

# The station

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## Thursday

A shabby duffle coat made of faded maroon wool, a mismatched worn out plum cap, washed out grey eyes behind scraped spectacles, a stubble creeping up his hollow cheeks towards his salt-and-pepper scruffy hair, his wrinkled skin reddened by years out under the sun, weather-beaten trousers and a shirt hanging on his thin frame, muddy sandals: everything about the man inspired pity, or wariness, for he looked like a flea-ridden vagabond.

He was sitting over the edge of the desert platform, eyes closed, his head slightly thrown back, breathing slowly and deeply in the last rays of sunshine. Next to him lay a few brushes, an untouched canvas, some driftwood used as a painting palette, one for bright colors, one for black and whites, and a bucket overflowing with tubes of paint.

Today again, he had not painted anything, but that did not worry him in the least. While some artists were terrified at not being able to fill a blank canvas, he knew his own pattern well by now. After years of traveling across the country on the lookout for new landscapes, he was quite aware that there was no forcing his inspiration. Whenever he found something he wanted to paint, he would settle down for some time, take long walks around the place or meditate, memorize every little detail, get lost in the colors and the smells, immerse himself in the particular feeling of the scenery his heart had chosen. And then he would set the canvas up, draw his brush and smear the fabric with pigments. The trance would last a few hours, one day at the most, and then, satisfied, he would pack his work up in the wobbly hand-cart that followed him everywhere, and set off again.

Quite a few art dealers still remembered his early years and the time when his paintings had sold for obscene amounts all around the world, and though his work was not that fashionable anymore, anytime he stopped in a big enough town, he would be able to sell it at a reasonable price. Enough to live comfortably for a few months, not that he needed it, considering he loathed shopping, cities or anything that had to do with being around a

significant amount of people. Which was exactly the reason why, while his bank accounts were every banker's dream, he was haunting the countryside looking like he did not have a penny to call his own. At least his poor appearance was a guarantee that no one in their right mind would try and seek his company, and he reveled in the peacefulness.

"Who the fuck are you? What are you doing here?"

The angry interjection startled him, and he opened his eyes.

A young woman stood before him, her hands on her hips, scowling at him. She was towering over him, her being quite tall for a woman and him having shrunk over the years. Her round glasses and slightly disheveled bun made him feel he was a naughty kid being reprimanded by his schoolteacher. He raised one eyebrow at her, not bothering to answer. After all, he had seen no "Keep out", "Private property" or even "Danger" sign around, so he had no reason to feel guilty.

"Well, you are trespassing, you old geezer. You've no right in hell to be here!"

God, he hated people! Especially noisy people. And arrogant ones. And that girl looked like she belonged to both categories.

In any case, she did not look like she would relent any time soon, so he resolved to stand his ground. Sighing, he waved his hand in the direction of supplies.

"Obviously, I'm a painter. I plan to..."

"Well, I don't give a care in hell, so you'd better beat it. I'm in enough trouble with the cops as it is, I don't need a bloody hobo loitering around. If you drag yourself along the rails over there, you'll reach the town. Now get lost!"

Without further ado, she gathered the shopping bags pooled at her feet, stepped on the run-down platform and went to open the door of the decrepit station. She disappeared inside. When she peeked out again, he was putting his canvas away in his cart. Satisfied, she slammed the door and left him alone in the dusk.

## Friday

She did not open the door before late afternoon, not caring for the heavy rain lashing at the window. When the pane started to shake from the gusts of wind, however, she finally decided to go out to close the blinds. Walking along the wall to stay out of the rain, she pulled on the shutter, and after a short but intense struggle against the wind, she flattened it over the window. She turned around, planning to shut herself inside again, when some strange greenish light caught her eye. She scowled - surely the police would not come and try to evict her in that weather! But the light was unmoving, and appeared quite close too, probably a few yards away from the building. She screwed up her eyes, trying to see through the pouring rain, to no avail: all she could make out was a blur of green just on the other side of the railway, at the foot of the bank.

A raincoat over her shoulders, she ventured under the thick thunder-shower, carefully stepping over the rails toward the mysterious light.

A tent. A one-person green tent next to a small cart covered in tarpaulin. Damned old man, he had tricked her, and tricked her well! Making her think he was leaving, and camping just next to her door the moment she had closed it! Gritting her teeth, she began walking back to the station... And stopped

after a few steps, feeling uneasy at the thought of that old man, probably shivering under his shelter. The fabric would be soaked to the core soon, and the storm might even tear the small tent from the ground during the night.

She sighed heavily, strode back to the tent and scratched the fabric, feeling somewhat ridiculous for caring.

"Oi old man! Get your sorry ass inside before you get drowned like a rat! Don't fancy finding a bloody corpse at my door in the morning..."

The front of the tent opened, and the painter reared his head, obviously quite exasperated.

"What do you want now? I dare say I am not getting in your way in the least, so do leave me alone. My getting wet is none of your business!"

"Come on, don't be a jerk! Sure, I want you to clear off, but since you're still around, I'm sure as hell not gonna leave you out there when it's pissing down. Now get your old crumbly carcass indoors before I drag you myself!"

They exchanged a few more insults, her standing against the wind and the rain, him yelling from inside the tent where he had retreated, both unwilling to yield, lest they might lose their pride. Finally, he relented reluctantly and followed her inside the station, grumbling all the way about impudent youngsters.

## **Saturday**

The next morning found them locked in a glaring contest over the breakfast table.

"You fucking snore like a bloody trooper!" she growled.

"Did you have a nightmare? Poor girl," he sneered.

"What?! What are you on?"

"Well, since you said yesterday you were in trouble with the police, I gathered you would not be too comfortable falling asleep to the snore of a trooper. That is what happens when one has a guilty conscience..."

She banged her fist on the table and stood up rigidly, scowling at him. She then stepped over her chair that had crashed on the floor and stormed out of the room.

He found her weeding her vegetable garden behind the station. He had been looking around for dry wood to start a fire with, but he paused to stare at her, enthralled by the strange scene.

Standing there in the middle of nowhere in her vivid striped pajamas, she was pulling weeds out viciously, and throwing them angrily on a growing heap close by. Her face was frozen in a grimace, tears falling freely from her swollen eyes, furious tears. Each movement sent mud flying around, and each step she took produced a disgusting sucking noise, but she did not seem to care that she was standing ankle-deep in the soaked ground. All along, she was hurling abuse at the offending plants, blaming them for being corrupted, for throwing harmless people out of their homes, for being artists' enemies, from thinking with their wallets instead of using their brains... All in colorful words.

All of a sudden, she felt empty, her anger deserting her. She looked around, distraught. The blood on her hands, mixed with mud, sent a flow of bile up her throat.

A slow clapping behind her had her whirl around. She was tempted to growl at the man leaning against the station, with one eyebrow raised, but her recent performance had left her so drained she could not muster the energy to do so. Instead, she merely staggered toward the building, shrugging when he taunted her:

"So? What was that about?"

The smell of roasting meat lured her out of her retreat a few hours later. Sitting next to the old painter, she sighed.

"The bloody Major plans to kick me out, that's what it's about. Fucking nerve, wanting the place for his shitty self when it's been in my family for three generations. Said he would "send out law enforcement officials", the bastard wanker, if I didn't make myself scare before next week. Asshole!"

"And what do you plan to do about it?"

"What d'you think? I'm staying, and they'll have to bloody drag me out and seal the building off if they want to get rid of me. I'm not gonna let those fucking wankers throw me out of my home without a fight! I'll be packing though, cause those brainless pigs don't give a damn about art, and I sure as hell don't want them getting their dirty fingers on my photos and cameras..."

"True ... Nice photographs by the way," he mumbled.

Humming thoughtfully, he went back to spinning his roasting hare over the fire, and she was left wondering what could be going on in that strange mind of his.

## Sunday

She woke up to the sound of hammering and metal banging. A few rays of light were creeping tentatively through the shutters and a thick coffee smell filled the air. On the other side of the room, the spare bunk was empty, the sleeping bag rolled into a ball at its feet.

She turned over, hiding her head under the pillow, without success. The banging was too loud and there was no way she could go back to sleep. Resigned, she left the warm comfort of the duvet, reached for a mug of coffee and a wool poncho and stepped outside.

Sitting cross-legged on the wooden platform, the painter was pounding happily on scrap metal with a flat rock. He acknowledged her presence with a grunt, not even lifting his head to greet her, his hand methodically beating the iron.

"Hell! What the fuck are you doing? Your mummy hasn't told you to bloody keep it down when people are sleeping? You'd wake up the entire county with your damned banging, bigwigs and hookers all the fucking same! You're a nutcase or just being a jerk on purpose?"

He stopped in the middle of a gesture and slowly set the stone down before turning to face her.

"Madam, I do believe you have a language problem. Now, if you could stop swearing like a farm girl and bring me any tool you have around, I would deeply appreciate it. A hammer would certainly be more suited for this than



the stone I'm currently using."

For a few seconds, she stood there, eyes wide and mouth hanging, utterly baffled by his nerves as he went back to ignoring her and started beating the metal again. And then, she sniffed haughtily and slammed the door as she stomped back inside. Quite a few bangs and screeches later, curiosity got the better of her and, swallowing her pride, she joined him again outside.

This time, he was bending over the rails, digging under them, a few tens of metres away from the station. Next to him lay a strange metal thingy, somewhat akin to a rake, apparently the result of the previous hammering. As she hovered next to him, unsure what to say, he slipped the rake across the railway, wedging its ends in the holes he had dug.

"Err, what are you doing?"

"This, my young lady, is a makeshift cheval-de-frise<sup>1</sup>," he said, looking proudly at his work. "Now, if you do not plan to provide me with appropriate tools, I suggest you at least let me work in peace."

His last sentence held none of the half-aggressive, half-friendly banter that had filled their afternoon the day before, only frosty complacency, maybe even contempt. She frowned. She had indeed been rude, so maybe she deserved the cold treatment, but, then, his behavior had not been the best either, waking her up at dawn like this...

He was now carrying dead branches over from the neighbouring bosque to the rake, and she really wanted to know what all that was about. She sighed and went to fetch the trunk where she kept her tools from under the station platform. She dragged it to the old man, threw its lid open, spilled

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<sup>1</sup>Cheval-de-frise: A portable frame covered with spikes or spears, used to stop vehicles on a road.

its content on the floor in a grudging peace-offering. He looked at her, and then at the mess on the ground, and his mouth stretched into a rictus.

"Nice collection! A shovel, a mallet, wire, a soldering iron... Why a soldering iron when you do not have electricity, I wonder? Anyway, thank you, they are going to be most useful."

"Are you gonna spill the beans yet?"

"Why, isn't it obvious? I am setting up a barricade. Here, take the hand-saw and go cut those shrubs down, make yourself useful."

Before she could argue or ask any more questions, he tutted:

"Talk less, work more! If you insist I explain, prove yourself first, soldier!"

And at that, he shouldered the shovel and strode toward the station.

They had spent the day piling up heaps of wood and barbed wire and digging traps all around the station, and were now sitting in companionship, sipping their vegetable soup. As the sun set, he began his tale.

"It was during the war. I had been tricked into enrolling with some friends of mine, and after a quick parody of training, they had sent us to hold some outpost in the maquis. At the bottom of a valley, and with the worst possible visibility, it was a defender's nightmare. In truth, it was just a crumbling shack, but they told us it was crucial in the proceedings of the war.

So here we were, eight young men between eighteen and twenty-five, in the

middle of nowhere, with one spare riffle and a few hundred bullets, supposed to fend off an army. What a joke!

One of us was a civil engineer, and he knew his trade well. When we realized we had next to no chance to get out of there alive, he set us to work. The hut was a remainder of a railway project abandoned at the start of the war. The rails had never reached the valley, but the shed was full of materials and tools. For days, we laid traps around, up to the top of the hills, waiting for the enemy."

"And...?" she prompted, holding her breath.

Standing up, he shrugged.

"They never came... More than a month after we had settled there, we had to rescue a shepherd from one of our pits, and he told us the war was over. The higher-ups had forgotten about us altogether, those fools... Stupid story, isn't it?"

"So you are trying to get even. They're not the same enemy, but still, you're reenacting that time, you want to take your revenge on life? Well, as long as we kick their ass, fine by me, mate!"

As he made way toward the station, he graced her with a smile, his very first honest smile in years.

**Monday**

**Tuesday**

**Wednesday**

They were bored.

After three days of intense hammering, digging, and fiddling, they had run out of ideas and material. They were as ready as they would ever be.

The Major's ultimatum had been on Sunday, that day when the old painter had started his trick frenzy. Every moment since then had been suspended time. They were packed, ready to trigger the traps, give the police a rough time and take to their heels before they had a chance to retaliate.

The weather was heavy, as was the silence, as they sat on the top of the bank, watching the railway. He was mindlessly playing on a loose thread of his vest. A lizard flashed next to them and dove under a rock. When she pulled her peeling off sole for the umpteenth time, he grunted and stood up.

"That's enough! I will not be mocked again! If they do not deign to come to us, we will go to them..."

Without a second thought, he hurtled down the hill and vigorously grabbed his handcart, pushing it on the railway line. He was already disappearing behind the barricade they had built when he turned around and shouted across to her, who was still sitting on the grass, gaping at him.

"Oh, close your mouth, will you! It would not do for you to suffocate because of a fly... Move! The day will not wait for us."

Struggling to her feet, she stumbled down to the station, retrieved her own rucksack and rushed after him.

When they reached town, the sun was low in the sky, and she felt she was going to throttle him if he went on mumbling about people not honouring their commitments and what he would do to them, from cursing their descendants up to the hundredth generation, to feeding them their boiled testicles. Thankfully, she did not have to resort to such violence, as he suddenly fell silent.

At that moment, she realized the street seemed stuck in an eerie quietness. They were alone, utterly and indisputably alone. Grabbing her companion's sleeve, she tugged him along as she went to check the closest shop.

The door was unlocked, and the lights were on, but the shop was empty. As was the backroom. And the next shop. And the city hall. No one answered when she tried to ring random bells. No one answered when she called the emergency number from a deserted phone booth. No one answered when she screamed to the top of her lungs on the city main square.

They faced each other. Her eyes were asking for answers he did not have. His eyes were burning in anger and frustration, from being deprived of his enemy once again. He spat, and swore.

"Fuck."