

Isak

Luka Prison Camp

“Where is that athlete who came today,” a voice bellowed. “Isak Gaši!”

A soldier swaggered into the middle of the hangar. His name was Ivan, and two soldiers trailed behind him sweeping the muzzles of their automatic weapons from one side of the room to the other at faces wide-eyed with fear. All three men wore camouflage uniforms, and Ivan gripped something shiny in his hand.

“Here I am.” I stood up.

His head snapped around towards me. “Come here, Gaši.”

I stood and walked toward him, my Adidas silent on the concrete floor, and stopped about ten meters away.

“Isak,” he said in a calm voice. “Come closer.”

As I stepped close to him I could see that the metal object in his hand was a large wrench – the kind firemen use for hoses and hydrants. Ivan lunged at me, swinging the wrench at my head. Purely by instinct I ducked to the side. He missed and lost his balance slightly. The soldiers with him snickered. He glanced at them, frowned, and looked back at me. Like a fighter in a boxing ring, he held his arms above waist level, hefting the wrench in his right hand as if calibrating its weight. Then he came after me again and starting swinging. I dodged, but was too slow this time. The heavy wrench smashed into my shoulder. Pain exploded, knocking me to my knees, robbing me of vision for an instant.

“This one is very strong,” one of the soldiers ridiculed. “Two swings and he’s still conscious.”

Ivan’s frown deepened.

From my vantage point I stared at Ivan’s black, military boots, dull with dirt. Then those boots got busy. As I knelt before him, Ivan began to kick me. His first blow landed in my ribs. I gasped in

surprise. His second kick found my stomach, knocking the breath out of me, and I doubled over, groping for air. Then came the pièce de résistance. His boot found my head and the world went black.

One of the soldiers grabbed the back of my shirt and yanked me to my feet. The room swam back into focus. I found myself face to face with Ivan, his features distorted with hatred. He pulled his pistol from its holster, triggered it, and jammed it into my mouth. The barrel clanked against my teeth, scraped the tender flesh of my palate. For an eternity, nothing happened. I had enough time, even in my dazed state, to realize that this was it.

I was a dead man.

Ivan squeezed the trigger.

Nothing. No bullet fired. I still breathed.

Pistol barrel still in my mouth, Ivan stepped closer, his face so near to mine I could feel his heat, smell his sweat.

“It looks like you’re lucky this time,” he breathed, “but I’m not through with you, Gaši. Next time I’ll have a bullet for you.”

The soldier behind me released my shirt and I fell to the floor. Like an animal on four legs, I crawled away.