

The New Dark Ages

by Nicholas Rombes

It was only later, much later, that we would discover that the war we were fighting was a war between ourselves. Melissa and I left the machine, with Carlton lost forever inside. We abandoned the warehouse. Our backs were scalded from the heat, and the hole in the back of her uniform showed her pink flesh.

Did I tell you about the uniforms? They were grey, like something out of the Civil War, as if designed by robots. There were extravagant threads of metal woven throughout the sleeves that, in the sunlight, gave the illusion of perpetual movement like an aquarium or a computer screen saver from the old days.

"Where to?" Melissa said.

"Anywhere but here," I told her.

But where was here? That was a question we didn't want to ask. We retraced our steps through the bombed-out village square, with its statues of fallen heroes whose names meant nothing to us. Melissa was beautiful in her burned-out exhaustion, with the old rifle slung across her shoulder, and I had to look away.

We walked. And walked. Shared a canteen of warm water. The remnants of the village faded behind us, and soon we were in grassy fields full of grasshoppers and small yellow birds, flitting between small trees like spies.

"We're lost," she finally said. We were beneath the shade of an enormous tree, something from the Dark Ages. In the distance, the terrible sound of a helicopter, coming closer, chopping the air into fragments.

Instinctively, we froze, pushed ourselves as close to the tree as possible. It wasn't one, but two helicopters, moving across the sky like Satanic insects. They passed directly overhead, and on toward the village. Then the rumbles of explosions, probably the warehouse that Carlton was already dead in.

Too dangerous to leave the protection of the tree, now. So we slept. Melissa talked in her sleep, in some other language.

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She's not one of us, I suddenly realized, but one of them.

And yet, here she was, beside me, her fingers off all triggers, her closed eyelids fluttering, her small wrists bare and exposed, her rifle loaded but not fired.

Not yet.

