



# SHADOW MARCH



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The past never forgets

The sky was stained with smoke. Even at dawn, a low gray hung over the town like a warning. From his window, he could see the soft glow of distant fires factories, maybe, or the remains of last night's drills. Sirens had stopped a few hours ago, but the silence didn't feel safe. It just meant waiting.

He sat on the edge of the bed, boots on the floor, hands resting heavy on his knees. The uniform hung on the chair, stiff and clean, a strange contrast to the ruined sky outside.

Behind him, the door opened with a soft creak.

He turned.

She stood in the doorway, her hands clasped in front of her, trying to smile. A strand of hair had fallen across her face, and her eyes red around the edges searched for him quietly.

She was a girl with one of the most beautiful smiles quiet, almost shy, but never afraid to speak. There was something open about her, the way she stood, the way her kindness showed before her words. Her eyes were soft and round, full of patience. A small nose, a circle-shaped face, black hair wrapped beneath a light scarf. Her dress was long and sleeved, patterned with small white flowers, simple and lovely in a way that made her feel calm in a storm.

She stepped forward, hesitated for half a second, then rushed to him. The floor cracked beneath her feet, but she didn't slow down. She threw her arms around him, holding tight, her face buried against his shoulder. Her breath was shaky, her eyes full of tears but none fell.

"Good morning, soldier," she whispered, pulling back just enough to salute him with a trembling smile.

He smiled wider than he had in days. She reached for his hand and gave it a small squeeze.

"Ready for your uniform?" she asked.

He didn't answer. He was just happy to see her. Still holding her hand, he stood, slowly, and stepped close.

She picked up the uniform from the chair, unfolding it carefully. He turned toward her, and without a word, she helped him dress adjusting the collar, fixing the buttons, smoothing out the sleeves. They looked at each other the whole time.

Neither one said what they were thinking. But they didn't need to.

He kissed her gently on the forehead, then turned and walked toward the bathroom. She sat down quietly on the edge of the bed, her hands folded in her lap.

"I brought bread this morning," she said softly. "From Uncle Sam's bakery. He told me he was a soldier once, too."

Her voice carried warmth, but outside, the distant sounds of the town reminded her how fragile peace was.

From the bathroom, he heard her words growing faint as he turned on the tap. Cold water spluttered out, splashing over his face. He stared into the cracked mirror dark and broken but in its shards, he saw every version of himself: the child, the teenager, and the man he had become.

He leaned closer to the cracked mirror, cold water still dripping from his face. The fractured glass split his reflection into jagged pieces each shard holding a piece of his story.

In one, he saw himself as a boy, running through fields under open skies, laughter light and free.

Another showed a younger man, tense and uncertain, reading a letter that changed everything.

The hardest shard held the present the battlefields, smoke, and the faces of friends lost in the mud and fire.

Joseph blinked, the weight of memories pressing down. This was the second time he'd gone to war. The first had taken so much. Now, the fear still lingered but so did something else. Resolve.

A voice cut through the quiet.

"Captain Joseph! Report in."

He leaned back, letting out a heavy sigh that she could hear clearly.

"Everything okay, Jos?" she asked softly.

"All good," he replied, wiping his face and stepping out of the bathroom.

She sat on the bed, holding a photo. Turning it toward him, she said, "Do you remember this night? Our engagement day."

He looked at the picture her, his father, and mother smiling together and smiled.

"Of course. Like it was yesterday," he said quietly.

She smiled back.

Just then, his mother called from the other room, "Come on, you two. Breakfast is ready."

She stood up and said, "Let's go."

Joseph slung his large military bag over his back and took her hand. Together, they walked downstairs.

In the kitchen, his mother smiled warmly. His father sat nearby a grand old man whose face looked stern but carried a quiet pride.

His mother, apron tied, was setting the table. "Look at my boy," she said softly.

His father folded his newspaper and nodded. "Ready, soldier?"

Joseph smiled back. "Yes, sir."

"Good bread today," his mother added, glancing at her daughter-in-law.

They exchanged a quiet smile.

"Sit, sit," his mother urged them both.

They sat down and ate, sharing smiles and quiet conversation. The warmth of the moment wrapped around them all engaged in a rare calm before the storm.

Suddenly, a patrol horn blared outside the door, breaking the peace.

Joseph stood quickly. "Thank you for this breakfast," he said softly. He kissed his mother on the cheek, ready to leave.

They all rose with him. His mother stepped forward and hugged him tightly, tears running silently down her face.

His father grasped Joseph's hand firmly, shook it, and gave a sharp salute.

Together, they moved toward the door. His father covered his face, trying to hide the weight of his sorrow. His mother's quiet crying filled the room as Joseph stepped outside.

As he stepped toward the last truck, a few of his friends already seated called out to him.

"Look who's finally joining the war!" one grinned, trying to keep it light.

Another stood and gave him a playful salute. "Bout time, soldier."

Joseph laughed softly, shaking hands with each of them. The grip was real. So was the look in their eyes. Jokes were easier than fear.

Someone patted the empty seat beside them. "Come on, Jos. Last one in's the lucky one."

He climbed up slowly, turned to face the crowd once more. That's when he saw it—his home. His family. The door still open.

He climbed up slowly, turned to face the crowd once more. That's when he saw it—his home. His family. The door still open.

His eyes locked onto them and wouldn't let go. His mother, hands pressed to her mouth, trying to be strong. His father, stiff and proud, a salute half-raised. And her his fiancée standing between them, eyes shining, smile trembling.

His gaze stayed on them as the truck began to move. The wheels rolled forward, slow at first. He didn't wave yet. He just watched.

Watched as they stood in the doorway, holding on to each other. Watched as they started to shrink in the distance.

Even when the crowd grew thicker around him even when the voices and flags swelled—his eyes stayed on that door until it disappeared.

As the trucks rolled deeper into town, the chant spread like fire.

"March on, march on, brave and strong!"

Doors flew open on every block. Families poured into the streets. Some clutched coats, some wore sleep still in their eyes, but all came out.

"To war you go, to right the wrong!"

Windows slammed open above. People leaned out from balconies and rooftops, flags in hand, scarves waving like flames.

A young boy ran beside the last truck, shouting until he ran out of air. A woman wept quietly near a lamp post, her hands shaking in prayer.

"For peace, for home, for those long gone!"

One soldier, late and out of breath, sprinted from the corner with his rifle slung and pack bouncing. The crowd parted for him cheering as he leapt onto the last truck, landing beside Joseph.

Another young man climbed in just ahead, stopping only to kiss his little sister's forehead before turning away.

"March on, march on!"

It wasn't celebration. It was ritual. A whole town stitching its hope and heartbreak into every word.

They all knew what war meant. They had seen boys return broken. And others not at all.

But still they sang. They gave their sons, their brothers, their fiancés.

And the chant didn't stop. It followed the trucks. It followed Joseph.

Even after the street ended. Even when the town was no longer in sight.

The town faded behind them, but the chant still echoed in their heads. The road stretched ahead wet, cracked, and quiet.

Inside the truck, no one spoke for a while. Just the sound of tires over gravel, and the low hum of engines.

Then someone broke the silence.

"Anyone else's stomach feel like it's twisting itself in knots?" murmured the boy across from Joseph. The others chuckled softly.

One of them reached into his coat, pulled out a small bottle. "For the nerves," he said, grinning.

They passed it around, one by one. No big toasts. Just quiet sips. Nods. A shared look.

Joseph took his turn, wiped the rim, and handed it on.

"You think we'll see action the first week?" another asked.

"Hope not," someone answered. "But I didn't pack my lucky socks for nothing."

A laugh rolled through the truck. Tired, real.

They kept talking. Jokes about food. Bets on who'd cry first. Wild guesses about what their camp would look like.

None of it eased the weight. But it helped.

Joseph looked across at the man beside him his closest friend since childhood. "You good?" he asked, voice low. "How did she take it your wife?"

His friend didn't answer right away. Just stared at the floor of the truck, hands resting on his knees.

"You know," he finally said, with a half-smile that didn't reach his eyes, "war is war. We have to fight for them."

Joseph nodded, his own smile fading. "Yeah," he said quietly. He reached over and patted his friend's back firm, steady.

Then, from the front of the truck, someone suddenly stood and clapped twice. "Enough of this gloomy stuff!" he shouted.

He raised a fist and started a new chant louder, rowdier, meant to shake off the fear.

"Steel and soul, we march as one!"

Another voice joined in.

"Till the bloody war is done!"

More laughter. More shouting. Boots stamped the metal floor. The truck filled with voices again.

Joseph leaned back, looking out at the gray sky rolling above the trees.

And he joined in.

"Steel and soul, we march as one!"

"Till the bloody war is done!"



"We won't break, we won't run—"  
"Not till peace is truly won!"

The first chant lit a spark. Another soldier picked up the beat, louder this time.

"Raise your heads, don't look down—"  
"We wear the boots, not the crown!"  
"Dust and fire, smoke and pain—"  
"Still we'll walk through war and flame!"

Laughter burst out as someone banged the side of the truck in rhythm. Others stomped their feet to keep the beat. The sound bounced around the walls like a drumline in motion.

"March with blood, march with pride—"  
"For the ones we hold inside!"  
"Steel and soul, we march as one!"

Voices swelled—no longer just the loud ones. Even the quietest soldiers joined in, some with fists to their chests, some with eyes shut.

And the chant kept going, steady and rough, holding back the fear for just a little longer.

After the long, tense drive, the convoy finally reached the camp. Soldiers climbed down, their boots hitting the dusty ground with a mix of relief and purpose. They unpacked gear, checked weapons, and helped one another prepare.

Joseph and his friend stuck close, moving through the lines together, steady and calm as they loaded their packs. The soldiers formed ranks, standing shoulder to shoulder, waiting for orders.

The commanding officer's voice cut through the noise, clear and sharp. Orders were given march to the battlefield, hold the line, push forward.

Joseph's group gathered tightly, smiling despite the weight of what lay ahead.

"We got this," one friend said, clapping Joseph on the back. "Let's show them what we're made of."

Laughter bubbled up as they walked out, teasing Joseph like always.

"Look at Joseph he looks scared!" someone joked.

They nudged each other, laughing and joking, the familiar warmth of friendship holding the fear at bay.

Then the march began. The ground shook beneath their boots. The fight started raw, brutal, and alive.

The war stretched on like a nightmare that refused to end. Hours turned into an endless blur of chaos and fear. Joseph's boots sank deep into mud that clung like glue, heavy with the stench of death and decay. Every step was a fight just to keep moving.

Explosions shattered the air without warning, each one ripping the ground apart with a roar so loud it seemed to shake the very sky. Fire bloomed in sudden bursts flames licking the torn earth, swallowing everything in orange and black smoke. The heat burned their faces even through the grime and sweat. The ground trembled beneath them, sending cracks racing through the shattered trees.

Gunfire cut through the chaos like angry hail. Bullets whistled past ears, kicking up dirt and splinters. Every crack and pop was a countdown to danger, a reminder that death could come from any direction. Joseph ducked behind a shattered wall, heart pounding so loud it nearly drowned the screams around him.

Friends were falling some hit instantly, their bodies collapsing into the mud, eyes wide with shock. Others cried out in pain, clutching limbs torn open or bleeding from shattered skin. Joseph saw one friend clutch his chest, blood blossoming like a dark flower on his uniform. The screams were raw, desperate then silence.

Smoke and dust filled the air, stinging their eyes and choking their lungs. Joseph coughed, tasting the bitter grit on his tongue. The sky was no longer visible, just a thick, swirling gray that swallowed light and hope alike.

Every moment was raw terror. The smell of burning flesh mixed with wet earth and sweat. Hands trembled as Joseph reloaded his rifle, fingers slick with blood and mud. The bodies of the fallen were everywhere friends, strangers, boys barely old enough to hold a gun.

Time lost meaning. There was only the roar of war, the flash of explosions, the staccato of gunfire, the cries of pain and loss. Joseph's mind screamed to stop, but his body forced him forward each step a battle against the horror surrounding him.

At times, between the chaos, he caught glimpses of the soldiers around him faces pale, eyes wide with shock, lips trembling. Some whispered prayers, others wept silently, while others kept fighting as if their lives depended on it because they did.

The fire from grenades and bombs threw eerie shadows over the broken earth. Flames swallowed the ruins of trees and buildings, turning the battlefield into a hellscape of burning wood and shattered stone. Joseph's skin felt raw, his clothes soaked in sweat and dirt.

As the hours dragged on, exhaustion took hold legs aching, lungs burning, body trembling. Yet the fight never stopped. Friends helped each other up, whispered quick words of courage, shared water or bandages when they could. But more fell, and the weight of loss pressed heavier on Joseph's heart.

When finally the enemy faltered, retreating into the smoke and shadow, the silence left behind was deafening. The cost was written in blood and broken bodies scattered across the scarred land.

Joseph stood, shaking, bloodied and broken not just in body, but in soul. The nightmare had ended, but the scars would never fade. The war was no longer a distant fear it was a living horror burned into his very being.

The bullet hit his friend without warning. He collapsed, blood soaking his chest, eyes pleading. Joseph dragged him behind a broken wall, heart pounding. His friend gasped, "Joseph... tell my wife... tell my wife..." again and again, voice weak but desperate. Joseph shook his head, tears falling, whispering, "I will, I will..." but the words caught in his throat. He held him close, crying silently, rocking him like a child. When his friend finally went still, Joseph stayed there, pressed against the cold body, tears soaking his uniform, lost in grief.

After hours turned to days, the fighting finally slowed. Victory became clear, but the cost was heavy. Joseph and the others celebrated quietly smiling, hugging, but their eyes held sadness. They carried their fallen friend carefully, the weight of loss pressing down on them all. Joseph smiled with the others, but inside, something had changed. He wasn't the same haunted by the silence left where his friend once was. The war was over, but the pain remained.

As they made their way back to camp, Joseph was frozen shaking, blood smeared on his hands. Memories of the battle flashed relentlessly in his mind. He couldn't believe what had happened. Quietly, he muttered to himself, lost in the nightmare that still clung to him.

At the camp, soldiers were settling in some heading to the medical tents, others resting in quiet corners. Joseph moved slowly through the chaos, drawn toward his friend's lifeless body. Kneeling beside him, he reached out, voice barely above a whisper.

"Hey... you still with me?" he asked, eyes searching the still face. "You're gonna be okay. You have to be."

He swallowed hard, fighting back tears. "Tell my wife... I couldn't... I couldn't tell her."

His hand trembled as he brushed dirt from his friend's cheek. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Joseph leaned his forehead against the cold skin, his voice cracking. "Please... wake up. Don't leave me."

Around him, life moved on, but Joseph stayed frozen, talking to a friend who couldn't answer, caught between hope and heartbreak.

As dawn broke, Joseph sat frozen beside his friend's still body. One by one, the others found him quietly gathering around, placing a steady hand on his shoulder, gently pulling him to his feet.

"We won," one said softly. "Come on, Joseph. Time to celebrate."

They led him toward the bonfire where the camp had gathered, the firelight flickering against tired faces. Someone handed him a beer. Joseph took it without really seeing, his mind still heavy with loss.

Around the fire, the soldiers laughed and sang, their voices rising with relief and triumph. But Joseph's smile was forced, his heart torn between the weight of victory and the emptiness left by his friend's absence.

The fire crackled, throwing sparks into the early morning haze. Laughter echoed from every corner of the camp men clinking bottles, shouting songs, some dancing, others collapsing in relief. But to Joseph, it was all far away.

The cheers came in waves, muffled like underwater sounds. His head buzzed, a high, sharp ringing buried behind his ears. Every face he looked at blurred for a second, then split into two. His legs swayed beneath him.

He stood by the fire, but the warmth barely touched him. The flames flickered—then suddenly twisted into the burst of a grenade. He blinked. Gone. Just fire again.

Someone patted his back. He flinched. For a moment, it wasn't a hand it was blood, warm and thick.

Laughter turned to gunshots. Cheers into screams. The crackling wood morphed into the rattle of rifles. Joseph's breath caught. His eyes scanned the crowd but he didn't see soldiers anymore. He saw his friend. He saw the battlefield. He saw the mud.

Then his family. His mother's smile. His father's folded newspaper. Her soft voice, "Good morning, soldier."

He blinked again. The world swayed. The beer in his hand dropped. He didn't notice.

He stood there, frozen, shaking slightly, the firelight painting shadows over his pale face. Around him, they celebrated. Inside him, it hadn't ended.

After hours of standing still, eyes wide and hollow, the weight of everything pressed tighter around Joseph. The laughter faded, the voices dimmed, and in the echo of it all he heard it.

That single gunshot.

Not real. Not now. But loud enough in his head to drop him.

It was the shot. *The* shot. The one that tore through his friend's chest. The one he couldn't forget, no matter how deep he buried it.

Joseph staggered, knees giving way. The beer slipped from his hand and spilled into the dirt, fizzing and forgotten.

He fell hard on his back, breath gone, eyes staring up into the dawn sky. The moon hung above like a quiet witness, pale and still. And in its cold glow, he saw his friend's face calm, almost smiling, the way he looked before the war started.

Joseph's eyes fluttered, then closed.

Silence.

Joseph blinked against a pale sky.

Thin clouds drifted slow above him, and the sun a weak, shivering thing pressed light into his eyes. It stung. He turned his head slightly, the dirt cool against his skin.

He didn't move at first. Just breathed.

A quiet wind passed over, brushing dust across his cheek. No voices. No shouting. No crack of guns. Only the soft sigh of air.

Then he tried to sit up.

The dizziness hit hard, like a wave slamming into the back of his skull. The world tilted. His stomach turned. He fell back, arms trembling.

For a moment, he just lay there, eyes half open, watching the clouds crawl across the broken sky.

He pushed himself up slowly, elbows shaking, breath short.

His head throbbed as if something had cracked open inside. He sat there for a long time, hands pressed against his forehead, trying to gather what little strength he had.

He didn't know how many days had passed. Could've been one. Could've been ten. Time felt like a fog wrapped tight around his mind.

Finally, he looked up.

Stillness.

No tents. No beds. No ash from the fire. No scattered bags or gear. Just trees. Just the soft hush of wind moving through them.

He stood in the middle of where the camp should've been should've been but it was gone. All of it.

Like it had never been there at all.

Joseph stood still for a moment, then cupped his hands around his mouth and called out—quietly at first.

"Marco...?"

No answer.

"Dan?"

Only the trees replied, their rustling leaves carrying his voice back to him like a ghost.

He tried again, louder this time, voice cracking.

"Where are you?"

Nothing but his own echo.

"They couldn't have left me. Not without me," he muttered, his voice shaking now.  
"They wouldn't."

He took a step. Then another.

And then he started walking through the tall grass, past the trees eyes scanning the silence, heart pounding, looking for anything. Anyone.

He found no one.

Joseph ran for hours. His soldier's feet blistered and heavy. Hunger clawed at his gut. Thirst cracked his lips. The war echoed in his head shots, screams, smoke.

Still, he kept going.

Until, at last, he saw it.

A broken-down car on the side of the road.

He stumbled toward it, barely standing. "Thank you... thank you," he muttered, tears in his voice.

An old man stepped out, eyes narrowing in confusion. His wife stayed seated, watching from inside.

"Are you alright, son?" the man asked gently.

Joseph tried to explain, words falling out too fast—how he was lost, the battle, the silence, the missing camp, his friend...

The old man didn't speak right away. Just looked at him. Like he wasn't sure if Joseph was real or if he was broken.

But his eyes softened. He nodded, slow. "Let's get you some water."

The old man handed Joseph a bottle of water. As Joseph drank, the man peered inside the car, muttering, "I think I got the problem."

He worked quietly for a few minutes. Joseph watched, anxious.

Finally, Joseph asked, "Where are you going?"

The man glanced at him but didn't fully trust him with details. "City, son," he said simply.

Joseph's voice trembled. "Can... can I come with you, please, sir?"

The man looked at his worried wife, then back to Joseph.

"Alright," he said, softly. "But quietly. Go to the back."

Joseph moved to the back of the car, sat down, heart pounding as the engine rumbled to life and they started driving.

They asked, "Where are you from, son?"

Joseph answered, "The city. I was at war."

The man and his wife exchanged confused looks.

"Son, rest your head if you can," the man said kindly.

"I'm okay," Joseph replied quietly, then asked, "How did you get through the war?"

No answer came just silence.

Joseph felt the quiet settle around him and laid his head back.

Hours later, a gentle hand patted his head.

"The city," the man said softly.

Joseph woke up, unsure where he was but feeling slightly more grounded.

Joseph stepped out of the car, still shaky and confused. He started running, stumbling and trembling as confusion surrounded him.

He spotted Uncle Sam holding bread and called out, "Uncle, where are my friends? They left me at the camp."

Uncle Sam looked puzzled. "They're at the bar, drinking like always. Are you okay? What's with the uniform? Are you playing around?"

Joseph froze for a moment, his mind slipping back into the war's chaos.

Joseph ran to the bar, heart pounding, breath heavy. He stopped at the door, eyes wild, clothes still stained from the war.



"Joseph! Hey, where have you been? Slept hard, come join us!" one friend called out, smiling and relaxed in casual clothes.

"How dare you leave me!" Joseph shouted, voice cracking. "Leave me!"

The laughter died instantly.

"What's with the uniform? Trying to scare us?" another asked, eyes narrowing.

Joseph opened his mouth to speak but no words came out. Confused and overwhelmed, he turned and ran out of the bar confused and muttering to himself. People watched him, whispering, "Is he crazy?"

He sprinted to his fiancé's house and started banging on the door. When she opened it, she stared at him as if he were a ghost.

He hugged her tightly, and she hugged him back.

"How are you?" she asked softly.

"I'm just... back," he said, his voice shaky.

She didn't know what to say. "Joseph, are you okay? You're scaring me. What's happening?"

"I just got back. Back from all of it," he whispered.

She squeezed his hand gently. "Calm down. Let's go to your house."

She held his hand, trying to steady him.

They began walking slowly toward Jos's house. The morning was quiet, but his thoughts were loud.

"Why is everyone acting so strange?" he muttered. "As if it never happened."

Sha looked at him, puzzled. "What is it you mean by that?"

He stopped and turned to face her. His voice was low, hurt. "Not you too. I can bear it from others. From my friends. From the town. But not from you, Sha."

She stepped closer, her eyes soft with worry. "Jos... what has become of you this morning? You speak in riddles, and wear your sorrow like a heavy coat. Tell me, what troubles your mind so deeply?"

His eyes searched hers, and for a moment, he didn't speak. Then he said, "I was there, Sha. I lived the war. The smoke, the fire, the cries of dying men. And now, I walk through streets that smile like nothing ever was."

"The war was real," Jos muttered, voice trembling. "It was deadly. I lost him, Sha. Elias... my good old friend. He died in my arms."

Sha looked at him, her face softening but her eyes full of worry. "Elias? Jos, I saw him this morning. He was with me—right there on the stairs, talking to his wife."

Jos froze. The world tilted again.

"What?" he whispered.

Sha stepped closer, voice low and calm. "I think you're not okay. Let's get you home."

They walked in silence, his thoughts racing, his legs barely holding him up.

At the door, Sha knocked. His mother opened it with a frown.

"Where did you sneak off to this morning? And what's with the uniform? Are you trying to cosplay for a play or something?" she said.

His father peeked from behind, brows furrowed. "Look at you. Dirt all over. Go wash up."

Jos stood still, every word cutting deeper.

Then, without a sound, he collapsed falling to his knees as the confusion swallowed him whole. His head in his hands, breath shallow, the world spinning too fast to hold on.

Jos woke up suddenly, breathing hard. His clothes were clean, fresh not a single stain or tear. No dirt, no blood. He sat up on the bed, hands shaking. The memories rushed in the war, the shots, Elias falling. It hit him like a wave.

He stood, stumbling toward the bathroom. Cold light, cold tiles. He turned on the tap and splashed icy water on his face, gripping the sink. Still shaking. Still there.

Joseph stared into the cracked mirror, his breath caught in his throat. At first, he saw only a blurry face, but then the image sharpened—it wasn't him. It was Elias. His friend. The man he thought was gone.

A sharp gasp escaped his lips. His hands trembled, and his heart hammered loud in the quiet bathroom. For a moment, everything felt frozen, like time had stopped.

He blinked, but the reflection didn't change. Elias stared back at him, calm and steady, as if waiting for Joseph to understand.

Joseph swallowed hard, the weight of what he saw pressing down on him. Slowly, he turned away, the room spinning slightly, and rushed out of the bathroom.

Joseph went down the stairs. His mother smiled warmly, "Here is my boy, sit down."

He saw his fiancée and father at the table.

But Joseph didn't sit. He shouted, "The war! The war! What happened to me? Why is everyone acting like it never happened? I was there. My friend died Elias, Elias. He died. Tell my wife—" He couldn't finish.

The laughter stopped.

His father's face hardened. "Stop this. No one died. No war. No war. Stop this nonsense!"

He slammed the table hard. Plates and bread fell to the floor. Everyone froze.

His father stormed out.

His fiancée and mother quietly picked up the broken pieces and started washing dishes.

She approached Joseph softly. "Maybe you should see a doctor."

His smile faded. Confused, he put on his coat and walked out.

He saw his father outside but didn't stop walking .

Joseph stepped onto the cracked sidewalk, his worn coat pulled tight against the chill. Heads slowly turned as he passed, eyes following the strange figure in the old uniform. Whispers floated behind him some curious, some pitying. An old woman paused on her porch, clutching her shawl, her gaze softening as if she saw a lost soul. Children stopped playing, watching him with wide eyes. But no one stepped forward to speak.

Further down the street, Joseph's steps faltered as a group of men at the café glanced up. One of them nudged his friend, nodding toward Joseph. Their eyes were heavy with sympathy, but no words came. A young woman at a nearby market offered him a hesitant smile, but quickly looked away. The weight of unseen distance hung between him and everyone else, like an invisible wall no one dared cross.

Laughter erupted around Joseph, sharp and loud. People pointed at him, whispering cruel jokes. Some sneered, others shook their heads, but no one came near. The sound felt like a weight pressing down, making him shrink inside himself.

Joseph clutched his head, whispering, "Shut up, shut up," trying to drown out the laughter. Then he whispered louder, "Wake up, Joseph. Wake up." His eyes squeezed shut as he stood frozen in the middle of the street. Suddenly, a car sped past, its horn blaring inches from him. The shock made him stagger back, heart pounding.

Joseph blinked against the bright headlights as the car roared past. He stumbled back to the curb, pressing himself against the cold wall to steady his breath. Without a second thought, he turned and sprinted toward the edge of the forest, rain slick beneath his feet, desperate to escape the noise and the laughter behind him.

The storm caught up to him, rain pouring down hard, soaking his face and clothes. But Joseph didn't slow down. He pushed deeper into the forest, farther than most would dare to go, where shadows grew thick and silence ruled. The cold drops slid down his skin, but he kept moving, lost in a world that felt more real than the one he'd left behind.

The storm caught up to him, rain pouring down hard, soaking his face and clothes. But Joseph didn't slow down. He pushed deeper into the forest, farther than most would dare to go, where shadows grew thick and silence ruled. The cold drops slid down his skin, but he kept moving, lost in a world that felt more real than the one he'd left behind.

His fingers fumbled inside his chest pocket, searching for something. Finally, he pulled out a small, battered pin and a folded piece of paper, slick with rain. His eyes locked onto the words printed inside:

Field Engineer, Lieutenant 3 — Eng. Alemayhue.

His breath hitched as the name hit him like a punch. He whispered it, voice barely audible over the storm's roar.

"Alemayhue... Alemayhue..."

His legs wobbled, the forest spinning around him. He lurched forward, hands slamming into the rough bark of a nearby tree, the splinters biting into his palms. His heart hammered violently, each beat echoing in his ears, drowning out the thunder. The rain blurred his vision, tears mixing with the downpour, but the name kept echoing haunting, relentless.

Then, as if his body gave out, the pin slipped from his grasp, falling with a soft thud onto the soaked earth. His knees buckled. Time slowed as his head crashed against the tree trunk, the sharp impact exploding in pain. The world tilted violently, colors draining away as shadows clawed at the edges of his sight.

And then silence.

The storm faded. The forest disappeared. Joseph lay there, caught in the fragile edge between waking and slipping away, trapped in the first fragile stage of unconsciousness.

Joseph's eyes fluttered open, the storm's roar replaced by a high-pitched ringing that filled his ears. Blinking against a blinding white light, he tried to focus but the noise grew louder, drowning out everything else. The world around him blurred and shifted, fading into a haze of static.

The ringing softened, but never fully disappeared.

The light dimmed, leaving only the endless hum of static as Joseph's vision faded.