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# BE A MAN!

(based on true stories)

**CONTENT WARNING** The text includes descriptions of scenes of gender-based violence, violence against representatives of the LGBTQ+ community, as well as coarse language. If you may find such topics sensitive, please take this into consideration before reading the text of the play.

## ACT I

*The scene is divided into two parts: the left half depicts a "tank" enclosed by bars – a pre-trial detention cell in the district police department, while the right half shows the desks of the duty unit equipped with a remote control and computers.*

*In the area behind the bars, three men dressed in women's clothing are sitting.*

*TONIA*[1] *[35–40] – subtle, deliberately mannered, he has an impudent appearance. His outfit is tasteless and gaudy, resembling something from an 80s disco, with matching makeup; he wears a*

[1] feminine name common in Ukraine (full form – Antonina)

*blonde wig, a miniskirt, and bright high-heeled boots. Under the blouse, there is a large bra stuffed with rags. Stubble is visible on his face through the makeup.*

*OLHA[2] [35–40] – reserved and with a straight posture, she bears little resemblance to a man. Her hair is styled in a simple ponytail, and her makeup is skilful yet almost invisible. While her behaviour is aristocratic, it does not come off pretentious. She is dressed in military-style pants and a swamp-coloured polo shirt, beneath which a small bra is visible.*

*NATASHA[3] [25–27] – slender, fragile, he is dressed entirely in black, wearing a black wig and expressive makeup. He resembles a goth. NATASHA is self-absorbed and silent.*

*Behind the control panel of the district police department sits LOKHA[4] [45–50], a tall, tired man in a police uniform.*

*TONIA, with his legs caught between the bars, positioning himself so that LOKHA can see his upturned skirt and widely spread legs, is pumping his abs. His poorly secured wig wobbles, barely staying on his head. The man, using a cartoonishly squeaky voice, counts out loud the number of exercises he has completed.*

TONIA

Forty-three, forty-four…

NATASHA

Eight…

TONIA

Forty-five…

NATASHA

It's only nine…

TONIA

Forty-six…

NATASHA

Who are you trying to impress? There are three of us here, plus the tough guy behind the control panel…

TONIA

Forty-seven…

*LOKHA looks up from the computer and sees TONIA, whose legs are spread in front of him.*

TONIA

(*in a high-pitched voice*) Oh, girlies! Forty-eight… Oh, he's looking at me! Oh my, forty-nine! He's looking right up my skirt! Gosh, he really wants me!

LOKHA

[2] feminine name common in Ukraine

[3] feminine name common in Ukraine (full form – Nataliia)

[4] masculine name common in Ukraine (full form – Oleksii)

If you don't get your balls off my face, I'll get up right now and rip them off you!

TONIA

Fifty!

*TONIA leans his hands on the floor, does a backflip, gets to his feet, and starts to freshen himself up while openly flirting with LOKHA.*

TONIA

Fifty… You're about the same age, grandpa, right? And yet there you are… "Balls off your face" – what kind of fantasy is that? Do you want a girl to sit on your face? Just say so! I'd be happy to help… as part of humanitarian aid for the elderly.

LOKHA

Shut up or I'll shove your wig down your throat right now.

TONIA

Grandpa, that's called a gag! Are you thinking of putting a gag in my mouth or something else, eh?

*LOKHA gets up from behind the control panel, takes a police baton from the table and slowly walks over to TONIA, who is leaning against the bars provocatively.*

LOKHA

Will you shut up or not?

TONIA

Oh, girls… it's not a gag that he's trying to force on me, oh no, not a gag… Grandpa, does your wife know that you don't mind groping a little faggot in the cell?

*TONIA doesn't have time to finish his sentence when LOKHA, swinging a short stick, strikes the bars in front of his face with the baton, slightly brushing his lip. NATASHA and OLIA[5] jump up, pulling TONIA away from the bars. Despite their efforts, he breaks free and screams.*

TONIA

Come on! You can see that the girl loves it rough. Show me who's the man here, show me who has the power, come on!

*NATASHA and OLIA throw TONIA onto the bed, not letting him get up, although he's trying to break free and reach the bars.*

OLHA

Shut up!

NATASHA

(*To TONIA*) Did you stop fucking around?

TONIA

Are you afraid of stepping into the cage? Think you can't handle it? So take the blue pill, and if you don't have one, I'll pick up your limp little brother-in-arms with my mouth! I can do it!

[5] diminutive form of the name Olha

NATASHA

I'm begging you, humanely, to shut up!

*OLHA grips TONIA's face, squeezing him with strong hands.*

OLHA

If you call your dick "brother-in-arms" one more time, I'll strangle you myself!

*TONIA forcefully breaks away from OLHA, and, refusing to calm down, rushes at her.*

TONIA

Do you enjoy games that involve strangulation? Let's play! Lokha will join, while Natasha stands guard.

OLHA

(*sitting down in her seat*) How pathetic you are…

*TONIA stretches his lips in a seductive smile and takes a rag from his bra to wipe the blood from his lip.*

TONIA

(*ironically*) Pathetic… I'm so… pathetic! You've got me figured out…

*OLHA sits down and closes her eyes wearily.*

NATASHA

Don't touch her. She'll figure it out and it won't be pretty.

*TONIA glares at him in anger as he tucks the dirty rag into his boot.*

*The door to the police department swings open. Two POLICEMEN [20–25] and a TCR[6] EMPLOYEE [45–50] lead in handcuffed ALEKS[7] [23–25]. ALEKS is dressed in stylish clothes, adorned with beautiful, large jewellery. A long wig frames his face in gorgeous waves that cascade down his shoulders. He has long, beautifully manicured nails on his hands, and high-heeled boots on his feet. Roughly pushing ALEKS on the shoulder so that he doesn't stand on the doorstep, the policemen approach LOKHA, jokingly saluting.*

POLICEMAN 1

Wishing you health[8], Sir, colonel.

POLICEMAN 2

Glory to Ukraine![9]

*The men shake hands.*

TCR EMPLOYEE

Glory to Jesus Christ![10]

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[6] Territorial Centre of Recruitment

[7] name Alex spelled in Ukrainian, usually used to resemble a gender-neutral, modern or feminine-sounding version of name Oleksandr/Oleksandra

[8] a kind of Ukrainian military formal goodbye or salute

[9] Ukrainian national salute, known as a symbol of Ukrainian sovereignty and resistance to foreign aggression

[10] common greeting in Ukrainian Christian tradition

LYOHA

And they say there is nothing sacred to your brother!

TCR EMPLOYEE

Yes, to my brother, he stole our grandma's pension, and he also fucked his neighbour in the parking lot near the church… on the eve of the Feast of the Transfiguration (*sighs*). But I'm a religious person.

*The man takes off his hat from his bald head, tucks a clipboard under his arm, and crosses himself at the portrait of Zelenskyi[11], which hangs in the police department.*

TCR EMPLOYEE

God save the queen!

NATASHA

(*nodding his head at ALEKS*) Oh, there's a new one in the women's battalion "Tysa[12]"!

POLICEMAN 2

Why "Tysa"? Wasn't it named after Kerenskyi[13]?

NATASHA

Renamed as part of the decommunisation. Now we're the "Tysa" battalion, named after Monroe.

POLICEMAN 1

Merlin?

NATASHA

No, our Kyiv travesty diva.

*TONIA approaches the bars, swaying his hips.*

TONIA

(*to the TCR EMPLOYEE*) Sir, division commander, where did you get such a beauty?

TCR EMPLOYEE

(*to the policemen*) Oh, did you hear that, division commander! Baby, weren't there any gypsies in your bloodline at some point?

POLICEMAN 1

You should say "Roma".

*The TCR EMPLOYEE waves it off. TONIA shakes his shoulders, imitating a Romani dance while seductively baring one shoulder.*

TONIA

Cross my palm with silver, dear, and I'll tell you the whole truth.

*The man approaches the bars, holds out his hand.*

TCR EMPLOYEE

[11] Volodymyr Zelenskyi – the sixth president of Ukraine

[12] one of the major rivers of Central and Eastern Europe that partially flows in Ukraine

[13] Aleksandr Kerenskyi – a key political figure in the Russian Revolution of 1917, served as the head of the Russian Provisional Government

(*with a smile*) Oh, you little bitch, where does a state employee get the money from? Of all the material assets I have, the only thing is a heart of gold, and that is given to my lawful wife Antonina Vasylivna, née Filipenko.

*TONIA begins to peer into the lines on the palm.*

TONIA

So your wife is my namesake… Loving girls named Tonia runs in your blood…

POLICEMAN 2

Two 100 ml shots of cognac and a small Arabica cappuccino run in his blood.

*The policemen hand LOKHA stacks of paperwork.*

POLICEMAN 1

Accept, lieutenant colonel, another fighter in thongs under your command.

*LOKHA takes the documents, starts looking through them.*

TCR EMPLOYEE

(*to TONIA*) What's the word from the heavens?

TONIA

Oh, bad news. Your life line is long, but dotted.

TCR EMPLOYEE

Why is it dotted?!

*The policemen, interested in the conversation, move closer to listen.*

TONIA

Well, look: a line, a dot… Is this a mole, though?

*TONIA spits into his palm, the TCR EMPLOYEE tries to pull his hand back, but TONIA is already rubbing it vigorously, as if trying to wipe something off.*

NATASHA

A mole on the palm means money...

POLICEMAN 1

See, that emo knows their omens... Must be that all the TCR employees have moles on their palms, because money just sticks to them. Heard they busted another one?

POLICEMAN 2

But there shouldn't just be moles, their arms should be covered in spots like a leopard, all the way up to the armpits and even lower.

TCR EMPLOYEE

What kind of dotted line?!

TONIA

Dash, dash, dot... Listen, that's Morse code!

TCR EMPLOYEE

And what's the message?

TONIA

Wait… A, S, S… They say you're an asshole and you're facing nine years in prison for bribery and confiscation of that heart of gold, transferred, like all property, to your wife Antonina Vasylivna, née Filipenko!

*The TCR EMPLOYEE pulls out his hand and spits at TONIA.*

TCR EMPLOYEE

(*leaving*) Bite your tongue, you fucking faggot!

*The patrolmen and the prisoners try to hide their laughter.*

LYOHA

But all of that is lies!

POLICEMAN 2

He's definitely lying! The maximum sentence for bribery is eight years in prison, not nine like Tonka[14] claims!

TONIA

And he'll rack up another year for insulting state symbols, so he better not be calling the president the queen!

POLICEMAN 1

Well yeah, in that case they can really give a nine!

TCR EMPLOYEE

You're all fucking degenerates here!

*He approaches LOKHA angrily, hands him a clipboard with papers.*

TCR EMPLOYEE

Sign the handover act for yet another pathetic scumbag, and I'm out of here.

*LOKHA signs the papers. The TCR EMPLOYEE puts on his hat, standing by the doorstep, raises his hand to his temple in salute.*

TCR EMPLOYEE

I have the honour![15]

TONIA

But you could have me instead, curly.

TCR EMPLOYEE

I'll send you to hell, fucking whore!

TONIA

(*blows a kiss*) And I'll bring you a fridge magnet!

*While the TCR EMPLOYEE is leaving, POLICEMAN 1 leads ALEKS to the bars.*

[14] colloquial form of the name Tonia (full form – Antonina)

[15] a kind of Ukrainian military formal goodbye or salute

POLICEMAN 1

Face the wall, legs shoulder-width apart!

TONIA

Oh, and can I spread my legs as well?

*ALEKS obediently follows the order. LOKHA walks up and opens the door to the cell. POLICEMAN 1 pushes ALEKS into the cell.*

POLICEMAN 1

Go play with the girls.

*POLICEMAN 1 closes the door*.

LOKHA

Where did you get him?

POLICEMAN 2

They took him off the Uzhhorod[16] train.

POLICEMAN 1

He forged the documents, but he couldn't hide his Adam's apple.

LOKHA

Where would he hide it? Sucked it in or what? (*To ALEKS*) What's your name, newbie?

*ALEKS stands by the door with his head down, facing away from the policemen*.

ALEKS

Aleks. Address me as "she/her".

*POLICEMAN 2 hands LOKHA the documents. He takes the passport and reads it.*

LOKHA

And the passport says Lytvynenko Oleksandr Viktorovych, born in 1999.

ALEKS

The documents will be changed soon. I've already started the paperwork.

LOKHA

She... her... What's the world coming to, Serozha[17]?

POLICEMAN 2

Not to be said in front of the ladies, but it's all gone to shit. It's all fucked, lieutenant colonel.

LOKHA

Couldn't have said it better, sergeant.

*TONIA lifts her skirt seductively.*

TONIA

Uncle, give me twenty hryvnias[18] and I'll show you my little pee-pee!

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[16] a city in western Ukraine

[17] diminutive form of the name Serhii

[18] hryvnia (UAH) is the national currency of Ukraine

POLICEMAN 2

(*ironically*) Daaamn... What a pity... I spent my last twenty on a jam-filled bun at the station. Stupid glutton that I am.

POLICEMAN 1

(*rummaging through pocket change*) Then let me lend you some...

POLICEMAN 2

(*puts a hand on his shoulder*) Thanks, my friend, truly, but no. You take a look at the pee-pee and tell me about it later. Or better yet, you can draw me a picture.

TONIA

I won't show him anything for less than thirty-five hryvnias... He's ugly.

POLICEMAN 1

Well now that hurts...

LOKHA

Mykola[19], you should at least sign up for yoga and maybe do some face masks – even transvestites don't consider you an option. And that's despite having your own room in the dorm.

POLICEMAN 1

Yeah, yoga and face masks today, and tomorrow I'm sitting on a prison bunk in a floral skirt with those sluts, waiting for the shrink? No, thanks. I'll stick with being straight over here.

*POLICEMAN 2 pulls a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket.*

POLICEMAN 2

(*to LOKHA*) Wanna go out for coffee?

LOKHA

My shift is over, I'm just waiting for the replacements – I can't leave the chicks alone though, can I?

POLICEMAN 2

They won't run away. Look (*bangs the bars with his foot*), steel bars, even this M-size can't squeeze through (*nods towards NATASHA*)

NATASHA

I'm an S actually.

LOKHA

Who knows what those girlies are up to? Might end up choking each other with their tights.

POLICEMAN 1

Nah, they'll be good girls and let the nice policemen to calm the hunger worm with a bite to eat.

TONIA

And perhaps...

OLHA

[19] masculine name common in Ukraine

If you say anything about your little “worm”, I’ll split your skull open so hard you’ll be bathing in your own brains.

*LOKHA approaches the table he was sitting at, takes the keys and phone, and shoves them in his pockets.*

LYOHA

Yes, dear little ones, boys and girls, a huge request: if you decide to kill each other, wait until the small hand is on the six, and the big one is on twelve – that’s when uncle Serozha’s duty time begins, and then you can kill each other to your heart’s content. But for now – no-no, okay?

TONIA

As soon as you step outside the door, I’ll cover everything in here with blood!

LYOHA

I knew it – you must be on your period. You’re kind of irritated and angry. I’ll bring you some Nutella, sweetheart.

*LOKHA walks to the door. The patrolman is already at the doorstep, letting his colleagues in and addressing the prisoners.*

POLICEMAN 1

Behave yourselves.

NATASHA

Or what, are you gonna throw me in jail?

*The policemen leave. ALEKS remains standing, motionless. Everyone silently watches him.*

OLHA

Come on, have a seat. You won’t be able to stand too long wearing heels like those.

*ALEKS doesn’t move still. His breathing is heavy, and everything about him says he’s struggling to make a decision.*

NATASHA

Huh, so you’re not hanging out with us?

*ALEKS is visibly nervous, his body starts to tremble with tension. The men look at one another.*

OLHA

What’s wrong with you?

ALEKS

I don’t know your rules...

OLHA

Ours?

ALEKS

I don’t want to offend anyone...

TONIA

He’s probably talking about the TGCC!

NATASHA

The what!?

TONIA

The Transgender and Gay Criminal Code!

OLHA

Don't talk bullshit!

ALEKS

(*nervously rocking back and forth*) I read that the way you enter and how you greet shapes how they treat you. (*shakes his head nervously, pressing his back against the bars, quickly, under his breath*) I don't know, I don't know how to act, I don't want to, I don't want to offend anyone, I can't, I can't be here...

OLHA

Stop it, this is not a prison. And not even a detention centre. Just an ordinary drunk tank in the district police department. Here they don't speck in thieves' slang and no one's gonna rape you for saying a wrong hello.

*TONIA approaches ALEKS, looks at him carefully, runs his hand through his hair, which makes him freeze in horror*.

TONIA

Sweetheart, do you seriously think that if you came into the prison cell looking like this, the inmates would care how you greeted them?

*ALEKS's nerves give out. His body drops heavily to the floor as he bursts into tears. TONIA rolls his eyes, backs off, and sits on her bed*.

OLHA

Cry and get up. Otherwise you're gonna freeze it all off down there.

NATASHA

Yeah, cystitis in a cell where there's only one toilet and it's in plain sight – well, sounds like a blast.

ALEKS

I can't, I can't be here, I'm not made for all this!

TONIA

Oh yeah? And we are? Made for detention. My mother, thirty years ago, goes: "Darling, I'm pregnant, do you want a boy or a girl?" and dad says: "Nah, let's go with a convict!"

OLHA

Leave him alone... Give him time to recover.

TONIA

What do I care? Let him cry. The mascara seems to be waterproof – it won't smudge.

*ALEKS takes a few deep breaths, exhales, wipes away tears. He gets up, holding onto the bars.*

ALEKS

Good evening. I’m ALEKS.

TONIA

Alright, lads, evening!

NATASHA

Stop it! Hello. I’m Natasha. This is Olha. And this little annoying firecracker here is Tonia.

*ALEKS timidly raises his hand in greeting.*

ALEKS

Aleks… Thank you…

NATASHA

(*nods towards the empty bed*) It’s not taken here.

*ALEKS slowly approaches the bed, sits down. Lowers his head.*

TONIA

So come on, tell me how you ended up behind bars?

ALEKS

Well, I guess like everyone here…

TONIA

Also for murder and posthumous rape?!

ALEKS

Oh my God, no!

TONIA

Thank God... Cause if you turned out to be the fourth necrophile in a cell this small, I’d start thinking that God gathered us here like a bunch of whores on a cruise...

OLHA

Oh, stop it already! These jokes are getting old!

TONIA

That’s what the old man said...

NATASHA

What old man?

TONIA

I chopped him down with an axe for saying such things, and then fucked him! So that others would think twice...

NATASHA

Other who? Other old men?

TONIA

Well, yes… It was in the park, where the old men play chess. I figured: I’ll fuck one, the rest will behave.

OLHA

So you’re talking about those infamous panic-prone grandpas, who calm down only after the death of a fellow?

TONIA

One death is not enough, I’ve tried. Only after sex do they shut up.

NATASHA

Like vampires – you gotta stake them to put them in peace…

TONIA

Exactly! I even have a certificate from the Pension Fund!

OLHA

For fucked grandpas?

TONIA

For reducing the number of pensioners and the strain on the state budget!

*ALEKS silently watches the exchange, eyes shifting between them.*

ALEKS

I don’t understand how you can joke in such a situation…

OLHA

Well, in what situation?

ALEKS

We’re in a cell! We’re waiting for a trial and prison!

OLHA

And what?

ALEKS

And if they find out what we are…

OLHA

What are we, exactly?

ALEKS

Since we were detained looking like this (*she runs her hand over her clothes*), they’ll tear us apart in prison... Like the real ones...

TONIA

(*mock horror*) Oh, aren’t you the real one?! (*loudly, towards the door*) Somebody help! There’s a fake faggot! He’s just pretending to be gay! Sound the alarms!

*ALEKS lowers his head.*

ALEKS

I’m not gay. And I’m not pretending to be anything. I... I... feel like a woman and I’m going to do a gender transition.

TONIA

Yeah. And now you're scared that we're all planted agents, sent here on purpose by the Territorial Centre of Recruitment to trick you, to prove that you're not a real transgender, but a draft dodger!

*ALEKS looks up at him, silent, clenching his jaw.*

NATASHA

What, did they read your mind?

ALEKS

Isn't that right?

OLHA

Do you really think that somewhere in the Ministry of Internal Affairs or the Ministry of Defence they signed an order "Issue three skirts, three wigs and seven kilos of sequins – we we're going to bait a draft dodger with costume jewellery"?

NATASHA

And in front of you stand lieutenant Olha, sergeant Natasha and ensign Tonka... just very undercover...

TONIA

What am I, an ensign?

OLHA

And I'm actually a major.

ALEKS

I don't know what to think. I don't know what to do.

OLHA

First of all, tell me what happened to you.

ALEKS

Nothing.

NATASHA

(*to OLHA*) One of the woke and well-informed friends, said: "If they catch you, stand your ground: Aleks, woman, she/her, freedom for transgender people."

*ALEKS's lips involuntarily stretched into a smile, but he immediately pulls himself together.*

NATASHA

Did he guess right?

*ALEKS lowered his head, hiding behind the curls falling over his face.*

NATASHA

Thought so. Why didn't your "well-informed" friends tell you something actually useful – like adopt a child, marry a woman with a disability?

*ALEKS doesn't move. He's silent. Finally sighs.*

ALEKS

What's going to happen to me next?

NATASHA

Well, you're not telling us anything about yourself, and I'm not a psychic. If you want predictions, go talk to Tonia. She's a first-generation fortune-teller, apparently. Did you see how she jinxed that bald guy a prison? He got so scared and ran away as if someone dropped a load right in the cell.

OLHA

There's nothing to guess here. It's not all written on the palm of your hand, but in Article 337 of the Criminal Code: "Evasion of military service under martial law" is punishable by three to seven years in prison.

TONIA

The cops said he forged the documents.

OLHA

Then add Articles 358 and 366 – forgery and fraud.

ALEKS

I didn't forge anything!

OLHA

Then drop to your knees and say you were all dressed up, on your way to the draft office. Took the Uzhhorod train cause you wanted to see the Carpathian Mountains one last time before heroically heading to the front lines – to get inspired by the Dovbush Rocks[20].

ALEKS

I can't go to war. I won't survive it. I'd rather take my own life than wait for the Russians to do it!

TONIA

They'll give you twenty years for that!

ALEKS

What do you mean?

TONIA

What do I mean? I mean if you kill yourself, they'll slap you with a 20-year sentence for aiding the enemy! Come on, when have you ever heard of Ukrainians killing themselves?

ALEKS

Oh, come on!

TONIA

I'm serious! Under martial law, different rules apply, now they can give a sentence posthumously. They'll bury you in the prison yard, and the inmates will spit on your grave and the crows'll do their business on you. And then, in 20 years, they'll dig your remains up and give them to your family. It's called exhumation.

NATASHA

[20] a group of natural and man-made structures carved out of rock at around 980 m a.s.l. in the Ivano-Frankivsk region of western Ukraine

And is there any chance of parole? Well, for example, if he lies there quietly and doesn't incite other corpses to escape?

TONIA

I don't know. I won't lie. But they say that relatives can bring some candy and plastic flowers for Provody[21] at the cemetery and Halloween.

NATASHA

I've heard about that too… But they won't bring you flowers.

ALEKS

Why?

NATASHA

Nobody likes draft dodgers. Not even family.

ALEKS

As if you're not dodgers yourselves!

OLHA

Of course we're not! I'm a retired major in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. I've been at war since 2014.

NATASHA

I'm enlisted and signed a contract.

ALEKS

So what are you doing here?

TONIA

I told you – necrophiles-recidivists…

ALEKS

Oh screw all of you!

*NATASHA stretched out and settled more comfortably on his bunk, leaning his back against the wall.*

NATASHA

It's a pity, I was hoping your story might actually lighten the mood. Otherwise, we'd have to listen to Tonia's stories about old faggots.

*The door on the police side opens. SERHII [35–40] and ANDRII [40–45] enter, both in police uniforms, carrying backpacks.*

TONIA

Oh, and they are, the old faggots. Speak of the devil!

OLHA

(*firmly*) Tonia, don't push it!

[21] Ukrainian tradition of commemorating the deceased, traditionally observed during the second week after Easter

*TONIA waves her off, gets up and sways towards the bars. SERHII tosses his backpack onto the table and approaches the bars, runs his baton over them. ANDRII heads to the table, pulls a phone and a thermos from his backpack, sits on the edge of the table, sips coffee, and flips through the documents left by LOKHA.*

SERHII

Were you expecting us, shape-shifters?

ANDRII

Shape-shifters?

SERHII

Well, what else do you call men who turn into women? Pure magic!

TONIA

Well, come on, Sir, major! The only shape-shifters here are the ones in uniform, and we are just regular civilians.

SERHII

Oh, does that make me a shape-shifter then? Like Sirius Black?

TONIA

Well, I don't know. And do you howl at the moon and lick your balls under the full moon?

SERHII

I have beauties like you to lick my balls...

TONIA

Thank God! I thought I was the only faggot at the district police department!

*SERHII slams his baton hard against the bars. TONIA smiles – the provocation was successful.*

SERHII

What a worthless and vile thing you are...

TONIA

(*seductively*) And pathetic...

SERHII

And pathetic!

TONIA

And also disgusting!

ANDRII

Disgusting. he Bible, Leviticus 18:22 says, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination."

SERHII

(*bangs his baton on the bars again*) An abomination!

TONIA

(*biting his lip*) But you want me!

SERHII

(*banging the bars*) I want...

TONIA

(*interrupting*) Do you want...

SERHII

I want you to die! You and your kind of scum! I wish you'd all just perish and stop poisoning the world with yourself and your filth!

TONIA

Then who's gonna lick your balls?

SERHII

Real women!

TONIA

Then real women need real men!

SERHII

(*hits TONIA in the face*) Come on, I'll show you what kind of man I am!

TONIA

(*confusedly to his cellmates*) They say the army makes a man out of you, but turns out a whore with a dick?

NATASHA

A revelation from Father Serhii!

SERHII

(*To NATASHA*) Shut your filthy mouth!

ANDRII

(*bangs mug on table*) Normal guys are dying by the thousands at the front lines. And this filth is still alive!

SERHII

We're collecting spare change for the electronic warfare equipment, for some kind of tourniquets, and they feed this trash, scheduling appointments with psychiatrists for an examination – has his pituitary gland gone haywire or did he become schizophrenic, just so they can shove a pill up his ass if things go sideways.

ANDRII

No, not up the ass. They'll probably enjoy it!

NATASHA

Where the hell did you get the idea that we're gay and like to shove something up our asses?!

SERHII

Oh, excuse me, sir. My eyes must've been deceiving me! That's probably not a skirt from "Humana"; it's some kind of combat kilt! And your hair is long because you, like a Khal of the Dothraki, haven't cut your braids since you haven't lost a single battle!

ANDRII

(*flipping through papers*) He's not a Dothraki. He's from Lysianka, Cherkasy region.

SERHII

That's just for cover. Syrskyi[22] is probably just waiting for Natasha and her warriors on their battle mares to finally launch the real counterattack!

*TONIA moves as close to the bars as he can, leaning on them as if trying to break through to the policemen.*

TONIA

So it's not just us here. You're not under Selidov[23] right now, but you're here with us! Why, you bastard, when deciding which faggots to fight, didn't you pick ones with machine guns instead of the pansies in skirts.

NATASHA

I'm not a faggot!

ALEKS

Me neither!

TONIA

(*ignoring*) And you get a bit more funding for your maintenance than we do for a prison slop and a psychiatrist. And judging by that mug of yours, the kind only a three-day hangover could explain, I doubt your paycheck's going toward any actual electronic warfare equipment. Most you've done is toss some empty cat food cans in for trench candles and share someone else's fundraiser on Facebook.

*SERHII grabs TONIA's hands, twists them, and lifts them above his head, forcing to turn his back to him.*

SERHII

(*to his partner*) Cuffs!

*ANDRII tosses the thermos aside, rushes to the bars, and starts unclipping the handcuffs from his belt. NATASHA and OLHA run up to TONIA, who starts laughing hysterically, struggling as they try to pull him out of the policeman's grip.*

ANDRII

Back off, you whores!

*OLHA and NATASHA ignore him, trying to pry SERHII's fingers off TONIA. TONIA's maniacal laughter fills the air. Finally, ANDRII cuffs TONIA's hands. SERHII unclips his handcuffs and*

[22] Oleksandr Syrskyi – commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, performs direct military leadership of the Armed Forces

[23] a city in Pokrovsk district, Donetsk region, Ukraine

*shackles TONIA's legs to the bars below. Meanwhile, ANDRII swings his baton at NATASHA and OLHA, who are reaching for him, but they dodge him. Frustrated, he drops the baton, pulls his service pistol from the holster, and aims it at the detainees.*

ANDRII

Scatter, you dirty sluts!

OLHA

You bastard... Who the hell did you point your gun at?

ANDRII

Zip it!

OLHA

At your own people?

ANDRII

The faggots are not my people!

TONIA

Girls, don't get involved!

*SERHII picks up his baton from the floor and slowly approaches TONIA.*

NATASHA

Drop the weapon!

TONIA

No, girls, his real "weapon" has only just started to erect, what kind of "drop" do you mean!

SERHII

"Drop"? Andriukha[24], did they say "drop"?

OLHA

Tonia, stop it, this is no longer a joke!

ANDRII

That's right, Sir, major! They ask you to "drop"!

*TONIA laughs. SERHII strokes the baton and steps right up to TONIA.*

SERHII

Well… The presumption of innocence tells us that a person suspected of a crime is considered innocent until proven guilty

ANDRII

Innocence, Sir, major? Is there anyone "innocent" here?

SERHII

Well, we're about to test that innocence right now… It's our job, isn't it?

OLHA

[24] colloquial form of the name Andrii

Don’t you dare!

NATASHA

(*rushes to the bars*) No!

*TONIA bursts into another fit of uncontrollable laughter!*

ANDRII

That’s right, Sir, major. It’s our duty to test that innocence...

*SERHII suddenly yanks TONIA’s skirt off. OLHA and NATASHA rush to her aid, but ANDRII fires a shot into the air. In that moment, the radiation alarm blares, and the room is filled with red emergency lights. OLHA and NATASHA are forced to step back.*

TONIA

Girls, no, I deserve this!

OLHA

Please, don’t do this!

NATASHA

Stop, you can’t do this!

*Slowly, savouring the fear in their eyes, SERHII steps closer to TONIA with the baton. He screams in terror. The sound of the alarm mixes with hundreds of screams – male and female, as if hell itself had opened up and was echoing the voices of the damned. The lights go out just as the shouting and alarm erupt. In total darkness, TONIA screams at the top of his lungs.*

TONIA

I DESERVED THIS!

*End of the First Act*

ACT II

*Anatomical theatre interior. The stage is also divided into two parts. On the left half there are four anatomical tables, on which lie TONIA, ALEKS, NATASHA and OLHA. Above each table hangs a camera pointed directly at them, projecting live footage onto screens suspended above each table, allowing the audience to view the characters from a top-down perspective. The characters are undressed. Next to each of them, in perfect symmetry, are objects that accompanied them through life – phones, wigs, clothes, photographs, etc.*

*On the right side of the stage, a raised platform holds a long table covered in paper folders and files. Seated behind it are ANNA [45–50] and VOLODYMYR [55–60], both wearing white medical coats. They are intently filling out various forms.*

*Behind the anatomical tables, on a higher platform, separated by a railing, sits a group of witnesses: ALEKS’S MOTHER [45–50], OLESIA [18–20], a PRIEST [50–55], a MALE SOLDIER [35–40], a FEMALE SOLDIER [35–40], a SERGEANT [30–35], and KATERYNA [25–26].*

*OLEH [30–35] enters – a stylish man in civilian clothes, carrying a beautiful leather doctor's bag in one hand and a paper coffee cup in the other. He cheerfully greets everyone as he steps in.*

OLEH

Greetings, everyone!

*ANNA and VOLODYMYR ignore him. OLEH walks up behind ANNA and kisses her on the cheek, despite her displeased expression.*

OLEH

Anna Oleksandrivna, as charming as ever!

*The man extends his hand to VOLODYMYR. VOLODYMYR responds reluctantly – his handshake more closely resembles someone offering their hand for a kiss than a proper grip.*

OLEH

Volodymyr Petrovych, how are we doing?

VLADIMIR

Thank you, Oleh. Within age-appropriate limits. (*irritated*) Let's get started.

*OLEH sets his things on the table, puts on a white coat hanging over the back of his chair, and sits down. ANNA and VOLODYMYR stand, picking up sheets lying on the table. They begin reading aloud – rapidly, as if racing each other through their separate texts.*

ANNA

The materials of case No. 5478/75K are being reviewed. Lytvynenko Oleksandr Viktorovych, born in 1999.

VOLODYMYR

The purpose of the forensic psychiatric examination is to determine the individual's mental health and assess their capacity for legal responsibility or competency to stand trial.

ANNA

The accused, being registered as a military conscript, received a personal draft notice, signed it in person, and – without any legal grounds for deferment – evaded enlistment by failing to report to the assembly point.

*ALEKS'S MOTHER [45–50] rises from the witness stand – a beautiful, well-groomed woman dressed entirely in black.*

ALEKS'S MOTHER

(*hysterically*) He's only partially fit for service! He has spinal curvature and flat feet!

OLEH

Ma'am, please sit down!

VOLODYMYR

The assessment of an individual's mental condition at the time of committing a criminal offense is conducted to determine whether the person was mentally sound or suffering from a mental illness during the act of committing the crime.

ANNA

The indicated actions were qualified by the pre-trial investigation body under Article 336 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine – evasion of military draft during mobilisation.

*OLESIA [18–25] – a graceful, poised young woman, rises from the witness stand*

OLESIA

(*dramatically*) At that moment, he died for me – as a man!

VOLODYMYR

(*with emphasis on the first word*) A post-mortem psychiatric examination is based on the study of medical records (such as medical history, psychiatric assessments, doctors' notes), the testimonies from relatives, friends, colleagues, and others who may have observed the behaviour of the deceased, as well as an analysis of that behaviour before and after the alleged crime.

*OLEH gets up, rolls up his sleeves and approaches the table where ALEKS lies. He takes a photo album and starts flipping through it. On the screen hanging above ALEKS's table, the images begin to change – old photos of grandparents, his parents' wedding, his mother pregnant.*

OLEH

Was he born full-term, without birth injuries?

ALEKS'S MOTHER

(*standing up*) Yes, 3 kilograms 560 grams, 56 centimetres.

The photos show a baby hospital tag from the maternity hospital, childhood pictures, and kindergarten.

ANNA

(*writing something down*) Head injuries, loss of consciousness, epilepsy?

ALEKS'S MOTHER

No, nothing like that.

OLEH

(*flipping through the album*) And where is our dad?

*A video from the phone appears on the screen, where DAD [30–35] spinning a little boy in his arms, then sitting behind the wheel with the child on his lap. Then, a phone screen appears, showing a chat being scrolled through with someone named "M". "I missed you," – "Come over," – "I can't, the little one is sick," – "Being without you makes me feverish too... with desire," a photo of a naked woman in the mirror, a dick pic. The next frame is a divorce certificate.*

ALEKS'S MOTHER

(*stands up and immediately sits down*) I'm a single mom.

OLEH

So, Olexander Viktorovych didn't have a model of healthy male behaviour growing up?

*Photos of ALEKS'S MOTHER with different men flash quickly across the screen: at a summer house, at the seaside, a naked woman in bed, turning her face away, a naked man hugging her in the bathroom, taking a photo through a mirror.*

ALEKS'S MOTHER

I tried to find him a father.

*OLEH scrolls through the photos in reverse order, and they appear on the screen the same way – photos in the bathroom, photos in bed. The camera freezes on one of them.*

OLEH

I can see that.

*The woman lowers her eyes.*

VOLODYMYR

Let's keep pornography out of this.

*The photo disappears. The camera switches back to real-time – the video from the camera above the table.*

VOLODYMYR

When did you notice his abnormalities?

ALEKS'S MOTHER

My God, what abnormalities, he was a healthy boy!

ANNA

Healthy or flat-footed and hunched? Make up your mind, ma'am!

ALEKS'S MOTHER

I meant he's not some psycho. And the flat feet – they found that during dance classes...

OLEH

(*chuckles meaningfully*) Dance classes...

*The man picks up the ballet slippers lying on the table next to ALEKS and spins them in his hands.*

OLEH

Have you ever thought about getting him into something more masculine? Like boxing or basketball?

ALEKS'S MOTHER

He wanted it too, not just me… I tried to give him everything he asked for…

VOLODYMYR

(*To ANNA*) Yeah, because that's exactly how you build character – stuff a kid with sweets and toys, then send him off to grandma in the village to be raised, while you…

*Photos from ballroom dance classes and competitions flash on the screen – both the girl and the boy wearing heavy makeup. A video plays showing the mother applying makeup to ALEKS before a competition. The child is crying.*

ALEKS (*on video*)

I don't want to… Please…

ALEKS'S MOTHER (*on video*)

Hold on, baby… It's just mascara that got in your eye. Mom will make it look beautiful soon…

*The video freezes on the boy's distorted, tearful face with smeared mascara.*

OLEH

So you started putting makeup on the boy when he was 8, right?

*ALEKS'S MOTHER picks up the phone and dials someone.*

ALEKS'S MOTHER

(*turning away*) They're bombarding me with questions about dancing. They say he was already wearing makeup back then... What do I say? I don't know! So what can I say?

*Listens to the voice on the other end of the phone, nods. Takes the phone away from the ear.*

ALEKS'S MOTHER

We raised the child to respect people, not gender! So, gender neutrality is respect for the individual, not a flaw!

*VOLODYMYR rises from his seat, takes a pointer, and approaches the anatomical table. A photo of ALEKS in women's underwear appears on the screen, taken in the style of a forensic examination: profile, full face, height chart in the background. In his hands is a placard with his full name and the case number.*

VOLODYMYR

(*in a lecturer's voice to the audience*) Dual-role transvestism (*aims the pointer at the photo*) is a psychiatric diagnosis describing a phenomenon in which a person, in everyday life, wears clothing that societal norms and conventions of their environment associate with the opposite sex.

*The PRIEST [45–50] rises from the witness stand.*

PRIEST

Deuteronomy 22:5: A woman shall not wear a man's garment, nor shall a man put on a woman's cloak, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God!

*The PRIEST sits down. The screen shows a still frame again with a crying boy.*

VOLODYMYR

As a rule, the tendency to cross-dress develops during childhood or adolescence. Sometimes it happens because of parents who tell the child they had wanted a 'girl' and dress them in women's clothing, or do so simply for amusement.

ALEKS'S MOTHER

I wanted a son!

*VOLODYMYR chuckles and returns to his seat.*

ANNA

And when did he first talk about being homosexual?

ALEKS'S MOTHER

He didn't say that!

*OLESIA gets up from her seat.*

OLESIA

When we had our first time, he couldn't get it up. Is that what it's about? Could this be a symptom of a fag?

*The doctors exchange meaningful glances with the girl and silently return to their work. Embarrassed, OLESIA sits down. OLEH picks up a diary from the anatomical table.*

OLEH

How did he get along at school?

*The video on the screen: hands flipping through the diary, school photos.*

ALEKS'S MOTHER

Fine. He studied well. Got praised. Took part in academic competitions. Was a Plast[25] scout.

*OLEH picks up a Plast scout tie, hands it to ANNA, and returns to the table. On the screen appears an amateur video, showing YOUNG ALEKS [10–11] solemnly taking the oath:*

YOUNG ALEKS (*on video*)

I promise and swear before God and Ukraine: to be faithful to my duties, to live by the Plast laws, to be honest, fair, and devoted to my Motherland, to help people, to be brave, and ready to serve.

*The PRIEST rises from the witness stand.*

PRIEST

(*expressively, with condemnation*) Swore before God! (*crosses himself*)

MALE SOLDIER

That's when they should've taken him. While he was still "brave and ready to serve," and hadn't started wearing his mom's underwear yet!

ALEKS'S MOTHER

But he didn't wear my underwear! However...

*The woman suddenly falls silent, as if she remembered something, she's texting someone.*

ALEKS'S MOTHER

(*typing something on her phone*) Wait a second...

*Meanwhile, OLEH picks up a bra from the table. Mom's phone beeps, indicating that a message has arrived.*

ALEKS'S MOTHER

(*reading*) Oh, I mean, he… he actually wore my underwear! Please write it down in the report! He wore my underwear since he was a little boy!

*ANNA and VOLODYMYR look at the woman, shake their heads in disapproval, and continue writing.*

OLESIA

Ew, that's disgusting!

OLEH

(*showing the underwear to the mom*) Is this yours?

[25] National Scout Organisation of Ukraine

*The woman is silent. Instead, OLESIA stands up, wanting to say something, but hesitates and sits back down. OLEH picks up ALEKS's smartphone from the table.*

OLEH

You don't want to talk, then let's continue the autopsy...

*A video recorded on a phone appears on the screen: a bedroom. On the bed opposite a mirrored wardrobe lies OLESIA, filming with her phone's camera, while her reflection is visible in the mirror. Near the mirror, ALEKS is spinning around, dressed in women's lingerie.*

ALEKS (*on video*)

I can't! This is not normal!

OLESIA (*on video*)

Is it normal to lie dead in the trenches? Is it normal to come back without arms or legs and lie sprawled out like a ragdoll on the sofa?

*The phone flies to ALEKS. The video disappears. Instead, a Telegram chat video appears with a contact named IHOR. The conversation is a series of short, circular Telegram video clips of a dialogue between ALEKS and IHOR [25–35].*

(*Video 1*) IHOR

There's such a rush at the border – just a flood. They don't have time to check documents, let alone look under women's skirts! You'll slip through just like a knife through butter! The main thing is to go through Hrebenne – Rava-Ruska and only when I say so!

(*Video 2*) ALEKS

Just look at me! Do I look like a woman?

(*Video 3*) IHOR

You're okay! I'd bang you! Let your mom and Leska[26] give you a little touch-up – eyelash extensions, some powder, nails!

(*Video 4*) ALEKS

(*grabs his head*) Fuck, I'm gonna die of embarrassment!

*The video switches to real-time. OLEH stares thoughtfully at ALEKS's body.*

OLEH

He didn't lie…

ANNA

(*writing*) People don't die of embarrassment anymore… Wrong era…

VOLODYMYR

(*writing*) Well, there are different kinds of deaths…

OLESIA

Different kinds of deaths?

[26] colloquial form of the name Lesya

VOLODYMYR

Depending on the classification, there are clinical, biological, violent, sudden, pathological, physiological, brain death, premature death, and social death…

OLESIA

What is “social death”?

VOLODYMYR

This is when a person voluntarily withdraws from social life.

*From the witness stand, FEMALE SOLDIER [35–40], in uniform and armed, bursts out:*

FEMALE SOLDIER

Or involuntarily!

VOLODYMYR

Or involuntarily…

FEMALE SOLDIER

Half of our army is “socially dead” right now!

OLEH

No, well, not exactly dead...

*An outraged woman rises from her chair*

FEMALE SOLDIER

“Not exactly”??? Are you saying that to me? We simply don’t exist! There is “us” and there is “you”. We are “there”, and you are “here”. It’s like we live in different worlds! You’re in the world of the living, and we’re in the world of the dead!

You come to the city, go down into the subway – no one looks at you. They just avoid your gaze, like you’re a ghost! You post about a fundraiser – no reaction at all. Invisible posts from invisible people you knew before the war! You knew them, knew them – and then they vanished!

MALE SOLDIER

Yeah... For them, those who went to the frontline, the ”zero zone” basically became “zero” themselves!

FEMALE SOLDIER

My friend’s getting married. Invited everyone except me! I asked: why? And she says, “I thought you had other things to worry about… You’re at war.” Sure, I’ve got other things on my mind, but invite me anyway! Say, “Svetka[27], I really want you there, maybe you can make it?” I won’t come, they won’t let me leave – but invite me! Talk to me like I’m still alive! You’ve already started writing us off before our time, like we’re halfway to the other side. It’s hell down there, but we’re still very much alive in that hell!

*The woman sits down in outrage, almost collapses into the chair.*

[27] colloquial form of the name Svitlana

*A pause. The PRIEST is the first to dare break the silence:*

PRIEST

(*sighs*) By the way, speaking of hell… Even in Christianity, we distinguish between two kinds of death – one when the soul separates from the body, and another when a person is cut off from God.

OLESIA

(*confused*) And what did Aleks die from?

OLEH

(*kicks the table lightly and leans over the body*) And what did you die from? (*sighs*) Silent… Well, fine… let's keep cutting

*He picks up a tablet from the table and switches it on. The screen lights up again. There is a multi-screen Zoom call with ALEKS'S MOTHER, OLESIA, IHOR, FRIEND 1 [18–20], FRIEND 2 [18–20], a NEWS window, and ALEKS.*

ALEKS (*on Zoom*)

I'm going to join the Territorial Defence[28]…

ALEKS'S MOTHER (*on Zoom*)

Are you out of your mind?

OLESIA (*on Zoom*)

What fucking Territorial Defence, Ihor is waiting for us in Romania!

ALEKS (*on Zoom*)

The borders are closed!

ALEKS'S MOTHER (*on Zoom*)

I swear, if you take even one step in that direction, I'll throw myself out the window!

OLESIA (*on Zoom*)

You promised to protect me – me, not the sovereignty!

IHOR (*on Zoom*)

Dude, leave the fighting to the soldiers!

OLESIA (*on Zoom*)

Are you even a man?

*Everyone starts talking at once, interrupting each other.*

FRIEND 1 (*on Zoom*)

My dad's friends with a doctor…

OLESIA (*on Zoom*)

How can you leave me?

FRIEND 1 (*on Zoom*)

He can help with the papers…

[28] Territorial Defence Forces of Ukraine

NEWS (*on Zoom*)

Another mass grave has been found…

FRIEND 2 (*on Zoom*)

You could get through as the volunteer…

ALEKS'S MOTHER (*on Zoom*)

I swear – I'll jump out the window! I can't just wait, not knowing if you're alive!

NEWS (*on Zoom*)

Over a hundred bodies were discovered in the burial site …

OLESIA (*on Zoom*)

You swore! You promised you'd never leave me!

NEWS (*on Zoom*)

The executed had their hands tied…

IHOR (*on Zoom*)

Damn it – they don't even check the papers. They see you in women's clothes – just walk through!

FRIEND 1 (*on Zoom*)

A couple of hours and you're free!

OLESIA (*on Zoom*)

Choose – me or…

ALEKS'S MOTHER (*on Zoom*)

I've got no one but you…

OLESIA (*on Zoom*)

If you abandon me, you're no man!!!

*Suddenly ALEKS, who is lying on the table, screams in agony, clutching his ears.*

ALEKS

AAAAAAAAAH! Shut up, shut up!

*The screen goes black. The PRIEST stands and crosses himself.*

PRIEST

Lord, have mercy, Lord, have mercy!

*ALEKS sits up, scattering the things lying nearby.*

ALEKS

I can't do this anymore!

*He starts looking for something to wear, but all he can find are women's clothes, which he immediately tosses aside.*

ALEKS'S MOTHER

Aleks, sweetheart, lie back down!

ALEKS

Don't call me Aleks! How many times do I have to ask?!

ALEKS'S MOTHER

Aleks, I said lie down!

ALEKS

Oleksandr! That's the name you and dad gave me! In Greek, it means "man," "protector"! I am Oleksandr! A man!

ALEKS'S MOTHER

Alechka[29], my sunshine!

ALEKS

Don't piss me off!

ALEKS'S MOTHER

God, you're killing me!

ALEKS

(*to OLEH*) Do you have any normal clothes?

MALE SOLDIER

Of course! What's your size?

OLESIA

He's an M, unless it runs small...

ALEKS'S MOTHER

(*to OLESIA*) Shut up!

*The MALE SOLDIER pulls a set of combat uniform from his backpack and, while ALEKS keeps talking, tosses him each piece one by one.*

ALEKS'S MOTHER

Stop this! Aleks, lie down, your mother said so!

ALEKS

(*to OLEH, pulling on a T-shirt*) You asked who killed me?! Anything still unclear?!

ALEKS'S MOTHER

Who killed you? Bite your tongue!

ALEKS

You, mom – you! With your "Mom knows best," "Aunt Katia[30] will handle it," "Don't upset mommy, wear this…"

*OLESIA chuckles loudly and nods. ALEKS catches a pair of pants mid-air and pulls them on.*

ALEKS

[29] diminutive form of the name Alex/Oleksandra

[30] diminutive form of the name Kateryna

(*to OLESIA*) And you? (*mocking*) "You're not a man, you're not a man unless…" followed by your endless list of your girly whims! So to be a "man" I have to do whatever you women want? Are you insane?! You killed the man in me!

OLESIA

Stop it, you're embarrassing yourself!

ALEKS

Are you freakin' serious?! When you made me wear lace panties and a skirt – that wasn't embarrassing at all! That's when I was "fighting for you." (*to OLEH*) Can you believe it? They convinced me that if I put all that on and leave, I would "gain my freedom"! Not with a gun on the eastern border, but in a thong on the western one!

OLESIA

Don't yell like a girl!

ALEKS

"Don't yell like a girl," "Are you even a man?" "Real guys don't do this!" "Look at Artur, now there's a man," "A real man earns…"

*The video on the screen starts again. It's a montage of typical Instagram clips where GIRLS [18–20] answer a journalist's questions.*

GIRL 1

A real man earns at least 30,000

JOURNALIST

Hryvnias[31]?

GIRL 1

(*laughing*) No, of course not!

GIRL 2

A real man should be able to buy me an apartment.

GIRL 3

To be with me, a man has to pay...

JOURNALIST

How much?

GIRL 3

I need about 10 thousand dollars a month

JOURNALIST

So where do you get that kind of money?

GIRL 3

A real man knows where…

[31]Ukrainian currency

*The video fades out.*

ALEKS

And she listens to all that – and then repeats it back to me! So what's the takeaway? That I'm not just not a real man, I'm not a man at all!

ALEKS'S MOTHER

I told you she wasn't right for you!

ALEKS

I can't take this anymore!

*ALEKS finishes putting on his uniform.*

MALE SOLDIER

Come on, I know a place where you can get away from them. Not too many women there, and the ones who are – are decent.

ALEKS

Fuck, I was gonna join the Territorial Defence!

*They head towards the exit.*

MALE SOLDIER

It's never too late.

ALEKS

Yeah, but the shame will stick for life…

MALE SOLDIER

(*laughing*) Come on – let's wash that shame away with blood!

ALEKS'S MOTHER

Nooooo! Nooo, I won't let you!

*The woman tries to climb over the curb, but the FEMALE SOLDIER and OLESIA hold her back.*

MALE SOLDIER

Don't make a fuss, mama – with the damn Russian blood, Russian!

ALEKS'S MOTHER

Aleks, where are you going?

*ALEKS turns around, sweeps the things off the table, and picks up the wig that had fallen.*

ALEKS

Aleks isn't going anywhere! Aleks stays here – in this wig, these panties, and those dance shoes. I am the one who leaves. My name is Oleksandr. It means "man." And a man goes to war! All this – stays with you. Play with it as much as you like!

*ALEKS and the MALE SOLDIER walk off stage. His mother grabs her head and collapses into a chair. OLESIA rolls her eyes theatrically, sits down, pulls out her phone and starts zoning out on it. Oleh watches them go. Then he turns back to ANNA and VOLODYMYR.*

OLEH

One down.

VOLODYMYR

Bite your tongue! That's one more! Remember, our task isn't to find sickness, but to affirm health. To help the person.

*Oleh steps toward the next table, where NATASHA lies. Standing at his head, he stretches out his hand and, in the voice of a preacher, declares:*

OLEH

With the intent to help you, human being, I command you: rise and walk!

*Nothing happens. Everyone stares at NATASHA, waiting to see what comes next.*

OLEH

(*pokes him in the forehead, imitating Muntian*[32]) I heal you, touch! Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah!

*The PRIEST, outraged, speaks from his seat.*

PRIEST

Hey, that's enough, don't take it too far!

OLEH

I'm not mocking you – I'm mocking Muntian, that Botoxed apostle knock-off. (*to NATASHA*) NATASHA, get up, we've wrecked everything!

*Nothing happens. VOLODYMYR turns back to his notes. OLEH sits down on the table where ALEKS had been lying, swinging his legs. ANNA takes one of the folders, opens it, and starts reading quickly.*

ANNA

Case materials No. 5587/79L are being reviewed. Private Antonovych Andrii Oleksiiovych, born in 1998. Article 407 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine – unauthorised departure from a military unit or place of service by a serviceman, as well as failure to report for duty on time without valid reasons, committed under combat conditions.

OLEH

Andrii Oleksiiovych. So, "Natasha" is just a callsign?

*ANNA shrugs and sits down. VOLODYMYR takes the folder from her hands and reads.*

VOLODYMYR

Well then, let's see where serviceman Antonovych A.O. disappeared from his unit – and where this "Natasha" came from… What do we have?

ANNA

(*takes out a form*) The conscript's registration card for someone accepted into military service under contract.

[32] Volodymyr Muntian – a self-proclaimed "apostle," founder of one of the largest religious sectarian organisations in Ukraine

*The screen above the table with NATASHA comes to life. On it – a pile of documents, with a questionnaire on top.*

VOLODYMYR

Place of birth?

*Photos of NATASHA appear on the screen in ordinary men's clothing, without a wig, near St. Michael's Church, the monument to young Shevchenko[33], and on Peace Square in Lysianka.*

ANNA

Lysianka, Cherkasy region.

VOLODYMYR

Home address?

ANNA

5 Sobornosti Street.

VOLODYMYR

Place of work?

ANNA

ATP-5, driver-mechanic.

VOLODYMYR

Do you have a reference from work?

*ANNA takes another sheet and reads. During the dialogue, photos appear on the screen: NATASHA at the wheel, with friends, with family.*

ANNA

Yes, he proved himself… a conscientious worker, proactive, friendly with colleagues… seven years without any penalties… nothing of concern.

OLEH

Well, I don't think he wore heels at the Transport Company No. 5.

VOLODYMYR

What's next on the form? Education?

ANNA

Secondary specialised, graduated from a technical school as a mechanic.

VOLODYMYR

Criminal record?

ANNA

None.

VOLODYMYR

[33] Taras Shevchenko – a Ukrainian poet, writer, and artist, known as the father of modern Ukrainian literature

Any close relatives with a criminal record?

ANNA

None.

VOLODYMYR

Desire to serve in the military?

ANNA

Yes. He signed the contract three months before the full-scale invasion.

VOLODYMYR

At the medical board, did the psychiatrist make any notes like “disruption of gender-role identification” or “gender identity issues”?

ANNA

No.

VOLODYMYR

Is there a reference from the commander?

*On the screen, videos appear one after another showing NATASHA in military uniform with the guys in a dugout, selfies with weapons, the guys goofing around. The last photo shows NATASHA and four of his brother-in-arms standing with their arms around each other. ANNA reads from the sheet:*

ANNA

Uh-huh. (*under her breath, clearly choosing the most important lines*) Military training – excellent… Conscientious and responsible completion of combat tasks… Well-coordinated combat interaction with fighters with call signs “Yavir[34],” “Ashdod,” “Ring,” and “Skópa[35].”

*NATASHA suddenly sits upright on the anatomical table.*

NATASHA

Skopá. His name was Skopá!

OLEH

And what is a Skopa?

*NATASHA looks at him angrily and turns away.*

OLEH

FIne, I’ll Google it.

*A Google search page appears on the screen, the text “what is skopa?” being typed, then a click on the Wikipedia link.*

OLEH

Skopa – a bird of prey, the only species of the osprey family. It feeds on fish, so it lives along the shores of various bodies of water.

[34] the Ukrainian name for the sycamore (sycamore maple) tree; here – a call sign

[35] the Ukrainian name for the osprey, a bird of prey; here – a call sign

NATASHA

(*with a sad smile*) He was born and raised on the banks of the Yalpuh[36].

*OLEH looks at NATASHA, then turns back to his phone. On the screen – the Wikipedia page "Yalpuh": Yalpuh is a freshwater liman-type lake, the largest natural lake in Ukraine. It is located in the Bolhrad and Izmail districts of Odesa region. Then a photo of SKOPA [35–40] on the shore appears. NATASHA raises her head, looks at the photo.*

NATASHA

Remove that!

*The photo disappears, the screen goes black. NATASHA begins to get dressed, taking the wig, skirt, and top laid out on the table.*

VOLODYMYR

What happened to you?

NATASHA

Nothing I would like to talk about.

OLEH

Any witnesses for the defence?

*ANNA and VOLODYMYR look back at the rows behind them, but no one stands up.*

VOLODYMYR

Will you tell us about the circumstances of leaving your military unit?

*NATASHA finishes getting dressed and, without saying a word, sits on the table where he had been lying before. He pulls on the wig. With defiance, he silently stares at VOLODYMYR.*

VOLODYMYR

Natasha-Andrii stays silent. What do the documents say?

*ANNA takes a sheet of paper in her hands, stands up, and reads.*

ANNA

According to the results of the official investigation, on March 24, 2023, in the area of the village of Antonove, Donetsk region, during a combat mission, the unit under the command of captain Voichenko Ihor Olehovych, call sign "Skopa," fell into an ambush…

NATASHA

(*interrupts*) Who was there?! Who was actually there, that they write "fell into an ambush"?! How did they even conduct that investigation?

OLEH

(*to ANNA*) Who returned from the mission?

ANNA

No one.

[36] a freshwater lake located in the southern Ukrainian region of Odesa; the largest natural lake in Ukraine

*VOLODYMYR nods to ANNA, signalling her to keep reading.*

ANNA

A group of five servicemen fell into an encirclement and…

NATASHA

Not five!

*OLEH jumps at NATASHA, forcefully throwing him onto the anatomical table where he had been lying. The stage lights go out; only one powerful spotlight comes on, shining directly into NATASHA's face, like during an interrogation. ANNA and VOLODYMYR approach the table and stand around it, looming over. On the screen appear alternating images: a close-up of NATASHA's face, then his point of view (from a camera above the bed right behind his head) – the doctors' faces bending over him, as during surgery.*

OLEH

How many of you were there?!

NATASHA

Five!

ANNA

Why did you say four?

NATASHA

Because only they ended up in the ambush!

OLEH

Why did five go on the mission, but only four ended up in the ambush?!

*NATASHA closes his eyes, trying to turn his head away, but OLEH grabs his face firmly and turns it toward the overhead camera.*

OLEH

Where were you?

NATASHA

I was supposed to lead them!

OLEH

Why didn't you?

*NATASHA struggles to break free; VOLODYMYR and ANNA press down on him. NATASHA screams in agony, then falls silent again, breathing heavily.*

VOLODYMYR

Where were you?

*Through NATASHA's tightly clenched jaws comes only a muffled, strangled cry.*

ANNA

(*gently*) Sweetheart, quiet, quiet… Tell Anna, where were you?

*NATASHA convulses on the table, squeezing his eyes shut, shaking his head. Suddenly, the sound of a radio turns on with static, and through it breaks the voice of SKOPA.*

SKOPA (radio, off-stage voice)

Mechanic, where are you?

*ANDRII freezes on the table.*

SKOPA (*radio, off-stage voice*)

Mechanic, where are you?!

*NATASHA collapses, tears rolling down his face. The doctors release him, taking a step back. NATASHA stares straight ahead, into the camera.*

NATASHA

I'm here, Skopa

SKOPA (*radio, off-stage voice*)

Are we encircled?

*NATASHA nods.*

SKOPA (*radio, off-stage voice*)

Can you do anything about it?

*Tears stream down NATASHA's face. He shakes his head. White noise bursts out of the radio. On the screen, SKOPA appears, lying somewhere in the forest, in a pit, looking up at the sky – directly into the camera, speaking into the radio.*

SKOPA (*radio, on video*)

Andriukha… if you can hear me and can't do anything, fall back.

*NATASHA convulses across the table, her body twitching uncontrollably.*

SKOPA (*radio, on video*)

Don't twitch. Retreat. Save yourself and tell my people… well, actually, don't tell them anything.

*The camera above SKOPA rises, revealing that in the pit with him, head to head, are YAVIR, ASHDOD, and RING. They lie in a circle, forming a cross with their bodies. As the camera rises, the guys smile; RING makes a "goat" hand sign, ASHDOD lights a cigarette without lifting his head, YAVIR waves at the camera.*

SKOPA (*radio, on video*)

Nebo[37], are you here?

NEBO (*radio, off-stage voice*)

Where else would I be?

SKOPA

48.5033 north latitude, 30.2625 east longitude. Repeating: 48.5033 north, 30.2625 east. Calling fire on ourselves…

[37] the Ukrainian name for the sky; here – a call sign

*The camera hovers over the men. ASHDOD smokes. The image freezes and dissolves into black smoke that vanishes like blown by the wind. Explosion sound. NATASHA screams and jerks upright on the anatomical table. The light goes out. Silence.*

*In the silence and darkness, a muffled sob rises, growing into a howl of grief. Another light comes on, faintly pulling NATASHA out of the shadows. The doctors are no longer by the tables. NATASHA sits alone, wailing quietly. Suddenly, the screens flicker on – four at once. On them appear SKOPA, YAVIR, RING, and ASHDOD. SKOPA's image looms directly above NATASHA. The boys are sitting in a dugout.*

SKOPA

Why are you howling?

YAVIR

Andriukha, stop it!

ASHDOD

Seriously, cut it out. That's not very manly.

NATASHA

You're right. It's not manly.

RING

What the hell are you wearing?

YAVIR

Damn, I didn't even notice. Look at that beauty!

SKOPA

Private, answer when your commander asks a question.

NATASHA

Ashdod already said it. I didn't act manly… I didn't act like a real man.

ASHDOD

Nah, I meant the tears!

NATASHA

I mean in general. A man wouldn't have fled back then.

SKOPA

What would he have done?

NATASHA

I don't know.

RING

What, like Rambo – charge in with a knife and slash through twenty inmates in uniform?

ASHDOD

Heroically died running at the enemy, emptying a magazine?

*While ASHDOD speaks, YAVIR silently opens his mouth as if shouting and pretends to shoot an invisible gun. SKOPA smiles.*

SKOPA

So, you, fool, put on leggings and a wig because you're a woman, not a man?

*NATASHA lowers her head.*

SKOPA

And by doing so, just like that (*snaps fingers*), you devalued all the women who took up arms and stood shoulder to shoulder with us?

NATASHA

I didn't devalue anyone!

ASHDOD

Yeah, Ivo Bobul[38] and Arestovych[39] said the same!

ASHDOD

I have no right to call myself a man.

YAVIR

Then who are you now?

NATASHA

Natasha…

ASHDOD

Fuck… This guy's completely fried…

YAVIR

Why the fuck "Natasha"?

NATASHA

(*long silence*) Back in Lysianka, that's what they called all the prostitutes.

RING

Didn't know Lysianka was a sister city of Antalya. Okay, in Turkey it makes sense, but… damn!

NATASHA

What else was I supposed to do??!!

YAVIR

Well, not wear a fucking thong, that's for sure!

NATASHA

So what then?

YAVIR

[38] Ivo Bobul – Ukrainian singer (baritone), composer, and teacher, People's Artist of Ukraine, who has made controversial remarks about women

[39] Oleksii Arestovych – Ukrainian ex-presidential adviser and public commentator, notorious for controversial sexist remarks about women

You could've put on a Russian uniform… I see a Russian uniform, I know – fag.
(*turns to the audience*) Sorry if there are any gay folks in the hall – nothing personal, just a figure of speech.

SKOPA

Alright, private Mechanic. Listen to me…

NATASHA

Private Mechanic is dead.

SKOPA

No! We're the ones who died. You're alive. You're the only one of us still alive. And you're disgracing us!

YAVIR

Half of Valhalla[40] is laughing their asses off at us!

RING

They're saying we need to deal with our Valkyrie[41], because there are no toilets for trannies here.

ASHDOD

Boys to the right, girls to the left. They're not gonna build you your own private water closet.

NATASHA

There's no place in Valhalla for me.

YAVIR

Listen, even Ashdod got in, despite his radical Judaism only ruined by the non-kosher rations.

NATASHA

They won't let me in...

SKOPA

Well, if you sit here in a skirt and cry, then no.

NATASHA

So what should I do?

SKOPA

For starters, get changed. (*to the side*) Doctor, do you have anything without darts?
*The overhead beam of light switches on again, illuminating NATASHA – it doesn't appear instantly, but slowly flares up from barely visible to bright white. A long pause. YAVIR, ASHDOD, RING, and SKOPA begin softly chanting in the manner of ritual funeral songs. As the guys sing, ANNA and VOLODYMYR approach NATASHA and begin undressing him.*

SKOPA, YAVIR, ASHDOD, RING

Saints went in chains along the Jordan's shore,

[40] in Norse mythology, the hall of slain warriors, who live there blissfully under the leadership of the god Odin
[41] in Norse mythology, maidens who served the god Odin and were sent by him to the battlefields to choose the slain who were worthy of a place in Valhalla

To save the soldiers, hell would take no more.
They flew like sparrows, skimming low and fast,
Over fields of mines, over dangers vast.
They searched the soldiers through the woods,
To bring them home as mothers would.
They wiped the mothers' tears, embraced them wide,
With gentle wings, kept sorrow from their side:
"Weep not, dear mothers, for your soldiers brave,
We've heard your fearful bell and call to save!"
All saints went in chains along the Jordan's shore,
To save the soldiers, and bring them home once more.

*NATASHA spreads his arms wide, as though hanging on a cross in the beam of light amid the darkness of the stage. The doctors remove his wig and skirt. NATASHA is left naked. From beneath the table, ANNA takes out a straitjacket; together with VOLODYMYR they put it on him gently, as though swaddling a child.*

*ANNA and VOLODYMYR quietly guide NATASHA toward the exit. The song gradually fades. On the screen, the soldiers repeat what they did before death: the guys smile, RING makes a "goat" gesture with his fingers, ASHDOD lights a cigarette without raising his head, YAVIR waves to the camera, and SKOPA salutes.*

NATASHA

Will they let me into Valhalla?

VLODYMIR

Yes, warrior.

NATASHA

Honestly?

ANNA

Honestly, Andrii, honestly.

*As he passes through the dark doorway, the image of the boys dissipates, turning into a black mist that vanishes like a breath of wind.*

*The beam of light gradually dissipates. ANNA and VOLODYMYR return to their seats. Suddenly, through the door ANDRII exited, a group of five medical students enters, wearing white coats and caps.*

STUDENT 1

Howdy. Sorry we're late.

OLEH

Bah, you morons scared me!

STUDENT 2

Good afternoon. Should we have worn shoe covers?

STUDENT 1

Because we didn't, they changed our class.

STUDENT 3

If there's a dissection, can I step out? I feel sick!

STUDENT 4

We're in the anatomy theatre! Of course someone's going to be dissected!

*OLEH bangs the folder on the table where he's sitting and stands up.*

OLEH

One more word and it'll be you getting dissected!

*The students quiet down. OLEH quickly approaches the table where OLHA lies.*

OLEH

Notebooks, pens in hand, and hurry over here!

*The students hurriedly pull out their notebooks, drop their backpacks on the floor, and rush to the table.*

STUDENT 5

Can we record on the phone instead of writing in the notebook?

OLEH

Only if you want them pulling it out of your ass on the next table.

*The student quickly grabs a notebook.*

STUDENT 5

Not another word. Ninety-six squared pages, hard cover, all ready to go!

*Oleh raises the upper half of the gurney so that OLHA's body almost "stands" facing the audience.*

OLEH

A remarkable case, future colleagues.

VOLODYMYR

(*to ANNA*) Better say "potential colleagues."

OLEH

Volodymyr Petrovych, as always, is right. Potential colleagues!

STUDENT 2

Is that a hint that not everyone will make it through?

ANNA

Not a hint, a prognosis. We don't practice sheep-gut witchcraft here.

STUDENT 3

(*to friends, nodding at TONIA's and OLIA's bodies*) Why sheep guts, when there are plenty of human ones around?

VOLODYMYR

Don't tell me your last name is Solovyov[42]?

STUDENT 3

Yaroshenko.

VOLODYMYR

Still sounds like Solovyov. (*mimics*) "The Ukrainians divine with human intestines."

OLEH

Fine, Yaroshenko-Solovyov, you start. Define transgenderism.

STUDENT 3

Why me? Why are you calling me that? I'm not transgender! Sorry, I'll just keep quiet!

OLEH

I didn't say you are transgender. I'm asking you for the definition of transgenderism according to the ICD[43].

*STUDENT 3 falls silent, glancing helplessly at his friends. OLEH shows impatience with his facial expressions and gestures.*

STUDENT 3

Well, that's when you're neither a boy nor a girl…

ANNA

And gastritis is when it's neither herpes nor hemorrhoids!

VOLODYMYR

And this, Anna Oleksandrivna, is a third-year student! Degenerates!

*VOLODYMYR stands, steps away from the table, and begins lecturing.*

VOLODYMYR

Transgender identity is the phenomenon of incongruence between gender identity and biological sex. For example, when the sex assigned at birth is male, but as the person grows up they experience themselves as female, leading to distress. In the new international classification of diseases, the concepts of "transgenderism" and "transsexualism" have been revised and replaced with the term "gender incongruence."

STUDENT 1

Is that treatable?

VOLODYMYR

You only treat an illness, or a condition that interferes with normal functioning. That means, if gender incongruence leads to negative states, then treatment may include psychological counselling or medical interventions, such as gender-affirming hormone therapy, genital surgery, laser hair removal,

[42] Vladimir Solovyov – Russian state TV propagandist, infamous for extreme and absurd claims about Ukraine
[43] International Classification of Diseases

chest surgery, or other reconstructive operations. But if it doesn't cause distress – then there is no need for treatment.

*Students take notes in their notebooks. OLEH steps closer to Olha.*

OLEH

A perfect example of a diagnosis, just as Volodymyr Petrovych describes.

STUDENT 4

Is this a trans?

VOLODYMYR

And how would a third-year student without mental defects phrase that?

STUDENT 4

Is this a patient with gender incongruence?

OLEH

Correct. Anna Oleksandrivna, what do we know?

*One of the students pulls out a phone and takes a selfie with OLHA's body.*

ANNA

Case 5778/68D. Oleh Matviiovych Levada. Born in 1986. First sensed a mismatch in perceiving himself as male during adolescence. An attempt to talk with his parents ended in a beating.

STUDENT 1

Did it help?

ANNA

No psychiatric consultations are recorded in his paediatric medical file. At age 13 he was enrolled in the Ivan Bohun Kyiv Military Lyceum.

VOLODYMYR

By his own choice?

ANNA

Not at all. His father insisted. Here is the application.

*She hands a sheet of paper to VOLODYMYR; he puts on glasses and reads aloud.*

VOLODYMYR

"…Requires constant discipline; in the event of violation of statutes or rules of conduct, the family will have no claims regarding the disciplinary measures chosen by the institution, including corporal punishment…"

OLEH

Well, where else do you send a boy who feels like a girl? To the "man-factory," of course. (*taps OLHA's forehead with his fingers*) "Here, have another trauma for the collection!"

ALEKS'S MOTHER

You can't be pleased! Dance school – wrong. Military academy – also wrong!

VOLODYMYR

(*to ANNA*) Any disciplinary notes, incidents during his studies?

ANNA

None. Excellent records, top grades.

VOLODYMYR

And the psychiatric evaluations?

ANNA

Clean. Responsible, level-headed, excellent analytical skills. No sign whatsoever of gender deviation.

PRIEST

So the father was right, then? Discipline cured him?

STUDENT 2

Do you honestly believe you can beat or drill someone into being "cured"?

PRIEST

Proverbs 22:15: "Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him."

ANNA

No behavioural issues were ever documented. Yet, despite excelling academically, Oleh never formed close friendships; teachers described him as "kind but not sociable." After graduating from the Lyceum, he earned a degree in Cybernetics from Shevchenko University and worked as a system administrator. Unmarried. Estranged from his parents. In 2014, he enlisted in the Armed Forces of Ukraine and was deployed to the ATO[44], achieving the rank of major.

VOLODYMYR

And why are there no personal belongings? Nothing to work with except reports and transcripts? Content analysis is hardly enough for a proper psychiatric evaluation…

ANNA

Childhood photos remained with the parents, but they refused to appear for identification or for the hearing. Their words, verbatim – (*points to the screen*):

*Above OLHA, a television-style graphic appears, the kind used to show phone interviews. The caption reads: "MATVII HNATOVYCH (on the phone) – father of the soldier who considers himself a woman"*

(*off-stage voice*) MATVII HNATOVYCH

I don't want to know this monster! I gave birth to a son! How can there be any identification? How am I supposed to recognise my Oleh in this… abomination?! He's gone! Oleh is dead!

VOLODYMYR

And his other belongings?

[44] anti-terrorist operation – a security force operation conducted by Ukraine against pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas region, officially starting in April 2014

ANNA

Personal items were destroyed during the assault on Robotyne in August.

VOLODYMYR

What else is known?

ANNA

According to his medical records, in October 2023, while on leave, he visited a psychoneurological clinic to confirm the diagnosis of "gender dysphoria" in order to begin the transgender transition process. He began hormone therapy in January 2023.

OLEH

Are there any witnesses for the defence?

*A burly SERGEANT [35–40] stands from the witness row.*

SERGEANT

Yes. Senior sergeant Tkachuk Vadym Serhiiovych, sergeant of the company where the Transformer served.

OLEH

Transformer?

SERGEANT

Oleh Matviiovych Levada. Olia. Transformer.

OLEH

Did you give him the call sign, or did he take it himself?

SERGEANT

She chose it herself. At first, we didn't understand. And then, once we did…

OLEH

Tell us about OLEH.

SERGEANT

Olha. Her name is Olha. We served side by side for six years. I don't know anyone more reliable or decent.

VOLODYMYR

When did you notice the deviation?

SERGEANT

I didn't notice anything. At the end of the summer, Oleh came up to me and said we needed to talk.

ANNA

And you?

SERGEANT

I was blown away. Then I laughed my ass off.

OLEH

At him?

SERGEANT

At the call sign. I mean, honestly, it was funny – transformer."

VOLODYMYR

And then what?

SERGEANT

Nothing. Oleh talked to the guys. He said his body would change soon because he had started taking hormones.

ANNA

How did his brothers-in-arms react?

SERGEANT

They reacted normally.

*The screen above OLHA turns on. One by one, soldiers appear on it, giving interviews in the studio. The first is a soldier with a mechanical leg prosthesis. Caption: "Private Serhii Yaremenko, call sign 'KIBORH*[45]*.'"*

KIBORH (*on video*)

He said that soon his body would change. I showed my leg and said that my body has already changed. I wasn't kicked out. And he won't be either.

*The caption on the second interviewee: "Military unit medic Oleksiy Maksymenko, call sign 'PILIULIA*[46]*.'"*

PILIULIA

I said that if the hormones start messing with him, I'm not giving sick leave. We don't have a reason like "side effects from a transgender transition" for skipping combat duty. As for me, whether it's Olia or Oleh – it's all the same. A decent, good person, and I never even looked down her pants before.

*The third person appears – SVITLANA, a FEMALE SOLDIER who has been sitting on the witness bench the whole time.*

SVITLANA

I knew. Olia shared her story with me. So I was prepared. But as for a brother-in-arms, or a sister-in-arms – well, kind of indifferent. Although… I lie… The sister-in-arms feels closer somehow… More like family, or whatever's the right way to say it.

*The screen goes dark. In its place, real-time video appears.*

VOLODYMYR

No conflicts? No bullying?

SERGEANT

[45] the Ukrainian name for the cyborg; here – a call sign

[46] the Ukrainian name for the tablet or a pill; here – a call sign

Nah, well, Kiborh was in town, brought some pads and gave them to her, but the Trans wasn't offended. She laughed along with everyone. She understood that the guys just needed some time.

VOLODYMYR

What happened next?

SERGEANT

After her coming out, I had to file a report. It just sat around for about a month, then an order came to send soldier Levada for a psychiatric evaluation. Olia was admitted to the psych ward for a month.

ANNA

(*reading*) The follow-up psychiatric evaluation confirmed the diagnosis of "gender dysphoria." This became the basis for discharge on health grounds.

STUDENT 3

Was a soldier who'd served since 2014 discharged because of atypical gender identification?

*Everyone ignores the question.*

ANNA

How did Olha react?

SERGEANT

She slammed our psychologist in the face when he read her the order. After filing a dozen reports, and seeing them all dismissed, she finally went home.

OLEH

Under what charge did she end up behind bars?

ANNA

Part 2 of Article 125 of the Ukrainian Criminal Code – intentionally inflicting minor bodily harm that caused a temporary health disturbance or slight impairment of work capacity.

SERGEANT

She came to the Ministry of Defence with another report requesting reinstatement, and an official grabbed her by the chest to check if it was real. She broke both his hands.

*OLESIA and SVITLANA applaud.*

SVITLANA

What a badass!

VOLODYMYR

Is there anything else?

ANNA

Yes. Evidence.

*She takes a thick rope in a transparent bag with lab labels from the table, and in another bag, a small scrap of paper. Without taking the paper out of the bag, she reads:*

ANNA

I can't do this anymore.

VOLODYMYR

Is that all?

ANNA

Yes.

STUDENT 4

Will this be on the exam?

OLEH

What do you mean, "this"?

*ANNA, exasperated, throws the evidence onto the table.*

STUDENT 4

All this stuff – trans people, whatever…

OLEH

Transgender issues on a pathanatomy exam?

VOLODYMYR

(*to ANNA*) I told you they're hopeless! Degradates!

OLEH

(*fuming, enunciating each word*) No, this will not be on the pathanatomy exam!

STUDENT 1

(*quietly*) Aw, come on…

*The students close their notebooks in disappointment.*

STUDENT 2

So… can we leave? Our next class is PE.

STUDENT 3

Yeah, if they're not going to ask this, can we go?

*OLEH turns away from the students in irritation, lowers OLHA's bed to a normal position, and walks over to his colleagues. The students, realising they're allowed, quietly grab their backpacks and leave.*

OLEH

God, they're hopeless! Why even bother going to med school if you're just a clueless amoeba?

VOLODYMYR

Maybe, like with Olha – the father insisted.

OLEH

At least the dad gave permission to hit! I wouldn't have minded taking a few swings myself!

ANNA

(*smiling*) Watch out – they're off to PE… They'll bulk up and give you a hard time.

*OLEH picks up a folder from the table and walks over to the table where TONIA lies.*

OLEH

The one thing that scares me about students after PE is them showing up at practice right after working out. Good Lord, the stench!

ANNA

And that's taking into account that we're in the anatomical theatre!

OLEH

So, what do we have left…

*Suddenly, in the middle of the audience, a FEMALE ACTIVIST [40–45] stands up.*

FEMALE ACTIVIST

May I speak up?

*A MAN [40–45] sitting nearby tries to push her back down, tugging her hand; she nervously pushes him away.*

FEMALE ACTIVIST

(*to the man*) Do not silence me! (*to the actors on stage*) Before we delve into the abominable recollections of this – God have mercy – "Tonia," I must speak.

OLEH

Who are you?

FEMALE ACTIVIST

Me? I'm a public activist!

VOLODYMYR

Do you have something relevant to say about the case?

FEMALE ACTIVIST

Exactly! Right to the point!

*OLEH and VOLODYMYR exchange glances; ANNA stops writing and looks at the woman with interest.*

FEMALE ACTIVIST

Don't you get it? This whole act is spitting on women. A skirt, a wig, a bit of makeup – none of that makes you a woman! It's mockery! It drags us down to stereotypes: skirt, lipstick, long hair – like that's all we are!

*Pause. Silence. No one speaks, except the man beside her, who tries to force her back into her seat, hissing angrily. She yanks her arm away again.*

FEMALE ACTIVIST

Do you understand that with all this you erase everything women have fought for – building a system of images where at one end stands the brutal, masculine "he," and at the other the shaggy, feeble "she"? Screw up in battle – and suddenly you're a woman! Or a "broad," as you call it here!

*OLHA suddenly leaps up from the dissection table.*

OLHA

Stop the play! Let's talk! The audience wants dialogue!

FEMALE ACTIVIST

Let's talk!

ANNA

Don't! Who needs this? (*looks at her watch*)

OLHA

I do! I need this! (*to the FEMALE ACTIVIST*) Tell me, please – how should I "properly" show my pain? Huh?

FEMALE ACTIVIST

Without farce and wigs!

OLHA

(*pulls at her hair*) This is my hair! How do I show that I was born a woman, despite what the papers say? How do I make the audience feel the pain of that mismatch – that I'm a person, not a clown in a skirt?!

FEMALE ACTIVIST

No distortions! No discrimination against women, especially those who joined the army!

OLHA

How am I discriminating against women?!

FEMALE ACTIVIST

I'm not talking about you, but Tonia, or that Natasha –decked out in makeup and fancy clothes – women like that don't serve.

*From the witness bench, SVITLANA stands and raises her hand like in school.*

SVITLANA

And how do they serve? Tell me, because I'm curious! I wear makeup – maybe I'm not "playing" a woman in the army correctly!

FEMALE ACTIVIST

See? That's exactly what you're doing – playing! You're all playing here, even though you act like you're talking about serious matters!

SVITLANA

Excuse me, but do you serve? Are you in the army?

FEMALE ACTIVIST

Why does it matter?

OLESIA

No, she's one of ours – a soldier on the economic front! Ribbon on her sleeve, candle on her profile picture!

FEMALE ACTIVIST

I'm just saying – this constant sexism, coming at us from the stage, from television, from everywhere – it's unbearable!

OLHA

So tell me – how am I supposed to show who I am without dragging anyone else into it, without makeup, without heels? How can I share my story, my life, without upsetting you? Why is it that if I feel like a woman and want to look taller and slimmer, wearing heels makes me a mockery, not just me expressing myself?

OLEH

And even if you don't feel like a woman, but just wanted to wear heels, a skirt, earrings – why does that offend you? (puts on Aleks's wig) Are we really the sexist ones here?! Why, in a supposedly tolerant society like the one you seem to live in, while we're still considered immature, are heels and dresses seen as strictly a woman's privilege?!

FEMALE ACTIVIST

I'm not talking about that!

*The FEMALE ACTIVIST, irritated, sits back down.*

OLHA

No, go on, get up on stage and tell my story in a way that won't offend anyone! Go ahead! You heard it all: born into an ordinary family – mom and dad, no abuse, no heavy beatings. And yet, I felt I was a woman. Already as a child. Not because dresses were prettier than shorts – no, it was inside. And not because I wanted to wear makeup – I barely use any even now. I just feel like I'm NOT OLEH. Not a man! I look in the mirror, I see I have a penis, but I feel my body isn't supposed to look like this! So tell me – how am I supposed to show that on stage? How do I make sure my problems don't insult you? So that my sense of self, my appearance, doesn't turn into a parody of you?

OLEH

And what if you get your period on stage, or go into labour?

FEMALE ACTIVIST

(*from her seat*) Not funny!

OLHA

Then they'll burn this damn theatre to the ground! (*to the FEMALE ACTIVIST*) Go on, get up there and tell me – how do you show, without turning it into a farce, what it feels like to be someone who served their Motherland, who fought to stay, and was still cast aside? Cast aside, despite experience, despite loyalty – just for daring to claim another name, another set of clothes!

*A pause. OLEH approaches, lays his hand gently upon her shoulder. The room falls silent. All glance at one another, then slowly out into the audience.*

OLEH

That's all? Can we continue? Or are there still questions from the audience?

*Silence.*

OLEH

Well then, let's proceed with the case. Lie down, Olha.

OLHA

I won’t lie down anymore! Enough. Peaceful death is a joke in this place.

OLEH

Fine. Then sit quietly, as a corpse should.

*OLHA mimes locking her lips shut. She sits on her table. The light above her fades. An anatomical lamp on a cord switches on above TONIA, along with the screen above her showing a real-time video. The stage is in darkness; only the lamp and the screen illuminate. VOLODYMYR and OLEH step up to the table, looming over TONIA.*

VOLODYMYR

The most interesting material for me today. Let’s dig around in this brain.

ANNA

Let’s try... but there’s almost nothing to work with here…

OLEH

What do you mean, there’s no brain?

ANNA

The case files are empty...

VOLODYMYR

Then what do we even know about him?

*ANNA grabs the papers and leans closer to the table to see better. She reads, holding the documents up to the lamp.*

ANNA

Anatolii Petrovych Boiko. Antonina.

OLEH

Call sign?

ANNA

No, he’s not enlisted.

VOLODYMYR

Any disabilities?

*ANNA flips through the papers, finds a document, and hands it to VOLODYMYR.*

ANNA

No… here.

VOLODYMYR

(*reading*) Not subject to conscription due to the death or capture of immediate family members. Who are they?

ANNA

I don’t know. He only came to the authorities’ attention after the Kherson region was liberated.

OLEH

How exactly?

ANNA

Soldiers found him chained like a dog. When freed, he tried to hang himself. He was hospitalised.

VOLODYMYR

Diagnosis?

ANNA

Acute psychosis.

OLEH

Any medical history? Anyone in the family with mental disorders?

ANNA

Nothing recorded.

VOLODYMYR

Is there a medical report?

ANNA

(*handing over the document*) Here you go.

*VOLODYMYR sits on the edge of the anatomical table where TONIA lies. He begins to read.*

VOLODYMYR

(*picking out the key points*) Disturbances of consciousness, unclear thinking, disorientation in time and space… Intense fear, generalised anxiety disorder… Dissociative symptoms – describing oneself in the third person… Calls herself Tonia, using phrases like "Tonia saw, Tonia heard." Hyperactivity. Main personality traits – masochistic tendencies, victim-like behaviour.

SERGEANT

(*from the witness bench*) Victim-like? What does that mean?

OLEH

It's when someone provokes others to act aggressively toward them. Victim behaviour… someone who will inevitably find their tormentor.

VOLODYMYR

Any information at all about him? Who was he before the invasion?

ANNA

No.

VOLODYMYR

Personal belongings?

*OLEH picks up items one by one from the table: a wig, a skirt, underwear*.

OLEH

That's it – wig, underwear, a makeup bag, a phone.

VOLODYMYR

He hardly looks like a transvestite…

*VOLODYMYR rises, steps closer to the table. He examines the items. The overhead camera zooms in, capturing an extreme close-up of the face. At the corner of the lips – dried, caked blood*

VOLODYMYR

The makeup was applied grotesquely, smeared across an unshaven face… intentionally clumsy.

ANNA

Could it be schizophrenia?

VOLODYMYR

Aside from the dissociative symptoms, there's nothing else to suggest it.

*The camera keeps zooming in on the screen.*

OLEH

He's covered in bruises.

ANNA

Forensic pathologists noted, in addition to multiple hematomas, clear signs of sexual assault.

OLEH

He was raped there? During the occupation?

ANNA

No. When he was first hospitalised right after the liberation, none of that was present. There was exhaustion, acute psychosis, traces of beating – but no sexual violence.

OLEH

So when was it first recorded?

ANNA

The first time was already in the psychiatric ward. He provoked other patients into violent actions. The orderlies intervened. Here – there's a psychologist's note: right after the assault, he seemed to breathe out, as if he'd finally gotten what he wanted. He craves that pain. And he was even grateful to his abusers when he received it.

OLEH

And what happened after that?

ANNA

His medical record shows four separate hospitalisations following beatings and assaults.

VOLODYMYR

Maybe it's just a form of masochism? It happens. Latent homosexuality. The mind of someone raised in a puritan society can't allow itself to accept being gay… But if you're raped – it feels almost acceptable. You get the satisfaction, but you're not the homosexual – the rape happened to you.

OLEH

In both the police station and the psych ward, he kept shouting it was what he deserved… And if it were just latent homosexuality, he wouldn't be putting on women's clothing... no. This is a form of self-punishment. But for what?

*From the witness stand rises a weary, deeply sorrowful woman in a black mourning kerchief – KATERYNA [25–26].*

KATERYNA

For me.

VOLODYMYR

And you are?

KATERYNA

His wife. Katia. My name is Katia.

*The woman climbs over the railing that separates the witnesses, dragging along two large bags. Suddenly, the lights cut out. The stage plunges into total darkness.*

OLEH

God, these blackouts are driving me crazy!

*VOLODYMYR pulls a lighter from his pocket, flicks it on, and uses the small flame to search the desk for candles.*

ANNA

Yeah! Especially when you're in a morgue!

*VOLODYMYR lights several candles, hands them to his colleagues, then passes the whole bundle to the witnesses. They, too, light theirs from the first candle given by the doctor. OLEH takes one and places it into TONIA's hands, like those of a corpse.*

VOLODYMYR

What happened to him?

*KATERYNA begins unpacking her bags beside ANTONINA's table. She takes out a small basin and a sponge.*

KATERYNA

I happened to him. And then the war happened to us.

*She takes a bottle of water from her large bag, pours it into a basin, dips a sponge, and gently, almost lovingly, begins to wipe the makeup and blood from her husband's body, telling her story. The doctors form a half-circle around the table, holding candles.*

KATERYNA

We met in Kherson, at Korabel[47]. I was working as a barista, and he came in for a coffee.

*From the dark doorway, two almost invisible figures in black dash out, their grotesque masks only faintly revealing male and female features. The masks are white, like death masks – floating in the darkness, they seem to hover in the air on their own. They push the empty beds aside, clearing space.*

KATERYNA

[47] a neighborhood in Kherson, Ukraine

It was love at first sight. He got my number, and we talked all night. In the morning, he was standing outside the café with flowers and a ring.

*The masks move toward each other as if to kiss. Then the male mask moves behind the female, the man's figure embracing the woman, and she, looking out at the hall, leans back against him, resting her head trustingly on his shoulder. The masks freeze in place. KATERYNA continues washing her husband.*

KATERYNA

We got married in three weeks. Everyone looked at me like I was crazy: who was I, from a tiny hamlet of five houses, just short of Crimea? No gas, no water. Just dust, peaches, and silence. But I didn't care, because we were there, together. Then, on the 24th, the Russians joined us.

*From the dark doorway, four more masked figures silently crawl out. This time, the masks are terrifying, grotesque depictions of demons. In their hands, they carry a large metal chain. They surround the couple, who look around helplessly. The man and woman stand back to back, while the demons circle them like hunters who have trapped their prey.*

KATERYNA

After that, it was the same for everyone. Those who were there understand. Those who weren't – there's no way to explain.

OLEH

But still…

KATERYNA

All the men were taken in for questioning. They searched the houses. Took all the SIM cards, flash drives. Also money, earrings, a tablet, and a mixer. Tolya[48] came back after two days. Beaten. And his friend, Tokha, didn't come. He had been a police officer in Oleshky[49]. Later, the two of us buried him in our yard, under the apricot tree. Tolya said that when he was little, they buried Nayda there – his dog, who guarded the yard. I broke two nails while digging the grave in the frozen ground. See?

*KATERYNA stretches her fingers almost to ANNA's face so she can look. The masks stop circling. Two of them grab the woman and drag her to one side, while the other two pull the man in the opposite direction. He struggles, but they restrain him, throw him to the floor, and chain him up. He tries to break free, but it's impossible.*

KATERYNA

That evening, they came to us. Drunk. They said, "We'll hold a memorial for the cop." They drank three bottles of vodka and a bottle of martini from my cupboard. And then they raped me. Right in front of him. All together.

[48] diminutive form of the name Anatolii

[49] a city in Kherson region, Ukraine

*The demons in masks rape the woman. Their movements are caricatured, vulgar – a disgusting parody of humans. They shift roles and positions rapidly, tossing the woman from hand to hand like a rag. The man lunges at them, scratches at the floor, tries to crawl, but the chain keeps him pinned.*
*KATERYNA throws the rag to the floor, takes a towel, and wipes the man's body.*

KATERYNA

He begged them. He pleaded for mercy. He begged them to do whatever they wanted to him, but to let me go. Then he begged them to kill – both him and me.
*KATERYNA takes the candle from the man's hands and puts it out.*

KATERYNA

And then he fell silent.
*The masked man collapses and freezes on the floor. The demons toss their victim aside and, like animals, crawl on their hands toward the masked man's body, sniffing him. They lift their heads and howl.*
*KATERYNA pulls a sheet from her bag and covers the man completely.*
*One of the demons lifts a leg over the man, like a dog marking a tree. The demons stand up, pick up the woman in the mask, and carry her into the dark doorway, disappearing from the stage.*
*KATERYNA gathers the scattered items – towels, TONIA's wig – and puts them in her bag. She wrings out the sponge and hides it as well.*

ANNA

What happened next?
*KATERYNA bends down, lifts the basin of water from the floor, and turns to face the audience.*

KATERYNA

I don't know. Because after that… I died.
*She tips the basin over her head, pouring water from head to toe.*

KATERYNA

They threw me into an old well. Dry and deep. From there, I could see the stars even during the day. I would have stayed there forever if it weren't for Tolik[50]. He always said we were one. That he couldn't live without me. But we were torn apart. Ripped apart alive. He never forgave himself for not protecting me. For letting me suffer. And he began to seek pain… To punish himself for what others had done to me. He wanted to feel pain like I did. For we are one, as in heaven, so on earth… He was suffering without me, so I had to climb out to reach him and tell him he wasn't guilty, that he didn't deserve it. While climbing, I broke more nails. See?
*She stretches her hand toward ANNA again, so she can see her nails.*

KATERYNA

If you have no more questions about the case, shall we go, Tolik?

[50] diminutive form of the name Anatolii

VOLODYMYR

Nothing more…

*KATERYNA leans over the body of the man, wrapped in a sheet.*

KATERYNA

Come on, my love. They've let us go… They're gone. They left. And it doesn't hurt me. And it doesn't hurt you. Let's go… There's the apricot tree, Tokha, and Naida. For we are one, as in heaven, so on earth. Come on, my love. No one will hurt us again…

*She strokes ANATOLII's face through the sheet, whispering gentle words. From the witnesses' bench, the PRIEST rises, approaches the table with ANATOLII, and takes out a small prayer book. He begins to recite a prayer.*

PRIEST

Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."

KATERYNA

Let's go… You can see the stars there, even in the daytime…

PRIEST

Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day...

*Other witnesses approach ANATOLII's body. The men hand their candles to the women and lift the body in the shroud. KATERYNA, holding a candle, walks toward the door. Behind her, the PRIEST follows with the prayer book, continuing to recite the prayer. The witnesses and doctors carry the body, quietly humming the soldiers' song under their breath. The prayer and the song merge into one.*

WITNESSES

Saints went in chains along the Jordan's shore,
To save the soldiers, hell would take no more.
They flew like sparrows, skimming low and fast,
Over fields of mines, over dangers vast.
They searched the soldiers through the woods,
To bring them home as mothers would.

*Only OLHA and SVITLANA – the FEMALE SOLDIER – remain on stage. The song gradually fades. SVITLANA approaches the table, takes the physical evidence – a suicide note in a bag and a rope with a noose – and walks over to OLHA, who sits motionless at her anatomical table.*

SVITLANA

(*holding up the evidence*) So… what exactly you've come up with?

OLHA

I just can't do this anymore.

SVITLANA

You think being a woman is easy? I feel like hanging myself three times a week. But, as you can see…

OLHA

What am I supposed to do?

SVITLANA

Alright, let's go break a few more arms for anyone bold enough to say we're not women…

OLHA

Us?

SVITLANA

Exactly – us.

*SVITLANA reaches out her hand to her friend, helping her rise from the table. Together, the two women follow the funeral procession.*

*End of Play.*