army?”

“It’s impossible!” I said sharply.

“Of course. That’s what I thought.”

He nodded.

“People of different nations work together as comrades... That’s how it should be. We’re striving for the same. In our brigade, you’ll find fighters from all the nationalities of our country. The struggle has forged strong bonds between people. But the trouble is, arguments — whether intentional or not — still arise.”

“That means there must be reasons,” I noted.

Vučetin gave a sorrowful smirk.

“Yes, but who creates those reasons?”

He fell silent, gathering his thoughts.

“You’ve probably heard the phrase: ‘The Balkans — a powder keg.’ Well, it’s true. Eternal feuds and animosities, endless strife and bloodshed between nations, between clans. Take the history of Yugoslavia, for example. What is it if not a chronicle of civil wars between different dynasties and political parties? A history of palace coups, conspiracies, betrayals, political assassinations — some direct, some from the shadows. No king, no matter the dynasty, no government, no matter the party, has ever managed to unite all the branches of our Yugoslav people into one great, harmonious family. Some historians blame us, the Yugoslavs. They claim we are incapable of unity, that we’re used to living in fragmented tribal groups, that we lack the perseverance and industriousness of, say, the Bulgarians. That no nation is more careless than the Serbs, who only sing and recite poems about the glory of their ancestors — about Dušan the Mighty and Marko Kraljević — but their love for their homeland goes no further than that. Utter nonsense! If that were true, we would have been crushed long ago, wiped off the face of the Balkans. But we endured five centuries of Turkish oppression. We withstood the intrigues of Catholic Venice and imperial Austria. When our country was threatened with destruction, we rose up together, fiercely and resolutely. For centuries, we waged an endless, sacred war for our forests, our valleys and our cold mountains — *za čestni krst i zlatnu slobodu** — for our national rights, which are older and more legitimate than those of many states that exist today. Every stone in our mountains is soaked in heroic blood. And if there were traitors among us, if anyone chose to speak in a foreign voice, to walk in a foreign stride, to flaunt the collar placed on them by Western Europe — it was not the people, not the ordinary folk, but the outcasts. Those were

* For the holy cross and golden freedom (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

the rulers — Karađorđević and Obrenović — the ministers, the deputies, the politicians and all the other scum...”

Vučetin uttered his last words with barely concealed frustration and caught his breath. It was as if he were rushing to pour out everything weighing on his soul. He spoke in abrupt, emotional bursts. His eyes burned, his cheeks flushed. And I understood that this sick, tormented, but still strong-willed man was being completely honest with me — just as Jovan had been — because I was Russian, from the Soviet Union...

“And these corrupt politicians,” Vučetin continued, “rub their hands with glee and smirk when a Serb says: ‘Bosnia is mine,’ and a Croat retorts: ‘No, it’s mine.’ The truth is, to this day, Serbs and Croats here still don’t know how to say together: ‘Bosnia is ours.’ Yet Bosnia is the heart of Yugoslavia, and we have only one homeland — the Yugoslav land. We argue, we butcher each other, while those who benefit from it stand aside, laughing and saying: ‘Fools! What you’re fighting over belongs neither to you nor to him — it should be mine.’”

I compared what I was hearing to what Jovan had told me.

“This situation is extremely dangerous,” I said. “It can only serve the imperialists. They deliberately inflame national divisions and hostilities, especially among the more backward sections of society, thus weakening the people...”

“Exactly! Exactly!” Vučetin eagerly seized upon my words. “I’m very glad you understand this. That’s exactly why, Comrade Zagoryanov, I wanted you, as someone new among us, to grasp just how complex our national question is. Yes, you’re absolutely right. It is the imperialists who sow discord among us, who weaken us this way. And when the opportunity arises, they simply tear us apart. Look at Istria, Trieste, Bosnia and Herzegovina — who hasn’t seized them at some point? The

Austro-Hungarians, the Italians, not to mention the Turks. After the First World War, we may have united territorially, but economically, we were still being ripped apart by Britain, France, Germany and America. Each of them tried to snatch the last piece of bread from the Yugoslav people, to pit us against one another, to muddy the waters so their dirty dealings would be less noticeable. And then, suddenly, they would proclaim their so-called 'strategic interests' in this region and declare their intent to defend them here. Absolute nonsense! And now, it's even harder to understand what's really going on. Historically and psychologically, we are all drawn to Russia. Now more than ever. We — Serbs, Croats, Montenegrins, Slovenes, Macedonians, Bosnians and others — want to live as one united, harmonious family of nations, to live as the peoples in your Soviet Union do: happily, peacefully, without any national strife or hatred. But some unseen hand, from both outside and within, keeps forcing our peoples to clash. That the fascists and the Holy Pope orchestrated the massacre of Serbs and Croats in '41 is no surprise. But who is stirring up and fuelling this hatred now? The Germans? Not entirely. Take Croatia, for instance — there are up to 200,000 Home Guards there. Their ideologue, Maček, is known to have ties not only to the Germans but also to the Americans and the British. Yet his thugs are being unleashed against the Serbs and Montenegrins. By whom, I ask? Mihailović commands several tens of thousands of Serbs. There is a British military mission at his headquarters, and his Chetniks are being sicced on Croats, Montenegrin and Macedonians. Again, by whom? Or take the situation within our own army. Why put forth slogans like 'the Serbs are the leading nation of Yugoslavia' or 'all Macedonians are Yugoslavs'? There are also Greek and Bulgarian Macedonians. It's astonishing how reckless we are! Instead of shielding our weak points with armour, instead

of protecting them, instead of easing relations between our peoples, we ourselves aggravate these tensions and put them on full display in the worst, most exposed way possible. And, of course, our enemies exploit this. The execution of the two Montenegrins, for example, reflected this very weakness as if in a mirror. A powder keg..."

Vučetin abruptly cut himself off. Instinctively, I turned my head in the direction he was looking.

From the mountains, a group of riders was rapidly approaching.

Vučetin rose from the bench and, waving his hand as if brushing away an unanswerable question, quickly said:

"No matter! Your people will come, and we'll pour the gunpowder out of the Balkan powder keg. In the end," he added, as if responding to his own thoughts, "the Sava, Drava, Drina and Prut all flow into the same river..."

The riders stopped near the crucifix. One of them was an American lieutenant colonel, the other an Englishman. I recognized them immediately.

They were accompanied by guards and our political commissar, Blažo Katnić.

"Those are representatives of the Allied missions," I quietly told Vučetin. "I saw them at the corps commander's headquarters in Homolje."

"Perfect timing! We have good news for them," Vučetin straightened his old, worn-out greatcoat.

Without dismounting, Katnić gestured for us to come closer.

We approached.

"Greetings," the political commissar smiled at us but immediately asked in a displeased tone: "What are you two doing taking a stroll? Nothing better to do? Lost your spirit? Don't despair. We'll take Sinj. And not just Sinj! The Allies

have come to help us.” Then, lowering his voice, he leaned toward the American. “This is the commander of the Šumadijan Battalion, Vučetin, and with him, a Russian.”

The American casually touched the visor of his cap, which bore a white star and insignia, while the Englishman simply lifted his chin even higher.

“Report on the situation, comrade,” Katnić said in a business-like tone.

“Sinj is taken,” Vučetin replied calmly. “The battle is over!”

“What do you mean over?! You must be joking!” Katnić exclaimed, rising slightly in his stirrups.

The Allies looked toward Sinj with scepticism. Thin columns of smoke rose over the city.

“So that’s not just chimney smoke?” the American muttered. “The town looked so peaceful to me. Then what is it? Fires?”

“Smoke from campfires. The fighters are preparing breakfast,” Vučetin answered.

“Well, well!” The American whistled softly.

A barely perceptible shadow flickered across his face, but he quickly masked it with an enthusiastic exclamation:

“Excellent! Congratulations!” But then, with a hint of regret, he added, “Still, it’s a shame we arrived too late. The partisans must have suffered heavy losses. Is that why you’ve come to this Madonna, to mourn your fallen, Comrade Vučetin?” he asked with feigned sympathy.

“No, there weren’t many casualties. We caught the enemy by surprise.”

“Oh? And? You wiped them out? The whole regiment? Unbelievable! And prisoners? Do you have any prisoners at all?”

“You can ask the commandant of Sinj,” Vučetin replied

curtly.

It was clear he didn’t like the American.

“I see, I see.” The lieutenant colonel glanced in my direction.

Of course, he recognized me immediately but seemed reluctant to acknowledge it right away.

“Ah, our Russian ally!” he greeted me belatedly. “The world is indeed small. Fate has brought us together once again. That’s what it means to be allies: always and everywhere — together!”

I looked him straight in the eye. He hesitated, then changed his tone.

“Well then, let’s go, gentlemen. Let’s celebrate this victory.”

Vučetin and I followed behind the mounted men.

In the town square, in front of the building with the tower, a rally was underway. A crowd of residents and fighters surrounded a munitions crate, which Miletić was using as a podium.

The American steered his horse directly toward the platform. The crowd reluctantly parted to let him through.

Jovan was speaking passionately, with great enthusiasm, about the grandeur and heroism of the Red Army, which, breaking through the enemy’s desperate resistance, was moving closer each day to the Balkans and the Carpathians, bringing liberation from Hitlerism to the peoples of Central and Southeastern Europe. He spoke of how the Yugoslav partisans, inspired by the example of Soviet soldiers and hopeful for an imminent meeting with them, were fighting ever more decisively and in greater unity...

The American listened attentively.

Todor Radović approached him.

“This is the garrison commander,” Vučetin told the Allies.

"*Zdravo!*" the American grinned broadly, extending his hand to Radović. "Lieutenant Colonel Sherry MacCarver, representative of the Anglo-American mission. This is Captain Badgie Pinch, His Majesty the King of England's liaison officer. He does not speak Serbian as well as I do, so he has entrusted me to greet, on his behalf as well, the valiant fighters and commanders of the National Liberation Army, who have just won a glorious victory!"

"The fighters and commanders will greatly appreciate your greeting," Radović responded with dignity.

Meanwhile, the residents of Sinj were stepping onto the podium, some with red ribbons, others with cardboard stars pinned to their chests. They spoke of their love for the National Liberation Army, for the Soviet Union, for the great Stalin. They pledged their full support to the partisans. Red and tricolour flags with stars appeared on buildings, even above the stone-laced Catholic church. The walls and fences were quickly covered with new slogans, where the words "Soviet Union," "Stalin," "Red Army," "Communist Party" and "YNLA" were repeated over and over. Soon, nothing remained of the former German inscriptions, the posters advertising the film "Enchanted by You," or the black silhouettes of eavesdropping figures with the warning: "Be silent! You are being listened to!"

MacCarver and Pinch looked around in surprise, even a bit bewildered. The American muttered something to Katnić. Katnić immediately called over Korchagin and hissed at him:

"What the hell is this? Don't you see that I arrived with our Western allies? Why didn't you mention England or America in your speech? No one else has either. It's a disgrace! And there aren't even any appropriate slogans. Why?"

Jovan defended himself, saying that the people and each speaker were simply expressing their feelings in their own

way...

"By the way, where are your prisoners?" MacCarver asked Radović, concerned. "Any officers among them?"

"Hard to say... Many were captured in their underwear."

"Amusing!" MacCarver chuckled and nervously patted his horse's neck. A hidden tension was evident in him, which clashed with his cheerful words. "Well done! I admire your bravery. Montenegrins are excellent soldiers, after all. They even defeated Napoleon himself."

"Montenegro is a beautiful country," Pinch added melancholically and out of place. "In Ulcinj and Kotor, roses bloom even in winter."

"Yes, yes, roses are, of course, lovely, but what's far more important is that Kotor Bay can accommodate an entire fleet of destroyers..." Now turning back to the garrison commander, MacCarver asked, "So tell me, didn't you capture at least a few officers? They could provide us with valuable intelligence."

"I'm interrogating one right now — a colonel, judging by his documents." Radović held up a briefcase in his hand.

"What is his name?" MacCarver exclaimed impatiently.

The American's eyes gleamed with hunger. I noticed it. But he quickly masked them with his usual indifferent, lazy expression.

"Goltz. Von Goltz... He has some strange papers here with mathematical symbols... Most likely a cipher. There's also a radiogram from Berlin."

"Let me see. Interesting," MacCarver said, now sounding completely calm.

Radović pulled a crumpled telegram form from the briefcase. MacCarver skimmed it quickly.

"I see... A New Year's greeting and an award — the 'Oak Leaf' distinction for the Iron Cross. Addressed to SS Col-

onel von Goltz. From none other than Himmler himself!... I hope you'll allow Captain Pinch and me to be present for von Goltz's interrogation and assist in analysing his documents?" MacCarver asked in a honeyed tone.

"Naturally!" Katnić bustled about before Radović could answer. "We'll arrange everything right away. But first, allow me to give a speech."

The political commissar struggled to climb onto the munitions crate.

MacCarver and Pinch, still on horseback, waved at the speaker and smiled.

20

Until late in the evening, the town square and streets echoed with excited shouts and songs. The townspeople and fighters — Šumadijans, Montenegrins, and with them Zagoryanov — celebrated their victory. But the cheerful noise barely penetrated through the tightly shut and curtained windows of a room on the upper floor of a three-storey building in the square.

Inside this small room — where clothes and personal belongings of its former occupants still lay scattered on the sofas and floor — the interrogation of the German Colonel von Goltz was taking place.

Radović conducted the questioning in broken German, in the presence of MacCarver and Pinch.

Upon unexpectedly seeing MacCarver before him, von Goltz barely concealed his relief. He immediately straightened up, even standing a bit taller, fastidiously adjusting the soldier's overcoat he had been forced to change into while fleeing Sinj.

MacCarver, however, showed no sign of recognition. He

casually sat at the table and began leafing through the documents retrieved from the prisoner's briefcase.

Answering Radović, von Goltz stated that in launching the winter campaign of 1943-44 in Yugoslavia, German commander General von Weichs had, for the sixth time, attempted to encircle, fragment and destroy the main forces of the National Liberation Army. His troops, including Chetnik and Ustaše units, had launched surprise attacks, broken through in various areas, and occupied vast territories in eastern Bosnia and the Sandžak at the beginning of December. But the partisans kept slipping away from destruction and sometimes even struck back with counterblows — like today in Sinj, which until now had been a peaceful outpost.

At this, von Goltz cast a sorrowful glance at MacCarver's back as he bent over the table, examining the papers.

"One might think," the prisoner continued in a strained voice, "that the partisans today were commanded personally by Arso Jovanović."

"Yes, we acted under his orders," Radović confirmed with pride.

Von Goltz sighed.

"Things are bad, Herr Commander. We've lost the Dnieper. We let Italy slip away. Even the Bolivian Indians have declared war on us. When we were strong, everyone loved us. The strong are obeyed, but the weak are stoned. And now, even here, we're being beaten. We've lost Sinj... It's hard to fight an enemy as slippery as an eel. He slips from our grasp, avoids the traps we set, refuses to engage in major battles, and instead forces us to fight on his terms... I must admit, I'm impressed by your improved tactical skills," von Goltz added obsequiously.

Pinch listened to the German with the polite disdain of a victor. He had little interest in this interrogation. With an ex-

pression of patient indifference, he gazed at a crookedly hung, coloured photograph in a gilded frame on the wall: Vincennes Park in Paris, with a gazebo by a pond amid emerald-green poplars, where, according to the German inscription, Napoleon once liked to dream. Suddenly, the Englishman's absent-minded glance fell on the map case hanging over the back of the chair where MacCarver sat, engrossed in examining von Goltz's documents. Sticking out from the open case was a folded topographic map, one Pinch recognized all too well.

As if in thought, Pinch strolled past the chair and, unnoticed by the American, slipped the map out of the case.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," he said. "I'll leave you for a few minutes."

He walked out into the corridor at an unhurried pace. MacCarver also stood up.

"I don't find anything of major significance in this prisoner's testimony," he said to Radović in Serbian.

"We'll send him to brigade headquarters. I think he'll be more forthcoming there," the garrison commander replied.

"Yes, yes," MacCarver yawned. "In fact, I'd suggest sending him directly to the Supreme Command. He's an important figure, after all — a Himmler man, no less. Besides, he seems to be a decent military strategist. They'll definitely take an interest in him at headquarters."

"All right. I'll do that," Radović agreed.

"Excellent. Now, we should get going. My friend, commander of the garrison, I'd appreciate it if you could arrange something. There's an armoured vehicle lying around. Have it checked. If the engine is intact, maybe we can make it to the airfield."

"Understood. I'll see to it right away. But..." Radović hesitated, nodding toward the prisoner.

"Don't worry. He won't escape." MacCarver set his sub-

machine gun down on the table. "I'll stand guard. I have a Thompson submachine gun — six hundred rounds per minute."

Radović hurriedly left the room.

As soon as his footsteps faded down the corridor, the American got up and latched the door. Then he turned around.

Von Goltz's face had turned crimson with excitement. His thick lips trembled.

"I'm very glad," he said, stepping toward MacCarver with a friendly outstretched hand.

The American stopped him with a gesture.

"Please, no emotions!" he grimaced. "Let's get to the point. We have only a few minutes." Papers rustled in front of von Goltz's face. "Which one of these ciphers contains the list I need?" MacCarver was in a hurry.

"But first, I'd like a guarantee, sir... You promised... Remember, at 'The Three Bears'?"

"I repeat, we're men of business. The fact that you're a prisoner hasn't diminished your value to us in the slightest."

"I hope so, sir..."

"You have every reason to expect that your hopes will be fulfilled. You want clearance to join us?"

"Yes, you promised me that..."

"Fine. You'll have it. Now, where's the list?"

"Here," von Goltz pointed to one of the documents.

"Is it updated?"

"Yes."

"Excellent. Decode it. Quickly." MacCarver glanced toward the door.

"But this is currency... The gold reserve," the nazi whispered, looking at the cipher table and writing down the code names and real names of the Gestapo's Yugoslav agents.

“Don’t worry. The payment will be calculated to the last cent,” MacCarver assured him, standing behind von Goltz, reading the familiar names with a triumphant smile...

21

The topographic map of Yugoslavia, which Badgie Pinch examined closely in the next room, was covered in various inscriptions. Near the name of the town Đakovac, the word “chromium” was scrawled in large letters; near Istria — “bauxite”; near Idrija — “mercury mine, second largest in Europe”; near Kutina, Međimurje and along the Drava Valley — “oil”; on Kopaonik — “uranium,” and so on. Deposits of zinc, manganese, tungsten, phosphorites, tin, copper and coal were also marked. A lead mine and processing plant in the Trepča region — where Pinch had once successfully served as director before the war — was circled. Marginal notes contained figures suggesting they referred to the results of geological surveys, explorations and mining operations. Despite having lived in Yugoslavia for a year, Pinch had never possessed such detailed information on the country’s mineral wealth — or rather, its strategic raw materials hidden beneath its soil.

So that’s what the “scientific discussion” between the Yankee and Commissar Magdić, the former mining engineer and geologist, was about!

Pinch was shaken by the unexpected discovery. A burning sense of envy toward his partner’s success took hold of him. True, he himself didn’t mind stepping beyond the immediate duties of a liaison officer for the Allied mission when the opportunity arose. But from the looks of it, MacCarver was conducting his business with far greater scope and energy!

With a determined expression, Pinch pushed open the door to the interrogation room. It wouldn’t budge. It was

locked from the inside.

Overcome by sudden suspicion and anxiety, Pinch knocked nervously.

It was a full minute before MacCarver let him in.

“Mr. von Goltz sends his apologies,” he said with a smile. “He’s changing clothes.”

Indeed, the German had taken off his soldier’s greatcoat and was pulling on an officer’s coat with a velvet collar that reached down to his heels.

Pinch gave the short-statured von Goltz a scrutinizing look.

“Fate,” von Goltz grimaced sorrowfully, casually admiring himself in the wall mirror, its glass shattered by grenade fragments. “The oak leaves have fallen. Poor Paul Bizius! My friend, who had hosted me here, has already moved on to another world — perhaps even a better one...”

MacCarver was leaning out the window, shouting something to the soldiers working on the armoured vehicle. Seizing the moment, Pinch discreetly slipped the map back into the American’s case.

“As soon as the vehicle is fixed, we’re heading to Glamoč,” MacCarver said, stepping away from the window. “So, shall we go, Captain?”

Pinch nodded angrily — once again, something had happened in his absence, just like back at Popović’s camp on Black Peak.

Katnić appeared in the doorway.

“The vehicle is ready! Repaired!” he announced. “But why the rush, gentlemen? I’ve arranged for lunch. We’ve discovered a cellar with excellent wines. We don’t drink, of course, but in honour of your arrival...”

“No, no! No time. Business!” the American declined firmly. “By the way, Captain,” he turned to Pinch in English,

“take a cue from this guy. Quick-witted, sharp. Always cheerful and full of energy.”

“May I at least load a crate of wine into your vehicle?” Katnić persisted.

“That’s acceptable!” MacCarver patted him on the shoulder. “Thank you, my friend. You’re a good man. I’m sure we’ll meet again. And, by the way, you’re quite the speaker. I had the chance to see that for myself. Your speech from that makeshift podium was excellent. Who was speaking when we arrived?”

“The company political commissar, Korchagin.”

“Is he Russian?”

“No, Serbian. Korchagin is just his alias.”

“Oh, really! I must say, his speech didn’t leave the best impression on me. It was far too biased. If out of three allies only one is praised, then that naturally suggests the other two are bad. That’s the conclusion anyone listening to your Korchagin would come to, wouldn’t they?”

“I agree with you,” Katnić jumped in. “I already called him out on it.”

“And what materials was he using?” MacCarver pressed.

“Most likely, he was just repeating the latest radio reports.”

“That won’t do. You need to control this. You’re the battalion commissar — it’s your responsibility. By the way,” MacCarver rummaged in his map case and pulled out a booklet. “Here’s a guide on how to use informational materials. It was originally published for our army lecturers and chaplains, but as you can see, we’ve translated the text into Serbian. I highly recommend it — we have extensive experience in political education.”

“I’ll take your advice.”

“We’ll keep in close contact, commissar. I’m always happy

to help. By the way...” MacCarver lowered his voice to a near whisper. “I’d like to take a little souvenir from this campaign, something to remember our meeting and the capture of Sinj. My cabin in New York is full of mementos. I collect them from all over the world.”

“I understand. Anything you like.” Katnić reluctantly felt for the gold watch in his pocket, taken from an SS colonel’s wrist. “A camera? Binoculars?”

“No, too bulky.”

“A bracelet? A watch?”

“Yes, something like that.”

Talking as they walked, MacCarver and Katnić left the room. Soon after, Radović arrived with his men, and they led von Goltz away. But Pinch kept pacing back and forth, trying to make sense of MacCarver’s strange behaviour. The Yankee had been so eager to get to Sinj, so interested in the prisoners, yet during the interrogation, he showed no curiosity about the SS colonel. But when they were alone...? There was no doubt — something was going on. They had managed to exchange words. Contact with the enemy was one thing — after all, espionage was espionage. But what kind of dealings did they have?

Outside the window, the impatient blare of a horn echoed through the air. Pinch looked out. MacCarver was already behind the wheel of the armoured vehicle, while several soldiers — his escort — climbed into the back seat. Pinch hurried down the stairs and jumped into the cabin almost on the move.

MacCarver floored the gas pedal.

He lounged at the wheel, his cap pushed back on his head, a cigarette clenched between his teeth. He steered lazily, barely holding onto the wheel, as if the vehicle were moving on its own — rattling and bouncing over the rough road.

Pinch was furious with himself. He couldn't stop thinking about the American's topographic map. This Yankee had his hands in everything, always managing to turn a profit!

"And where exactly are we going now?" Pinch asked irritably, suddenly realizing his frustration. "I'm tired of this aimless wandering."

"We're flying to Drvar, Captain. To the Supreme Command. Home!"

"Finally! In that case, let's clarify the route."

"You won't get lost with me, sir."

"Show me the route on your map."

"You have your own."

"I lost it. Let me take a look at yours." Pinch's tense, feverishly anxious expression amused MacCarver.

"Be my guest, Captain. It won't change anything." He handed him the map and pressed the accelerator.

The armoured vehicle surged forward. The map jolted in Pinch's hands, making it impossible to read. Not that he was even looking at the text.

"So... You want to fly straight across? Wouldn't it be better to follow the coastline? Beautiful landscapes! A slight detour, but still... What's this writing here? These notes have nothing to do with military matters. Bauxite, chromium... What is all this?"

"Nothing to do with military matters?" MacCarver laughed. "You're as naive as Voltaire's *Candide*! I'd love to know how your war factories in Birmingham and Sheffield would function without these 'non-military' minerals... But fine, I'll satisfy your curiosity. I'm studying the geological features of this region. I have no secrets from you, Captain."

"I hope not..." Pinch made his thin voice sound stern. "Otherwise, that would be quite ungentlemanly and a direct violation of our allied duties... But I don't see why you'd be

studying geology here right now."

"And why are you so keen to study the Yugoslav coastline? The ports, the bays, the inlets, the islands? Why is your notebook filled with all sorts of geographical names?!"

"That's no secret to you. We, the British, favour an invasion of Europe not from the West, but through the Balkans. And to land troops here, the first priority is to prepare ports and air bases."

"Yes, yes," MacCarver nodded knowingly. "Your Prime Minister has been obsessed with that plan for two years now."

"To drive a wedge into the soft underbelly of Europe..."

"I know exactly what's behind this! You want to use our technology to get here before the Russians. Clever, I must admit! I have to give you credit — you have a real knack for choosing the right allies."

"I'm being just as honest with you, Colonel. Our duty is to liberate the countries of Southeastern Europe," Pinch finished in a monotone voice.

"Go ahead, say it outright: and occupy them too — your beloved Balkans! After all, we're not hiding anything from each other!" MacCarver burst into loud laughter.

Pinch started to say something but only made a contemptuous face and chewed his lips in silence.

The armoured vehicle shuddered and zigzagged sharply, as if laughing along with its driver.

"Ah, Captain, Captain! You're a good man, but so short-sighted! You can't see past your 'soft underbelly of Europe.'" MacCarver spoke again as the vehicle, having sped past Trnova Poljana, began a slow crawl up the mountainside. "You're right that the Balkans must be prepared as a staging ground, but not as quickly as you want, and not for this war — for the next one. That one, damn it, will be the decisive and toughest of all. Small plans mean small business. Big

plans — that's big business. And they sing to us like sirens..."

With that, MacCarver pressed the horn button, letting out such a long, deafening blast that Pinch had to cover his ears. As soon as the sound faded, the Englishman muttered, glancing sideways at the lieutenant colonel:

"Dangerous fantasies, sir! The British are more reasonable and pragmatic."

"Alas, my dear friend, judging by what you've gained from our little trip, I'd say Schopenhauer was right about you: you are as suited for practical life as a telescope is for the theatre."

The words were harsh, and they only reinforced Pinch's burning suspicions. But he remained silent, unwilling to let his dignity slip any further. His long-nosed face took on a greenish hue once again. The violent shaking, the stench of gasoline and the roar of the engine were making him unbearably nauseous.

Suddenly, Pinch slammed his head hard against the edge of the windshield hatch. With a screech, the vehicle braked sharply, swerved to the side and came to a stop right at the edge of a ditch — one that sloped steeply downward into a deep gully buried under snow.

MacCarver's face turned pale, and his hands, gripping the steering wheel tightly, bulged with strain. Pulling his head into his shoulders as if bracing for impending danger, he leaned out of the cabin and glanced back in alarm.

The soldiers in the escort exchanged amused glances. Lying in the middle of the road was a beet — vaguely resembling a small German anti-personnel mine...



PART THREE

1

...The blizzard had barely begun to cover the tracks left on the road by the captured armoured vehicle when a messenger returned to the battalion — sent by Katnić to Ranković with a report of our victory. He brought back an order that abruptly changed Vučetin's plans: we were to fully equip and resupply ourselves from the captured spoils, arm the battalion with artillery and heavy machine guns. A hurried mobilization began, and we left Sinj that very evening, carrying only the essentials.

Koce Petkovski and the Stankov brothers parted with the three mountain guns with visible frustration, almost in tears. We could only take what we could carry on our shoulders and in our satchels. The Montenegrins, burdened with trophies, military equipment and prisoners, remained in the city. Ahead of us lay a forced march across the Dinaric Alps.

We walked all night. It was damp, dark and bitterly cold.

Sticky, half-frozen mud clung to our boots in such thick layers that lifting our feet from the ground became a struggle. A piercing wind lashed our faces with sharp snow carried down from the mountain peaks, making it hard to breathe. Every step was an ordeal. At each rest stop, when the command “*odmor*”^{*} was given, men collapsed instantly into thorny roadside bushes, slipping into a state of exhausted stupor.

No one knew exactly where we were going or why. We were following Ranković’s orders. We could only guess that the mission must be of great importance and extreme urgency.

Trying to explain the purpose of our forced march, Miletić spoke as we moved:

“We must grow accustomed to everything, comrades. We will harden ourselves like steel. We are a light and fast army. One more mountain, one more valley — our duty is to follow orders. Where will we stop? That is not for us to know. The Supreme Headquarters thinks and decides for us.”

Someone sighed heavily:

“Oh really? Do they even know that we’re fleeing Sinj practically in rags?”

“And where to? Back to Livno, it seems?”

“Leaving the artillery behind?!” Petkovski exclaimed in a high-pitched, furious voice.

“If only we knew where we were heading — it would make everything easier!”

The column murmured discontentedly in the darkness.

“They’re right,” Miletić whispered to me, stepping alongside. “Of course, it’s better when a soldier understands his manoeuvre. But what if that manoeuvre is a secret? What if..”

Leaving his thought unfinished, Jovan fell back again, and soon I heard his lively voice from the rear of the company:

“Keep up, comrades, don’t break formation! Once more,

^{*} A rest stop or break (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

let’s prove that we are from the First Šumadija Battalion, that we are tougher than stone, that we endure everything — rain, snow! As the old song goes: ‘The youths weep, yet they fight; their rifles rest on bare shoulders, pistols on bare chests, powder pouches on bare thighs.’ So shall we... We will pass through fire and steel and achieve our goal! After all, we are allies of the invincible Red Army! With them, our strength is vast and unshakable.”^{*}

A murmur passed through the column again, but this time, it was different. Korchagin had found the right words, lifting the spirits of the fighters, filling them with renewed strength.

The partisans began recalling their victories, which had led to their triumph in Sinj.

This surge of enthusiasm naturally flowed into a beloved song, which Bajo started:

“From the Don, the Volga and the Urals...”

I sang along with all my heart. The success of the battle had uplifted me too.

My friends, my distant comrades from the division — here I am with you once more! I had found myself again, my place among the fighters of a just war. Now, I thought, I would not be ashamed to look my comrades in the eye.

Suddenly, the sound of hooves and Katnić’s harsh shout rang out.

“Silence! Where is the commander?”

“The stormcloud has arrived,” Bajo muttered. “Cut the singing, boys...”

“Comrade Jankov!” Katnić spoke irritably. “I never expected such a circus in your company! What the hell is this?! You’ve forgotten about vigilance. Find out who started the singing and report back to me.”

^{*} A Serbian proverb.

The song died out.

Kića kept walking at the front of the company without turning back. He had no intention of finding out who had started the singing.

The road, now narrower, led into a dense coniferous forest. We stumbled over roots, got caught on dry fir branches. The sound of tearing fabric filled the air.

The forest ended abruptly at a gorge. We crossed a churning river, then slid over ice at a steep pass.

Dawn was breaking. In the east, a flattened orange sphere of the sun blushed behind a cloud. Moments later, the cloud sank like cotton wrapped around a glowing ember. The sun blazed brilliantly, illuminating the snow-covered Dinaric range.

A rest was called.

Here, at this altitude, in the piercing wind that flung hard, grainy snow into our faces, dressed in rags and exhausted, men still joked and laughed, encouraging each other, warming up by playing games.

We passed by Livno at a distance. By noon, before us stretched the vast Duvanjsko Polje, encircled by steep mountains, some bristling with bare forest.

This path led us deep into Bosnia. There it was — proud, in all its wild splendour before my eyes! If the villages of Serbia, nestled among orchards, reminded me of the Ukrainian homesteads, and Herzegovina's stark landscapes bore a resemblance to the Caucasus, then here, I felt a sharp echo of old Bukhara. Villages — rows of grey-yellow blank walls, small, low houses packed tightly together, not a single window facing the street. Gates locked; few gardens or trees. Life sealed off in strict Muslim fashion. Yet even here, new fighters joined us — men in fezzes wrapped with scarves — gathering around the elder Ali Fehti, who had marched with us from

Trnova Poljana and had fought bravely in Sinj.

As we passed one such village at the edge of Duvanjsko Polje, Katnić and his orderly suddenly spurred ahead.

“On reconnaissance! The political commissar wants to assess the situation himself!” Panther called back to us, cracking his whip with flair.

They soon overtook the forward guard and vanished from sight.

Branko Kumanudi, wheezing and puffing, turned to Filipović:

“Look at our political commissar — what bravery! By God, what courage! May the Holy Virgin protect him. And why are you so quiet? For you, speaking must be as hard as moving a rock! Eh, such ignorance! No feeling, no understanding at all!”

Duro remained silent, his head bowed. The flag hung limply behind his back. Time and again, he lifted his gaze, anxiously scanning the perfectly clear sky.

The sun bathed the field in warmth. Dazzling glints sparkled in the hollows where porous, rain-soaked snow still lay. The weather was ideal — just as the pilots would have wanted.

A vague sense of danger took hold of us all. The column moved slowly, stretched out along the road. The fighters were barely trudging forward.

I approached Vučetin. He was worried too. His sunken eyes gleamed feverishly — his illness was taking its toll. He could have ridden a horse from the supply train, but he never did so during a march.

I carefully shared my thoughts with him.

“Why did we rush headlong through the forest and gorges at night, only to crawl now?” I said. “Wouldn't it have been better to organize the march evenly, moving through the forests and mountains by day and crossing open valleys at

night? If there's a risk of an air attack, we should be travelling covertly and swiftly during the day, in dispersed formations and preserving the soldiers' strength at night — not the other way around."

"That's just how it turned out," Vučetin replied awkwardly. "I brought this up, but..." He cut himself off mid-sentence, waving his hand in frustration.

I understood that it was Katnić who had forced him into this hasty march. I advised Vučetin to break the battalion into platoons and move along the sides of the road, keeping the middle clear, just in case. He quickly issued the necessary orders.

The road stretched through a flat, barren valley, littered with rocks, occasionally marshy and crisscrossed by numerous streams. We needed to reach the base of the forested Vran mountain as soon as possible!

But alas! Vran was still far away when three planes appeared on the horizon. They passed over the mountain ridge toward the range, circled as if scouting the passes, then turned toward Duvanjsko Polje. They were flying along the road — straight for us.

"Air attack! Get down!" the commanders shouted.

The fighters scattered, pressing into any depressions in the ground, into ditches, covering themselves with their coats. The planes were already banking, approaching from the direction of the sun, descending.

I immediately recognized the Henschel-126 — small reconnaissance planes with blunt noses, long "legs" on wheels and swept-back wings like swifts. The Germans usually used them to monitor roads.

It was no surprise that the pilots had spotted us.

The planes began to dive. Small bombs detached from them — white, gleaming in the sun. They plummeted with

a growing whine and hiss. The ground groaned, seemed to sway, engulfed in thick clouds of acrid black-orange smoke. Clumps of earth thudded softly around us, stones shot into the air, and shrapnel hissed and whistled through the air.

A desperate scream rang out. I rushed through the dense smoke in that direction, thinking someone was wounded. Vasko, dragging his rifle, ran after me. He had stayed close to me since the planes appeared. He was terrified, deathly pale, but he had the courage to stand up and run after me.

I hit the ground as the Henschels circled back and their bombs whistled again. Vasko dropped too, pressing his whole body against mine. Only Ali Fehti didn't take cover — he knelt with his arms raised, as if silently praying or cursing... Finally, Vasko and I reached the man screaming bloody murder. It was Kumanudi. He lay sprawled right on the road, his head buried in the crook of his bent arm, babbling in between howls and moans: "Holy Mother, save me! Spare us! We are but a handful, and there are a hundred planes!" Branko's shoulders trembled convulsively. I felt around his flabby body — there were no wounds. I shouted in his ear:

"The planes are gone!"

Branko lifted his round face, smeared with wet clay, and his eyes suddenly darted around. He caught Vasko's amused smirk.

"Don't be scared," Vasko said. "Get up. There were only three *avioni*."*

He even helped him up and dusted him off.

Branko pushed the boy away and grumbled:

"I'm not blind, I can see how many!" He wiped his moustache.

The commanders were regrouping the units into a column.

* Airplanes (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

"We need to get out of here fast," Vučetin said.

"In this cursed valley, we're like actors on a stage," Kića Jankov remarked sarcastically.

In Serbian, it sounded like: "*Kao na pozornici.*"*

The bombing had spurred us on, and we could have moved faster, but now the wounded slowed us down. Ajša and Ružica were exhausted from administering first aid. The Muslim fighters wailed as they surrounded Ali Fehti — the wise old man they had followed like a prophet. He had been pierced by shrapnel. Ajša, realizing he was dead, burst into tears. Overcoming herself, with tears streaming down her face, she bandaged the arm and shoulder of a severely wounded young recruit and, trying to comfort him, whispered:

"Let your pain pass on to me."

The young man endured his suffering bravely, even attempting to smile. "Just don't leave me," his eyes pleaded.

Katnić and his orderly galloped up on their lathered, snorting horses. I couldn't help but think, "They were lucky — they left for reconnaissance just in time." Rising in his stirrups, the political commissar surveyed the aftermath of the bombing, as if assessing the damage.

"Comrade Commissar," Ajša addressed him firmly, "give your horses to the wounded."

"The wounded?" Katnić asked absentmindedly. "There don't seem to be too many, fortunately. What about the dead?"

"Six fighters killed. The horses — quickly!" Ajša impatiently tugged at his stirrup.

Dismounting, Katnić roughly took her by the chin.

"Well, well, what a girl! A true hajduk! I like that. Always act this way. Saving the wounded is a sacred duty..."

Then he approached me.

"What remarkable women we have, Comrade Zagorya-

* Like on a stage (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

nov. True patriots!"

Katnić was smiling, but his eyes remained cold.

"I must admit, I was worried about you," he continued in a soft voice. "That unexpected air raid... It's always the same — just as soon as I leave, something happens to the battalion. But we know how to use the terrain during a bombing, don't you think?"

"How much farther to our destination?" I asked.

"To our destination?" Katnić's eyes gleamed sharply. "That's a military secret, and I wouldn't advise prying..." Leaning close to my ear, he whispered conspiratorially: "Just between us, like brothers — I'll tell only you... A good day's march left."

I didn't have time to reply before he suddenly burst into laughter:

"You think we won't make it? *Evo!** You don't know our fighters, our brave young men well enough!"

2

...On the fourth day of our rapid march, we barely managed to cross yet another icy pass in the Raduša Mountains. Straining every muscle, thoughtless, consumed by nothing but movement, we finally reached the forested heights near Gornji Vakuf.

A narrow trail wound through snow-covered rocks along the edge of a gorge. The column stretched into a long, thin line. Someone slipped... A faint cry was swallowed by the roar of a snow avalanche. The swift waters of the Volica River carried the fighter's body away. For a moment, we huddled at the cliff's edge. A cold cloud of snow dust stung our faces.

"One more life lost, one more soul freed from suffering,"

* Look! (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

someone murmured.

One final push, the last effort, and we collapsed beneath the trees — we had arrived, we had endured.

Only now did Katnić announce our combat mission. It turned out to be much more modest and straightforward than we had anticipated. We were to capture the small town of Gornji Vakuf and free the wounded and sick partisans who had been left behind in the town hospital about two weeks ago when the Third Corps units had suddenly retreated from the area.

Everyone was utterly exhausted. The battalion couldn't immediately begin executing the mission. We set up camp in the forest at the foot of Mount Podovi, each soldier making do as best they could. The men cursed under their breath, and someone mumbled plaintively: "Why all these detours? It would have been easier to march at night along the good roads through Livno and Šuica. We'd have been here long ago, the planes wouldn't have spotted us, and my friend Stanić wouldn't have been killed by a bomb..."

Luckily for us, the weather warmed up. A thick fog rose from the valley, wrapping the forest in a fine mist. The fighters lit small, well-hidden fires — what northern hunters call *nođa*. They built windbreaks from branches. Everyone was freezing and soaked to the bone. The stiffened *opanci* made of rawhide softened near the flames, as if they could be wrung out like wet rags. We took off our shoes, dried our socks and footwraps. The damp clothing, steaming as it dried, acted as a warming compress, saving many from rheumatism.

Bajo began to sing; jokes and laughter soon followed — as if all hardships had been forgotten. Ružica Brković and Ajša, blowing on their stiff fingers, prepared a new issue of the battalion's wall newspaper. The captured typewriter was gone — Katnić had sent it to the brigade headquarters — so the

girls wrote with ink pencils. This time, the articles were very short. One was titled "What to Eat in the Forest." Another eye-catching piece was a four-line verse by Petkovski:

*"The Germans hide behind steel,
But we strike them through and through.
Comrade Stalin sent us
A rifle strong and true!"*

In the "On the March" section, my own slogan, carefully handwritten in Russian, was published:

*"Fighter, stay well-camouflaged,
Remain unseen by the foe,
Use the land with skill and cunning,
Preserve your strength for victory!"*

The wall newspaper was pinned to a beech tree under a birch-bark shelter, and soon, the snow beneath it was packed down by the boots of eager readers.

That night, I bunked down with Jovan beneath an arch of snow resting on fir branches. We ate the last of our captured hardtack, nibbled on a handful of seeds shaken from pinecones that had opened in the heat of the fire and immediately fell asleep, pressed tightly against each other for warmth.

I woke up to someone shaking me. Opening my eyes, I saw Katnić standing over me.

"Good morning," he greeted. "*Evo*,* look where you've burrowed in! Not easy to find you." He glanced around mockingly and kicked at the brown pile of dry needles that served as a mattress for Miletić and me.

"Not a bad setup. So, how did you rest?"

* See (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

"Thanks, I slept well," I answered shortly.

"Why the sour face?" Katnić put a cigarette holder between his lips. "You must be having a tough time with us? I doubt your army — or any army in history — has seen marches like the ones we endure! Don't agree? Well, take a look at this, comrade. What do you make of it?"

He unfolded a crumpled copy of the wall newspaper in front of me.

"What does your slogan mean: 'Preserve your life for victory'? Think carefully. If we all start preserving our lives, then who will go into battle, perhaps a deadly one? Who wouldn't prefer to 'cunningly' and 'skilfully,' as you put it, dodge danger? Hmm? Your slogan politically misguides the fighters. You overdid it, brother. This is what happens when you don't double-check your words — you end up with distortions. What poetic liberties! By the way, I forgot to ask you... Naive of me! Are you a Party member?"

"Yes, I crossed the Dnieper as a communist."

"A communist? I see... But communists, my friend, don't surrender. At least, that's not how we do things. Show me your Party card. Or do you not have it anymore?" He smirked maliciously, his eyes fixed on me. "Ah, I see..."

The offensive insinuation hit me like a slap in the face.

"I never had the chance to receive my candidate card," I replied calmly. "But my Komsomol membership card is always with me. Here it is."

Katnić turned the booklet over in his hands with interest.

"Komsomol..." He fell silent for a moment, thinking rapidly. "Well, fine. You're Russian, and that says everything to me. But keep in mind that we also have OZNA... Don't forget that you were a prisoner of the Germans. I know you're brave and loyal to our struggle, and I want everyone to be convinced of that once again. There's a certain task coming

up... Would you like to take part?"

He left, showering me with smiles and assurances of his sincere, brotherly attitude. But I sensed the falseness in his words and couldn't understand why he treated me so differently from Vučetin. Deep in thought, I headed into the forest to gather lingonberries for breakfast for myself and Jovan.

Suddenly, Miletić caught up with me. He looked deeply troubled.

"You're here? Has Katnić spoken to you yet?"

"Yes."

"About the assignment?"

Jovan knocked a pile of snow off a fir branch with his fist, venting his frustration.

"Why you, of all people?" he said quietly. "You see, the mission is very dangerous and difficult. And, as far as I can tell, rather pointless. Vučetin was against it, but Katnić insisted, saying there's no other way!"

Jovan took my arm, and we slowly walked back toward the camp...

3

...Gornji Vakuf lay in a river valley. From above, from the mountain, we could clearly see its white houses with red-tiled roofs, narrow, winding streets lined with tall poplars, church spires and white minarets. By the road, dark horse-shoe-shaped trenches stood out, and on the opposite side of town, the Vrbas River twisted sharply through the landscape.

The battalion command decided to take the town at night, as usual. The situation remained unclear. Along the way, Vučetin had learned from locals that the Chetniks and a small German unit were stationed in Vakuf — local and foreign fascists had now completely united against us.

The plan was to send a sabotage team into the town — soldiers and an officer familiar with the streets. But, as I later found out, Katnić personally selected those he trusted, including me.

The four of us sat on a forested slope, waiting for dusk: Ružica Brković, Ajša Bašić, Koce Petkovski and I. Our mission was to slip into town, bypassing the trenches and sentries, create some kind of panic, and thus make it easier for the battalion to attack the enemy garrison at night. Petkovski and I dressed as German Gefreiters, while Ružica and Ajša played the role of local girls of questionable virtue. Ajša wore a black skirt and a green woolen jacket, decorated with small shiny buttons along the lapels, while Ružica put on a bright blue coat and tied an orange-and-blue checkered headscarf. The girls carried these outfits in their bags and had used them before during reconnaissance missions. As for our Gefreiter uniforms, Petkovski and I found them among the captured clothing.

When I learned who Katnić had assigned to our sabotage group, I was surprised and thought: “Why are they sending two medics, who are extremely necessary in the battalion, on such a dangerous mission? Could this be some sort of punishment because both girls are considered ‘guilty’ of something?” There were rumours that Ajša had violated partisan moral codes. However, it was perfectly clear that her relationship with Petkovski was pure, based only on dreams of the future. Jovan once told me that the issue with Koce wasn’t so much about morality, but rather the political inaccuracies and mistakes he constantly made in his poetry. And Ružica was “guilty” of disobedience — she had never cut off her braids, as was expected.

Thinking about it, I realized that all four of us had something in common, at least in Katnić’s eyes. Each of us, in one

way or another, was seen as a violator of discipline.

Sitting beside me, Ružica absentmindedly braided the loose end of her hair.

“Why don’t you cut your braids, like Ajša? It must be difficult with them during marches,” I asked her.

“Why?” she shrugged. “I’m used to them. They don’t bother me; they actually help. When we enter the town, no one will take me for a partisan... I don’t like being forced to do anything. I’ve hated coercion since childhood. Probably because my father always tried to control me. He didn’t want me to go to school, wouldn’t let me attend SKOJ meetings* and ordered me to work from morning till night at his mill. But I didn’t want to live the way he dictated, so I joined the partisans. They asked me: ‘Who do you want to fight against?’ I said, ‘Against all dishonest, evil and cruel people, against the fascists.’ And they accepted me into the battalion.”

She paused before continuing:

“Ajša had it even worse than I did. At home, they forced her to cover her face with a yashmak, to wear a *feredža*** — even in Turkey, they stopped wearing those long ago. In this part of Bosnia, people lived like the poorest *raja*.”***

Her greenish eyes gleamed with dry, quiet anger. She squeezed clumps of sticky snow in her hands and tossed them downhill. But then, suddenly, she smiled, listening.

Petkovski was reciting poetry to Ajša:

*“If I perish, my mother Stojanka,
Foremother will avenge me,
Our Foremother — Russia.
The wait won’t be long — the time of reckoning has come,*

* The League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia (Omladina).

** A traditional Ottoman-era veil worn by Muslim women.

*** A disenfranchised mass or lower-class populace.

I can already hear the great roar from the East...

“Good poetry,” Ružica said softly. Then she straightened up, her voice full of feeling. “If only you knew how much we dream of visiting your country! We’d go there on foot if we were allowed. We understand: this happiness must be earned, we must do much, much good, bring great benefit, we must fight...”

The last rays of the sun slipped behind the mountain pass and darkness settled over the valley. The time had come when an evening stroll by two Gefreiters with their local girlfriends wouldn’t seem suspicious. We checked our grenades once more, set the detonators to safety mode and descended the slope onto the road that townspeople used to reach the forest. Two pairs, walking a short distance apart — I was in front with Ružica, Koce and Ajša followed behind us.

Playing the role of an occupier boasting about his romantic conquests and general success, I quietly began to sing:

*“Geh weiter,
Geh weiter,
Du bist doch
Nur Gefreiter!”*

*[Go on,
Go on,
You are after all
Only a private!]*

It was an incredibly risky move, but we had found no other way to get into the town.

From a sentry trench, two figures wrapped in grey cloaks emerged. One of the sentries chuckled and asked:

“*Kako?* Are our girls any good?”

Chetniks! That made things easier.

“In some ways, even better than ours,” I replied in German.

The sentries laughed.

Only about fifty steps remained to the outskirts of Gornji Vakuf. We walked the distance with the same carefree demeanour, ready for anything. Those few minutes felt like an eternity to me. We passed the first houses on the main street. From the entrance of a grand house, a German officer in a tall cap emerged, escorting a woman on his arm. Leaning toward her, he walked ahead of us. Following behind him, we moved forward more confidently.

Darkness fell quickly. Narrow strips of light stretched across the sidewalks, filtering through the lowered blinds of windows. Near the brightly lit sign of the “Kafana & Inn ‘Veselje,’” the German officer and the woman stopped. We slowed our steps. He whispered something to her, trying to persuade her, then suddenly flung the door open and almost forcibly pulled her inside. A burst of jazz music spilled onto the street.

“We’ll act here, under the cover of the music,” I whispered to my companions.

Diagonally across from the kafana, at the corner of the street, loomed the ruins of a large building. The collapsed concrete floors, rafters and wooden planks dangling from the broken walls gave the wreckage a surreal appearance.

Waiting for a moment when there were no passersby nearby, we slipped through the gaping doorway.

Broken tiles crunched underfoot. We pressed close together, listening. It was silent. Only the wind rustled a torn strip of wallpaper, and a chandelier, still hanging from the remains of the ceiling, creaked faintly as it swayed.

Carefully, we made our way up the stone steps to the second floor, into a room filled with bricks and shattered furniture. Only one wall remained intact — the one facing the street. A portrait still hung there. In the dim evening light, Koce examined it closely.

“A girl in a wedding dress,” he murmured, grabbing my arm. “See? How many beautiful hopes were destroyed here! Damn fascists!”

“Hope will return, Koce,” I answered quietly, listening to the chime of a clock somewhere in a tall building.

Each strike of the bell seemed to come after an endlessly long pause. Six... Finally, we heard the seventh, the eighth...

At exactly nine, we had to begin. Our signal — two consecutive grenade explosions — was expected by the observers stationed on Height 785, about three hundred metres south of the town. From behind the same mountain, as agreed, the battalion, already prepared, was to charge into the town at the peak of the panic. One company was assigned to push forward aggressively toward the hospital building and secure it before the fascists could kill the wounded and sick partisans.

Nine! The deep chimes echoed in my chest.

“You throw the first grenade,” I whispered to Koce.

He swung fiercely. The grenade flew out of the window opening and smashed directly through the café window. I threw my grenade into another window. One after another, the explosions thundered. Screams erupted. The lights inside the café went out, and the street immediately darkened. Terrified revelers ran out of the café. A motorcycle sped past. From somewhere, a truck crawled into view. A German soldier jumped out of the cab and fired at the first bearded man he saw. Gunfire broke out on the surrounding streets.

Shouts rang through the town: “The partisans are here!”

At this crucial moment, while the enemy still had not

understood the cause of the commotion, the battalion needed to act boldly and decisively. Vučetin understood perfectly well that the success of the night operation depended on its suddenness, that a nighttime attack had to be straightforward, without any complex manoeuvres or delays. And I was unwavering in my belief that they would not abandon us to our fate.

But minute after minute passed. Pale yellow flares now hung in the dark sky, tracer bullets slowly drifted in a line like stars, yet our forces were nowhere to be seen.

“I don’t understand,” Ajša whispered, pressing herself against the window. “Why aren’t they coming?”

“What if something happened? How many grenades do we have left? Can we fight our way out?” Ružica worried. “We’ve walked right into a trap.”

“Ruža, calm down!” Ajša snapped at her.

“I’m not afraid, but where are our men?”

“Vučetin will come,” I said firmly, though I could feel my heart pounding harder and harder.

We had no choice but to wait!

Meanwhile, the Germans had apparently realized that the grenades had been thrown from the ruins. Voices echoed below. Heavy boots crunched loudly on the gravel. Beams of pocket flashlights swept across the rubble, creeping upward.

I recalled Jovan’s anxious words when he saw me off on this mission and couldn’t help but think: “Was he right? Were we sent here to die?”

Footsteps now echoed on the partially collapsed staircase. The Germans, pushing one another forward, were climbing to the second floor.

“Quick, follow me!” I called to the girls and Koce. “We need to get out of here.”

The adjoining room was gone. The doorway opened into

emptiness. I jumped down, landing on a pile of debris. Placing a few stones to boost myself, I reached up to the floor level and caught Ružica in my arms, then Ajša. At that moment, a burst of bullets from a submachine gun whizzed against the stone blocks. Petkovski, standing in the doorway, ready to jump down after the girls, suddenly turned and threw a grenade.

A fiery explosion erupted, and in its light, I saw Koce, gripping the doorframe with one hand, slowly collapsing. I caught him. He was dead. He had thrown his grenade with the last strength of his will.

I laid Koce's lifeless body at Ajša's feet. She dropped to him, forgetting everything else. I straightened up and hurled my last grenade at the rushing mass of Germans.

But they had no time for us anymore — the sound of an approaching battle was growing louder with every second.

"What's that?" Ajša whispered, her face wet with tears.

"It's our men," Ružica answered triumphantly.

The battalion had stormed into Gornji Vakuf. But the element of surprise was lost. A brutal battle had begun.

4

...A trembling border of flames burned along the edges of a large mass grave, where yellow candles — solemn offerings from the townswomen — stood planted in the ground. Each woman had lit as many candles as the relatives she had lost in the war.

"My son, my son, my son..." an old woman wept, kissing the earth at the grave.

Her son had been killed somewhere far away, but her grief was the grief of all mothers in Yugoslavia who had lost their children — the grief of an entire people.

She mourned Koce Petkovski, her sorrowful gaze fixed on his youthful face, a pale strand of hair stuck to his forehead. She mourned Radislav Stankov, whose clenched fist lay upon the chest of Bajo, the hero of the night assault. She mourned all the partisans — those who had fallen in the battle that night, and those whom the fascists had tortured to death in the hospital. Among the victims was old Živko, the same man who had helped us in Bogovina.

I would never have recognized the old man in the skeletal figure, his blackened skin stretched over bones, his rags barely covering him — if not for Evžen Laušek, who unexpectedly appeared beside me at the edge of the grave and pointed him out. An unforgettable, staggering reunion! Overgrown with a wild beard, horrifyingly thin, his hands trembling, scarred by wounds, hunger and abuse, Laušek barely managed to tell me that Mušić's detachment, which had been formed in Bogovina, no longer existed — and that Aleksa himself had vanished from Gornji Vakuf without a trace.

"A tragedy... I'll tell you everything later," he whispered to me.

I couldn't take my eyes off the grave and barely registered what Blažo Katnić was saying. His mournful voice blended with the sorrowful *tužbalica** of the women.

He spoke of the sacrifices made last night on the altar of freedom... Thirty-two dead, thirty-two — the number kept echoing in my mind. "And in Sinj, where the enemy garrison was nearly three times larger, we lost only twenty." My mind refused to accept it. Katnić spoke of the people's martyr's cross, of heroes "greater than those of Sparta."

"It was we," he declared, "our Party that raised such youths, that ignited in their hearts the fire of protest and struggle. We taught them how to speak with immortality, to

* Funeral songs (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

die — if they must — then to die with glory.* We are the echo of the people!”

When Katnić finished speaking and pressed a checkered handkerchief to his eyes, a strong voice rang out — Tomaš Vučetin. His words resounded like a deep, thunderous toll after a sorrowful funeral bell:

“We will avenge them, comrades! We will avenge our fallen for the thousands and thousands of graves scattered across our suffering land — the land of workers, the land of heroes. We will achieve victory, comrades, no matter how heavy the losses, because we believe and we know that the Soviet people will come and help us in our unequal struggle against the enemy.”

At these words, Ajša, standing across from me, straightened, and her dry, grief-stricken eyes burned with new fire.

“Revenge!” she swore in a whisper. “Revenge!”

The speeches ended. Ružica raised her hand, and the battalion choir, hastily organized by her, began to sing “*Da budet im slava.*”**

Women and elders tossed small loaves of bread, paper dinars, handfuls of earth and snow into the grave.

The final volley, the last farewell...

Miletić and I walked back to our company in silence.

I kept thinking about Koce — the young poet, the dreamer-shepherd who believed in the bright future of his beloved homeland. I had never seen Macedonia, but from Koce, I knew that it resembled our Caucasus. Everything there was rich in contrast and colour: towns and villages with vibrant houses, peasants in woven, multicoloured garments, and the most beautiful songs, melodies and legends in all the Balkans! Dense beech forests, mountain lakes — Ohrid, Prespa, Do-

* Petar II Petrović-Njegoš, from *The Mountain Wreath*.

** Glory Be to Them (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

jan — deep and clear, like the great eyes of the earth. Fish there were still caught as in ancient times — with spears and the help of birds that migrated from the north. It was simple: their wings were clipped, and they were sent onto the water to chase the fish straight into the woven reed nets. It was fascinating and beautiful, but Koce never envied the fishermen; they lived in poverty, in reed-built stilt houses above the water — almost like primitive dwellings. And though the peasant dressed in bright, picturesque garments, he was grim, forever bent over his *ralo* — his wooden plough. Even harder was the life of the miners in the Zletovo mountains. In truth, all of Macedonia was a land of suffering, hardship and sorrow, torn apart between three states, where foreigners controlled the mines rich in chrome, lead and manganese, where thousands of landless peasants and farmhands struggled to survive...

Koce often pondered the sad fate of his homeland and dreamed of a better future for it. Gazing at the turbulent Vardar, he envisioned iron bridges spanning the rivers, hydro-electric stations illuminating the mountain villages with bright light, peasant cooperatives — kolkhozes, tractors in the fields — a life like in the Soviet Union...

At times, listening to Koce, I sensed anxiety and uncertainty about the future in his words, and I recalled other stories — the stories of my friend Dzamil about his homeland, Azerbaijan... About how the noisy, unruly Kura, dammed in the Boz-Dag gorge, would soon spread into a sea near Mingachevir, irrigating the barren steppes, reviving them with the greenery of fields and gardens, bringing animals and birds, giving rise to villages. About how bold steel arches and intricate viaducts of a highway would span the chasms of Upper Dashkesan. About how the long-nosed black pump jacks, bowing low, drew oil from the seabed; about the flower beds laid out in front of the workers’ high-rise buildings in New

Surakhany; about the flotillas of fishing shallops filled with pink sturgeon; about the nature reserves where birds floated in the air; about the mountain forests of Karabakh, immersed in green twilight; about the tea plantations, cotton fields and mandarin-lemon groves — about the Land of Eternal Fires, Azerbaijan, the happiest corner of the earth, where 26 different nationalities lived peacefully, actively and in harmony, boldly building communism together with the entire Union of Soviet Socialist Republics...

How far Macedonia and all of Yugoslavia still were from this! But Vučetin was right: “The Sava, Drava, Drina and Prut all flow into one river...”

We walked in silence. Miletić was also deep in thought.

Footsteps sounded behind us. I turned around. Maček was catching up to us.

“What a magnificent speech Katnić gave!” he said. “A remarkable agitator!”

“Yes, he never misses a chance to show off his eloquence!” Jovan frowned.

“He spoke well about the Party: ‘We are the echo of the people!’”

“Of course!” Jovan smirked sarcastically. “Exactly ‘we.’ ‘We won, we organized, we educated, we taught...’ And where was this ‘we’ yesterday? Do you know, brother?” He turned to me indignantly. “It was ten to nine, and suddenly Katnić decided to hold a discussion with the fighters on how to act at night. Really, it was high time to act, yet he kept talking. By the time he finished, flares were already shooting up. Can you imagine? If Bajo and his platoon hadn’t stormed into the city first, we would have been too late.”

“Well, isn’t that something!” Maček remarked. “In what you’re saying, Comrade Korchagin, I don’t sense much respect for our Party.”

There was a note of threat in his voice.

Miletić bit his lip in frustration.

“Excuse me,” he muttered. “This is our turn.”

He pulled me into an alley and sighed with relief when we were alone.

“Gave a magnificent speech! Imagine that!... Sorry, brother, I’m just mad at everyone right now,” Jovan muttered, trying to light a cigarette.

Lately, I had often seen him with a cigarette. He hadn’t smoked before. His fingers trembled, and the matches kept going out, blown by the wind that whistled like through a pipe between the houses in the narrow street.

Katnić and Vučetin were in the square, where the fighters were gathering trophies. The battalion’s quartermaster, Rakić, was already bustling about, taking inventory of the military equipment abandoned by the German-Chetnik garrison as they fled the city.

“Well, well, wanderers!” Katnić exclaimed as Jovan and I approached. “Comrade,” he grabbed the button of my greatcoat, “congratulations on your success. I knew you would justify our trust. Everything turned out well. See how many trophies we have? I told you we’d make a haul here! Otherwise, we’d be dragging all sorts of junk from Sinj! Say what you will, but I rarely make mistakes.”

“You’ve been appointed *vodnik** in place of Bajo,” Vučetin said, shaking my hand.

“Yes, yes,” Katnić confirmed. “You’ll be *vodnik*, I approve. You have a bright future ahead, my friend. Shall we stop by a kafana for a cup of coffee to mark the occasion?”

We headed down the main street. I could barely walk. The intense nervous strain of the past day was catching up with me.

* Platoon commander (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

Katnić walked slowly, proudly glancing around. The townspeople, stepping aside respectfully, followed him with admiring looks, convinced that he had led the partisans' night operation.

"It's around here somewhere." Katnić raised his head, scanning the signs. "Ah yes, here it is — 'Veselje.' But it looks different. Dark and empty, windows shattered. Well, of course, I knew it. These kafanas always get hit. A city looks bleak without them. Damn it! We're celebrating, rejoicing, and here it feels like a morgue."

He was annoyed and began inspecting the damage the kafana had suffered from grenade shrapnel, not noticing when we left him alone.

In the gymnasium building where Jankov's company was stationed, Jovan and I were already being awaited by Evžen Laušek, who smelled of iodoform and had his left shoulder bandaged. Ajša had taken care of him. He was feeling better and, in response to our impatient questions, was able to tell us about the fate of the Bogovina detachments.

When we parted with him that morning after the victory in Bogovina, the Italians and Serbs had headed to the narrow-gauge railway running between Petrovac and Požarevac and dismantled the tracks over a long stretch. After that, they attacked Majdanpek, crushed the SS troops there and blew up the mine. The renown of the detachments, bearing both Serbian and Italian names of Garibaldi, spread throughout Homolje. New fighters joined them from all directions. Even Nedeljko, a miner, transferred from the brigade to the detachment and became Mušić's commissar. The detachments grew stronger, reinforced with fresh forces. Everything seemed to be going well. But one day, on the eve of their planned attack on Bor itself, a representative of OZNA galloped in from the brigade headquarters on Black Peak, leading a group of

mounted soldiers armed with submachine guns. He accused Nedeljko of desertion and sentenced him to execution. Mušić and Kolacione were also held accountable for unauthorized actions. The detachments were split up. The Garibaldians remained under Popović's command, while Mušić's detachment was urgently sent to Bosnia to assist the units of the Third Corps. There, in Gornji Vakuf, they were encircled. Laušek last saw Mušić as he was swimming across the Vrbas while the Chetniks fired at him.

The Czech's beautiful, supple voice sounded muffled and weary. His elongated brown eyes, set in a gaunt, haggard face, gradually closed. Mid-sentence, he suddenly shut them completely and, resting his face against my shoulder — exhausted by the pain of his wounds and soothed by our reunion — drifted off to sleep.

Right there, on the floor, in the corner of the classroom, Miletić and I also collapsed into sleep, as if struck down.

I woke up, probably past midnight. Against the white wall, an unmoving shadow loomed, cast by the window frame's lattice in the dim, ashen moonlight. Something else flickered — wavering, restless — I realized it was the silhouette of poplar branches swaying outside the window.

I immediately understood where I was. The thought of Laušek, Nedeljko and Mušić struggled to take hold in my mind — what kind of terrible, merciless force, knowing neither compassion nor justice, was hunting my comrades? Beside me, Laušek breathed unevenly and muttered incoherently in his sleep. I had the sudden urge to pull him close, to embrace him, to cover him with my coat...

Jovan, lying on my other side, stirred as well.

"You're still awake, brother?" he asked in a low voice.

"No, I can't sleep..."

Miletić propped himself up, listening. The sounds of

snoring filled the room, and from the street, the sentries' calls drifted in. Yet both Jovan and I felt a fragile, uncertain sense of safety — as fleeting as the shadows of tree branches on a white wall.

My *pobratim* moved closer.

“It feels like something strange is starting again... Just like last year, when we all nearly died here... It was a terrible winter. I'll tell you about it so you'll understand everything.”

Jovan lowered his voice even further.

“There's a parasite — fluke worm — that infects a sheep's liver if it grazes on lush grass right after a flood. For three months, the sheep seems fine, even grows fat, but then it starts wasting away and soon dies. Something similar is happening to us. Some kind of parasite is eating away at our army from within — a force that gnaws and gnaws at the body of our troops, which on the surface seems so strong and healthy.”

“He's right,” I thought as I listened. Lately, I too had been troubled by the growing feeling that not everything was well within the partisan army.

5

...November 1942. The liberated city of Bihać...

Jovan had written in his diary:

“Here, I have learned so many incredible things, experienced so much joy, that I truly believe all the good I now dream of will come true. The path before me is wide and bright...”

The youth of Yugoslavia had gathered in Bihać for their first anti-fascist congress. The spacious theatre hall was filled with resolute young fighters. On the wide stage, decorated with carpets and a massive portrait of Stalin, sat the presidium — a group of young heroes, boys and girls, among them

Ivo Lola Ribar, a national hero, the General Secretary of SKOJ, a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, and the soul of the revolutionary youth movement in Yugoslavia.

Jovan would never forget his speech. Leaning on the table with both hands, his entire body leaning forward, Ivo spoke with passion about the Yugoslav workers' struggle against the nazis. He urged the young men and women to learn from Soviet Komsomol members on how to defeat the enemy. With love and pride, Lola spoke about the Soviet Union and the Red Army, which at that very moment was encircling and crushing the nazi forces at Stalingrad while simultaneously advancing on other fronts.

“By taking the full force of the fascist armies' attack upon themselves, Soviet soldiers give us the chance to breathe freely on this small patch of liberated land. In his desperate attempt to save his forces at Stalingrad, Hitler is withdrawing divisions from the occupied countries — including from the Balkans — and sending them to Russia. This,” Ivo Lola Ribar declared, “is what allows us to hold on here and strengthen the national liberation movement. We will never forget this, my dear comrades!”

The entire congress rose as one, their voices thundering:

“Long live the Red Army! Long live Stalin — our teacher and protector!”

And the songs they sang between the meetings! “Wide Is My Motherland,” “Kakhovka,” “Through Valleys and Over Hills,” as well as the poetry of Petar II Njegoš — written over a century ago, yet still ringing with the proud certainty that a people fighting against tyranny will defend “the sacred law of the youth, the Serbian name and the light of freedom.”

“Will the golden power of the sun ever fade into eternal dark-

ness?

*Its rays will light a flame of life for the Serbs,
Growing ever brighter and more glorious through the coming
centuries...*

As Miletić returned to the battalion, still under the spell of all he had heard and experienced at the congress, he kept repeating these lines from *The Mountain Wreath* to himself.

He brought the fighters encouraging news. The heroes of Stalingrad and other Soviet fronts, having launched a decisive offensive, had drawn so many fascist troops onto themselves that the Anglo-Americans, under exceptionally favourable conditions, were able to advance their operations in Egypt, Algeria, North Africa and the Mediterranean. Even in Yugoslavia itself, after achieving nothing in three offensives, the occupiers seemed to have quieted down, sitting idly in their garrisons. Free territories were no longer marked on maps as small, scattered circles but as large patches stretching across a significant area — from the Adriatic Sea to the Sava River, from the Slovenian Alps to the southern regions of Montenegro. The National Liberation Army had been established, and new divisions and corps were being formed.

“Divisions, corps!” Jovan smirked. “Of course, even a tree stump can be called a tree. That’s precisely the problem — these corps, like the ordinary partisan detachments, still had no supply depots, no weapon reserves, no material base to sustain their life and struggle. Nothing but a name — corps. People whispered that key positions in the headquarters were occupied by ‘intelligentsia types’ who had somehow earned Tito’s favour but knew as much about military affairs as they did about Chinese calligraphy. The people mockingly called them ‘patriots’ — in quotation marks — who managed to live comfortably and safely in the rear while the fighters bore the

brunt of the war. Nevertheless, the partisans believed in the enticing prospect of fighting within large formations, across a broad front. They thought they were being prepared for a major, decisive battle. And it seemed as though the Supreme Headquarters was indeed planning such an operation. At the beginning of January 1943, the main forces of the YNLA were entirely concentrated in Bosnia. Hunger, filth and overcrowding led to a typhus epidemic within the troops. Yet despite all hardships, morale remained high — everyone was convinced that this concentration of forces was the prelude to some massive operation.

“And then something happened that no one expected...”

Jovan fell silent, lowering his head. When he spoke again, his voice was hollow, as if a terrifying memory had surfaced in his mind.

On January 18, the Germans, Italians, Ustaše, Home Guards and Chetniks suddenly launched a joint attack on the partisans — like a summer hailstorm out of nowhere. It seemed as though the YNLA divisions had deliberately squeezed themselves into a confined space between the Dinaric Alps and the Bosnian Ore Mountains, trapped between the Vrbas and Sava rivers, only to be encircled there.

“How could this happen?” I looked at Jovan questioningly. “What were the headquarters and their intelligence service doing? Did they not gather and analyse information about the enemy? Surely, the occupiers must have spent weeks moving their troops and sealing off the exits from the ‘pocket’ you found yourselves in.”

“I think the ‘patriots’ simply missed it,” Miletić remarked, then continued his story.

The encirclement tightened further. Advancing from Sarajevo, the Germans aimed to cut off the retreat routes to Herzegovina and Montenegro. There was still one way out

in that direction — across the Neretva River and along its mountainous course. The bridges over the river were still intact. But no order for retreat was given, and the fighters, pushing themselves to the limit, held back the enemy until March. They were struck down by both bullets and typhus. The sick and wounded never left their snow-covered positions. The situation was catastrophic.

Then, suddenly, another unexpected development: in March, the Germans ceased their attacks. It turned out that Lieutenant Colonel Vlatko Velebit, a trusted associate of Tito, had met with German command representatives somewhere in the Rama Valley and, as a result of negotiations, accepted their offer of a truce. Vučetin, Jankov and many fighters of the Šumadijan Battalion reacted to this news with surprise and suspicion. Vučetin insisted that any peace with the Germans while they remained in Yugoslavia was an insult to all honest patriots — that, at best, it was mere shortsightedness on Velebit's part, and at worst, a provocation. Clearly, he was unaware of the old saying: "Who plants pumpkins with an enemy will have them smashed over his own head." Katnić, however, reassured everyone that Tito was merely using this manoeuvre to deceive the Germans. This was also the official explanation for the negotiations with the enemy.

Later, it became known that during these talks, Velebit had secured German permission for the safe evacuation of certain Political Bureau members' families from occupied territory to the partisan zone. As a result, the Germans released Tito's second wife, a Slovenian woman living in Zagreb. Additionally, Velebit arranged a prisoner exchange. In return for individuals needed by Tito and Ranković, he agreed to release many German officers and Gestapo members captured by the partisans. For certain other undisclosed commitments, the Germans promised to refrain from attacking the partisan

forces for a time. And indeed, after the negotiations, the Germans remained inactive. A lull followed.

It was during this time that Lola Ribar arrived at the brigade. Miletić happened to meet him near Perućica. They embraced, kissed each other on the cheeks, and reminisced about the youth congress. Alas, how many hopes had faded since then! "It's a disaster," said Lola, "that Arso Jovanović isn't at the Supreme Headquarters. It's as if Tito deliberately sent him to lead operations in Slovenia. And yet, he is needed here now more than ever!" Jovan spoke candidly to Lola about the mood among the fighters: they instinctively sensed that the delay played into the enemy's hands, condemned Velebit and suspected him — being the son of a royal general — of betrayal.

"I don't like him either," Lola Ribar remarked in passing after listening grimly to Korchagin.

That night, Lola held a long meeting with Perućica. The next day, the entire brigade attacked the Germans, deliberately breaking and disrupting the truce. Other units followed suit. Intense battles resumed.

The partisans moved toward the Neretva. But on the wide mountain river, with its steep rocky banks and no fords, the bridges were no longer there. They had been destroyed by Tito's order. The supposed reason was to mislead the enemy and confuse the direction of the retreat. But the damage affected the partisans more than the enemy. With their pack horses, they found themselves trapped against the riverbank like in a stone tomb. Then the Junkers came. Only the lucky ones survived that bombing, that massacre... Finally, they managed to cross the river over a damaged bridge near Jablanica.

After crushing the Chetnik forces in a three-day hand-to-hand battle near Glavatičevo and breaking through the

“pocket” at its weakest point, YNLA units escaped from the encirclement one after another. The march through the gorges of the Neretva’s upper reaches, slipping along icy goat trails while carrying the sick and wounded, the battle-ridden crossing of the raging Drina under relentless enemy air raids — no, nothing like this had ever happened before.

Jovan’s diary contains an entry about those days:

“We are retreating. The Junkers drop heavy bombs, the artillery pounds us mercilessly. The number of wounded keeps growing. The situation is critical. We continue retreating — this is the seventh day. Our comrades’ wounds are severe, yet no one groans, no one complains. Their brows are furrowed, but they even smile to encourage us. We sacrifice everything — except the wounded.”

“Ahead lies the Drina. It roars, churns. We must go straight through it. We stop. Cliffs loom over the rushing waters. Where to now?”

“We’re doomed,” some whisper.

It truly is terrifying. The planes keep bombing.

Yet we cross the Drina. We are on the other side.

...We desperately need rest so that we can carry out new orders flawlessly.

Utterly exhausted, we collapsed in the first house we found, sleeping like the dead. We were no longer capable of moving. The order to leave the village due to the threat of an air raid was impossible to execute right away. Only at three in the morning did we, with half the battalion, finally set out — grim and half-asleep.

“Dear God, my friends! When will this all end, when?” asked our host, Jozo, sympathizing with our endless suffering. “At least let it have some kind of end!”

“No, we do not want just any end. We want a victorious and joyful end — for the entire nation, for us and for future

generations. That end will be illuminated by the light of freedom, and it is worth the sacrifices we have made, are making and will still make in this struggle.”

And how strange it was, after all this, to read in the newspapers and hear on the radio the reports from the higher commands! The same “patriots” who had escaped the encirclement at the tail end of the units were now declaring, in grandiose terms, the “defeat of the fourth enemy offensive,” the “historic and classical battles on the Neretva and Drina,” which, according to them, “hold an honourable place in the history of the liberation war.” They spoke of “bold operational manoeuvres,” supposedly carried out “according to plan and under the direct command of the ‘Supreme Commander,’” meaning Tito!

There was great fanfare. Even the British arrived from Cairo to congratulate Tito. Meanwhile, the Germans regrouped their forces and launched a Fifth Offensive — which was, in reality, just a continuation of the fourth.

It was now May 1943. After the catastrophe at Stalingrad, while preparing for a new gamble in the Kursk and Orel regions, Hitler was in a hurry to eliminate the Balkan partisans. Advancing forward, the enraged nazis burned villages indiscriminately, killing anyone they encountered. They understood that while they might somehow negotiate with the leadership of the YNLA, they could never truly eliminate the partisans without simultaneously wiping out the civilian population — just as one cannot extinguish the glow of a fire without snuffing out the flame itself. Planes bombed and strafed every house in the forests, circling over roads and trails. Alpine divisions, trained for mountain warfare, relentlessly pursued the partisans.

Perućica’s brigade moved deeper into the narrow gorges of Herzegovina, where even pack trails were scarce.

People could barely walk. They slaughtered their exhausted horses and ate the raw meat without salt. They chewed on tree bark, moss and the tough grass that grew in patches between the rocks. There was not even water. The meagre supplies collected from rivers ran out quickly, forcing them to suck on the darkened spring snow found only in shaded spots or deep ravines. The sparse population in these regions gave the partisans their last reserves. The people shared the suffering of their army and replenished its thinning ranks.

On one of those indescribably grim days of retreat, just before a steep mountain climb, when the survivors of those “historic victories” lay exhausted on the rocks, Miletić saw Tito once again.

Suddenly, the lively clatter of many hooves echoed. A messenger announced that Tito was approaching. Katnić bustled about — he wanted to arrange a grand reception, a loud display of enthusiasm. But somehow, it didn’t work out. The exhausted fighters rose sluggishly and unwillingly.

The first to jump up was Mate Maček, the current battalion Party secretary, ever quick to respond to any call from the leadership. He was the first to shout out a greeting at the top of his lungs, and only to him did Tito smile favourably, calling him “my brave lad.” From that day on, Maček’s rise began.

The Supreme Commander sat with an air of self-importance atop a large white mare known as Mico. He wore a simple jumpsuit, faded and worn from time and bad weather, and scuffed boots with high tops. A pistol, hanging from a wide belt, was attached to a green Italian cord. His dark grey, muscular shepherd dog, Tigr, growled menacingly and bared its teeth, scanning the partisans with a wary gaze as if deciding whether they could be trusted near its master. Tito’s two bodyguards, Boško and Crlja, both towering men of immense

build, looked around with equal suspicion. Peering over Tito’s shoulder, shaking his head disapprovingly, was an Englishman in a grey uniform. Velebit rode slightly ahead — Miletić recognized him immediately. Frowning, Velebit peered over his tortoise-shell glasses at the soldiers who were struggling to line up properly and without haste.

Among the Supreme Commander’s large entourage, Miletić quickly spotted several figures he had first glimpsed through the half-drawn blinds of Dedijer’s mansion: the sul-len Ranković, the shaggy-haired Đilas, the narrow-browed dwarf Pijade. There was also the mansion’s master himself — the bull-necked Dedijer — with a camera slung over his shoulder and an assortment of pens sticking out of the top pocket of his tunic. He clumsily slid off his sturdy mule and busily searched for the best angle to take a photograph.

Now assembled in formation, the fighters regained some spirit. Hope stirred in their hearts — Tito had not come to them for nothing.

Without dismounting, Tito addressed the battalion. His speech was smooth and measured. He spoke once again of the great and latest victory at the Neretva, of the “classic crossing” of the Drina...

And his pale blue eyes looked past those he was addressing.

“My loyal fighters! My dear Šumadija lads!” he called out sharply, turning from profile to full face before the camera lens pointed at him. “I am ready to lead you into further battles that await us, battles that, I won’t hide, will be very difficult... But I will lead you to victory — there is no doubt about that!”

Before he even finished speaking, the battalion shouted in unison: “*Borba! Dole fašizam!*!”* Dedijer, acting as the

* Struggle! Down with fascism! (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

chronicler of Tito's wartime exploits, put down his camera and eagerly began scribbling in his thick notebook.

Tito dismounted and strode proudly along the formation, patting the fighters on the shoulder in a friendly manner and offering them English cigarettes. His shepherd dog walked beside him the entire time, like a bodyguard. Then he called out to it, "Tigr, let's go!" Dedijer and Velebit helped him mount his horse, and he rode off, turning back occasionally to wave coquettishly at the partisans.

Jovan watched Tito ride away with a sad sense of bewilderment. Why did he carry himself with such arrogance in front of these exhausted fighters? Why did he speak only about himself without even mentioning the people?

Miletić felt a deep and conflicting turmoil. The doubt that had first surfaced when he saw Tito at Dedijer's mansion now returned with new intensity. His personal, subjective impression of Tito clashed with the widely accepted opinion of him — the opinion he had been accustomed to trusting...

"That's how it is, brother," Miletić finished his story. "In the autumn of 1942, we had hopeful dreams and bright prospects, but by the spring of '43, everything had turned to dust..."

Where was Lola Ribar now? He was no longer alive. The Anti-Fascist Assembly had entrusted him with leading negotiations with the Western powers. He was supposed to fly abroad. For an entire month, a local partisan battalion prepared an airstrip on the Glamoč field. A platoon from Jaško's company secured the road against the Chetniks, ensuring Lola's safe passage from the town of Jajce. The platoon was ordered to escort him only as far as the Mliništa heights, from where the airfield was visible. And then, just before takeoff, a German fighter suddenly appeared from behind the mountains. Flying at low altitude, with no risk to itself, it dropped

bombs and opened fire, setting the plane ablaze. Lola Ribar was killed. The second delegate, Miloje Milojević, was wounded. Officially, it was announced that Ivo Lola Ribar had died "due to a tragic accident." Dedijer was sent to Cairo in his place.

Later, various theories emerged about the true cause of Lola's death. Some claimed that Velebit, who had ambitions of conducting the negotiations with the Allies on Tito's behalf, had leaked the details of the flight to the Germans. He supposedly wanted to escape the war for a month or two and indulge in some pleasure with women in the bars of Cairo. Since he had personal animosity toward Lola, he may have betrayed the departure secret — especially considering this was during the same period he was negotiating a truce with the Germans. Others went even further, suggesting that Tito himself was behind Lola's death, arguing that Tito had a habit of accepting all kinds of defectors from the enemy's ranks. After all, the Croatian pilot who was supposed to fly the delegation to Cairo had previously defected from Pavelić's Home Guards and turned out to be a spy planted within the YNLA. Perhaps it was he who informed the Germans about the flight. Many also noted that Tito did not attend Lola's funeral — was it guilt gnawing at him? Or maybe he still held a grudge against Lola, even in death, for opposing him on several key political decisions. For instance, Lola had strongly objected to the agreement with the Chetniks at Ravna Gora, opposed the disbandment of partisan detachments in Serbia and resisted the retreat into Bosnia. He rarely stayed at Tito's headquarters — he was almost always among the fighters. While retreating from Užice through Zlatibor, he came across many wounded partisans in Kraljevo-Voda, along with a large stockpile of valuable equipment. He rushed to Tito, pleading for permission to defend Kraljevo-Voda until they could evacuate the

wounded and the supplies. Tito refused. Two days later, the Germans arrived, executed all the wounded, including Predrag Vizmaković, a former teacher from Raška and one of the first organizers of the partisan detachment in Kopaonik. The rift between Lola and Tito grew. They argued frequently. Yet despite this, Lola — charismatic, humble and genuinely principled — held enormous influence and prestige, especially among the young partisans who adored him. He passionately believed in Lenin and Stalin's cause, in the Soviet Union's victory over fascism and in a brighter future for Yugoslavia. He could have become an outstanding leader of the Party, a true leader of the people...

"That's how it is, my dear *pobratim*... Our youth is so unlucky. We all wept when we learned that we would never see Lola again, that he would never sing with us: 'Can the golden power of the sun vanish in dreadful darkness?' ... Why do good people almost always die here in such strange, mysterious ways?"

"But that's not all, brother. One day, I'll tell you about the most terrible of all — Sutjeska... But for now — it's already morning. Soon, spring will come again. What will it bring us this time? If only we can hold out until your people arrive..."

The classroom where we had spent the night grew brighter. A ray of sunlight crept across the edge of the tiled stove, casting a warm yellow glow. It was morning already. And yet, I still shuddered when I suddenly heard Vaško Hrstić's cheerful voice beside me:

"Good morning, comrade lieutenant!"

He was the first to congratulate me on my new position — platoon commander...

6

Making a wide circle over the village of Drvar, the liaison plane landed ten kilometres southwest of it, on an airfield at the foot of the mountain. An officer from the Supreme Headquarters was already waiting there.

"On behalf of Marshal Tito, allow me to welcome you and congratulate you on your safe return!" he saluted the arrivals, MacCarver and Pinch.

The guards lifted Pinch's luggage and a crate of wine onto their shoulders, ready to take MacCarver's heavy suitcase as well.

"No need, no need," he waved them off good-naturedly. "I'm a simple man, I can carry it myself."

The officer led them to a jeep camouflaged among the bushes.

A British sergeant stood at attention beside the brand-new vehicle.

"Whose is this?" MacCarver asked in surprise.

When he had last left Drvar, there hadn't been any cars here.

"Marshal Tito's personal jeep. A gift from Field Marshal Wilson," the sergeant responded crisply.

"Ah, our Henry Wilson!"* Pinch smiled, stretching his stiff legs.

As always after a flight, Pinch's head was spinning, his liver ached and he felt nauseous. But at the same time, he experienced a pleasant sense of relief, as if he had finally stepped onto the promised land — back home, among his own people.

"Very nice. Very, very nice!" Pinch settled into the jeep with satisfaction. "Now that's what I call taking care of the

* Supreme Allied Commander of the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations.

Marshal! The vehicle is your brand,” he nodded toward MacCarver, “but the gesture is ours.”

But MacCarver didn't seem to notice the jab.

The squat, dark-green jeep, resembling a giant tick, rolled down the road toward Drvar. It sped over a small pass in the wooded mountains and descended into the valley of the Unac River. The village came into view. The half-ruined Drvar resembled an excavation site of an ancient city. Off to the side yawned a deep gorge, with a winding trail leading up its slope to Marshal Tito's secluded cave. Before reaching the bridge over the Unac, the jeep veered toward a cluster of small houses nestled at the forest's edge. These served as the quarters for members of the Anglo-American military mission. The jeep came to a halt. MacCarver and Pinch climbed out and headed toward the houses.

The Englishman didn't even glance at his luggage, knowing that the Yugoslav officer was carrying it for him. With an air of importance, he strode toward the residence of his chief — the head of the joint Anglo-American mission, Brigadier General Maclean.

With a sigh of relief, MacCarver set his suitcase down by the door of the cottage where Colonel Huntington, Maclean's deputy, resided. He knocked softly.

Huntington himself opened the door — a tall, dark-haired man with thin, neatly groomed, almost glued-on English-style moustache.

“Ah, my dear friend!” He gave MacCarver a light embrace. “I've been eagerly expecting you, eagerly... Settle in with your things here for now. I'll be free in a few minutes. I'm teaching Mr. Đilas how to play bridge. We'll finish this round shortly.”

The small room, lined with white parachute silk, had an improvised fireplace where blocks of TNT burned with a yel-

low, bubbling flame, making it warm and cosy.

Milovan Đilas leapt up from behind the card table, yanked a soggy, half-chewed cigar from his mouth and gave a refined bow. His curly black hair stood on end.

MacCarver shook his hand in silence. He had always liked this guy... In his jacket with a greasy, dandruff-dusted collar, frayed cuffs and battered boots, Đilas reminded him of a typical American politician — a dealmaker who handled the people on behalf of the boss, skilfully blending gentlemanly manners with a rough, democratic appearance. A man like Đilas was someone MacCarver could do business with, and he immediately sensed that his superior wasn't just playing cards and drinking whiskey with him for nothing.

“You're losing, sir,” Huntington remarked. “Your trump cards are weak.”

“Seems that way,” Đilas grimaced. “Unfortunately, this game isn't very common in our country. The rules are too complicated.”

“Do you like golf?”

“Golf is a different matter. I played in university.”

“Not bad! Well, here's a partner for you, Sherry. Or at worst, a caddy.”

“A caddy — yes,” MacCarver smiled, unpacking his suitcase. “That's more likely.”

“Excuse me, what's a caddy?” Đilas asked. “I don't know that word.”

“A caddy is a beginner. Someone who's still learning and, for now, just retrieves balls on the course,” Huntington explained.

Đilas choked on his cigar smoke.

“Well, I've lost this one,” he admitted, placing his cards down.

“Until the next game, Mr. Đilas. We'll play a foursome

next time. We'll invite Kardelj as well. I'm glad to see you learning English so boldly, pushing forward without worrying about mistakes. That's exactly the right approach — don't be embarrassed by such trivialities," Huntington praised his guest condescendingly, opening the door for him.

"One of the first on the list," MacCarver nodded as Dilas left, then solemnly placed a few sheets of paper in front of the colonel.

Huntington's eyes locked onto them.

"You've outdone yourself, Sherry!" he exclaimed in admiration.

"And there's more," MacCarver unfolded a map of Yugoslavia marked with mineral resource deposits.

Huntington glanced at it briefly.

"That can wait... We'll have time to deal with geology later." With a smile, he patted MacCarver on the shoulder. "I'm pleased, Sherry, that you have such a keen understanding of our responsibilities to this country... Want some whiskey? Just got a fresh shipment."

MacCarver recounted his "reconnaissance" in Bor, the brilliant operation in Sinj, which he framed as having been carried out under his "personal involvement," and put in a good word for von Goltz.

Huntington approved of his suggestion to bring the captured German colonel into the Supreme Headquarters as a military advisor or consultant.

"That would strengthen our operational command," he said, rereading the list. His face showed such satisfaction that MacCarver no longer had any doubt — he was now going to be the leading figure in the mission's affairs. "My dear friend and fellow-traveller, Badgie Pinch, won't be too pleased about this," he thought with an inner smirk.

"I've fallen behind on things during this trip," MacCarver

said to Huntington, who was still absorbed in reading the list. "What's the situation with Churchill's plan? Judging by Captain Pinch's interest in the coast, the British haven't abandoned it yet?"

"Nonsense! Our junior partners are so bogged down in their so-called Mediterranean sphere of influence that they can't see beyond the Balkans. A landing here has little chance of success. The Soviet Army is advancing too quickly," Huntington replied, making marks next to the names of those he personally knew. "Our interests are vast and far-reaching. For now, we're unable to manage everything at once. But fortunately, our company — the one we have a little stake in — is now running at full capacity and producing so many bombers each month that..."

"So, dividends are growing?" MacCarver asked eagerly, his eyes gleaming with greed as he made a practised three-fingered motion, like a merchant counting dollar bills.

"You're incorrigible, always chasing profits," Huntington chided. "These little earnings of ours are nothing compared to what's ahead, what's already smiling at us. In short, we're becoming the masters of the situation, Sherry. Our Ike* will be leading the Allied invasion."

"The invasion! When and where?"

"In the West, in France. Operation Overlord! It will happen when opening the Second Front becomes an unavoidable necessity for us."

"I see. And what about things here?"

"Everything in its time. Right now, there's no point in struggling through these mountains, wasting money and military resources that are more urgently needed elsewhere. This list, Sherry," Huntington continued with restrained enthusiasm, "is worth a battle won... As the local saying goes,

* Dwight Eisenhower.

this is the little stone that will overturn the cart. But it will do so not now, but much later, at the right and most convenient moment for us. Long-term strategy, Sherry — that's the smartest politics. In the meantime, we'll study the situation here and, more importantly, the people — just as a true businessman studies a client's bank account before doing business with him. Come sit closer. I'm particularly interested in a few names from this list. Let's start with Moša Pijade. What do you know about him?"

MacCarver glanced at the notes attached to the list, which had been provided by von Goltz.

"Connections with workers' organizations..."

"Be more precise, Sherry. Was he an informant?"

"Something like that. Before the war."

"I see. But what matters more to us is that Pijade is a theorist. His attempts to 'enrich' and 'deepen' Marxism are worth encouraging. He's capable of framing anything we need as a step forward in communist doctrine. True, he's a dwarf, and his philosophy doesn't reach any greater heights just because he wears high-heeled boots. But despite that — or rather, because of it — Pijade, as an agitator and propagandist, is an invaluable asset to Tito and... to us. By the way, Pijade dabbles in painting and even writes love poetry. Here, take a look at his illustration for one of his own poems."

MacCarver looked at the drawing Huntington handed him and let out a low whistle of amusement.

"Quite provocative! No doubt about it."

"Exactly! Now, moving on. Milovan Đilas?"

"As a student, he did minor favours for the Yugoslav police. He was a 'silent observer.' A meticulous informant," MacCarver replied.

"Just like his father! According to my sources, he's the son of a gendarmerie captain. A journalist. I expect he'll put his

talents to better use if he starts promoting Pijade's philosophy. In time, Đilas could become the Yugoslav Goebbels. Don't be surprised, Sherry. This man will go far."

"But isn't he a bit too simple-minded?"

"Not at all," Huntington assured him. "That's exactly what makes him valuable — he looks like a man of the people! Right up our alley. He wins over the masses by dressing like a drifter but speaking like an ideologue. He grovels before Tito and Ranković, though he holds a grudge against Ranković — as a bachelor — because of his own wife, Mitra Mitrović."

"She was recently released by the Gestapo."

"No doubt, not without reason? Excellent. They say this Mitra deceives her husband just as skilfully as he deceives the people with his speeches and his entire demeanour. Keep in mind, Sherry, every detail matters to us. Đilas — or Đido, as he's casually called — is valuable because he can, with a magician's ease, turn a fly into an elephant and an elephant into a fly. But his greatest asset is that he's a simpleton! Unfortunately, that can't be said about Edvard Kardelj — he's excessively polite, always smiling, always bowing. A real diplomat! By the way, he's also a so-called theorist. The second secretary of the Central Committee and a member of the Political Bureau. Tito's right-hand man. They even sleep on the same felt mat. A coward. Have you noticed? He always has that mournful look of a sheep resigned to slaughter, as if he's about to start bleating in despair. His saving grace is that he speaks Russian fluently."

"Of course!" MacCarver jumped in. "He lived in Moscow. Studied there and even, supposedly, taught at a Party school."

"Bravo!"

"He was sent there by Gorkić, the former secretary of the

Communist Party of Yugoslavia.”

“Ah, the one they call a Trotskyist? Trotskyists, Sherry, are people of our orientation. So, connections with Gorkić...”

“In the past,” MacCarver smirked. “And now Kardelj is tied to the head of the Gestapo in Slovenian Primorje, a man known as ‘Jožica.’ He helped him track down and destroy three partisan headquarters in Slovenia.”

“Quite the character! He was, if I recall, an anarcho-syndicalist. It all fits perfectly. Even so, I’m surprised...”

“Kardelj’s wife and children are in a concentration camp near Belgrade. That’s how the Germans keep him in line.”

“Surprised that Ranković hasn’t dealt with him yet?”

“Well, Ranković is on the list too...”

“Which is exactly why he should be the one most ruthlessly hunting down and punishing traitors. Aleksandar Ranković... Nicknames: Marko, The Terrible, The Conspirator. Quite the gem.”

“On the police payroll since at least 1935.”

“I see, I see.”

“At one point, he helped them eliminate around a hundred Party leaders. This effectively cleared the way for both Tito and himself, while he played the role of a working-class hero. In the new Central Committee, he took charge of Party personnel, meaning he has a dossier on everyone here.”

“Understood!” Huntington paused. “Tito knew exactly who he was dealing with. The only thing unclear is why he tolerates Ranković’s absolute dictatorship now. The man is reshaping both the Party and the army entirely to his own design, controlling personnel without oversight. There must be something behind this.” The colonel fell into thoughtful silence again. “It seems Ranković knows a great deal about Tito. That’s valuable to us, and I’ve been keeping an eye on him for a long time. Outwardly, he appears quiet, reserved,

modest — always staying in the background, behind others. Have you noticed? But in reality, he’s cunning, stubborn, and I suspect he’ll stop at nothing to achieve his goals. With our support, he could become quite the Yugoslav Thiers in time. What’s his connection to the Gestapo?”

“From my conversation with von Goltz, I confirmed that Ranković’s escape from the prison hospital in Belgrade in the summer of 1941 — where he had supposedly been transferred for treatment — was orchestrated by the Gestapo.”

“Bravo, Sherry! You’re a superhero!* The ‘Great Cyclops’ of the Ku Klux Klan, standing guard over our flag! Fishing out such a big catch! As the third secretary of the Central Committee and a member of the Political Bureau, and most importantly, as head of the Central Committee’s organizational department, he will, I believe, help us find the right guys for our purposes here.”

“Undoubtedly,” MacCarver confirmed. “I quickly found common ground with him.”

“Well, we’ll get back to him later. Next. Vlado Dedijer?”

“Sent to Tito by the Belgrade Gestapo.”

“He’s in Egypt now. Tito sent him there as his representative. Mingling with the English, sipping sherry brandy. I doubt the Intelligence Service will let such a fine specimen slip through their fingers. Which means neither will we.”

“But isn’t that too much — handling three roles at once?”

“Not at all. He’s a heavyweight! By the way, his older brother, Steva, is with us here. He recently completed parachute training and has been assigned to Ike’s European army. He’ll probably land here soon. Tito needs our translators. Next — Koča Popović.”

“I’ve already settled things with him! This Frenchified Serb, a lover of refined intellectual pleasures and sharp thrills,

* *Übermensch* — Superman (concept from Nietzsche).

fully embraces Nietzsche's philosophy that 'man is a constantly evolving, multifaceted, ravenous and secretive beast.' On top of that, he's a poet. Once, he wrote about celestial worlds and 'the flares of cat-like eyes,' but now all his poetry has transformed into military orders," said MacCarver.

"So Popović can be relied upon?"

"Absolutely."

"Excellent. Thank you, Sherry. You've brought some fresh insights. These profiles match my data."

Huntington skimmed through the rest of the report.

"Now it's just small fry — insignificant ones! Dapčević, Gošnjak, Nađ, Lekić and so on. The so-called Spanish heroes. The Gestapo likely recruited them back in France, in the internment camps. Almost all of them are in command positions now. Individually, they may not amount to much. But a hundred of them together — that's quite an ensemble."

7

Huntington paced the room, excitedly humming a tune from "The Stars and Stripes Forever." He tossed another block of TNT into the fireplace and stopped at the door, listening. From a nearby house, sounds of laughter, shouting and singing spilled out like from a rowdy bar.

"That's Captain Pinch drinking with his boss, Maclean, and Randolph Churchill, enjoying the wine we brought," MacCarver guessed.

"Let them be!" Huntington shut the door tighter. "Now, Sherry, let's talk about the maestro of this Yugoslav ensemble — Marshal Tito."

"What's there to say?" MacCarver spread his hands. "His name isn't on the list, and we don't know much about him. Except that he quietly aligns himself with the Labour Party,

who long ago scored a goal against him, while loudly professing his love and loyalty to the USSR."

"Of course!" Huntington smirked. "He wouldn't last a day as leader if he did the opposite — secretly loyal to the Soviet Union while openly declaring love for England. He fears the people, but he's damn good at playing to their passions and sympathies. And you're wrong, Sherry, thinking we don't know much about him. I know almost everything now. Tito has many vulnerabilities — fatal vulnerabilities."

"That's intriguing." MacCarver's eyes lit up. "What do you know about him, Colonel?"

Huntington sat down at the table and opened his notebook.

"Listen, Sherry. I'm handing you these trump cards in confidence, and not without reason. Remember everything well. Let's start with Tito's biography. Son of a wealthy Croatian peasant or, in Marxist terms, a kulak. A corporal in the Austro-Hungarian army. Fought on the Carpathian front, meaning he shot at Russians and Serbs. Over a glass of whiskey, he once let that slip to me himself. He found his way into captivity very quickly — or rather, he simply deserted, reasoning that surrendering was the best way to save his own life. Wandered somewhere in western Siberia or Kazakhstan. Worked as a mechanic at a kulak's steam mill. That was during the intervention, under Kolchak, with whom, as you know, the British were playing games at the time. Tito once mentioned to me, in passing, that he even met some of your guys there. That's significant. After the Russian Civil War, Josip Broz, for some reason, didn't return home but stayed with the Russians, got married and had a son, Žarko. The rest of his activities are shrouded in mystery. One thing is clear: in Moscow, he had close ties to the Trotskyists, particularly Bela Kun. With Kun's help, he started building a career as

a bureaucrat in the Comintern apparatus and, through the same connections, made his way back to Yugoslavia. At that time, Tito's alias was 'Walter.' Then, another gap... Broz was either in Yugoslavia or back in exile. Either in prison or free. Somehow, he always managed to get out of prison quickly, despite his face being printed in every police bulletin. He even showed me one such journal with his portrait in it."

"That open with you?"

"Not entirely yet. If we had caught him in America, we could have injected him with a scopolamine and chloroform compound — our 'truth serum' — and he wouldn't have been able to lie. But here... here, I remain on the sidelines. Just compiling a dossier on him, just in case. Now, pay attention, Sherry! The Party undoubtedly suspected Tito of something, possibly even betraying the battalion of Yugoslav volunteers who set out for Spain by ship. One way or another, they were indeed bombed at sea. There's also speculation that in Paris, Tito was selecting men to send to the Republicans, and that these very men ended up being of great use to Franco. That there, in France, he assembled his new Central Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia from these trusted Yugoslavs. After that, he was out of action for some time, translating *The History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks)* into Croatian. A translation not without its liberties, I should add..."

"You've read it?" MacCarver asked, surprised again.

"Yes, and I suggest you do too. You need to know Marxism to fight Marxists. But don't interrupt me, Sherry. Listen carefully. Broz turned out to be a capable organizer. However, he had no popularity among the people and only surfaced in the summer of 1941. Why? Coincidence? Or did he seize the moment? Exactly, Sherry. The fact is, he skilfully exploited the sentiments of the people, their sympathies for the Soviet

Union. He knew how to put forward the right slogans at the right time. Tito suits us perfectly. A demagogue, a showman, a lover of material comforts — what more could we ask for? In some ways, he reminds me of Kerensky — not in scale, of course, but in nature. And so..."

The colonel pulled out his pipe and carefully began to light it.

"I'm listening, I'm listening," MacCarver said impatiently, irritated by the pause.

"Patience, Sherry. I'm getting to the results of my direct observations. Mr. Tito's tastes and habits are far from ascetic. I have quite the list here. He loves parties, wine and women. His secretary, Olga Ninčić..."

"A luscious little pastry," MacCarver approved.

"One of several, of course — not counting the wives."

"He has wives too?"

"Of course. One in Croatia, the second left behind in Russia. The third — in Slovenia."

"Well, well! How did you find that out?"

"Strategic intelligence. In this case, what interests us is his infatuation with Olga Ninčić. A thoroughbred girl, daughter of the Royal Minister Momčilo Ninčić. The very one who, on our advice, arranged the marriage of Aleksander Karađorđević to the mother of the current King Petar — the former Romanian princess."

"Ah! Gold!"

"Exactly... This Ninčić is, in fact, quite an important detail."

"Magnificent!"

"Ninčić is our person. She is also Ranković's watchdog at Tito's side. Only through her can you get to the Marshal. They say that when Tito's Croatian wife came to visit, Ninčić even laid down between them at night. Guarding the Mar-

shal's morality!" Huntington laughed heartily. "Can you picture that juicy little scene? She often doesn't let Arso Jovanović in to see Tito either — he's either resting or working. By the way, do you have anything on this Arso?"

"Nothing."

"A shame... He's difficult to deal with. He neither trusts us nor welcomes us. I doubt we'll be able to get along with him... Now, back to Tito. Power-hungry, vain. Always seeks attention, pays great care to his wardrobe and appearance. Have you noticed? He plucks his bushy pale eyebrows to make them thinner. Thinks his profile is perfect for being minted on coins. Loves luxury, gold and jewels..."

"Well, he has a healthy taste for life," MacCarver remarked.

"Extremely greedy."

"So, as the Serbs say, he'll follow a salty hand,"* MacCarver said.

"In his cave, he has plush carpets, soft chairs, trinkets. Smoky crystal goblets. The other day, he showed me some of his trophies. Rings, bracelets, diamonds. If only you had seen his eyes at that moment! I must say, Sherry, I've never seen a greedier look. That's an important detail for us, too. But let's go further. The corporal is fascinated by the writings of Niccolò Machiavelli. Ninčić slipped them to him."

"So, he's free of scruples and will do anything for power?"

"He's been doing just that for a long time. Two-faced, like Janus. A man with great acting talent. It's probably these talents that allow him to manoeuvre so skilfully through political shifts and twists of fate. He has an enormous ego. He sees himself as practically a Balkan Bonaparte. In general, he tries to emulate monarchs and great men — a little bit of Julius

* A folk saying — an allusion to bribery: a sheep follows the shepherd if he lures it with a hand dipped in brine.

Caesar, a little bit of Napoleon. This pathetic pygmy mimics their habits, their gait, their poses. He carries a small bust of Napoleon in his suitcase and sets it on his desk whenever he has the chance. A trait just as worthy of encouragement as Pijade's Marxist obsessions. By the way, yesterday I noticed an old, tattered overcoat on Tito's coat rack and a pair of worn-out, battered boots in the corner. And imagine, Sherry, I wasn't mistaken in calling them souvenirs — mementos of his 'military exploits.' He's actually keeping them for a future national museum."

"You're serious?"

"Absolutely!" Huntington replied. "In general, our task is to treat him as if he truly is the hero of the Balkans, a brilliant military commander and a wise statesman. We need to plant the idea and firmly convince him that he is capable of liberating not just Yugoslavia but also its neighbouring countries, and then creating a great Balkan-Danube federation stretching from the Black Sea to the Adriatic."

"A grand idea!" exclaimed MacCarver. "It was born in the States, of course?"

"Not exactly," Huntington smirked.

"And our Tito, at the head of this federation?"

"Yes. This way, we'll secure our political and military leadership in the future unified state, with its political centre in Belgrade. Obviously, we'll need territories — vast spaces as staging grounds for solving global tasks. And it's crucial for us that these spaces aren't divided like a honeycomb by various demarcation lines and borders."

"I can just imagine the look on the Limeys'* faces," MacCarver laughed, "when Tito suddenly starts demonstrating absolute understanding of our objectives."

"He's already showing a tendency in that direction. King

* Derogatory American term for the British.

Petar's envoy, Kosanović, is Tito's trusted contact in America. Through him, Tito maintains unofficial ties with our State Department. I believe that even after the war, once he takes power in the country, Tito will make this royal envoy his representative in Washington. By the way, Kosanović is an old friend of Popović."

"Well, well!" MacCarver said, pleased. "Another lever for you to pull!"

"Popović and Kosanović — both surrealist poets. They used to carouse together in Parisian and Belgrade cabarets. I hope that, in the future, they'll find even more delightful places to meet and entertain themselves in New York."

"Especially at the 'Diamond Horseshoe.'* Although Popović plays the saint, supposedly scorned by all womankind just because his wife refused to return to him from Belgrade. And they say she's quite the striking Dalmatian."

"But let's get back to Tito," Huntington interrupted, giving MacCarver a slyly reproachful look. "In addition to what I've already told you, you might find it useful to hear the opinion of Brigadier General Maclean."

Huntington pulled out several densely written pages from his desk drawer.

MacCarver tensed. "Fitzroy Maclean!" That extravagant English operator — nothing like Badgie Pinch. He could outmatch any American intelligence officer. MacCarver knew a thing or two about Maclean's escapades in Moscow, where he worked at the British embassy in 1937. What a rogue! Like a Baghdad caliph, he prowled the markets and alleyways in disguise, gathering all sorts of rumours. And his incognito travels across Soviet cities! He had deftly slipped out of a Trans-Siberian Express carriage in Novosibirsk and quietly boarded a train to Alma-Ata. After that stunt, he was promoted to

* The largest den of vice in New York.

second secretary of the embassy. Then, operating in Iran, he abducted General Zahedi from his residence in Isfahan — an officer who had fallen out of favour with the British. Then came a new disguise, a new arena of action: Maclean became a lieutenant in the Scottish Rifles in North Africa and later the commander of the parachute company Mystery Column! Churchill had good reason to entrust him with establishing contact with Tito. A year ago, Maclean had parachuted into the "jungles" of Bosnia with a Kodak camera, a pipe and an Anglo-Croatian dictionary in his pocket. And now, at just thirty, he was already a brigadier general, head of the Anglo-American military mission, Tito's drinking companion and enjoying absolute freedom of action in Yugoslavia!

MacCarver was filled with envy toward this adventurer, a seeker of thrills and military glory in distant lands. Maclean's escapades in Yugoslavia, his frequent trips to the Dalmatian islands of Korčula and Hvar — revealing Britain's persistent interest in the expanses of the Adriatic — and, finally, his close personal ties with Tito and Vlatko Velebit, all stirred in MacCarver the same feeling an athlete experiences when a competitor overtakes him in a race.

"Interesting," he murmured, leaning toward the papers.

"Here's what Maclean writes in his report to Churchill about the situation in Yugoslavia."

"You're already privy to his secret dispatches?" MacCarver asked in astonishment.

"Yes, Sir Maclean and I are much closer than you might think, Sherry. Closer than you and Pinch, for that matter," Huntington remarked offhandedly and then read aloud a passage underlined in coloured pencil:

"...That Tito and his entourage might eventually turn into something more than they are now seems to me too remote a possibility to serve as the basis for our calculations... How-

ever, if we look far ahead, it seems possible that in the end, nationalism will triumph over communism... Stranger things have happened in the Balkans..."

"Clear enough?" Huntington asked with a sly grin. "A remote possibility!... But we'll turn it into a near certainty if we take the bull by the horns, making use of the fact that the British don't hold Tito in particularly high regard. London is a refuge for kings. The British will prefer King Petar, whom they are still keeping in Cairo, not far from the Egyptian pyramids. For the British Prime Minister, Tito is nothing more than a Moor who will do his work and then leave."

"And we, as true democrats, will, of course, prefer the Moor to the king!" MacCarver eagerly interjected.

"Exactly." A thin smile flickered at the corners of the colonel's lips. "Tito, I believe, is already beginning to realize that Churchill is playing games, juggling an alliance between the king and the former corporal. Not long ago, Churchill even attempted to arrange a triumvirate: Petar, Tito and Draža Mihailović. The British are betting on all three cards at once — whichever wins. They aid all three, flatter them, make promises, recognize and appease them, believing they have all three leaders on a string, like beetles tied to a thread. However, despite their flirtations with all three Yugoslav leaders, the British still prefer one of them — the king."

"Why is that?"

"Oh, the old British fox — Churchill — knows exactly what he's doing. The Yugoslav constitution grants the king significant powers. Controlling him alone, and through him the entire country, is much easier. With Tito, as long as he remains weak, they still have to contend with AVNOJ and the members of the Political Bureau. Too many expenses and too many complications."

"Ah, I see!" MacCarver drawled. "But Tito is clever

enough — surely, he suspects that after the war, Britain's affections will be reserved for just one face in the triumvirate: the scion of the Karađorđević dynasty?"

"Of course, he suspects it — and not without my hints... Have you noticed, by the way, how irritated he has become lately by these persistent Brits? They flock here like flies to honey, each trying to grab the sweetest piece for themselves. It's a gold rush, like the early days of the Klondike! Poor Tito undoubtedly understands that he is a soap bubble — one that will burst the moment the British stop inflating it and let go of the straw. That's why he's looking for, figuratively speaking, sturdier ropes to rise on the Balkan horizon as a new star. He is wary of the Russians. And our bosses, Sherry, will gladly help him in this difficult ascent — only to inflate him even more than the British have done so far. Of course, the bubble remains fragile."

Huntington remained silent for a moment, slowly refilled his extinguished pipe with tobacco, and lit it again. His yellow, dry fingers trembled slightly. He absentmindedly looked out the window, where dusk was already settling in, and with a sigh, repeated:

"Fragile."

Rising from the table, he paced the room to stretch his numb legs, stood by the window, took several deep draws from his pipe and then spoke again:

"Tito, unfortunately, still has moments that could even be dangerous for us. He's a neurotic, almost a psychopath. He frequently yells at subordinates, loses his temper, makes threats — this only pushes people away from him. Moreover, he's a coward and, in his own way, quite proper. He's afraid to show himself to the army, to the people, afraid to travel through liberated territory. He sits in one place for months — sometimes in the fortress at Jajce, sometimes here, in his cave.

He often acts thoughtlessly, contradictorily. For example, he's driven the Communist Party underground, dissolving it into the People's Front — that's good. But then he immediately swears that he follows the Russian example in everything. He's also prematurely and too obviously bringing in various Chetniks, and he grovels before every one of our officers far too openly. He has many other political missteps. The Serbian peasants barely support him."

"That's true," MacCarver confirmed.

"He undermines his own reputation. That's not in our interest. We're going to have to deal with him closely, Sherry. We need to inflate this already deflated bubble — but in a way that it doesn't pop, rather, so that it sparkles with all the colours of the rainbow." Huntington gave MacCarver a stern look. "So, to work! Right now, I've handed you such trump cards that you can play all-in."

"Me?" MacCarver jolted.

"You. You are tasked, Sherry, with having a private, heart-to-heart conversation with the Marshal. As deputy head of Sir Maclean's combined mission, it's more convenient for me to remain in the background. Officially, we have no interest in Yugoslavia or the Balkans at large. We're merely assisting Tito as allies. So then..."

"I'm ready!" MacCarver replied with measured restraint, though inwardly he thought, "This is it — the first violin in the mission's affairs!"

"Act immediately," Huntington paused for effect. "The Soviet military mission could arrive here any day now."

MacCarver's rosy, smiling face stretched in alarm:

"A Soviet mission?"

"Yes. They're already in Bari. We've been delaying them there under various pretexts — bad weather prevents flying, the airstrips are snowed in, landing is impossible, air oper-

ations aren't being conducted to provide cover for their landing. Among the partisans, rumours have already begun that we're deliberately holding back the Soviet mission, that this is capitalist sabotage... We've been stalling for three weeks, but we can't delay the Russians in Bari much longer. They're threatening to parachute in or come down on gliders."

For a moment, the two men sat in focussed silence.

In the hearth, the last pieces of explosive tol were burning out. The yellow flickers on the white silk-covered walls dimmed, and the room grew darker.

A sense of unease gripped MacCarver. He felt unsettled. The Soviet mission! And what if it — the harbinger of the Russians' formidable strength — upended all the American plans in the Balkans? All the cards he, MacCarver, was betting on for his own personal gain?

MacCarver repeated, his face bewildered:

"A Soviet mission? What terrible timing!"

"No need to worry! They're rushing here not to dig through the dirty laundry of local leaders. The Russians will sincerely help the partisans, and in that matter, we have no intention of competing with them."

"Yes, but they might..."

Huntington straightened to his full height.

"Listen, Sherry! Don't forget — we're from Missouri.* No hesitation! The time hasn't been lost yet. Get to work! Get to Tito tonight. Remind him, by the way, about the radio broadcasts from Spain, where it's claimed that the Tito now posing as a friend of the Soviet Union is actually a double, while the real Josip Broz is a nationalist and an anti-Soviet figure, a major adventurer, an enemy of the people's power. Hint at certain facts from his biography. Don't stop at any-

* According to common opinion in America, people from Missouri are known for their incredible stubbornness.

thing. Make it clear to him that he will find in us a new, generous master and a stronger protector than the British and the Russians. Don't be too delicate with him, Sherry — grab him firmly by the gills. Like this!”

Huntington clenched his fingers so tightly that the blue veins on the back of his hand looked ready to burst from strain.

The flames in the fireplace flared up one last time and then went out.

In total darkness, MacCarver's voice sounded low and firm:

“Okay!”

8

...The snow had been falling almost non-stop for a whole month. The dark purple forest above the river lay deep under the snow. The fir trees, as if dressed in camouflage cloaks, huddled at the edge of the woods, their heavy branches drooping under thick white sleeves. Frost-covered birches, their branches covered in tiny crystalline needles, looked as if they had been drawn with fine strokes. Old stumps had jauntily pulled white caps over their bald heads. Just like back home, near Lgov, this time of year — a real Berendey's forest!

The drooping chestnut branches along the alley beneath the school windows, where we were staying, had already shed nearly all their reddish-brown leaves. Only the most stubborn ones, still faintly green near the veins, fluttered timidly in the wind.

Along the streets, wavy drifts had piled up, the eaves of houses were lined with smooth white edges, the balustrades on terraces stood out in relief, and the stained-glass windows shone even brighter.

The town looked fresh, renewed.

The snowfall and blizzards had brought enemy movements and operations to a halt. Our battalion, stationed as a garrison in Gornji Vakuf, got a respite and turned to studying.

The training sessions followed a schedule drawn up by Vučetin with my assistance, held regularly, according to plan. Previously, training had been limited mostly to political discussions, but now the fighters were studying engineering tactics, camouflage and topography — though, of course, just the basics. I recalled passages from Soviet military manuals, regulations and guides. My lessons usually drew nearly the entire company.

Vasko Hrستیć always sat at the front, right by the chalkboard. He was curious about everything, eagerly absorbing every new idea, often asking child-like questions: “What does that mean?” Beside him sat Tomislav Stankov. Tomislav was still mourning the loss of his older brother, but his growing friendship with Vasko in recent weeks was easing the weight of his grief. The two of them dreamed of mastering every type of weapon so they wouldn't feel ashamed to march alongside Soviet soldiers all the way to Berlin. They shared a primer and proudly wrote on the classroom board: “Soviet Union,” “Moscow,” “Red Army.” The letters were uneven, but even a know-it-all like Branko Kumanudi couldn't find any mistakes in those words. Their progress even inspired Đuro Filipović to learn to read and write. He was never without his notebook and a thick, tri-coloured trophy pencil.

On February 23, the 26th anniversary of the Red Army, even soldiers and commanders from other companies came to our classroom for the final lesson. The festive mood was evident in the extra discipline, in the way they all looked at me with keen attention, expecting to hear something special.

The 26th anniversary of the Red Army! The third war-

time anniversary! “Where is my division now?” I wondered. “What new frontiers has it already crossed?”

My thoughts were with my fellow soldiers, my comrades-in-arms. On this day, I could not simply talk about deviations of a compass needle or methods of camouflage. That was not why so many people had gathered today! Excited, I spoke about the great and glorious path of the Red Army from the day of its birth — February 23, 1918 — when young Red Army detachments first entered battle and defeated the German invaders near Pskov and Narva, to its recent world-historic victories at Stalingrad and Kursk. I spoke about the great battle for Moscow, where the myth of the invincibility of the nazi army was shattered; about the heroism of Panfilov’s men, Nikolai Gastello and Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya; about the high moral qualities of Soviet people, their unyielding will, their fearlessness in battle. I spoke about the unique nature of our army, raised in the spirit of internationalism, in the spirit of love and respect for the working people of all nations, in the spirit of preserving and strengthening peace among peoples.

When I finished, everyone erupted into applause and excited chatter, the loudest of all being Branko Kumanudi.

“*Hvala, hvala** — great thanks to the Russians!” he shouted, pushing his way toward me. “I’ve always said we won’t be lost with you! When we marched across Mount Igman, it was freezing, we slept in the snow. But when we thought of the Russians, it became easier. *Boga mu*, easier!”

“Hold on!” Filipović stopped him. “What are you talking about? You weren’t even with us then...”

“I wasn’t, but I know everything — I heard. The amount of snow that winter! I remember walking in Sarajevo — on one side, a house, on the other, a snow wall so high you couldn’t even see the other side of the street...”

* Thank you, thank you (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

“Oh, shut up,” the soldiers groaned at Branko, but he had already gotten carried away with his stories, dragging Đuro to the window as he continued to excitedly recount his memories.

It was already dusk. Lamps were lit in the classroom.

The solemn moment was approaching.

Miletić and Laušek brought in a radio receiver and placed it on the table in front of the blackboard. They connected the antenna and grounding. Laušek, now fully recovered from his wounds and everything he had endured, was once again his usual cheerful and energetic self, joking around.

“Quiet, quiet,” he repeated, standing on his toes in front of the radio. “No noise! Pay attention!”

The anticipation in the room grew.

And finally:

“This is Moscow speaking...”

An extraordinary silence fell over the room. It was hard to believe the classroom was packed with people.

The clear, familiar voice of the Moscow announcer rang through the room, filled with the excitement of the occasion.

Every word of the Soviet Supreme Commander’s order sparked a joyful premonition of an imminent final victory.

“Soviet soldiers are completing the liberation of the Leningrad and Kalinin regions from the fascist fiends and have entered the land of Soviet Estonia.

“A mass expulsion of the occupiers from Soviet Byelorussia has begun... Hitler’s Germany is relentlessly moving toward catastrophe...”

And when the powerful “I order” rang out, the fighters and commanders, holding their breath, pressed even closer to the radio receiver.

“...To the partisans and partisan women...”

“That’s for us! About us!” came a collective murmur.

“...Attack enemy headquarters and garrisons, strike at their rear, destroy their communications and supply lines, deprive them of the ability to bring in reinforcements.”

The final words of the order, “Death to the German invaders!”, merged with the solemn, oath-like cry of the entire hall: “Death to fascism, freedom to the people!”

And the twenty artillery salvos in Moscow echoed in our hearts like the victorious thunder of Soviet batteries on the front lines and the rifle shots of partisans in the mountains and forests of Yugoslavia. Suddenly, someone embraced me by the shoulders — Commander Vučetin! His eyes gleamed brightly as he fervently said:

“Thank your people, my friend. Thank them for everything!”

9

The head of the Supreme Staff, Arso Jovanović, and Ranković, accompanied by their guards, hurried to reach Gornji Vakuf before dark to spend the evening and the following day with the partisans before continuing toward the Konjic area, where the Perućica Brigade had regrouped after withdrawing from Livno.

Reaching the riverside road, Arso spurred his horse. He glanced back. Ranković, who had been closely trailing him, met his gaze and smiled warmly.

“Why is he tagging along with me?” Arso wondered.

“We’re headed the same way, comrade. It’s more enjoyable in company. I want to spend some time with the people, with the fighters,” Ranković had said as he joined the Chief of Staff just before their departure.

Lately, Marko had been making a great show of his love for the Soviet Union, his friendly sympathy toward those around

him, and especially toward Arso. But Jovanović was not particularly pleased by this change. He remembered Ranković’s previous hostility toward him all too well. True, it could be explained simply: as a member of the Political Bureau and a strict guardian of Party purity, Ranković likely still did not fully trust a former officer of the royal army. But then the Soviet military mission had arrived, and it was as if Ranković had become a completely different person...

Even Tito had changed somewhat for the better in recent days, though his characteristic arrogance and irritability remained. Arso had long felt uneasy in his presence. It was becoming increasingly difficult to speak with Tito in a normal, calm, business-like manner. The distance between them was growing. This estrangement became particularly evident after the return of the Anglo-American mission members, MacCarver and Pinch, from their trip to Homolje. Tito had warmly welcomed MacCarver and had a long conversation with him. After that, a certain uncertainty and nervousness became noticeable in many of the Marshal’s actions. He frequently nitpicked Arso, refused to approve orders, issued contradictory instructions, and when Arso cautiously pointed this out, Tito would lose all self-control and fly into a rage. One day, out of nowhere, he suddenly suggested to Jovanović that he should listen more closely to the opinions of Ranković and Kardelj — since, after all, they were the Party’s leaders — and to heed the advice of the Americans — since, after all, they were experienced officers. Moreover, he added, it was necessary to take into account and soberly assess the special political and strategic interests of the United States in the Balkans. Arso was taken aback by Tito’s statement. After all, the Americans themselves had repeatedly claimed that they had no interest whatsoever in Balkan affairs, that they were selflessly aiding Yugoslavia in its struggle against

fascism. And now — special interests! What were these interests? And how exactly did they differ from Britain's so-called traditional gravitation toward the Mediterranean basin? Tito gave no answer. He merely said, "In time, you will see and understand everything." Regarding the British, he unexpectedly spoke with disdain: they, he said, had already sung their song, played their role, and sooner or later would have to make way for America.

"Special interests! Political and strategic!" — thought Arso Jovanović, not noticing that his horse had slowed to a walk. "What lies behind these terms? Could they have something to do with the British operation plan codenamed 'Ratweek,' which was backed by Colonel Huntington? The operation entails the mass destruction of the country's key infrastructure."

"Overzealous execution of such a plan could only lead to the collapse of the national economy. And this on the eve of liberation! What are these strange discussions about geological maps and profiles? About the 'carpets' of bombs that the Western Allies promise to lay over occupied Yugoslav cities — including, first and foremost, Belgrade — as part of their so-called military assistance? And what about this SS Colonel von Goltz, whom MacCarver is practically recommending as a consultant to the Supreme Command? Now this SS officer is singing endless praises of Tito's military genius, while ingratiating himself with the Americans, babbling about some kind of global intercontinental strategy, about the gates to the wider world that the Yankees will open, enriching old Prussian traditions with the theory of the new era!"

Arso felt a sense of relief, and even the air in the Supreme Headquarters seemed fresher when the Soviet representatives arrived. Just the thought of these simple, warm-hearted and courageous people filled his heart with warmth. Arso had been eagerly anticipating a meeting with Red Army officers

for a long time. As soon as they landed in Bari and established contact with the Supreme Headquarters of the YNLA, Arso personally communicated with them by radio and oversaw the clearing of the landing strip at Medeno Polje, near Bosanski Petrovac. How anxious he had been in those days! Everything was ready for the arrival of the aircraft, but the weather in Italy suddenly worsened, or heavy snowfall buried the airstrip. The Soviets, however, found a solution. On February 23, gliders were flown in from Bari, and the Soviet mission landed on the snowy fields of Medeno Polje — on the anniversary of the Red Army.

What a celebration it was in Petrovac! The people greeted the Russians warmly and hospitably. That evening, a solemn gathering was held. And the next day in Drvar, in the building of the Supreme Headquarters, an official reception took place, attended by members of the Anglo-American mission led by Maclean. Maclean read out a greeting telegram from Churchill. The Prime Minister stated that "the remarkable armies of the United States, which are already here or arriving to join us, and our own forces — the best trained and equipped we have ever had — stand shoulder to shoulder, equal in number and united by true friendship." Stand... Maclean's lengthy dinner speech followed in the same vein.

The head of the Soviet military mission, however, spoke briefly but to the point: "We have come here to assist the Yugoslav National Liberation Army in its heroic struggle!"

And indeed, the operational work at the Supreme Headquarters immediately gained momentum, enriched by deep theoretical analysis, and more active operations involving large units began to take shape. The entire course of the partisan struggle was now being directed toward concrete strategic objectives...

Arso smiled at the memory and urged his horse into a

steady trot. But his thoughts kept restlessly circling back to Operation “Ratweek” and the Anglo-American bombing tactics. With both affection and anxiety, he thought of Belgrade, the city where he had spent so many years. He had come to love its wide, straight yet cosy streets, with their charming kiosks on the corners and elegant villas completely covered in wild grapevines and ivy. In summer, they hung from the walls like green carpets shimmering with yellow and orange hues, their window openings like cutouts in the foliage. Before the war, these streets had been lively and full of joy. Jovanović had loved taking evening strolls past the opera house, past the Alexander Nevsky Church, which had been built on the site of the field church used by the Russian volunteers who had fought against the Turks in 1876 — their battle flags were still preserved there. Then he would descend to the Danube, where an unbroken silence reigned. The river, as if absorbing the last rays of the sun, wound through the misty banks like a golden ribbon, caressed by the greenery of weeping willows, poplars and thuja trees, standing like small pyramids. The fiery colours gradually faded, dusk enveloped the ancient fortress walls, and in the small, romantic garden, young couples would appear, basking in their happiness, full of hope for the future. Once, during his student years, Arso himself had whispered his first “I love you” in that very place. And now — could it be that Belgrade, dear and familiar, was to be bombed under Operation “Ratweek”? And by whom? The Allies — the Americans! But why? What operational or strategic benefit would it bring? There were few German troops in Belgrade, and no major industrial facilities of military significance. Unless they meant the Zemun brick factories?! To bomb Belgrade itself would mean slaughtering its peaceful population...

“Stop! Wait for me! I need to change my horse!” — a sud-

denly irritated voice rang out behind him.

He turned.

Ranković, sitting heavily to one side in the saddle, had put so much weight on his bay horse’s back that the animal was beginning to buckle.

“I’ll keep going at a walk — catch up with me!” Jovanović called back with a wave of his hand.

The road began to slope upward. A light snowfall dusted the path. Under the canopy of sprawling dogwood trees, blackbirds were pecking at fallen, ruby-red berries.

Arso listened with pleasure to the chirping birds, his mind drifting toward old thoughts and long-forgotten desires. He longed for the marshes, overgrown with tall golden reeds and sedges. There, among the dense thickets of cane, where tufts of feathery seeds were already carried away by the wind, flocks of grebes, coots, cormorants and ducks bustled and called out in their many voices. “If only I could go hunting there, just for an hour — to forget all these worries!”

He took a deep breath of the crisp, frosty air. To the right of the road stretched a frost-covered forest, shimmering in shades of bluish-grey. Occasionally, a gust of wind from the ravine rustled through the treetops. To the left, the Vrbas River murmured dully, veiled in mist. The sky, too, was covered in heavy, murky clouds.

Accompanied by his orderly, Arso slowly ascended the ridge. His restless thoughts took hold of him once more.

Before leaving Drvar, he had had a heated argument with Tito. It had been difficult to even get in to see him — his hysterical secretary, Ninčić, guarded the Marshal like a watchdog, demanding that he be shown proper honours and making visitors wait for hours in the reception room. Tito had been in a foul mood. He had lost a chess game to the half-drunk young Churchill. Arso had started the conversa-

tion by advising Tito to pay serious attention to strengthening the national liberation movement in Serbia — to send part of the forces from Montenegro and Bosnia there. The Marshal listened and shook his head in disapproval. He was clearly thinking about something else.

Then Arso approached the front-line map and patiently explained the situation. The Red Army, he said, was advancing. It had already broken through the German defences along the entire stretch of the Dnieper from Zhlobin to Kher-son and had created a new Stalingrad for Hitler's forces on the western bank of the Dnieper near Korsun-Shevchenkivsky. Soon, the spring-summer offensives would begin. It was highly likely that the Red Army would soon reach the borders of Yugoslavia.

"Are we ready to meet them? Are we ready to assist them, at least through the operations we have already planned based on the advice of the Soviet representatives?" Arso asked. "The Soviet military mission must be convinced that our words align with our actions. After all, the mission's chief will report everything to his Supreme Commander-in-Chief."

Tito fell into even deeper thought. His face darkened. He strode quickly through the cave, kicking over chess pieces scattered on the floor with the toe of his boot, then suddenly stopped and slammed his palm on the table.

"So be it. You are right. We cannot afford to undermine the boundless trust that the Soviet people have placed in us," he declared pompously. "We have earned this trust through honest, selfless struggle for a just cause, and our friends have come to our aid — my dear old friends. Yes, you are right, Arso. I approve your proposal. Go to the First and Second Corps, speak with Koča and Peko. Determine which divisions we can allocate to strengthen our forces in Serbia. Act accordingly. But beware..." — and Tito shook his fist in front

of the Chief of Staff's face.

Jovanović had an idea of what that gesture meant, but he couldn't fully decipher this "beware," which left him with an unpleasant, unsettling feeling after the conversation. An hour later, he learned that Marko, along with his entourage, would be accompanying him on his trip to eastern Bosnia and Montenegro. "Tito doesn't trust me," the thought now firmly took hold in Arso's mind. He glanced back once more. Ranković, now on a different horse, was already catching up, swinging his whip. "Then again, perhaps this is for the best," Jovanović thought. "As a member of the Political Bureau, he may help exert pressure on Peko Dapčević. This self-important, small-scale Napoleon will undoubtedly do everything he can to resist the withdrawal of units from his forces for deployment to Serbia. And even if he does comply with the order and transfers a division, he'll likely restructure it in such a way that it will be nearly combat-ineffective. The same will probably be done by his friend, the 'philosopher' Popović. With both of these 'feudal lords,' I'll have to tread carefully to avoid an uproar and a scandal while still ensuring that Serbia receives fully capable troops. After all, they will have to advance on Belgrade together with the Red Army! Finally, we must clarify on the ground how this Operation 'Ratweek,' which the Allies have practically imposed on us as an ultimatum, should be carried out — effectively, in accordance with military necessity, and in a way that avoids causing significant harm to Yugoslavia."

"What are you thinking about, Arso?"

Jovanović flinched and tightened the reins.

Ranković was now riding beside him.

"Oh, about many things... about family..."

"Ah..." Ranković gave Arso a piercing look. "Avoiding the question..."

He recalled the instructions Tito had given him before departure: to “assist” Jovanović in his work, to carefully select and position trusted people in the divisions being sent to Serbia. He was also to hint to Koča Popović about the possibility of his upcoming appointment as the commander of the Main Headquarters of Serbia. How would Koča himself react to this? And did Ranković find him suitable for the role? Of course! Koča was their man.

Additionally, Tito had tasked Marko with ensuring the most thorough and unquestioning execution of Operation Ratweek and had advised him to keep the arrival of the Soviet military mission secret from the rank-and-file fighters for the time being.

“Keep an eye on things there,” Tito had said. “Make sure Arso doesn’t make a mess of things. You can issue orders on my behalf and correct anything on the spot if necessary.”

Now, riding alongside Jovanović, Ranković wanted to get a clearer sense of his intentions so he could figure out in advance how best to discreetly obstruct anything Tito wouldn’t approve of.

“What do you think, Arso — where should we start in the First Corps with Popović?”

“Let’s start,” Jovanović replied with a smile, “by announcing the good news: Soviet officers are now with us!”

“You want to reveal a military secret?” Ranković frowned menacingly.

For a moment, Arso was so taken aback that he dropped the reins.

“Is that really a secret?”

“For now, yes. Listen, I advise you to be careful... Anything can happen.”

Again, that warning — “Be careful!” A pang shot through Arso’s heart. He sighed and spurred his horse forward.

Alongside the road, the tall, snow-covered mulberry trees swayed slightly in the wind, as if they had been dipped in white wax. The alley narrowed in the distance, and at its end, the outskirts of Gornji Vakuf appeared, veiled in a net of lazily falling snow.

10

...The day’s lessons had ended. Among the fighters, a conversation had begun, inspired by my lecture.

“I joined the Party blindly,” said Đuro, furrowing his brow in concentration. “But now, little by little, I’m starting to understand some things.”

He looked at his comrades and waved his hand emphatically.

“Now we know what kind of life we’ll have after the war. A Soviet one! Am I right?”

“That’s right, that’s right,” the fighters confirmed, surprised that the usually silent Đuro had so neatly expressed their shared thoughts.

“I have two sons,” he continued with a smile. “They will study... That’s why we joined the partisans. We took our axes, our knives, and off we went.”

“And what about the sticks and pitchforks? Did you forget those?” Kumanudi pushed forward from the corner where he had dozed off a bit. “Forgot, huh? What a thick head!”

“Well, you didn’t come with us right away either,” Đuro snapped. “Back then, you were sitting in Sarajevo making those bonbons.”

“Holy Mother of God! What nonsense is this?” Branko’s yellowish eyes widened in astonishment. “What are you babbling about, man? How could I have been making bonbons, you fool, when the Germans took everything from me — my

shop, my sugar — and threw me in prison?”

Suddenly, Miletić nudged me with his elbow and motioned toward the door with his eyes.

In the deep doorway stood Vučetin, alongside a tall, gaunt commander wearing a fur coat down to his knees and *opanci* on his feet.

“Stand up!” Miletić ordered the fighters. “This is the Chief of the Supreme Headquarters,” he quietly informed those nearby, though many had already recognized Arso Jovanović.

“*Zdravo*, comrades!” Arso greeted us in a low voice.

The partisans responded in unison:

“*Zdravo!*”

I couldn’t take my eyes off Arso. He approached us — neat, disciplined, with a strong resemblance to a man from the Caucasus, his dark hair already streaked with grey. His large black eyes, set in a weathered, angular face, regarded us with a slightly bashful smile.

“You had a shop?” Arso looked at Kumanudi with curiosity. “So, they took it from you and threw you in prison, you say?”

“Yes,” Branko replied, hesitantly.

“And, of course, you managed to escape from prison and joined us, right? And what exactly are you fighting for now?”

“What do you mean, what for?” Branko now looked boldly, with his usual hint of cheekiness. “We are all, of course, fighting for socialism, but besides that, each of us has their own interests in mind. I, for example, have a small shop in Sarajevo — a confectionery.”

“He was a shopkeeper, deceiving people,” someone remarked.

Branko’s shiny face turned red.

“I traded honestly, but of course, I looked after my own profit — otherwise, what’s the point of being in business?” he

retorted angrily.

“I see,” Jovanović said. Then he turned to Filipović. “And what about you? What are you fighting for?”

Duro rubbed his rough nose, gathering his thoughts, and after a moment, replied:

“For my own land, Comrade Jovanović. I want to plough my own soil, not work the land of a kulak, if God allows.”

“And why do you need land?” Branko prodded him mockingly. “You’re a lumberjack. And tell me, where did your land go — if you ever had any? Did you drink it away?”

“I never really had land, just rocks mixed with sorrow. And even that was taken by a kulak for debts after a bad harvest.”

“Of course. You people are always like that, you *golanci*,”* Branko sneered. “Now, my father — he’s a peasant too, but he’s wise, thrifty and knows how to save a little for a rainy day. He made something of himself and he doesn’t complain about life. He has enough land for grazing goats and chopping firewood — not too much, just eighteen *ral*.”**

“Eighteen *ral*?” the fighters were astonished. “That’s nearly a week’s worth of ploughing! How many workers does your father have? Come on, admit it.”

“I haven’t counted, but in the summer, there are some — they harvest the grain in the fields and pick plums in the orchard.”

“Wait! And how does he plan to live after the war in the new Yugoslavia?” Filipović asked.

“Even better.”

“How so — better?”

“Comrade Tito will give every landowner three or four Germans as workers. No need to pay them, obviously.”

* The naked, the poor (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

** Approximately three desyatins (about 3.3 hectares).

“And why would your father need workers when his extra land will be taken away?”

“Who’s going to take it? You?” Branko shot a dark look at Filipović. “Holy Mother of God! What nonsense — you see, even you’re embarrassed now. You must have forgotten what Political Commissar Katnić said. Allow me to remind you,” he turned to Jovanović with exaggerated politeness. “Because you and I, Đuro, we are one and the same: your father is a peasant, and my father is a peasant. Poor peasants and rich peasants — we are all fighting against the Germans now. So how could you take my father’s land? That land is mine too!”

Đuro struggled to find the right words to argue against Branko and defend his position. He glanced at Jovanović in confusion.

Arso, along with Vučetin, moved in closer.

“What are their names?” he asked with a frown.

Vučetin named the two men.

The fighters gathered tightly around Arso, waiting for his explanation.

After a brief pause, he said:

“Let me tell you a story. There was a factory owner in Belgrade who made cooking pots. The Germans seized his workshop and started using it to assemble mortars. And they also assaulted his daughter. They wronged him badly, so out of sheer hatred, he ran off to join the partisans. Or here’s another story: there was a shopkeeper who loved the king and respected Hitler, but that didn’t stop the Germans from taking his sons as hostages and then executing them. So he too joined the partisans. In the end, both the factory owner and the shopkeeper turned against the fascists, but only out of personal revenge. They both even ended up in the Communist Party. But I don’t think the Party gained much from that. They might be good fighters, but whether they’ll ever be true

communists — I have my doubts. In the future, our Party may have to rid itself of them, or perhaps even fight against them. For now, it’s not a problem that they’re with us. What matters is that they don’t lead ordinary people, who lack political awareness, down the wrong path. But that won’t happen because our ordinary people trust only one party — the Communist Party — which has consistently defended their interests.”

“Exactly,” Đuro confirmed with conviction.

“And only in alliance with the working class...”

“With you, Tomislav,” Đuro smiled at Stankov.

“...under the leadership of the Communist Party,” Arso continued, warmly glancing at Filipović, “will we build the most just society on earth after the war — a socialist one. And it is incorrect to think that the peasantry is a single whole. Some peasants, like Filipović, unable to withstand competition, go bankrupt and abandon their land, becoming farmhands or labourers, swelling the ranks of the working class. Others buy up land, grow even richer and use their wealth to push their sons into the bourgeoisie. They cling to their property like a crab to rotten meat. Yes...” Arso drew out his words thoughtfully. “And you, Kumanudi, and you, Filipović, still have a lot to understand, a great deal... It’s a pity that political education in your battalion seems to be lacking...”

“So what? Does that mean we can’t be in the Party?” Branko asked with a hint of irony, raising his eyes.

“I didn’t say that. But if it turns out that you’re a Party member, tell me, how did you get in?”

“Me?” Branko looked around. “I was invited to join.”

“And of course, you didn’t refuse? I see. Understood. Well, that’s how it happens.” Arso paused. “Of course, it’s wrong to think that people join the Party already possessing the qualities of a Bolshevik. These qualities must be developed. The

entire life of the Party, all its work — it's a great Marxist-Leninist school, and many of us are still in its preparatory class. Learning is difficult, but don't be afraid of difficulties, comrades, don't fear failures," Arso spoke as if answering some deep thoughts of his own. "Just try to have as few failures as possible. Be honest and truthful, patient and persistent. Weigh every action, every word..."

"Here," Jovanović pulled a newspaper from his field bag, "there's an article about what a Communist Party member should be. The most important part is Stalin's words. I've underlined them with a pencil. Can you read it, Filipović?"

"I can't," Đuro murmured, embarrassed. "Branko is literate, though."

Kumanudi reached for the newspaper, but Tomislav Stankov snatched it first.

"Can I?"

"We, communists," Stankov read with a trembling voice, "are people of a special kind. We are made of special material. We are those who form the army of the great proletarian strategist, the army of Comrade Lenin... There is nothing higher than the title of Party member, whose founder and leader is Comrade Lenin... Not everyone can withstand the hardships and storms that come with being a member of such a Party."

After reading, Tomislav wiped his forehead with his hand, his eyes shining with pride. Đuro took the newspaper from him and, stepping toward the window, carefully smoothed it out on the windowsill. How he regretted that he couldn't read now!

11

...Through the pointed stained-glass windows of the high school auditorium, streams of March sunlight poured in. The

sky was so bright, so blue, as if the snow and blizzards had spent the entire month polishing it to a shine.

Both the sun and the sky matched the festive, elevated mood that had lingered among the people since the previous evening when they had met and spoken with Arso Jovanović. Even the need to arrive at the meeting secretly, one by one, and the strict, scrutinizing control at the door — where Katnić's orderly, Pantera, stood with a menacing look — could not dampen the spirits of the Party gathering's participants. Jovan, as he left, told me that he needed to visit the church bell tower, where we had an observation post. Under various pretexts, Filipović, Kumanudi, Stankov and other fighters disappeared from the platoon.

Suddenly, Vučetin came for me, happily announcing that, as a Russian communist, I was also allowed to attend the Party meeting, which was being convened in secret. I had already been quite surprised that the Party organization's membership was classified, that there were no membership cards. It was difficult to distinguish a Party fighter from a non-Party one. One simply had to take a person at their word. It was only now that I learned who among my platoon members was a communist.

In the front row of chairs, Katnić placed two large plush armchairs — for Jovanović and Ranković. Glancing at me and Miletić, he leaned toward Ranković's ear and, with a guilty expression, began whispering something to him, but Ranković disdainfully pushed him away.

"Marko is with us again," Miletić quietly said. "But he's unusually quiet this time..."

When the members of the presidium took their seats at the long, narrow table, Maček, with a fussy gesture, pointed Jovanović toward the carpeted podium and solemnly announced:

“The floor is given to the Chief of the Supreme Headquarters of the National Liberation Army and Partisan Detachments of Yugoslavia, Comrade Arso Jovanović.”

Katnić was the first to clap and twisted his face into a half-smile:

“Please, please.”

The fighters listened to Jovanović with enthusiasm. He spoke about the international situation, the state of the fronts and how the Red Army was steadily advancing — moving north, west and southwest — toward the Balkans.

“And our Western allies?...” Ranković casually remarked, straightening slightly in his chair. “They are heroically pushing toward Rome!”

“I’ll speak about them now, about their heroic drive,” Arso furrowed his thick black brows. “To be precise, I’ll quote the latest statements by General Eisenhower. Here are his words from a press conference with war correspondents in London.” Arso flipped through his notebook. “Here it is. ‘Essentially, wars are won by public opinion. If you,’ Eisenhower said to the correspondents, ‘are as eager as I am to win this war and bring it to an end, then we have nothing to worry about.’”

“Well, imagine that!” Vučetin said mockingly. “And here we are, fools, worrying ourselves sick.”

The fighters smiled. Đuro rubbed his nose awkwardly with his fingers, his ears burning. He seemed uncomfortable sitting at the presidium. Kića Jankov kept taking off his glasses to clean them. Only Ajša remained at ease, her clear laughter echoing throughout the hall. It seemed like she was laughing for the first time since Petkovski’s death.

Ranković kept his eyes fixed on Jovanović with a puzzled, questioning look. A faint, strange, joyless smile froze on his lips.

“So,” Arso said with a serious expression, “full of battle

impatience, Eisenhower is, for now, not worried about anything at all. Now, let’s turn to the latest front-line report. Here it is. The Allied High Command in Italy reports: ‘Patrols are operating on all sections of the front, and raids are being carried out... We pray to God for good weather, which would allow us to conduct naval and air operations.’”

“They’re praying to God!” someone in the hall snickered again.

“Waiting for a miracle.”

“And they claim they’re pushing toward Rome!”

Katnić glanced around nervously, trying to pinpoint who was making the remarks.

“Stop shouting from your seats! You’ll have your turn after the report,” he snapped. “Quiet!”

“I think,” Arso said with a slight smile, “that good weather will soon be upon our Western allies. Even now, comrades, it is clear that the Soviet Union has enough strength to win this war without a second front and despite unfavourable weather — to crush Hitler’s Germany and liberate Europe. Just yesterday, Eisenhower, in his greeting to the Red Army, called its massive offensive ‘a great military epic.’ So, comrades, allow me to bow before the creator of Soviet military strategy, Comrade Stalin, before his genius, before the Russian soldier, who has selflessly liberated enslaved lands and seas many times before...”

The hall stirred, and everyone jumped to their feet, shouting, “Long live Stalin!”

Miletić shouted loudly:

“The sun of victory is rising over the whole world! The Soviet sun!”

“It is rising!” Arso Jovanović fervently echoed, and when the noise in the hall died down somewhat, he continued with calm conviction: “We all believe in the Red Army. I am firm-

ly convinced that the day is not far when our great Slavic brother will appear on the Danube and extend a hand of aid to us. We all believe that any struggle alongside the Soviet Union will inevitably lead to victory. For our happiness, the Soviet soldiers are shedding their blood on countless battlefronts. And here too, on the sacred soil of our homeland, the fraternal blood of Russian men flows — men who have escaped German captivity to fight alongside us.

“I believe that a new Yugoslavia will emerge, and an unbreakable brotherhood and unity will be born — not only among our Yugoslav peoples but among all South Slavs, all Balkan nations. And this brotherhood and unity will last forever, for they are the guarantee of our freedom, independence and a better future. A free Yugoslavia can only be envisioned in close cooperation and friendship with neighbouring nations and with the Soviet Union. Thanks to the Soviet Union’s struggle, we have been able to build our national army, which now numbers nearly 300,000 fighters. Thanks to the victories of Soviet soldiers, we have managed to achieve something significant for this great day. We have thwarted the enemy’s SIXth Offensive, launched a counter-offensive and taken seven cities in Bosnia. Our forces are now fighting along the entire mountain range from Slovenia to the Albanian border. Our banners fly over one-third of the country’s territory. But is that enough? In these decisive months of the war, can we afford to simply wait for the Red Army’s rescue, merely defend liberated territories and carry out uncoordinated operations without a unified, overarching strategic goal?”

“No, no and no!” loud cries rang out from different corners of the hall.

“In that case,” Jovanović raised his voice, “I see no reason to keep this idea a secret. It is not a mystery. It lives in our hearts. Every fighter will understand it.” Arso spoke in short,

urgent phrases, as if hurrying to finally express the main reason for his visit. “Comrades! Brothers and sisters! Enemy supply lines run through our country. We must ensure that not a single German unit escapes from here, out of the reach of the advancing Red Army. That is the idea!”

Voices in the hall did not subside:

“We won’t let them through! We’ll destroy the fascists!”

Ranković silently nodded.

“Saying it isn’t enough, comrades,” Arso continued. “The most important thing is to strike the enemy hard — to strike him as the glorious Soviet soldiers do, to strike according to all the rules of modern military science. Over the past year, we have gained enough combat experience, we have risen another step in military skill. And I believe, I want to be certain, that nothing like Sutjeska will ever happen again, where the bravery and courage of our partisans were sacrificed to our lack of military knowledge...”

Jovan grabbed my hand.

“Sutjeska! Do you hear?! That’s the most terrifying thing...”

“Yes, yes, the inability to wage war,” Arso firmly repeated.

Vučetin couldn’t hold back:

“This lack of skill, by the way, was evident again quite recently during the capture of Gornji Vakuf,” he said. “And with Sinj, things could have turned out even worse...”

“What do you mean by Sinj?” Ranković sharply asked, slightly rising from his chair.

“I mean the case of the two Montenegrins,” Vučetin replied. “The joint actions of our battalion with the Montenegrin unit were nearly disrupted.”

“Hm!” Ranković shrugged. “Well, let me tell you that you yourselves are to blame for that. Why did you allow the execution?”

“What?!” Vučetin rose from the table. “Who allowed it? A verdict was handed down... in the name of the people, and it was carried out so swiftly that we didn’t even have time to react, let alone intervene.”

Ranković waved his hand dismissively.

“A mistake was made. A terrible mistake! The secretary of the tribunal omitted the words ‘consider the sentence conditional’ when transcribing the text. For this criminal negligence, he has been punished. And the chairman of the corps tribunal, Grombac, has been removed from his position and reassigned to the brigade as deputy head of OZNA. I deeply regret that you weren’t able to prevent the execution if you found it unjust,” Ranković added, then leaned back in his chair again.

Vučetin turned deathly pale. The hall was as silent as that field outside Sinj...

12

...Some time passed before we recovered from our sorrowful astonishment.

Arso confirmed what Ranković had said.

“But the battle for Sinj,” he added, “showed the enemy that we are strong in our national unity, a unity that cannot be broken. However, what happened afterward? Why did you flee toward Gornji Vakuf in a panic, like mountain deer, making yourselves easy targets for enemy bombs?”

Arso described the night battle for the town as chaotic and poorly organized, while the preliminary sabotage he deemed an unnecessary, foolish invention of the political commissar.

“This is a Party meeting, and we have nothing to hide,” he said to Katnić, who sat gloomily, buried in his notebook. “And I will hold you accountable for much more. I don’t see

any real agitation or cultural-educational work being carried out in the battalion. Are the communists receiving any political training? Why do they lack basic political literacy? Even worse, they are being taught completely false ideas that contradict Marxist-Leninist doctrine. And what are the SKOJ members* doing? They’re nowhere to be heard. Why don’t you have political study groups? Why aren’t you holding regular classes for the illiterate? No general education lectures?! There are no discussions on the national question, and yet it is of utmost importance to us. The incident at Sinj proves that. And finally, why is your wall newspaper under such tight control and censorship that it’s practically on its last breath?!”

“He’s cutting them down to size.”

“Far-sighted!” whispers were heard in the hall.

With each question, Katnić would half-rise, exchange glances with Maček — who was nervously shifting in his chair — run his hand over his forehead, start to say something, but, failing to utter a word, sit back down.

“Life in the battalion,” Jovanović concluded, “both on the march and in the villages, can be made interesting, meaningful and vibrant. All that’s needed is initiative. Without it, any useful effort turns into dull bureaucracy and fades away. Remember the words of our great Montenegrin poet Petar Njegoš: ‘A strike sparks fire from stone, otherwise, it would remain lifeless within it.’ Cheerfulness, enthusiasm, a spirit of uplift — this is what we need to honourably fulfil the great combat mission before us.”

“That’s right!” came Ružica’s voice.

“I’ve said all I wanted, comrade, and I’m ready to hear you out,” Jovanović addressed her.

“We, the SKOJ members, want to work, we really do. But it’s hard for us.” She hesitated.

* Members of the Communist Youth League.

“Speak openly, don’t be afraid,” Ajša encouraged her.

“I will. Why can’t we have a button accordion, for example? Do songs and music really distract us from serious tasks? And then...” Ružica stepped closer to Arso and, as if confiding in him alone, quietly asked, “And if a girl doesn’t want to cut her braids, or if she falls in love — is that such a terrible crime?”

Without waiting for an answer, Ružica sat back down.

“Why have you scared everyone so much?” Arso turned to Katnić. “This is no way to teach morality. And where did you get the idea that a fighter, during war, must abandon all their habits and inclinations, suppress their most natural feelings and turn into a walking model of virtue? If you do have any instructions on this matter, then it’s clear you’ve misunderstood them,” Arso said, noticing how Katnić kept glancing at Ranković, as if awaiting his support. “Well then, Comrade Katnić, would you like to take the floor to explain?”

“I’m ready,” Katnić gloomily stepped onto the podium.

The fighters watched him with curiosity. Stuffing a cigarette holder with a half-smoked cigarette into the pocket of his tunic, he smiled meekly, appeasingly and — to everyone’s surprise — immediately began openly admitting to all his mistakes and oversights. His speech was full of phrases like “I failed to account for,” “I overlooked,” “I didn’t keep track of,” “I was too hasty.” It was so unlike his usual self-congratulatory remarks: “I knew it all along,” “I rarely make mistakes,” “I warned you!”

“Your fair criticism, Comrade Jovanović, will be very helpful to us,” he declared, gradually regaining control and shifting from a repentant tone to his usual lecturing style. “We will strive not to repeat our mistakes, though, unfortunately, no one is immune to them.” Katnić kept his eyes locked on Ranković. “At the same time, I want to warn some people...”

He hesitated, like a poor speaker who had lost his notes.

I glanced at Ranković, who was sitting close by. His eyes were half-closed. He turned his face toward a ray of sunlight streaming through the red glass and basked in its warmth, almost as if he were dozing off. But then his head tilted slightly. It could have been taken as a nod of approval — or as simple drowsiness. But suddenly, Katnić straightened up defiantly. He had clearly sensed silent encouragement.

“I want to warn my fellow Party members,” he repeated in a stronger voice, “that one must resort to criticism skillfully and cautiously. Otherwise, you understand, there are those — secret agents of the imperialists — who would seize any opportunity to undermine the authority of our Party, our leaders, to slander them... Yes, yes, to slander them, and in doing so, weaken and disarm our ranks!”

Jovanović frowned as he listened. Hunched over, he sat among the fighters and undoubtedly noticed how the enthusiasm in their eyes faded. No one wanted to speak after Katnić, and Maček hastily declared the Party meeting closed.

As everyone was leaving, Vučetin stopped me, saying that Jovanović wanted to speak with me.

In a small classroom, Arso Jovanović sat me down beside him and placed his hand on my shoulder.

“Vučetin has told me about you, Comrade Zagoryanov,” he began with a friendly smile. “I called you here because...”

Soft footsteps sounded, and Ranković appeared on the threshold.

“You’re being careless, Arso!” he said cheerfully. “The window faces the courtyard! Conspiracy, conspiracy!”

Ranković drew the curtains together and sat down by the window, like a guard.

“...so that,” Jovanović continued, hesitating slightly, “we could have a frank conversation.”

“By the way... Excuse me for interrupting,” Ranković threw in his direction. “Zagoryanov, would you like to transfer to the company we’ve formed from Russian prisoners of war who escaped from the camps? You’d be among your own people.”

“I wouldn’t recommend it,” Jovanović said to me, then turned to Ranković. “Why gather them all in one unit? I’d distribute the Russians among the companies so they can share their combat experience with our people everywhere.”

“You forget, Arso, that not all Russians are the same... Not all of them have been vetted yet,” Ranković murmured quietly. “But if you don’t want to, Zagoryanov, I won’t insist. We trust you completely.”

I decided to seize the opportunity.

“Would it be possible,” I asked, “to somehow let the Soviet Union know that Russian prisoners who ended up in Yugoslavia are fighting in your army — that we are alive?”

“And so that your family finds out as well?” Arso guessed my unspoken wish. “It’s possible. We’ll try to arrange it.”

He fell into thought, looking at me.

I recalled everything I had heard about this remarkable man. A sensitive, attentive friend of the partisans... A fearless and intelligent strategist... The son of a poor peasant, he had risen to the rank of Chief of the General Staff before the war thanks to his extraordinary talent and had written the first treatise on Yugoslav army tactics. When the army capitulated to the German aggressors in 1941, Jovanović went into the woods — not to Draža Mihailović, as many other career officers did, but to the ordinary people, the partisans. During the difficult early period of the struggle, he joined the Communist Party and emerged as both a hero and a brilliant organizer. He built the Yugoslav National Liberation Army from scattered partisan detachments. He led all the key successful

operations of the YNLA against the Germans. If there were operations where the YNLA attacked rather than defended, it was Arso who commanded them. The Supreme Headquarters depended on him — Arso was its heart and mind. More than once, Arso had stopped unit commanders, and at times, it was said, even Tito himself, from making hasty and ill-considered decisions. It was also rumoured that his directness, honesty and uncompromising nature distanced him from certain influential figures in the army — people well-known for their ruthless ambition. It was likely these individuals who were pushing him away from Tito, forcing Arso to spend more time away from Supreme Headquarters, leading operations on the periphery.

I looked into Arso’s open, tanned face, into his intelligent, deep eyes, and impatiently waited to hear what else he would say.

“I heard you’re from Moscow, comrade?”

“Yes, I studied there.”

Jovanović’s face brightened.

“My dream is to visit Moscow. To enroll in a military academy, or at least a basic military school. To march in a column of happy people across the Red Square, to see Comrade Stalin...”

“Yes,” Ranković nodded. “In Belgrade, we’ll establish the same tradition: salutes, fireworks and a grandstand on Terazije.”*

Arso smirked slightly.

“The most important thing is to learn,” he said thoughtfully. Then, turning to me again, he added, “The fighters enjoy your lessons. I thank you for them. We eagerly learn from the Soviet people the Stalinist science of victory. Russia has always been a mighty military power, giving the world

* A square in central Belgrade.

unparalleled commanders. And for us, for our people's army, learning is even more crucial, as our soldiers and commanders were recently lumberjacks, miners, peasants and students. They are going through a harsh school of struggle, achieving victory through courage, yet often suffering heavy losses due to lack of military experience." Jovanović became lost in thought, hunching slightly in his chair. "We pay dearly for this lack of experience!... And much of what has happened in our struggle, especially the battle at Sutjeska, can never be justified or forgotten..."

"Sutjeska? I've heard about that battle."

"From whom?" Ranković asked quickly, gracefully slipping down from the windowsill.

"At today's meeting," I replied, instinctively omitting any mention of Miletić. "You said, Comrade Jovanović, that at Sutjeska, the partisans' bravery was sacrificed due to a lack of military skill. And now you've repeated it."

"Lack of skill, yes! Perhaps..."

The sorrowful crease on Arso's brow deepened even further.

Ranković tapped his palm on the windowsill.

"Time to go, we need to hurry."

Jovanović glanced at him, then stood up.

"Well, we had our talk," he said with a sad smile. "Write to me if you ever need anything. And when we meet in Moscow, we'll have a proper conversation at our leisure. Agreed?"

He shook my hand firmly and left, followed slowly by Ranković...

13

...Miletić and I stood in the church bell tower, watching through the archway as the line of horsemen disappeared into

the riverside thickets, heading south along the road by the Vrbas River. Farewell, Arso!

"Tomorrow we leave too," Jovan said. "Vakuf is a good town. We've grown strong here! Now we can take on any task. Look, our replacements are already arriving. Probably from the Third Corps."

A long column of foot soldiers was marching onto the square.

"Yes, farewell, Gornji Vakuf, farewell, Koce..." I murmured thoughtfully, then turned to Jovan. "Listen, brother. Tell me now about Sutjeska."

"About what?"

"About Sutjeska. You promised."

"Ah..." he glanced around.

No one could overhear us. Only sleek crows, cawing hoarsely, circled the sky around us.

Yet Miletić began his story in almost a whisper.

...It happened in the summer of 1943, after the units of the National Liberation Army, having crossed the Neretva and Drina, broke through from Bosnia into northern Montenegro. The days were wonderfully calm and quiet. The grass in the mountain pastures had grown to its full height, untouched, thick like felt; wild figs and pomegranates were ripening; raspberries, blackberries and blueberries were abundant. Any game that was shot immediately went on the spit or into the pot. In the impenetrable forested mountains of the Piva Plateau, the enemy would not have been able to spot the partisan camp even from the air.

The fighters were overjoyed — here, at last, they could rest, regain their strength and recover! Many were wounded or sick, and even the healthy ones could barely stand on their feet from exhaustion and overwork. Everyone dreamed of at least a brief respite. But that was not to be!

The order “Forward!” once again roused the partisans, worn out by the Great March. They forced their way across the Sutjeska at its mouth, then crossed the raging Piva on a suspension bridge made of cables. This bridge, swaying like a pair of narrow, elongated swings hanging high above the river, rocked violently from side to side as people walked across it. Imagine how difficult it was for a massive army, along with supply carts and field hospitals, to cross such a structure! Many exhausted fighters lost their footing and plunged from this damned bridge into the churning abyss below. Yet the army made it across. And then it became clear that the enemy had deceived the Supreme Command of the YNLA and had set a deadly trap, just as hunters drive a wild beast straight into the sights of concealed shooters...

The main forces of the partisans found themselves encircled within a triangle, bordered on two sides by the steep gorges of the Piva and Tara rivers, and on the third by an almost impassable mountain range with Montenegro’s highest peak, Durmitor. They had escaped one trap only to fall into another. There was plenty to think about... The occupiers seemed to have known in advance that Tito would lead the partisan units precisely to this spot, and they had already fortified key positions in northern Montenegro, concentrating several divisions there. The Italians occupied the heights on the eastern bank of the Tara. The Germans and Chetniks closed the encirclement behind the Piva.

The entire partisan army — 30,000 people — was crammed onto the open, nearly treeless, rocky plateau of Rudine. Even in mid-summer, it was cool and windy here. The only trees that grew were *koscelas* — stoney trees whose tough roots wrapped around and split the rocks. Thorny buckthorn, St. John’s wort and blue thistle dotted the landscape, while at the base of the mountains, dark spruce and pine forests

loomed. There were few settlements — only scattered dry-stone huts where peasants stayed during the summer while grazing their goats and sheep.

In this triangle — an area twenty by ten kilometers — began the mass slaughter of nearly defenceless people. They were bombed from the air and shelled by artillery positioned on the river heights. There was nowhere to take cover. The partisans were dying by the hundreds. More than 5,000 wounded had already accumulated.

The Supreme Headquarters was then stationed at the foot of Durmitor, in an old coniferous forest by the shore of the Black Lake. No bombs fell there, and no shells reached that far. From there, messages of reassurance arrived at the brigades: “Help from the Allies is coming soon; transport planes will arrive and evacuate the severely wounded to an English hospital in Bari, in southern Italy.”

At last, a plane arrived... It landed at the Jezero field and dropped off two British officers and a Yugoslav lieutenant from King Petar’s entourage. They were accompanied by Velebit, who coached the partisans on how to greet the English — their best friends — with more enthusiasm and cheerfulness. The guests questioned the fighters about their needs and, with sympathetic smiles, promised that things would soon take a turn for the better. After spending some time with Tito, the envoys of Prime Minister Churchill departed, leaving the fighters with a sense of confidence that Tito had secured the promised assistance. Everyone eagerly awaited the much-anticipated turn for the better.

During those days, Miletić had the opportunity to visit the Supreme Headquarters. He had to deliver a letter from Brigade Commander Arso Jovanović. Perućica reported on the high morale of the fighters and their readiness to take immediate action — to break out of the encirclement without

waiting for help, since relying on others was a poor strategy, and time was slipping away: “We’re just hanging here, like a drop on a leaf.”

Staff officer Niko Iljić, a participant in the Youth Congress in Bihać and an old acquaintance of Miletić, told him with sincere regret that Jovanović was still in Slovenia, leading partisan operations there. It seemed as if he was deliberately kept away from the Supreme Headquarters because he didn’t get along with Tito. Niko spoke about an operational plan developed by Tito in collaboration with Đilas and Ranković. This plan was all anyone in the headquarters talked about and it was no longer a secret. It was given great importance — praised as the only correct strategic and tactical decision, based on the Napoleonic principle: “As many forces as possible at the decisive point.” But could this principle always be applied in mountainous terrain, where even a line of fighters could barely pass through? Nevertheless, the upcoming operation was expected to replicate the glory of the “brilliant” spring battles on the Neretva and Drina. The plan had been coordinated with and approved by the British. In short, it was as follows: the main strike group was to attack the enemy in the Sutjeska River sector, break through the front, and then continue an aggressive advance toward Kalinovik, Foča and further north, aiming to reach western Bosnia.

While explaining this to Jovan, Iljić bitterly remarked:

“The plan is Napoleonic, no doubt about that. But it looks more like something out of Don Quixote. Right now, we should only be thinking about how to get out of this noose.”

It was bleak by the Black Lake. Bare grey cliffs loomed over the water; the jagged peak of Mount Bear stood ominously, surrounded by sharp, splintered ridges; fallen trunks of ancient trees lay scattered on the ground, giving off a heavy, cloying scent of decay. Nothing disturbed the grim silence of

this isolated place. Only a faint ringing hum could be heard — the sound of air flowing through the thick needles of ancient fir trees, covered in grey moss like cobwebs. Beneath a rain- and wind-worn cliff, Tito’s large tent glowed like a lantern in the dark, heavily guarded.

“What a remote den Tito has holed up in,” thought Jovan. He knew that the locals avoided the Black Lake, fearing it due to an old legend about this “cursed” place.

Miletić returned to his brigade empty-handed. Velebit had told him: “Tell the commander not to worry — others are thinking on his behalf here.” Jovan was already nearing Mount Pirltor, where the brigade was stationed, when a rider unexpectedly caught up with him. It was Iljić. His sharp, gaunt face, with tightly pressed lips, was full of determination. “Faster, comrade, follow me!” he shouted to Jovan.

Soon, the camp’s huts appeared in the forest. Pale but outwardly calm, Iljić dismounted and approached Perućica. Their conversation was brief. Iljić’s words and arguments were straightforward and logical. “For the sake of the future, I advise you: leave,” he said. “Go after Kovačević’s division. It’s not too late today.”

Perućica made his decision. Commissar Magdić supported him. Under the cover of pitch-black night, the entire brigade made its way through the dense forest... Right under the Germans’ noses, they passed through a narrow gorge between Durmitor and the Piva River, heading south into Montenegro. In doing so, they caught the enemy off guard and even captured prisoners and war trophies. Meanwhile, Iljić went to see Division Commander Popović, but Popović, it seemed, did not take his advice. He did not go through the open gate Kovačević had created. Instead, he stayed put with two brigades. After that, Iljić vanished without a trace...

Only a few days later, after waiting in vain for the prom-

ised British medical planes, the partisan units moved again — this time back across the Piva, according to Tito's plan. But by then, the encirclement on the western bank of the river had closed completely. The Germans occupied all the high ground. Two Serbian brigades launched an attack, smashed through the enemy front, and — leaving behind dying comrades at every step — reached Sutjeska. They should have immediately followed up with a push to join the main forces and crossed the Sutjeska River under cover of night. For a brief moment, conditions were actually favourable. The partisans had broken through in two places — Kovačević and Perućica in the south, the Serbian brigades in the northwest. The Germans were clearly uncertain about where the main force of the YNLA would go next. If they had acted swiftly and boldly, they could have broken through in either direction.

However, the opportune moment was lost. Tito ordered the entire army to spend the night in the Sutjeska Valley. The Supreme Headquarters, burdened with a large pack convoy, was unable to quickly leave its well-established position near Durmitor. It needed time to gather itself and move out. That entire headquarters armada slept beneath the rustling pines, while overnight the Germans regrouped their forces, closed the breached ring and secured advantageous positions for an offensive. By morning, the partisans once again found themselves in an unfavourable operational and tactical position.

The Sutjeska River, squeezed between sheer rock formations, seems to rip through them as it flows into the dark green Drina. Just as the cliffs press against the Sutjeska, as if unwilling to let it merge with the Drina, so too were the partisans crushed — trapped between the rocky banks of the Sutjeska and the Piva by Hitler's troops, alongside hordes of Chetniks and Ustaše. Panic erupted. Some partisans took their own lives... Certain units, launching desperate counter-attacks,

used bayonets and grenades to carve a path toward Lubinovo and Borje.

In the Supreme Headquarters, chaos was likely just as great. Tito sent couriers after Kovačević, ordering him to return with his division and cover the army's rear. Sava turned back toward the "triangle of death," but by then, none of the Supreme Command remained there. No one had waited for Kovačević. Each man thought only of saving his own skin. Đilas disappeared in an unknown direction. Meanwhile, Tito and Ranković, along with their guards, managed to slip through the encirclement and escape. By what route? That remained a mystery to the partisans.

Perućica's brigade, having left the encirclement in time and without losses, attacked the enemy from the rear and managed to save a small portion of the trapped fighters. The rest of the divisions and brigades, abandoned by Tito in the rearguard — or rather, to their fate — had no choice but to charge head-on into enemy positions under the command of their own officers. They had no other way out and perished almost entirely.

Thus, in the small area between the Piva and Tara rivers, more than 10,000 of Yugoslavia's finest sons and daughters perished — including all the wounded and sick. Many national heroes, seasoned fighters and true proletarian warriors who had been among the first to rise against the occupiers also fell. Among them was the commander of the Third Shock Division, Sava Kovačević — the most legendary partisan leader. He was, in every sense, a fearless warrior, intelligent and resolute. His fighters followed him with absolute confidence, wherever he led. Luck always seemed to be on his side. The people composed songs and legends about his exploits, calling him "the Montenegrin Chapayev." He even resembled Chapayev in appearance. Rumours circulated that

certain figures within the Supreme Headquarters did not like Kovačević. Perhaps some envied his immense popularity? Who knows... The Third Shock Division, defending hospitals and field infirmaries, fought to the death. In his final moments, Sava Kovačević called upon his fighters to die with honour — and was the first to charge at the enemy.

“Such was the tragedy of Sutjeska,” Jovan concluded grimly.

Noticing my scepticism toward his story, he rummaged through his field bag and pulled out a copy of *Proleter*. Under the headline “Notes of a Partisan,” excerpts from Vlado Dedijer’s diary described the events that had taken place the previous year between the Piva and Tara rivers.

“Monday, May 23. — The Old Man* assigned me to prepare for a meeting with the English. I will be the translator. Čiča Janko** is organizing a ceremonial reception. The Old Man says we must leave Piva as soon as possible, but we are being held back, waiting for British aid. If we weren’t waiting for it, we would have left here days ago.”

“Tuesday, June 23. — Priest Vlado Zečević*** says that while escaping from the encirclement, he walked over the bodies of our comrades. Almost every dead fighter was disfigured. The Germans were executing our exhausted and wounded soldiers. In one forest, he came across a familiar doctor from Nikšić, sitting motionless on a tree stump, his tangled head hanging low. Starving and utterly exhausted, he had lost his mind... According to initial reports, we have 2,000 dead...”

“Monday, August 9. — Great joy at headquarters. At last,

* Tito.

** The partisan alias of Moša Pijade.

*** A former Chetnik who later became Minister of Internal Affairs in Tito’s government.

two liberators arrived. The British dropped six anti-tank rifles for us. Excellent weapons. But there is very little ammunition — just a few rounds for each. Instead of the four hundred sets of clothing they promised, they dropped seventy. They also sent us five portable radios, one of which was already broken. The British in Cairo have given us two conditions for using these radios: (a) they must only be assigned to units of at least 3,000 fighters; (b) they must operate using only British encryption. Both conditions were accepted.”

“Strange conditions. They sound more like an ultimatum...” I thought, overwhelmed by the troubling thoughts stirred by Jovan’s story. Trying to make sense of it all — both for myself and for him — I said:

“Sometimes things go wrong. Maybe someone betrayed you, leaking your route to the Germans.”

“Maybe...”

“But now Sutjeska is in the past, it’s behind us...”

“The past?” Jovan smirked bitterly. “I used to think the same, brother... That it was over and wouldn’t happen again. But what about Majdanpek? What about Bor?”

“What about Bogovina? What about Sinj? What about Gornji Vakuf? Why do you only speak of defeats?”

“Bogovina? Gornji Vakuf?”

Jovan cast his gaze over the small town that our battalion was set to leave the next day — such a neat little town, dressed in white snow, framed by forest and river. With a tinge of bitterness, he said:

“You see, all the successes and victories happen mostly when we take the initiative ourselves. But then what is the role of strategic plans and those who make them? What is the role of leadership? How can one juggle with such matters — turn black into white? Read this as well.”

He pointed to the editorial in *Proleter*.

I read aloud:

“The operational skill of the Supreme Headquarters reached its peak in this fateful, decisive battle. The foresight and cunning of our command, the heroism of our army and its moral strength have brought us yet another historic victory.”

“Can you believe this? They’re talking about Sutjeska...”

I remained silent for a long time. So this was the truth about Sutjeska! I kept replaying Jovanović’s words in my head: “where the courage and bravery of the partisans were sacrificed to incompetence in warfare...” But perhaps it wasn’t just incompetence — perhaps it was the arrogance and conceit of so-called strategists, their reckless disregard for the actual conditions on the ground? Maybe that’s why they tried to cover up the flaws and weaknesses of their strategy under the label of an historic victory — to avoid responsibility.

These suspicions seemed so improbable that I didn’t dare voice them even to my blood brother, though I felt he was thinking the same thing...

“Listen,” I finally spoke. “But now do you believe we will be able to carry out the combat mission that Arso Jovanović spoke about yesterday?”

“I do,” Miletić answered simply. “Now that Arso is with us.”

And with a joyful smile, he turned his face toward the strong wind, carrying the first timid scent of spring.

14

...The winding, ice-covered trail, emerging from the thickets of the river valley, stretched along the ridges of the Bosnian ore mountains, passing through a barren deciduous forest. At times, it disappeared into rocky gorges, where we

were pierced to the bone by the sharp wind and sprayed with the cold, burning mist — sometimes from the swift upper reaches of the Vrbas River, sometimes from the churning Neretvica. We sank into the snow, stumbled over stones in the washed-out streambeds, slipped and fell on the ice-slicked limestone slabs.

We climbed yet another mountain, crossed yet another valley. It seemed as if a flat road would finally begin, but beyond, it was always the same: mountain, valley, descent, ascent. Bosnian trails, Bosnian forested slopes — so deceptive...

But none of this mattered to the fighters. Their songs now rang out louder and more cheerfully than before. We greeted with delight the first ray of sunlight, accidentally slipping through the gloomy mountain ravine where the trail wound, and the sight of the young moon’s white crescent appearing in the blue sky above a snow-capped peak. And even if the mountains before us had been ten times steeper, the rivers and chasms many times wider and deeper, and the forests even more impenetrable — we would have overcome all obstacles and hardships just the same.

The battalion was driven by a clear purpose. We were marching to reunite with our brigade, heading straight for the Mount Ivan region to operate as part of the brigade along enemy supply lines between Sarajevo and Mostar. The narrow-gauge railway connecting these two cities was occasionally used by the Germans to manoeuvre reserves, moving reinforcements from Croatia and Serbia into Herzegovina and Dalmatia. This was not yet the main combat mission that Arso Jovanović had spoken of, but it was the first step toward its fulfillment.

We remembered Arso warmly. His disarming smile had left a deep impression, as had his weathered face with its fine features and his jet-black eyes, sometimes filled with gentle

attentiveness, sometimes burning with righteous anger.

It felt as if he were invisibly accompanying the battalion, hearing the cheerful voices, the songs, seeing the fighters overcoming the hardships of the journey, understanding the manoeuvre... Thinking about this manoeuvre, I made a silent vow: I would keep fighting without sparing my life, doing whatever I could to help my comrades in the division, who might even now be making their way here...

On the second day of the march, Vučetin took additional security measures in the morning — reinforcing the vanguard and sending reconnaissance ahead. We moved silently, ready at any moment to deploy for battle. As the fog rolled down from the heights, we saw before us a curved, forested ridge.

“That’s Ivan Pass,” Miletić pointed. “Mount Ivan. Named after a Russian Ivan, no one knows when. We’re getting close... Branko, you’re from around here, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Kumanudi replied. “Why?”

“Will you invite us over?”

“Of course, I will! My father will be overjoyed. He’ll treat everyone to a sla...”

Branko suddenly choked on the last syllable, his mouth left hanging open. His comma-shaped eyebrows shot up on his bumpy forehead, and the stuck “a” burst from his throat in a drawn-out scream:

“Airplanes!”

He recoiled, and a few soldiers darted aside with him.

I looked up at the sky: at high altitude, two hawks were slowly soaring, trailing long tails.

“Those aren’t airplanes! They’re birds!” I shouted at the top of my lungs.

The soldiers who had scattered stared upward, embarrassed and slowly returned to their places in the column. Branko just spat to the side:

“The devil played a trick on me!”

Upon learning the cause of the panic, Vučetin gave Branko a look of irritation — his round, shiny face and darting yellow eyes — and said angrily:

“Upon arrival, three days under arrest.”

Katnić, overhearing this, rode past indifferently. After the Party meeting attended by Jovanović, he no longer interfered with the commander’s orders and seemed to show no interest in them at all. Overtaking the column, he dismounted and sat under a tree.

I saw the political commissar motion Branko over with a finger. The man, trudging at the rear of the platoon with his head down, hesitantly approached. “Now he’s going to lecture him,” I thought...

Zagoryanov moved ahead with the column, while a shaken Branko, trembling, stood before the political commissar.

“You got yourself into trouble, my friend,” Katnić said. “And from Arso too?”

“I did, may the Holy Virgin preserve me,” Branko replied in a tearful voice, lowering his eyes, bracing for a harsh reprimand.

“Ah, no luck for you.” To Branko’s surprise, Katnić shook his head with apparent sympathy. “They don’t appreciate real fighters... Here you are, fighting, shedding blood...”

“I am.”

“Sacrificing your life...”

“Uh-huh,” Branko nodded.

“Starving...”

“Uh-huh!” he agreed eagerly. Gaining confidence that a scolding wasn’t coming, he spoke up more boldly and quickly: “They always overlook me. I even wanted to complain to you, comrade political commissar. Yesterday, for example, my bread portion was the smallest. And the lard was distributed

unfairly too. By God, unfairly. Laušek — what a crook...

"Ah! The Czech? Wait, wait..." Katnić fell silent, focused on some thought that had come to him. "A Czech? A crook... I see... And Zagoryanov is friends with him? Even made him a platoon sergeant? So that's how it is... Keep an eye on that Czech. Watch how he distributes food, what he talks about with Zagoryanov. And in general, come to me if anything happens."

"To you?" Branko's eyes widened.

"Yes, to me. Why are you so surprised? Just make sure no one sees you coming. And listen to Zagoryanov, don't stir up panic... There will be more important matters. Got it?"

"Understood! Thank you! I never knew you were so kind," Branko babbled. "That Zagoryanov is always picking on me, saying I lack military discipline, making me wash laundry. But washing only wears clothes out faster."

"Well, he might have a point about the laundry. You're quite a slob, to be honest. But he doesn't like you because you're a tradesman, a bourgeois. Back in the Soviet Union, they liquidated all people like you as a class. Got it?"

"So, it'll be the same for us?" Branko asked anxiously.

"We'll see when the time comes," Katnić answered evasively. "You're a good lad, quick-witted, sharp. We need people like you. That's why I called you over." He shifted to a business-like tone. "I wanted to encourage you. It's my duty to boost morale, to lift people's spirits. Yes. I like you. A reliable guy. In Gornji Vakuf, Vučetin wanted to send you on a reconnaissance mission instead of Petkovski. I stood up for you. And I won't let anything happen to you now. Stick close to me. Watch out for Vučetin. He hates Croats, like all Montenegrins do."

"Damn them!" Branko hissed. "They weren't cut down enough."

"Shh, you fool!" Katnić wagged a finger at him. "Run along, catch up with the unit," he gave him a push. "And don't forget to say, if anyone asks, that I was dressing you down for your panic-mongering."

With a crestfallen look, Branko ran back to his place, while Katnić, handing his horse over to Pantera, continued on foot.

"Damn it," he thought as he walked among the soldiers trudging at the rear of the company, "Ranković is right after all — you have to go among the people, study their psychology and build the authority that a leader needs. If these people are to follow us, they must trust us, love us. And winning their trust and love isn't all that hard — a handout, a kind or flattering word, a promise to fulfil a personal request, and before you know it, you're popular. Yes, everything would be fine if it weren't for these dangerous assignments..."

Katnić sighed heavily, recalling his last conversation with Ranković in Gornji Vakuf. That morning, while Jovanović was speaking with the soldiers at the gymnasium, Ranković had wanted to survey the town's surroundings from the church bell tower. There, gazing thoughtfully into the distance, he had said: "So, dear Blažo, the situation is escalating. New circumstances are arising. An imminent threat is looming... And you're still busy with theories? Is everything in order in your battalion? Is the yeast still in the dough?... You know who I'm talking about, don't you?" And, placing his hands on the stone parapet, staring even more intently eastward, he continued in a quiet voice: "Move quickly, act. While there's still time. We must mobilize all our traditional national forces as soon as possible. If any Chetnik or Ustaše officers switch to our side, create conditions for them befitting their rank. I brought an order regarding this. And on the other hand, don't forget about your connection with the people. Stay close to

the soldiers... In general, you must combine the qualities of a lion and a fox. Act cunningly, but boldly and decisively. I've given you a task, and I expect it to be carried out." As he said this, Ranković looked Katnić straight in the eyes with his sharp gaze, sending a shiver down his spine...

"Yeah," Katnić thought, stumbling over the ruts in the trail. "No joking with him. He has his own man in the battalion. From OZNA. But who is it? Who should I suspect? What secrecy... It's terrifying! You feel like you're being seen through at every step. A theoretical paper won't get me out of this one."

But there was also something reassuring, even uplifting, in this unsettling closeness to Ranković. After all, Marko spoke to him in a way he spoke to no one else. And that made sense. They were like-minded. They were both concerned about Yugoslavia's future: freedom of orientation... the leading role of the Serbian nation... command positions, the leaders of the people. It was all very enticing. The vast Balkan horizons lay ahead... But what if they were obscured by those who needed to be removed as soon as possible... But how to remove them? It would probably be easier to drown a fish in water.

Katnić's train of thought was interrupted. He gave a friendly nod to a soldier who turned around in surprise after Katnić accidentally stepped on the back of his heel.

"And where's your horse?" a soldier asked.

"Why would I need one?" Katnić replied modestly. "It's my duty to share the hardships of the march with all of you."

And he strode forward briskly, sweating from the unaccustomed fast pace. The road to the people's hearts was tough — oh, so tough! Even walking alongside them was necessary.

...After listening to the reconnaissance report, Vučetin announced our combat mission: to seize the settlement of Raštelica, near the Konjic-Sarajevo railway line.

We entered the dense forest in complete silence. Branko managed to stand out again — blundering through dry bushes like a bear, loudly snapping branches as he went. I reprimanded him. Muttering an apology, he explained that he was in a hurry to reach Raštelica because, thank God, his father, Mikoš Kumanudi, lived in that very village. He added that he'd be delighted if I came to his house for lunch...

The enemy retreated from Raštelica with unusual haste, offering almost no resistance. Buoyed by our success, we pursued the Chetniks and Germans along the road to Tarčin until we were completely exhausted and returned to the village, where we were to wait for our brigade to join us.

The villagers had already prepared for our arrival. A crowd gathered, the church bells ringing, carrying a tri-coloured Yugoslav flag — held up at the ends by children so it wouldn't drag on the ground — and a banner on long poles with the slogan: "*Živela narodno-oslobodilačka borba!*"* A thin, stooped man of about fifty, bent like a broken pole, stood at the front. He wore an unbuttoned coat, revealing a white vest with a pocket watch chain, and held out a carved wooden platter with bread and salt.

"*Živeli,*** brothers-in-arms, partisans!" he proclaimed solemnly, offering the platter to Vučetin.

The crowd cheered "Hurrah!" and rushed to offer the soldiers whatever they had — tobacco, dried fruit, boiled eggs,

* Long live the National Liberation Struggle! (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

** Cheers (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

flatbreads. They began inviting us into their homes.

Miletić led me to the man from whom Vučetin had accepted the honorary platter:

“Meet him, brother. This is Marko Petrović, a school-teacher. We’ll be staying at his place — I knew him from last year.”

“Welcome to my home, comrade! It will be an honour,” Petrović said, unexpectedly uncovering his cropped, greying head and bowing low to me.

It seemed that Jovan had already told him that I was Russian.

Petrović lived with his wife, Zorica, in a small wooden house whitewashed with lime. Something about the three modest rooms felt strangely familiar, almost homely: woven rugs made of colourful fabric scraps covered the floors, lace doilies and embroidered pillowcases adorned the furniture, potted ficus trees stood in the corners, and on the walls hung reproductions of paintings by Aivazovsky and Shishkin. In one corner, an old brass samovar stood proudly on a shelf. Petrović had even managed to collect a small Russian library over the years, complete with bound issues of *Niva* and *Rodina* magazines, but the Chetniks had recently burned it all as “suspicious.” They had nearly killed the teacher himself over a small metal lyre pin he wore on his lapel as the leader of the village choir — accusing him of harbouring communist sympathies.

Several days passed. Vučetin waited for orders from Perućica regarding our rendezvous with the other battalions, waiting for battle commands. Meanwhile, life in the garrison began to settle into its usual routine.

On the first quiet Sunday evening, Zorica — Petrović’s wife — invited the soldiers from my platoon over for tea.

We gathered around the large table, where a stout samo-

var puffed out steam through the vent in its lid, creating a warm, homely atmosphere.

“Oh, what a clever contraption!” Vasko marvelled.

It was the first time he had ever seen a samovar. For many others, the strong, fragrant tea was also a novelty — if they had ever drunk it before, it was only as an expensive remedy for colds.

Zorica placed a dish of paprikaš — stewed meat in a tomato sauce with red pepper — on the table, along with a fresh round loaf of bread, which smelled of baked cabbage leaves, a scent that instantly brought back childhood memories. Branko took a deep sniff and smacked his lips in delight. His thick lips glistened with grease — he had probably already sneaked a meal at his father’s.

“Come, friends, break this bread together,” Petrović invited. “Let’s break it in the name of our friendship with the Russians. For friendship!” he repeated with conviction. “According to our old custom, if we break bread together, we will remain loyal friends for life.”

Everyone reached for the loaf.

As they tore it apart, Petrović straightened up and, visibly moved, declared:

“*Živeo ruski narod!*”*

“*Živeo!*” the fighters echoed in unison, their voices loud and firm.

“Honour and gratitude to the Soviet people,” the teacher continued, his eyes fixed on me. “To them, we send our first salute and our deepest thanks... Their land stretches vast across the globe. When dusk falls over the Baltic shores, the sun is already rising in the Far East. Over your homeland, Comrade Zagoryanov, shines an unsetting sun. That Russian sun lights up the whole world. It shines upon us too!”

* Long live the Russian people! (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

“Bravo, bravo!” a sudden voice called from the doorway.

The room was dimly lit by wicks burning in saucers of oil, and we hadn’t noticed when Katnić entered — with another man in tow.

“We were passing by and saw the light. Good evening!”

Nodding to those gathered, the political commissar removed his garrison cap and thick overcoat. Smoothing down his sparse hair, he turned to the stranger who was dressed in a British military coat.

“Come in, why are you hesitating? You’re among comrades here.”

The man stepped forward hesitantly.

He was stocky, with a large, clean-shaven face so closely shorn it had a bluish tint, marked by a scar running across his cheek. A large, white tin star gleamed on his cap.

“Salute, comrades!” he greeted us with an outstretched hand.

His voice was deep and resonant.

“We were passing by and heard the commotion,” Katnić said casually, glancing around the room.

“Please, have a seat,” Petrović quickly pulled out a chair for him.

Jovan, who had just been smiling enthusiastically, suddenly frowned and jabbed his cigarette butt into the ashtray with a nervous flick.

The room fell silent. Everyone exchanged cautious glances. Outside, the wind rustled bare tree branches against the house’s tiled roof.

“Comrades!” Katnić suddenly spoke up. “I forgot to introduce you. This is Captain Vulo Kuštrinović, an officer of our old army. He left Mihailović’s command and has now been assigned as the new chief of staff for our battalion.”

“If I may,” Kuštrinović removed his cap and sat at the

edge of the table.

He seemed to realize that his arrival was ill-timed. The scar on his cheek darkened as blood rushed to his face. His black, glossy eyes darted warily over the fighters’ faces.

“Chetnik,” Jovan muttered quietly, but everyone heard.

The soldiers all turned to Kuštrinović. One by one, without exchanging a word, they began rising from the table. Đuro even demonstratively slammed his glass onto his saucer. Zorica, smiling awkwardly, poured tea for the unexpected guests.

“A remarkably delicious drink!” Katnić acted as if he hadn’t noticed the growing tension. “I understand now why Russians love it so much. Do you like it, Captain?”

Kuštrinović shrugged and, looking flustered, dropped his gaze. Katnić, with a carefree smile, absentmindedly stirred his tea with a spoon.

“What’s the matter with all of you?” he finally asked in feigned surprise. “Why did you stand up from the table and go silent? Ah, I see! The captain arrived, and the rank-and-file soldiers don’t dare sit in his presence? Captain, do you permit them to sit?”

“He’s a Chetnik!” Vasko shouted angrily. “He murdered my mother!”

The boy’s hand instinctively reached for his weapon. The fighters, undeterred by Katnić’s presence, murmured threateningly.

“What nerve!” Laušek grumbled loudly. “Unbelievable!”

Kuštrinović’s cheeks twitched. With exaggerated indignation, he declared:

“I am a captain and your chief of staff. I demand respect!”

“Well, well!” Jovan snapped. “You pinned on that star a little too soon.”

“Oh, is that so?!” Kuštrinović heaved himself up from his seat. “You don’t trust me? In that case, I have no choice but

to leave. Excuse me,” he gave Katnić a curt nod, then stormed toward the exit, slamming the door behind him.

Branko, taking advantage of the commotion, continued chewing his meat with great focus. After swallowing the last bite, he leaned in close to Katnić’s ear:

“Scandal. That Laušek again...”

“Annoying,” the political commissar muttered through clenched teeth. Then, glancing sideways at Miletić, he added, “And you, Korchagin, couldn’t hold yourself back? You won’t get away with this. Kuštrinović was in Đurić’s detachment, yes, but then he defected to us and earned our trust — he now holds an official position. None of us have the right to insult him. I believe I already read you Tito’s order: ‘All officers from enemy formations who switch to our side retain their previous ranks and positions.’”

Jovan remained silent, weighed down by his thoughts.

He knew that Radoslav Đurić’s detachment had been the most ruthless of all Mihailović’s *čete*. That ataman had used refined torture methods when dealing with partisans, especially their defenceless families. Now, sensing Mihailović’s impending downfall, Đurić had defected to the YNLA with a thousand Chetniks. Ranković had welcomed him and, for the time being, assigned him as deputy chief of staff of the First Corps. The Chetniks were merging into the partisan ranks. Kuštrinović, it seemed, was now our problem to deal with.

I tried to restrain myself, remembering Katnić’s warning — not to bring my own rules into someone else’s monastery — but every fibre of my being rebelled. Why had Katnić brought a Chetnik into our peaceful, friendly evening?

Unable to hold back, I spoke more bluntly than Jovan. I said that former collaborators had no place among freedom fighters, that no one would forget their crimes. They had gone

too far in aiding the enemy — people would never believe in their transformation.

“No one will trust them!” the fighters supported me. “They wear beards like apostles, but they’re nothing more than dogs!”

Katnić realized he had made a mistake by introducing the Chetnik in such a manner. He shot me an angry glance and, with the air of a man losing patience, began trying to prove that I was wrong and simply uninformed. In his view, those above understood the situation better than we did.

“We do not have the right to question the actions of our superiors. That is not our way,” he emphasized. He pointed to the example of Father Vlado, who had once been a commander under Mihailović but was now Tito’s Minister of Internal Affairs. He then declared that soon, all the Chetniks would likely dissolve into the national liberation movement, as their backers — the royal government of King Petar in Cairo and the London Yugoslavs — were beginning to take Tito seriously and intended to reach an agreement with him, accepting all his conditions. It wouldn’t be surprising, he claimed, if one fine morning, King Petar himself landed in Yugoslavia, ready to finally join the partisan struggle under Tito’s command!

“Let him try!” Miletić fumed. “We won’t accept him — we’ll send him back to the British!”

“Of course,” Katnić quickly agreed. “But his arrival is a possibility, and such things can only happen here, in the Balkans, where the supraclass unity of the Serbian nation is paramount,” he concluded with a sense of pride. “In all of this, Comrade Zagoryanov, it is only natural that you find it difficult to understand.”

Yes, it was truly difficult to make sense of this kaleidoscope of rivalries and intrigues, opportunism and defections, political hostility and betrayals. I recalled Vučetin’s words

about the Balkan powder keg... “Does Ranković know about Kuštrinović?” I wondered. “Perhaps appointing a Chetnik to the battalion will turn out to be just as much of a mistake as the execution of the two Montenegrins near Sinj?”

The room grew uneasy and quiet.

Petrović, barely managing to contain his own agitation, tried to smooth over the incident as a good host:

“Let’s continue our tea, comrades. Nothing extraordinary has happened. The captain, it seems, has realized the folly of his past oath never to cut his hair or shave until Mihailović defeated the communists. He has come to understand that the Chetniks will turn into porcupines before that ever happens. And now, as we see, he’s shaving diligently.”

Petrović attempted to joke.

“Come on, friends. To the table! Zorica, pour everyone some strong tea.”

But no one touched their tea. Our evening was ruined for good...

16

...The streams, at first timidly stirring beneath the ice, grew wider, foaming as they rushed toward the Neretva with a gurgling sound. The sky grew bluer by the day. To the northeast, flocks of cranes stretched into the sky in triangular formations. Their long cries carried like the call of marching war trumpets. I followed them with a lingering gaze, a bitter-sweet ache in my heart: there they go, flying back to their nests, far away — perhaps to my own Kursk homeland, to the quiet backwaters of the Seym and the Psyol...

We were still stationed in Raštelica. Whenever I met with Vučetin, he would narrow his tired, feverishly gleaming eyes and grumble with dissatisfaction. Everything was unfold-

ing quite differently from what he had anticipated. We had not joined up with the brigade operating somewhere south of Konjic, nor had we engaged in any major battles over the Mostar-Sarajevo supply line. We limited ourselves to brief raids on the enemy stationed in Tarčin and to sabotaging the railway tracks along the Konjic-Sarajevo line. However, the Germans, protected by an armoured train, would promptly restore whatever we had destroyed. In short, as Vučetin put it, “We took a swing at an oak tree and snapped a blade of grass instead!” The reason for this lay in an order from the corps headquarters, now stationed somewhere near Drvar. Signed by Popović, it stated:

“In the interest of coordinating operations and in light of the expected aid from England and the United States in the form of supplies, weapons and ammunition — including explosives needed for railway sabotage — I strictly prohibit any troop movements without my direct authorization... Commanders will be held personally accountable... Failure to comply will be punished without mercy. Death to fascism, freedom to the people! Koča Popović.”

With such an order in place, there wasn’t much room for initiative!

Nevertheless, our time was not wasted. The fighters spent their days training in marksmanship and tactical drills, and studying political literacy in discussion groups.

Our new chief of staff, Kuštrinović, diligently worked on drafting various training programs and schedules. He personally oversaw the soldiers’ training, constantly correcting commanders and flaunting his knowledge of the French field service regulations. He tried to be on familiar terms with everyone, but no one ever called him “comrade.” Kuštrinović provoked universal dislike. If not for this general attitude toward him among both soldiers and officers, Jovan and I

would likely have faced trouble over the incident at Petrović's house. But it all blew over. In the end, interest in Kuštrinović faded. Other concerns, other troubles loomed ahead.

...April had already arrived. Up in the mountains, the bare branches of the *koscela* still trembled in the cold wind, but in the Neretva valley, the walnut trees had unfurled their greenish catkins, the hornbeam and holly maple were adorned with blossoms, and the wild rose bushes blushed with fresh buds. The plum orchards foamed with white blossoms, bordered by the delicate lace of blackthorn. Even the oaks, not yet fully awakened and stripped of their lower branches for livestock fodder, resembled evergreen cypresses, their trunks entwined by thick ivy.

Right behind Petrović's house, our feet sank into carpets of yellow *bukvica** flowers and young, silky grass. All of nature was coming to life, swelling with sap and strength. But the soldiers were starving. They searched between rocks for *gomoljika*** using its tubers to cook a gruel resembling porridge. They scraped edible Icelandic moss from tree trunks, hunted rooks or dug through gardens, searching for last year's root vegetables. Training had come to a halt. Exhausted men fell asleep during lessons.

The peasants shared everything they had, but even their last reserves were running dry. Petrović could offer nothing but a small plate of *kačamak* for lunch. Even our quartermaster, Bogdan Rakić — who usually worked wonders in supply matters — had lost hope. In Raštelica, he had already slaughtered nearly all the pack horses, and now his greatest "prize" was an ox hide. He roasted it over a fire and divided this "roast" into rations.

Every morning, we woke up hoping that maybe today

* Beech-nut (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

** Edible underground fungi (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

the promised aid would arrive, only to go to sleep with bitter disappointment that yet another day had passed without any change.

"Things are looking grim," Đuro Filipović told me one day.

His long, pale face had grown gaunt, his bones protruding more sharply, and a dry, hungry gleam flickered in his sunken eyes.

"It's worse that you've lost heart," I replied.

And then we talked about the character of a communist, about the character of resilient people who do not bend, do not whine, but persevere to achieve their goals.

"Look!"

A long plantain stem that I had stepped on, nearly pressing it into the mud, sprang back up, standing tall and proud once more.

"There are people like that too. Nothing can break them, nothing can crush them..."

Filipović gazed at me thoughtfully.

"I understand. But you see, comrade..." He pulled a well-worn copy of *Proleter* from his pocket — the very same newspaper Arso Jovanović had brought to Gornji Vakuf, which he had carefully kept in his satchel ever since. "I read this all the time. Slowly but surely, I've taught myself to read. I know what a communist should be. One must endure hardships and storms... But then there's Branko — he's a communist too, right? And yet, he's like a *prasac*!* He complains all day that his stomach is stuck to his spine from hunger, yet at night, under his blanket, he smacks his lips as he chews. He eats anything and everything! And in the morning, he's the first to grab at old radishes, always bickering with Laušek. It's disgusting!"

* Pig (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

I fell into thought. Branko brought a lot of chaos into our squad's daily life. He had also been unsettling me with his strange, persistent presence. No matter who I spoke with, he always seemed to be nearby. His round, unblinking eyes never left me, watching my every move.

I pushed away the thought that I was being watched. "By whom? Could it be OZNA?" Nonsense, that's impossible!

Out of curiosity, I decided to accept Branko's invitation to visit his father's home.

17

"...*Hvala, hvala!* Many thanks for taking the trouble to come," a stately peasant in a black wool suit and a velvet vest greeted me at the doorstep of a brick house, bowing obsequiously.

"Welcome! *Boga mu*, it's good that you came. *Hvala vam*,"* he repeated in his deep, rolling voice, seating me in the sitting room at a round, low table. "Sit down, please. Hey, wife, bring our guest some coffee, and my pipe! Do you see what kind of man has come to visit us?"

A woman with a motionless, mask-like face, dressed in a wide pleated skirt and jingling with old ducats, imperials, zecchinos and Turkish medjidies hanging from her chest, disappeared behind a partition in the corner. It was clear that Branko had already warned them about my visit. His mother had dressed up, and the coffee — without which no Yugoslav would sit down for a conversation with a guest — had already been brewed. I was served a tiny cup, while the old man puffed on his short-stemmed *čibuk* pipe. He lavishly praised the Russians and the Soviet Union, peppering his speech generously with words like socialism and progress. I took a sip of

* Thank you (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

the astringent acorn brew. The hostess poured me another. She was about to go for a third cup — traditionally a sign that it was time for the guest to leave — when Branko grew restless.

"This coffee isn't real. That's enough!" he said, glancing at his father with a certain expression, but since the old man didn't catch on, he added bluntly: "You could at least serve us something more substantial."

"Of course. I won't spare anything for a Russian guest. Ask for whatever you like."

"Well then? Do you have kajmak?"

"*Pa*,* that's not available right now! We have everything except kajmak!"

"What about meat?"

"Meat? We don't keep meat, you know that, *bolan!* Partisans are the best army, but today one group comes: give! Tomorrow, another: give! And where am I supposed to get more?"

"So what do you have?" Branko asked irritably. "For that camera I gave you, you could at least feed us properly."

"Whatever you want, we have it all," the old man softened. "Hey, wife! Bring the soup!"

Jingling her coins with every movement, the hostess set down a pewter tray with a large bowl. She pulled a hardened piece of bread from a brightly painted chest with a hanging lock.

"This is soup made from my own vegetables. Specially prepared for you," the old man explained.

Branko dipped his spoon into the whitish liquid with some brownish flakes floating in it.

"And where's the meat?" he asked with disappointment.

* Well (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

“You have some, Father, up in the *dimnjak*.”*

“Ah, true, *bolan*! I do have a little, I suppose.” Mikoš Kumanudi shot his son an annoyed look, climbed up a small ladder, and pulled down a sizable ham from the chimney.

Tearing the cured meat apart with his hairy fingers and handing out pieces, he said:

“The Holy Virgin is my witness — I didn’t eat it myself, I didn’t give it to my son, I saved it for guests. I am an hospitable man. My father was a Greek from Salonika, but I consider myself a Croat. Croats are the finest nation in the Balkans. Tito is a Croat too — may the Mother of God protect him. I even know him a little.”

“Well, then, tell us about it.”

Branko looked at me with pride, as if to say: “See what kind of connections my father has!”

“Yes, we served under the same emperor, Josip Broz and I. Under Franz Joseph. Tito was a corporal, and I was a *pan-dur*** and I often travelled to Vienna.” The old man glanced at a photograph in a gilded frame, where he posed in his former gendarmerie glory. “The Marshal and I even met in Vienna.”

“Where?” I asked.

“In a cabaret. He had just won second place in a fencing competition. He loved honours — oh, how he loved them! If he hasn’t forgotten how I handed him a glass of mastika back then, he’ll help Branko and me make something of ourselves. I’d like a bit more land, and my son — a pastry shop in Belgrade. *Daj Bože u zdravlje**** Eat up, why aren’t you?”

I recalled Vuja Hrstić, his humble hut, his poverty, his

* Chimney (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

** Militiaman.

*** May God grant it in good health (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

modest hospitality and his sincere love for Russians. And then there was Mikoš Kumanudi... And these people, I thought, are what Katnić calls a “united whole”?! But they are as fundamentally different as their sons, Vasko and Branko! How will their conflicting interests and aspirations be reconciled after the war, when they set about building socialism in their country together? And what kind of socialism will that be? After all, old Kumanudi’s socialism is having more land; Katnić’s socialism is “Serbia above all”; Branko’s socialism is a pastry shop in Belgrade; Maček’s socialism is “*polako, polako*” — slowly working his way up the career ladder, and maybe marrying a wealthy bride with a house on Terazije. Even the Chetnik Kuštrinović had his own “dreams of socialism”... And I remembered Arso Jovanović’s words — that many of the current communists, hastily recruited into the Party as part of the “social base expansion,” would have to be discarded later and, perhaps, even fought against. Yes, that would be inevitable...

Lost in thought, I didn’t immediately notice the growing hum of engines. It grew louder. I leaned out of the window. American Dakota-type transport planes were circling over Mount Ivan, over Raštelica.

A commotion broke out in the village. Hesitant voices could be heard:

“They’ve arrived? The Allies?”

Katnić came bounding down the street, binoculars in hand.

“Americans! Supplies! We made it!” he shouted.

I ran outside, Branko behind me.

The soldiers exchanged excited glances, watching the planes. Suddenly, parachutes detached from the fuselages, carrying cargo.

But what was this? The parachutes were drifting too far

from us — toward Tarčin, where the Chetniks were.

“The wind is working against us,” Laušek muttered gloomily. “A celestial misalignment...”

“It’s just chance,” Katnić assured him. “Just watch, they’ll drop for us next. And stop your foolish jokes!” he snapped at Laušek.

The planes made another pass, and again, parachutes carrying long bundles drifted toward Tarčin.

Jankov pulled off his glasses in dark contemplation:

“Are infants piloting those planes? Do they not know how to drop properly?”

“It’s not like they’re doing it on purpose!” Katnić snapped. “Look, look, watch closely! Put your glasses back on and see that I’m always right.”

He was triumphant. A portion of the transports, now accompanied by a newly-arrived reconnaissance plane, adjusted their drop further upwind, and several parachutes with cargo finally landed near the outskirts of the village. We dashed toward them at full speed.

“Do not touch!” Vučetin warned. “Intendant, over here! Make a record. Take strict inventory of the contents of these bundles. No squandering!”

Bogdan Rakić arrived with a cart, harnessed to his last remaining horse. Drawing his dagger, he approached the bundle with a satisfied and business-like air. Slashing through the parachute cords, he enthusiastically began slicing through the canvas.

We held back, waiting in anticipation, convinced we were about to see tins of bacon, thick-soled boots, submachine guns and ammunition.

“I smell salted meat,” Branko mumbled, running his trembling hands over the crinkling parachute silk. “*Hvala, hvala* to the Allies, may the Holy Virgin protect them!”

“Well then, let’s see what we’ve got here,” Katnić said, rubbing his hands together. “What have our friends sent us? Careful now, don’t rush, Rakić. Don’t scatter anything.”

The canvas tore with a loud snap, and the bundle split into separate packages. Each one contained nothing but foot wraps — sturdy linen strips, about a metre per foot, neatly folded and tied with paper twine. Rakić angrily tore through the bundle. There was nothing else inside.

“This will come in handy too,” Katnić muttered awkwardly. “What about those other sacks?”

But the second and third bundles held the same thing — foot wraps. In the fourth, Rakić found cans of pickled zucchini. The fifth contained something baffling — after some examination, it turned out to be improved fly swatters for killing insects in hot weather. The sixth held a crate of shells... for artillery pieces we didn’t have.

“Swindlers!” Rakić glared at the departing planes as if he wanted to reduce them to ashes.

The soldiers stood in silence, looking grim and bewildered. Only Branko, seizing the moment, quietly cut a piece of sky-blue silk from the parachute.

No one spoke for a long time. The commanders avoided each other’s eyes, seemingly sharing the same feeling of embarrassment and shame in front of their soldiers, whose patient expectations had been so cruelly dashed.

Only Katnić, with desperate hope in his eyes, kept watching the manoeuvres of the liaison plane. After flying along the railway toward Sarajevo, the aircraft circled over Mount Ivan and then returned to Raštelica. It was coming in for a landing. With a shout of “I’ll get to the bottom of this right now!” Katnić ran toward the landing site. We all followed him.

The pilot, a young man in a black beret, politely swung open the cabin door and was about to assist someone down

when the passenger easily jumped out on his own.

I recognized him instantly. It was American Lieutenant Colonel MacCarver. Right behind him, the commander of our corps, Popović, jumped down with a jaunty air. He was dressed in a brand-new bluish-grey uniform. Running his fingers over his short black moustache, he adjusted his tunic and cast a stern look at us. Next to him, MacCarver, with his unbuttoned jacket, a loosely hanging khaki tie matching his wrinkled, untucked trousers, looked more like an untidy orderly.

“Hello, Allies!” MacCarver waved at us cheerfully.

“Hello!” Katnić quickly responded. “*Živeo!*”

But no one echoed the greeting or showed any enthusiasm, despite Katnić’s encouraging gestures. Embarrassed, he stepped closer to the American, glanced at Popović and said quietly:

“It’s me. Do you recognize me?”

“Ah! Hello, my dear friend! Hello, hello,” MacCarver shook Katnić’s hand vigorously. “I can spot good guys from a bird’s-eye view and come down to them without hesitation. How are you?”

Popović, noticing the lack of proper respect on the faces of the soldiers and commanders, beckoned Vučetin over with a curt gesture and asked sharply:

“What’s going on here?”

“Well, you see, *druže* Commander,” Vučetin saluted before speaking. “We followed your order: we’ve been sitting here in Raštelica doing nothing, waiting for weapons and ammunition. Instead, we received pickled zucchini, foot wraps, shells we can’t use and fly swatters.”

“Yes, yes,” Katnić quickly chimed in, turning to MacCarver. “This is quite awkward, to be honest... Well, we can still make use of the footwraps and zucchini. We sincerely

thank you for those. But... fly swatters?! This isn’t Africa! We’re not colonial troops, for whom these things were probably intended. We’re surprised!” He raised his voice, glancing at the soldiers.

“I don’t understand...” The corps commander turned his eyes to the American. “This is some kind of farce!”

“This is news to me,” MacCarver widened his eyes. “I personally did everything I could. I directed the transport crews to a better drop position. My duty is to support you and provide aid. After all, my friends, I am now officially assigned to your corps. I’m doing everything I can... But footwraps and fly swatters... Ah!” A realization struck him. “This must be some misunderstanding! Damn limeys! They always mess things up. I see now! British supply incompetence! They mixed up the shipments! The devil take them! Sitting there in Bari — rear-echelon rats!” Here, MacCarver demonstrated an impressive command of Serbian curses. “I won’t let this slide!” he fumed. “We’ll find out who’s responsible at the Balkan Air Forces headquarters. Air Vice Marshal Elliot has always shown interest in your cause and promised support when needed. He oversees all supply planning and coordination. And look at this! What a mess! But don’t lose hope, guys!” MacCarver turned to the soldiers. “Keep your heads up! We Americans have something far more substantial and necessary prepared for you. Such demolition devices, such explosives, such alloys of ammonium and melinite that you’ll be able to blow the Germans sky-high — along with the mountains!” He clapped one soldier on the shoulder, ruffled another’s hair, handed out Camel cigarettes and even playfully tickled Vasko under the arms. “Come on, cheer up, guys! Everything’s gonna be okay! Comrade political commissar!” Katnić eagerly jumped to attention.

“Now, this — this needs to be returned. Make sure it’s

taken care of.” MacCarver nudged a parachute sprawled on the ground with his foot and suddenly noticed that the toe of his boot had slipped through a torn section.

He quickly crouched down, spread the silk out and found a massive hole.

Branko, watching from the corner of his eye, quickly disappeared into the crowd.

“What is this?” the American asked angrily.

“I don’t know, I don’t know. I don’t handle parachutes,” Katnić mumbled.

“Investigate!” MacCarver snapped at him. “And make sure the culprits are properly punished.”

“Yes... It will be done.”

“No worries! Just a little setback,” MacCarver grinned. “Happens to the best of us. Don’t get discouraged, guys!”

“Let’s go,” Popović tugged at his sleeve.

With an easygoing wave and a disarming smile, MacCarver sauntered off after the corps commander toward the house where Katnić was staying. A flask’s neck peeked out from the back pocket of his trousers. The soldiers watched them go, filled with frustration at being left empty-handed once again. “Everything will be fine!” Somehow, that was getting harder and harder to believe. How many times had they been consoled with nothing but empty promises?

18

Katnić was quartered in the best house in the village, its chimney shaped like a chess rook, its red-tiled roof surrounded by a stone wall. Above the gate was a carved emblem: a wild boar with a goose feather stuck in its back. Beneath it, painted in blue, were the words: House of Dušan Cicmil. Above this inscription, on a crimson background, a white double-headed

eagle with a crown stood proudly — the symbol of the Serbian nationalists.

Letting MacCarver and Popović enter first, Katnić turned back toward the soldiers loitering at a distance, among them Zagoryanov, and ordered Pantera to stand by the gate.

Pantera saluted knowingly.

Popović stopped by a crooked walnut tree, rubbed a young reddish leaf between his fingers and inhaled its aroma.

“We won’t be here long, will we?” he asked the American quietly. “There could be bombings.”

MacCarver tensed.

“You’re that well-informed?”

“No insinuations, please!” The twig in the corps commander’s hand snapped with a sharp crack. “As you know, everything has already been settled. This is just intuition.”

“Don’t worry, Kobra!” The piercing eyes moved so close to Popović’s face that their breaths almost mingled. “Even if things aren’t entirely settled yet... I understand you completely. A man transferring to our lifeboat naturally leaves part of his baggage behind on the sinking ship... We’ll leave here as soon as you carry out my little assignments.”

MacCarver then turned to Katnić, who had just approached.

“Will you treat us to a cup of coffee, my friend? I’d like to rest for half an hour. I brought you a gift — real Brazilian coffee!”

“My deepest thanks!” Katnić eagerly took the sack and linked arms with his guest. “By the way, today is my host’s *slava* — the feast day of his family’s patron saint. An ancient Serbian tradition.”

“Oh! How fascinating!” MacCarver cast a quick glance at a deep trench discreetly dug beneath the trees.

“We Serbs are very devoted to our old customs. We even

have a saying: 'Where there is slava, there is a Serb,'" Katnić declared.

"Our nations have much in common, my friend!

"A pleasure! Please, Mr. MacCarver." Katnić flung open the door and hurried over to the corps commander. "Please, comrade."

But Popović shook his head dismissively and muttered through clenched teeth:

"I'll walk around here for a bit. I need to gather my thoughts."

Popović wanted to be alone with his thoughts...

As the American entered, hurriedly buttoning up his frock coat, the host, Dušan Cicmil — red-faced, his bulging bead-like eyes making him look like a boiled crayfish — rushed forward to greet him.

"Please! Whoever visits on this day is a welcome guest," he intoned, bowing.

"A farmer?" MacCarver asked.

"Yes, a typical one," Katnić replied. "With a slight inclination toward trade. A supporter of free enterprise, so to speak. He is also the head of the local national liberation committee. And this is his wife."

A tall, slender brunette in a lilac dress, cinched at the waist with a belt adorned with orange-red, glassy gemstones, made something resembling a curtsy.

"Oh!" MacCarver adjusted his tie. "My apologies. I'm in field dress, no formalities... A soldier!"

The hostess presented him with a flat, round *kolač* on a copper tray, its surface decorated with a floral pattern, along with a cup of clear water and small teaspoons.

"It is customary to taste this," Katnić whispered.

Setting an example, he took a bit of *kolač* with a spoon, smacked his lips as he put it in his mouth, then dipped the

spoon into the water-filled cup.

Before taking his own spoon, MacCarver solemnly raised his eyes heavenward and recited the prayer "Strong in salvation," giving thanks for the blessing bestowed upon travellers. Then, following custom, he said, "*Srećna vam slava!*" — wishing them a blessed feast day — which utterly charmed his hosts. After tasting the bread, he glanced around the room with satisfaction.

The room was dim, scented with incense and holy oil. Thick wax candles, wrapped in paper flowers, burned on the table. Narrow streams of sunlight filtered through the lowered blinds, illuminating specks of dust in golden flecks. The walls were adorned with colourful photographs — views of Venice, Genoa... Along the cornice ran crude, child-like drawings: a shaggy lion playing with a ball, a squirrel gnawing on a nut, a rider with a lance as thick as a log, a bird with a letter in its beak addressed to Dušan Cicmil, and finally, the Serbian Prince Marko wielding a mace, locked in battle — according to the inscription — with the Turk Musa Kesedžija.

"A truly Serbian national ornament," Katnić explained to the American.

The hostess approached again with a tray. Glasses of wine, boiled sweet wheat mixed with walnuts and raisins, preserves. Then came glasses of šljivovica and roasted piglet.

MacCarver eagerly sampled everything — drinking, eating — smacking his lips as he praised the tradition of honouring a saint's name, in this case, St. George. He compared Serbian hospitality to the grand hospitality of the old American South, fawned over the hostess and insisted he was delighted to have the opportunity to learn about the villagers' lives and customs, emphasizing that he was, above all, a simple man, a true democrat...

Meanwhile, Koča Popović, having lingered in the small

garden, paced along a red-sand path, nervously plucking leaves from the bushes as he pondered the current situation.

The Red Army was approaching! It had already reached the Prut River — the very border from which the Germans had launched their invasion of the Soviet Union. In Italy, however, according to the reports, the Allies were merely patrolling and shelling, pushing back enemy reconnaissance units, while Eisenhower was still touring England on an inspection visit. The Western friends were stalling... Meanwhile, the Soviet military mission in Yugoslavia had already begun its work. Once the fighters found out about it, they might start flocking to the Russian representatives with all sorts of requests, complaints and grievances... During a recent meeting with Marko, Popović had immediately noticed his heightened nervousness... Ranković was clearly uneasy about the presence of the Soviet mission. He was careful to keep his distance, remembering the golden rule: “Anyone in plain sight is subject to scrutiny.” There was a strong likelihood that the Soviets would take an interest in the histories of certain individuals in Tito’s inner circle — including Ranković’s rather curious biography. They might start asking where he had been and what he had done before the war, how he had managed to escape from a Gestapo prison hospital. They could even saddle him with their own liaison officer... Fortunately for Ranković, his operations were structured in such a way that it was unlikely any complainers would be able to reach the Soviets. It was also unlikely that a single suspicious document would slip past his watchful eye. But could one ever be completely safe from those who see and know more than they should? At the very least, caution needed to be tripled — tenfold, even — secrecy had to be tightened...

“Comrade commander,” a voice called. “You are requested.”

Popović impatiently waved a hand, and Katnić disappeared inside, realizing that the general-lieutenant was deep in thought over something of utmost importance.

...Perućica needs to be removed. He’s impossible to work with. He’s Arso Jovanović’s protégé... Maybe send him off to some training courses? Popović continued reasoning. And commanders like Vučetin need to be quietly replaced too. Replaced with more pliable, loyal people — those who can be trusted when the time comes for internal restructuring... Ranković’s latest instructions on this matter were strict and unequivocal. The rank-and-file and commanders in the battalions need to be kept on a tight leash. Any attempts at self-initiative must be nipped in the bud. Ranković has plenty of tools at his disposal to ensure this. Yes, OZNA doesn’t play games! There shouldn’t be too much cause for concern about one’s own security, but... damn it, why did that insolent American have to show up at Bor back then? He’s a constant nuisance. Things were so much better in remote Vrbovo — plenty to eat, peace and quiet. I could even focus on poetry. Real poetry, of course, not the stuff that Zogović* churns out. Though, in public, I have to pretend to admire his crude, pseudo-Mayakovsky verses. As if our ignoramuses could appreciate anything refined! Now, the French — Rimbaud — that’s poetry, truly exquisite. Even their verses about cattails are poetic: “Que-chat — my little kitty tail,” Popović recalled. But what if I actually end up trailing behind in events myself? Again, he returned to the thoughts that had been nagging at him.

Why, for instance, had the American insisted on flying him to the Konjic area? MacCarver was completely preoccupied with his so-called Operation Ratweek, meticulously

* Radovan Zogović — a prominent Serbian poet, persecuted by Tito’s regime.

developed in the rear headquarters of the Anglo-American mission in Bari. The plan aimed to disrupt the Skopje-Niš-Belgrade railway line and other key enemy supply routes. But MacCarver also wanted to completely demolish the bridges, viaducts, tunnels and railway junctions along the Mostar-Sarajevo line. In truth, there was no real military necessity for this — the German movements there were minimal. But what could be done if all of Yugoslavia had already been divided into sectors by the Western Allies with Tito's approval? The destruction of targets in each sector was assigned to a partisan commander and the liaison officer from the Allied mission. What a headache! At Raštelica, both he and MacCarver had landed fully expecting food, dynamite and detonators to be delivered, but instead, they got a load of nonsense — *portyanki* and pickled zucchini... How humiliating in front of the troops... Well, Ratweek — that's still somewhat reasonable. Let them blow up every brick, stone and concrete structure in sight. The Americans have promised to rebuild everything after the war anyway. Yankees, as true businessmen, are already planning where to invest their capital in peacetime. Let them make their profits — just as long as they don't interfere with my own ambitions. MacCarver will pay, and not in dinars or marks, but in dollars. Then, maybe, a ministerial portfolio will follow. And after that, perhaps my old millions will return to my pocket. I've had enough of this charade of selflessness! "Everything is tiresome!" thought Popović, the scion of a Serbian plutocrat, who had first dabbled in surrealism out of idleness, then decided to play the hero in Spain and finally "accidentally" ended up in the Gestapo's hands.

Now, without sparing himself in self-analysis — like a man torn in two, internally uncertain — he both feared his new and complex obligations to MacCarver and clung to him like a lifeline.

Lost in thought, the lieutenant-general walked more and more slowly, not noticing that he had stepped off the path and was trampling early flowers.

But what, in essence, is Tito's position? Popović was not as close to the Marshal as he was to Marko. Yet, from some of the latter's hints, it was clear that Tito shared the aspirations of Serbian business circles — to create a great Balkan state under America's aegis.

Popović remembered how Willy Schmolke, back in France, in an internment camp, had let slip that certain Nazi circles entertained the idea of forming a Balkan or Danubian confederation led by Yugoslavia, which would align with a Federative Greater Germany as part of a new political and industrial order in Europe based on vast territories.

It seemed that Tito had already grasped the essence of this plan. There had once been a rumour among his inner circle that when Vlatko Velebit negotiated an armistice with the Germans in the Rama Valley, Tito had allegedly agreed to cease hostilities altogether — provided that Hitler left him alone and allowed him to establish his own government in Yugoslavia, which would cooperate with the Germans. Now, it appeared that the Anglo-Americans were tempting Tito with the very same idea — and with some success. And that was perfect! Tito clearly aspired to become a Balkan Führer. A semi-literate braggart, a windbag who fancied himself a ruler trained in Machiavellian statecraft! All he truly desired was a gilded throne and as much reverence as possible.

Popović seethed with envy and hatred toward those who had outrun him on the road to glory.

Still, one could live with someone like Tito, he concluded. "A crow doesn't peck out another crow's eye!" Ranković, on Tito's behalf, had already promised Popović that he would soon command an army and, later, perhaps even take the post

of Chief of the General Staff. Tito was unlikely to get along with Arso Jovanović... Yes, one can live with Tito. The key was to be extremely cautious and clever. It was worth taking a page from the Americans' book. Look at MacCarver! He wriggles, pretends to be a democrat, ingratiates himself with the people, trying to appear uninterested — "I'm just here to assist and support." But behind the scenes, he pokes his nose into everything, even geology... He plays the connoisseur of poetry and philosophy. But has he ever actually read Schopenhauer or Nietzsche? Fool!

Popović spat in irritation. He enjoyed mocking everyone, for — as Confucius advised — "Let neither friendship blind you to your friend's faults nor hatred to your enemy's virtues." But where would this crooked path ultimately lead him, Popović?

It was turning out exactly as Goethe had put it: "You think you're in control, but in reality, you are being controlled."

Once again, just as on Crni Vrh, he was forced to navigate conflicting orders: on one hand, from Arso Jovanović, whose ideas strikingly aligned with the sentiments of the soldiers; on the other, from Ranković, whose plans Popović fully supported — and whom he feared. On top of that, he had to keep MacCarver satisfied, as the American was becoming increasingly insistent with his demands for "minor favours for the Allies." It was hard to serve three masters, but there was no other way... Recently, Jovanović had visited the corps headquarters and issued a series of instructions and orders. The division had to be prepared for deployment to Serbia as soon as possible, properly reinforced, with reliable commanders appointed and fully briefed. But Ranković, who had accompanied Arso, had vaguely hinted that there was no need to rush — though the division would have to be sent eventually. He himself had named the officers and political

commissars who should be assigned to key positions. What to do? Marko had said that the division should be armed just enough not to weaken the other units and corps. What does that mean?... Clearly, the division was not to be armed as Arso suggested. "But we can at least select our own people..." That could be done.

Popović murmured lines from a poem, struggling to complete the stanza:

*"Everywhere, I am greeted with rapture,
On Montparnasse and in the forests...
And all the way to Saturn itself,
My glow is cast upon the heavens..."*

He couldn't come up with a proper rhyme for "phenomenon." "Vision, illusion, apparition?" he mused. "No, none of them fit. The lines just won't come!" Frustrated, he waved a hand in the air. Who has time for poetry now, when there's still the matter of coordinating the upcoming Serbian operations with Dapčević? Prose! Arso had gone to strip Dapčević of one or two divisions. But Peko wouldn't give in easily. Popović knew Dapčević well from Spain — selfish, cowardly, ambitious; he had taken many heads to carve out his own path. Even back in Spain, he had avoided the front lines, preferring to watch naked dancers at the anarchist club in Barcelona. Still, it was strange to think that this same Peko — a former dropout who once wore a ridiculous polka-dot jacket, like an old-school police spy — was now also a lieutenant-general! What inflation! The so-called hero of the Spanish Civil War, the fearless defender of some nameless hill on the Mediterranean coast, which the Spaniards supposedly renamed "Montenegro" — Black Mountain — in his honour. They even made up a story that during his escape from a German prison, he

had managed to destroy two German factories. Utter Titoite fabrications! But it was precisely such “tall tales” that now allowed Dapčević to vie for the role of a great commander...

“*Sapristi!*”^{*} Popović suddenly exclaimed, stopping before a bush with splayed branches. “Did Ranković also promise Dapčević the position of Chief of the Supreme Staff in the future? True, he firmly promised it to me, Koča, but what if Peko, too? Marko, Peko — both are a mix of fox and snake. You can’t trust either of them.” “Well, no matter. I’m no fool either,” Popović murmured to himself with a smirk, stroking his moustache — this time with pleasure, as he thought of MacCarver. Distracted from his thoughts, he glanced up at the cloudless sky and quickened his pace. He circled a flower bed covered in withered stems from last year’s blooms and entered the house.

19

MacCarver was half-reclining in an armchair, his legs draped over one of the armrests, while Cicmil leaned toward him with his large, fleshy hands:

“A sip from the holy cup, please. So that my barrels are always full of wine, my granaries of bread and my home of all good fortune. Drink, drink to the last drop — may the Holy Mother assist! In the name of the Father and the Son, with God’s blessing, for prosperity and life, and may St. George himself pray for us! Many happy years! To your health, most noble Mr. MacCarver!”

MacCarver drank. Meanwhile, Katnić, smugly smiling, rolled the mouthpiece of his reindeer-horn pipe between his teeth.

“To your health!” he encouraged the American. “I propose

^{*} Damn it! (French in the original).

another toast — to the city where we’ll soon be. To Sarajevo!”

“Oh!” MacCarver reached for his notebook. “They say it’s a marvellous city!”

“The heart of Bosnia! A wonderful place! A bizarre blend of Europe and Asia. On the same street, you’ll see an ancient mosque — one of the most majestic and elegant in the entire Balkans — and a modern dance hall. A donkey laden with goods and a tram. A Bosnian Muslim with a topknot, wearing colourful shalwars and a fez, and a dandy in a bowler hat.”

“Not that significant!”

“And the hot sulfur springs near Sarajevo, at the foot of Mount Igman? A first-class spa resort!”

“That’s more important. So, there’s a place to recuperate?” MacCarver jotted it down.

“*Viva!*” Cicmil again shoved a glass toward him. “Living in Sarajevo is my dream, most noble sir! And you know what? I’ll go with you to Sarajevo! Before all the shops of the former owners are snatched up... I’m going! I’ll prove that I am a true Serb, a patriot! I swear by my saint. I’ll take all my supplies — wine, cured meat, flour — and come with you.”

“Bravo!” Katnić approved. “You’ll be our brigade’s chief quartermaster.” Spotting Popović entering, he leapt to his feet. “Comrade General, do you permit this fervent patriot to join our army as a quartermaster? A most worthy man!”

Popović shrugged with a half-mocking expression.

“Wife!” Cicmil shouted, grinning drunkenly. “Do you understand? It’s decided! I’m leaving with the army, I’m a partisan now! Forgive me and bless me!”

His wife stared at him in dull bewilderment.

Popović stepped onto the terrace and subtly gestured for Katnić to follow.

“So, here’s the deal...”

The general put on a serious expression, furrowed his

brows and, biting his moustache, silently scrutinized the political commissar for a moment — someone, as Ranković had warned him, with whom there was no need for formalities.

“I’ve been meaning to call you in for some time, comrade. But there’s been... important matters! I’ve had to personally oversee the supply lines for our units. By the way, I’ve heard some very flattering reports about you. In short, take note of the following...”

Katnić, though somewhat unsteady on his feet, immediately expressed his utmost readiness to carry out anything required of him. He was eager to learn why these high-ranking guests had come and why the Šumadija Battalion had suddenly become the focus of their flattering attention.

Popović furrowed his brows even more sternly.

“First.” He pulled a brochure from his field bag. “Take this. It details how to conduct political discussions with the soldiers — questions and ready-made answers. All radio reports and bulletins must go through your oversight.”

“Understood.”

“Second. I have information that Vučetin nearly botched the operation at Gornji Vakuf.”

“Yes,” Katnić choked on his cigarette smoke. “It would be best to replace him altogether.”

“But with whom?” Popović asked, though he already knew perfectly well who was vying for Vučetin’s position.

“I recommend Captain Kuštrinović. A seasoned, experienced officer. A patriot.”

“Kuštrinović?” The lieutenant-general pretended to struggle to recall the name. “Ah, yes! I believe Grombac, the brigade OZNA official, reported on him. Hmm... Not quite suitable — former Chetnik! A black sheep... The soldiers probably point fingers at him!”

“A misunderstanding!” Katnić spread his hands in feigned

regret.

“That’s just it. You should set an example for them, like our dear Father Vlado,* our minister — or better yet, Major General Staff Officer Radoslav Đurić: he was a commander under Mihailović, and now he’s my deputy chief of staff, and quite a good one! I could take Kuštrinović into my staff as well. I do need military specialists, but they’re even more necessary in the battalions.”

“You’re absolutely right,” Katnić agreed.

“Avoid anything,” Popović continued, “that could leave a bad impression on the troops. I’m referring specifically to Kuštrinović. Nevertheless, you will, of course, find a way to make use of the knowledge and experience of a career officer... But as for his promotion to an appropriate post, that must happen naturally. Clear?”

Katnić silently nodded, secretly unnerved by this clarity.

“Third... A minor matter, but one that must be addressed...” The corps commander stretched, plucked a green twig from a tree and inhaled its fresh scent. “Spring,” he murmured dreamily. “By the way, how’s that Russian of yours? Getting nervous?”

“Not at all,” Katnić assured him.

“That’s good. The thing is, the Soviet military mission has arrived. We’re very pleased about it, but for now, this should not be made public. No need to stir things up. Now, regarding the Russian — exercise caution. The situation is changing, damn it, by the minute! Kindness, attention... In short, he mustn’t leave the battalion for any reason. Especially not on his own initiative... Take good care of him. He’s young and seems to be a good fighter.”

“Already a platoon commander. Vučetin appointed him.”

“Vučetin? Hmm... Instead of promoting one of our own...”

* Zečević.

That Russian will leave for his own people anyway. And ours will have to be trained later. Better to train them now.”

Popović fell silent, listening. A choppy rumble grew in the sky. Planes were approaching.

MacCarver stepped onto the veranda. Cicmil’s hands, like a crab’s claws, reached after him.

“In glory and praise! My American brother! Don’t hold back!” he muttered, sloshing wine from his glass.

“They’re coming!” Katnić cheered. “The Allies! They’re dropping something again. Bravo to our Western allies!”

Popović narrowed his eyes, studying the planes intently.

“Transport planes, it seems. But why aren’t they descending?” MacCarver asked in a suddenly sober voice.

Then, all at once, he leapt over the terrace railing into the garden and dashed toward the trench. He had recognized the engine sounds — German Junkers! And immediately, he imagined the planes tilting their blunt noses downward, roaring as they dove toward the village, with bombs already hurtling down, whistling and swaying in the air.

Popović also stepped down from the terrace.

At that moment, Cicmil’s drunken voice rang out:

“They flew past, heading for Konjic.”

Soon, from the direction of the town, came the deafening roar of bomb explosions, as if giant hammers were pounding the earth.

Groaning, MacCarver began to crawl out of the trench.

Popović stood above, smirking and putting on a show of bravado. He had figured out immediately where the planes were headed, though, truth be told, he had been plenty spooked. Damn nerves! They’re completely shot...

“Looks like they’re bombing Konjic,” he announced to the now sheepishly smiling MacCarver. “That means the town is already ours. You may congratulate us.” He extended

a hand to help him out of the trench.

Pantera was frantically motioning to Katnić, beckoning him toward the gate. Someone outside was knocking insistently. Katnić cautiously slid the bolt aside: it was Vučetin. Behind him, filling almost the entire street, was a crowd of soldiers. In a state of elated excitement, they surrounded a mounted rider. The man turned his head, and Katnić recognized the brigade commissar, Dobrivoje Magdić.

“May I speak with the corps commander?” Vučetin brushed past the somewhat bewildered political commissar and strode quickly into the garden.

“Comrade Lieutenant-General,” he addressed Popović with restrained urgency. “The brigade commissar brings excellent news... It turns out the Soviet military mission has been at Supreme Headquarters for two months already! Why was this kept from us? The moment our men found out, they stormed Konjic. The town must be held. I have orders from Perućica to move in and support him. Permission to advance?”

Popović furrowed his brows, studying the gleam in Vučetin’s eyes.

“Perućica took Konjic?” he repeated, almost indifferently. “I never doubted he would. Advance? Permission granted. Immediately! Immediately!” he repeated with grandiloquence. “Let the Russians see that we not only know how to take cities but how to hold them.”

“Yes, sir!”

“I am confident,” Popović added, flaunting his authority as a commander, “that you will seize the momentum in Konjic and hold onto it tightly, or else it may slip right through your fingers!”

“We will press the advantage!”

“I approve. And remember — fortune in war is like a woman. Never let her out of your grip, and handle her rough-

ly.”

But Vučetin was no longer listening to Popović’s pompous rhetoric. He was eager to make use of the permission to march at once.

“Wait, commander!” MacCarver suddenly called out.

He ran a hand over his bristly moustache, brushing off bits of dirt.

“I’ll be heading to Konjic soon myself. I’ll send a radio message to Bari right away. Hopefully, this time, our Bill Elliot won’t botch the drop, and you’ll get exactly what you need to secure your victory. Everything will be okay! See you in Konjic.”

And with a gracious smile, MacCarver gave the battalion commander an encouraging pat on the shoulder.

“They already know about the Soviet mission?” Katnić, now completely sober, asked Popović in a hushed, uneasy voice, glancing around warily.

“Yes, as you see, news travels fast,” Popović smiled. “And that’s for the best,” he raised his voice so everyone could hear. “The presence of the Russians inspires us to great deeds!”

20

...The rattling sound of engines drilled into our ears... Small bombs whistled as they fell. Machine-gun bursts lashed through the branches, tearing off leaves. The sharp howl of Pikatelo — those small, unimpressive reconnaissance planes — filled the air. Tirelessly, they trailed us, skimming just above the treetops, hunting for movement in the clearings and dropping their bombs with deadly accuracy, as if tossing them into a sack. It was nearly impossible to hide from Pikatelo, even in the forest. Infantry pursued us as well. The Germans and Chetniks closed in from both the left and

right, trying to trap us in a pincer movement, to keep us from reaching Konjic. But we fought stubbornly, pushing toward the city. A bomb fragment took the life of Tomislav Stankov. One less loyal soldier, one less communist in the battalion.

At last, the forest thickened, and by evening, we had managed to shake off the enemy. We trudged on, our feet tangling in dry ferns, getting caught in piles of fallen branches, slipping on damp roots.

And then — what was this? We stepped onto a wide, perfectly paved asphalt road. A magnificent highway, deep in the forest, far from any settlements! Everyone stared around in astonishment. A miracle! Lining the road were luxurious villas. People stood on the balconies, waving at us in greeting. Some even ran toward us with pots and bowls in their hands, and the smell of food filled the air.

“We’ve reached a town,” Đuro whispered to me.

“Look! They’re bringing out a roasted lamb on a spit!” Vasko exclaimed.

But just then, Vučetin’s loud voice rang out:

“Halt! Attention!”

In an instant, we snapped out of it. Disappointment flickered across our faces as we exchanged glances — around us, the same dense, impenetrable forest.

It had been a mass hallucination. The tricks hunger plays on exhausted minds!

The forest, the forest... When would it end? It was eerie. Nearly every step we took, we saw the bleached skeletons of fallen men. A whole clearing was strewn with bones — likely the remains of an entire field hospital. Young grass had already begun to sprout through them. At one spot, a skeleton was propped up against a tree trunk in a sitting position. A rusted-starred cap still clung to its skull. Its bony fingers clutched the remains of some bird.

“Last winter, we retreated through here from Bosnia,” Jovan said grimly. “Remember? I told you about it... We ate crows back then.”

I said nothing. It was too painful to talk about.

Miletić couldn't shake his restless thoughts. He had lost weight, his face had hollowed. His loose-fitting jacket jutted out awkwardly. His moustache stuck up over his dry, cracked lips like tufts of coarse heather. His thick black eyebrows furrowed, and in his shadowed, weary eyes, the golden sparks no longer danced.

“Hunger kills the soul,” he muttered. “Look at them. They're sleeping on their feet, too tired to keep fighting before they've even been hardened by war. They're worn out. You could push Branko off a cliff right now and he probably wouldn't even notice.”

“Look at the others,” I countered, determined to lift my friend's spirits. “Look at Đuro, Vasko, Ružica.”

Đuro, his pale face set with quiet determination, walked steadily behind the brooding Kićo Jankov. Wounded in the leg, Vasko hobbled along, leaning on my arm, never betraying his pain. Those who couldn't walk were carried by their comrades — on makeshift stretchers of wooden poles or cradled in greatcoats with sticks slipped through the sleeves. Laušek slung two rifles over his uninjured shoulder. His jokes, though faint, still managed to bring a flicker of smiles to the weary faces. The girls, Ružica and Ajša, held themselves firm. Even the old teacher, Marko Petrović, after consulting with his wife Zorica, had decided to march with the battalion. In his sporty blouse, Tyrolean green hat, hunting boots, with a Winchester rifle slung over his shoulder and a checkered blanket rolled up across his chest, he looked every bit the seasoned mountaineer.

“These are the true strength of the people, the real spirit of

resilience and heroism, not Branko,” I told Jovan. “We've had harder times before. But when we were digging into trenches near the Terek, we sang ‘Oy, Dnieper, Dnieper...’ And on the Dnieper, we dreamed of the Danube. We never lost sight of the goal.”

“Don't compare, brother. You have a man, the only one of his kind in the world...” Jovan's eyes widened, and they seemed to brighten.

“He leads you. He saw victory even when all anyone else saw was the Germans at the gates of Moscow.”

“He doesn't just lead us. He leads all of the working people of the world forward.”

“Yes!” Jovan lifted his head and glanced back at the soldiers, slowly making their way through the dense forest. “And they know it. They feel it...”

Soviet people in Drvar! Perućica in Konjic! These reports, brought to us by the brigade commissar, gave us the strength to march. Konjic wasn't far now, but enemy aircraft had slowed us down and thrown us off course, and Mount Ivan was vast and roadless...

“Ours are at the Supreme Command!” I thought, eagerly snapping the branches that blocked the trail. “Ours!” I quickened my pace, pushing my limits. “Ours are in Drvar!” It was as if a fresh wind, the wind of my homeland, wrapped around me. “But how do I see them? How do I get to them?” Back in Raštetica, I had asked Jovan about this. He had grown somber. “You want to leave us? Talk to Katnić.” I followed his advice.

“That's impossible,” Katnić replied after hearing me out. “You won't be allowed into the Supreme Command.”

“Why? Why not?” I exclaimed.

Katnić hesitated, then dryly responded:

“We have our own rules here.”

This “impossibility” only fuelled my desire even more — it was natural, justified. “Ours are in Drvar!” The thought wouldn’t leave me for a moment.

That night, in my sleep, I heard the low hum of airplanes flying very close. There was something familiar in that steady, uninterrupted drone of engines. It wasn’t the strained, howling sound of the Junkers that had flown over Raštelica. Could it be ours? Excitement kept me awake for a long time.

I woke at dawn, feeling the chill. Vasko lay beside me, mumbling something in his troubled sleep. Đuro was already up, moving around the fire, preparing breakfast. No matter the season, he could always find something edible in the forest. Feeding twigs into the flames, Branko Kumanudi hungrily stared into the pot.

“A little lard would go well with this grass!”

“Why didn’t you bring some from home?”

“Didn’t have time, believe me!”

“I believe you,” Đuro smirked bitterly. “But you didn’t forget your spoon!”

“Strange,” I thought, “how much kindness there is in Filipović. Not long ago, they were arguing.”

“Hey, Đuro!” I called. “Give the first, hottest portion to Vasko.”

After barely satisfying our hunger, we moved on.

We stopped in front of a gorge with steep slopes overgrown with thornbush. Below, in the deep darkness, a mountain stream churned. How were we supposed to cross it? The wounded were holding us back.

Katnić approached the group of commanders who were discussing options. Pushing ahead of him, Pantera led a packhorse, with a large blue coffee pot tied to its load. The political commissar slouched gloomily, glancing around as if expecting another bombing raid. At the sight of Magdić, he

straightened up and adjusted the pistol hanging awkwardly from his sagging belt, shifting it to his side.

“*Evo!** What’s gotten into you all, my friends? What’s the matter? Finding it hard to cross the gorge? Nonsense! Let’s take an example from the Russian eagles, who, with Suvorov, flew over even greater Alpine wilderness. Forward, through all the Scyllas and Charybdises!” Katnić stepped toward the gorge. “What? The wounded? What about them?” He thought for a second, peering at the map through his celluloid-rimmed glasses. “We’ll drag them to Brđani. It’s not far. That’s where our brigade hospital is.”

“It was. But whether it’s still there now — we don’t know,” Vučetin pointed out. “The Germans are bombing Konjic and everything around it.”

“I suggest leaving the medical post here for now,” Magdić interjected.

On the slope of Mount Pleševac stood an abandoned forster’s lodge. Ajša stayed there with the sick and wounded while we moved on.

“We’ve abandoned people to their fate,” Katnić grumbled loudly as he descended into the gorge with us.

Before long, we reached the village of Brđani. It was deserted. The wind carried the smell of burning, lifting clouds of ash. The ruins of a large house still smouldered with wisps of grey smoke. On the remaining section of the tiled roof, the red cross emblem stood out sharply.

We slowed our steps. Charred wood crunched underfoot. A bristling grey cat roamed the ashes, yowling wildly. Spotting us, it darted under a scorched log. Burnt fragments of human bodies, shattered medicine bottles, half-burnt bandages — this was all that remained of the partisan hospital. The plum trees, as if recoiling in horror from the craters, rustled

* Come on! (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

their brittle black branches, their bark cracked, where the sap had boiled and hardened into large, glassy tears.

The fighters passed by in silence, their weathered lips pressed tightly together. Laušek, walking beside me, half-closed his eyes, his sunken cheeks twitching nervously.

And Đuro lifted the banner even higher. Tall, barefoot, in tattered clothes, with a pale, bony face and a determined gaze in his strangely wide eyes, he seemed to me the most magnificent of them all. His feet, bruised and torn by sharp stones, left bloody prints on the ground, but he didn't seem to notice.

Crossing several more deep forested ravines that sloped down toward a mountain stream, we finally emerged onto a highway. Our scouts came under rifle and machine-gun fire. A battle was already underway on the outskirts of Konjic. By the time Magdić had come for us, the enemy had likely reinforced its positions. Vučetin and Magdić decided to bypass the town from the north or northwest. We moved further down the Neretva, which here formed the border between Bosnia and Herzegovina, and waited in the forest for nightfall. We spent the entire day preparing to cross the river. Using railway ties from the dismantled tracks, we built several rafts, tying sacks made from rain capes filled with dry leaves to improve buoyancy. My company had done the same when crossing the Dnieper.

Meanwhile, the brigade commissar was engaged in "field-work." He wandered the area with a hammer and a geological compass, collecting various minerals and fossils, wrapping the stones in paper, labelling the packages and packing them into his rucksack. He showed me one grey stone.

"This is a grindstone. I found an outcrop of it here and marked it on the map. It will come in handy."

Katnić, who had approached, examined the stone as well.

"A grindstone? The kind used for milling grain? But that

hardly seems relevant right now."

"The war is coming to an end. It's time to think about the peaceful future."

Magdić's eyes glowed with a dreamy smile.

"Yes, it's time," Katnić agreed. "But it seems to me that Mr. MacCarver, with whom you discussed this topic, had other, more valuable minerals in mind."

"He was interested in everything."

"For what purpose?" I asked. "Why would the Americans care about your minerals?"

"Oh! Judging by MacCarver's words, they're preparing to provide us with great assistance, especially after the war!" Magdić exclaimed naively. "For that, it's important for them to know what resources we have and what we lack; whatever we're missing, the States will provide."

"I'm convinced that MacCarver doesn't throw words to the wind," Katnić said with a strange smirk. "What else did you discover along the way, comrade commissar?"

Magdić could talk for hours about the riches of his homeland, which still needed to be discovered and studied. He likely thought more about the future than the present. His passion for geology was even greater than for his military duties.

The night was bright, with a full moon. But thick clouds kept drifting across, covering it. The river's inky surface shimmered dully with restless, flickering reflections. A tall cliff cast a wide shadow across the water. The rafts moved within this shadow's cover. The swift current pushed them toward the rocks on the opposite bank, at a sharp bend in the river. After climbing the steep incline, my platoon silently crawled through the vineyards toward the highway. With a sudden attack from the rear, we overran the enemy outpost at the bridge, opening the way for the battalion. At dawn, shouting

“Death to fascism!” we stormed into Konjic.

“How did you manage to break through?” the Montenegrins asked us.

We could barely respond. The crushing exhaustion from the past twenty-four hours of relentless tension had taken its toll. The fighters collapsed right there on the cobblestone streets and instantly fell asleep.

The Montenegrin commander, Todor Radović, still wearing the same worn-out uniform that elegantly fit his tall frame, approached me with a light step. Tossing his thick, wavy hair, he greeted me warmly.

“In both fortune and hardship, we stand together! Greetings to the Russian comrade!”

I shook his thin, sinewy hand.

“Any news?”

He sat me down on the steps of a half-ruined building.

“Your Russians — simply outstanding!”

“What happened?” I straightened up.

“Don’t worry, I’ll tell you. As you see, we had to disobey Corps Commander Popović’s orders,” Radović unexpectedly said in a hushed voice. Noticing my open mouth, he laughed slyly. “On one condition — no interruptions!”

“All right, all right!” I urged him on.

“When we heard about the Soviet mission, we abandoned our original positions. The fighters called them ‘hopeless positions.’ We marched toward Konjic. As you see, we took the city. But holding it was tough — we understood that. Our commissar went to find reinforcements, to look for you. That’s when it happened. The Russian radio station in Drvar ordered us to arrange bonfires on the outskirts of Konjic in a rectangular shape at night. The OZNA official, Grombac, objected, saying it would attract enemy aviation. But I took the risk and gave the order to light the fires. And imagine —

at midnight, your planes arrived. They dropped exactly what we needed most, what neither the British nor the Americans would give us — anti-tank rifles and heavy anti-aircraft machine guns. Now we can fight both tanks and planes. And even more importantly — they dropped medical supplies!”

“Let me kiss you, Comrade Todor!” I shouted, overcome with joy. “So I really did hear the sound of planes last night, coming from the Soviet Union.”

“Well, well, what’s that for? But actually, I don’t mind. The Russian way — three times!”

We exchanged kisses.

“You see, comrade, what genuine help means,” Radović continued. “Your bases are somewhere in the Ukraine, a thousand kilometres from here. And yet, your pilots managed to get here.”

“How many planes were there?” I asked.

“Eight or ten. They came one after another, every two or three minutes. If only you had seen, comrade, how precisely they dropped the supplies onto our rectangle. As if they were placing them directly into a granary. They dropped from no higher than fifteen hundred metres and weren’t afraid. And yet, there are mountains in this area over 2,000 metres high.”

It’s hard to describe the happiness I felt — happiness and an overwhelming sense of pride. It was as if a piece of my homeland’s strength had been passed on to me. I felt the touch of its powerful, caring hands reaching out to us here, on the banks of the Neretva.

“Not like our Western friends,” Radović said excitedly. “At official banquets and in radio speeches, all you ever hear from them is: ‘We will help, we will help, we will help...’ When General Maclean first arrived here, he declared: ‘The primary task of my mission is to provide maximum assistance to the YNLA.’ To supposedly achieve this, they even created

the so-called Balkan Air Force. But in reality — you've seen it yourself. Bluff! A mountain of mistakes and a labyrinth of slippery explanations. They've shown their true colours. But oh, how they love putting on a show! They kept making excuses at first, saying that since their bases were still in Africa, they couldn't provide significant help. But they promised that everything would change once they moved to Italy. Finally, they set up naval and air bases in Italy, particularly in Bari. The distance from those bases to our coast — by ship, it's just an overnight journey. A Dakota aircraft can cover the route in forty-five minutes. And it doesn't even have to fly over enemy territory with anti-aircraft defences, airfields and fighter bases — it flies over the Adriatic Sea, where there's no air defence at all. That's nothing compared to what your pilots have to deal with."

"But I often see British and American planes during the day and hear them at night," I said. "Where are they flying, then?"

Radović glanced around to make sure no one was eavesdropping and continued:

"Where are they flying? Oh, the Liberators and Flying Fortresses have plenty of work! They're bombing our cities occupied by the Germans, various economic targets."

"Bor must be getting hit too, then?" I asked with interest.

"Bor? No."

"Even now? Why not?"

"Who the hell knows! They're sparing it. But Belgrade is getting hit hard. They're also flying missions over Budapest and Bucharest, bombing the Romanian oil fields. And, of course, they help us along the way — by dropping boots, underwear, blankets, crackers and things like that. Whatever was meant for Montgomery's army in Africa but is now useless — knee-length shorts, little underwear, cork helmets, yel-

low tents."

"*Portyanki* and fly swatters," I added, recalling the supplies dropped for us in Raštelica.

"Exactly! All the same kind of thing. Once, they dropped an artillery battery in Montenegro — disassembled. But the guns had flat trajectories, only suitable for shooting in the desert, not in the mountains. And they provided only five shells per gun — not even enough for a single salute! Sometimes they drop incomplete weapons that can't be used at all. And then, pay attention to the delivery methods and how they drop supplies. Oh, there are tricks here too. As you know, we have Mihailović's, Nedić's, Pavelić's and Rupnik's troops mixed among us. And many of the supplies tend to end up with them more often than not. You've seen it yourself, haven't you? Well, there you go! But officially, Churchill boasts to the whole world that they've provided us with aid. Sometimes they fly over without dropping anything at all. And later, they blame us, saying we didn't light our fires on time, or that they were too bright or too dim, or in the wrong place. Sometimes, the Germans light fires too. And the Allies, failing to properly verify the signals, drop the supplies right into their hands. Or maybe someone is passing our signals to the Germans. Who knows! There are cases when they promise us tactical air support — we begin an operation, wait, the weather is perfect, but no planes come, and the Germans pound us. Turns out, there was fog and rain in Italy, so they couldn't take off. Or, on the contrary, there was fog here. In general, there's a lot of fog in all of this. Sometimes, they tell us to wait our turn — saying that supply priority is determined by the needs of partisans in different regions. And so we wait... until hell freezes over."

"Outrageous!" I couldn't hold back.

"Tell me about it! It's outright sabotage," Radović con-

firmed. "Then there's another trick: two or three planes drop a few sacks, then circle the area all night. It gives the impression that the Allies are intensively supplying us, but we can haul away everything they dropped in a single cart. We're grateful even for the parachutes — we can use them as bandages in the hospitals. But the Allied officers demand them back and sell them for rakija, using the silk to entice our girls. That's how it is, comrade. Meanwhile, they frequently drop their own scouts with radio stations, and here, they never make a mistake with the address. As a result, almost every division has a foreign officer with support staff, yet there's hardly any weapons, uniforms or medicine," Todor concluded gloomily. "That's the way things are!"

"How does the Supreme Command feel about this?"

"I don't know. It's a complicated matter. This is high-level politics. They say the Allies have made certain demands on us that we can't meet yet. So, they're pressuring us through supplies."

What I heard from Radović deeply outraged me. My eyes were opened to many previously unknown aspects of the partisans' relationship with the Western allies. And as I returned to the soldiers to check on their accommodations and food, I kept thinking about our conversation for a long time.

At midday, Radović approached me again. He looked somber, as if something was bothering him. I asked what had happened.

"Popović arrived this morning — with the American."

"And?"

"We're about to find out." And without looking at me, as if embarrassed by something, he called out to Vučetin:

"Let's go, Comrade Tomaš, we've been summoned to Perućica."

Vučetin walked with slumped shoulders, occasionally

stopping to clear his throat with difficulty.

With a tight feeling in my chest, I watched the two battalion commanders disappear around the corner of a narrow alley and thought: "Why are Vučetin and Radović so worried about Popović's arrival?"

21

The brigade headquarters was set up in the spacious basement of a shop. Seated at a table covered with operational maps, dimly lit by oil lamps, were Lieutenant-General Popović, Perućica, Magdić and Lieutenant Colonel MacCarver. The American was speaking at length, lounging casually with his elbow resting on a portable radio set in a soft case, which he never parted with.

As Vučetin and Radović entered, he was finishing his point:

"As your ally, I strongly recommend that you carry out Operation Ratweek with honour."

"That is Marshal Tito's order," Popović added sternly. "We, on the ground, and our allies, by sea and air, must carry out a series of combined attacks on German lines of communication across all of Yugoslavia. We are obligated," he raised his voice, "to completely disable these lines. And we will do it because bravery is not yet dead in the Yugoslav people!"

The arrival of Vučetin and Radović relieved Magdić from a difficult position — he had wanted to object to the Supreme Command on certain points but feared he would not be supported. Now, the situation had changed.

"I did not expect, Mr. MacCarver," he said, "that your interest in geology is primarily and above all from the perspective of demolition work."

MacCarver exhaled a puff of cigarette smoke, exchanged a glance with Popović, and replied:

“Well, my dear Magdić, even science serves war nowadays. I fondly recall our scientific discussion. I have seen the excellent work you are doing in the interest of the future, and I sincerely hope that the bonds of our scientific cooperation and friendship will never be broken, and that after the war, they will serve the cause of peace.”

“Thank you for those fine words,” Magdić responded with an ironic smile.

“But what can be done?” MacCarver continued in a harsher tone. “Right now, my duty as an ally requires me to be interested in rock formations and their properties from a completely different perspective. Of all the characteristics of a given rock, what matters to me now is its resistance to explosive force — how large a charge must be used for an effective detonation. If the charge is too small, you understand, the objective will not be achieved. The size of the charge and the composition of the explosives must be such that the explosion can destroy a structure completely, not in parts. For example, a tunnel must not be damaged in sections but obliterated entirely. Do you gentlemen understand what I am saying?” he turned to the battalion commanders.

Vučetin saluted and stepped up to the table.

“We fully understand what you are saying!” he began. “But if you want to know our opinion, we still find it hard to believe that Tito fully agrees with this British proposal, that he...”

“He agrees, he agrees!” MacCarver interrupted impatiently. “The Marshal studied Maclean’s plan, spending two or three hours over a large map, and gave it his approval. Of course, he expects us, the Americans, to supply him with explosives and assist with heavy bombers. The British idea will,

in fact, be carried out by us — and on a much larger scale.”

“It is precisely this scale that concerns us.”

Vučetin leaned on the table with both hands, as if seeking support.

“To disrupt enemy manoeuvres and inevitable retreats, it seems to me that disabling key sections of the roads would be sufficient. Why completely destroy the railways? The Red Army is not far, and soon, I believe, we ourselves, along with them, will go on the offensive. We will need these transport routes. Furthermore, by destroying them in Dalmatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina while leaving them untouched in Serbia and Macedonia, we are only fulfilling our mission one-sidedly. Under such conditions, the German and collaborationist forces will be free to manoeuvre in the east against the Russians. We cannot allow this. I believe that such a one-sided destruction of infrastructure will only benefit the enemy.”

“For the enemy?” Popović asked in astonishment. “An original conclusion!”

“Absurd!” MacCarver shook his head disapprovingly. “And this is coming from the hero of Sinj?”

“Demagogy!” exclaimed the corps commander. “You know very well, my friends, that we are still weak in Serbia and Macedonia. Obviously, you are dissatisfied with the scale of our operations? Or do you hope the Germans will leave on their own?” he asked mockingly.

“Let me clarify,” Vučetin replied firmly. “I am not a great strategist. However, I am truly convinced that the Germans will withdraw from the southern Balkans. Their situation here has become very complicated. They should already be thinking not about holding the Balkans but about how to cover Germany’s southeastern border, which is exposed from the vast Danube plain, and establish a more solid defensive line somewhere further north. Their days here are numbered.

Naturally, while their forces are still in Greece, they are trying to hold on to their key supply lines in this area. Key, but not all of them! And their objective is clear — to throw their forces eastward to slow the advance of the Red Army. Under these conditions, our task defines itself..”

“Oh, really!” Popović smirked. “And here I thought it was determined by the Party and Tito!”

“You’re just looking for something to criticize,” Vučetin noted. “Of course, the Party and Tito define our objectives because our leaders are not isolated from the masses; they understand the specific situation. And the current situation is such that it is not at all unrealistic for us to seize the strategic initiative.”

“We stand for ensuring that the Germans do not escape from Yugoslavia,” Radović interjected. “Let the Red Army finish them off here.”

“We support conducting combined attacks and raids on supply lines,” Vučetin continued, controlling his emotions. “But I believe we should not demolish infrastructure indiscriminately across all of Yugoslavia. Destruction should be carried out only where it serves a military purpose — primarily on the Belgrade-Salonika and Zagreb-Ljubljana railways, as well as on the corridors along the Vardar, Ibar and Morava valleys. If we manage to take the initiative and cut these main routes, which the German forces may soon use to retreat from Greece, their position here will become even more desperate. But let’s assume that such large-scale operations still need to be prepared. Let’s say that even the small railway from Mostar to Sarajevo holds some significance for the Germans. It needs to be destroyed. But why do it on such a massive scale, with such overwhelming force, as Mr. MacCarver suggests?”

“Completely unnecessary,” Perućica agreed with Vučetin. “Blowing up infrastructure should be done selectively and

with clear benefits. Damaging a tunnel partially and temporarily makes sense. But destroying it entirely... why?”

“Oh, my friend!” MacCarver clapped him on the shoulder. “Our duty is to carry out Tito’s orders without unnecessary questions. Today, we will drop tons of TNT and demolition charges for you.”

“No objections — blow it all to hell!” added Popović. “*Un ordre c’est un ordre*. An order is an order.”

Perućica frowned but said nothing more.

Red patches appeared on Vučetin’s face.

“Excuse me, comrade corps commander.” He held Popović’s gaze and ignored the significant way his superior furrowed his brows. “But I still dare to insist that there is some misunderstanding here. The Yugoslav people built these railways, bridges, tunnels and viaducts. We have no right to destroy them completely, as you propose, Mr. MacCarver. Demolishing essential infrastructure entirely is, I repeat, completely senseless. We must preserve it for the future. After all, once the war is over, we will be the ones rebuilding everything, and that will require enormous effort and resources.”

“I understand you,” MacCarver smiled, tugging at his tie. “You are a prudent caretaker. Very commendable. But, my dear friend, what the hell do you need a bridge for if the Turks built it from the ruins of a Christian church? Why on earth do you need this decrepit narrow-gauge railway from the Austro-Hungarian era, with its pathetic stations, toy locomotives and wooden carriages?”

“This was all built through the efforts of the people,” Vučetin replied restrainedly. “And your insistence, Mr. MacCarver, in this matter, leaves a rather strange impression.”

“Well, I’ll be damned!” The American jumped up and spread his arms. “I assure you, my insistence is driven purely by a sincere desire to help you. Yes! What the hell do you need

this junk and scrap if, after the war, with our help, you will be able to build a modern railway — comfortable, sleek and beautiful? We will lift you up; count on us. The Balkans, my friends, are a magnificent bouquet, and the finest rose in that bouquet is Yugoslavia. How can we, your comrades and allies, allow this rose to wither?” he concluded with pathos.

“All right. Everything is clear.” Popović swept his signature across the map with a flourish at the end. “As commander, I approve the execution of Plan ‘Ratweek’ in the sectors under my responsibility. This meeting is adjourned. And you,” he turned to Vučetin, “with your stubbornness and distrust in the order of the Supreme Commander, are worthy only of pity.”

“Oh, come now, why so harsh?” MacCarver smiled gently, hurriedly unpacking his radio. “Why so harsh? Don’t be discouraged, my friend,” he called after Vučetin. “You’ll see today that you can rely on us...”

Vučetin walked out of the basement in silence. A concerned Radović caught up with him on the street.

That same day, Dakota aircraft dropped explosive materials and demolition devices over Konjic. This time, the cargo bundles landed precisely at the designated location. Neither wind nor clouds nor even fog interfered. And immediately, under the supervision of the corps commander and MacCarver, the brigade began executing the operation, code-named “Ratweek.”

The explosions began. Along the railway lines leading to Sarajevo and Mostar, station buildings were blown into the air. Bridges, viaducts and tunnels collapsed. The ground trembled as if from an earthquake. Columns of fire shot skyward like gigantic tornadoes.

Vučetin, in those days, was angrier and gloomier than ever. It was painful to look at him. With every powerful ex-

plosion, he paled and glanced around helplessly, as if something inside him was tearing apart. Meanwhile, Katnić was more active than ever, taking charge in the commander’s stead.

Almost simultaneously with the ground operation Ratweek, American strategic aviation intensified its activity. Heavy bombers with white stars on their wings, accompanied by a small number of fighters, appeared in broad daylight over defenceless Yugoslav cities. They carried out a massive raid on Belgrade on the morning of Easter Sunday. The planes covered the city with so-called “carpet bombing,” wiping out entire working-class districts, schools, hospitals and shops.

22

The weather took a turn for the worse. Spring storms raged over Mount Pleševac, on Mount Ivan, where the medical post of the Šumadija Battalion had been left behind. Heavy, moisture-laden clouds crawled across the treetops of the pines, dragging behind them pale streaks of torrential rain.

In a half-collapsed *koliba* made of large stones, with a roof of fir bark that the rain was pounding down on, it was damp, cold and gloomy. The wounded and sick shivered under wet scraps of blankets and coats. A fire smouldered on the floor, giving off more smoke than heat.

Throwing some twigs into the fire, Ajša would step outside to check if the smoke was too visible above the roof; she would listen to the suspicious rustling in the forest, anxiously circle the clearing, and then return to the fighters. The Germans were close. They had taken the road from Raštelica to Konjic, cutting the medical post off from the battalion, and were combing the mountain slopes, searching for partisans.

The medical post had no medicine, no clean bandages, no

cotton wool. Ajša treated the fighters with herbs: an infusion of *kičica** for fever, wild mint for gangrene. She also stood guard, sitting at the hut's entrance with a submachine gun on her lap, and took care of food and water.

Fetching water meant descending into a deep ravine. The roar of the stream could have drowned out even a bull's bellow, yet Ajša carefully scooped up water, trying not to let her mess tin clatter against the rocks. She always felt that the slightest careless noise would draw the Germans' attention. Even more dangerous was the journey to fetch food from the tiny village of Brđani. After the bomb that had destroyed the partisan hospital, the scattered villagers had slowly begun returning home. There, Ajša had met a woman who started helping her. The woman worked in the Germans' infirmary and stole bandages and cotton for Ajša. From her neighbours, she managed to get the medic small amounts of food — sometimes a jug of milk and a bowl of porridge, sometimes pieces of cornbread and a few handfuls of tobacco. Ajša carefully carried these gifts from the impoverished villagers back to the wounded fighters.

A narrow goat trail wound along the ravine's slope, at some points suspended on wooden beams over the abyss. Ajša crept along it at night, freezing in fear whenever a loose stone slipped from under her foot and tumbled noisily downward.

As they waited for the girl, the wounded whispered anxiously among themselves, worried for her safety. Their own suffering seemed insignificant compared to the hardships and dangers Ajša faced for their sake. When she returned, the fire in the hut burned brighter, the branches crackled more cheerfully, steaming as they dried, and the water in the mess tin boiled faster. After drinking the hot "tea" and taking their food as if it were medicine — just tiny portions — the

* Centaury (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

wounded would settle down and drift into sleep...

And so it went, day after day, for an entire week. Vasko Hrستیć held on with all his strength, assuring Ajša that his leg no longer hurt at all and that he could go find the battalion.

Ajša patiently urged him to rest a little longer. One night, overhearing the boy's groans, she took off her white headscarf, tore it into bandages and carefully dressed his inflamed wound after rinsing it with rakija she had brought from the village. Vasko felt relief. She gently stroked his gaunt face, his cheekbones sharply protruding, his expression lightening in the dim firelight, and quietly said:

"Our men are fighting well in Konjic. They've pushed the fascists far back. Do you hear the explosions? Do you hear the shooting during the day? That's our side. And those are Russian planes humming — listen!"

Vasko fell silent. Something was droning overhead, stretching out over the forest.

"The Russians?..." The boy's pale lips trembled into a weak smile. "How do you know?"

"They said so in the village. Everything is going well. Sleep, my dear, sleep," the medic whispered.

But how could Vasko sleep now? He lay awake for a long time, his open eyes reflecting the fire's glow in tiny bright specks, speaking in a dreamy, half-delirious murmur.

He spoke of a special road that led to a far, far away land where people lived freely, where the sun never set, and where great stars made of red stone shone down upon the earth with a warm light. Whoever saw them would know true happiness. The road to this land passed through a dense, almost impenetrable forest, home to evil spirits, witches and *vurdalaki** — cruel forces and savage dog-headed beasts lying in wait to destroy any traveller. Beyond the forest lay treacher-

* Folkloric vampires.

ous swamps, covered in thick, poisonous mist. Further still, enormous, wondrous mountains rose across the path, and in them lay *ponors* — bottomless caves that burrowed deep into the heart of the mountains, where even rivers disappeared underground. In these caves, something was always howling and growling, for there lived the terrible Aždaja, a fierce three-headed dragon. Day and night, he lay in wait on the road for brave travellers.

Vasko dared to set out on this distant journey. He ran and ran toward his goal until suddenly he heard it — the cursed Aždaja chasing after him. Its wings cracked like thunder, it loomed over him like a black storm cloud, roaring and spitting sparks and lightning from its mouth. It wanted to catch him, seize him, lock him away in its cave. Vasko ran with all his might, remembering the advice given to him in a dream by a kind *vila* — one of those benevolent sisterly spirits who helped young heroes, healed their wounds and foretold their fate, whether good or ill. He recalled her words: “Hurry toward your goal, but if you look back, if you stop — even for a moment — you are lost!” And so Vasko did not stop. He did not look back, not even out of the corner of his eye. And the road became straighter and easier. It curved around a blue sea with white-crested waves, where joyful, sun-kissed children played by the shore. Comrade Nikolai had told him about them — they were Pioneers. Vasko rushed on, riding a train through vast fields, across rivers and forests, through underground tunnels that were not frightening at all but instead glittered beautifully with precious stones. And there, at last, was the great square, the tall silver fir trees, the towers crowned with red stars, their glow warm and shimmering. And at the gates stood a man in a military coat, his moustache grey, smiling just as Nikolai had described. Vasko handed him a bouquet — the best flowers that grew in his beloved

Dinaric Alps...

Ajša guessed who that man in the coat was. She had dreamed of seeing him too! Now, without her beloved, it was hard for her to imagine happiness, but still, she would have followed Vasko on that distant journey, carrying with her the most precious thing she had — a single black lock of a child’s hair, the only thing left from her little sister, from her lost home.

“How much we have in common, Vasko,” Ajša said softly when he finally fell silent.

Vasko drifted into sleep with a smile. Ajša slowly ran her palm over his feverish forehead and fell into thought.

There had been no joy or happiness in the little house where she was born and raised, the one with a plywood crescent moon on its thatched roof. Her life in *junačka** Herzegovina, the land of vineyards and barren rocks, was no better than Vasko’s life in proud Bosnia, the land of forested mountains and plum orchards, from which he had set out to chase his dream. The fathers and grandfathers of Vasko and Ajša were equally unfortunate *siromasi*** — crushed by poverty and fear; they had long since abandoned their weapons, long ceased to take revenge for the wrongs done to them. Bosnia and Herzegovina — lands of farmers and shepherds. There, as here, people were forced to work from dawn to dusk all year round just to avoid starving. Their tiny fields and gardens required endless backbreaking labour — clearing the land of stones, digging and fertilizing it, protecting it from being washed away by heavy rains — yet it yielded almost nothing. The soil was barren, dusty; seeds sprouted poorly, and even the goats could find nothing to nibble. No matter how many times each spring the wise women advised them to bury the

* Heroic (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

** Poors (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

bones of a black rooster in the field for a better harvest, it was all in vain — there would be no harvest. The parents of Vasko and Ajša had to toil for the rich. Just as soon as one oppressor loosened his grip on a poor man's neck, another was already climbing onto his shoulders — finding not only new ways to skin him alive but also to humiliate and insult him in every possible way.

Yet there were many beautiful and fertile valleys in both Bosnia and Herzegovina, just as across all of Yugoslavia. The vineyards and orchards were splendid everywhere; the mountains were rich with forests, the rivers teemed with fish, the pastures held countless sheep and goats, and the land contained various ores and precious stones — but none of it belonged to the people. They lived in hovels yet built palaces; they extracted everything necessary for a prosperous life — but not for themselves.

In Vasko's hut, woven from branches, and in Ajša's stone-built cottage, there was the same bleakness, the same hunger. And the same tragedy, the same misfortune, was brought by the fascists under both roofs. The Chetniks had slaughtered Vasko's mother, while Ajša's father, sister and grandfather had perished at the hands of the Ustaše. The marauders did not take much from Vasko's home — just three ducats, once earned by his father working for a landowner, his father's new shirt, and his mother's silk scarf, which they immediately used for the tassels on their caps. That was all the family's most valuable possessions. Ajša, however, had no home left at all. The last thing she saw as she fled her village was burning houses and her seven-year-old sister with her head smashed against a rock. She had only managed to cut a lock of her sister's black hair...

Such things could never be forgotten. To return to the past would be an unbearable shame. Vasko and Ajša walked a

hard and dangerous road — but it was the only right one. At every step, treacherous traps awaited them. But the worst, the heaviest and the most dangerous was already behind them. Never again would a Turkish pasha, a Hungarian baron, an Austrian gendarme or a fascist return to their land. Vasko and Ajša, like all the common people of Yugoslavia, had taken their fate into their own hands. They marched bravely toward their goal, without stopping and without looking back...

By dawn on the sixth day, two of the gravely wounded passed away silently, unnoticed. Their jaws were clenched tight. They had not let out a single sound of suffering, fearing to wake the sleeping medic.

The girl dragged their cold bodies to the edge of the ravine and covered them with pine needles, branches and dry leaves. On the small mound, she placed a bundle of white spring flowers and two caps with red stars.

On her way back, Ajša heard the clatter of metal and the guttural voices of men echoing from the ravine, thickly filled with cold morning mist like cotton. She immediately dashed back to the hut.

"Germans! Whoever can walk or crawl, hide in the forest. I'll stay here with the others. You go too," she urged Vasko to his feet. "I'll gather the rest after you."

Some of the wounded scattered. Ajša stood fearlessly at the hut's entrance, gripping her submachine gun.

Luckily, the Germans passed by without noticing anything in the dense fog. Soon, their voices faded into the distance and Ajša called back the wounded. She found everyone — except Vasko.

Ajša wandered along the edge of the ravine until dusk, cautiously searching through the thick wild pomegranate thickets, calling softly:

"Vasko, where are you? Answer me, Vasko!"

But only an owl hooted in reply, and far below, the stream grumbled in the darkness...

Suddenly, it was as if the glow of the sunset had fallen to the ground. Ajša lifted her head. The treetops of the pines were ablaze with an alarming crimson hue. But it didn't look like a sunset. Overcome by an inexplicable fear, she rushed into the hut. Inside, it was cold and dark. The fire had gone out. The wounded lay in silence.

Crouching by the pile of cooled ashes, Ajša desperately tried to blow life back into at least a single spark. The ashes scattered, dusting her face, but there was no spark, no warmth. A thought flashed through her mind — was it the reflection of a fire she had seen on the pines? Had the Germans set the village in the valley ablaze before leaving? She pictured the smouldering embers, the bright flames. The decision came instantly. Grabbing her mess tin, she ran down the trail toward Brđani.

Dying tongues of flame still licked the blackened walls of the clay houses in some places. The wind blew red and blue sparks from the charred wood, spreading the stench of burning. Ajša crept through the shadows. She stumbled upon something soft, bent down — and there at her feet lay the body of a woman in a low cap tied with a white scarf. It was the one who had so faithfully helped her. Ajša's vision blurred; the ground swayed and seemed to slip from under her feet. Gathering all her strength, forcing herself not to look at the dead, she swiftly filled her mess tin with glowing embers and, pressing it against her chest, burning her hands on the hot metal, ran back.

The hearth in the hut flickered to life again. But Ajša returned to it only to add more firewood. All night, she wandered through the dark, eerie forest, calling and searching for Vasko.

...At dawn on the seventh day, we returned to our abandoned medical post in the forest near Mount Pleševac. Popović and MacCarver, having expressed their satisfaction with the results of our work on Operation Ratweek and after some private discussion with Katnić, departed on a liaison plane to the Vrnovo area, where the corps headquarters was now stationed. Following Arso Jovanović's orders, our entire brigade was to gradually regroup in the Sandžak.

While crossing the ravine, the fighters unexpectedly came upon Vasko Hrstić. He was lying unconscious on the bank of the stream. We carried the boy to the forest hut. With tears in her eyes, Ajša ran to meet us. She rushed to Vasko, listened to his faint breath, not knowing how to help him, how to hold on to his life.

"Vasko, Vasko," she wept. "Let your pain pass to me instead, let me die instead of you, my dear..." Suddenly, she turned to Vučetin. "Tell me — do they really not know, in the Supreme Command, what is happening in our hospitals? Why don't they send us medicine, gauze, bandages, iodine? Why don't the Allies drop these supplies for us, at least out of simple mercy?"

"Calm down, Ajša," said Vučetin. "We have everything we need now. Look!"

Ružica stepped forward and showed her a tightly packed rucksack.

"Even penicillin is here. It's a rare and expensive medicine, very powerful. They say that thanks to penicillin, even severely wounded soldiers recover quickly in Russia."

"We are fully supplied with medical supplies," Vučetin added. "The Soviet military mission has managed to organize aid for our medical service — not just with medicine but with

medical personnel as well. And as for weapons and ammunition! Now we have heavy-calibre anti-aircraft machine guns and anti-tank rifles. We're no longer afraid of German planes or tanks."

"If only you had seen it, Ajša!" exclaimed Ružica. "When the planes dropped parachute containers with supplies, all the fighters ran into the streets, despite it being night. They tossed their caps into the air and shouted: 'Hurrah!' 'Long live Stalin!' 'Long live the Soviet Union!' Everyone embraced and kissed each other..."

"Give me the medicine quickly," Ajša urged excitedly. "Look at Vasko — how is he?"

Both girls bent over the boy.

Vučetin thanked Ajša for saving the fighters and for her selfless care of them, saying that he would make sure she was nominated for a medal that was already being introduced in the army.

"Thank you, thank you," Ajša said emotionally. "I am ready to give my life for our People's Yugoslavia."

Her eyes filled with tears. She removed Vasko's old bandages.

When Vasko regained consciousness, his face turned pink. He recognized Vučetin and me.

"Well, how are you, partisan?" the commander asked. "Think you'll recover?"

Vasko lifted his head.

"Of course! I would have run away to join you long ago if it weren't for Ajša. I didn't want to upset her. And then the Germans came... I escaped to the river."

"And what were you doing there?"

Vasko smiled slyly.

"Listening to the sound of the water. It ran and sang songs."

"About what?"

"About Moscow..." the boy said dreamily. "And how are things going with you? Any news?"

"A lot of good news. One piece of news even has four legs."

"Oh? What's that?"

"A captured horse. And a wonderful one, I must say — chestnut-coloured, gentle. You'll be riding it."

"I'll get up today, for sure," Vasko declared and even tried to do so immediately.

Ružica gently held him back.

"You can't yet."

The next day, Vasko finally made his way out of the damp hut and sat in a sunny clearing. He was feeling much better.

"I'm completely healthy now!" he shouted when he saw Jovan and me from a distance.

After talking with the boy, we headed back to our company.

Vučetin was coming toward us, leading the chestnut horse by the reins. After giving us a few instructions about preparing for the march, he continued on his way.

The forest was warm. Moist vapors rose from the ground. A barely perceptible wind whispered through the tops of the mighty firs and pines, sounding like the steady flow of a great, calm river. And in the gaps between the trees, the sky shone blue — deep as an ocean, pure as a drop from a spring.

I kept thinking about my fellow countrymen, about the Soviet people stationed at the Supreme Command. Katnić had told me that the corps commander wouldn't grant me permission to meet with them. Not understanding the reason for this strange restriction, I decided to write a letter to our mission, requesting to be summoned and heard. Worried about this and a few other things, I told Jovan what had hap-

pened to me recently.

“Near Ivan Pass, there is a large railway tunnel. We had blown up its exit, but MacCarver thought that wasn’t enough. He advised Katnić to set another charge. Vučetin protested and sent me and Laušek to extinguish the fuse. It really made no sense to destroy the entire tunnel, especially since the next, smaller one had already been demolished. And just as Laušek and I were exiting the tunnel after completing our task, a bullet whizzed past my ear — followed by another, slightly off to the side. There were no Germans nearby. It was clear that someone from our own ranks had fired.”

Miletić listened to me anxiously.

“This is how things are with us, brother,” he said in a low voice. “It’s terrifying! Be careful. Strange things can happen here... I’m not afraid to die in battle — from a bullet or a bayonet. But to die the way our first political commissar Slobodan Milojević did, like those two Montenegrins, like Lola Ribar, or the way you almost did near the tunnel — that is terrifying, that is senseless. I am against such deaths. Of course, this is war... There can be no victory without sacrifices. But for some reason, it is almost always the most honest of us who die. And almost always in ridiculous ways. A mistake, a fall from a cliff, another so-called accident. It’s as if some kind of fate looms over the very best among us.”

Suddenly, Jovan stopped by a small mound — a grave with two pilot caps on it.

“Take these two fallen fighters, for example. They lived, they fought, they dreamed of the future. And now they’re gone. Soon, even their grave will disappear without a trace. But they were probably veteran soldiers, honest, brave — maybe even communists. You know what, my dear blood brother? No matter what you say, it will be hard for us without Sava Kovačević, without Lola Ribar. These heroes are

gone, and it feels like they’ve left behind a void that no one can fill. If I survive, I’ll return to my Split, I’ll see the warm blue sea again, the cypress trees, and on the cliffs — the black pines. I’ll take a boat out at night with a lantern for fishing, I’ll hum a tune, just like before... Yes, everything will seem the same, but already without them, without those who now lie by the thousands under such small mounds or have simply rotted away in the forest — without their spirit, without their minds, without their laughter and without their faith... It will be hard for us...”

Jovan slowed his steps, paying no attention to the green world around us, full of life, movement, warm sunlight and the cheerful clamour of birds. But I was deeply enjoying it. It was as if some life-giving force was flowing into me, and despite my worries, my thoughts were clear and firm. I felt a strong sense of connection with my people and confidence in their immense strength. That’s why I asked Miletić with some irritation:

“Why do you think it will be unbearably difficult without those who have fallen? The people will remain! And all strength lies in them.”

He answered with complete seriousness:

“Because, brother, we will desperately need organizers and leaders for a new life. We will need statesmen — those who have experienced the full weight and horrors of this war, who will know how to value peace and protect it. People with a clean, untainted conscience, devoted to our cause, those to whom the people could confidently entrust their fate. And yet, it is precisely these people we will lack most if we keep losing them so often, endlessly, so easily and simply.”

“A part of the people gives its life, sacrifices itself for the future,” I countered. “But the people as a whole remain. And they will achieve their goal sooner or later. They will see the

freedom for which the heroes gave their lives; they will know how to be worthy of the bright memory of the fallen, how to hold onto and secure what has been won at such a high cost. I can feel it, Jovan — many dark forces still hover over you here, and maybe even among you. But it doesn't matter — no one can turn history back now. No one! Remember what Koce Petkovski wrote: 'Closer to the sun, more light. I want to know happiness!' And remember, Jovan, your own words about the firm faith and hopes of Vujo Hrstić — Vasko's father. You said that the partisans would never betray those hopes."

"Never!" Jovan repeated, though without the same enthusiasm he had when he said it in winter on the road to Sinj.

"And remember what happened with Đuro and the radio transmitter."

Jovan smiled. Something remarkable had indeed happened to Đuro a few days earlier. Inside one of the railway stations, Filipović had spotted a polished wooden box with headphones. Someone realized it was a radio transmitter left behind by the Germans. Đuro got excited, quickly put on the headphones and started shouting into the horn:

"Moscow! Moscow! Can you hear us? Get our Comrade Stalin on the line. Who's this? Is that you, Comrade Stalin? Greetings! The Yugoslav partisans from near Konjic are speaking. We're reporting to you, Comrade Stalin, that we are hitting the fascists hard here. Thanks for the help — for the machine guns. Send us more, and in larger quantities. And most importantly, let your soldiers come soon because it's very tough for us here alone. Hello? Hello?"

Branko, listening in, burst out laughing:

"Oh, what a fool you are! The transmitter doesn't even work!"

"Let it not work," Đuro replied. "Stalin still hears us. He

knows about our struggle."

And with a radiant face, he kept speaking into the receiver, sending greetings to Comrade Stalin from all the fighters.

Remembering Vujo Hrstić and Đuro, I said to Jovan: "With people like them, like Vasko, like Ružica and Ajša, like Vučetin and Jankov, we won't be lost."

"Yes," Jovan said with relief. "You're right."

He picked up his pace, humming: "*Tamo daleko, daleko od mora.*"

On both sides of the gangway, the makeshift shelters of the camp stretched out. The fighters were preparing for the march — sorting through trophies, cleaning their weapons and securing their packs. Kića Jankov was training the machine gunners on how to handle the anti-aircraft machine gun that the battalion had received as part of the weaponry dropped for the brigade by a Soviet plane.

Suddenly, we heard the pounding of hooves behind us. From the direction of Mount Pleševac, a rider was charging through the overhanging branches of the trees. The bay horse, stumbling, slid down the rocky slope on its hind legs. The saddle had slipped forward and the rider was barely holding onto the horse's withers. Recognizing Vasko, Jovan and I rushed toward him and grabbed the horse's reins, thinking it had been spooked and bolted.

But Vasko's face told a different story. It wasn't the usually calm horse that had taken off with him — he had whipped its sides raw with a branch. He would have jumped down onto his wounded leg if I hadn't caught him. Trembling all over, he buried his head in my knees as if seeking protection and broke into uncontrollable sobs.

Some time passed before we could make out the fragmented words he gasped out:

"There... lying there... What do we do?... There he is..."

“Who?! Speak, for God’s sake!” Jovan shouted.

“Commander Vučetin!” Vasko cried out. “He was walking behind me...”

Miletić stared at me in shock, but in the next instant, he was already racing up the trail, stumbling, scraping his knees on the rocks, scrambling back to his feet, spreading alarm through the camp just by the sheer urgency of his movements, rousing everyone.

I caught up with him. Not far from the forest hut, on the trail, lay our commander, Tomaš Vučetin. He lay face down, his arms spread wide as if trying to embrace as much of the earth as possible and on his back gaped a knife wound, from which blood was slowly trickling.

24

...In Gornji Vakuf, I once heard the mournful wails of a muezzin. Raising his long arms toward the green evening sky, he chanted his “*Allahu Akbar, La ilaha illa Allah!*” in such a monotonous, drawn-out, lifeless voice that one could easily fall asleep to it.

I recalled that muezzin as I watched Mate Maček, the secretary of the battalion Party bureau, summoning us to a rally. Leaning forward awkwardly, he shuffled from one group of partisans to another, feebly waving his hands and droning in a calm, indifferent tone:

“To the rally, comrades, gather for the memorial rally.”

People said that Maček had once worked for a village blacksmith and had been about to marry the master’s daughter. But then the Germans came, destroyed the smithy, raped his fiancée, and in despair, he fled to the Monastery of Saints Cosmas and Damian on Fruška Gora. However, the fascists drove out the monks as well. Maček then shed his cassock

to escape the ‘army of the anti-Christ,’ wandered into the forest and ended up in a partisan unit by pure chance. Having been accustomed all his life to obeying either a master or an abbot, he now, as a partisan, showed an exceptional punctuality in carrying out any orders from above, never questioning their purpose.

Dull and perpetually drowsy-looking, Maček would come to life only in Katnić’s presence. He was especially captivated by the political commissar’s speeches. Listening to his long-winded rhetoric, Maček would tense up as if straining to memorize every word, expressing his readiness to carry out any order at once. Naturally, Katnić took notice of him and, as a “true proletarian,” admitted him into the Party. Maček became secretary of the Party bureau shortly after the fortunate incident when he was the first to successfully greet Tito during his visit to the battalion while retreating from Bosnia. The words “my brave lad,” spoken by Tito in reference to Maček, always served as a glowing recommendation for him.

At the secretary’s call, fighters and commanders silently gathered in the forest clearing before a rock with a small recess where Katnić had set up his quarters.

Đuro Filipović arrived at the rally with our old banner, slightly charred from the tunnel explosion. Scorched, smoke-stained, riddled with bullet holes, this banner was becoming more sacred to the fighters with each passing day — a symbol of their honour. Just yesterday, it had covered Vučetin’s body before his burial at the edge of the ravine, beside the nameless grave of two partisans. Now, clustered around their banner, the fighters softly repeated after Marko Petrović the verses from *The Mountain Wreath* by Njegoš:

“May the shame of Branković befall
those, oh brothers, who betray the young warriors,
who rise against the enemy...
May the wind breathe fury into them,
may they be robbed of mind and reason!
Let rust corrode all in their homes,
so that even weeping and lamenting
for them would sound false and hollow!”*

These solemn and ominous curses rang out with power and passion, as if, through the words of *serdar*** Vukota, the partisans were cursing the traitors — one of whom had murdered Vučetin.

Katnić stepped onto a limestone slab that jutted from the ground like a podium and spoke in a strained, quiet voice:

“My comrades, my brave lads! I lack the words to properly express our shared grief and fury. Even today, I cannot gather my thoughts. What has happened is shockingly unbelievable. I still cannot grasp it, cannot come to terms with the fact that Tomaš is no longer with us — our dear comrade, a hero of the National Liberation War, and a steadfast, fiery patriot. We do not know who this treacherous enemy is, this vile fiend, this German agent who struck down our commander from the shadows. But alas, whoever he may be, a stone cast into the water will never rise from the river! A warrior from the knightly lineage of the Montenegrins will not return to our ranks. We weep, yet we remain as solid as granite, not easily wounded... We must not lose heart, my brave lads. Comrade Tito leads us to victory — he, too, weeps and mourns with us. Yes, he weeps, just as

* Vuk Branković — a Kosovo nobleman, condemned in folk songs as a traitor who abandoned the Serbian army during the Battle of Kosovo.

** A district elder (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

we do.” Katnić demonstratively wiped his eyes with a large checkered handkerchief. “He weeps, yet in his mighty hand, the torch of faith in our better future does not tremble. The heart of our hero Tomaš Vučetin has ceased to beat, but his name will forever burn as a sacred flame on the tablets of our history...”

The fighters listened with bowed heads — or perhaps they weren’t listening at all, lost in their own thoughts. And I was thinking the same thing as everyone else — about Vučetin. What a good man he had been, a truly pure communist, a devoted friend of the Soviet Union. He drew his strength from the ideas of Lenin and Stalin, and his inspiration from the great Soviet example. For some reason, Katnić didn’t mention this in his speech... Vučetin, persistent, calmly energetic, remarkably steadfast, had disproved the outdated notion that Montenegrins were only active when they heard the call to battle — that fighting was their only true element. No, Vučetin would have been an outstanding builder of the new Yugoslavia. Jovan was partly right: without men like Vučetin, tomorrow would be much harder... He had a way of reaching the hearts of his soldiers. He never hid from danger. Everyone loved him. He treated me with warmth and kindness. And I felt no shame in the tears welling in my eyes as I stood over his fresh grave... I would never forget his thin, pale face, the gentle squint of his calm grey eyes, his confession at the roadside crucifix near Sinj, his passionate dreams of the future...

No one immediately noticed the menacing, rumbling sound.

I looked up. Over the clearing, not far above, circled a broad-winged, twin-engine aircraft with a glassed-in, blunt nose. An old acquaintance: the Junkers 88. The bomber tilted downward, howling as it dove toward the ground. Some-

one managed to shout:

“Avion!”

Kića Jankov, tearing off his glasses, waved them in alarm:

“To cover!”

Everyone scattered toward the ravine. Jankov ran to the sentries stationed at the anti-aircraft machine gun. Katnić and Maček were the first to take cover in the rock recess nearby.

The bomb exploded, splintering tree trunks and scattering stones. The edges of the ravine began to crumble and collapse. A blast of hot, dense air hit us.

Another pass...

Again, the whistling of a falling bomb, a deafening crack, a piercing hiss and the shriek of shrapnel.

“What’s going on?!” Laušek muttered, shaking clumps of dirt off himself. *“What a day! And, as if on purpose, the sun is setting so slowly! The Earth is turning so slowly!”*

Another pass, a dive... But then Kića’s sharp command rang out:

“Fire!”

A steady, hurried rattle filled the air, resembling the rapid hammering of a pneumatic drill.

We lifted our heads.

The plane, plunging toward us almost vertically, suddenly tilted onto its wing and, trailing a thick black plume of smoke and fire, crashed into the trees. With a sharp crack, breaking branches as it fell, it smashed into the ground. A massive column of fiery smoke shot up over the forest. A thunderous explosion shook the air, sending a wave of searing heat across our faces.

The fighters leaped out of the ravine, loudly voicing their excitement. They ran up to me, cheering and shouting: *“Thank you!”* After all, the Junkers had been shot down by

one of the heavy-calibre machine guns dropped near Konjic by our Soviet pilots...

My dear, distant homeland! Oh, how happy and proud I am of you!

As dusk settled and the freshening wind carried away the smoky haze, the commanders gathered around Kića Jankov. It was almost understood without question — he was the only one who could replace Vučetin! Moreover, according to battle orders, he had always been designated as the deputy battalion commander in case Vučetin was incapacitated.

Kića sat hunched under an oak tree, his thick lips pressed tightly together, his already wrinkled broad forehead furrowed even deeper. For the first time, he didn’t ask where Katnić was, nor did he wait for him. Slowly scanning us with his gaze, he said:

“I’ve come to a conclusion: there are traitors among us. Traitors and all sorts of scum! We may not even suspect that someone beside us is just waiting for the right moment to drive a knife into one of our throats.”

“We should check!” came the deep voice of the approaching Kuštrinović. *“There are all sorts of Czechs and other foreigners here.”*

“Captain Kuštrinović!” Kića cut him off. *“I advise you not to falsely insult our loyal friends.”* Then, more calmly, he continued: *“I believe, comrades, that we need to investigate this matter more thoroughly. But for now, let’s decide what to do next.”*

Kića spoke with strain, making long pauses. He was weighed down by grief. Taking on the responsibility of leading the battalion in such a state was no easy task.

“How should we proceed?” he repeated, looking at me. *“Where do we move? Ilija Perućica, when we were leaving Konjic, gave Vučetin directions for the entire brigade — to*

the Sandžak! I think that's the right course. What do you think, Comrade Nikolai?"

I agreed with Jankov: of course, we had to head east, towards the Red Army. It was already on Romanian territory and could soon appear near the Danube. It moved with a giant's stride!

"That's the only right decision!" exclaimed Jovan. "The Russians' mighty advance is our salvation. You can't even grasp what's happening here... Do you hear that? Shooting again, somewhere."

We listened closely. In the distance, a heavy-calibre German machine gun rumbled. All throughout the forest, an indistinct noise was growing, becoming stronger and more unsettling. Shouts rang out, bushes cracked under hurried footsteps. Someone was running straight toward us.

Kića jumped up and grabbed the runner by the shoulder.

"What happened?"

"We... we're surrounded!" the man screamed.

"Who said so?"

"Everyone's saying it..."

"I see you're new here?" Kića shook the soldier forcefully.

"So what?"

"That's what, you foolish sheep," Kića told him, leaning in close. "Yes, exactly, you're a sheep, and it's obvious. You weren't with us lying in the snow under Foča. You didn't storm the trenches at Slepica and Gacko. You weren't trapped in the mountains between Sutjeska, Piva and Tara. If you had been through all that with us, you'd know, you miserable coward," he spat out the word in Serbian, *kukavica*,* "that there are no traps, no situations the Šumadija fighters can't break through with honour, like true proletarians. Understood?"

* Coward (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

The soldier remained silent, his head bowed, listening — whether to Kića's words or the sounds in the forest was unclear. His face was twisted with fear, his mouth slightly open, teeth glinting in the darkness.

Kića shoved him away.

"Go. Run home and hide behind your grandmother's skirts. There's no place for you here."

But the soldier didn't move.

From the forest, Filipović's voice rang out. He was dragging someone, swearing furiously.

"Is the company commander here?" he asked, gripping the man's arms, twisted behind his back.

We peered closer. It was Branko Kumanudi!

"Where the hell did you drag me?!" Branko struggled to break free, but Đuro slammed him to the ground.

"He..."

"What about him? Speak!" Kića demanded.

"I was just walking, what's the big deal? Let me go!" Branko shouted.

"Not walking — running," Đuro corrected him.

"Fine, running, so what? Can't I use my legs as I please?"

"Then why were you yelling that we were surrounded and that all was lost?"

"I didn't yell! I swear to God, everyone was running, not just me. Let go, you devil!"

"Liar! You were the first to spread panic. I should strangle you right now like the filthy toad you are."

Kića pried Đuro's heavy hand off Branko's shoulder, and the latter struggled up. Kića's eyes flashed sharply.

"Now, answer honestly — where were you running, and who told you to shout about an encirclement? Well?!"

Branko slumped down in front of the pointed submachine gun — and suddenly collapsed at the commander's

feet.

“Spare me! I didn’t mean to... I’ll tell you everything...”

His desperate scream was suddenly cut short by two gunshots, fired one after the other.

Đuro lunged toward Kumanudi’s fallen body, as if trying to snatch the unfinished words from his lips.

A figure emerged from the nearest tree. Katnić approached us unhurriedly.

“That’s how it’s done!” he said hoarsely. “This is the only way to deal with traitors. Just like OZNA does!” he added, emphasizing OZNA. “And you? Why were you even bothering to talk to him? There’s panic in the battalion, and you’re wasting time with words! Couldn’t you have handled this filth more efficiently?”

Katnić contemptuously nudged Branko’s body with his boot. All eyes were fixed on the commissar.

“Where did his knife go?” Filipović quietly asked as he rose to his knees, as if he had been preparing to pose this question for some time. “He always had it in his boot,” he explained. “I know that for sure.”

“What knife? Ah...!” Katnić suddenly lashed out at Filipović in fury. “You fool! Idiot! Why didn’t you notice earlier that he didn’t have his knife? Do you even know what kind of knife Branko had? Can you identify it? Search for it, find it immediately! Damn it! No matter. I’ll handle this. Đuro, you’ll help me.”

“No! We’ll handle this ourselves,” Jankov interjected firmly.

Katnić stared at him in surprise. Jankov had never spoken to him in such a way before.

“Who’s ‘we’?” he asked arrogantly.

“The Party bureau.”

Kića turned to us.

“Back to your companies, comrades! Establish full order. Zagoryanov, you’ll take over my company, pass your platoon to Filipović. We leave by morning.”

“Comrade... May I stay?” the newcomer asked Jankov. There was firmness in his voice now.

“That’s more like it,” Kića responded briefly. “Stay, but not as a sheep — be an eagle!”

Discussing what had happened, Miletić and I hurried back to our company.

“Damn it all! If Branko killed Vučetin, it was probably personal revenge,” Jovan speculated. “Maybe over those three days of arrest, remember?”

“I don’t think so. This isn’t just about Branko,” I said.

We caught up to Katnić. Puffing and panting, he was making his way through the thorny underbrush. Hearing our footsteps, he turned, trying to see us in the darkness. The glow of his cigarette flared briefly, momentarily illuminating his bloated face.

A sudden thought struck me: by getting rid of Branko, was Katnić trying to cover up some traces of the crime — the murder of Vučetin? I immediately voiced my suspicion to my comrade.

Jovan was silent for a moment, staring at me intently.

“I thought the same thing, brother,” he finally said in a barely audible voice. “But no, no. He’s the political commissar! He came to us from the Central Committee. That means a lot!” he said slowly and deliberately.

But his answer didn’t reassure me. A burning anxiety for the fate of the battalion, which had lost its commander so tragically and inexplicably, and a deep concern for my new comrades and their future, gripped me with renewed force.

By morning, planes were again circling over Mount Pleškovac and Mount Ivan. Thermite bombs set the trees

ablaze. Pillars of fire swayed above the forest, while smoke spread through the ravines. But the Germans were bombing in vain.

We left before dawn, taking only the bare essentials on our backs and horses...



PART FOUR

1

...We were heading east, making our way through the formidable, grim ridges of the Treskavica Mountains. The sheer cliffs took on shapes — sometimes like a half-bent finger, sometimes like a pyramid, sometimes like a blunt, split hoof. Twice, we crossed the Great Route, the path the partisans had once used to retreat. We struggled over the steep slopes of Mount Jahorina. At Goražde, wading chest-deep through dark green waters, we crossed the Drina. We passed through the Orlovača Mountains, the narrow valley of the blue Lim River and ascended the majestic Stari Vlah, with its dense, somber forests. Here, Bosnia ended, and Serbia began — this was the Sandžak region. Along the way, we wiped out and scattered several bands of Chetniks. People's rule was returning to the mountain villages. Some of our fighters stayed behind to rebuild life, while others remained to heal their wounds. Meanwhile, those who had recovered rejoined our ranks, entire platoons filling the gaps in our lines. The line

between the army and the people blurred — everyone was fighting. And in that struggle, they were forging their own people's state.

It was already June 7 when we set up camp on the forested plateau of Zlatar.

These lands are beautiful and welcoming!

"Mount Zlatar! Oh, Zlatar, you are truly magnificent!" Jovan exclaimed, sweeping his arm around. "Look, my friend, how far you can see!"

We stood atop the highest cliff.

From here, the mountain ridges with their rounded peaks stretched like frozen green waves. Their slopes transitioned into a vast plateau, breaking off into winding ravines and valleys, where rivers — Ibar, Uvac, Lim, Moravica — rushed swiftly. To the north, the bare ridge of the Zlatibor Mountains was visible. To the west, the Lim River wound like a blue serpent through a narrow gorge, and beyond, the mountains stacked chaotically upon one another, their peaks in Montenegro rising like giant buttresses, wreathed in garlands of clouds. Towering above them all was the great Durmitor, crowned with eternal snows. Slightly to the left, a ridge with three sharp peaks rose — a place, Jovan claimed, where the Lim and Tara rivers were born. To the south lay the desolate, wind-scoured and rain-washed mountains of Ozren. But if you looked east, your eyes were met with an open mountain landscape stretching far into the distance. There, beyond the forested heights of Golija, lay our path into Serbia — the famous Ibar Gorge, stretching for dozens of kilometres. A highway and railway ran through it, connecting the south to Kraljevo and leading north and northwest. A vital German supply route!

"If only we could cut off that gorge!" I said to Jovan.

"That would be something... But who knows where we'll

be sent from here? In which direction, and how soon? There are always 'higher considerations,' brother... Do you hear that? It sounds like someone is calling us."

We started descending the mountain.

Inside a small cave where the headquarters had set up, Kića Jankov had gathered the company commanders and commissars. It was clear he had made some sort of decision.

"Comrades," he began firmly. "I don't know military tactics and strategy as well as Tomaš Vučetin did. My trade is locksmithing. But now, I've learned a thing or two. It seems to me that, moving forward, we will have to rely only on ourselves."

"Why?" Miletić asked. "Once communication with the Supreme Headquarters is restored, orders will come."

"That would be best," Kića replied with a smile. "But..." He fell silent.

Just then, Katnić burst into the cave, shoving past the sentry. His face was flushed, his breathing uneven with excitement.

"Comrades!" the political commissar shouted joyfully. "Long-awaited news! The British and Americans have landed in France between Le Havre and Cherbourg. The Second Front now exists!"

"What?!"

"Really?"

"Finally! They've been planning this for so long!"

The commanders exchanged excited glances. It was truly joyous and long-awaited news.

"Incredible!" Katnić sat down on a rock. "I just picked it up... Spent ages fiddling with the damn radio! And then suddenly, I tuned in. I hear all the stations announcing: on June 4, the Allies took Rome, crossed the Tiber, and now they've launched the invasion of the French coast. Eisenhower visited

the landing zone. Roosevelt is praying on the radio, asking God to grant us faith in one another, faith in our unified crusade and to help us defeat the apostles of greed and racial arrogance! Congratulations, comrades. Hurrah for the Allies! A distant salute to Mr. MacCarver! And what's going on here? A meeting? What's on the agenda?"

"There's a lot to discuss. We were just about to..." Jankov began.

Katnić, as usual, interrupted before he could finish.

"The most important thing is that we are now truly strong!" he exclaimed enthusiastically. "Let's put aside all our internal disagreements! Yes! Oh, I have a rally to lead!" he suddenly remembered. "I have to run. Finish up here quickly, taking into account the new situation — and come to the rally! By the way, why isn't Captain Kuštrinović here? I recommend listening to his advice. He's an excellent military strategist. Well, I'm off!"

From outside came Maček's monotonous voice:

"To the rally, comrades, to the rally! Gather for the rally on the opening of the Second Front!"

"Now then, comrades," Jankov continued after Katnić disappeared. "The news is great, no doubt about it. But we can't rely solely on the Allies. Remember how we celebrated when they landed in Sicily and then in southern Italy? Everyone expected the war to change. They said: in a month or two, Yugoslavia will be liberated, the Anglo-Americans will soon arrive! And what happened? They've been stuck in Italy for an entire year and have only now taken Rome. Meanwhile, in that same year, the Red Army has fought its way over 1,500 kilometres and is already at Romania's borders. The real help we should be waiting for isn't from the Second Front — it's from the Russians."

Kića turned his kind gaze toward me.

"And soon, comrades, very soon! It's really a shame that at such a crucial moment, we are cut off from the Supreme Headquarters with no way to communicate. They remained in Drvar, while we are heading farther into Serbia. Frankly, it was a mistake for us to leave Serbia for western Bosnia back in '41. We left the working class behind!"

"That's true! Why did we leave Serbia back then?" one of the commanders asked thoughtfully, exhaling tobacco smoke through his drooping moustache. "The Chetniks betrayed us, but we could have returned and taken revenge. Why didn't we? We left the Serbian people at the mercy of the Chetniks!"

"Because we were hoping the Second Front would open along the Dalmatian coast," the second company's commissar said with a sly smirk, smoothing his greying hair at the temples. "Turns out we were wrong. It opened over there, in France! Can you imagine the reshuffling happening in Drvar right now? The Supreme Headquarters will surely relocate here, closer to us!"

"That's exactly what will happen," Miletić confirmed with confidence. "Closer to us and to the Bulgarian partisans. After all, the struggle must be happening in the mountains of the central Balkans as well. They say there are partisan detachments in Bulgaria. It would be good to establish contact with them."

"About time!" Kića snapped angrily, frowning his brow. "But it's unlikely, comrades, that the headquarters will move from Drvar to Serbia. There are too few of our forces here. And unfortunately, the fact that there are many workers, miners and peasants who support us is considered insignificant."

"Besides, Drvar is obviously safer and more convenient. It's a base," the greying commissar added, realizing that Jankov shared his irony. "So, what do you propose, comrade?"

"Not to settle here, but to prepare for a campaign, for

battles,” Jankov answered decisively. “For now, we need to immediately find Perućica. He was supposed to follow us with the other battalions. Let’s see what he says. Comrade Korchagin, you will go search for him — you’re a proven courier. As for the rest of you,” Kića stood up, “back to training! I’ve put together a training program, and I ask you to follow it precisely. That’s why I called you here. To training, comrades!” Kića repeated forcefully. “We must take advantage of this rest period and catch up. We must not feel ashamed when we meet the Red Army,” he added with a smile that softened the stern expression in his eyes.

He gave us a few more orders regarding the camp’s security, and everyone hurried off to the rally.

Usually quiet, reserved and even somewhat timid, Kića Jankov suddenly revealed his true character to us that day. Not domineering, but rather subtly commanding. I couldn’t help but think: Where does he, such a modest-looking man, get so much inner strength and charisma?

2

...At the rally, we heard the rest of the radio reports from Katnić. So many updates! The Red Army is already approaching the Balkans.

“They’ll be here soon,” Miletić said.

Listening to the political commissar, the partisans exchanged relieved glances. I saw their shining eyes, their smiles, their heads held high. Everyone felt the same thing — as if they had been trudging endlessly down a difficult road, exhausted and disheartened, when suddenly music broke out. A lively march stirred their souls, the weight of fatigue fell from their shoulders, new strength coursed through their bodies and their steps grew more confident.

Everywhere, the talk was only about the Red Army. As always in such moments, I immediately became the centre of attention. It was as if I, not the radio, had brought the joyous news, as if I were one of those Russian warrior-giants marching to their aid.

Marching, marching! Gogol’s words suddenly came to mind: “Is there any fire, torment or force in the world that could overpower Russian strength?” People shook my hand, hugged me, patted my shoulder. It was incredibly heartwarming to see their joy, yet at the same time, I felt an involuntary embarrassment. My conscience kept asking: Have you done enough so that you won’t feel ashamed when you look your comrades in the eye? The meeting would be soon!

One soldier sketched a rough map in the sand: here’s the Dniester, here’s Romania and this is the Danube. The others crowded around, eagerly explaining to me the quickest and easiest way for the Red Army to enter Yugoslavia. Another asked: “What do Russian soldiers wear? Can you recognize them from afar?” Then, nearly the entire company made their way to the spring, washing and scrubbing their clothes as if preparing for a celebration.

Đuro Filipović suddenly became unusually strict. Strutting around in polished boots and a trophy wristwatch worn over his jacket cuff, he scrutinized everyone and scolded them: one had a missing button, another’s boots were in dire need of repair, yet another’s rifle wasn’t clean enough. He remembered everything — how one had panicked during the bombing in Raštelica, how another had argued when sent to relieve the patrol near Tarčin. “This way, we’ll embarrass ourselves in front of the Russians!” he grumbled.

The next morning, Miletić and Laušek set out to locate the brigade headquarters, while the rest of us threw ourselves into training with enthusiasm. At the small shooting range

near the mountain, we practised hitting targets; in the clearing, we drilled in formation. The training machine gun was constantly surrounded — everyone wanted to disassemble and reassemble it with their own hands. Marko Petrović was besieged by eager learners, while the newcomers listened with envy as Vasko Hrستیć read entire passages from Nušić's* lively play *The Peasant and the Lamb* without a single mistake; before his departure, Laušek had been directing rehearsals and Vasko played a role in the performance.

Life in the battalion was becoming truly engaging, meaningful and full of energy — just as Arso Jovanović had described it to us in Gornji Vakuf. “A strike finds a spark in the stone, otherwise, it would be lost within it.” These words by Njegoš were even placed by Ružica as an epigraph under the title of the wall newspaper *Glas Šumadinca***.

And before lights-out, a choir would inevitably gather by Petrović's shelter, filling the quiet of the night with the powerful and passionate sounds of our Russian songs from the Civil War era. I listened, lying on my back in the grass, still warm from the sun, while above me, stars shimmered gently through the branches of a pine tree. My heart felt light, as if I were already among my own, under my own Soviet sky...

Two days passed. Miletić and Laušek had not returned. Kića and I were beginning to worry. I climbed the rocky observation post with binoculars, scanning the forest roads and trails. But there was no one in sight. Only the chirping of birds disturbed the absolute silence.

One day, as I was descending the mountain, I unexpectedly came across Katnić. He was sitting under the gnarled branches of a wild olive tree, surrounded by dense, thorny rosebushes, reading something from a thick notebook to a

* Nušić — a famous Serbian satirical writer.

** The Voice of the Šumadijan.

small group of soldiers.

Upon seeing me, he rose from a round boulder.

“I knew you'd be interested too,” he said. “We're having a political discussion. I just finished a new chapter of my work and am reading some excerpts. Have a seat.”

He motioned me to sit on a rock and, waving off the flies, glanced at me from beneath his brow. At that moment, he himself resembled an *obad* — one of those large, grey flies with fat bodies and bulging eyes. Clinging to the branches with their legs, shifting their plump torsos, the *obads* filled the hot air with their incessant buzzing.

“Our people are very unique, with a distinct character and an unparalleled, original history,” Katnić continued his thoughts. “This is partly due to our geographical position. We are at the very centre of the world. Yes! Let me explain. Picture a map in your mind. Europe is the centre of the world. The centre of this centre lies somewhere between London and Constantinople, and roughly between Berlin and Salonika. And at the very heart of this centre live the Serbs. This was also asserted by our renowned scholar Dragiša Stanović.”

For a long time, and in a tedious manner, frequently referencing the statements of this 19th-century Serbian nationalist ideologue, Katnić lectured on the supposed unique historical and social development of the peoples of Yugoslavia, on the special virtues of the Serbian nation, which, according to him, was destined for the mission of “gathering lands” in the Balkans, on its leading role among the Balkan Slavs, and on the Serbian homeland standing on the “main street of humanity” — between London and Istanbul, between Europe and Asia.

“And just as the Russians are the leading nation in the Soviet world, so we, the Yugoslavs, are the leading conglomerate of ethnic groups in the Balkans,” Katnić continued. “But

we are closer to Europe than the Russians. We are practically at the forefront of modern culture! Russian communism plus Western culture — that will propel us, the Yugoslavs, far ahead.”

The sheer arrogance, chauvinism and naive self-importance of his words were overwhelming. Unable to hold back, I said to the political commissar:

“The essence of your work is perfectly clear to me. This is nothing but a sermon of Greater Serbian nationalism!”

The fighters murmured in approval.

“Wait, wait!” Katnić flustered. “This is only, so to speak, the introduction, the explanatory part.” Waving his thick notebook, he continued hastily, addressing me: “Here are my theses! It is very important to me, you see, extremely important, that I am understood correctly. I don’t want you, for example, to seriously think that we are some kind of nationalists. Such accusations are unthinkable! That would be prejudice, a misunderstanding! I would be the first to oppose such slander against us. We have nothing to do with nationalism. We are internationalists. We are loyal to the goals of the global proletarian movement and infinitely devoted to the Soviet Union. That is exactly what I am saying!” He flipped through his notebook almost to the end. “Here.” Read this: “We and the Soviet Union are inseparable, like a single crystal.”

Katnić stepped aside, clasped his hands behind his back, then sharply turned and raised his voice:

“Yes, yes! And since we are inseparable, you and I, Nikolai, must have complete mutual understanding. That is why, my friend, I want you, as a witness and participant in our struggle, when you return home, to inform Soviet society correctly and objectively about our new, strengthened power. We are not just some Albanians or Bulgarians...” He shot me a probing look. “Why are you smirking?”

“And what’s wrong with Albanians and Bulgarians?” I asked. “I think your work contradicts the true Marxist approach to the national question.”

“Oh, is that so?” Katnić squinted. “Then it seems you still don’t fully understand me. Wait, wait!” He held me back. “In that case, it is my duty to convince you. We Serbs have a very distinctive, purely national trait — *inat* — the stubborn desire to stand our ground, sometimes even against all odds. *Basta mu* — I want it, and that’s that!”

“You even have an old proverb about it,” I remarked. “*Inat* will lead you all the way to Istanbul.”

“Oh-ho! So you already know our proverbs!” The political commissar was surprised.

That whole evening, after training with the fighters, I kept thinking about Katnić’s “work.” Why does he so carefully avoid mentioning Serbia’s historical ties with Russia and the sacrifices the Russian people made for centuries in the struggle to liberate the Balkans? Without those sacrifices, there would have been neither an independent Serbia in the 19th century nor a Yugoslavia in the 20th. Why, in glorifying his own nation, does he try to belittle its neighbouring, fraternal ones? And what is this nonsense about “being at the forefront of modern culture”? What kind of culture is that, in a land where they still plough with wooden ploughs, and relations between people are dominated by oppression and arbitrary rule? I couldn’t help but link what I had heard from Katnić to his behaviour, his constant nitpicking at me, the case of Branko — and I came to the conclusion that Katnić was a dubious person, his actions inexplicable. He was being trusted by those in higher ranks, but he was at best duplicitous and insincere. If only I could meet with my comrades from the Soviet military mission soon! There was so much I would tell them! So many questions I would ask! I had al-

ready requested that Kića allow me to temporarily leave the battalion, to give me some assignment to Perućica. From the brigade headquarters, it would be easier either to reach the Supreme Command in Drvar myself or, at the very least, send a letter to Arso Jovanović and the head of the Soviet mission. Kića had promised to request leave for me as soon as we re-established contact with Perućica.

3

Kića Jankov listened in silence as Zagoryanov harshly criticized Katnić's "theses" and the man himself, clearly growing more agitated. What to do? Gathering the Party bureau was proving impossible. Yet, urgent issues needed to be addressed — the assassination of Vučetin and the summary execution of Branko Kumanudi. But Katnić firmly opposed convening the bureau. He insisted that the extraordinary incident in the battalion had already escalated beyond a Party discussion and was now within the jurisdiction of OZNA. As political commissar, he claimed to have taken all necessary measures, an investigation was underway and the Party bureau had no reason to worry...

"Still, something needs to be done," Kića decided. "I'll consult with the secretary. He's a sycophant, of course, but at the same time, a cunning fox — he always keeps his nose to the wind. Maybe he'll realize that Katnić is no longer someone worth aligning with for his own careerist ambitions."

That same evening, Jankov called Maček over.

He laid out everything he thought about the political commissar. It was no secret that Katnić had repeatedly made mistakes and missteps in his work. True, at the Party conference in Gornji Vakuf, in the presence of Arso Jovanović, he had admitted to them, but in practice, he remained the

same petty tyrant and bureaucrat. He neglected political education for the fighters. Instead of teaching them about the development of society, the workers' movement, the proletarian revolution and the building of a communist society, he fed them nationalist nonsense that had nothing in common with Marxist-Leninist doctrine. His summary execution of Branko was more than questionable. All of this allowed Jankov, as a member of the Party bureau, to boldly state that Katnić was behaving in an unworthy and unparty-like manner. The fighters neither liked nor respected him. He no longer held any authority over them and was incapable of leading them through these harsh days of struggle when they were all making sacrifices and facing death for the sake of a better future.

Maček, squinting against the harsh white glow of the captured carbide lamp, listened to the commander's impassioned speech in complete bewilderment. He wasn't convinced of Katnić's infallibility, but he also didn't dare question him. Maček believed that criticizing a superior's actions was not only improper but outright dangerous — especially since Katnić had connections in the Central Committee. Hesitantly, he reminded Kića of this fact.

"Clearly, they haven't looked into him properly," Jankov replied. "If the Central Committee found out about the summary execution..."

"And there's no need to make a fuss over it," Maček interrupted. "It's obvious that Katnić shot Branko because that scoundrel was Vučetin's murderer."

"So he already knew that at the time?" Kića asked, giving Maček a piercing look.

"Well, of course," Maček answered confidently. "Filipović didn't find a knife on Branko, after all."

"Yes, but that whole story about the missing knife, which Branko supposedly threw away, only came to light after Kat-

nić's shots."

"After... But what about intuition?" Maček nervously ran his palm over his bald head. "Katnić has impeccable intuition and political instinct. He did the right thing."

"Right?!" Jankov shouted indignantly. "How is it right if Branko wanted to say something, and Katnić didn't let him? That means he had a reason to stop the murderer from telling us everything!"

"That's true..." Maček muttered. "He was too hasty... Yes, you're right. Some things needed to be clarified first, and only then could the scum be crushed. It was a mistake."

"A mistake like that borders on a crime."

"Logically," Maček nodded. "But if it's a crime, then the commissar will answer for it before OZNA."

"Maybe someday he will..." A sharp glint flashed in Jankov's eyes. "But for now, answer me: why was he in such a rush to get rid of his favourite?"

"Why, why... I already told you why," Maček said in a weary voice. "I can explain it psychologically, too..."

"I'm listening."

Leaning on a crate, Jankov scrutinized Maček's half-closed eyes.

The secretary was desperate to avoid delving into the essence of the issue — it was too murky, too dangerous. Getting involved, stirring things up, would bring too much trouble. It was easier to play the naive simpleton and try to shield his patron.

"The way I see it, here's the issue," Maček began, speaking slowly and deliberately. "We Serbs, for the most part, belong to the Dinaric type of people. We are just as impulsive and fiery as the highlanders living in the Dinaric Alps. Katnić acted like a true Dinaric — hot-tempered and quick to anger — when he shot Branko."

Jankov snorted mockingly:

"He's as much a Dinaric as I am a Turk — this merchant from Kragujevac."

"What are you saying?... You forget that he's an educated man and has powerful connections. That's not something to ignore," Maček whispered, glancing around nervously.

For a moment, both men were silent. The only sound was the heavy droplets of water rhythmically falling from the porous cave ceiling.

Believing his last argument had made an impression, Maček quickly continued:

"Believe me, Katnić deeply regrets not being able to restrain himself. I know — he's tormented by it. Branko took the secret of Vučetin's murder to his grave. That much is true. And the commissar, you'll see, won't rest until he finds the instigators behind the killer. He'll launch an investigation and help OZNA find the right trail." His voice took on a challenging tone. "It's still unclear who among us has lost vigilance and who trusts outsiders too much..."

"Who, for example?"

"Oh, different Czechs here and there..."

"Oh, Maček!" Kića shook his head sadly. "You're quite the smooth talker, but it's clear you're singing someone else's tune. I'm listening to you, and all I can think is — who's feeding you these lines? What do Czechs have to do with this? Nedić is a Serb, and he's our worst enemy. Kumanudi was a Croat, like Tito, and what good did he turn out to be? Do you really prefer to trust people like Kumanudi? How many times have we heard from you and Katnić that the Party is a fortress, open only to the most worthy, yet you both, taking advantage of secrecy and lack of oversight, smuggle in God knows who!"

"You know very well, Kića, that anyone who truly wants to join our Party will find a way," Maček said meaningfully.

“And that’s exactly our problem. Everyone tries to squeeze in... The real issue is that we Party members barely know each other, we rarely come together to discuss pressing matters. We work as if we’re still underground. Who are we hiding from?”

“We’re not hiding, we just don’t want to provoke our friends, the English and the Americans, with the Party’s power. Otherwise, they might refuse to help us. Do you understand? And inside the country, we can’t afford to scare off those who want to fight against the Germans.”

“Why would we scare them off? The people trust the Party, they love it, they follow it!”

“Yes, but not everyone is drawn in by our slogans... You know we have a People’s Front. The Party is just a small group, while the People’s Front is nearly the entire population of the country. The dictatorship of the proletariat, the Party’s leading role and so on — all these things need to be very carefully masked in our current situation. Do you understand that?” The secretary finished in a patronizing tone, with an ambiguous smile.

“Not really,” Jankov shrugged. “But wait!” He slammed his fist on the table, forcing Maček to listen. “You’re setting the Party against the People’s Front! That’s a dangerous path. I’m not as much of a theorist as you and Blažo, but I think you’re interpreting things incorrectly. Here’s how I see it: our Party, the Communist Party, was, is and will remain the main force of the national liberation movement. How can you possibly ‘mask’ that force? A boat is bigger than its rudder. But can you convince anyone that the boat steers the rudder and not the other way around? In my opinion, the Party’s work should be open, deep and widespread. That’s how I, a worker, understand the Party’s role. And how do you see it?”

Maček mumbled something incoherent.

“But let’s drop this argument. No matter how you spin it,

I don’t think Katnić can continue as our political commissar. He’s disgracing the Party,” Kića did not hesitate to reach a final conclusion. “What’s your opinion?”

“Mine?” Maček lowered his voice again. “Why do you need my opinion on this?” Every wrinkle on his gaunt face twitched with inner anxiety. “I’ll refrain from expressing my thoughts for now.”

“Fine,” Jankov stated after a brief silence. “In that case, I’ll write to Magdić myself..”

Jankov quickly stood up and walked to the entrance of the cave, covered by a rain poncho. The fabric swayed, as if someone had brushed against it from the outside.

When Jankov peeked out, he took a step back. Katnić strode into the cave and, for a moment, squinted against the bright lamplight.

“What’s going on here?” He stared at the commander defiantly. “I happened to overhear something while passing by. You, Kića, seem to be planning to write some kind of denunciation against me? Be careful not to miscalculate!” he said menacingly.

“I trust that the brigade’s political department will conduct an objective review of everything.” Jankov calmly held Katnić’s gaze, which was filled with open hatred.

4

...I had a guest in my shelter — Todor Radović. Miletić had located his battalion, stationed not far from us. But no one knew where the brigade headquarters or the other two battalions were. Radović had come to ask whether Korchagin had returned, as he had once again left several days ago to search for Perućica. This time, Jovan had taken a sealed package from Jankov, addressed to Commissar Magdić and the

head of the brigade's OZNA, Grombac. Kića had told me about his conversation with Maček and that his letter directly raised the issue of Katnić — his removal as political commissar and the appointment of Korchagin in his place.

Yes, that would be the right decision!

Upon learning that Jovan had not yet returned, Radović became worried.

"I suspect," he said, "that Perućica has been left in Bosnia. I overheard Popović telling him about the need to go to Drvar to take part in securing the headquarters and celebrating Tito. Tito's birthday was at the end of May, I believe."

"Then why didn't they leave our entire brigade there?" I asked, puzzled.

"I think Perućica played a trick here. He was rushing us and Vučetin: 'Hurry up, go to the Sandžak, I'll catch up...' He probably later justified himself to the commander, saying he couldn't hold back two battalions — they went east on Arso's orders. Our brigade just doesn't seem to have any luck. It's always split apart, never together. Even with Vučetin, we only saw each other in passing. Ah, Tomaš, Tomaš! He was a great commander, a wonderful man!"

Radović kept reminiscing about Vučetin. He was deeply affected by the loss of his friend. As a sign of mourning, he had even stopped shaving. His face, now covered in dark stubble on his cheeks and chin, had turned almost black.

After having dinner with me and wiping his spoon with a clean fern leaf, he let out a heavy sigh and spoke again, sorrowfully:

"You know, Nikolai, after the war, I'll move Tomaš' body to the cemetery in Rijeka Crnojevića and carve three words on his gravestone: 'Friend of the Soviet Union.' Tomaš was wholeheartedly devoted to Russia. A true son of his people, he was receptive to everything progressive and bright. We often

talked about the future. I won't rest until I see our land as Tomaš envisioned it in his dreams. I will fight for it to the very end, fight for two — for myself and for him. I swear to you, Nikolai, I will avenge Vučetin. And here, we know what the oath of a son of the Black Mountain means."

Radović clenched his fists so tightly that his fingers cracked.

"And who do you plan to take revenge on, Todor?" I asked. "After all, we still don't know who the killer is."

"I know that he was killed by enemies — the enemies of the new, better Yugoslavia that we are fighting for."

We stepped out of the shelter. It was getting dark.

Filipović was still sitting under a maple tree, deeply engrossed in his work. He was carving a pipe out of a piece of walnut wood with his pocket knife. The stem, made from wild jasmine, was long, and now — letter by letter — he was engraving along its length: "*Za uspomenu na dan oslobođenja.*"*

Radović studied the pipe for a long time.

"Beautiful! My fighters are also preparing gifts for the Soviet soldiers," he said. "Our people all share the same thoughts, the same hopes..."

"Not much longer to wait now," I said.

"If only the day of their arrival would come sooner. Ah, Tomaš! How he dreamed of that day!"

Suddenly, I was called to the commander.

Three lathered horses stood outside Kića's cave, their sides heaving.

"Jovan!" I thought joyfully. But when Radović and I rushed into the cave, I found myself in the tight embrace not of Miletić, who was also there, but of a man wearing a sheepskin coat with the wool turned outward.

* In memory of Liberation Day (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

“*Zdravo*, Comrade Nikolai!” said the visitor in a very familiar deep, raspy voice.

“Aleksa Mušić?!”

“It’s me, it’s me! Recognized me?” he asked, gripping my hands.

Indeed, it was Mušić, dressed like a shepherd. His face was covered in a thick, long beard. His dark eyes burned with excitement and he laughed with joy.

“Enough!” Jovan pulled him away from me. “Just listen, brother, listen... Strange things are happening in this world...”

“It’s nothing short of a miracle!” confirmed Laušek. “Our long-lost Aleksa — can you believe it? — made his way from Veliki Šator, straight from the Supreme Headquarters!”

“From Marshal Tito?” Radović asked in surprise.

“No, my comrade, from Arso Jovanović!” Mušić replied.

His eyes, glinting beneath his furrowed brows, flared up even brighter at these words, like embers after the ash has been blown away.

“I come from Arso Jovanović,” he repeated. “From him.”

Kića handed Radović a crumpled, dirty sheet of paper, smeared from handling.

“Read this.”

It was a typed directive from the head of the Supreme Headquarters, formulated in very brief and clear terms. The first point provided a general assessment of the strategic and operational situation. It included an excerpt from Comrade Stalin’s May Day order: “Under the blows of the Red Army, the fascist bloc is cracking and collapsing... Germany has lost the war. Romania, Hungary, Finland and Bulgaria have only one way to avoid catastrophe: break with the Germans and withdraw from the war.”

The second point addressed the situation in Yugoslavia. It stated that the Germans were trying to secure their right

flank and were determined to hold the Balkans at all costs, or at least Yugoslavia. To this end, they had launched an airborne assault on Drvar and, with a ground offensive, had begun their seventh campaign against the YNLA forces. The directive outlined the immediate task for the units: launch a counter-offensive, delay the withdrawal of German troops from Greece, Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro and southern Serbia beyond the Sava and Danube rivers, intensify operations against their main supply routes and disrupt enemy manoeuvres. Going forward, the forces were to move eastward to meet the Red Army at the Romanian and Bulgarian borders. It detailed the mission of the Serbian forces and the First Proletarian Corps under Koča Popović: prevent the Germans from moving north from Macedonia and Greece, disrupt their strategic movements and link up with the Red Army in Homolje. The directive also covered the coordination of operations among the units in Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro.

“I’d like to hear what you think of this, Comrade Todor?” Kića asked impatiently after reading the directive.

“Me?” Radović glanced again at Jovanović’s signature, then at Mušić. “I don’t understand why he keeps saying that Arso Jovanović sent him, and not Tito.”

“Tito has bigger concerns right now. The Supreme Headquarters is in the middle of nowhere!” Miletić said with a smirk.

“Where exactly?”

“You’ll find out in a moment. Speak, Aleksa!”

Mušić crouched down and lit his pipe...

...After escaping from Gornji Vakuf, where nearly the entire Bogovina Detachment was wiped out, Mušić swam across the Vrbas River. He had been wounded on the right side of his chest, making it difficult to swim; but gasping for

air, swallowing water and nearly drowning, he managed to crawl onto the shore and lay hidden in the bushes for a long time. By nightfall, he reached the village of Vrsi, nestled deep in the forest. The local peasants took him in and nursed him back to health.

Once he could stand again, he wondered: Where should I go? Where can I find the partisans? He set off blindly toward Bugojno, where he encountered a company from the First Corps. However, he was too weak to stay with them — he could barely hold a rifle. What to do? Then he remembered that near the mountain Veliki Vitorog, a distant relative of his wife, the shepherd Dragutin Medić, spent his summers. Mušić decided to head there. It took him a long time — perhaps a week or more — but he finally made it.

At the summer pastures, the mountain air, the scent of forests and meadows, a diet of dairy and the abundance of medicinal herbs quickly restored his health. They say that spending one summer in the mountains adds two years to your life.

Now, if you head northwest from Veliki Vitorog, you'll eventually reach Drvar... Dragutin made weekly trips there, leading mules loaded with cheese and kajmak for the Supreme Headquarters. When Mušić had fully recovered, he travelled with him. Leaving the mules in Drvar, they set off on foot toward the location of the headquarters. After some discussion, they decided to go straight to Tito's cave.

The cave was located in a narrow, gloomy gorge, at the bottom of which a mountain stream rushed swiftly, breaking into a foaming waterfall. Above the cave towered a massive mountain. A narrow path wound along the stream, skirting the edge of the precipice. Dragutin grew fearful and refused to go any farther so Mušić pressed on alone. He carried a jug of his own homemade kajmak — thick, rich, pinkish-yellow,

with a dense creamy crust. But the sentries would not let him approach the cave.

As he argued with the guards, a tall, gaunt man in *opanci* emerged from the cave. His face was troubled and Mušić was about to turn away when the man noticed him, called him over and began asking about life in the high pastures. He inquired about the situation in the mountains, whether there were any Germans nearby. He asked how many lambs were in the flock, whether wolves were attacking, and advised him to protect the sheep from the poisonous *blor** grass. As he spoke, he gradually seemed to calm down, even smiling.

That was how Aleksa first met Arso Jovanović. He received a pass from him and began delivering to the headquarters sweet, firm young cheese that squeaked between the teeth and thick, buttery mountain goat's milk, sincerely hoping that Arso would recover quickly. He was terribly thin — nothing but skin and bones. His nose jutted out sharply, his cheeks were sunken. But Arso ate little himself, giving most of his food to the guards. One day, he came out to Mušić looking as grim as a thundercloud.

"What happened?" Mušić wondered. Only then did he notice the unusual activity around him. Horses and donkeys, laden with crates, baskets, bundles and barrels, were stopping near the cave. The guards were unloading them, while quartermasters and adjutants rushed about. But the head of the Supreme Headquarters looked deeply troubled. Mušić didn't dare question him, handed him the jug and silently took his leave, heading back to the pastures...

5

Mušić, of course, didn't know and couldn't describe what

* A type of wild millet.

was happening in Drvar. For the past two weeks, supplies and wines had been arriving there from all over. From Montenegro came the famous *prepečénica*, from the Dalmatian coast, aged wines renowned across the Balkans. Maclean had even sent two Dakota transport planes to Cairo for Egyptian oranges and bananas, along with American whiskey and dry gin. Additionally, gifts had arrived from Algeria, sent by Field Marshal Wilson. General-Lieutenant Popović had sent Tito several barrels of šljivovica and coloured rockets for a fireworks display.

Dilas' propagandists had gathered musicians and singers from the surrounding villages to prepare performances for an amateur concert and a mass kolo dance. Actors from Zagreb, who were with the partisan units of the Coastal Group, had also been summoned. Couriers of Ranković had distributed pre-written congratulatory letters and messages to various locations, from where they were now being sent to Tito. In short, a grand rally, a feast and a lavish celebration of Tito's birthday were in the works. On May 25, he was turning 52.

That day, Dragutin and Aleksa rose before dawn, as usual. The quiet May sunrises in the Dinaric Alps were breathtaking! First, the snow-capped peak of Veliki Šator gleamed silver, resembling a sentry in a steel helmet. Then, the sun's rays broke into the gorges and valleys, filling them with warm, joyful light. The slopes of the mountains blossomed with colourful Alpine flowers, freshly washed by the morning dew, while the leaves of blooming plum and apple trees fluttered cheerfully. The sky was cloudless. The deep silence gradually came to life with the whistling and chirping of waking birds.

The shepherds had barely finished washing in the cold stream when they heard the growing roar of aircraft. The planes were coming from the northwest. Aleksa assumed they were American Flying Fortresses heading to bomb Belgrade

or another city. But as the planes drew closer, Mušić suddenly recognized the black fascist crosses on their wings. "Junkers!" The aircraft, approaching from behind the sun over the Velika Klekovača mountain, banked into a turn and began descending over Drvar. Bombs rained down. Across the Drvar valley, black clouds of smoke and dust shot up like volcanic eruptions, pierced with fire.

Mušić tore down the mountain toward Drvar. Bombs were exploding near the Supreme Headquarters building, by Tito's cave, at the barracks and throughout the village. Fighters were strafing civilians who were fleeing in panicked crowds up the slopes. Then, transport planes with gliders appeared. Hundreds of white parachutes unfurled in the sky. The gliders, with large braking parachutes on their tails, detached from the planes and, without making any turns, descended directly onto the small landing zone along the Unac River. A German airborne assault was underway.

Eighty bomber aircraft shifted their strikes to the approaches of Drvar, while fierce ground combat erupted in the vicinity of the village. Mušić, alongside the Supreme Headquarters' security battalion, also joined the fight. Arso Jovanović was there as well, issuing orders to the battalion commander and his staff officers. He had a specific action plan prepared in case of a sudden enemy attack. The airborne assault did not catch him off guard. From captured documents and intercepted communications, he had already learned of the Germans' plan to destroy the Supreme Headquarters and capture Tito. Planes, both individually and in groups, had repeatedly appeared over the Drvar region, dropping bombs, strafing with machine guns and likely conducting aerial reconnaissance. Intelligence reports indicated the concentration of gliders and transport aircraft in Zagreb and revealed that the German command intended to use Brandenburg

SS troops — fluent in Serbian and Croatian — disguised in partisan clothing to carry out sabotage against the Supreme Headquarters.

In light of this, Jovanović had advised Tito not to expand the size of the headquarters at the expense of its mobility and not to establish a permanent base in Drvar — such a thing was unnecessary in the conditions of partisan warfare. However, Tito insisted on his own way. He had grown weary of roaming the forests and had become sluggish in movement. Instead of the dangerous and unpredictable life in forest huts, constantly exposed to enemy forces, he preferred a more stable existence in a well-equipped cave, surrounded by his close associates. He aimed to turn the Drvar area into a fortified administrative centre of the liberated territory, as if the partisan war had already ended.

Arso took every precaution to defend Drvar from attacks by German forces, whose outposts were nearby. The village's northern approaches were securely covered by units of the Fifth Corps, commanded by Arso's protégé — Bosnia's 27-year-old hero, Major General Slavko Rodić. To the south, just a few hours' march from Drvar, Koča Popović had set up his headquarters in the settlement of Mokre Noge. Responding to his summons, Perućica was hurrying from Konjic with half of his brigade to attend the birthday celebration. Additionally, Maclean had promised that, any day now, the Supreme Headquarters' security forces would be supplied with mortars and pack artillery.

And so what Arso had feared came to pass. There were no mortars, no artillery, no Maclean, no Huntington and no Randolph Churchill in Drvar at the moment of the airborne assault. The Supreme Headquarters' evacuation plan had been disrupted. Tito refused to leave his supposedly airstrike-proof cave. The security battalion fighters had to hastily take up

defensive positions to prevent the paratroopers from reaching the cave. In response to Arso's call, cadets from the senior officer school, stationed near Drvar, arrived to reinforce them. Meanwhile, Perućica was delayed. Popović ordered the protection of the road that the Supreme Headquarters was supposed to use for retreat.

An uneven battle began. More than a thousand German troops, armed with submachine guns, grenades, machine guns and mortars had landed. Fighter aircraft supported them from the air, pinning the partisans down and preventing them from launching a counter-offensive. The heavy machine guns positioned on the heights around Drvar — recently delivered by Soviet transport aircraft — managed only a few single shots before falling silent. Someone had given the order to remove them from their positions. The enemy's aviation became increasingly brazen, flying at low altitudes and shooting point-blank at individual fighters moving or taking cover behind rocks on the mountainside.

The brutal battle raged all day. Fighters and officers, one after another, fell in combat, defending the Supreme Headquarters with unwavering dedication. Several times, the enemy nearly broke through to the cave. But Arso, personally commanding the battle, launched counter-attacks that pushed them back to their original positions at the airstrip. He repeatedly informed Tito of the battle's progress and the massive casualties, urging him to retreat toward Velika Klekovača as quickly as possible. However, Tito, Ranković and Kardelj stubbornly remained holed up in their shelter.

By evening, the situation had become desperate. Arso decided on extreme measures. Accompanied by several officers and communist soldiers, he slipped through machine-gun and mortar fire to reach the cave. Entering, he once again insisted on an immediate withdrawal.

Tito remained silent. Seated at a table brightly lit by a powerful battery lamp, he was nervously tearing up papers handed to him by Ranković — perhaps congratulatory letters and messages.

Kardelj answered for him:

“We cannot risk the Marshal’s life.”

“We’ll wait for nightfall,” Ranković muttered grimly.

“I completely understand you,” Arso snapped sarcastically. “Above you is three hundred metres of solid rock — no bomb can penetrate it! But the cave is exposed from the ground. The Germans can bring up direct-fire artillery.”

Even this argument had no effect.

At that point, Arso called in his men, and they nearly had to force Tito down into the ravine using ropes — then Ranković, Kardelj and the rest followed. They were led through the bushes into the forest, and from there, under reliable protection, escorted further to Velika Klekovača.

After covering the Supreme Headquarters’ retreat, Perućica, along with two battalions, launched a night assault on Drvar. The battle for the village was still ongoing. The proletarian units encircled the German paratroopers. At that moment, command of the troops was assumed by Lieutenant-General Koča Popović. However, he acted indecisively and, upon receiving alarming reports of approaching German regiments, ordered his units to withdraw into the forested area near Veliki Šator. The road south to Drvar was left open, and from Knin, the German 118th Division and the 92nd Motorized Regiment began advancing along the highway. From the north, units of the 313th and 382nd Divisions pushed through from Bihać and Bosanski Novi. Their advance was heroically resisted by the Fifth Corps under Slavko Rodić. Meanwhile, from the east, German SS Seventh Division units were already approaching Drvar from the Sarajevo

and Jajce regions.

Thus began the Germans’ seventh — and perhaps most powerful — offensive against the YNLA.

The Supreme Headquarters, meanwhile, was hiding in the forests near Potoci, where Arso Jovanović had previously prepared an alternate command post. The Germans received intelligence about this and began actively hunting the Supreme Headquarters. Multiple times, the headquarters came under attack and bombardment, and several times, it was surrounded. Brave fighters and officers broke through the encirclements, leading the YNLA leadership further and further into the Stekerovci region. They crossed the open, rocky valley north of Glamočko Polje and continued toward Veliki Šator Mountain.

Fleeing from pursuit, Tito lost control over the troops and all communication with them. They hid during the day and moved at night.

After consulting among themselves, Tito, Kardelj and Ranković decided to evacuate Yugoslavia for a safer location. They requested aircraft from the Balkan Air Force headquarters. Arso made the same request to the Soviet military mission. The mission immediately radioed its small base in the Italian port of Bari. The next night, a signal was received: expect an aircraft. Bonfires were lit in the Kupreško Polje area, among the mountains. The Soviet aircraft flew across the Adriatic Sea and the high mountains. The sky was thick with clouds, and strong winds were blowing. The Germans detected the aircraft by the sound of its engines and radar, opening fire. But despite everything, the Soviet pilots managed to land precisely at the last bonfire, near the edge of a mountain cliff. There, they were met by officers from the Supreme Headquarters.

Tito, however, was waiting for American rescuers and

hesitated to depart. He stood indecisively before the ladder of the Soviet aircraft, playing the noble leader — insisting that headquarters staff, the wounded and the sick should leave first, while he, the captain, would be the last to abandon the sinking ship. He was convinced the “ship” was going down and feared that the Soviet pilots might take him somewhere other than where he wished to go. But then a radio telegram arrived from the Anglo-Americans: they would not be able to come, as landing in the designated area was impossible due to bad weather. Only then did Tito give in to persuasion and readily agreed to be the first to board.

...Mušić, who had remained with the Supreme Headquarters security unit all this time, saw Tito boarding the aircraft and heard the whining of his dog, Tigr, who refused to climb the gangway. Arso Jovanović was overseeing the loading of the headquarters’ archives. Noticing Mušić, he called him over, took him aside and asked: “Are you a communist?” “Yes,” Mušić replied. Arso pulled some papers from his bag and handed them to him. “Here is my assignment for you, comrade. This directive has already been sent to various units by couriers, but just in case, I’m giving it to you as well. Go to the Drina and Zlatar region — our forces are stationed there. Find the headquarters and deliver this. Make sure the commanders and fighters are informed. Do you understand me?”

Mušić solemnly swore to carry out the mission. The aircraft engines roared. The plane lifted off, made a turn to clear the mountain and disappeared into the thick clouds.

That same night, the Soviet pilots returned and took the remaining headquarters staff and members of the military missions on board. Brave Russians! Heroes! They feared nothing. They saved the Supreme Headquarters. Such simple, cheerful, young guys. Mušić would never forget them.

Sewing the papers into his cap, he disguised himself as

a shepherd, took a walking staff and set off eastward. He crossed the Vrbas and the Drina, travelling through the most remote areas. Eventually, he found the Eighth Corps headquarters. The corps commander, Vlado Četković, a Montenegrin worker, received Mušić warmly and carefully read the documents. After that, he provided him with a horse and informed him that the First Corps headquarters was in the Vrbovo area. Mušić immediately rode there. He was taken to the commander. After reading the directive, Popović looked at Mušić with suspicion and muttered through clenched teeth: “All right, I’ll verify this.” Just then, a red-cheeked foreign officer entered the room. The commander, exclaiming, “Ah, Mr. MacCarver!” hurried to greet him, while Mušić, seizing the moment, slipped outside, mounted his horse and galloped away.

By chance, he encountered Miletić and Laušek. He immediately recognized them — what joy it was! Together, they found the brigade headquarters, which had just arrived and settled in a dense forest along the banks of the Uvac River, while two battalions were still making their way there. Perućica was already aware of Arso’s directive. He advised Mušić to continue delivering it to the battalions. Miletić handed Jankov’s letter to Magdić, and the three of them left headquarters. No sooner had they crossed the river than horsemen began closing in on them. They called out to Mušić. Sensing trouble, he lashed his horse and sped away. Something about those riders unsettled him, even though they didn’t look like Chetniks — they were clean-shaven, unlike the typically bearded Chetniks. Miletić and Laušek hesitated for a moment; when they glanced back, they immediately understood — it was a chase. Nearby, bushes snapped, a horse neighed and a short burst of gunfire rang out. Bullets whizzed through the foliage...

They hid in a remote ravine overnight, but at dawn, they

saw the same riders again on the only trail. Forced to climb steep cliffs, they fled blindly into the unknown. For several days, they wandered through unfamiliar terrain until they finally reached Zlatar. Only then did the pursuit cease.

"They were definitely clean-shaven Chetniks, but they rode boldly!" concluded Aleska.

6

After listening to Mušić's story, Radović stood up and buttoned his old, sun-faded greatcoat all the way.

"Well, what do you say now?" Jankov asked impatiently. "Will we follow Arso's directive?"

"Our fighters, Kića, have only one thought and one goal," Radović replied firmly.

"I knew you'd decide that way," Kića said and suddenly fell silent.

Everyone tensed.

In the stillness of the late evening, the rhythmic clatter of horse hooves echoed. We stepped out of the cave. The full moon bathed the clearing in an ashen-green glow. From below, near the river, a mist rose in a pale wave. In the crisp silence, we could hear pebbles shifting along the riverbed. The warm, intoxicating scent of plants and earth drifted from all around, and a strange haze, like floating poplar fluff, hung in the air.

We listened intently as the horses snorted. Silhouettes of several riders emerged on the edge of the forest, illuminated by the moonlight. They moved through the camp as if surveying it. Behind them, the dewy grass of the alpine meadow darkened in streaks.

"Who's riding there?" Jovan called out to the sentries.

"Our own."

"From where?"

"From brigade headquarters."

"Look at that!" Jovan whispered to me. "They look just like the ones who chased us."

One of the riders turned in our direction, with Katnić hastily walking alongside him.

All these days, the political commissar had spent his time tucked away in a quiet corner under an olive tree, or simply lounging in the shade, smoking or sunbathing, without any other occupation. But I had noticed something: whenever a noise stirred in the forest or the sound of hooves echoed, he would instantly perk up, alert. He was clearly expecting something. Perhaps a decision on his fate. He had likely learned from Maček about Jankov's letter to Magdić. And now, at last, he had his answer. Katnić was the first to greet the head of the brigade's OZNA — a man named Grombac.

"I have good news for you," Grombac said. "You're staying in the battalion."

"I thought so," Katnić replied with evident relief. "And for how long?"

"Until victory, commissar!" Grombac spotted us. "Good evening, comrades. Who here is Korchagin?"

Jovan tensed.

"I am."

"I have excellent news for you. Congratulations, Lieutenant Korchagin! You're now an officer. Just like in the Red Army, we've introduced officer ranks. The appointments have begun."

Grombac turned to me.

"And you haven't been forgotten, Zagoryanov! You've been confirmed as company commander. But as for you, Comrade Jankov, you weren't so lucky. The corps headquarters did not approve you as battalion commander. The Šumadija Battalion

will now be led by Captain Vulo Kuštrinović. This is a direct order from Lieutenant-General Koča Popović.”

Grombac rose in his stirrups, the leather saddle creaking beneath him.

“There are important orders, so I ask you to report to the new commander. He has already been informed of his appointment.”

Kuštrinović was indeed waiting for us in his tent. In front of him, on a crate from an Italian Breda machine gun, lay a large map, which he was marking up.

“Greetings, comrades! Come in!” he said in a deep, satisfied voice. “Have a seat.”

His broad face, with a crimson scar running across his cheek and already covered with a light reddish beard, bore an expression of complete satisfaction — he had finally secured a command position in the partisan army.

The order signed by Popović, which Grombac had brought, directly contradicted Arso Jovanović’s directive. The corps commander wrote:

“I order all units to remain in their positions and repel enemy attacks. Any unauthorized movement without my knowledge is strictly forbidden. Those who violate this order will be immediately and ruthlessly punished.”

Kuštrinović read it slowly and deliberately, then added:

“I foresee that the Western Allies will soon arrive in the Balkans. It is unlikely that Soviet forces will get here first. As for Tito, according to what Grombac told me, he was in Bari and is now safely on the island of Vis, under the protection of the British Navy and Air Force. Everything is fine!”

As Kića and I returned to the company, he said bitterly:

“So, my command is over. I’m back where I started. Well, maybe that’s for the best!” He looked around and then added, “You know, Nikolai, I’m starting to feel like I don’t

understand what’s happening anymore.” He sat down on a tree stump. “Why did Tito go from Bari to the island of Vis instead of returning to the army?”

He gazed at the dark sky, where the pale crescent moon was tangled in the black pine needles.

“Vis... That’s far. Far from us. And you know what else surprises me? Why are some of the main roads in the eastern regions, where the Germans are actively manoeuvring, almost untouched, while in places where the enemy hardly moves — like the Sarajevo-Mostar line — everything has been wiped out under this idiotic Operation Ratweek?”

Kića fell silent for a moment.

“I guess only an historian will be able to make sense of all this someday... But for now, since I am still officially in command of the battalion and haven’t handed it over to Kuštrinović yet, I’m giving you an order: ride to Perućica immediately. Tell him that all the fighters are eager to go into any difficult battle to carry out Jovanović’s directive, while the corps commander orders us to stay put. Who should we listen to? Kuštrinović will, of course, follow Popović’s orders. And that means allowing the Germans to manoeuvre freely here. The situation is serious.”

“If only I could contact our people from the mission!” the words escaped me involuntarily.

Kića stood up.

“That’s exactly my point, Nikolai! It will be easier to do that from the brigade headquarters. You must tell our Soviet comrades everything. Get to your people. Safe travels, my friend! Laušek knows the way — go with him.”

It goes without saying how eagerly I jumped onto my horse, taking with me letters addressed to the Soviet military mission and to Arso Jovanović.

Miletić and Radović accompanied me to the edge of the

camp. Laušek and I were leaving in secret.

“Come back! Help us!” Jovan whispered to me.

7

...Beneath our horses' hooves, fallen branches crunched as they broke. The needles of tall, shaggy junipers pricked our faces, while oaks and hazel trees thrust their tough, whipping branches across the path — forcing us to duck constantly.

It was close to midnight when Laušek and I finally heard the rushing waters of the Uvac, tumbling over the rocks. The sentries' calls rang out. I gave the password.

“Death to fascism!” one of the sentries responded as we rode closer.

“Freedom to the people!” Laušek replied confidently.

They carefully examined us and, after a brief explanation, allowed us onto a clearing bathed in bright moonlight. We dismounted. Beneath an ancient oak stood a shepherd's *koliba*,* which now served as the brigade headquarters.

From inside the *koliba*, I could clearly hear the solemn, measured chime of a clock, accompanied by the brief honks of automobiles. That sound — it was so familiar, so dear... The Kremlin... Moscow... In an instant, my mind transported me thousands of kilometres away, to Red Square, to the old crenellated walls, to Lenin's Mausoleum and the slender blue fir trees beside it. My heart pounded... When, at last, would I see it again?!

Laušek took my hand.

“Moscow!” he whispered. “It feels as if it's right next to us...”

“Moscow,” I echoed in a single breath, pouring into that word all the depth of my longing for home, all the pain of

* Hut (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

separation from my loved ones.

And with that word, my resolve only strengthened. I stepped across the threshold of the *koliba*, illuminated by several lamps.

The hut was crowded. The commanders stood in silence, heads uncovered, listening to the anthem. When the final drawn-out chord faded, Perućica, recognizing me instantly, approached, his face glowing with joy.

“Greetings, comrade lieutenant! Every night, we listen to Moscow's voice, learning of your victories. Every single night!” he said with deep feeling.

Perućica struck me as particularly likeable this time. There was something energetic and resolute about him, a clear sense of confidence and strength. “It will be easy to come to an understanding with him,” I thought. Magdić, however, left an entirely different impression — he seemed weighed down by something. He said nothing to me, only shook my hand.

“Wonderful news!” Perućica said enthusiastically. “Everything happening in the West is insignificant compared to the Russian offensive! In Byelorussia, thirty German divisions have been encircled and an enormous number of prisoners have been taken. The battle is now at the borders of East Prussia, along the Vistula River. The strike is aimed directly at the heart of Germany. A Stalinist blow... The Third Ukrainian Front is approaching us! Yes! Let me introduce you, comrades!” Perućica suddenly remembered, turning to the headquarters staff gathered in the *koliba*. “This is Soviet officer Zagoryanov.”

From the next room, beyond a wooden partition, a radio crackled as someone adjusted the frequency. Suddenly, a voice called out:

“Can you keep it down, eagles?!”

The people around me fell into an embarrassed silence.

With a worried expression, Magdić left for the adjoining room. The radio static ceased, and the signal of the British station *Sunday Times* came through.

“Our new OZNA chief is a rough man,” Perućica said to me, glancing toward the partition. “He was chairman of the corps tribunal, but after that incident near Sinj — remember? — Ranković demoted him and recently sent him to us. And his nickname suits him: Grombac — ‘Thunderer.’ He just returned from your battalion. You must have taken different routes to get here since you didn’t arrive together.”

“I have a task from Jankov — to inform you about our situation,” I lowered my voice and told him about Kuštrinović and Katnić, whom the fighters refused to recognize as their commanders.

Hearing me out, Perućica spread his hands in resignation:

“What can we do? Magdić and I supported Kića Jankov as battalion commander and Korchagin as political commissar. But Grombac, after directly contacting the corps headquarters, informed us that our decision had been overruled. After all, Ranković controls all personnel matters. There’s no arguing with him. Nothing can be done...”

“Where is the Soviet military mission now?” I asked impatiently.

“Hard to say exactly! Most likely on Vis. They have a lot on their plate!” Perućica’s face lit up. “Imagine organizing the supply of our army from bases somewhere in the Ukraine. Planes have to fly over the Balkans at night and return in time. The British and Americans should be ashamed! Soviet pilots are hauling supplies from a thousand kilometres away, while our Western allies could deliver everything from their Italian bases in just an hour. But that’s beside the point. You’re eager to see your people, I understand. Unfortunately, for now, it’s impossible.”

“But why, why, comrade commander?”

“First, because reaching the Supreme Headquarters right now isn’t easy. And second, the leadership wants you to continue sharing your experience directly with the fighters.”

“Well, can these letters at least be sent somehow?”

“I’ll try. Don’t lose heart,” Perućica encouraged me. “Maybe things will change soon... The main thing is that we’re all together now... What’s the situation on the Second Front?” he turned to Magdić, who had just emerged from behind the partition.

The commissar waved his hand in frustration:

“In northern France, they’re still reinforcing their bridgeheads along the Odon River. Near Caen, they’ve made some progress — took some place called La-Haye-du-Puits. But overall, they’re stuck, advancing at best a kilometre a day. And in Italy, they’ve completely bogged down on the Rimini-Livorno line, stalling for months at every little river.”

“What can I say? ‘Brilliant’ success!” Perućica smirked. “It seems the Allies don’t want to take risks. They’re probably waiting for the Red Army to do all the work for them.”

“But they sure are bombing heavily! The working-class district of San Giovanni in Rome is in ruins. The city of Casinò is completely destroyed. Now they’re promising to wipe out almost all of northern Italy, zone by zone. Just like here... Poor Belgrade! They say entire neighbourhoods are in ruins... My family is there...”

“What can we do? It’s war,” Perućica sighed.

“The destruction under Plan ‘Ratweek’ is happening on an astonishing scale,” Magdić continued bitterly. He led us to a map. “Look at this: the Zagreb-Ogulin railway line has been dismantled in 144 places! Seven bridges have been blown up on the Bihać-Sunja line. All railway infrastructure along those routes has been destroyed. In Slovenia, to prevent

enemy forces from redeploying against Allied troops in Italy, a key viaduct — the Litija Bridge over the Sava River on the Ljubljana-Zagreb line — has been demolished. And yet, our situation hasn't improved. The Germans keep manoeuvring. Not just in eastern Yugoslavia, but even here, near our own forces. Along the Ibar Valley, not far from us — that's one of the areas where the Germans are currently on the move."

"It's all right," said Perućica. "We'll seal off that route. That's Arso's directive. I've already thought everything through. Tomorrow I'm going to my superiors, and I'm sure our plan will be approved."

Listening to the brigade commander, I felt a sense of relief. I understood that it was the incredible news from Moscow that gave Perućica such confidence and composure.

Everyone at the headquarters was in high spirits, filled with excitement. Every now and then, someone would mutter the word "Minsk" as if to themselves. They were tracing Romania on the map, pointing out possible paths for the Red Army's advance south toward the Balkans. The intensity with which the commanders hung on Perućica's every word, the speed and diligence with which they jotted down key phrases, made it clear that they were deeply captivated by the prospect of moving forward to meet the Red Army.

"We must prove in these final battles," Perućica concluded, "that we can hold our ground with honour until the Russians arrive."

"What kind of meeting is this?" a deep voice suddenly interrupted.

I turned around. Standing in the doorway of the adjacent room was Grombac. With his head drawn into his shoulders and slightly swaying on his long, crooked legs, he was eyeing me with sharp, piercing eyes.

A wave of unease washed over me.

"Ah, the Russian! How did you end up here?" he asked, tapping his fingers on his holster. "Who gave you permission to leave your battalion? Or did you go AWOL?"

"Listen, Comrade Grombac," Magdić addressed him. "Comrade Zagoryanov is here at our request. We're discussing important matters..."

"I don't think now is the time to discuss plans that fall under military secrecy."

"I know exactly what I'm saying and who I'm saying it to," Perućica cut him off.

"Well, well! In that case, carry on with your business," Grombac said conciliatorily and disappeared behind the partition.

I felt a heavy weight on my heart. No luck. It was a shame that the Supreme Headquarters was so far away, out on some island — otherwise, I would have made my way there no matter what.

There was nothing more to be done. That very night, Laušek and I set off on our journey back.

As he bid me farewell, Perućica said:

"I'll push for permission to have you assigned to my headquarters. And at the first opportunity, I'll arrange contact between you and the Soviet military mission. We have major operations ahead. Tito is on the island of Vis... They must be developing plans there for decisive battles, planning an operational-tactical link with the Red Army," he added with conviction...

8

Vis is the outermost island of the Dalmatian coastal archipelago. Rugged and rocky, with a sheltered harbour in Komiza and a vast valley transformed into a large airfield,

Vis was a prime naval and air base. That's why the Allies established themselves there. It was also where they transferred Tito and his general staff from the Italian port of Bari. At least it was still Yugoslav soil!

From the island of Vis, the head of the Anglo-American mission, Fitzroy Maclean, sent detailed reports to Prime Minister Churchill about the military-political situation in Yugoslavia and his dealings with Tito. He wrote that Tito's stay on Vis, just a few hours' flight from Caserta — the headquarters of the Balkan Air Force in Italy — provided an excellent opportunity for direct negotiations with him.

One evening, in the summer twilight of Vis, the personal aircraft of the Supreme Allied Commander of the Mediterranean Theatre, Field Marshal Wilson, landed. It was there to take Tito to Italy. That night, three jeeps pulled up to the airfield. Maclean, tall and hook-nosed like a pole, observed the boarding process. Alongside Tito, his bodyguards, Boško and Crlja, boarded the plane, as well as Vlatko Velebit — whom Maclean had already flown to London in the spring to meet Churchill — Arso Jovanović, Ranković, Olga Ninčić, a staff doctor and other members of the delegation accompanying the Marshal. They didn't forget to bring Tito's German shepherd, Tigr, either.

The departure was arranged with full official protocol and efficiency. At headquarters, everyone was convinced that Tito was heading to the Western Allies for critical negotiations regarding further military operations in the Balkans.

After crossing the Adriatic Sea, the plane flew over southern Italy and landed at Capodichino Airfield near Naples. There, General Hammel greeted the delegation. He then drove Tito and his entourage in luxury automobiles to Caserta — the "Versailles of Naples" — where Wilson was expecting his guests for breakfast.

Six people gathered in the rose-coloured dining hall. Tito kept his armed guards close. One stood behind his chair, while another kept a sharp eye on the servants entering the room. Tigr lay under the table at the Marshal's feet, quietly whimpering — begging for scraps.

An awkward silence hung in the air. Tito discreetly slipped his dog bits of orange, oysters or whatever else was on the table, exchanging only brief remarks with Wilson. Then, a small unexpected incident broke the tension: as an Italian waiter entered and caught sight of Boško and Crlja, he suddenly let out a frightened gasp and dropped a platter of French beans. He must have instantly recalled the terrifying partisans from whom he had once fled Montenegro!

Wilson and Tito burst into laughter, and the atmosphere lightened. The amber-coloured wine further loosened tongues...

That same day, in the presence of Arso Jovanović, official military negotiations began. They discussed the supply of weapons to the YNLA and how they would be delivered, the techniques of sabotage operations and the progress of the Ratweek plan.

Several days passed. It seemed that all the major topics had been covered. In their free time, the Yugoslavs toured all the palaces of Caserta, the royal castle with its chapel, and the gardens with their cascades, fountains and statues. They attended a theatre performance where, before an audience of British Tommies,* Pulcinella, in his black-nosed mask, enthusiastically played the fool. Then, the entire group moved to Naples. Seeing that Tito was caught up in the excitement of sightseeing, Jovanović began pressing for a swift conclusion to the talks. He was troubled by the situation in Yugoslavia — Germany's Seventh Offensive was still ongoing. However,

* British soldiers.

Wilson and Maclean came up with various excuses to keep Tito in Naples. They hinted that yet another important figure wanted to see him. But Tito already had a good idea of why he had really been brought to Italy. He had been in communication with this “important figure” — Winston Churchill — through Maclean and Velebit long before. He did not share Jovanović’s concerns.

His time in Naples was light and enjoyable. The Allies treated the Yugoslavs with great courtesy. They accommodated them in the finest hotel, the Washington, in the foreign quarter. Tito never missed an opportunity to impress those around him with his imposing presence. Three or four times a day, he changed outfits. For breakfast, he appeared in the uniform of a naval commander; for lunch, in a deliberately modest olive-green tunic with a shoulder strap; by evening, he would put on a brand-new marshal’s uniform, adorned with gold-embroidered oak leaves and monograms. After dinner, Tito would stroll with Tigr along Toledo — one of Naples’ busiest streets.

The heat was fading, and the bitter-salty moisture of the sea breeze revived the dusty greenery of the plane trees. Neapolitans crowded on the narrow, dirty sidewalks, eager for some spectacle. It was at this hour that Tito would appear — wearing suede gloves, holding an olive twig instead of a cane, flanked by his athletic bodyguards, dazzling in his white dress uniform.

The curiosity of the street onlookers flared — gasps of amazement, applause... Tito walked slowly and with great importance, bowing stiffly in response. It never crossed his mind that this was all an elaborate charade, a carefully staged deception, that the English were quietly mocking him. He was even ready to take the sudden flare of light over Vesuvius, which brightly illuminated the rooftops in the evening

blue, as a grand illumination in his honour. He also failed to notice Maclean’s ironic smirk when they passed beneath the ancient triumphal arch built to commemorate Alfonso of Aragon’s entry into Naples. Tito studied the sculpted frieze depicting Alfonso on horseback, the bas-reliefs on the bronze gates showing the victories of King Ferdinand I, and then, turning to Maclean, he solemnly declared:

“I will build an arch like this in Belgrade...”

Tito met the envious gazes of exiled ministers without portfolios and generals without armies with the triumphant smile of a conqueror. These men had flocked to Naples in search of new masters, new appointments. They wandered the city’s streets unnoticed, loitered hopelessly at the grand entrances of Allied headquarters. Many of them were, in essence, the same kind of hardened adventurers and shady opportunists as Tito himself — only less shrewd. They had failed to grasp that the real wave to ride now was the people’s struggle for freedom, for democracy and their love for the Soviet Union. And because they had miscalculated, they had far worse luck than Tito.

Without giving the Marshal a moment to reflect, Maclean tirelessly took him on visits — to the island of Capri, for example, where they met a certain Madame Harrison Williams, who, among other things, held a séance and predicted Tito’s bright future in the stars. Then to the extravagant seaside cottage of the famous actress Hermione Ranfurly, where Tito sipped tea in a gazebo surrounded by neatly trimmed boxwood, glowing red under the fading, windswept evening light.

Tito also met with the head of American intelligence in Europe, General William Donovan, who had travelled from London to Naples specifically for the meeting. Later, Maclean took him to Lake Bolsena, to General Alexander’s camp..

Tito was overflowing with impressions. The fiery wines of Vesuvius, the crowds of cheerful, obliging Italians; the trinkets allegedly from the Capitoline collection, which stuffed his suitcases; the necklace and bracelet — supposedly taken from a skeleton unearthed during the excavations at Pompeii — a gift from Maclean to Olga; and, finally, Olga's newfound romantic attentions... All of this fascinated and captivated Tito so much that he was in no hurry to leave behind the luxurious and celebratory life of Naples.

But Rome... Rome drew him in with increasing force every day.

Not for nothing had Ninčić scribbled into his notebook a phrase she had come across while idly reading the memoirs of the Venetian adventurer Casanova: "Rome is the only city in the world where a man, starting with nothing, can become everything." Enthusiastically, Tito accepted Maclean's invitation for a trip to the Italian capital.

Maclean himself took the wheel of the jeep. Beside him sat an elderly guide from Naples. Tito, with his German shepherd, settled in the back seat. Whenever they passed a notable landmark, the guide would politely tip his hat and glance at the travellers with a subtle smile:

"Gentlemen, if you please, look — this is Capua! During the Second Punic War, Hannibal's soldiers were stationed here. According to legend, they became so indulgent in this place that they were no longer able to fight the Romans, who then took the city with ease."

But the travellers barely listened to the guide. The sun blazed relentlessly, the sky was flawless and their only thought was to reach the next roadside *osteria** as soon as possible,

* Tavern, inn (Italian in the original).

where cool, foaming Genzano wine awaited them under a green canopy of grapevines.

"And here, gentlemen, is the sea!" the guide continued after a while. "This is Gaeta. It was here that Garibaldi's forces imprisoned the last of the Bourbons. And we have Garibaldini once again," he added proudly. "The traditions of the old volunteers live on..."

"Oh, be quiet, will you?" Maclean interrupted, shifting into second gear.

As they crossed a low mountain range, the guide spoke again...

"Itri, look closely, please. This is where the famous bandit Fra Diavolo was born... Attention! We are now entering central Italy."

A little later, the road curved toward the sea and the guide announced:

"Gentlemen! This is the cape of the enchantress Circe, daughter of the Sun, where Cicero occasionally lived. He loved eating oysters... And over here, please, the Pontine Marshes."

Tito gazed gloomily at the semi-desert stretching between the mountains and the sea. The air was heavy with the smell of stagnant water and swamp vapours.

"Those arches over there are the aqueducts of ancient Rome," the guide continued.

"Rome?" Tito perked up.

"The aqueducts," the old man repeated.

Tito nodded as if in understanding. He was tempted to ask what exactly an aqueduct was, but he didn't want to appear ignorant. "One must always strive to give one's words and actions an air of wisdom, grandeur and importance," he recalled from Machiavelli's teachings.

"When will we reach Rome?" he finally asked impatiently, wiping his sweaty face with a handkerchief.

“Ah, here we are, here is Rome!” the guide finally proclaimed, pointing toward the grey mass of buildings in the distance. “We are travelling along the Via Appia, the oldest road in Italy.”

But upon seeing Rome, Tito felt somewhat disappointed. Jagged walls covered in moss, crumbling statues... Rust-coloured stones forming heavy, cube-like buildings... Columns that looked like the massive gnawed bones of some prehistoric creatures...

The monotonous streets were nearly empty — only troops could be seen.

“Where are we heading now, General?” Tito asked grimly.

“To Saint Peter’s!” Maclean commanded, as if he had already decided in advance how their tour of Rome should begin.

The guide pointed the way.

They crossed the Bridge of Saint Angelo over the murky, litter-strewn Tiber. On a vast square, surrounded by colonnades with an obelisk and fountains in the centre, Maclean abruptly hit the brakes, stopping the car before the portico of such a colossal church that Tito gasped.

“St. Peter’s Basilica, here you are,” the guide said with enthusiasm. “This is where popes are consecrated and saints are canonized...”

“Enough!” Maclean waved him off. “Please stay here with the dog.”

And stepping out of the car, he respectfully took Tito by the arm and led him forward.

The offended old man stood there in confusion, not expecting that the tourists would manage to explore the basilica without him.

A heavy sense of numbness, a dreary feeling of oppression seized the Marshal as he stepped inside the enormous

building, large enough to fit all of Avala* along with the Monument to the Unknown Soldier. The towering columns stretching into the heights, the frozen, blade-like sculptures of Bernini exuded the cold breath of death. The scent of wax and incense, the lifeless light streaming through the narrow windows high above; the bronze figure sprawled on the tomb, with a blackened face and a long nose protruding from beneath a lofty tiara, and the giant statue of Saint Peter, its heel nearly worn away by the kisses of the faithful — all of it was eerie.

“Why am I here?” Tito thought with displeasure.

His boots echoed loudly against the stone slabs, drawing the murmurs of stern-faced nuns and pilgrims who had come to pay homage to Saint Peter. Maclean, stomping carelessly across the floor, glanced around with idle curiosity.

Up in the choir loft, as if on cue, the organ began to play and a solemn evening mass commenced.

Tito felt somewhat better and indulgently regarded the stout man in a cassock who had approached him.

“You... Marshal Tito?” the man asked in a gentle voice in English, peering closely at the Marshal’s uniform adorned with golden stars and oak leaves.

“Yes, I am Tito.”

“Give thanks to the Lord and the Blessed Virgin, my son. The Holy See is favourably disposed toward you.”

“What is this now? What’s the matter?” Tito grumbled irritably.

“You have a rare and fortunate opportunity to be granted an audience at His Holiness’ residence.”

Tito quickly glanced at Maclean, suspecting that he had orchestrated this, but the general seemed entirely absorbed in

* A mountain near Belgrade, where a monument to the Unknown Soldier was erected after the First World War.

admiring the statues and altars.

“You are expected, my son,” the prelate repeated insistently, gesturing for him to follow.

Tito hesitated. What did he care about the Pope’s residence? But, in the end, why not go, if only out of simple curiosity, damn it? Besides, there were no dangerous witnesses — no one in Yugoslavia would find out... Casting one more glance around and at the general, who was lost in reverent contemplation, he strode after the prelate toward the exit of the basilica.

On the way back, Maclean took Tito to Rome’s working-class district of San Giovanni, where they viewed not ancient ruins but entirely modern, still-smouldering wreckage. Then they visited the town of Monte Cassino, which had been reduced to nothing more than a name.

Tito saw first-hand the effectiveness of American strategic bombing.

“Something similar, Marshal, you will soon have the opportunity to witness in Belgrade,” Maclean remarked with a cynical smile.

Yet neither this reminder of Belgrade’s grim fate nor even the fleeting thought of the Yugoslav partisans bleeding to hold back the Germans’ Seventh Offensive while their commander-in-chief strolled through Italy managed to dampen Tito’s good spirits. He remained completely at ease even during his meetings with Ivan Šubašić, the Prime Minister of the new royal Yugoslav government. These meetings were arranged by Maclean, though he tactfully refrained from attending, subtly indicating that Yugoslavia’s internal affairs did not concern him in the slightest.

This went on until the day an awkward-looking British York aircraft appeared over Naples, flanked by a dozen escort fighters.

Winston Churchill had arrived.

10

The arrival of Prime Minister Churchill in Naples sparked great excitement at Field Marshal Wilson’s headquarters — and for Arso Jovanović, it brought hope that the military negotiations might finally be concluded more quickly. Only a few details remained to be clarified on issues where a fundamental agreement had already been reached back in Caserta. But by the very next day, the excitement had faded. Once again, the British and American officers, avoiding concrete discussions, steered the negotiations into vague generalities, raising all sorts of conditions, absurd demands, and at times, even tactless and rude proposals.

Arso was also outraged by the fact that the debate table was cluttered not so much with operational maps and necessary materials as with bottles and decorative figurines. It seemed that these plaster satyrs, bacchantes and cupids, taken as “souvenirs” from the museums and palaces of Naples, along with Marsala and Malvasia wines from the Jesuit cellars, interested the staff officers far more than the negotiations themselves. Time and again, Arso reminded the Allies about the urgent and pressing needs of the YNLA. But even the most skilled interpreter struggled to extract any sense from their muddled responses and, to salvage the situation, resorted to lengthy improvisations, delivering them in the same drowsy and indifferent tone as his superiors.

There was only one idea the Allies expressed clearly and insistently — the necessity of landing their troops in Yugoslavia, something Arso categorically refused to accept.

Once again, the meeting had to be postponed. Another day lost for Arso.

That evening, after debates that had dragged on since noon, Arso, exhausted and frustrated, stepped out of Wilson's headquarters.

The heat of the day still radiated from the buildings, but the wind blew in from the sea, and a refreshing coolness embraced Arso's flushed face. He drew in a deep breath, relishing the fresh air, rich with the scent of flowers and greenery, carried from the Nazionale park by the breeze.

Stopping at a kiosk where a tub of ice sat on the counter, Arso downed a glass of lemon juice with water in one gulp. Then he stood for a moment in contemplation at the street corner, in front of a niche with a saint's statue. The dim glow of a votive lamp faintly illuminated the dark green stone face, which, to Arso, seemed more soulful and alive than all the officers he had just left behind.

He quickened his pace. Noise and commotion poured out from the wide-open doors and windows of the Washington Hotel. He was eager to escape the shrill and grating English chatter that had long begun to weary him, the constant buzzing of jeeps rolling up to the hotel after their "excursions" to palaces and castles. With relief, he immersed himself in the restrained yet lively, sing-song rhythm of life along the Neapolitan waterfront on the narrow and dimly lit Santa Lucia street.

He loved wandering there, blending into the crowd of Italian fishermen — cheerful despite all the hardships of war. Among them, troubles seemed to fade away more easily. Life here surged like a swift river confined within tight banks. Only when a military patrol passed did the lively atmosphere momentarily hush, interrupted only by the timid sound of a tambourine, the mournful wail of a bagpiper before an image of the Madonna, or a quiet, passionate song, accompanied by the muted clicking of castanets. But as soon as the patrol

disappeared, the energy of the street returned — shopkeepers eagerly called out to passersby, despite their stalls holding nothing but coral trinkets, lava brooches and tortoiseshell combs, while half-naked boys emerged from the shadows, persistently offering lobsters and oysters.

Arso stopped by the parapet of the waterfront.

The waves, shimmering with the flickering reflections of a lantern, hissed as they crashed against the stone boulders. The horizon blended with the dark silhouettes of ships and the deep blue sky, where the southern stars sparkled with extraordinary brightness. Up above, on the steep slope, white houses gleamed like freshly washed laundry hanging on a line...

Memories flooded in — of his hardworking mother, of his father who perished in the First World War, of his wife and two little daughters, the younger of whom, Zoja, named in honour of the Russian Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya, was still just a tiny child. How were the children living now with their grandmother and their mother, suffering from tuberculosis, in the remote Montenegrin village of Piperi? The thought of his family gripped Arso's heart with pain.

Suddenly, from one of the houses along the waterfront, an awful yowling rang out, followed by whistling and high-pitched screeches. The Yankees were putting on a "serenade" beneath a window where a woman's silhouette had briefly appeared.

Arso turned into the nearest alley. But he had barely taken a hundred steps when he heard a woman's sobs and the heavy tread of footsteps.

"Again!" he thought indignantly.

The woman resisted, clinging to the walls of buildings, grabbing onto drainpipes. Her sobs, mixed with gasps and wails, tore at the heart.

Arso resolutely stepped into the path of three American

sailors.

“Where are you taking her?” he asked sternly, struggling to find the right English words.

Instead of answering, one of the sailors pressed the barrel of his submachine gun against Arso’s side and forced him off the sidewalk, nearly shoving him aside.

Barely managing to stay on his feet, Arso caught a glimpse, in the glow from a nearby window, of the American’s contorted face — and beside him, the girl’s large eyes, glistening with tears, pleading for help.

“Let her go, you scoundrels!” he shouted furiously.

Encouraged by the commanding tone of his voice, several Neapolitans who had been trailing behind the sailors immediately lunged at them, wresting the girl away.

The Yankees, momentarily stunned by the unexpected turn of events, soon recovered and, cursing furiously, began to beat the “inhospitable *lazzaroni*.”* But the crowd around them swelled menacingly and they quickly ducked into a nearby wine cellar, where the raucous sounds of their wild boogie-woogie dance could be heard until dawn — when a military truck arrived to haul away the dead-drunk sailors.

“Worse than the Germans,” the Neapolitans muttered among themselves, gesturing furiously.

“A new invasion!”

“They broke into my storeroom.”

“They paid me for my goods with counterfeit dollars.”

“They wrecked all the furniture in the widow Caraccio’s boarding house.”

“They looted the royal palace...”

“When will they finally leave?”

Arso instinctively understood the meaning of their words and his cheeks burned with outrage. Some allies, indeed! Just

* Neapolitan underclass.

yesterday, he had witnessed the Yankees beating an old fisherman for some unknown reason and forcing a ten-year-old boy to dive to the bottom of the bay for a small coin just for their amusement. At Wilson’s headquarters, Arso reported on the unacceptable behaviour of enlisted men, acts that disgraced the honour and dignity of the U.S. Navy. The officers, not even letting him finish, simply laughed:

“Oh, just innocent fun, sir!”

“Our sailors behave the same way in foreign ports as sailors everywhere.”

“Is Mr. Jovanović trying to defend the scoundrels around here?”

“Excuse me,” Arso objected. “What kind of scoundrels? These are the people, the rightful owners of this city, of this country. One shouldn’t take advantage of their respect and gratitude. Why leave behind such a disgraceful impression?”

The officers burst into even louder laughter:

“Ah, maybe we won’t leave at all!?”

“We’re quite enjoying ourselves here.”

“Naples is a dream, just as our guidebooks say. But ‘see Naples and die’ — what nonsense! We’d rather stay here alive...”

Their frivolous mood didn’t leave them, even after Arso suggested getting down to business. The negotiations weren’t making any progress. Arso realized that the officers were simply stalling and that they themselves couldn’t make any decisions. It all likely depended on the meeting between Churchill and Tito.

As he replayed the day’s events in his mind, Arso didn’t even notice how he had reached Piazza del Plebiscito. Crossing the moon-cast shadows of the two equestrian statues spread across the asphalt, he approached the Palazzo Reale — the former royal palace.

The long, massive building, with its dark, hollow windows, looked blind and grim, as if it had just been dug out from beneath volcanic ash. The doors stood wide open. The wind, rushing inside, rustled through something in the deserted halls...

“Looted,” Arso thought bitterly. “What a relief that Yugoslavia will never again suffer foreign occupation!”

Skirting the palace, he strode forward with large steps, not even knowing where he was heading, as if trying to lose himself in the labyrinth of dark, winding alleys leading to Toledo. He wandered for a long time, gathering his thoughts, until he finally made a decision: he had to see Tito immediately, right now, and tell him that the negotiations on military-technical matters had reached a dead end. The representatives of the Mediterranean command were dodging any concrete discussion about real aid to the YNLA. They promised to deliver weapons, ammunition and equipment only to the island of Vis — which, in reality, meant simply moving supplies from one storeroom to another. They knew full well that the Yugoslavs had no way to transport all of this to the mainland: they had neither steamships nor transport planes. And in exchange for air support, the Allies were demanding agreement to land their operational forces in Dalmatia so that they could launch offensive operations — either through Sarajevo toward Belgrade or through Zagreb toward Budapest. This could not be allowed under any circumstances. The people and the army would never accept it. “Let a pig sit at the table, and it’ll put its feet on it,” Arso recalled a Russian proverb.

After half an hour of brisk walking uphill, he was already approaching the marble villa that had once housed Queen Victoria of England.

Tito was there with Churchill. Lately, Arso had lost touch with the Marshal — Tito was constantly on the move: one

day in Rome, another on the island of Capri, then somewhere else. Maclean seemed to be deliberately dragging him around, distracting him from his work. But now that Churchill had arrived, Tito was surely pressing him, demanding real and immediate assistance. “But will it lead to anything? It’s time to end this whole charade, time to return to Vis,” Arso thought. “Fierce battles are raging in Yugoslavia. We need to get back to our lands, to our own troops. The Germans will be forced to leave the Balkans sooner or later. The enemy must be struck on the retreat, on the march. If only we could establish contact with the advancing Red Army sooner! Right now, all hope rests on them. Fortunately, they are already close!”

Pushing aside any hesitation about disturbing the British Prime Minister, Arso resolutely headed for the villa’s entrance, which looked uninhabited. The Venetian windows were tightly covered from the inside.

From behind the statues flanking the gates, two sentries with carbines immediately stepped forward. One of them, upon recognizing the Yugoslav general before him, smartly clicked his boot in salute and allowed Arso Jovanović to pass through to the villa. In the vestibule, he encountered a second, officer’s guard post. Arso stated his name.

The officer respectfully touched the brim of his cap with two fingers and, after glancing at a document on his desk, gently said:

“Your name is not on the list.”

Arso explained that he was the Chief of the Supreme Headquarters of the YNLA and was here to see the Marshal.

“No one other than those listed is permitted to enter,” the officer stated more firmly.

Looking at the list, Arso saw the names of everyone who had arrived with Tito: Ranković, Velebit, Olga Ninčić. The only one missing was himself — Arso Jovanović. This puzzled

and unsettled him. Without a word, he turned and walked out onto the street.

“What does this mean?” Arso wondered as he moved away from the villa. “It can’t be that Tito is deliberately hiding his negotiations with Churchill from me. He’s probably just convinced that I’m too busy with matters at Wilson’s headquarters and wouldn’t have the time to come here.”

But that explanation did not put him at ease. Analysing Tito and Ranković’s attitude toward him, Arso couldn’t shake the feeling that they were not always entirely honest with him. Why did they seem to avoid him, often disagreeing with the military policies he advocated? “Perhaps,” Arso pondered, “they have their own distinct party-political strategy that they’re keeping from me, seeing me as a former career officer of the royal army. No wonder Tito, while constantly stalling decisive operations against the Germans and local collaborators, always said: ‘Arso, wait. You don’t understand everything yet.’” Yes, it was indeed difficult to understand this strange tactic — counting only the Germans’ offensives, even documenting the history of their seven attacks, while portraying themselves merely as heroes of more or less successful retreats. When confronted with these concerns, Tito would respond: “I have my own plans. We need to endure for now, to conserve our strength for the decisive moment.” “Conserve strength!” Arso thought bitterly. “That should have been considered at Sutjeska... But now the decisive moment has already arrived: the Germans are launching their Seventh Offensive, aiming to destroy the YNLA before the Red Army arrives... And we — the leadership — are either stuck on Vis or now here, in Italy, endlessly going in circles... But why, then, is Tito avoiding me, hiding his plans, refusing to let me into the conference with Churchill? When will this mistrust end? He doesn’t trust me... Could it really be just because I’m

an old military specialist?”

The thought tormented Arso: “For nearly three years, I’ve been actively fighting the enemies of my homeland, my third year as a member of the Party... So why was I accepted into the Party in the first place?”

Arso felt deeply alone.

That night, his tall figure wandered aimlessly through the dark, narrow streets of old Naples.

11

At Queen Victoria’s villa, in a small hall with Corinthian columns and painted Amazons on the ceiling, yet another “plenary session of the Naples Conference,” as Maclean called these secret meetings of like-minded individuals, was underway.

The discussion revolved around the present and future of Yugoslavia. Tito had already grown completely at ease in Churchill’s presence, seeing him as a straightforward, broad-spirited man, and no longer hesitated in his statements. In any case, he and Ranković had little choice but to agree with the Prime Minister, as Churchill was doing most of the talking. His deep, resonant voice filled the hall like a brass echo. The Prime Minister spared no praise for Tito — calling him his friend and a potential leader of the modern era — nor did he hold back on promises of support for Yugoslavia, emphasizing Britain’s traditional ties of mutual understanding with the country. He jumped from one topic to another, occasionally posing an unexpected question, then, after hearing the response, resumed speaking without pause, all while gnawing on his cigar and occasionally sipping from a narrow glass of his favourite cognac.

“Tell the Marshal, my dear,” Churchill addressed Ninčić,

“that I am very interested in ensuring he has a firm seat on the Balkan horse.”

Tito straightened in his chair and expectantly looked at Olga. He understood almost everything Churchill said, but having an interpreter involved lent the conversation a more official tone.

“My position, Mr. Prime Minister, would be even stronger if Britain and America strictly fulfilled their commitments to my army,” Tito replied, briefly glancing at himself in the wall mirror. “I am referring to the promises made at the Tehran Conference.”

Churchill waved away the thick, layered cigar smoke in front of him with his plump hand. He curiously examined the man speaking to him as an equal, carrying himself like a self-absorbed Narcissus. Old Winston was pleased. In general, he had a certain admiration for this brazen upstart, who had already begun to see himself as the head of state. Churchill could well appreciate a man like Tito, who was “neither truly committed to either side, but merely a passing guest.” In his mind, the Prime Minister was already calculating what an impressive place such a master of political acrobatics and deception would occupy in his upcoming memoirs — those would be fascinating pages indeed! And so, he indulged himself in playing with Tito, much like a cat toys with a mouse, engaging in this grand diplomatic game, these serious negotiations, even though a single pound of his fist on the table would be enough to make this self-styled Napoleon, this mere corporal, stand at rigid attention. But the game was worth playing. It was useful to maintain Tito’s decorative prestige, and so Churchill made a show of attentively listening.

“You agreed,” Tito continued, “to provide us with equipment and weapons to the maximum possible extent. Yet, to this day, I still have nearly 70,000 fighters unarmed. We lack

even rifles, not to mention artillery, tanks and aircraft. All of these, I would like to have.”

“But you forget, my friend, that Britain has many dependents,” Churchill replied. “Your partisans do not represent all the national forces of the country. Two hundred thousand Serbs do not recognize you, and there is still the legitimate government of Yugoslavia, headed by the king. Now, if you were to unite your forces with his...”

“The king has no forces,” Tito interjected quickly.

“The king is us, the Allies. That is our strength. Without our approval, no ruler has ever existed in any country of the Mediterranean basin. You seek recognition? But how can we recognize you when you openly advocate for the overthrow of the king? You seek to overturn all of Western culture and civilization! To follow in the footsteps of the Russians!” Churchill furrowed his brows grimly, his thick neck flushing red.

Tito hesitated.

“But we cannot disregard the will of the people... we cannot go against the tide...”

“Sensible!” Churchill seized on the point. “But that tide may carry you too far.” He turned to Ninčić. “And in that regard, my dear, I have another question for the Marshal. A straightforward one.”

Ninčić narrowed her eyes.

“Is it true that the majority of Yugoslav peasants would be pleased if, following the Russian example, so-called socialist construction were to begin in Yugoslavia?”

As soon as the phrase was translated, Ranković, who had been sitting modestly and silently behind Tito, leaned forward slightly. His heavy-lidded eyes flashed sharply. Tito felt his gaze and frowned, contorting his face as if struggling through a deep and painful thought.

"We intend to follow our own distinctive path," Tito finally said. "I have emphasized this many times. Our country is advantageously located between the West and the East. We cannot simply sail along the shore of just one side. That would be too shallow for us. We have our own — I repeat, our own — middle path, our own channel..."

"Yes, I've heard about that," Churchill rolled his cigar to the corner of his mouth and smiled cheerfully. "But I would like to hear from you personally, my friend, that calling Yugoslavia a communist country would never be accurate — at least not without risking a terminological inaccuracy."

"I find this constant question about socialism in our country rather troubling, Mr. Prime Minister," Tito said slowly, with effort, trying to meet Churchill's probing gaze. "Do you really place much importance on my declarations regarding this matter?" he asked smoothly, glancing sideways at Ranković.

"Only a unique, special form of socialism is possible in Yugoslavia," Ranković explained carefully, measuring each word. "A socialism that will be acceptable to landowners, to workers and to farmhands alike." As he spoke, he pushed himself forward and spread his large, fleshy hands with knotted fingers across the table.

"In any case, building socialism in our country will be a long process," added Velebit.

"A geological process?" Churchill burst into laughter. "Excellent!" He licked his lips and stared absentmindedly over Tito's head. "Well then, in that case, may I assume that both the king and those stubborn Serbian peasants — the so-called kulaks — as well as the businessmen of industry and trade will all be able to reconcile themselves with such a distant prospect?"

"Yes, we can find common ground with them," Tito

agreed. "We place national unity above party interests."

"Sensible, very sensible!" Churchill clapped his hands together enthusiastically and cast a warm glance at Maclean, who was busy examining a museum painting he had brought as a gift for the Prime Minister.

The general responded with a knowing smile, though he wasn't entirely sure whether Churchill's approving look referred to the successful co-opting of Tito or to the acquisition of the painting, which depicted a wistful Medusa.

Taking advantage of the pause, Tito was about to clarify certain aspects of his domestic policy, but he didn't get the chance.

Churchill asked:

"And why do you need so many weapons?"

"We're holding back the Germans..."

"You're holding back no one!" the Prime Minister interrupted heatedly. "It's us who are holding back the German divisions in the Balkans. Did you see how many of our ships are stationed here in the harbour of Naples? They are ready to set sail and land my boys on the Yugoslav coast. Hitler fears our landing just as much as he fears the arrival of the Red Army in the Balkans. Another question... How many German divisions are inside your country, and how many are on the coast?"

Tito mumbled something indistinct.

"You don't know? Well, let me tell you. Seven divisions are stationed along your Adriatic coast and five inside the country. And even those five are mostly mixed units — German heads with Yugoslav bodies and tails. It looks more like Yugoslavs holding back Yugoslavs. You're spending more time and resources fighting each other than fighting the Germans. Now, on the Eastern Front, German divisions are actually being ground down — like grain in a proper steam-powered

mill. But in your Yugoslavia, the Wehrmacht command is sending its battered units, essentially on a resort retreat — to mend their nerves and patch themselves up after Russia...”

Tito sat, flushed red, wiping his sweat-slicked face. Ranković, however, remained unshaken. Sliding his chair slightly away from the table, he gazed indifferently at the painted ceiling.

Seeing that his pressure had hit the mark, Churchill softened.

“So, you’re asking for our help?” he asked. “Well, you shall receive it. In the near future, we will begin rearming your partisans. Would you like that?”

“And what about ammunition?” Tito brightened up.

“That depends on how quickly our factories can work. But we’ll find something for you... If not from ourselves, then from others... In addition, Marshal, the Tehran Conference outlined not only supplying you but also carrying out commando operations along your coastline. We are fully prepared to land several divisions in Yugoslavia. For this, you will provide us with ports on the Dalmatian coast and air bases on the islands. I am addressing you on this matter,” Churchill concluded, “as the head of state.”

Tito beamed with a smile. He was deeply flattered that the British Prime Minister had referred to him as the head of state and immediately agreed to place all ports and islands of the Yugoslav Adriatic at Britain’s disposal.

Churchill was pleased. His deliberate distortion of the Tehran Conference’s decisions had yielded results. Feeling triumphant, he spoke with enthusiasm about how he would never turn his attention away from Yugoslavia — neither now nor in the future — and how the Balkans were a magnet that the compass needle of British policy would always point to, no matter how much it was shaken.

In conclusion, he said:

“As for your domestic matters, Marshal, to help resolve them, I will send Mr. Šubašić to you. He will continue negotiations with you on behalf of King Petar. I have every reason to believe that after our meeting, you will come to terms with him as well.”

“Everything will be in order, sir!” Tito replied with a jaunty air, once again glancing at himself in the mirror.

The next morning, to celebrate the end of the “conference,” Churchill arranged a picnic for Tito, including a boat trip across the Bay of Naples. The day was magnificent. The dazzling sunlight scattered across the deep azure waves. The rocky island of Capri, with its whimsical, almost molten-looking contours, appeared like a light cloud on the horizon.

...For two weeks, the Marshal’s entourage had been waiting for him on Vis. Finally, he returned. Dr. Šubašić arrived on the same plane. He was eager to immediately resume formal negotiations. However, Tito — still brimming with impressions from Italy — was distracted, responded absent-mindedly and seemed lost in his own thoughts. Pinčić barely managed to seat him at the same table with Šubašić.

The staff at headquarters speculated: Would an amicable agreement be reached? Would Tito agree to a compromise with the royal government, which had so recently considered him a dangerous revolutionary upstart? Would Šubašić accept the condition of Tito leading a coalition government?

In this chaotic atmosphere, Huntington found it difficult to secure a meeting with the Marshal. Following Ranković’s instructions, Olga prevented anyone from seeing Tito. But dollars did their job — Huntington slipped into Tito’s cave and convinced him to go on a boat trip for a confidential discussion on behalf of Washington...

Leaving a secluded cove on the northern coast of Vis, the boat gently cut through the blue waves of the Adriatic Sea. The scorching subtropical sun wrapped the waters and the parched, cracked land in a sweltering haze. Inside the boat's small cabin, it was cool, like a cave, and — most importantly — there were no interruptions. Boško and Crlja, both armed, settled on the shady side of the boat behind the cabin. An American officer, a member of the mission, navigated the route from the captain's bridge. And Tito's ever-present companion — Tigr, his German shepherd — lay under the table in the cabin, ears pricked, listening attentively.

Tito listened very attentively and seriously to Huntington's introductory remarks about methods and means of prolonging life, appearing completely absorbed in the conversation. However, the quick glances he cast toward the porthole, half-covered by a silk curtain, betrayed his hidden desire to get straight to the point and return to the island — to his cave. The trip was by no means safe. They could hit a floating mine, a German submarine might appear or a sudden enemy dive bomber attack could take them by surprise.

But Tito was willing to take this risk to clarify some important matters concerning the new situation in the Balkans. Moreover, prolonged seclusion with Huntington inside the cave might attract too much attention from the Russians and the British. The boat trip, on the other hand, could be framed as an inspection of coastal fortifications...

The boat moved close to the shoreline. Sheer cliffs towering over the sea gave way to heavy, rolling hills, covered in dense, interwoven, felt-like evergreen maquis. Narrow valleys, overgrown near the shore with broom and juniper, dotted with small groves of pistachio trees, stretched inland, grad-

ually widening into vast plateaus. Across the slopes, rocky trails snaked in thin white lines.

From here, Dalmatia seemed like a ghostly vision, shimmering in the scorching haze above the sea's surface. Gazing at the wavering outline of the distant shore, Tito suddenly thought that his own position was just as uncertain and unstable.

"Yes... All of this is very complicated and difficult..." he muttered sourly.

"What is difficult?" Huntington asked, not understanding.

"You see... The Red Army is already approaching Yugoslavia's borders."

"So what?"

"And I am here with the Western Allies, far from my own army."

"You misspoke," the American replied with a smile. "You are at home. The island of Vis is Yugoslav territory."

"What naivety!" Tito picked up a Tunisian banana from the fruit bowl and turned it over in his hands. "As if no one knows that I have already given this island to Churchill and that I am here under the protection of British guns and your airplanes!" Tito fell silent, peeling off the golden-cream skin of the overripe banana. "The Red Army — whether I want it or not — will, in pursuit of the Germans, march across Yugoslav territory and take Belgrade. And if my forces do not at least symbolically participate in the battle for Belgrade, it will be as good as a defeat for me, and I will no longer be able to claim the title of Yugoslavia's liberator."

"Yes, that's true," Huntington puffed on his pipe, watching the Marshal intently, noting every detail.

Tito sat with his chin resting on his hand, prominently displaying a ring with an enormous diamond that shimmered

with fiery sparks — one that could have made even an Eastern princess envious.

“Besides...” he continued grimly, “we are facing an overall complicated situation. The mere threat of the Red Army taking Belgrade and advancing into the Sava-Drava basin will force the Germans into a hasty retreat.”

“Hardly hasty. Their supply lines are destroyed. The Germans are forced to cling to defensive positions here, move eastward and fight the Russians.”

This blunt reference to Operation Ratweek — which aimed both to economically weaken Yugoslavia and to delay the country’s liberation — did not faze Tito.

“Exactly, exactly! But under the Ratweek plan, everything is being destroyed in western, not eastern Yugoslavia. That means the Germans can manoeuvre there however they please. As they retreat and carve out a path for themselves, they will crush only my units, while they will leave untouched the forces of the various quislings — Mihailović, Nedić, Rupnik and Ljotić. And there are about 250,000 of them...”

“Don’t worry,” Huntington interrupted. “Those troops are just as much quislings as yours. We’ve had ties with them for a long time, and once the Germans leave, they’ll all switch over to you and merge with your forces.”

Tito made a dismissive gesture.

“Are you saying that doesn’t suit you?” Huntington smirked. “To be frank, your only task is to find the right forms and methods to integrate them, and then they’ll serve you far more reliably than all of your so-called ‘proletarian corps.’”

“Perhaps in the future,” Tito agreed. “But right now, I’m worried about something else. At this moment, I am caught between a hammer and an anvil. On one side, the Russians are approaching and the people are expecting them — I can’t

ignore that. On the other side, Churchill is pressing his demands. He has issued me a categorical request to provide him with a naval base on the Yugoslav coast — either Split or Dubrovnik — along with air bases on the islands of Brač, Hvar and Korčula. I must open all Yugoslav ports on the Adriatic to the British and your American fleets...”

“I’m aware of all that, Marshal,” Huntington remarked casually.

“Wait, let me finish,” Tito impatiently tapped his knuckles on the table.

“All right, all right,” Huntington selected the largest orange from the silver bowl and slowly began peeling its skin.

“Churchill also demanded that I allow his troops to pass through Sarajevo toward Budapest or Belgrade. But I refused.”

“You... refused him?” Huntington couldn’t suppress a smile. He thought that, overall, Churchill had taken the right approach in negotiating with Tito. This was probably how a spider persuades a fly to “step into its parlour for an important friendly conversation.” But Churchill, it seemed, had no idea that the pleasure of draining the fly dry and discarding its lifeless body would not go to the British spider at all.

“And?” the American asked.

“He agreed with me that it would be poorly received by the people, especially the army,” Tito replied.

“That’s true, and you’re wise to ensure that the people don’t think badly of you. Besides, the British are already too late. The Red Army has outpaced them. And why would they need to be here when you and your forces are already present? If the old Tory wants to send his boys to Hungary, he can do it through Trieste and Istria.”

“Exactly!” Tito seized on the point. “But I still agreed to provide the British with air bases on the islands and on the

mainland in Zadar. I also agreed to open all ports to their fleet. I've already issued orders to local authorities and to my army units that, in the event of a landing by the Western Allies, they should be received everywhere as they should be — with brotherly hospitality..."

"That no longer matters much now," Huntington remarked dismissively.

"But that's not all. I also promised Churchill to include some of King Petar's trusted men in my government, along with some other émigré riff raff. So, I've settled matters with England..." Tito hesitated. "But the thing is... the arrival of the Red Army in Yugoslavia will stir up the people. The people will start demanding..."

"Demanding what?" the American asked cautiously.

"Well, you understand..." Tito sighed. "It won't be easy to discard the slogans I had to use to bring the people to my side. Nor the goal for which..."

"Enough! Hasn't it become clear to you yet that Yugoslavia's true prosperity can only come through financial and other support from America alone?" There was a note of challenge in Huntington's voice. "Who but us, the Americans, is capable of compensating you for the losses we ourselves caused by bombing all your economic and industrial centres, like Belgrade, Subotica, Niš, Brod, Osijek and Leskovac?"

"I'm afraid that, despite everything, the partisans will insist on their own course."

"In that case," the American continued eagerly, "there's another radical solution to get rid of overly enthusiastic admirers of the Soviet model. In the First Proletarian Corps, as I know, the majority are workers and communists. And it's commanded by our trusted friend Popović. So, send him and his corps to hold back the Germans somewhere in the Morava Valley — let his proletarians prove their loyalty to the Rus-

sians with their blood. You should summon Popović here and give him the necessary instructions. At the very least, advise him to use the Russian slogan: 'Communists, forward.' After all, you're a communist yourself — you know these slogans better than anyone."

"Yes," Tito swallowed hard. "That can be arranged. But even so, it will still be very difficult for me to manoeuvre and conceal my true line from both the Russians and the people. Especially since many émigrés will be joining my government and the state apparatus, and I'll have to appoint some royal officials to local governing bodies. The British are insisting on this as well. But the people won't praise me for it. Even the Russians from the mission are already wary of me. They're surprised that the national liberation movement in Serbia is still so weak and that a real partisan war hasn't taken root there. They also didn't like that I went to Naples to meet with Churchill."

"But you had Ranković and Arso Jovanović with you. Didn't that make your trip look entirely official?"

"Arso, that devil, has been saying that I kept him out of my meetings with the Prime Minister. In general, he's too open with the Russians. Somehow, they even sniffed out that I was in Rome. In Rome..." Tito repeated, furrowing his brow in concern.

"But they won't find out the details of that trip, I hope?"

Tito looked up, startled.

"And you... you know something?"

"Me?" Huntington smirked slightly. "Have you forgotten what a certain lady foretold you by the stars?"

"What lady? And what does all that nonsense about stars and predictions have to do with anything?"

"The stars are ours, American stars," Huntington hinted.

"It's all nonsense either way. No one can know anything.

The only one with me was Maclean.”

“At my request...”

“Oh? So, my meeting with Donovan... I owe that to you as well?”

“Partially...”

“Much obliged.”

Tito’s eyes darted restlessly. He felt completely trapped but was desperate not to let the American see it — otherwise, he’d lose any chance to stand his ground and bargain further.

“It’s a difficult situation for me overall,” he sighed. “It’s difficult, you know, to justify to the people both my current departure to the West, to this island and my temporary absence from the army. After all, I am still the Supreme Commander and General Secretary of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia!” Tito leaned back importantly in his chair.

Slowly sipping his soda whiskey through a straw, Huntington studied Tito once again, even though he already seemed to know nearly everything about him. He saw right through this schemer, saw through his game. What more could that evasive gaze, that tense, forced smile, that affected independence and arrogance, that act of imperial grandeur reveal? How ridiculous, for example, that for this boat trip, this newly-minted Marshal — an ex-corporal who had risen to the highest military rank without serving in an army or leading any real military operations — had dressed in a white parade jacket, with gold oak leaves embroidered on a red collar. It had probably been tailored in Naples.

An international opportunist! A provincial gendarme playing the role of Caesar — most likely one he had seen in a Zagreb theatre production of a Shakespearean play! He lives for himself and thinks only about what can solidify his power. Clearly, the right choice has been made. Tito is the key that, when the time is right, can open doors to the Balkans. The

English keys — King Petar, King Michael, King Zogu — are rusty, outdated. They won’t unlock the modern Balkan doors. It is necessary to keep the new ones firmly in one’s pocket.

And yet, Huntington had serious reasons for concern. The Russians were close... Churchill hadn’t flown to Naples for nothing. Old Winnie had a sharp nose for these things. But if Tito were temporarily let out of their grasp, would he be able to mend his already strained relations with the Russians? Would he manage to atone for some of his obvious transgressions against them? Could he do all this with a sincerity that wouldn’t arouse suspicion? And would he later try to build political capital by playing the West against the East, to the detriment of the role that the United States would one day assign to him?

“By the way, Marshal, do the Soviet representatives know about our little excursion?” Huntington suddenly inquired.

“No, they don’t,” Tito grimaced. “I don’t report my actions to anyone.”

“So you’re here incognito with me?”

“Of course! But eventually, I’ll have to say something. They’ll find out anyway. Our people, like Arso, don’t hide anything from them. The people trust the Russians — you have to take that into account.” Tito leaned toward his companion. “Yes, the people... I so often feel alone...”

“What can you do?” Huntington said. “That’s the tragedy of all great figures.”

Tito sighed and continued in his same ingratiating tone:

“Yugoslavia is a small country, and we must acknowledge the influence of the Great Powers. But if we were to unite the Balkans under our leadership, then we could speak louder — with a commanding voice. I envision a country with a population larger than France’s and, in terms of natural resources, perhaps far richer. Not to mention its enormous strategic im-

portance. A great Slavic power — but a Western one.”

“I see, I see.”

“This was the dream of Serbia’s and Croatia’s most famous leaders of the past century: ‘Serbia from sea to sea,’ ‘Alpine Croatia,’” Tito confided, sensing approval. “They dreamed of a federation of South Slavs. This mosaic of different peoples living in the Balkans and the Danube Basin, including Hungary, Romania and Greece, must be firmly cemented. Otherwise, they will all turn toward the Soviet Union. That’s their natural inclination. A counter-balance is needed. How does Washington see this? Do they consider such a state possible? I can create it,” he declared arrogantly, though with a hint of ingratiating.

“Washington is beginning to understand,” Huntington replied evasively, “that you have a chance to become the future leader of the Balkans.”

“Churchill and I discussed this as well,” Tito boasted.

“Of course! Old John Tar* has his moments of wit. The idea of a Balkan federation belongs to Metternich, after all. Even Hitler toyed with it.”

Tito listened absentmindedly to the sound of the waves splashing against the hull of the boat and remained silent.

“Still, the idea itself is not a bad one,” Huntington added after a pause, now without any irony.

Having revealed his cards, Tito, without hesitation, asked directly whether he could count on America’s recognition as the sole ruler of Southeastern Europe.

Even Huntington, a seasoned intelligence officer raised in the spirit of Pan-Americanism, was taken aback: “Well, well, look at him! A mere pawn, yet aiming for a queen’s role. MacCarver did a fine job stoking the Marshal’s ambitions!” Huntington had already suspected Tito’s grand aspirations

* A humorous nickname for an English sailor.

— his apparent claims to Istria, Austrian Carinthia, Bačka, all of Macedonia and Albania. But hearing for the first time that Tito now wanted to swallow up all of Greece, Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary in one gulp was a revelation. Still, everything was going well, and Huntington, without looking at his conversation partner, vaguely drawled:

“Well, that depends...”

“I can steer my people either toward the East or the West,” Tito hastily clarified.

He was certain that, just like Churchill, Huntington would try to dissuade him from turning to the East, from seeking Russian assistance, and would promise him everything, agree to anything.

For his part, Huntington understood perfectly that Tito was using the veiled threat of “turning East” to drive up his own value.

“I believe Washington will approve of your idea,” Huntington unexpectedly said, “and will provide you with substantial support. In fact, I have a plan.”

“What kind of plan?” Tito looked at him with curiosity.

“You should go to the Russians,” Huntington said in a slow, measured voice. “And you must do it in complete secrecy. Arrange your departure with the utmost mystery. Stage a kind of escape from us, from your capitalist allies...”

This suggestion initially stunned Tito.

“You will go to the Russians,” Huntington continued just as calmly. “Let’s say, under the pretext of coordinating military operations in connection with the imminent entry of the Red Army into Yugoslavia. Keep one important rule in mind: if you can’t strangle your enemy, embrace him. But be careful. Be extremely cautious. One wrong step, one false note, one careless move — and everything is lost!”

“But this is a bold move!” Tito exclaimed.

“Not everyone is capable of it,” Huntington emphasized.

“Yes... but hold on — does this mean I’d also be running from the British? Now?! When Churchill has promised me support?” Tito asked in confusion.

“Yes, from the British too,” Huntington nodded. “Don’t let that trouble you. It’s an interesting situation: the farther you run from us, the closer to us you’ll actually be. This is an escape, so to speak, along a closed loop.”

“Is this your personal advice?” Tito almost whispered.

Huntington only shrugged. He wasn’t in the habit of openly discussing things that could be interpreted as interference in the internal affairs of another country.

After a brief moment of reflection, Tito declared:

“Well then, it’s decided!” And, adopting his usual pompous manner, added: “Though the sun rises in the East, it shines on me more brightly from the West.”

Only now did he realize his grave mistake — abandoning the “ship” in the midst of a storm. The squall had passed, and the ship, righting itself, continued sailing its course even without a captain. Huntington was right: it was crucial to get back to the helm before it was too late, to steer the ship forward so that later he could discreetly adjust its course toward the desired direction. Tito also now fully grasped that neither the Americans nor the British could manage Yugoslavia without him. This realization filled him with triumph, with confidence. He felt solid ground beneath his feet again.

Leisurely, he rose from his chair, let out a weighty sigh and walked over to the porthole. Behind the thick glass, a pair of heavy-soled boots was visible — an American soldier was swinging his legs idly while sitting on the boat’s edge. It slightly spoiled the view. The Yugoslav shore was visible beneath American heels.

Tito motioned to Huntington.

“Look over there.”

The boat was rounding the southeastern coast of Vis. To the right, the green outlines of the island of Korčula appeared.

“This is the most beautiful of all the Yugoslav islands in the Adriatic. It has magnificent villas, luxurious vineyards and gardens. When the war is over, Colonel, we will go there to relax, and I will gift you the finest villa as a token of our friendship.” Huntington silently put his arm around the Marshal’s shoulders. Tito stood with one foot forward, head slightly raised, his right hand tucked behind his jacket and his left resting on his hip — a pose of monumental calm. A statue of some Greek general in the Naples Museum stood in exactly the same classic stance. Simple and yet so strikingly elegant: a smooth upward movement, a harmonious clarity of character...

The boat approached Cape Promontore in the Vis Channel.

Suddenly, the whistle of an incoming shell cut through the air, followed by a deafening explosion. A column of water shot up. A German battery on the island of Hvar had opened fire. Tito turned pale. His shepherd dog jumped up, growling fiercely.

Huntington, warily glancing at the animal, rushed to the door and shouted hoarsely to the officer above:

“Full speed ahead!”

The engine roared, and the water churned behind the stern. The boat surged forward at maximum speed. Four more shells struck the water in quick succession, but the vessel had already entered the bay. There, Ranković was waiting for the Marshal with reinforced security.

The road was deserted. No civilians or partisans were allowed to walk around the cave area or on the road leading from it to the sea during Tito’s outings. Only British and

American patrols roamed freely, feeling at home.

Tito, with Tigr at his side, hurried back to his cave.

“See you in Belgrade, sir,” Huntington said as they parted, raising his hand and shaking it in the air.

He was pleased with the results of their outing. In his mind, he could already see the stars and stripes flying over the Balkans — stars and stripes over one of the key gateways to the Soviet Russia he so despised.

13

...So I never made it to my own people. Time was slipping away, yet our situation was not taking the turn Perućica had hinted at... On the contrary, it seemed to me that circumstances were worsening. Perućica’s plan had been rejected by Popović. A strict order, combined with the vigilance of OZNA agents — who embodied the full power of the secret police, ensuring unquestioning obedience to directives from above — kept our brigade stationed in the Zlatar region.

Ilija Perućica had temporarily left the brigade. As if on purpose, the corps commander sent him to study at the higher officer school, which Arso Jovanović had established back in 1942, right in the midst of the most critical period. Battalion and brigade commanders arrived at this school straight from the battlefield and, over the course of one and a half to two months, studied the fundamental principles of modern warfare, inter-branch cooperation and military tactics.

Perućica was no longer with us, but every fighter already knew about his unrealized plans and Arso Jovanović’s directive. It was becoming increasingly difficult to keep them from taking action.

From the heights of Zlatar, they often gazed down into the green valley. Sometimes, spotting a cloud of dust rising

over the road, they would rush to Kuštirinović’s tent, shouting: “The Germans are coming!” But the commander took no action, citing Popović’s orders.

Finally, after long deliberation over the map, Kuštirinović devised a plan for an operation: set up an ambush along the road somewhere between Novi Varoš and Banja during the night and wait for an enemy convoy. The fighters rejoiced — at last, they had something to do!

We set up our ambush at the edge of the forest, near the banks of the Bistrica River, which flows into the Lim. Several large, flat stones covered in ivy and clusters of gorse and hawthorn growing between them provided excellent cover for Filipović’s platoon, concealed in position. I positioned the rest of my company deeper in the forest line. Kuštirinović stationed Jankov’s company on the other side of the road in a ravine.

We waited until dawn. Soon, enemy columns were expected to move along the highway.

The tense silence of anticipation was suddenly shattered by the loud chopping of axes. The fighters exchanged bewildered and anxious glances.

I set off to find out what was happening but had barely taken a few steps when I ran into a breathless Miletić. He was running toward me, cursing loudly:

“What a strategist! Damn him to hell!”

“Who?”

“Kuštirinović! Thinks he’s smarter than everyone else! *Druže* Jankov!” he called out. “Come here, quickly!”

The three of us rushed to where the fighters had just cut down a tall, young oak. With a loud crack, it crashed across the road. Kuštirinović sat on an old tree stump, scribbling something in his notebook.

“Just look at this!” Jovan spat.

“What are you doing here?!” Kića yanked off his glasses as if he were about to smack Kuštirinović’s broad, stubbled, reddish face with them.

“Salute! I’m sketching a terrain map,” Kuštirinović replied, lazily rising to his feet.

“I see. And why are you making this barricade?”

“What do you mean, why? To slow down the enemy.”

“But you’ve just given away our position! Now the ambush is visible from a distance!”

The grey scar on Kuštirinović’s cheek turned crimson.

“I’m doing this according to military tactics.”

“There’s about as much military tactics in what you’re doing as there is hair on a toad!”

“I ask you not to interfere!”

But Kića wasn’t listening anymore. A cloud of dust had begun swirling over the road.

“To the ambush!” he shouted.

Then, quickly tossing his cap, weapon and jacket into the bushes, he grabbed an axe and walked up to the fallen tree. In his white shirt, with his scruffy, patchy beard, he looked just like a peasant who had cut down a tree to chop some branches for livestock.

Kića’s trick worked. Neither the fallen oak by the roadside nor the “peasant” calmly cutting branches aroused any suspicion from the enemy’s forward guards, whom we let pass. But when the German column approached, accompanied by bearded Chetniks escorting a supply convoy, Kuštirinović had no choice but to open fire — on his former comrades.

We captured a large number of spoils. However, this success, like all our corps’ recent operations, meant little compared to the feats of the neighbouring Eighth Corps. Legends circulated about the bold and daring actions of its commander, his personal fearlessness, initiative and extraordinary re-

silience. Vlado Četković, like Sava Kovačević, was called the Montenegrin Chapayev. He lived in shelters alongside his partisans and personally led them in coordinated attacks. When necessary, he was the first to crawl across open fields, holding a flat slate stone above his head as a shield. He undertook desperate “actions,” yet they were always calculated and intelligent. The Eighth Corps inflicted serious blows on the enemy. “If only we had a commander like Četković,” the Šumadijans said enviously.

They told the story of how he recently got rid of Major Randolph Churchill, who had arrived in Bosansko Grahovo as an advisor. This son of the British Prime Minister — a man in his forties with perpetually disheveled straw-coloured hair, reeking of whisky and rakija — decided to take command of the corps himself. He started by pompously criticizing the strategy developed by Arso Jovanović, dismissed Četković’s doubts about the Ratweek plan, and unceremoniously explained all the nuances of the military and political situation in the Balkans. He ended his rhetorical fireworks with a proposal to immediately throw the corps’ forces against the towns of Glamoč and Livno, where German troops were concentrated. Colonel Četković, they said, patiently listened to Randolph’s speech, delivered with exceptional determination and flatly refused to carry out his reckless order. Frustrated, the young Churchill flew back to Vis.

And now, the Eighth Corps was struck by a terrible misfortune. Rumours spread that Tito had summoned Četković to a meeting on the island. The corps commander departed on a liaison aircraft sent for him. But he never returned. The plane he was flying in was intercepted over the sea by two Spitfire fighters, mistakenly fired upon and shot down. Vlado Četković was killed... It was said to be a tragic accident, just like the death of Lola Ribar. Upon hearing about Četković’s

fate, our Kuštirinović smirked maliciously and muttered, “He got what was coming to him!” After that, he became even stricter and more cautious, refusing to entertain any initiative. The entire corps fell silent, as if frightened by Četković’s tragic death.

Meanwhile, German troops were advancing past us northward at an accelerated pace.

Another week passed, filled with impatient anticipation of the order to march. To our great joy, Perućica returned — just in time. There was a sense in the air, an almost tangible premonition of major events approaching.

One night, as we sat by the radio at midnight, we heard an order from Comrade Stalin. The Soviet Army had crushed a powerful enemy grouping in the Kishinev-Iasi region, completing its strike by encircling twenty-two German divisions — not counting the Romanian ones. Moldavia had been liberated. Germany’s allies, Romania and Bulgaria, had been knocked out of the war, and both had declared war on Germany. “The opportunity has now opened to extend a hand of assistance to our ally, Yugoslavia...”

Among the names of unit commanders who participated in the Iasi-Kishinev operation, I heard the name of my rifle division’s commander. It sent a thrill through me. The division, with which I had marched from the Caucasus to the Dnieper, was now part of the Third Ukrainian Front. It was coming here! Soon, I would reunite with my comrades from the regiment, with the fighters of my company!

In the morning, a rally was held. Katnić was the most energetic of all. Having remained in the battalion in his previous position, he now displayed boundless activity. Almost daily, he held political discussions, passionately and verbosely proclaiming his love and loyalty to the Soviet Union, praising the Red Army. He insisted that Yugoslavia would follow the

path to socialism even faster than the Soviet Union had. “For example, our collective farms will emerge more quickly,” he said. “After all, we already have traditional family *zadruga** — each one is practically a ready-made collective farm.” He helped Ružica prepare the wall newspaper and suggested that Maček organize a study group on the history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks). In short, he did everything possible to restore his shaky reputation. And today, he was the one who gathered the fighters and delivered a speech...

Then we sang: “Oh, Russia, dear mother!” — standing on the rocky ledge of a mountain, in the shade of beech trees whose thick crowns unfurled like flags, nearly parallel to the ground. We sang in unison, looking toward the road that wound like a white ribbon, stretching eastward...

An unprecedented surge of fighting spirit swept through our brigade. The Red Army was extending a brotherly hand to Yugoslavia! Nothing could hold the men back anymore. Without waiting for any orders from the corps, without any response to the directive of the Supreme Headquarters, Perućica took the initiative and led us into Serbia. We reached a narrow mountain gorge through which the Ibar River rushed in a wild torrent. German troops were moving from southern Serbia along the Ibar toward Kragujevac and Belgrade. The idea of halting an enemy unit, preventing it from advancing north and east, and crushing it was immediately embraced by all the partisans.

The main forces of the brigade took up strong positions near Kavlin, where the highway on the left bank of the river and the railway on the right sharply turned east, skirting a mountain ridge. The Second Battalion concealed itself on this ridge. Further north, near the highway, two companies

* Rural communes (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

of the Third Battalion lay in wait, reinforced with mortars and anti-tank rifles. Their task was to prevent the enemy from advancing from Kraljevo toward Raška and to engage their vanguard.

The overcast weather worked in our favour. We were spared the threat of bombings and aerial reconnaissance. The Germans advanced in denser formations than usual, confident that they would pass through the Ibar Gorge as smoothly as other German units had before them — those who had rushed north, desperate to escape the Balkan trap.

At dawn, the German reconnaissance units and then their vanguard passed by us unnoticed. Forty-five minutes later, we heard the crack of anti-tank rifles. Two of our companies had blocked the highway with destroyed vehicles and engaged the enemy's forward units. At that moment, the main column of the German division was approaching Žutica station. As soon as it halted, Perućica, from his command post, gave the signal to open fire. The Second Battalion, nearly impervious to enemy fire, unleashed a point-blank barrage from the heights of the ridge, striking down enemy infantry.

Panic erupted among the Germans. Dropping their weapons, they scattered in all directions. Officers shot at their own soldiers, trying to restore order. Then Perućica gave a new signal, and from the high ground, the Fourth Battalion and our own Šumadijan Battalion charged into the attack...

It had been a long time since we fought like this. The sense of danger, fear, even caution — all vanished. Only the raw feeling of movement, struggle and absolute confidence in victory remained. I knew that every fighter in my company, after hearing my words before the attack — “Strike fast, strike suddenly. Smash, press, overthrow, strike, pursue, do not let them recover!” — words of Suvorov himself — repeated them in their minds as they saw the stunned, retreating, leaderless

fascists before them. Just as they had marched in tight formation, they fell just as densely, like grass under a scythe, along the banks of the Ibar. Many, in desperate clusters, plunged into the river and drowned. Only the tail end of the column managed to escape destruction, turning toward Novi Pazar and Prijepolje in time. We captured the entire supply convoy, a vast amount of weapons and many prisoners. Overnight, we became twice as strong.

After all this, the fighters of the brigade pressed forward with even greater enthusiasm, heading east toward the border, just as Arso Jovanović had directed in his orders.

Zlatar was now behind us, lost among the chaotic mass of mountains. We were surrounded by the rolling hills of Šumadija, with their smooth, rounded contours. Beyond them, in the distance, lay Bulgaria.

Like golden rings, the quiet, sunlit days of September rolled by — slightly cool in the evenings. Days of bright, rich colours, filled with the sweet scents of ripened fruit. Everything called for peace! It seemed as if even nature itself held an indescribably joyful premonition of the coming peacetime.

Soon, very soon, I will return home, I dreamed — to my Kursk region. I must go there first and foremost! Were my father and mother well? And how was everything now in Lgov? Was that old park still there — the one where, as a schoolboy, I used to wander, imagining myself as a discoverer of new lands? The ashes, poplars and oaks intertwined their crowns into a lush canopy above the low but resilient Siberian maple. At the end of the alley, the view opened onto a vast, floodplain meadow, tinged with a bluish haze. The gentle waters of the Seym meandered through it, reflecting the willow and alder thickets, as well as the steep cliffs with overhanging oaks.

*“Broad Seym — my native river,
Amid the wild beauty of the steppes,
You rush along, your waves in play,
Towards the distant depths of the seas.
There, beneath the clear azure sky,
You, mighty Seym, my homeland’s pride,
Will tell a foreign land afar
Of the glory of our motherland.”*

Ah, how I longed to see it all again! To gaze upon the moss-covered watermill by the stream, where even now, surely as in the past, it must still be clanking away — sighing, as if from weariness — its broad wheel churning the water, casting its great shadow over the alder grove through the long nights. Where was my childhood friend Kuzma, nicknamed Baryshok, the threshing machine operator? He could thresh three railcars of grain a day, and how cheerful he was at the collective farm’s threshing floor! His voice never ceased among the lively chimes of girls’ laughter. And the golden grain poured and poured from the thresher’s chute into the sacks — barely enough time to keep up! To see my school again, where I studied — the classrooms that amazed me with their sunlit spaciousness, and my desk by the window. Perhaps the carvings I once etched into it with my penknife were still there. To see again that unforgettable world of my childhood — and then, to Moscow, back to my academy, back to my student bench!

Now, after having been abroad, where so many people live such different, closed-off lives — with their own customs, aspirations and dreams — I feel completely, completely different about everything that is mine. Of course, our homeland is vast, and it is beautiful everywhere. My life belongs to it, wherever I may be. But still, the strongest pull is to the place where I was born and raised — to where people will

call me by my childhood nickname, unknown to anyone else anywhere in the world...

My dear, beloved land! My homeland! Fighting for you in distant Yugoslavia, I am giving only the smallest part of what I owe you — what I am indebted to you for during this year of our forced separation!

...The sunlight, the sound of the forests through which we marched — sometimes roaring in gusts, sometimes flowing steadily, gentle and tender — the singing and chirping of birds, the warm scents of the valleys and the crisp, snowy freshness of the distant peaks, the aroma of wildflowers and the pure, light mountain air — all of it filled me, creating a sense of health and youth, stirring dreams of a bright future...

14

...Our march eastward came to an unexpected halt. A rumour spread that Corps Commander Popović had returned from the island of Vis, where he had met with Tito, and was now catching up with the brigades moving to meet the Red Army. Allegedly, he had been appointed the chief of Serbia’s main headquarters.

We were ordered to wait for him.

During the march, Major Perućica often visited us, and we had long conversations. He asked me about Moscow, about the Frunze Military Academy, where he dreamed of studying after the war.

We recalled history: how the regiments of the South Slavs — Bulgarian, Dalmatian, Macedonian — had fought heroically and in unity with the Russian army in wars against their common enemy, the Ottoman Empire. How Don Cossack detachments and Serbian hussars rode stirrup to stirrup into the conquered Berlin of King Frederick. How Dalmatian sail-

ors, who had a particular fondness for serving in the Russian fleet, were present in large numbers in Admiral Senyavin's squadron when it operated in the Adriatic Sea against the French. How many times Russian soldiers had crossed the Danube to aid their Slavic brothers in times of hardship. It had long been the way of things: if a Yugoslav saw Russians, hope awoke within him...

We spoke of both the present and the future, which we imagined in the most hopeful light.

Now, Perućica had returned to us once more. He called Jankov and me aside. The three of us sat not far from the partisan shelters hidden in the forest on the mountainside.

The sun was scorching, and only the yellowing leaves on the trees hinted that true autumn was near. Below, in the valley, the South Morava River shimmered like a silver ribbon. A dusty haze hung over the road along its banks — it was the Germans on the move.

The major, this time, was troubled and stern. He explained the situation in detail, as he had been to the corps headquarters and had learned much.

Yes, he confirmed, Popović was indeed aiming for a high leadership position. In his place, Peko Dapčević had been appointed as our new corps commander — though he was just as unsuccessful in leading battles and operations as Popović, his friend. There was some reshuffling of military leaders, but things were not improving. On the contrary, they were coming to a standstill. One would think there was nothing left to wish for — the Red Army was approaching, and our forces in Serbia were growing rapidly as a result. Two new Serbian divisions had already been formed from the Kumanovo, South Morava, Toplica and other partisan detachments. Our brigade had taken control of the Veliki Jastrebac area. The rest of the corps was catching up. Morale among the fight-

ers was sky-high! And yet — complications. The Second and Fifth Divisions, which had been following us from the west to the east, were unable to cross the Ibar River due to flooding. Snow was melting on the mountain peaks, and the river had swollen, turning into a raging torrent in the Ibar Gorge. The enemy-held bridges had not been captured, and there were no means of crossing. Using this as justification, Popović redirected both divisions northward, launching an offensive toward Čačak and Valjevo. He nearly decided, on his own, to seize Belgrade. But this reckless gamble, as Perućica put it, ended in disaster.

They did manage to reach Valjevo and even caused panic in the enemy's ranks, but naturally, they lacked the necessary equipment and ammunition to carry out a decisive operation. They had to turn back, once again breaking through the enemy's encirclement, once again suffering endless losses... While crossing the Užice-Požega railway line, near the outskirts of his own village, where he hadn't been in three years, another valiant hero of the army, Deputy Commander of the Second Brigade, Lune Milovanović, was killed.

The newly formed 21st and 22nd Serbian Divisions, also sent north by Popović, advanced no further than the Toplica River valley. Their path was blocked by the fascist Bulgarian expeditionary corps. The partisan units began crossing the Western Morava, intending to reach the Southern Morava and link up with us before making one final leap toward the regions of Zaječar and Knjaževac, near the eastern border. But now Koča Popović had assigned a new task to the First Corps: to hold back the advancing German forces retreating from Greece and prevent them from heading north toward Belgrade.

This created a contradiction. On the one hand, according to Arso Jovanović's directive, we needed to break through

to the Yugoslav-Bulgarian border to meet the Red Army and then advance on Belgrade together. On the other hand, our movement eastward was now supposed to be limited to the Southern Morava valley! We were not to let the Germans move north! In other words, we were expected to engage them in a decisive battle even before the Red Army could provide us with direct support. Perućica considered such an order impossible to carry out. He was frank with me and Kića, speaking harshly about Popović, whom he saw as ruthless, vain and an unlucky commander. Did Popović not realize that as the Germans launched their Eighth Offensive in Serbia, they were concentrating massive forces here, in eastern Serbia? It was clear they aimed to crush the partisans first, freeing themselves to face the Russians. From Kragujevac and Čuprija, Nedić's regiments and the German Seventh SS Division were advancing toward Montenegro, pushing against the 12th Vojvodina Corps. From the south, the retreating "Prince Eugene" German divisions and the First Alpine Division were approaching from Greece. To the west, at the highest peaks of Kopaonik, on Suvo Rudište and Pijni Preslo, fierce battles were raging against the Chetnik corps, which Draža Mihailović had gathered from all over Serbia and sent to aid the Germans. All these forces were determined to prevent the unification of the partisan units moving in from Bosnia with those already positioned in Serbia. The 29th Division from the Second Montenegrin Corps reportedly could no longer advance in this direction, as Peko Dapčević had halted its movement near Novi Pazar. Meanwhile, the two new Serbian divisions had engaged the enemy west of Leskovac. In short, the enemy was closing in from all sides.

Perućica said he foresaw a disaster if we passively sat here waiting for the enemy.

"What can we do to avoid this disaster?" Kića asked.

Perućica shrugged, unable to answer. He lay stretched out on the ground, burying his face in the coarse grass. I lay down beside him, trying to think of something — anything — to suggest.

Suddenly, he lifted his head slightly, staring curiously at a fuzzy bumblebee with an orange belly and tiny blue bead-like eyes, stubbornly climbing up a stalk of couch grass. It clung to the flat leaves with its legs, struggling upward. Halfway up, it fell — probably not for the first time — but immediately began its ascent again, gradually bending the stalk under its weight, relentlessly striving for the top. Finally, it grasped the seed head tightly and pressed it to the ground.

The major smiled.

"Persistent!" I said. "He got what he wanted in the end."

Just then, someone called out to Perućica.

"Comrade Major!"

We turned around.

The patrol was leading a man toward us — he wore brown riding breeches and a white fur vest, had short black hair and wore glasses.

"*Da živeo sloboda!*"* he greeted Perućica. "Are you the commander of this partisan unit? Allow me to introduce myself," he said, mixing Serbian and Bulgarian words. "Captain Bote Atanasov, courier for the commander of the First Bulgarian Army in the Kriva Palanka sector."

The revelation was so unexpected that Perućica took a step back.

"The Bulgarian army?" he repeated in surprise.

"Yes. Haven't you heard that our leader, Georgi Dimitrov, called us to fight against the occupiers and the Bulgarian fascists as early as the summer of 1941? Haven't you heard how our partisan units tied down 20,000 Germans and police

* Long live freedom! (Serbo-Croatian in the original).

forces in Sredna Gora?”

“No, we weren’t aware of the scale of your struggle,” Jankov admitted.

“Well, this is something!” Atanasov was surprised in turn. “So, they kept our struggle hidden from you? It’s very unfortunate that our efforts were so isolated. But now, comrades, all of that is behind us. From now on, Russians, Yugoslavs and Bulgarians are united forever! Under one banner bearing the sacred motto: ‘Death to fascism! Slavic unity! Truth and freedom for the people!’” Atanasov declared solemnly.

“A year ago,” he continued, settling down beside us, “our battalion, named after Hristo Botev, was fighting in the areas of Leskovac and Crna Trava for the liberation of Yugoslav Macedonia. And now, we are an entire army — a great people’s army. Together with you, we want to fight side by side to completely drive the German invaders from the Balkans. *Da živeo sloboda!*” he finished passionately.

The patrolmen remained nearby, watching the Bulgarian with eager interest.

“See how a friend has come to us.”

“And rightfully so!”

“A rope is strong when it’s tightly wound, and a man is strong with the help of others.”

“Now we are a force to be reckoned with!”

Atanasov fell silent, listening to the soldiers’ words. His eyes shone even brighter.

“Our hopes will come true,” he said emotionally. “The Russians bring us happiness and unity.”

“How far are they?” Perućica shifted the conversation. “You are closer to them — have you seen them?”

“I haven’t seen the Soviet troops myself,” the captain replied, “but we are already in contact with them.”

He showed us a letter from the commander of the Bulgarian

ian army, addressed to the commander of the Yugoslav forces in Serbia, requesting operational cooperation. According to Atanasov, the Soviet command, anticipating the German retreat from the southern Balkans, had given the Bulgarian People’s Army the task: “With a rapid advance through the Morava Valley, cut off the Germans’ retreat to the north and northwest.”

The letter stated: “After a long struggle, the Bulgarian people have succeeded in removing those who, by all means and methods, sought to divide the brotherly Slavic nations.”

“September 9* changed everything for us,” Atanasov added.

“Well, this is excellent news. Let’s go quickly to the corps commander,” Perućica urged. “He probably has instructions on this matter. We can’t decide this without him. This, by the way,” he turned to me and Jankov, “is exactly what needs to be done to avoid disaster — unite with the Bulgarian People’s Army and act together until the Red Army arrives.”

“That’s the right thing to do!” Kića exclaimed joyfully. “Of course, that’s how it will be!”

But alas, our expectations were not fulfilled. When, a few days later, we saw the Bulgarian captain again, we were struck by his gloomy expression. He was returning from the corps headquarters in a state of deep disappointment.

“What happened?” Kića asked him.

“I don’t know. I don’t understand anything!” Atanasov spread his hands in frustration. “It turns out that some of your people look down on us — Bulgarian partisans, our Communist Party and our people. They don’t trust us, they insult us. It’s very hurtful... I’m an old Spartacist, a Komsomol member since ‘29 and later a Party member. I deserted

* The day of the nationwide anti-fascist uprising in Bulgaria in 1944, which led to the overthrow of the fascist government.

to Yugoslavia from the expeditionary corps stationed in Proklje. I fought in Dencho Gyurov's partisan unit..."

"What's going on? Speak, comrade!" Jankov pressed him.

Atanasov couldn't hold back any longer and handed him Popović's response:

"To the Commander of the Bulgarian Army in the Kriva Palanka sector.

"Based on directives received from the Supreme Command, I order the immediate withdrawal of all Bulgarian units. Use the main lines of communication for the retreat, staying no more than two kilometres away from them. No further crossing of the border is to be made without our knowledge. You must obtain prior authorization from Marshal Tito before deploying your army into Yugoslavia. Any unauthorized movement onto Yugoslav territory without prior approval from Marshal Tito will be considered a hostile act. During the retreat, do not halt overnight near populated areas — otherwise, Yugoslav machine guns will open fire.

*"Commander of the Serbian Forces,
Lieutenant-General Koča Popović."*

"Well then," Jankov muttered after exchanging glances with me. "There's your answer."

Atanasov left disappointed — this was not the response he had hoped for. But at least he was relieved to see that ordinary Yugoslav soldiers and commanders treated the Bulgarian people differently than Popović did.

On his next visit, Perućica met with Jankov alone in the forest. I approached them, and the major greeted me warmly:

"Sit down, brother."

"Are we moving soon?" I asked, noticing Kića tracing something on a map.

"Not sure. Just in case, we're planning a route — to the border!"

"Why did the command reject Bulgarian support?"

A deep look of dissatisfaction flashed across Perućica's gaunt face.

With a sigh, he said, "When upstarts and braggarts — poets who dream of millions — imagine themselves as great generals, what else can you expect?"

By now, Perućica's sharp words no longer surprised me.

"They'd make even a man's two eyes turn against each other if they could," Jankov added grimly.

Perućica cast a worried glance down into the valley.

The Germans, like scurrying beetles, were gathering strength. With each passing day, their numbers grew.

"The situation is getting worse. Yes, it's hard to serve under commanders like Popović."

Perućica spoke even more openly about Koča Popović the next day when we received shocking news: our commander, along with the American MacCarver, had unexpectedly flown to the island of Vis at Tito's request — to receive an award. Meanwhile, his chief of staff had fallen ill. Peko Dapčević had yet to arrive. We were now under the command of the corps' deputy chief of staff, Major Đurić — the same man who had recently defected from Mihailović. In reality, our units were left leaderless. Popović's departure, under these conditions — on the eve of a major battle that he himself had set in motion — felt like desertion. And the way he left the units without any operational orders resembled betrayal. Perućica, though indirectly, made this quite clear:

"An intellectual! He holds nothing dear. To make himself out to be a genius, he wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice an entire

corps. Well then,” Perućica turned to Jankov, “we’ll manage without him somehow. Persistence and an unbroken drive toward our main goal — that’s what we need now. We must push eastward — that’s our salvation. We’ll carry out Arso’s directive.”

But by morning, the Germans launched their offensive from both sides. The Fifth Division, under artillery fire, deployed its front to the north and northwest, while the Second Division turned its front to the south and southwest. Our brigade secured the flanks of both divisions from the east and southeast. The battle erupted in the narrow strip of land along the South Morava River.

Taking cover in hastily dug trenches, we waited for the artillery barrage and bombing to end. Breathing was difficult. The stench of gunpowder, the thick choking smoke, burned our eyes. Faces, blackened with soot and streaked with grimy sweat, all looked the same. Only by the defiant gleam in his eyes and his restless movements did I recognize Vasko. He was always by my side.

The thunder of explosions and the brain-piercing whine of shrapnel finally began to subside. The German infantry advanced on us. We held our fire, letting them come closer, and then, at my command, the company opened fire.

Mounds of corpses rose before us. Driven mad with rage, the nazis darted across the field, some dropping and feigning death, others crawling backward. And then, in that unmistakable, instinctively felt moment, we launched a bayonet charge. One of the first to leap up was Đuro Filipović, tall and blackened with dirt, a flag in his hands and without a word, everyone surged forward behind him.

Obedying the strict order to hold the territory at all costs, scattered partisan units and groups fought steadfastly, displaying incredible heroism. But the enemy’s firepower was

overwhelming. The battlefield was filled with cries and wails of the wounded, the mangled and those drowning in the river. A thick shroud of smoke, ash and dust blanketed the battlefield. Pierced by the sun’s rays, it hovered over the river like a menacing, blood-red haze.

By the end of the day, an order came from somewhere to break through eastward. It seemed to have been issued by Perućica. Holding back the enemy’s advance, our brigade forced its way to Mount Odern. The remnants of the Second and Fifth Divisions retreated in separate groups — some following us, others fleeing into the Juhor Mountains.

We suffered heavy losses in this battle. Ružica Brković was killed. Thinking of her with sorrow, I couldn’t help but recall Jovan’s words when he had paused at the grave of two fallen comrades, speaking about how difficult it would be “without their spirit, their wisdom, their laughter and their faith.” Yes, he was right. The bravest and most honest are the ones who leave us first. The people will struggle without them. The battalion already feels the loss of Vučetin. And Ružica’s absence will be even harder for her friend Ajša. And for Miletić too. Only now did I realize how much he had loved her — hiding it from everyone, perhaps even from himself.

He found Ružica already lifeless on a sloping sandbar of the South Morava, lying beside another fallen soldier, whom she had likely tried to bandage with her weakening hands. Her head rested near the water’s edge. The foamy crest of a wave gently combed through her long chestnut hair. A stubborn, diagonal crease had settled on her forehead, as if she had been deep in thought, and her eyes remained wide open, faintly reflecting the glow of the setting sun.

Jovan bent over her, gazing into her eyes for a long, long time. Perhaps he couldn’t believe that their deep, hidden brilliance — so thrilling and joyful to his heart — would never

shine again; that she would never again speak the words he had so desperately longed to hear from her on the day of victory. He kissed her cold, wet forehead and, swallowing his tears, whispered:

“Farewell, my love...”

A gusty wind, the wind of the Morava wetlands, gently rustled through the bushy crown of a poplar tree, tenderly caressing its velvety leaves. Slowly swirling and turning over, they fell to the shore, releasing a delicate scent of early autumn freshness...

15

The C-47 aircraft, carrying Popović and MacCarver, was heading west.

The American stared intently as bright river bends glided beneath them, moonlit reflections shimmered on snowy peaks and mountain chains with sharply defined ridges stretched into the distance.

There was Durmitor, gleaming with its white cap, and there, like a thin mica thread, wound the Neretva, squeezed between gorges. That was Konjic... Familiar places! The Dalmatian coastline... Magnificent, with its spacious bays and inlets. A land blessed in every sense!

The plane began its descent. There it was — the blue sea! Blushing under the first rays of the sun, lacquered bodies of dolphins sparkled in the waves. Ahead lay the long island of Hvar... And on either side — Brac and Korčula. Like three unsinkable aircraft carriers, lined up in formation, their sharp bows pointed eastward. Strategically excellent locations!

Suddenly, British fighter planes appeared in the air.

MacCarver felt a chill in his chest. Damn it! What if they were “mistakenly” intercepted the way Colonel Četković had

been? These hounds knew how to remove obstacles from their path. Could he, MacCarver, be next?

But no, they were safe. The Spitfires dipped their wings in greeting and sped past.

A small, rounded island — like a walnut — came into view. Vis. From above, it looked like a military camp. Anti-aircraft and field artillery barrels protruded from rocky heights, machine-gun nests dotted the terrain. Military depots, enclosed with barbed wire, were scattered among vineyards and on rocky hills beyond the villages. Transport ships stood at the pier in Komiza, with two destroyers anchored offshore. Army trucks and jeeps darted along the narrow roads.

MacCarver felt relieved. A sigh of relief escaped from Popović as well.

The plane landed on the airstrip in the valley at the island’s centre. The place was packed with Spitfires and Halifaxes.

MacCarver was surprised that no one had come to meet them, even though a radio message about their departure had been sent to the Supreme Command.

They had to beg for a jeep from the pilots. Finally, they reached the caves in the mountains near the town of Vis, specially equipped for Tito and his staff.

“Well, here we are — home,” MacCarver said.

Lieutenant-General Popović smiled uncertainly.

“Yes, it seems so. *Tout est bien qui finit bien.*”*

But something felt off. The usual headquarters atmosphere was missing. Normally, patrols walked cautiously, weapons at the ready; there were no loud voices, no songs. But now, the headquarters guards bustled about, talking loudly and cheerfully, even singing. They were packing up and hauling equipment, headquarters property and archives. Arso Jovan-

* All is well that ends well (French in the original).

ović was energetically overseeing preparations for departure.

Popović approached the chief of staff to report in. MacCarver, sensing something was wrong, hurried to the bay, to Huntington's villa. But the chief wasn't home. The staff informed him that he had gone swimming at the pier with Ranković.

MacCarver stepped into the quarters of the British mission members. Not a soul in sight! Only on a side veranda, open to the air, lay Captain Budgie Pinch in a deck chair, Colonel Lawrence's memoirs resting on his lap. Tall and lanky, dressed in a striped bathing suit and an enormous straw hat, he resembled a broken mushroom with an umbrella-like cap. In his hand, he held an exotic bright pink flower on a brown stem — "a sea rose."

A lover of Adriatic flora and a platonic seeker of adventure, he lazily lifted his head and greeted MacCarver. His pale, flat-cheeked face, with dark circles under his eyes, bore clear signs of a sleepless night. It was obvious at first glance that the Englishman was in a foul mood.

"Our Russian allies, sir, are advancing far too quickly," said MacCarver, certain that this was the reason for Pinch's dejected state.

Unexpectedly, Pinch displayed an uncharacteristic burst of emotion.

"Damn them all!" he exclaimed, jumping up from the deck chair. "Damn our Balkan aviation, damn that dawdler Wilson and damn that scoundrel Tito!"

MacCarver was taken aback.

"What's the matter, sir? What happened?"

"What happened, sir? What?" Pinch stormed across the veranda in a fury. "Tito has fled! Vanished without a trace from the island. There's a telegram from Churchill — he's outraged! An unbelievable scandal! To slip away without tell-

ing us a thing. A disgrace to our mission! To betray us all like this — typical sergeant-major arrogance!"

Pinch snatched a piece of paper from the table.

"Here, take a look! Wilson orders Maclean to find Tito immediately. But Maclean is out there on the mainland, planning further operations under the 'Ratweek' plan! So now I'm supposed to go chasing after the runaway marshal myself?"

"Hold on a moment, sir," MacCarver interrupted the enraged Pinch. "How could the commander-in-chief disappear? I don't understand. Explain properly."

Pinch collapsed back into his chair in exhaustion.

"This is all so dreadful!" he whined. "I went to see Tito yesterday with a message from Wilson, and he wasn't in his cave. Without the Marshal, there's no one in headquarters to conduct business with. No one to give a proper answer. That Jovanović... Impossible to deal with! And it's not just him — even the junior officers push back against some of our proposals. All mutual understanding has broken down."

"What about Tito's ministers, his aides?"

"They say the Marshal is ill, or busy, or out for a walk. Lies!"

"I see... But perhaps Tito left for the mainland to personally oversee the battle for Belgrade?"

"Yes! But how dare he leave without our knowledge? This secret escape — yes, an escape, I repeat — is nothing short of an insult to us. Tito has undermined both our authority and his own. And at such a decisive moment, when the situation demands the closest cooperation between us..."

MacCarver left Pinch deeply unsettled. As he made his way toward the shore, he was caught up by a hunched little man, almost a dwarf, with long hair and a hooked nose. He was wearing only swim trunks and red bathing shoes, with a shaggy towel slung over his shoulder.

“Mr. MacCarver!” the man called out.

“Ah, Moša Pijade! *Zdravo!*” MacCarver greeted him cheerfully.

“At your service, always.”

MacCarver gave him a probing look.

“How’s the mood?” he asked meaningfully.

Pijade smirked.

“Steady.”

“In all this chaos? And where are you off to? Bari? Rome, perhaps?”

“Oh, no, sir! We’re moving to the mainland.”

“The mainland?” MacCarver cast a sidelong glance at the short man scurrying beside him. “That’s quite a bold move. You do realize the Germans are concentrating their forces there? Heavy fighting is likely.”

“So what? We have 300,000 fighters in our army now!” Pijade boasted. “Besides, external circumstances are turning in our favour.” He tossed his shaggy towel into the air and caught it mid-flight. “The Soviet troops are already near the Yugoslav border. Soon, we’ll be in Belgrade! That’s how it is, my dear sir! You, unfortunately, are too late,” sighed the little man. “The Russians have arrived in the Balkans first. I always predicted this.”

“And what does Tito think about all this?” MacCarver asked quickly.

“Tito?” Pijade shrugged his narrow shoulders. “I think he’s enthusiastic as well!”

“He hasn’t been seen. Is he ill?”

“Yes. Something like a sore throat...”

“In this heat? And is it serious?” MacCarver pressed on.

“The Marshal is feeling better,” Pijade replied. “Only struggling with insomnia. The doctor allowed him to read.”

“What? Your translation of *Capital*, I suppose?”

“No, that would be too difficult for him right now. He’s reading that novel — you remember — the one you gave me to translate, *The Superman*.”

The American smiled.

“And what does the Marshal think of it?”

“It’s quite something!” Pijade exclaimed.

“Let’s sit,” MacCarver said, leading Pijade to the edge of the steep shore.

Below them, waves foamed and crashed against the rocks.

Pijade sat down on a sun-heated flat stone, stretching out his bony legs toward the sea spray.

“And what is the Marshal planning to do?” MacCarver continued his probing. “Today, for example?”

“Today, he’s receiving me,” Pijade answered importantly. “I’ll be reporting to him on my work. By the way, are you interested in my new socialist theory?”

“Of course! I’ve heard about it. As a democrat, I’m always interested in fresh perspectives in this field.”

MacCarver stretched out on the sand. He was determined to extract Tito’s whereabouts from Pijade.

“I’ll be brief. Straight to the essence... Even while in prison,” Pijade began, blissfully closing his eyes, like a capercaillie enchanted by its own song, “I came to the conclusion that our national bourgeoisie can peacefully integrate into socialism. In other words, I advocate for a supra-class unity of our peoples in the name of the nation’s higher interests. With my theory, I aim — within my abilities — to somewhat broaden and deepen Marxism in accordance with our conditions. I want, to some extent, to ease the tension between classes and, in doing so, push Marxism forward. Forward on the path of national socialism!”

The American barely listened to this tirade — he was thinking about something else — but he caught onto the last

phrase.

“Doesn’t it bother you,” he said, “that the fascists also call themselves national socialists?”

“The same barrels can hold different wines,” Pijade replied and fell silent, allowing his companion to appreciate the imagery of his expression.

“And what else is new here on the island?” MacCarver asked thoughtfully, trying to steer the conversation in another direction.

“Oh, plenty of news! Just recently, under my chairmanship, the presidium of the Anti-Fascist Council for National Liberation held a session. We decided to begin awarding decorations.”

“That’s interesting.”

“We’ve already introduced our own orders — the Partisan Star of three degrees, the Order and Medal for Bravery, the Order of National Liberation, the Order of Brotherhood and Unity and our highest distinction — the Order of the National Hero.”

“Who is receiving the awards?”

“First, Koča Popović, Peko Dapčević, Mihailo Apostolski, Kosta Nađ, Vukmanović-Tempo, Ivan Gošnjak, Danilo Lekić.”

“Ah, a cohort of heroes!”

“Everyone has been decorated. Even the members of your mission. You personally, it seems, are receiving the Order of Brotherhood and Unity.”

“Is that so?” MacCarver nodded with satisfaction. “Well, we have all worked hard. When will Tito present me with the award? Today?”

“Not necessarily Tito himself,” Pijade answered evasively.

MacCarver jumped up. His patience had run out. He grabbed the dwarf by the shoulders and shoved him toward

the very edge of the cliff. Pijade turned pale — sharp rocks jutted below, with waves crashing against them.

“Get to the point, Moša! Answer me — where is Tito? Or you might just take a tumble off this cliff!”

“Just between us,” Pijade croaked, realizing this was no joke. “It’s a secret. I beg you...”

“Well?”

“He’s over there,” Pijade vaguely gestured.

“Where?” MacCarver shook him.

Pijade cast a desperate glance downward.

“In Romania.”

MacCarver let go of him.

“With the Russians?”

“Yes, yes, somewhere there... I beg you, don’t tell anyone. I have always...”

MacCarver didn’t wait to hear the rest. He was already striding hurriedly toward the Komiža pier, where music was playing.

16

On the veranda of a restaurant, under a canopy, an English band played with enthusiasm. At the tables sat young Tommy commandos in green berets and khaki uniforms. Everything about them suggested they did not share Badgie Pinch’s panic.

“Rear-line braggarts!” MacCarver thought as he passed by them in his dusty clothes and worn-out boots. “Do they really not suspect that their time at this resort is running out?”

MacCarver scanned the beach, with its canvas umbrellas, and quickly made his way to a secluded corner where sentries stood. There, he spotted the tall figure of Huntington alongside the burly Ranković.

Milovan Đilas approached them, carrying fishing gear, and led Ranković toward the bay, where stargazers — greyish-brown fish with white spots — were found. Meanwhile, Huntington lay down in the shade of a tamarisk by the rocks.

Taking advantage of the fact that his boss was alone, MacCarver sat down beside him.

“Oh, it’s you, Sherry?” the colonel said, as if MacCarver had just returned from the restaurant where they had last seen each other, rather than flying in from the front lines. “We were just debating with Marko about ways to delay the inevitable fate of dying from old age. Tito is concerned with maintaining his elegant figure. He fears getting fat. He wants to stay young forever, to prolong his life. Incidentally, that’s something we are also quite interested in.”

“And which method did you settle on?” MacCarver asked sarcastically.

“I favour the Egyptian method of rejuvenation: frequent vomiting and sweating. Tito prefers the recipe of Louis XIII: laxatives, bloodletting and enemas. Of course, there’s also the method of Henry Bourbon and the Duke of Alba — bathing in human blood... But Ranković firmly rejects that one.”

“Excuse me, boss,” MacCarver interrupted impatiently, “but this doesn’t seem like the most pressing issue right now. You are, of course, aware of what’s happening on the mainland?”

“Aware?” Huntington smirked. “I know very well that the Germans intend to hold onto their strongholds in the Balkans tightly. Besides, they have already prepared defensive lines along the Narew and Vistula Rivers and in the mountain heights of the western Carpathians. And let’s not forget the Siegfried Line. There’s still a lot of fighting ahead...”

“Yes, Colonel. But things are not going at all as Hitler expects or as we anticipated. These damned Russians have

learned to turn even seemingly unfavourable factors to their advantage. I just flew in from eastern Serbia. The Germans are failing to hold back the advance of the Third Ukrainian Front. If this continues much longer, we could lose the Balkans,” MacCarver concluded bluntly.

Huntington remained silent for a moment, stroking his hairy chest with his palm.

“Sherry,” he finally said. “Do you remember our conversation in Drvar? Do you remember how you had Tito by the gills back then?”

“Oh, I had him so tight he didn’t even squeak.”

“Well, Sherry, we have a chance to hold onto the Balkans, provided we keep everything we know about Tito strictly confidential; if we continue, for the time being, to refrain from any open actions that could be seen as interference in the internal affairs of the Balkan states; if we succeed in further inflating Tito’s status as a communist leader and the head of the national liberation movement in the Balkans; and if, finally, he himself remains cautious... We may need to systematically accuse him in the press and on the radio of being too oriented towards the Soviet Union, of pushing his policies too far to the left and of failing to uphold his gentleman’s agreements with the Allies. Perhaps, at the outset, he will actually have to make his policies so radical that even the Soviet Union will have to rein him in. Let him, for example, execute a few shopkeepers, seize a couple of factories from their owners and forcibly drive peasants into these so-called *zadruge*...”

MacCarver listened attentively, agreeing with Huntington while impatiently waiting for his boss to finally address Tito’s mysterious disappearance. But Huntington seemed to be deliberately avoiding the topic, and the lieutenant colonel couldn’t hold back any longer:

“Yes, but can we really rely on Tito? This sudden, inexplic-

able departure of his... You know as well as I do that Tito has already served four states: Austria-Hungary, Soviet Russia, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and Germany — and he was never truly loyal to any of them. Are you sure he will serve us reliably? He's a traitor!" MacCarver lowered his voice, though he saw no trace of concern on Huntington's face. "According to my sources, he has now fled to Romania, to areas already occupied by the Red Army."

"According to your sources?" Huntington laughed. "You're an excellent intelligence officer! Well then! He made the right move — before it was too late."

"So that's how it is!" MacCarver was beginning to suspect that Tito's disappearance had not happened without Huntington's involvement.

"But how is he going to look the Russians in the eye now?" he asked in confusion.

"Look them in the eye? With his innocent, blue ones — the same shade as the stone in the ring you gave him," Huntington replied. "You see, Sherry, Tito has fully grasped an important concept: treason, as an idea, only exists for naive fools. For people like him, there is only a synonym for it: flexible, elastic and... profitable politics. The only question is the price. He has already served multiple states? All the better. He loves gold, he loves power and he openly pursues them. Well, we will satisfy him." Huntington leaned in slightly, lowering his voice: "The truth is, Sherry, we really don't have much to worry about. The current Communist Party of Yugoslavia has enough cracks in it, through which, even without Tito, our people have already slipped in. Our Balkan reserves."

"Excellent!" MacCarver said with restrained admiration. "But speaking of the Balkans and Central Europe, are there similar people in Bulgaria and Hungary?"

Huntington forcefully tossed a pebble into the sea. After

listening to the soft splash of water, he abruptly turned to his companion.

"Listen, Sherry! I have no reason to hide from you what I'm about to say." The colonel glanced around. "I've made contact with one of the OSS leaders,* Noel Field. He provided me with some materials on certain Hungarians who, much like some Yugoslavs from your famous list, worked for the French *Deuxième Bureau*** in an internment camp and later returned home with Gestapo assistance. I won't hide from you the name of the man we'll be backing in Hungary. Laszlo Rajk! I have a photocopy of his written pledge to Horthy's police, signed by him back in 1931. When the time comes, and he and his group take leading positions in the Communist Party and government with our support, I'll hand this valuable photocopy over to Ranković and he'll establish contact with him."

MacCarver listened, no longer surprised by anything.

"And in Bulgaria?" he asked.

"Everything's in order there too! Someone recently got out of Pleven Prison and, after September 9, infiltrated the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party... Traicho Kostov — remember that name! These are our Balkan reserves, Sherry. This is the stormtrooper unit we'll deploy when the time is right."

"I understand," MacCarver said quietly. "But isn't there a risk that Tito himself, under public pressure, could go too far in building socialism in Yugoslavia and strengthening ties with the Russians? And then, following our own principle of flexible politics, one day he could just send us to hell?"

"He wouldn't dare. He's stuck like a wasp in honey. He

* Office of Strategic Services — an American intelligence organization in Europe.

** The intelligence division of the French General Staff.

won't take a step without our knowledge. The circle around him is being built carefully. And if he tries to act against our directives, we'll immediately expose him to the public. He fears that more than death. Don't forget certain traits of his character — his ambition to become a Balkan Bonaparte. He's flattered by the fact that he's our most reliable piece on this board. He's the leader and Ranković is the enforcer. These two pillars are what we'll rely on here," Huntington smirked. "And they can't do without our support. Isn't that right, Sherry?"

"No way in hell," MacCarver exclaimed. "The war and the Ratweek plan have sufficiently prepared Yugoslavia for the necessity of asking for help. And we've already made sure that when Tito seeks assistance, he'll come to us, not to the Russians."

"Exactly! Even the Romans understood that the best and safest way to keep control of a conquered country is to ruin and weaken it. By destroying Carthage, they secured it for themselves."

MacCarver rubbed his hands together in delight.

"I can already feel the crisp banknotes between my fingers, Colonel. Yugoslavia is a brilliant deal for us. Every dollar we invest now could later bring us two or three in return."

"You're a petty trader, Sherry!" Huntington grimaced with distaste and plucked pink flowers from a tamarisk branch. "This isn't about what we'll earn from rebuilding Yugoslavia or exploiting its natural resources. That's just spare change in our pockets. The real issue is much greater. The Balkans, with Yugoslavia at the centre, will be our stronghold in the war of the future. It's our gateway to the East, our lever to turn everything upside down and establish our firm order in this part of the world — an order based on the power of our great democratic United States!" Huntington concluded with

conviction.

After a moment, he added fatherly:

"Sherry, it's time for you to stop looking at your mission here like a cattle trader from Kansas. We won't get far on chequebooks alone. In wars, the most important thing isn't gold — it's good armies."

"A rather discouraging thought. The Soviet Union surpasses us in manpower," MacCarver said gloomily, breaking his respectful silence.

"That's true — they surpass us. That's precisely why we are now less concerned with profits — though, judging by the latest reports from Washington, that won't be an issue — than with people who can fight under the command of strategists trained in our school, like Tito."

"As a strategist, Tito is still just in the first grade of our school."

"It's our duty to ensure he graduates successfully."

"But aren't we shoeing a dead horse? Can Tito withstand everything we're piling on him?" MacCarver asked anxiously.

"He'll manage, he'll endure for a while..."

Huntington tore a large shell from the wet rock.

"See this, Sherry? Right now, it's low tide, and the shell is tightly shut. It protects the mollusk inside from drying out and allows it to survive through the tide's retreat. I believe Tito will endure for a while in his shell, just as this mollusk does — he won't suffocate. When the time comes, we will pry these shells open, and they will let in the water that brings food and oxygen for the mollusk — our food, Sherry, our oxygen."

MacCarver stretched out more comfortably on the sand, spreading his arms wide and taking a deep breath of the salty sea air. However, the sharp anxiety didn't leave him, and his relaxed pose didn't match the expression on his face — it was

the look of a man peering into an abyss.

17

...At the head of our Šumadijan battalion, like a glimmer of a distant fire, an old battle flag rippled tautly in the wind in Đuro's hands. We marched behind it with a steady, resolute stride. Along the way, independent partisan detachments joined us.

Near the city of Kruševac, a battalion of Italians also joined us — men who had been separated from the Garibaldi Brigade of partisans. I heard a song:

*"We are Italians,
And we fight for our renewed homeland!
We are proletarians,
And we march bravely toward victory.
Fascism will perish, Italy will rise again!"*

It was the very same song that Enrico Marino and Antonio Colaccione had composed in the wintry forests of Homolje. "Where are they now?" I thought with excitement, as I looked at the dark-haired, sharp-featured men with tanned faces. They were dressed in a mishmash of uniforms — worn-out greatcoats, civilian clothes, ragged green tunics. On their heads were pilot caps with earflaps and Tyrolean hats, and on their backs, massive grey rucksacks. A ragged sight — but a battle-ready one!

"Antonio!" I shouted in sheer joy and ran up to the commander, who was marching beside the column with an effortless stride.

He embraced me tightly.

"So, we meet again, Signor Nikolai! See what kind of

company I have now? Fortuna smiles upon us!" Antonio joked and laughed.

"Where's Marino?"

Colaccione's face darkened.

"He was killed by the Morava River."

"Are you heading east as well?" I asked after a pause.

"Of course! ...Ah, Signor Laušek!" Antonio turned to the approaching Czech. "And you're alive, noble knight!"

"Alive, alive, dear Antonio, and glad for you!"

The friends embraced.

"Do you remember the road we built last autumn?" Laušek asked.

"Of course I do!"

"Well, this is it. We paved it for ourselves, just as I predicted. We'll march along it with the Red Army to Belgrade."

"And then to Italy, right? Great things await us, gentlemen! We'll create a free federation of European republics! We'll fulfil Garibaldi's dream!"

"And the legacy of our Jan Hus!" the Czech added.

I watched them with emotion. How wonderful that people of different nations were marching hand in hand toward a shared, great and beautiful goal. I recalled the words of my comrade, the Party organizer Dzamil: "We must have enough strength for much, for the long road ahead..." Of course, we will, I thought, looking in admiration at the long columns of troops stretching along the road. So many of them! And all moving in the same direction... Even the Chetniks had joined us. Tito had granted them amnesty. All their heinous crimes and betrayals of their homeland were forgiven, and they were allowed to enlist in the National Liberation Army to "atone for their guilt." After their "repentance," they shaved their beards and greasy locks, replaced their royal cockades with red stars and followed in our ranks, clingy and insistent. A

massive, filthy stream had merged into a broad, bright river.

Miletić couldn't bear to look at them with indifference.

"Damn it all!" he grumbled. "Look how they wriggled their way in! Slippery, sneaky! If we don't keep an eye on them, they'll latch onto our cart — and you won't be able to shake them off! Just like Kuštrinović... We better not get stuck with these fellow-travellers. Their numbers are growing, while the good, honest people are getting fewer and fewer," he finished in a barely audible voice.

I understood him. Jovan seemed afraid to utter Ružica's name, even though she was constantly on his mind. The pain of loss was still too raw, and to distract himself, he forced himself to focus on other things. He was outraged by the case of Katnić — a shady turncoat with no respect from the fighters, yet somehow, he had remained with us as a political commissar!

"You see," Jovan said, "how much it matters that he has connections in the Central Committee of the Party. I wouldn't be surprised if Ranković pushes him even higher. These things happen. Take Nađ, for example, commander of the Bosnian Corps. He got almost all his men killed. The partisans called him a traitor. For a time, he was even removed from his position. And now, rumour has it, they're putting him in charge of an army. That's what connections can do! It's a real problem that those at the top don't listen to the masses. That's why we end up with what I've been telling you. Remember? Remarkable people — like Bajo, Vučetin, Kovačević or Četković — are dying by the hundreds because they don't spare themselves in battle. Or rather, because they don't spare them. Meanwhile, men like Kuštrinović survive and worm their way into our ranks, into our Party. And these are the ones we'll have to build the new Yugoslavia with."

Thoughts of the future deeply troubled my blood brother.

And though he firmly believed in an imminent victory, he no longer dreamed, as he once had, of a carefree postwar life by the "blue sea," "far away," where the evergreen maquis rustles and roses bloom three times a year. His songs now sounded different:

*"Tamo daleko, kraj Save i Dunava,
Tamo je grad moj lepi, tamo je moj Beograd."*

*[Far away, by the Sava and the Danube,
There is my beautiful city, there is my Belgrade.]*

After Ružica's death, he decided to return to Belgrade instead of his hometown. Not to work in a bookstore as before or to admire the sunset over the Danube from the Kalemegdan hill, but for serious political work. He understood that the Yugoslav people still had a long struggle ahead for their happiness.

And as if weighing the scale of the great tasks to come, Jovan still cast sombre but increasingly focused glances at the deserted road, at the grey mountains and bald hills where rock choked the greenery, at the tiny fields terraced along the slopes, at the poor cottages nestled among plum orchards.

Only occasionally did we come across a *šumica* — a small grove, a remnant of the once vast pine forests that had given this land its poetic name: Šumadija.

Almost all these groves and small forests were owned by wealthy landowners. They mercilessly destroyed them for immediate needs, without any thought for the future. The forests turned into low thickets sprouting from old stumps, and even those were devoured by goats. It was only fortunate if the mountain slopes were not too steep and the soil was suitable for sowing. But where the thin forest soil of Serbia — so

abundant in this region — became exposed, the rains soon washed away the top layer, leaving behind barren, desolate ridges, where the wind carried clouds of yellow dust. What remained was no longer fertile, abundant land but merely its skeletal remains.

“This land needs to be given back everything people have so recklessly wasted — its true strength and beauty,” said Miletić. “In general, things here are very different from the coastal regions. Even though people there are not much wealthier, they are at least caressed and spoiled by the warm blue sea and the soft, picturesque nature. The cliffs of Dalmatia are draped in ivy and wrapped in the fragrant cloaks of oleander groves, yet beneath their shade, just as much sweat and just as many tears have been shed as here, under the beeches and firs. But all of it together is our one, suffering Yugoslav land, which must finally receive what it has been denied for so long — the happiness of peaceful and harmonious life.”

Even weighed down by grief and doubts, Jovan never stopped dreaming of a better future. He agreed with me that the most important thing was not to stray from the grand and righteous path and not to waste the energy of the people on some steep and treacherous side trail leading to an unclear and dubious goal...

One day, he pointed to a conical mountain peak in the distance, with rocky outcrops resembling shattered teeth.

“That’s Mount Ostrovica, near Gornji Milanovac. See the ruins at the very top? They say there was once a castle there, where Queen Irina lived — a woman both power-hungry and cruel. The people called her the ‘Cursed Queen.’ Even now, she is used to scare children. According to legend, Irina the Cursed was the lover of Aždaja — a dragon much like your Zmey Gorynych. They say they met on those cliffs at sunset on stormy days, sitting there and plotting which new plague

or war to unleash upon mankind.”

Vasko, who was riding nearby and overheard part of the conversation, asked skeptically:

“You’re talking about Aždaja? But does he even exist?”

Aždaja... the very one who covers the clear sky with black storm clouds, kills people with thunder and lightning, grabs those who fall for his cunning words with his long claws and chains them up in a dark, serpentine lair?!

But from Petrović, Vasko had already learned that this terrifying three-headed serpent, along with the *veštica* witches who bring disease and misfortune, and the *vurdalak* ghouls rising from their graves to suck the blood of sleeping people — these monsters, so often told of by old grandmothers, existed only in the dark, superstitious minds of men. There was no need to fear them at all.

“Ridiculous!” Vasko laughed and, without waiting for a response from Miletić, pressed his heels into the sides of the bay horse Vučetin had given him and galloped up the hill.

He raised a hand to his cap and stared into the distance for a long time — were the Soviet soldiers already on their way?

Jovan and I watched Vasko with genuine joy. How could a guy like him ever lose his way?

In Vasko’s satchel, wrapped in a damp cloth, were purple Ramonda flowers with silvery-green rosettes of pressed leaves, which he had gathered on the slopes of Zlatar. These rare semi-tropical flowers in Yugoslavia were meant as a gift for the Russians. Đuro had also prepared a present — a carved pipe. Laušek had a tobacco pouch, while Aleksa Mušić, who had joined our battalion from Zlatar, carried a cleverly designed lighter shaped like a tiny aerial bomb.

Behind us lay the Morava — the Serbian Volga.

Petrović reminded us that in 1877, a little further down

this river, between Aleksinac and Niš, the joint Russian-Serbian Morava detachment, under the command of Russian General Chernyaev, had fought against the Turks...

“Our fate,” said Petrović, “is forever tied to Russia. I can’t even imagine a day when the great brotherhood between our peoples and the Russian people could be broken. We share common interests and we are mutually devoted to each other. The sorrows of the Soviet people are our sorrows, their joys — our joys, their strength — our strength... Soviet Russia is the great beacon that guides us on the right path.”

“Well said!” exclaimed Miletić, noticing how the dust-covered faces of the weary soldiers brightened at Petrović’s words.

Yes, Jovan had chosen his teacher well. He was a good agitator.

The Homolje mountains greeted us with the rising sun, its slanted rays stretching like golden threads over the valleys and ravines of the Mlava and Pek rivers, and with the lively rustling of ancient beech forests.

The town of Bor, with its copper mine and smelting plant, forever etched in my memory, was left behind. From a distance, Aleksa Mušić shook his fist at it. Soon, soon there would be no trace of Schmolke or Krebs, and he, Aleksa, would return to Bela Reka, where only the ashes of his home and the graves of his wife and son, Srećko, remained. He would return to his village and start building a new, better life. Soon...

We passed through deserted areas between Bor and Salaš, then turned sharply south. With a concentrated three-pronged attack, alongside local partisans from the 23rd Division, we captured the enemy-fortified town of Zaječar — a key transportation hub near the Bulgarian border.

The townspeople rejoiced. But the very next day, they bid us farewell with disappointment and fear. General-Major

Đurović, the Supreme Headquarters representative who had arrived in southern Serbia after Popović’s departure, ordered all units to immediately move north toward Negotin. Only one platoon of the Ninth Brigade was left to guard Zaječar, with a covering battalion taking positions in the Vratarnica Gorge.

Yet, before Zaječar even disappeared from sight, a German motorized division burst through from Niš and retook the city. Forced into a series of rear-guard battles, we withdrew to the forests south of Mount Deli Jovan, near Salaš, and halted there, waiting for the arrival of the Red Army. Moving any further was impossible. All roads, mountain passes and crossings from the border to the Morava Valley were mined and occupied by SS mountain infantry.

Ilija Perućica arrived at our battalion again, this time with Grombac. Smiling as if nothing had happened, the head of the brigade’s OZNA greeted me and quietly took a seat beside me as Perućica began to discuss business.

Twisting a sharply sharpened pencil over the blue lines of rivers on the map in deep thought, the brigade commander explained the current situation to the battalion commander and me.

The Germans continued to fortify their positions in eastern Serbia. From the south of the Balkans, the well-known “Prinz Eugen” division had arrived — already battered more than once but still formidable. The Hitlerites were digging trenches and anti-tank ditches everywhere, installing armoured pillboxes, burying tanks in the ground and setting up barricades of felled trees in the forests, interweaving them with barbed wire. The German command was determined to block all routes from Bulgaria and Romania to the Morava Valley for the Third Ukrainian Front at any cost. After all, this valley opened the way to Belgrade, and Belgrade was the

gateway to the Danube Lowlands, which led through Hungary straight into Germany — from its least defended side.

“Our situation is almost catastrophic,” said Perućica. “If the Red Army is delayed even for a week at the Yugoslav border, the Germans may force us into new battles and wipe out all the partisan units here. Only a swift and decisive advance by the Third Ukrainian Front can save us from a tragic fate. We need to take action. I think we should establish contact with the Russians in advance to properly guide them on the terrain and explain our position. Nikolai, I believe your commander, Marshal Tolbukhin, will send part of his forces here. The Red Army has entered Sofia, and we are right on the direct road from Sofia to Belgrade. Your divisions are likely advancing toward us through the western Balkans and along the Danube.”

Grombac moved closer and, joining the conversation, said:

“That’s right. It would be good to make contact with some unit of the Red Army. Zagoryanov, we trust you completely. I have seen your resilience, discipline and dedication to our struggle. I have no objections to entrusting you with an important mission.”

Perućica assigned me my task: to go deep into reconnaissance under the guise of shepherds, taking one fighter of my choice, to meet the Russians.

“Do you agree?” Grombac asked me.

Of course! To go meet my own! This was finally the happiness I had dreamed of for so long and waited for with such anticipation!

Kuštrinović readily allowed me to take Vasko with me.

Jovan and Kića accompanied us to where the mountain trail descended into the Timok River valley. I bid them farewell at the edge of the forest, among the sombre junipers.

“Farewell, my dear blood brother. Come back soon and with your own,” Jovan said, tears glistening in his eyes.

But his face was serious and pale. He was not ashamed of his scarce tears, as if we were parting for a long time — or as if he was not entirely sure we would meet again.

“We will be waiting for you eagerly,” said Kića, shaking my hand firmly.

Both of them waved their garrison caps for a long time.

From below, we could see them well — their sun-bleached tunics standing out against the dark greenery.

“We’ll be back soon! Soon! Wait for us!” Vasko shouted to them, constantly turning back.

Sliding over the stones, we descended to the very river and followed its course downstream along the Bulgarian border. We wore black sheepskin hats, tattered jackets and carried sturdy sticks that Đuro had carved from young hazel branches.

18

Zagoryanov and Vasko had not yet left the battalion when Grombac secluded himself with Captain Kuštrinović in a forest hut.

After carefully closing the door, the head of the brigade’s OZNA stepped close to the captain.

“Let’s have a heart-to-heart talk,” he began.

“Salute, chief, I’m listening! Ready to carry out any order,” Kuštrinović responded.

“Now, now, don’t rush, my friend,” Grombac held him back. “I know exactly what kind of bird you are.”

Kuštrinović lowered his eyes.

“And what is it that you know?” he asked, unable to endure the prolonged silence.

“I know that you hanged Stefan Čekić, the company commander of the partisan detachment in Valjevo. You cut the heart out of the living partisan Ratko. You executed captured partisans in Kruševac.”

“That was done by the Chetniks of my battalion, not me,” Kuštrinović replied without raising his eyes.

“You were their commander!”

“I repented and joined you. You promised...”

“To keep your rank and position?” Grombac interrupted mockingly. “The promise has been kept. But do you really think we have forgotten all the atrocities you committed? They make the blood run cold! The people will not forgive you. And, by the way, it’s not just us — OZNA — who know about your crimes. Commissar Korchagin of your company knows about them too.”

The captain turned pale.

“But it’s not even about Korchagin himself,” Grombac continued. “He will keep quiet if ordered to. The problem is that he blurted out a lot to the Russian lieutenant Zagoryanov — things that he was never supposed to know.”

“That’s criminal,” Kuštrinović muttered through clenched teeth. “Revealing information to a foreigner...”

“Exactly,” Grombac said. “Zagoryanov knows too much... Recently, he wrote a letter to the head of the Soviet military mission, in which, among other things, he referred to you as a saboteur. Don’t worry, we intercepted that letter.”

Grombac was lying: Zagoryanov’s letter contained only a request for a meeting to discuss an important matter. But the OZNA officer knew exactly what he was doing.

The battalion commander sighed in relief.

“Good thing we rounded up all the other Russians who escaped from German captivity into one company and are keeping them tightly under control. But Zagoryanov — he

has embedded himself right into our core. That’s our mistake, and now it’s too late to fix it.”

Kuštrinović paced around the hut.

“Indeed,” he muttered, then suddenly asked quickly, “Why is it too late?”

“It’s too late,” Grombac repeated. “Tomorrow, he might meet his own.”

“Tomorrow...” Kuštrinović stopped in front of Grombac, staring intently into the OZNA chief’s evasive eyes, searching for confirmation of his thought. “A lot can happen in a day...” he said thoughtfully.

Grombac smirked.

“Of course, here in Yugoslavia — and I’m certain of this — nothing will happen to Zagoryanov that could cast a shadow on our warm and friendly relations with the Russian people,” he enunciated slowly. “But in Bulgaria, before he meets his own... There, anything is possible... A sabotage operation against a Soviet citizen is quite conceivable...”

Grombac stared intently into Kuštrinović’s face.

“Do you have the guts?” his gaze seemed to ask.

Kuštrinović nodded affirmatively.

“The Bulgarians... You can expect anything from them...”

In his mind, a plan was already taking shape: “If I go myself with Pantera, Katnić’s man...”

Confident that he had been understood correctly, Grombac suddenly changed the subject.

“By the way, my friend,” he said with a smile, “things aren’t so bad for you... I have the impression that you’re on your way to redeeming yourself, and I think I wouldn’t be wrong in congratulating you in advance on a possible promotion in the near future.”

...Vasko and I walked along the bank of the Timok.

It was late September. A drizzling rain hung over the valley like a mist. The river had swollen from the rains, turning a murky coffee colour, with dark debris floating near the shores.

The trail clung to the gravelly slope of a tall, sombre mountain, partially overgrown with oak and poplar. At times, it descended right to the roaring river, which sprayed us with its cold mist; at other times, it wound steeply through the wooded heights like a corkscrew, or stretched straight between strips of bright green second-crop fodder corn. Finally, it led us to a large village.

Vasko had never been to these places before. Before joining the partisans, he had never strayed farther from his village than the small patch of land where he worked alongside his father. But now, after Sinj, Neretva, Zlatar and Šumadija, he had discovered yet another beautiful, remote corner of his beloved homeland.

“The peasants here live just as poorly as we do,” Vasko said sadly, glancing around with curiosity. “See?”

He pointed to an old farmer hobbling toward the church. The man wore a tall straw hat and short trousers made of coarse hemp fabric, woven on a simple loom. Vasko’s father and grandfather had dressed exactly the same way. They had walked along the village road in the same manner — hunched over, their long arms, crippled by backbreaking labour, nearly dragging on the ground, their calloused palms rough and unhealed.

Fearing we might run into Germans and startled by the sound of music, we made our way to the church square and stopped, stunned by the unexpected sight before us.

Musicians were beating drums, blowing into flutes and

fiddling away on violins, while people danced the kolo. And on a rainy day — on a weekday, no less! The young women were dressed up in white embroidered blouses and wool skirts, with patterned scarves draped over their shoulders — some even carried colourful umbrellas. Alongside the elderly and the children, they moved cheerfully and nimbly in a circle, singing:

*“Oh, Stalin, Stalin,
Come to the Balkans!
Oh, comrade, comrade,
Come to the Balkans!”*

We approached the dancers and greeted them:

“Dobar dan!”

“Dobar dan!” they replied.

“Where are you from? Not from the forest, are you?” asked an old man in a straw hat. “You haven’t seen my grandson, Marin Stefanović, have you? He’s a partisan, thank God. Right now, he’s tracking the *švabe* and sending us signals from that mountain over there. Hear that?”

Sure enough, the wind carried the sound of a flute from the heights.

“What’s he signalling?”

“No *švabe* on the Zaječar-Salaš highway. They’re holed up in their bunkers.”

“And where are the Russians?” Vasko asked anxiously.

“In Prahovo, on the Danube!”

“In Kula! Close by!” the women and children shouted. “They’re coming this way! The Germans are fleeing from Romania and Bulgaria — rushing home!”

So that was why the people of Velika Jasikova were celebrating! The victorious Soviet forces had reached the western

slopes of the Transylvanian Alps, advancing along the Danube. Somewhere near the Romanian-Yugoslav border, they had already crossed the river, while from Bulgaria, they were descending from the western Balkans near Vidin.

From mountain to mountain, the joyful news was carried by the call of the flutes. People shared it with each other in excitement:

“They’re coming!”

Overcome by the moment, Vasko let slip that we were partisans heading to meet the Russians. That childish slip delayed us in the village for a while.

We were immediately seated before a spread-out rug and treated to grapes. I had never seen grapes like these before. There were round, delicate green ones with a pinkish hue, almost translucent, with seeds faintly visible inside; elongated pink ones with a bluish-purple sheen; and small, dark purple ones with a matte bluish skin, as if covered by a gentle morning mist.

I stood up.

“We need to go, Vasko.”

Everyone hurried us along:

“Make haste. The Russians are already beyond the Timok.”

“Tell them we’re waiting. Let them come faster.”

“Do you have oxen?” I asked.

“The *švabe* took the sheep and chickens, but we still have oxen.”

“Then here’s what you should do,” I suggested. “Haul gravel onto the road and fill the potholes. Lay down some support — it’ll help the Russians get here faster.”

The proposal was accepted. They promised to start repairing the road immediately. Everyone agreed it was full of

ruts and muddy — an *araba** could still pass, but a cannon might get stuck.

The Timok foamed and roared as it rushed through its deep channel. Beside the trail, disappearing into tunnels at times, ran the railway from Zaječar to Negotin. In many places, the rails had been torn up, but the sleepers remained and the embankment was intact. Vasko and I realized that, if necessary, divisional artillery could bypass the road and move directly along the sleepers — as long as the tunnels were intact and safe.

Unwilling to inspect the tunnels ourselves, we made our way to Tabakovo railway station. The station building had burned down. Overturned railcars lay scattered along the tracks. A man in a uniform cap, embroidered with a golden winged wheel, and wearing wooden sandals on his bare feet, was already diligently sweeping the platform.

“Is a train coming soon?” Vasko asked him.

The stationmaster’s gaunt face lit up with a timid smile.

“It will,” he said, “as soon as the Russians arrive.”

“And the tunnels — are they intact?”

“We saved them.”

“They didn’t blow them up here like in Konjic?” Vasko asked in surprise. “No? Well, good on you. And where are the Germans?”

“They’ve gone into the mountains. The Russians are already in Tsar Petrov, just over there.”

Gathering information from different sources, Vasko and I continued on, no longer hiding, scanning the area for a place to cross to the right bank of the Timok before nightfall.

The rain had stopped. Layers of mist still hung in the gorge, but above the river — golden in the sunset glow — the sky was clearing, turning a soft blue.

* Wagon (Turkish in the original).

Cheered by the scene, Vasko sniffled thoughtfully and mused aloud about how we would lead the Russian soldiers back along this very road — through Tabakovo and Velika Jasikova, into the forest beyond Slatino, where our brigade was stationed. What a celebration it would be! And then, together — to Belgrade!

“Look!” Vasko suddenly exclaimed. “A bridge!”

A narrow stone bridge arched over the river. Its ends had been blasted and it now hung from its central pier like a bird in flight. On both banks, people were bustling about — Bulgarians on the far side, Yugoslavs on this one. They were hauling logs and planks, pulling stones from the river, and stacking them along the shore to raise the roadbed to the level of the bridge supports.

We were so absorbed by the sight of these former enemies working side by side that we didn't notice two soldiers approaching us. They wore long, grey-lilac overcoats with red shoulder boards and buttons embossed with eagles. Seeing them, Vasko was about to run, but I held him back.

The sharp eyes of the Bulgarian border guards instantly recognized us as partisans. Smiling, they extended their hands in greeting and offered us Plovdiv cigarettes — Voynishki.

Vasko relaxed. One of the soldiers, round-faced, dark-haired, with quick brown eyes, said:

“From now on, we are friends forever. Nothing can separate us again. There are no barriers between us. All Slavic peoples are one union.”

“*Taka, taka, vsichko dobre,*”* the other soldier chimed in, nodding enthusiastically, never ceasing to smile.

From the border guards, we learned that the Russians were expected the next morning in the nearby Bulgarian vil-

* Yes, yes, everything is good (Bulgarian in the original).

lage of Shishentsi. They also pointed out a crossing — a narrow section of the river where logs had been laid from stone to stone. As we crossed, I tested the depth with my stick: the water was shallow, the bottom rocky.

Reaching the other bank, we climbed a steep mountain, grabbing onto bushes for support. Behind us, the soldiers' encouraging song rang out:

*“Napred, drugari, vsi kum pobeda!
Napred, ura! Ura, napred!”*

*[Forward, comrades, all toward victory!
Forward, hurrah! Hurrah, forward!]*

“See you at the front! Together to Berlin!” Vasko shouted to them from the mountaintop.

Glancing back one last time, he suddenly grabbed my hand.

“Nikolai!”

“What is it, Vasko?” I asked.

“Don't you see? Down there, in the bushes — two people hiding. I saw them just now before they disappeared. Could they be following us?”

I looked carefully but saw nothing suspicious.

“It must have been your imagination,” I reassured him.

Still, we quickened our pace.

20

...We entered Shishentsi at dusk. No one paid us any attention — many people had come down from the mountains to welcome the Red Army. At the edge of the village, along the road from Tsar Petrov, where the Soviet troops were

expected to arrive, an arch had been erected. Young women were decorating it with colourful ribbons, fir branches and clusters of bright red rowan berries. In the square, tables and benches had been set up. Women were bringing their festive provisions in baskets — fruit, meat, *brynza** and wine.

From nearby villages, food was being carted in. A feast was being prepared for about five hundred people.

It was already late, but the excitement in the streets had not faded. Lanterns burned everywhere. Riders galloped back and forth from the direction of Tsar Petrov, bringing word that the Russians would definitely arrive in Shishentsi the next day. Each time, the news was met with jubilant cheers:

*“Da zhivee slavnata i nepobedima Chervenata Armiya!”***

*“Ura! Vsichko za pobedata! Vsichki kum Berlin!”****

*“Da zhivee bratskiyat yugoslavski narod!”*****

Vasko and I stood for a long time near the open, low window of the municipal hall. Inside, a rehearsal was underway for a concert that the local youth were preparing for the Soviet soldiers. A choir was singing the Slavic anthem, followed by a song glorifying Stalin’s warriors, bringing liberation to Bulgaria. Accompanied by a flute, the performers also sang a long ballad, then a cheerful folk tune — *“Pusti menya, lele, chereshni sbirat.”****** But what Vasko liked most was the poem “Struggle” by Hristo Botev. A girl with long black braids recited it with deep emotion. Her voice rang out strong and full

* Brined white cheese.

** Long live the glorious and invincible Red Army! (Bulgarian in the original).

*** Hurrah! Everything for victory! Everyone to Berlin! (Bulgarian in the original).

**** Long live the fraternal Yugoslav people! (Bulgarian in the original).

***** Let me go, dear mother, to pick cherries (Bulgarian in the original).

of joyful determination:

*“And in this kingdom of blood and sin,
Of tears, corruption and dark deeds,
In this land of sorrow, where evil knows no bounds,
The struggle has begun, the struggle has begun!”*

Standing on tiptoe, holding his breath, Vasko watched the girl’s face — flushed with passion, radiating unstoppable energy. He followed every movement of her small hands, which constantly rose above her head, powerfully emphasizing the stirring words that called for the fight for freedom. And later, when she danced in the lively *bochvanka*, Vasko never took his eyes off her.

“A fine girl,” Vasko whispered. “Oh, she’s beautiful! We don’t have ones like her.”

And when she stepped outside, after some hesitation, he bravely ran after her and struck up a conversation...

Less than half an hour later, we found ourselves in Netka’s home — that was the girl’s name — and felt so comfortable there, as if we were among family. Netka’s grandfather, Tsoko Zhelezkov, an old man with curly grey moustache and a long, sharp nose that resembled a pepper pod, teared up with joy upon learning that we were from Yugoslavia and that I was Russian.

We sat at a low, round table, drinking mild wine, snacking on quince and slices of melon. From the street, through the open door, came singing, voices and the sound of harmonicas.

A dim oil lamp flickered. A round tin lamp hung from the soot-blackened wooden ceiling, but it wasn’t lit — according to Netka, there had been no *gasa** for two years. The

* Kerosene (Bulgarian in the original).

lack of light was compensated by a small fire smouldering on the earthen floor — the *odzhak*. Smoke rose toward a hole in the ceiling, though not all of it escaped. It stung the eyes and tickled the throat and nose.

“They have it just like we do — no better at all,” Vasko whispered to me, coughing quietly.

He had already grown unaccustomed to the heavy, smoky air of village huts.

“Listen, Netka,” Vasko said. “Do you want to study?”

The girl sadly shook her head.

“No money.”

“Is that so! I don’t have any either. And I don’t need it. We’ll study without money... Would you go to Moscow?”

Netka’s face flushed with embarrassment.

“I don’t know.”

“Let’s go together!” Vasko declared resolutely, puffing up with importance.

“Maybe someday. But for now, we, the Komsomol members, have decided...”

“You... you’re a Komsomolka?” Vasko nearly choked in surprise.

“Yes,” Netka said simply. “We’ve decided to climb Musala* in honour of the Red Army.”

The old man shook his head doubtfully.

“It’s high. It takes three days to climb that mountain.”

“We’ll make it! And we’ll carve a name into the rock...”

“Which name?” Vasko’s cheeks flushed — he had already guessed.

“Stalin,” Netka said softly, as if breathing the word.

Vasko stared at her in admiration. So this was who she was — brave, energetic, intelligent. And already a Komsomolka!

* The highest peak in the Balkan Mountains in Bulgaria (2,925 m).

Clenching his fists stubbornly, Vasko blushed and loudly declared:

“Then I’ll climb Durmitor!”

His voice carried a reckless boldness, but there was still a hint of hesitation. After all, he knew nothing about Durmitor — he had only heard from Đuro that its peak pierced the clouds. But he had to say something to uphold his masculine pride!

“Good,” Netka smiled encouragingly.

Vasko shook her hand with respect and gratitude.

“We’ll be friends for life.”

“God willing,” Tsoko Zhelezkov approved. Pulling a dagger from the worn sheath at his belt, he lightly touched its gleaming blade between Netka and Vasko’s clasped hands.

“So that our peoples,” he continued, his voice trembling, “from now on and forever, may live as brother and sister. Our Musala and your Durmitor — they are mountains of the same peninsula. The same sun shines upon them...”

I thought of Miletić. If only he were here with me! Soon, very soon, his dreams of a peaceful and united life for the free Balkan peoples would come true. Soon, I would introduce him to my Russian comrades, and together we would march on the road to victory and glory...

* * *

At noon, the villagers joyfully welcomed a regiment of the 223rd Rifle Division advancing toward the Timok. The unit commander called a short halt in Shishentsi.

In the midst of the celebration, as Soviet soldiers took their seats at long tables set up in the square, invited by the peasants to share a meal and listen to a folk concert, a young girl approached the commander hesitantly, her eyes full of

tears. It was Netka.

She told him how Yugoslav partisans — one, a young Russian named Nikolai, and with him, a Serbian boy named Vasko — had spent the night at her grandfather's house. They had come from Yugoslavia on some important mission from their superiors. Nikolai had spent almost the entire night writing in his notebook.

...Through the small window, barred with iron grating, the first light of dawn was breaking. For Nikolai, for Vasko, for Netka and for everyone in Shishentsi that night, the happiest day was about to begin...

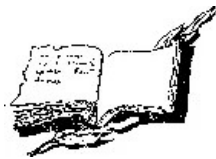
Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. Two men entered. Nikolai and Vasko recognized them, but they did not seem pleased to see them.

Netka overheard their conversation. The visitors spoke of some new order they had brought. As he said goodbye to Netka, Nikolai promised he would return to the village soon, with the first detachment of Russian troops.

All four men set off down the road toward Tsar Petrov. Netka watched them until they disappeared into the wooded ravine. She was puzzled — why had they left the night before the Russians' arrival?

The sun gilded the treetops; the day promised to be bright, clear and extraordinary. And then, suddenly, shots rang out from the forest... Netka's heart froze. And when the Soviet soldiers arrived, Vasko and Nikolai were nowhere to be seen among them.

Moscow — Novye Gorki, 1948-1951



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