

UNDER FIRE

Libretto Jan Kaus

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Score Märt-Matis Lill

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CHARACTERS:

Hero

Hero's friend

Jaan (tenor)

Juhan (baritone)

Soldier 1 (tenor)

Soldier 2 (baritone)

Company commander

Supreme commander

Andromache / Voice / singer at the beginning

Girl 1 (*letters*)

Girl 2 (Soprano 1)

Girl 3 (Soprano 2)

First woman (mezzo)

Second woman (mezzo)

Deserter (Juhan)

Bearer 1 (Soldier 1)

Bearer 2 (Soldier 2)

Nurses (Girl 2 & Girl 3)

CHORUS

ACT I

Cafe by the sea, piano, double-bass, singer can be heard through the murmur of voices. A large building with several storeys, women at the windows (Chorus).

1.1

Buzz of chatter. Piano playing. Enter Hero and HERO'S FRIEND at the front of the stage. Peaceful mood.

HERO'S FRIEND: Can you feel something in the air?

HERO: I can feel something bearing down, but it's a long way off. I'm not sure if it's in the air as such, or smouldering in the hearth, but there's something stirring inside the people.

HERO'S FRIEND: This unease. The disquiet. The frayed tempers. Feelings that need an outlet. It means that people are waking up!

HERO: What are you getting at?

HERO'S FRIEND: I'm not the only one wondering if it can be long. The boundary dispute's still unresolved. They're buying houses here and the land that goes with them. I've always said...

HERO: Yeah, yeah, I know, attack is the best form of defence.

HERO'S FRIEND: Exactly! They've been asking for a wallop for a while now.

HERO: Well, I still think that...

HERO'S FRIEND: Yes, I know. But you know, you can't just let the danger grow for ever...

HERO: But if we talk about these things...

HERO'S FRIEND: How long will you manage to keep talking? A year? Ten years? For ever? Talk, talk, talk! It never gets anyone anywhere. Listen!

1.2

Individual orchestral instruments gradually start playing

Two women at a coffee table / JUHAN, JAAN and two other young men (later SOLDIER 1 and SOLDIER 2) behind them.

FIRST WOMAN: So what do you really think, should we hold onto the shore?

SECOND WOMAN: That would mean they keep the best fishing place on their side! And besides, what have they ever done that's decent?

FIRST WOMAN: The men just dress differently.

They take milk in their coffee, but we drink ours without.

SECOND WOMAN: Say what you like - milky coffee gets you noticed!

JAAN, SOLDIER 1 AND SOLDIER 2:

S2: Look at those old women, their stubby cigarettes.

J: The antics that cloak the way we fool the masses.

S2: It's story after story, S1: one after the next.

S1: A marsh brimming with rumours, S2: a mire of hypocrisy!

J & S2: A battle is better than prattle!

FIRST WOMAN: At midsummer they eat meat, not us though.

SECOND WOMAN: All that greed, and just for show – it's not our scene at all.

FIRST WOMAN: A girl can make a pretty living here in our homeland.

SECOND WOMAN: What on earth they're doing here I cannot understand!

FIRST WOMAN: They'll doubtless have much the same rights in mind.

SECOND WOMAN: Just look who's here, seems they need some more of our special, personal treatment!

JAAN, SOLDIER 1 AND SOLDIER 2:

S2: Strange how giving satisfaction's the only thing we've time for.

J: If only water instead of blood echoed inside our veins.

S1: I want good hot luck, flowing like lava!

S2: Even if it flows from the most catastrophic wound!

J & S2: A battle is better than prattle!

FIRST WOMAN: The difference between us is sheer fortune, I'd say...

SECOND WOMAN: No, no, what do you mean? it's all down to fate!

FIRST WOMAN: If you carry on like this much more I can see you acting on your words.

SECOND WOMAN: Well, there's nothing wrong with being known for what you've done!

JAAN, SOLDIER 1 AND SOLDIER 2:

S1: Oh to feel the pulsing of sweet life a little longer!

J: What's the point of hacking at those tasty kringel pastries?

S1: Just look at them slurping away, it's turning into slop!

J: The easy life grates with me, no matter how it looks!

J & S1: We need a battle rather than prattle!

HERO: A little song's been going round and round in my head over the last few days

ANDROMACHE: I don't care for war-fever,
it fills my mind with gloom.

HERO'S FRIEND: You never know, melancholy won't make your final resting place any better, but it might do something for a trench!

HERO: What do you think of this little song?

ANDROMACHE: Oh, for a little time
To keep this peace alive.

HERO'S FRIEND: And what if the enemy finally brings the attack to us?
They've threatened us, haven't they?

JAAN: You're the type to say everything's fine – peace, peace and more peace!

Until a foreign gun's pointing in your face!

S2: Better to be the first to attack,

J & S2: We remove the danger from the scene.

HERO: I don't know, we'd be biting off more than we can chew.

HERO'S FRIEND: You're right, it would be too much! The only thing that can take on guns is bigger guns.

HERO: (*reading newspaper*): Hey, listen to this! It says a two-headed calf has been born. Fascinating.

HERO'S FRIEND: (*to HERO*): Come on! Let's go and sign up!

WOMEN AT THE WINDOW (CHORUS):

We want men like this, yes, we want you!

We want you to go to war!

Our best wishes and warm hearts will protect you.

The hours that we spend apart cannot compare to your glory!

HERO reluctantly follows his friends. The two other young men leave, JUHAN and JAAN remain. A dreadful sound freezes everything.

Everyone stays quiet, frozen in position.

1.3

JAAN: So?

JUHAN: I don't know.

JAAN: I do know. We are seventeen, too young.

JUHAN: I don't know.

JAAN: Staying at home would be too much to bear.

JUHAN: I don't know.

JAAN: We need this war, it won't last long.

JUHAN: I don't know.

JAAN: If I had a uniform I'd get a table in there straight away. (*points in the direction of the cafe*).

JUHAN: Yes. Perhaps.

JAAN: Before this war ends, if it ever starts.

JUHAN: Yes. Perhaps.

JAAN: That's why they'll be asking for our young lives in just a year.

JUHAN: Yes. Perhaps.

Two girls in the cafe notice the boys. One of them gets up and approaches them. They face each other uneasily. The girl rifles through her handbag and finally takes out two large white feathers. She offers the feathers to the boys.

JUHAN: For me?

GIRL 2: For you, for you.

JUHAN: Why?

GIRL 3: Because you're still here.

JUHAN: Where should I be?

GIRL 2: Shame on you, asking that.

JUHAN: What do you mean, a shame?

GIRL 3: It's not a shame. It's a disgrace. A disgrace!

GIRLS TOGETHER: A disgrace! A disgrace!

The girl turns round. She stands still and looks at JUHAN again.

GIRL 2: Other men of your age are blowing trumpets,

GIRL 3: flying flags,

GIRL 2: flashing their swords.

GIRLS TOGETHER: A disgrace! A disgrace!

JUHAN: I'm not seventeen yet.

GIRLS 2 & 3: Age doesn't matter.

JAAN looks at the feathers, picks them up from JUHAN's lap, stands next to a cafe table with them and puts the feathers in a coffee cup. He douses the feathers in the coffee and takes out black feathers. He sticks one on himself and one on JUHAN as moustaches. The

girls nod in approval.

WOMEN AT THE WINDOWS: We want boys like you, yes, we want you!
We want you to go to war.

Our best wishes and warm hearts will protect you.

The hours that we spend apart cannot compare to your glory!

- **Enthusiasm, ceremonies, parties.**

During the next song the men carry military equipment, fall in line and begin to move, at the end of the song they march. "Iliad" chorus with the song

1.4

SOLDIERS: Let these words, these impassioned enthusiastic words,
be the voice of our country and me
To deliberations we now close the door,
In formation let's fight our uncertainty!

MEZZO 1 & MEZZO 2:

SOPR 1 & 2 and MEZZO 1 & 2:

SOLDIERS: Now let's make our homes into HQs
and, if needs must, our roads into trenches!

WOMEN:

The music stops

CHORUS: Hurry, hurry, there's movement at the border!

SOLDIERS (*talking, at the same time chorus repeats "Hurry, hurry," etc while marching*):

Blackout. In the background the sound of white noise and the occasional drumbeat can be heard.

1.5

VOICE:

2.1

COMPANY COMMANDER: Forward march!

In your previous lives you danced a waltz,
but now you'll tramp my march!

To the song - fire!

JAAN: Man was not set up to stumble, or
blunder around his own backyard,

SOLDIER 1: to relish the rasp of an oven rake.

JAAN: Man is made with the will to work,
a need to foil his foes!

SOLDIER 1: I'm off to the city to cast the die -

JAAN: The die is cast, to war at last

SOLDIER 1: I gird myself in German garb,

JAAN: Schooled like a squire.

SOLDIER 1: I cast my clothes onto the grate,

J & S1: black greatcoat onto the burning grate,

SOLDIER 1: I cast my clogs, a cause for care.

J & S1: a regular rifleman I shall be,
iron helmet on my head,

SOLDIER 2: honest grey uniform on my back.

Then shall I bid my adieu
to you in all glad heart.

SOLDIER 2: I'll take a rifle from the rack,

I'll strap the strange sword on

J & S1: I'll burrow into battle,

J, S1 & S2: Redden the Russian regiment,
JAAN, JUHAN, S1 & S2: Flatten the French
And browbeat the British.

HERO'S FRIEND (*To HERO*): It's hard.

HERO: When things get rough ...

COMPANY COMMANDER: What's going on?

HERO: Nothing!

COMPANY COMMANDER: Private! A song!

HERO: When things get rough, then...

When things get rough, ...

JAAN: When things get rough,

then ride it out!

SOLDIER 2: When things get rough,

then ride it out, ride it out. ...

SOLDIER 1: When things get rough, then

ride it out, ride it out...

JUHAN: When things get rough,

then ride it out... ride it...

During the song it starts to rain, very hard. The earth becomes sodden, it seems to hold the men's legs fast.

GIRL 1 opens a letter and begins to read it out.

2.2

GIRL 1 (*reads*): My darling, I'm thinking about you and the way you wash your hands. You're waiting for a letter from your husband in which he writes about himself and his comrades at sunset, while the enemy's bullets whistle in his ears, and he gazes at the blue sky, defying all danger. We were all expecting something like that.

My darling, it may surprise you but I don't really have much to tell you about apart from the never-ending mud. Mud, mud, mud, everywhere: inside the shell-holes, in front of the shell-holes, behind the shell-holes. We now have "mud-legs", or "trench foot", which means that our toes are rotting from the tips. Mud is a curious substance, especially when you live in it. It's neither earth nor water, it can be both solid and liquid at the same instant. You can't get away from it. It soaks into every crevice. There's more of it all the time.

JUHAN: Don't cry, farm maidens,
don't mourn, darling wives,
don't pity us, girls of Harju

JAAN: blonde heads of Viru!

JUHAN: I don't cower with dread at the casting die,

JAAN: the casting die, the squire's quota.

JUHAN: I'll keep my distance from the casting die,
escape the squire's quota,
darken not the doctor's door.

SOLDIERS (CHORUS): When things get rough

JUHAN: I've escaped the squire,
the doctor's door

JAAN: the die was not cast
the squire's quota was left unsquared

JUHAN: I left the doctor to deplore,
the Russians to rage

JAAN: their thundering threats and clamouring curses
I was free to follow my fancy.

SOLDIERS (CHORUS): When things get rough, then ...

JUHAN: I entered the city below me

JAAN and there I wrought three wrongs:

I humped the horny housekeeper,
banged the bonny baker,
mated with the milkmaid.

JUHAN: Then from the city I skedaddled.

JAAN: The traders were terrified,
the parishioners self-pitying.

SOLDIERS (CHORUS): When things get rough, then.

JUHAN: When I skedaddled from the city
I foraged food for
my chestnut charger

JUHAN & JAAN: When my steed had supped and sipped,
supped and sipped, supped and sipped.

SOLDIERS (CHORUS): Ride it out, ride it...

JUHAN: I met a wench wending her way
to draw water,

JUHAN & JAAN: yellow yoke across her back,
Carrying pails carefully in her clasp.

JAAN: Tailing her on my trusty steed
by the bushes I beckoned her,
past poplars I persuaded her.

SOLDIERS (CHORUS): Then ride, then ride it out, then ride...

JAAN: She followed me, she did

JUHAN & JAAN: followed me to flirt:

S1: Oh groomsman,
what's that dancing down there,

S1 & S2: bulging in your breeches,
prancing in your pants?

JAAN & JUHAN: "A worker stiff, with head of red,
with you he pines to play,

straight and strong incessantly.”

SOLDIERS (CHORUS): Then ride, then ride, then ride...

S1 & S2: Oh groomsman, tell,
what's that towering in your trousers?

JAAN, JUHAN, S1 & S2: "It's a tool of my trade, truelove,
A beam for breaching bloomers,
It's for slipping in
and sliding,

S1 & S2: Slip and slide incessantly."

JAAN, JUHAN, S1, S2 and CHORUS:
When things get rough, then ...
Then ride it out, ride it, ride it out...
Then ride, then ride, then ride...

COMPANY COMMANDER: Halt! At ease!

2.3

The soldiers sink to the ground. Soon they are snoring – in marching time.

Only HERO does not fall asleep, he stands up and wanders among the men.

Silence.

Gradually, smoothly and unnoticed the orchestra begins to play a lullaby as background to the following scene

HERO: What's the matter with me... Why can't I sleep.

And what's up with them. Why do they believe the things they do. Like, the war will be over soon. 'Cause you know that wars never last long. It could be a hundred-year war. Or perhaps a three-hundred year one. Off you go, a twenty-odd year old, and by the time you come back you're over fifty. If you come back. Ach, I'm probably talking rubbish. Times have changed, everything's moving faster.

HERO's friend gets up and moves towards HERO.

HERO'S FRIEND: I'm scared.

HERO (*nodding thoughtfully*): Well, we're close to the frontline.

HERO'S FRIEND: No, it's not because of that. Everyone says the war'll be short, don't they?

HERO: Yes. I don't know. I hope so.

HERO'S FRIEND: So... what will happen if the war ends too quickly? If we don't see any action? I'm scared I'll be left out and won't see anything. How will I be able to go home if that happens?

They face this fact for a while then the friend turns in and starts snoring away. HERO also turns in and at the same time the company commander stands up. He listens.

LULLABY (WOMEN):

The night brings back everything
that the day scatters.

It brings the sheep, it brings the goat,
it brings the child back to his mother.

FEMALE SOLOISTS (Sopr 1&2) and CHORUS (*sings in support*):

Sudden musical contrast

The stillness is shattered by a bursting shell, clods of earth rain down on the sleeping soldiers.

COMPANY COMMANDER: Get up! Get up! Quick now! Get up!

They start to dig in while being shelled. Large sandbags appear from somewhere, intended to protect the trenches. Everyone coughs, gasps, splutters.

The company commander doles out rum to everyone.

Focus on the women, the men gasping etc., shaking from the blast.

WOMEN (CHORUS):

The night brings back everything

that the bright dawn has scattered.

FEMALE SOLOISTS (Mezzo 1&2):

The women sink back into the semi-shadows. Snuffling, shuffling of feet, sighs, coughs.

2.4

* HERO and VOICE.

The soldiers walk round slowly, semi-comatose. Drink slowly revives them, they gradually get their voices back. The men clear their throats, some are surprised by their own voices. Someone is warming himself in the firelight and clothes are hanging up to dry. HERO watches from above, he doesn't join in with the drinking but sits down anyway.

JAAN (*tries to start a conversation, regain his bravado*): Good... That was a good march!

JUHAN:...

JAAN: Good.

JUHAN: Good? Good?

JAAN: What...? What's up?

JUHAN: You said "good".

JAAN: Good is... a good word.

SOLDIER 1: Better than... pud. Or mood.

JAAN: You're in a mood. Don't be in a mood, be good.

JUHAN: What? Go f**k yourself!

JAAN: Hey! Just listen now. (*Offering JUHAN the bottle*)

It's just... just don't think too much.

SOLDIER 1: Just think about something that's on our minds.

JUHAN: What like?

JAAN, S 1 and S 2: Fame! Medals! A Cross of Honour!

JAAN springs to his feet like a jack-in-the-box, and in fits and starts and with a few difficulties regains his previous mood, but his confusion is evident.

JAAN: The enemy can wait - I'll slaughter them in the streets.

Yes... then... oh yeah... they'll scream

Remember, we're the ones with the power..., today only!

S2: I've got something... our homeland... great and wide...

S1: I've a beautiful wife, my mother and father have loads of trees and land...

JAAN: But it all disappears when I see the war machinery at the front.

S1 & S2: I am a machine that starts the offensive and the tree-felling!

S2: I'm the people's hero!

JUHAN: Yeah, no s**t!

JAAN: Don't be so touchy!

You're too serious for here.

JAAN & S1: You're not some kind of wandering spirit, are you?

JAAN: The lifeline has many branches.

JAAN & S1: The most important is the motherland!

Here you can see that stalemate is impossible.

You'll either surrender or dither,

have doubts, and be sorry.

You may become more open-minded, gradually,

but you'll always do your duty as best you can!

S1 (*in a friendly fashion*): Now less blether, and more duty!

JUHAN: F**k off!

S 1: What about when you're a long way from home...

JUHAN tips the bottle up. Cheeky JAAN sees HERO, who is sitting down, and goes and hugs him

to cheer him up.

JAAN (*pointing to HERO*): Another man who thinks too much.

He's a great guy, a man's man!

S1 & S2: Less blether, and more duty!

JAAN (*shouting*): Now for a war dance, everyone!

The drunken men begin to dance wildly round HERO. The bottle is passed round each time they salute each other. One after the other they collapse on the ground until they are all huddled together asleep. As the dance gets quieter, a rumbling sound can be heard - artillery. Something flashes - like the flare of a searchlight piercing into a room. It startles HERO.

2.5

HERO: Who's there?

I dreamt of a Voice... a Voice that was one voice yet a thousand voices...

The thousand and only ...

It had a form, it moved, it took shape, the air shimmered around it... the river frothed and foamed, a river of fire inside the earth, inside the earth that threw up smithereens, whispers... yells of command... from inside the earth came the clatter of hoofs, the battue, the scraping of matches...

the creaking of wheels... the crackle of caterpillar tracks... groans, groans, smithereens... eyes searching for the sky from the trench... Without groans the Voice cannot... The Voice does not like words... it needs them, but sometimes it is lost without them... How can you know

that a war is just? The groans that smother all the other sounds... footsteps, lots of footsteps, boots in the mud, horses hoofs... rats... Mum! Mum!...

Shells spotlight broken trees, broken bones...

Silence... smothering silence... I can see... someone's coming... piercing the Voice... the Voice cannot kill her... the Voice cannot smother her...

She's coming and she brings comfort, impossible though it may be...

HERO sinks back into sleep / Enter ANDROMACHE in a darkened corner of the room.

ANDROMACHE goes from one man to the next, startling them awake, stroking their heads, patting their shoulders, after which each man settles back down. ANDROMACHE does not speak, quietly humming her later song in an unintelligible language. The men wake up with a start.

SOLDIER 1 (*waking up with a start, eyes goggling in the dark*): The bullet that kills

you has no voice.

SOLDIER 2: So death has a voice only if you aren't yet in its plan.

HERO: But it has many voices.

JAAN: Is the voice of a bullet different from the voice of shrapnel?

HERO'S FRIEND: In war day can remind you of night.

JUHAN: In war night can remind you of day.

It gets light. Exit ANDROMACHE. JUHAN dithers, taking a white handkerchief out of his pocket and uses it to wipe his brow.

3.1

COMPANY COMMANDER: Private, what's that?

JUHAN: This? It's a pocket handkerchief. I've got a few of them, I can give you one.

COMPANY COMMANDER: As you were! Get rid of it! *(He tears the handkerchief out of JUHAN's pocket.)*

JUHAN: I don't understand, Commander. A snotty nose is no fun for a soldier.

COMPANY COMMANDER: A snotty nose? A snotty nose? If a soldier wants to surrender *(he waves the handkerchief, finally flinging it to the ground)*, then he can... then he can...

A shell explodes nearby, they take cover.

*** The Front. Almighty confusion. Materiel, the confusion of war.**

3.2

The muddy soldiers smoke cigarettes in the starlight.

JAAN: The sky's full of stars and the earth's covered in mud.

HERO'S FRIEND: The stars are beautiful, the mud's awful.

JUHAN: The stars are meaningless and so is the mud.

SOLDIER 1: But the mud is more meaningless than the stars.

SOLDIER 2: You can't drown in the stars.

JUHAN: The stars are pointless.

HERO: This mud is even more pointless.

Enter the Supreme Commander. The Supreme Commander invites the company commander to sit down. The Company Commander is not at his best. The SUPREME COMMANDER watches him, smiling.

SUPREME COMMANDER: How do you feel?

COMPANY COMMANDER: As always in war, one brother is far away from another.

SUPREME COMMANDER: Don't worry, the war won't last long.

COMPANY COMMANDER: Ohohh?!?

The COMPANY COMMANDER looks at him, astonished. The SUPREME COMMANDER is smoking a cigar.

SUPREME COMMANDER: We can be quite sure of it. We have artillery, infantry, cavalry. But if we are to achieve a rapid victory, then it won't be enough! (The COMPANY COMMANDER nods enthusiastically)

COMPANY COMMANDER (*enthusiastically*): What will bring us victory?

That's a lot of guns and bombs. But it's not enough. They won't bring us victory tomorrow.

SUPREME COMMANDER: We need a weapon that works like a bomb, but is silent. (*The COMPANY COMMANDER stares at him aghast*). I can't talk about it at the moment, it's still a secret.

COMPANY COMMANDER (*as if waking from a stupor*) We need something with a very distinct sound. The secret, sir, is something that will bring them to their knees.

The SUPREME COMMANDER takes a deep puff and blows out smoke. The stars begin to grow, at the same time the sound of whistling and roaring can be heard, and the stars become bombs that fall to the ground. New stars light up the sky. During the woma(e)n's song they begin to go out one by one.

3.3

CHORUS (WOMEN)

The dusk steals away

all that the dawn gathered

It takes the sheep, it takes the goat,

it takes the child from its mother.

(Fades during the following):

A new day dawns in the trench. Suddenly smoke appears in a section of the enemy trench. The COMPANY COMMANDER springs to his feet.

COMPANY COMMANDER: Look lively, lads! Fire!

The men seize their rifles, pointing them towards the enemy trench. Smoke closes in although no men can be seen. The soldiers watch in confusion.

The smoke is nearly upon them.

COMPANY COMMANDER: Fire at will! Fire!

The soldiers fire while coughing. Soon they are all coughing, some of them so hard that they drop their rifles. The COMPANY COMMANDER suddenly realises what's happening and distributes gas masks to the men. The soldiers are seeing them for the first time. No-one, including the COMPANY COMMANDER can remember how to put them on. One of the soldiers grabs a gas mask and in terror manages to put it on correctly. The others follow his example although one or two keel over and lie on the ground. The smoke envelops the men.

3.4

GIRL 1 *(reading a letter)*

CHORUS (WOMEN)

The dusk steals away

all that the dawn gathered

It takes the sheep, it takes the goat,

it takes the child from its mother.

CHORUS:

Who carried news of the war,
who brought this talk of strife? - To war!

The magpie carried news of the war,
The crow brought the talk of strife - To war!

Light on HERO who "shakes" his comrades up from the ground and into file.

3.5

WOMEN SOLOISTS (*sopranos*):

CHORUS:

Who carried news of the war?
The magpie carried news of the war. - To war!

SOLOISTS:

CHORUS:
who brought tales of strife?
The crow brought tales of strife- To war!

GIRL 1: (*Speaking*):

CHORUS:

Who will he take to the war?
The father or the son?
Will he take the youngest son? - To war!

SOLOISTS (MEZZOS 1&2) (*Speaking*):

CHORUS:

The youngest brother
the youngest one, the smallest one,
he takes the grandest horses
the very best saddles. - To war!

ACT II

4.1

Enter the COMPANY COMMANDER and two men, dragging a third man between them. The man's legs cannot carry him. HERO hurries to help them.

HERO: What happened? Shrapnel? Burns?

COMPANY COMMANDER: Burns? Yes, could be burns.

He must have been burned for his face to be like that. All the bridges have burned so badly they've collapsed.

HERO: What bridges? What are you talking about?

COMPANY COMMANDER: He wouldn't take it. We have to take it.

He decided he wouldn't take it any more.

The men let the DESERTER go, he sinks to his knees. HERO and the men with him gather quietly beside him.

COMPANY COMMANDER: It's up to you now.

HERO: Up to us?

COMPANY COMMANDER: Yes, get him upright. Against the wall...

Then form a line and... you know...

HERO: No, we don't.

COMPANY COMMANDER: How shall I put it? Dispatch him...

HERO: Dispatch? Where to?

COMPANY COMMANDER: To meet his maker.

HERO stares at the deserter, kneels beside him. He offers him a cigarette. The COMPANY COMMANDER begins to assemble a firing squad from the melancholy soldiers.

HERO: What happened?

DESERTER: When you've had a bellyful of s**t this c**p makes no difference, it's just too much to take.

The DESERTER gets to his feet, the men stand in a line.

DESERTER: We are comrades. Blood brothers...
We made an oath to each other...
An enthusiastic promise...

The DESERTER turns to face his brothers in arms, who at the same time prepare to shoot him.

DESERTER: Stand by me and I shall stand by you.
Stand by me and I shall stand by you.
Stand by me and I shall stand by you.
Stand by me and...

Shells strike the front, the earth shakes, the men scatter. Artillery. The men sink down. But the earth shakes again underground. Everything shakes, the earth shudders.

*** The fire of hell that burns all enthusiastic cheers once and for all.**

4.2

The Company Commander's nerves are fraying.

COMPANY COMMANDER: Help!... We must attack...

What was it I was supposed to say?... Help!... No, it wasn't "help"

SOLDIER 1 (*prosaically*): Hurrah!

COMPANY COMMANDER (*startled*): What? What?

SOLDIER 1: We were supposed to shout "Hurrah!" and go.

COMPANY COMMANDER: Go where? Go where?

SOLDIER 1: There! (*He points upwards*)

A shell explodes on their position. Everything is bathed in light.

COMPANY COMMANDER: Ahhhh... Men...(more resolutely) Men!... Help!
Help!

The shelling suddenly stops. The soldiers blink in confusion at the silence. The Company Commander, cowering in a ball, straightens up, laughs a couple of times - the laughs resemble machine gun fire - and looks at his men attentively. He quickly tries to compose himself.

COMPANY COMMANDER: The fact that... I was thinking that...

Discipline has got out of hand. So... so...

(hysterically) Shells and shell cases, cigarette packs...

The trench must be spick and span before we get out of here!

The men look at him in confusion. They quietly begin to tidy up.

COMPANY COMMANDER *(self-confidently)*:

Some men are born to give commands
and make sure toes and heels are kept in line.

While others are born to take the orders.

Now I've given you instructions aplenty!

Shells and shell cases, cigarette packs...

The trench must be spick and span before we get out of here!

4.3

The men are tidying up the trench.

CHORUS:

Who carried news of the war? - To war!

The magpie carried news of the war, - To war!

the crows brought the enemies' chatter. - To war!

JUHAN *(initiates and carries the emotional brunt of the entire song, JAAN backs him)*:

The brother went to help construct

the sister then went to teach. - To war!

JAAN: Dearest, darling lovely brother,

JUHAN: when you go to war. -To war!

JAAN: Don't be among the first to into war

JUHAN: and don't waltz out the last. -To war!

JAAN: The first into battle were bombed,

JUHAN: those at the rear were slain. - To war!

JAAN: Those in the middle came home,

JUHAN: those in the middle came home. - To war!

JAAN: Don't drink the water from the marsh

JUHAN: and do not drink the water at the shore. -To war!

JAAN: The marsh is full of the dead,

JUHAN: the shoreline is full of carcasses. -To war!

HERO'S FRIEND: When will it end?

No one answers.

HERO'S FRIEND (*more stridently*): Does anyone know when it will end?

JAAN raises his hand. A shot is fired and hits JAAN's hand. Enter NURSES and carry JAAN, with wounded hand, away to the field hospital. The men at the front read his letter.

JUHAN, S1 & S2 (*read the letter in unison*):

Comrades! I now feel quite at home in the field hospital.

One dreadful nightmare after another is plaguing me here.

When I'm awake I think, "life is wonderful"

but I don't know... I don't know... it's so dark here!

The men stare at the letter in bemusement. Finally, holding a white handkerchief, JUHAN slowly raises one of his hands. The COMPANY COMMANDER notices and shoots him in the neck.

4.4

GIRL 1: (*reads a letter*): Darling, You've always said I'm dreadfully serious. But yesterday I actually laughed. Loudly, without the slightest embarrassment. In a word, we came across a body. There are so many of them, sometimes they are lying so close together that you just can't help but tread on them. In winter they get a covering of snow, in spring they stink and their colours change with the seasons.

The smell of a corpse is sweet, it reminds me of some of the gases we've

used on each other. Sometimes the corpses burst, like bombs. Once we were desperately thirsty so we drank water from a shell hole, no one had time to boil it.

Only after we'd quenched our thirst did the sergeant notice a leg floating in the puddle.

Yesterday our corporal unwittingly trod on a body. The tongue came out of its mouth, just as if the corpse was sticking it out at us. It made us laugh. How we laughed, really laughed. With strange voices.

I think the laughter came from being alive.

4.5

SOPR 1 & 2: Are you riding into the sunset?

MEZZOs 1 & 2: Did the enemy immediately step off the road?

SOPR 1 & 2: I can imagine how handsome the cavalry are!

MEZZOs 1 & 2: All the field guns lined up, each one like a hill!

Father says a few bangs won't do any harm.

SOPR 1 & 2: One man has to stay alive to stand behind the gun.

MEZZOs 1 & 2: We're loath to believe the letters from the front.

SOPR 1 & 2: Their tone is dark, but the world is colourful.

MEZZOs 1 & 2: It's hard for everyone now, life isn't easy.

MEZZO 1: Though the war is taking longer than expected.

JAAN goes back to join the other soldiers at the front.

SOPR 1 & 2 + MEZZOs 1 & 2:

Large explosion. Everything is buried in dust and smoke (or darkness). When it disperses, we can see bodies. HERO and HERO'S FRIEND are sprawled in the trench, HERO'S FRIEND is fatally wounded.

*** HERO in a hole. *Delirium vivens.***

5.1

HERO: You're bleeding.

HERO'S FRIEND: Perhaps.

HERO: You're bleeding out!

HERO'S FRIEND: Perhaps. You're bleeding, outside and in.

HERO: We have to go.

HERO'S FRIEND: I suddenly feel lighter.

Water is thinner than blood. Clearer.

CHORUS (*sings underneath the following dialogue*):

Do not drink marsh water -

the marsh is full of the dead.

Do not drink the water at the shore -

the shoreline is full of carcasses

Do not drink seawater -

the sea is full of men's heads.

Do not drink the water of the Narva -

The Narva is full of women's heads.

Do not drink the water of the Koiva

The Koiva is full of the bones of the dead.

HERO'S FRIEND: Over there, are they... (*feels the air with a hand*)...are they hills?

HERO: Where?

HERO'S FRIEND: Over there... Here... Looked as if they were right here.

HERO: Those? (*Touches the curved edge of the shell-hole*)

HERO'S FRIEND: Yeah, them. They're hills, yeah? Hilltops. We can see so far from here. If we were there we'd see even further.

HERO: No... they...

HERO'S FRIEND: There are no hills where we live. We only have gentle slopes.

But here there are hills. Did we attack beyond those hills, eh?

HERO: I don't know.

HERO'S FRIEND: God's handiwork is so close at hand.

HERO: It wasn't God who made those hills, it was just a mine!

HERO'S FRIEND: Are you crying?

HERO: It's mustard gas. Damned mustard gas, you can never get it out of your eyes.

HERO starts smoking a cigarette. His hands are shaking. Everything is wet and muddy.

HERO mumbles something to himself.

HERO'S FRIEND: Are you praying?

HERO *(to himself, in desperation)* F**k, f**k f**k! *(To his friend)* What, mate?

HERO'S FRIEND: I can't see, are you praying?

The front is enveloped in smoke or fog (gas?). At the same time, focus on the women reading letters from the front.

5.2

GIRL 1: *(reading a letter)*: Darling, my body is crawling with lice - more of them than there are people in our beautiful hometown. Today I heard one of them whispering in my ear. It had a good deal to reproach me for. For example, when a bomb buries me in earth, he, his children and wives choke. And when hot air burns me I stay alive but the forests and thickets on my skin are burned away and with them his entire living quarters - which he fought for honourably. And now his body is covered in welts because when in desperation I stubbed a cigarette out on my hand I burned his full brother to death and he himself barely escaped with his life. And when we sink into the muddy water day after day then I'm to remember that lice have no end. I put a

finger to my ears and asked the louse to climb onto my fingertip. Then I placed it on the edge of the trench and told it to try and escape with its life. At least he can take his chances. I asked it whether lice have deserters like we do, and courts-martial, but he wouldn't answer any more. I didn't see what became of him. We were enshrouded by something – gas or fog. I couldn't see a thing, only hear voices. Right, my darling, I have to go. The attack's starting. There were a hundred of us. Now there are seven. But we have to attack. I hope one of us is spared. Even if it's the louse...

5.3

*** HERO's reception and ANDROMACHE's song.**

Enter the Supreme Commander, the remaining men (HERO and the COMPANY COMMANDER) stand to attention. The Supreme Commander inspects the depleted ranks but acts as though he has not noticed how empty they are.

6.1

SUPREME COMMANDER (*Singing*): Speak!

COMPANY COMMANDER: (*Incomprehensible mumbling*)

SUPREME COMMANDER: Go on!

COMPANY COMMANDER: (*Incomprehensible mumbling*)

SUPREME COMMANDER: And?

COMPANY COMMANDER: (*Incomprehensible mumbling*)

SUPREME COMMANDER: Why didn't you hold your position?

COMPANY COMMANDER: What?...

SUPREME COMMANDER: (*To HERO*) Only one of you stayed on the line. Or two.

Silence.

SUPREME COMMANDER: Well?

HERO: Permission to speak, sir. Well sir, you see, the fact is that there was no line.

SUPREME COMMANDER: Explain yourself.

HERO: There was no line. There were only points. Not points even. Gaps.

Pause. The SUPREME COMMANDER takes a box out of a pocket, opens it and pins a medal on HERO's chest.

SUPREME COMMANDER (*troubled*): Mhmh. At ease. Fall out. Back to your positions. We'll soon be on the attack.

The SUPREME COMMANDER is left alone. The giant map falls in front of him. The SUPREME COMMANDER is left scrutinising it. Enter ANDROMACHE. She sings in Ancient Greek.

6.2

GIRL 1:

*** Night falls, HERO runs away.**

HERO removes his military coat and equipment and hangs them on the crossed rifles. His medal is the finishing touch to a scarecrow. HERO studies it for a while and sets off.

7.1

COMPANY COMMANDER: What's happened to your uniform?

HERO: I put it out to dry. (*He motions towards the scarecrow*)

COMPANY COMMANDER: Aa. Right. Ahaa. A Cross of Honour! (*Salutes*)

Congratulations!

HERO sets off to exit.

COMPANY COMMANDER: Hey, still got fire in your belly?

HERO: What?

COMPANY COMMANDER: Fire. You know. (*Shouts*) Fire! (*Laughs*)

Not that kind. There's no need for a whole volley. It helps them for a change.

HERO: No... Not any more.

COMPANY COMMANDER: Lost your matches or something?

HERO: No... no, I... there's just no fire any more. There used to be. But there isn't any now.

Never again.

COMPANY COMMANDER: Never again? No ashes even, things can't be that bad.

Where are the others?

HERO:(*thinks it over*): A long way off. I have to go and find them.

COMPANY COMMANDER: Hey, you're going the wrong way.

HERO: (*stops*): Yeah, looks like it. (*Carries on without changing direction*)

COMPANY COMMANDER: Hey, wait!

HERO stops.

COMPANY COMMANDER: Know any good songs? Any good tunes?

All the music and ditties have gone.

HERO: I don't know, the Voice took the songs away.

COMPANY COMMANDER: What voice? You mean you can't sing? Me neither. Not that that matters at all.

HERO: No... I don't know any good songs.

COMPANY COMMANDER: No... wait! You're going the wrong way.

HERO: No need for loud voices in a cemetery.

COMPANY COMMANDER: Hey! Listen... A Cross of Honour...?!! A Cross of Honour...?!! Do you really have a Cross of Honour!?!?

So you're a real hero?!?

HERO exits in military fashion. The humming of the Chorus develops under the previous [dialogue] and grows louder; it can be heard in the background during the following scene: Enter HERO's friend. We do not know whether he is alive or dead. He is accompanied by the silent spirits of soldiers.

7.2 & 7.3

HERO'S FRIEND: I wanted to ask your forgiveness.

HERO: What for?

HERO'S FRIEND: You stayed here with me.

The earth was waterlogged.

Water filled the bodies.

They came from mud

and to mud they had to return.

The earth's surface was made of bones.

The burning air, the unseen fire.

The fire that was more than air.

The air that held a million voices.

You wanted to breathe.

You had the right to, my dear friend.

You had the freedom to.

HERO: How are you?

HERO'S FRIEND: When things get rough, then...

HERO;...I can't ride it out. Listen, let's just go home. Eh?

HERO'S FRIEND: My home's here now.

You were right.

When you see the line close up

you can see it's nothing but a chain of gaps.

Pause.

They call it no man's land.

What kind of a joke is that.

It's everyone's land.

The land of the ravaged.

Hundreds of thousands of smithereens.

CHORUS (*whispering, overlapping with the preceding dialogue*):

My brother came back restless from the war,

hands shaking from service. - To war!

He went to father's door,

he went to mother's room. - To war!

His Father answered but did not know his son,

His Mother answered but did not know her son. - To war!

Then he went to his brother's door.

His brother answered but did not know him. - To war!

Then he went to his sister's door.

His sister answered but did not know him. - To war!

His Father, His Mother,

His brother, his sister, no-one knew him.

The warrior, the warhorse

soldier's rifle in his grip, soldier's sword under his coat.

soldier's boots upon his feet, soldier's gloves on his hands.

soldier's letters in his gloves. - To war!

FINIS