

DANCER

He didn't want to work today. Neither did he yesterday, nor the day before yesterday. Tomorrow, too, he won't want to. For a month now, since he first saw Nada, he only wanted one thing - to be with her, talk to her and not talk to her, make love to her and not make love to her; to see her and not to see her, but then at least to hear her, and if not to hear, then inhale her smell, and if not to inhale, then imagine inhaling...

Fraiser never talked neither to himself nor to Nada about love. He was monogamous, and in the not-too-distant past he used to have a wife whom he loved and was about to return to. She was raising his children, whom he tried not to think about, since such memories caused acute bouts of tenderness, which not in the best way affected his combat readiness. Fraiser considered his feelings for Nada to be a matter of business, a campaign, and therefore showed restraint, with a tinge of formality. It should pass soon, he hoped.

In the meantime, the joys of commanding and delights of administration did not, as usual, enthrall him, and he tried to leave for home early. He didn't call for anyone, and if he did, he almost always canceled and rescheduled councils and meetings, hadn't checked upon the industrial park or the barracks for a long time, hadn't dropped by at the soldiers' kitchen or the medical unit. This was already becoming noticeable, senior officers were exchanging glances, sergeants were whispering, rumors began spreading among the rank and file about the transfer of the commander, either with a demotion, or with a promotion to the Reserve Army, and some shell-shocked sucker or, on the contrary, a perfectly healthy staff general from the Center replacing him, under whom serving will become either even harder, or, conversely, much easier.

Nevertheless, Fraiser decided to receive Dancer, since a conversation with him couldn't be too difficult. This juicy fat man, covered with wet eczema, started out as a sports journalist, and would've likely ended as one, if not for somehow accidentally getting into a fight with some Chechens while waiting in a line at a nightclub and being so shocked that he suddenly churned out a book about the Chechen War and wrote it so badly, with such abysmal incompetency and, consequently, mass appeal that it instantly became a bestseller. It soon turned out that he didn't actually get into a fight with a crowd of Chechens, but with a single Mordvin, and that the fight was one-sided, without reciprocity, that is, the Mordvin was the one beating him up, while the journalist cringed at every blow and called the police with his piglike voice. But the truth, as you know, does not affect public opinion, and the author of the book nevertheless secured himself a reputation of someone experienced who knows life from the inside out, someone versed in military affairs and even somewhat heroic. He began to get invited to all kinds of militaristic talk shows, and as he participated in these he gradually started believing in his own fictitious fate. He so inflamed himself in these disputes, showed so much televisual courage, put such a fear into his imaginary enemies that from his own speeches he somewhat lost his mind. Struck by fantasies of bravery, the brain inside his head stalled like an engine that was filled with champagne instead of gasoline. Not noticing that now he no longer thinks with his brain, but exclusively with his marrow, the popular writer came up with the idea of participating in a real war. He wanted to be like Aeschylus, Cervantes, Tolstoy, Malraux - real soldiers who had mastered the sword just as well as the pen.

Arriving as a volunteer in the Donbass, he took on the formidable pseudonym Windbreaker and immediately joined the battle, just as they were sieging an airport. It was a hot forty-degree noon, blown up kerosene tanks were burning out in the distance, and it seemed as if the sun itself was emitting a burnt odor and fuming with black oily smoke.