The year was 2004. We were living in that strange, hyphenated limbo called "Serbia and Montenegro." The country felt like a shirt that had been washed too many times—the colors were fading, and the fit was all wrong, but it was the only one we had.

I stood backstage at the Dom Vojske (Army Hall) in Belgrade, adjusting a bow tie that felt like a noose. The air smelled of mothballs, floor wax, and the cheap cologne of the brass section. This was the "Festival of Military Songs and Marches 2004."

Why was I here? I'm a pop singer. My usual habitat is a smoky club in Dorćol or a summer terrace in Budva singing covers of Oliver Dragojević and Zdravko Čolić. But my landlord didn't accept "artistic integrity" as payment, and the Army paid on time. Plus, my uncle, a retired Colonel, had pulled some strings.

"Milan, stop fidgeting," said Bane, the bass player. He was smoking a cigarette right under a 'No Smoking' sign, ashing into a potted ficus. "It's just a gig. Sing the song, salute the General, eat the cold cuts."

"It feels like a séance, Bane," I whispered, peeking through the heavy velvet curtains.

The auditorium was half-full. The front rows were occupied by men in uniforms—olive drab and navy blue. Their chests were decorated with ribbons from wars that history was already trying to rewrite. Beside them sat their wives, hair sprayed into immobile helmets of lacquer. Behind them were rows of conscripts, young kids with shaved heads who looked bored out of their minds, probably promised a weekend pass if they filled the seats.

The orchestra began to tune up. It was the Big Band of the Army. Whatever you could say about the state of the military in 2004—shrinking budgets, outdated equipment—that band could still swing. They played with a precision that belonged to a bigger, stronger country that no longer existed.

"And now," the announcer's voice boomed, echoing with that specific, metallic reverb you only hear in socialist-era halls, "contestant number seven. Milan Petrović, performing 'The Sky Keeps the Memory.'"

"Showtime," Bane grunted.

I walked out. The stage lights were blinding, hot against my face. I squinted, finding the microphone stand. I nodded to the conductor.

The song was a pastiche. It had been written by a guy who usually wrote folk hits for Grand Production, but for this occasion, he had channeled his inner Soviet composer.

Verse 1:

The clouds are heavy over the mountain ridge,

The eagle flies where the heroes walked.

We stand guard on the eternal bridge,

While the wind whispers how they talked.

I crooned. I gave it the full trembling vibrato. It was absolute kitsch, a melody trapped somewhere between a Eurovision ballad and a funeral dirge. But as I looked at the front row, I saw something that killed my cynicism.

There was an old man in the third row. civilian clothes, shiny suit, probably a veteran. He wasn't bored like the conscripts. He wasn't posturing like the active generals. He had his eyes closed, and he was swaying slightly.

In 2004, everything was uncertain. We were transitioning to capitalism, waiting for the EU, arguing about The Hague, arguing about Kosovo, arguing about whether we were Serbs or Montenegrins or just tired. But in this hall, for three minutes, these people were pretending that honor was simple, that the borders were secure, and that there was a dignity in marching.

I hit the chorus.

Oh, Sky above the motherland,

Watch over the son, watch over the grain.

We remain here, hand in hand,

Through the snow and through the rain.

I raised my hand in a dramatic gesture. It felt ridiculous, but the applause that washed over me was genuine. It wasn't the screaming of teenage girls I wanted; it was the polite, heavy applause of heavy hands.

I walked off stage.

"Good job," the stage manager said, handing me a lukewarm bottle of mineral water. "You're up against the choir from Niš, though. They have a song about a tank. Hard to beat a tank."

I loosened my tie and headed for the buffet—the holy grail of Serbian events.

The "cocktail" party afterwards was a surreal tableau. Waiters moved through the crowd with silver platters of *meze*—cubes of cheese, rolled ham, and those little toothpicks with olives. The generals were drinking Vinjak.

I found myself cornered by the composer of my song.

"Milan! You sold it!" he shouted, smelling of brandy. "Did you feel the emotion? The power?"

"It was very moving, Zoran," I lied.

"Next year," he leaned in, conspiring, "I have an idea. We do something more modern. Maybe electric guitars. 'Rock and Roll Soldier.' What do you think?"

"Let’s survive 2004 first," I said.

I slipped away and found a side exit. Stepping out onto Braće Jugovića street, the cool night air hit me. The noise of Belgrade traffic—the horns, the trams rattling, the distant bass of a techno club—flooded my ears.

Inside the hall, they were preserving a museum exhibit. Outside, the city was messy, loud, and rushing toward a confusing future. I checked my pocket. The envelope with the cash was there.

I hailed a taxi.

"Where to?" the driver asked. He was smoking, listening to B92 radio.

"Anywhere," I said, leaning my head back. "Just drive. And turn the radio up. Anything but a march."

The driver laughed and cranked up the volume. The Red Hot Chili Peppers started playing. I watched the lights of the Republic Square blur by, leaving the generals and their ghosts behind in the hall, marching to a beat that had stopped a long time ago.