

PART I

SEPARATION

CHAPTER 1

APRIL 28, 1977: DULICI, YUGOSLAVIA

THEIR WORLD CHANGED the afternoon they were released early from school. The rain began in March, more of a drizzle at first, but then it became heavier, the clouds darker and more ominous. One Sunday morning, the heavens opened and the rain hammered down in torrents, continuing through the spring. In April, the Drina River spilled over its banks and flooded surrounding fields. The farmers warned of catastrophe, claiming they could smell more rain on the way, but that afternoon when a plumbing malfunction caused school to let out early, only a few drops wet the youthful faces of cousins Marko and Celo Mescic.

Twelve-year-old boys with the rest of the day now free, they jumped over fences and ran through fields of wet, shoulder-high weeds, their chests heaving. Along the way, they could smell the smoke drifting from fireplaces and wood-burning stoves. Passing between the engorged Drina and the sprawling Zvornik aluminum plant, they stepped into a recently plowed field and found themselves suddenly mired in dark, thick mud, slogging their way through. Their shoes made loud sucking sounds like the croaking of bullfrogs in a vast swamp. When one of Celo's shoes was pulled off by the muck he cursed a stream of obscenities. Marko howled, amused at their predicament and at Celo's heated reaction. Some of the words, Marko had never heard before—at least, not in those combinations. After yanking and pulling on one another, they finally extricated themselves from the muddy field and rushed down the long, grassy trail that skirted Dulici village, lungs and legs pumping.

By the time they arrived home, the rain had stopped altogether; the air was cold and the skies clear. Their dripping clothes clung to their bodies; mud still covered their shoes. Once inside, steam rose from them and they laughed as they listened to each other's teeth chatter uncontrollably. Goosebumps covered their bodies. They quickly changed into dry clothes, leaving their wet ones on the pine-planked floor along with the gobs of mud they'd tracked inside.

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Concerned that no one would be home for several hours, and just so Celو wouldn't forget, Marko complained for the hundredth time that he was hungry and that it was lunchtime. And for the hundredth time, Celو told him to shut up. When Celو was dressed, he marched into his parents' room.

He reemerged, holding his father's shotgun boldly in one hand and an old Makarov pistol in the other, smiling ear to ear. He looked like a lanky, long-legged urban gangster. Marko looked at his cousin with wide eyes, but before he could say anything, Celو grinned, motioned him toward the door with the pistol in his hand and announced matter-of-factly, "There's nothing for us to eat here, so we'll hunt it down ourselves!"

Marko was fixated on the weapons in Celو's hands. "But, what will your papa say?" he whispered.

"He won't know, because you won't tell him. You scared?"

"I'm not scared!"

"Then why are your knees shaking?"

"But . . . where . . . and what is there to hunt?"

"Just shut up," Celو shoved the pistol under his belt. "I know a place, by the dam."

Marko pointed at the grey wooden floor where they'd tracked in large clumps of mud. "We should clean—"

Celو gave him an angry glare. "I said shut up! We'll be back before Mama and Papa come home. We'll clean everything up then."

"But—"

"Let's go."

Soon they were walking uphill, on a trail that meandered along a ridge, winding north, east, and then north again. The trail led up to the pumiced ruins of a past era—either Roman or Turkish—that overlooked the Drina River to the east, and the deep ravines that surrounded it. To their right, the Drina cut a jagged edge along the provincial border between Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia. On the opposite bank, the terrain was an undulating green. On its western bank, their side of the river, the city of Zvornik was contained by the Banat Mountains—striking peaks of limestone, earth and granite—jutting skyward, then leveling off into verdant meadows of the southwest, near Sarajevo.

Both boys were drenched with sweat; their legs felt like lead and their lungs burned from their climb. They sat, looking out over the Drina River and the swelling countryside. Inhaling, he smelled the fresh scent of pine

resin. He shivered in the cool shade. The place reminded him of King Arthur's castle in the story of *Camelot*, which his father used to read to him at night before bed. He dreamed of being among the greatest and most chivalrous warriors in Europe, the Knights of the Round Table. After his father had been taken from him, he came to view Camelot not only as a place, but as a beacon—guiding him back to a better, happier time.

"Here's where we'll find the boars," Celso announced confidently. He sat on one of the ancient, stacked, white granite blocks that were once an outpost or a landowner's perimeter.

"Boars?"

"Mmm," Celso nodded, pointing below them to the right. "Look, their tracks."

He focused his gaze through the thick vegetation in the direction Celso indicated, and could make out a clearing some thirty meters away.

"And there is where they were today and yesterday." Celso pulled the Makarov from his belt and handed it to him. "You can see where they've dug up the ground. Their shit is everywhere."

Suddenly, as the weight of the pistol—the cold metal—was placed in his hand, the scenic view no longer mattered. He'd never handled a pistol before, and he felt a rush of adrenaline. He concentrated on not letting go of the handle, for fear he'd lose it or shoot himself by accident.

His anxiety was doubled with Celso's simple admonition: "Be careful, it's loaded."

Celso rested the shotgun on his lap. He looked comfortable with it, natural even. "It's better to wait quietly than to search for them. If we're moving, they'll hear us."

They waited in silence. The sun had begun to set and the sky darkened. His heartbeat slowed as his grip on the Makarov became looser and finally felt more natural to him. His hands no longer shook. He looked at Celso, who stared intently in the direction of the clearing.

He admired Celso. With all of his hot air and showing off, Marko saw him as a natural leader. He looked the part too. His adult face had still not settled on him, but he bore a strong resemblance to his father with his jet-black hair and piercing blue eyes. And he spoke with the authority of someone twice his age. Once, Marko had seen a classmate a year older challenge him at school. Celso had ended the brewing fight before the other boy had an opportunity to start it. Girls were attracted to him—a source of fascination and envy for Marko, especially when Celso introduced him to

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them as his brother.

Their daily routine helped to take his mind off his own father, who was sitting in a jail somewhere in Zagreb or Belgrade; he didn't know which. Although Marko knew his father was in trouble with the government, he didn't know why he'd been arrested. No one had ever explained it to him.

His aunt and uncle had brought him to their home about six months ago. They told him only that his papa had a disagreement with Tito, as if he were one of their neighbors, instead of the country's communist leader. He listened silently, but still didn't fully understand. All he knew was that he missed his papa. Still, there were the bad dreams of being led away from his father. In the orphanage, they came to him as anxious shadows, and every night they returned—the same, familiar sense of loss flooded back to him like the rising of a tide, plunging him into darkness.

Every night, as the darkness and the shadows returned, he was thrust into a living nightmare. The sound of loud knocking, doors being kicked in, shouting, his father's protests, screaming sirens, and crying—always his own—startled him out of sleep and kept him awake. Only when he imagined the sound of his father's violin would sleep finally come to him.

Celo nudged him and pointed behind them and to their left. He heard the rustling before he actually saw the black shapes in the streambed. Celo motioned to him as he dismounted the granite slab slowly and attempted to approach the boar from their right side in a kind of fishhook maneuver that would allow them to remain on the high ground, allowing Celo a clear shot.

He tried to emulate Celo's stalking movements, but as much as he tried and as slowly as he moved, he was painfully aware of the noise he made with every step. Celo looked back and motioned him forward, but at that instant, they heard the sharp, rhythmic crack of rifle fire echo loudly around them. It startled the boars; they grunted and squealed and ran into the underbrush before Celo had the chance to fire at them.

The automatic rifle fire came from the west, in the direction of the lake and dam. Celo cursed loudly, then threw his father's shotgun on the ground in front of him, kicking the leaves and dirt in frustration.

"It's the army, isn't it?" Marko asked with a nervous smile. They'd seen the trucks rolling through the village that morning on the way to school.

"The bastards! What are you smiling about? The fucking bastards

ruined my shot!"

He nodded and tried to keep from laughing, but he couldn't conceal his grin.

Celo shook his head. "I'm going to teach you how to move in the forest, Marko. You're like a freight train at night!"

"I know. I tried to copy you, but I'm still too loud," he admitted, then attempted to change the subject. "We should go home before your father returns and sees his guns missing."

Celo nodded, and Marko could see a renewed sense of purpose in his eyes. "We'll take a different way, along the lake."

"And the maneuvers?"

"Don't make so much noise. Walk toe to heel and they won't hear us." Celo gripped the middle of the shotgun. "Just follow me."

"Toe to heel," he repeated, close behind Celo, still tiptoeing like a ballerina.

As they approached the lake, they could hear trucks moving around at the base of the dam, coming and going. The lake was a dull orange and smelled of sulfur. Large deposits of a flaky white substance ringed its banks. Celo pointed at the steel pipes that emerged from the ground and emptied directly above the water.

"They dump the chemicals and shavings from the aluminum plant," Celo said, "so the lake is dead. No fish, and the water looks like orange soda."

"Fanta Lake." Marko replied, referring to the western beverage that had recently arrived in Yugoslavia.

"A good name for it," Celo agreed, and pointed toward the opposite bank. "We'll go around the lake and come out in the woods in front of the dam, so we can see the army's maneuvers without being seen, but we have to move quickly."

The sun was sinking below the line of pine and oak trees atop the dam. He walked by his cousin's side, anxious. "It's getting late, Celo. What will your mama and papa say?"

"We're on our way now. There's no shorter path." Celo replied. "If we'd killed one of the pigs, it'd be easier to explain."

"You can tell them I got lost, and you came to search for me."

Celo turned to him, smiling. "With guns?"

"Well, you can say that you were afraid the army would arrest me, too."

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There was the very subtle, if accidental, reference to his father. During the past month, Celso had done his best to keep Marko's mind off all of that. He walked a few more steps before responding.

"I said, don't worry," Celso replied impatiently.

Marko grunted and nodded his head.

As they approached the dam, they could hear voices and laughter. Just ahead, they could see a wooden guardhouse at the top of the dam. To avoid being seen or heard, Celso turned deeper into the woods and slowed their pace. *Toes to heel*, Marko reminded himself. Soon they were walking downhill, parallel to the dam, and away from the lake, holding branches and trees whenever possible to control their descent. The voices were louder now. Celso stopped and silently knelt down next to Marko, motioning toward the hilltop opposite the dam, not far from the main road that led to their house. Marko nodded.

As the boys began climbing the hill, the soldiers' voices were muffled by the loud arrival of more trucks struggling up the dirt road to the dam. Marko noticed that Celso used the trucks' noise to mask their own as they climbed up the hill at a more rapid pace.

Another good lesson, Marko told himself.

At the top of the large hill, they slid on their bellies and crouched behind a boulder where they could see across to the police guardhouse over the darkening horizon. It was lighted, but appeared unoccupied. Long black pipes stretched along the width of the dam, their release valves rusting, pointing in the direction of "Fanta Lake."

Below, at the base of the dam, Marko counted three jeeps parked on the far right side near the entrance. Two bulldozers were parked on opposite sides of a large rectangular hole that had been cut deep into the ground. Piles of earth surrounded the hole, except on its western-most end, where one of the 'dozers had created a dirt ramp entranceway to the bottom. Soldiers with machine guns and rifles congregated by the parked vehicles talking, smoking cigarettes and laughing.

From Marko's vantage point in the gathering darkness, he could see both trucks parked on the dirt road at the entrance to the dam, their engines still running where the two guards stood. A jeep drove around the trucks, and the guards saluted as it passed. It stopped in front of the group of soldiers, and a tall, thin man in an officer's uniform stepped out. He carried a pistol holstered in black leather on his hip. He returned their salutes crisply, and the group immediately ran to positions atop the piles,

standing in a semi-circle, their guns facing the dam.

Four soldiers were posted at the entrance of the hole on each side. One of the trucks moved forward, then backed into the entrance. Two soldiers gave the driver directions from the front and rear. They stopped the truck just as the rear wheels began to descend down the earthen ramp. The rear tarp was lifted by two other soldiers with guns, who quickly jumped off the back and took their positions on each side of the truck, weapons raised. At the other end, another soldier lay down with his machine gun on a bipod, its linked ammunition pouring out, aimed at the rear of the truck.

Marko shook Celo's arm. "What are they doing?" he whispered.

"Sshh! They'll hear you!" Celo placed his hand on Marko's shoulder and forced him down to the ground. "Don't say a word."

They heard a series of orders barked out by one of the soldiers near the truck. Marko watched in horror as men, young and old, jumped off the back of the truck, fell to the ground, and struggled to stand.

From the distance, he could finally see why: each man's hands were tied behind his back. Some of them had their mouths bound with cloth. As one truck emptied and then departed the ramp, the other was moving into position, preparing to go through the same drill. Marko estimated that there were thirty prisoners falling off the truck and shuffling together into the hole.

"Look!" Marko said, pointing. One of the prisoners, dressed in filthy street clothes, had broken away from the group, alternately shuffling and hopping toward the dam steppe in an attempt to escape. They watched as one of the guards calmly raised his rifle and took aim. There was no warning given to the prisoner or any order to stop. Only a single shot. The man collapsed in a heap to the gravel. Another guard walked over to the prisoner's body and kicked him down into the hole.

The terrible significance of the scene tore through Marko, and his heart began to flail ominously. Tears streamed down his face. So Celo would not see, he buried his face on top of his hands—one of them still holding the Makarov loosely in the dirt.

They dared not move.

A moment later, the staccato rattle of gunfire tore through the forest, echoing at once against the side of the dam, projecting the noise back upon them in a seemingly endless wave. The groans of those wounded were cut off with short bursts, then single shots rang out. Celo reached across and gripped Marko's arm, drawing him closer. When the noise finally

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subsided, Marko realized he was sobbing silently against him.

Celo whispered close to his ear. "Come on, Marko! We've got to get out of here." As he began to help Marko up, the last truck pulled away from the ramp with its headlights on. The truck slowly drove off, its headlights silhouetting the officer Marko had seen earlier, casting a long, thin shadow that intersected the group of soldiers. The soldiers had all descended from the piles of earth around the grave, and now stood at attention before him. His voice was deep, authoritative, and seemed accustomed to giving orders. But Marko was struck by how calm he appeared in the wake of the slaughter he'd just supervised.

"It's too dark to bury them now. Post guards here tonight and we'll finish tomorrow morning, when it's light."

There was no discussion in front of the officer, but as soon as he departed the area in his jeep, the arguments began in earnest.

"Fuck him . . . and fuck them too! They're all dead. They don't need guards!" The dim glow of cigarettes being lit illuminated the soldiers' young faces. A small mob of troops began to walk toward the trucks, joking and laughing. After they loaded on the trucks, Marko heard another soldier shouting over the noise of the engines. He barked out names, then there was more laughter as two soldiers jumped off the back of the truck closest to him and Celo.

Celo pointed at them. "Those must be the 'volunteers,'" he muttered sarcastically.

As the trucks drove away from the dam, gravel crunching under the tires, both soldiers that had been left behind continued to be teased loudly by their comrades who had escaped guard duty for the night. As they drove by, one of them taunted: "Why don't you go over there and have a *rest* with your friends!"

The guards stood by at the base of the dam, smoking their cigarettes, weapons slung over their shoulders. One of them stamped his cigarette into the gravel. The other was urinating in the hole, and as he did so, dismissed the taunts with a final obscene gesture that he directed toward the last truck: "Fuck your mothers!" The guard's insult was returned with howls of laughter from the back of the truck.

Marko followed the cluster of truck headlights down the road until they were out of sight. He looked back toward the dam and saw both the guards light fresh cigarettes as they walked away from the hole along the same dirt road.

"We're going home," Celso whispered. "Do you hear me?"

The truth suddenly dawned on Marko. "They killed them all, didn't they?"

Celso rose from his prone position with the shotgun in his hand. Squeezing Marko's arm and pulling him up, he replied firmly. "We need to go *now*. *Come on!*"

Marko sniffed and nodded slowly, rubbing his hand against his nose and mouth, now caked with dirt. "Are they all dead?"

Celso knelt to face him and looked into his eyes. "Yes! They're dead. *All of them*. And we shouldn't have been here to see it happen." Celso grabbed Marko's arm insistently. "Listen to me! If they catch us, they'll kill us, too—"

Celso was interrupted by a low, wavering moan below them. He forced him back down onto the ground and held his index finger to his mouth, signaling Marko to be silent, then pushed his chest off the ground to see over the boulder. Bringing his knee to rest beneath him, Celso searched for any sign of the guards. The noise came again, from the direction of the grave, a low constant groaning that sounded more like a wounded animal than a human.

Marko, now kneeling beside him, tugged at his shirt. "Someone's alive down there!"

"No! I told you, they're all dead!" Celso insisted, staring at him fiercely. "And we're leaving."

Marko placed his hand on Celso's back, pleading. "Celso, you heard it too—there's someone alive down there! We gotta help him!"

Celso shook his head defiantly. "I said no. We don't know them, and we aren't in a position to help *anyone*. They're prisoners! Look, we're going home now!"

Celso rose and started to walk down the opposite side of the hill. Marko ran up to him, nearly stumbling into him, and grabbed hold of his arm with a surprising strength.

"Celso, listen to me! Someone *is* alive down there, and he's been shot just like all the rest. He'll die if we don't help him." His tears were rolling down his face, causing the dirt to streak heavily. "Don't you see? It could be Papa. He's a prisoner too. We gotta do something!"

Celso looked at him. This was the first time Marko had directly referred to his father.

"Where are the guards?" Celso asked quietly, looking around.

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"I don't see them. They must've left."

"They're behind us . . . over there," Celo said in a whisper, pointing behind them. "On the road."

Marko looked back, but could see nothing through the forest. "Don't stop me. I'm going down there."

Celo looked at Marko for a moment, as if sizing him up. Finally he said, "I'll watch for the guards up here and cover you. If I start shooting, you run. Understand?"

Marko nodded silently and began descending—sometimes sliding—down the steep hill toward the base of the dam. He stopped when he heard the moaning again, this time louder and more distinct, more human. *It was not an animal.*

As he inched closer, he realized that in order to get to the mass grave, he would have to go below the gravel base another fifty feet to the bottom of the hill, and then climb up to the dam steppe. Directly across from the hole, he was overcome by the putrid smell of decay, human excrement and loam. He choked back the heavy bile that rose in his throat. He tried to hold his breath but it only made the smell worse when the lack of oxygen forced him to inhale the thick rancid air. He dropped to his knees and elbows, pressing his mouth to his free hand to muffle the sound of his gagging.

He clung to underbrush and pulled on tree saplings to assist in negotiating the steep parts of the climb. Drawing closer, zigzagging between trees and boulders, he saw the guardhouse with the corrugated metal roof on top of the dam. A moment later, he heard the voices—faint, indecipherable. He froze, then slowly moved to flatten his body against the steep incline. His arms were outstretched in front of him, holding onto a sapling to prevent from sliding down.

Who were they? Guards or survivors?

The sound of crunching above startled him. Seconds later, he felt an avalanche of gravel, branches and leaves falling around and on top of him. He reached for his pistol, but before he could remove it from his belt, a giant hand suddenly took hold of his wrist. His pulse raced. Reflexively, he pulled back, but the man's grip was too strong.

"Comchye...Neighbor...." It was a rasping, barely audible male voice, heavy with desperation. "Please . . . help us!"

Marko found the pistol grip with his other hand and pulled it out in one swift motion, pointing it at the bridge of the man's nose directly above

him. He felt a sudden shock at the face he saw—covered with mud and blood. His eyes were a liquid black, and were glazed over in a vacant, mad stare.

“Li .let .tt go of me, now . . . or . . . or I’ll sh . . . shoot,” Marko stammered, every nerve of his body on edge.

He saw the man close his eyes, and noticed that he was struggling to breathe. His eyes opened and stared back at him. *“Neighbor . . . I am already dead . . . others are alive . . . help them before the soldiers return.”*

He felt the man’s grip release completely, leaving his own arm wet with blood and slime and dirt. He lowered the pistol and pulled himself up parallel to the man’s head. He could see the grave directly in front of him. The dam was its backdrop. “How many are alive?” he whispered.

“Two, three . . . I don’t know”

Marko dragged the man down by his belt like a sack of flour, his limbs boney and wasted, and rested him against a tree. Only then did he realize that the man had been shot in his chest. He knew the man was dying in front of him, but he could do nothing except try to make him more comfortable.

“Help them . . . please. . . .”

“Rest here—I’ll be back for you.”

The man nodded weakly, and Marko saw him close his eyes. Fear gripped him, as if he were clutching the side of a cliff. *How could this possibly be happening? From a simple hunting trip to this?*

Attempting to stay in the shadows, he ran up to the dirt mound closest to him and found the bulldozed entrance to the mass grave. Turning the corner onto the ramp, he was hit by another wave of stench—the coppery stench of blood and death. His mouth filled with bile. The dry heaves that followed caused his eyes to flood with tears, momentarily blinding him. He put his hand to his mouth and lay still. He blinked his eyes hard and his vision cleared.

He looked below and saw faint silhouettes that seemed to float noiselessly. He leaned forward to get a better view. Bodies illumined by the moonlight. Scattered grotesquely. Many were intertwined with others, as if they had all been dancing in celebration together, and had suddenly collapsed from exhaustion—their mouths agape, grinning at him in an odd, disconcerting levity. But they were dead, mangled and still bleeding in front of him. No one else had survived the slaughter. Other bodies had been buried before, in previous executions, but hastily, and occasionally he

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could see a face staring at him in lifeless disbelief. Shoes and hands seemed to be reaching to him out of the ground. Shiny, metallic-colored flies buzzed around, reflecting the moonlight, swarming onto the corpses and on the pools of blood on the ground around him. The grave was cluttered with shell casings that had fallen from the dirt mounds above. Papers, photographs and identification cards were scattered about.

He remembered promising Celo he'd return quickly. Now that seemed an impossible task. Not in this darkness, and not in this hell. But now he wanted nothing more. He searched for Celo on top of the hill, but his sweat and tears stung his eyes and made everything foggy around him.

He turned to step off the ramp, and the man he'd left in the woods appeared suddenly in front of him, like a ghost. Marko gasped. The man was standing now—hunched over, and fell heavily into Marko's arms.

"Not here . . . I'll show you where they are."

Marko quickly took hold of the man and placed his arm over his shoulder. The man guided him around the grave to the end opposite the entrance. In front of them, two men were lying down on the gravel along the large dirt piles. He helped the man down to a sitting position on the dirt mound, then moved to the other men. Their eyes were open, but only one was still alive. He knelt down and closed the dead man's eyes. He looked up and noticed the other man was weeping.

"They're brothers."

"We can't take him with us."

"No! We must!"

This was taking too much time, Marko realized—time they couldn't afford—with men who had barely survived their own executions, now giving *him* orders! *"I'm arguing with the dead."* He looked over and saw that the brother who was alive was holding the other's hand, breathing querulously. *"I'll take him into the woods and hide his body. Then I'll come back for both of you."*

Both men nodded at one another.

He reached over, separating the brothers' hands, looking at the one who had survived. The man nodded and covered his face with his hands.

Marko managed to drag the man's body, little by little, to the edge of the woods, and dropped him there. Reaching for branches with his free hand to control his descent, he slid the body to the bottom of the hill between two trees and covered it with branches and leaves. Gasping for air, he hurried back up the hill, and found both men slowly making their

way to the woods, unassisted. Marko ran up to them and helped the other brother, draping the man's arm over his shoulders.

"Walk with me . . . lift your bad leg off the ground, and rest your weight on me." He looked up and saw the other man standing a few steps ahead, watching them. *How could he have survived a bullet in the chest? He should be dead!*

"Get into the woods! I have him." His voice was no longer a whisper.

In the distance, he saw the reflection of headlights against the trees bordering the dirt road, followed by the sound of a small engine approaching. The ground erupted around them, and an instant later he heard the deafening sound of automatic gunfire from above accompanied by voices, sharp and hectoring. He lunged forward to a nearby tree and pulled his pistol out of his belt. He looked up at the guard shack, where he saw the guards standing up in full view, firing directly at them from atop the dam. Without aiming, he fired the pistol twice in their direction and he saw them disappear, taking cover.

A loud boom filled the night air, and he realized it was Celo, firing the shotgun. The guards returned their fire, above and below. He heard a pronounced grunt, then felt the man's arm around him go limp. Unprepared to bear his full weight, Marko's knees buckled. He looked at the body of the man next to him, face down; his shirt stained a dark crimson. He searched for a pulse, but found none.

He felt all of the muscles in his body propel himself forward, toward the woods only a few yards to his front. In only a few moments, he was tumbling down the hill in a headlong plunge through all the saplings in his path. The full weight of his momentum carried him to the bottom of the ravine, where he careened into a fallen log and twisted his back painfully.

He tried to breathe as he quickly assessed his surroundings. Looking up at the dam, he could see the headlights above him. Suddenly, there was a tumult of shouting and cursing—first questions, then accusations, and finally orders. The tall officer he'd seen during the executions was standing above him. He could feel a dull, throbbing pain in his right hand. A shiver ran through him. The guards were now using the headlights of the jeep as an improvised searchlight, illuminating the hill opposite them, where he was hiding. They were randomly firing their rifles in the direction of the beams, and one burst impacted only an arm's length beside him.

There was more gunfire. Some of the rounds erupted in the dirt and leaves in front of him. He crawled as quickly as he could through the creek

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bed, toward the road and around the hill. He was panting. Sweat soaked through his clothes. The scent of human decay was still sharp in his nose.

Celo fired twice again above him. More shouting, and this time screaming, came from the dam. Celo had hit one of the guards.

Marko stood up and sprinted forward to a log twenty or thirty yards away. Crashing into the log, he heard a loud grunt, revealing the unearthly body of the prisoner who had been shot in the chest. The man's hand enveloped the back of his head and pushed it forcefully down into the dirt.

"Quiet!"

After a few moments, the guards were firing away from them. With the initial surprise now passed, one of them was taunting Celo.

"Come down, *Chetniki*, or we'll hunt you and your families down and kill you! If you surrender now, we'll let you live."

"If they're calling us 'Chetniks,'" Marko asked, "who are *they*?"

"Tito's secret army," the man next to him whispered, looking over the log. He did the same. Men seemed to be surging toward them from all directions. Just ahead of him on the side of the dirt road, he saw the tall officer. He was alone, skirting the hill, moving deliberately and quietly, ghostlike.

Marko turned to the man next to him, whose ashen white complexion, mixed with blood and dirt and eyes black as death, almost glowed in the moonlight. "Who are you?"

The man appeared delirious, hardly human. His voice was choked and cracked. "Thanks to you, you can call me Lazarus, like in the Bible."

The name had no significance to him, except that it had a unique sound to it. *Lazarus*. "Well, I can't help you anymore, Lazarus. My cousin is on top of the hill," he whispered, then pointed at the officer. "And *he's* going to kill him. If you can, get to the church just down the road. It's not far, and there is a wood shack behind it. I'll look for you there tomorrow."

The man nodded in a way that made him appear drunken. Before Marko could leave, he felt the man's hand firmly take hold of his shirt, causing him to turn around, startled. Lazarus' eyes suddenly appeared lucid, alive, but his voice was weak he seemed to be scarcely breathing.

"*Hvala, Comchye*—thank-you, neighbor. I am forever indebted to you."

Marko looked at him, but said nothing. He doubted the man would live much longer in his condition, even if he escaped the guards. More guards would certainly be on the way.

Marko saw the officer, pistol in hand, quietly, deftly, ascend the hill.

He was even taller than he looked at first. Powerful, but not fast. Fifty yards up, Marko left the man who called himself Lazarus at the log and began walking up the hill also, matching the officer's steps one-for-one, toe to heel. Copying his movements, Marko realized he would have to stop this officer to save Celo's life.

He struggled to keep up with the officer, whose movements up the hill seemed quick and effortless. In the moonlight, he could see that the officer was holding a small pistol in his hand. Only fifty yards remained to the top. Exhausted and gasping for air, his lungs burned and his legs screamed in agony. Clawing frantically at the ground, he felt his hand pounding. It was swollen and he could barely move his fingers. He was confused when he felt his knees and shins crashing forward into a rock outcropping.

Something was grinding into his back, between his shoulder blades, driving the air from his lungs.

"If you move, I will kill you." The voice was caustic, yet matter-of-fact. He felt a rough hand grasp the Makarov, then forcefully remove it from his hand. He turned his head out of the dirt and leaves to breathe, only to find himself staring into the barrel of the officer's gun. He tried to look away, but the officer buried his knee further into his back. A hand took hold of his hair and jammed his head into the ground. His neck crackled in protest. He struggled to spit out the dirt in his mouth and felt his lungs beginning to collapse.

"Please . . . let me go."

"Shut-up. Is that your friend up there?" The officer pulled his head up with such force that he could feel the muscles in his neck tear, and the center of his back felt like it was being cut in two. Spasms wracked through him, and he began to choke.

"Yeah. . . ." He felt himself begin to black out.

The officer pulled him by his hair, to his knees, then drove his knee between his shoulder blades. He gasped for air. Streaks of yellows and reds shot through his clenched eyes.

"Call him down here . . . now," the officer growled, smiling derisively. "Or you will both die like the rest."

Marko inhaled, smelling the sourness of his breath and coughed violently. He spat out a spray of bloody saliva and nodded. "Okay," he gasped. He felt the officer's grip loosen, and he gasped for air.

"Tell him!"

Again his hold slackened, and Marko shouted as loudly as he could

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manage. “Celo! Run!”

The officer’s boot heel crashed into the back of his head, a heavy weight struck him in the back and pitched him forward into an abyss . . . and then, everything went black. The searing flash of pain in the back of his neck was what caused him to regain consciousness. He opened his eyes and the world was spinning around. He wanted to scream, but his vocal chords had shut down. He tasted the dark, coppery tang of his own blood in his throat. He coughed and gasped violently, fighting off waves of nausea.

His eyes gradually focused on the officer directly above him. The face was long and narrow, with eyes that were cold and hollow, displaying no emotion—only calculation. He was lying on his back, with the officer’s heavy boot on his chest. A wave of nausea passed over him.

“That was foolish,” the officer snarled. “Because now both of you will die, and you will be first.”

“Why are you doing this?” he half-cried, half-screamed. He swallowed convulsively. His stomach cramped and his body instantly seemed to draw in upon itself in anticipation of what was to come. He peed himself just as he saw the pistol aimed at his head. He closed his eyes to say a prayer . . . any prayer. . . . And then there was a loud noise, shattering the darkness like a clap of thunder. Not one, but two shots, one distinctly louder than the other. Dirt flew onto his face and he crashed to the ground.

I’m dead, he thought. But he could open his eyes and his ears were ringing. He was breathing in shallow, panting gulps. The dirt on his face obscured his vision, and he realized the officer had released him.

“StopStopStopPleaseStop!”

It was Celo’s voice, loud and high-pitched. Desperate. Interrupted by the sounds of fists striking bone and flesh. Everything was in motion. The officer was on top of Celo punching him viciously, relentlessly. A shot rang out, followed by another one soon after, but the second shot sounded different, louder than the first. He scrambled awkwardly to his feet and ran to where he heard Celo’s voice. He found his cousin laying face-up on the ground, wide-eyed and panicked. He was holding his side, blood oozing between his fingers.

The officer was lying beside him.

Marko looked back and could see a group of soldiers assembling at the base of the hill, now surging toward them.

“Celo! Get up! We have to go!” Marko screamed. “They’re coming!”

He was hyperventilating. His bones popped and cracked. Rivulets of pain shot through his neck and back. His face was raw and numb.

Celo was struggling to speak. Blood welled from his badly battered mouth. "Marko . . . go without me . . . I'll be okay."

Marko tugged on his arm. "No! *Get up!* I won't leave you!"

The officer groaned beside them. *He was still alive.*

Where was his pistol?

The panic receded as he flexed and rubbed the circulation back into his hands. He found the shotgun beside Celo and took it in both hands. His head pounded and his mouth was dry from swallowing blood. He swayed heavily, dizzy from the pain shooting through his body.

He looked down at the officer, and could see that he was breathing and his eyes were blinking. His shoulder reflected a mass of dark red in the moonlight.

He heard Celo's faint voice. "I have his pistol!"

Ignoring his cousin, Marko raised the stock of the shotgun to his left shoulder and aimed the barrel at the officer's head.

"Marko! *No!*" Celo gasped.

He pulled the trigger, but it only clicked. He lowered the shotgun to the ground with his good hand, and pumped it to inject another shell. Raising it in a single motion, he pulled the trigger again. The click echoed against the trees.

The officer stared at him, then at Celo with a wide grin. "Thou shalt not kill," he recited.

Celo managed to lift himself to a knee. "The guards, Marko! We don't have time!"

With a stiff, jerky gait, Marko stepped forward, away from his cousin, and reversed his grip on the shotgun as if it were a hammer. He glared at the officer with a hatred he'd never before experienced. *These are the people who took my Pa from me.*

Marko raised the stock of the shotgun above his head with his left hand and brought it crashing down with all his power. There was an audible *CRACK!* as the wooden stock shattered the officer's jaw. He felt the reverberation throughout his entire body. Blood sprayed across his face. Pulling the shotgun away, he looked down and saw the man's body lying on the ground, motionless. He took Celo's arm in his and pulled him to his feet.

"Let's go."

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The darkness of the forest seemed to close in upon them. Using the shotgun as crutch in one hand, grasping Celo's waist with the other, Marko stumbled through the woods along a faint depression, away from the dam. They waited in the woods until the trucks roared past them. Outside the forest and over the ridge, the moon was low and full.

"Do you have the pistol?" Marko asked suddenly.

Celo looked up at him and handed him the officer's pistol.

"No! I mean your Papa's pistol!"

"I thought you had it!" Celo grimaced.

Marko stared back at his cousin blankly, blood and sweat oozing from his hair. He shook his head. "I had the shotgun."

Celo tensed and looked back at the trucks approaching the dam. "If they find it. . . ."

Marko shook his head, anticipating his reaction. "No, we can't go back there. They'll kill us!"

Celo, still holding his wound, looked back at him and reached with his free arm. "Help me up then. We can't rest."

Casting a glance at the horizon as he helped his cousin to his feet, he was suddenly conscious of a terrible fear—raw, intense, and sickening, submerging him like an anchor, made heavier still by overwhelming dread of what was yet to come....