One, two, three, four— I count as I load the cartridges into the magazine, making consecutive clicking noises as they are inserted. Shuffling through my pouch for one more, I grip it tightly between my thumb, index, and middle finger, feeling the frigidness of the casing strike and eat away at my fingers’ warmth through my coarse glove. It was worn, yeah— with scratches and scuff marks along its brass, yet its foreboding look about it creates the uncanny imagination of feeling the bullet penetrating, ripping, and tearing through my body. *Click*, now there are five.

The reliability of our equipment has been overestimated, the tank seems bereft of its mandatory inspections and maintenance. If it is not only neglect caused by extensive years in storage since the 90s, then it is also improvisation in vain, as it has broken down on the unpaved road, remaining ever so still. We were supposed to be stationed near the outskirts of Kyiv in support of a flank, but currently— we sit by the warmth of a crackling fire pit in a metal barrel, standing by until further notice. Rifle on my lap, I set it to lean on the side of the metal folding chair, standing upright on its stock, from which it subsequently falls over into the snow.

“Shit.” I sigh as I bend down to grab the rifle by its sling, avoiding my fingers digging into the snow, and then I hear a voice across the fire.

“Viktor, how much longer?”

“About an hour, maybe.” I whip my cell phone out for a time check while brushing the snow off my rifle.

“Do you know what that means?”

“What?”

“New Year is coming, woo!” His voice ricochets off the vacant and shelled buildings surrounding us as he jumps from his seat, waving his rifle up in the air as if he’s going to do a celebratory shooting.

“Yeah— it certainly is.” The misinterpretation of the question and his enthusiasm caught me off guard, the words ‘New Year’ never had a special ring to it either.

“Got any special goals, new year, new person?” He settled himself down and leaned in, as if he were to hear me spill gossip.

“I dunno Artyom, not really, it seems kinda stupid.”

“How unambitious, Viktor.”

“Well, I just wanna get out of here— in one piece, that’s my goal for the year.” I reply with a change in attitude, looking at the monstrous hunk of metal before us, helpless despite its lengthy multitude of barrels pointing upwards to the sky, and a letter spray-painted on the front, where the trickle of the paint dried and cracked: a white letter ‘Z’. It is a beast in its slumber, supposedly being able to release thundering volleys of warheads to three and a half kilometers at most. ‘*Solntsepyok’* as the professionals call it.

Boots crunch in the snow behind me along with the dragging of metal along the ground, and from there a man unfolds his chair and seats himself to the right of me, hovering his hands over the fire, his gear shuffling, and rifle loaded on his lap. He had himself perfectly concealed behind his many layers to the point his movement is constricted to some degree, his balaclava shows the only somewhat human feature about him, his eyes, which seemed defeated through constant exhaustion, and the texture along his skin appeared calloused and stressed. He is Dmytro.

I hear boots trudging in the snow again, this time at a quicker pace, and another person props their chair down followed by a grunt after carrying it over his head. The lower half of his mask was pulled down to his chin, revealing the majority of his face. His face has much youth in it, his skin is clear of wrinkles and blemishes, his eyes containing a sliver of that of a child, yet the rest of his figure, wearing the standard grunt attire as the rest of us, assumes the shape of a warrior that contrasts the youth in his face. He is Maksim.

And finally, Artyom— across from me, who looked as if he was in his early thirties with his stubble beard, hearty, laid-back, and somewhat carefree in such a setting, which is complemented by the fact that he is the only one out of the four of us who refuses to wear a helmet, but a woolen beanie to shield his ears from the cold. I’d imagine he’d know how to hold his own; his humor masked something deeper, perhaps maturity or skill, but he is always telling jokes and veteran stories, like right now, where there is no finer hour or place to do so than at a fire pit on New Year’s—

“Viktor!” Maksim broke my trance, his adolescent voice makes him sound as if he’s nasally congested.

“Do you wanna come with us or not?” Artyom raised an eyebrow at me.

“Where?”

“Anywhere, really, just a walk.”

“Let’s go exploring the houses, yeah?” Maksim proposed.

Artyom rises up from his chair, slinging the rifle to his side and takes a stroll to one of the houses, his idle way of assenting.

Maksim immediately swaggers ahead of Artyom as Dmytro and I are the last to leave the fire pit. The radiance from the fire dissipates from our bodies every step we take while our boots crunch in the gravel and patches of snow. The town still has tranquility to it, its brightly colored playground still intact, and its coniferous trees towering over us to shelter us from the sky. The operation taints its image however, fallen lamp posts, scorched armored vehicles, and the ground is sculpted by sparse craters of massive size caused by sporadic shelling. Its peace is disturbed by the presence of men in balaclavas and camouflage uniforms with tri-colored patches of white, blue, and red. Their laughs, howls, and mockery of the Ukrainians echoed throughout the town, they are the enemies, and we are the heroes. *We are the Heroes*, I think to myself, certain that we have a *righteous purpose*. But there was a repelling force to those thoughts, the bold notion overlooked significant gaps, where the human mind can’t help but subconsciously string together assumptions and even lies to give justification to a cause. As bigger questions begin to recur in thought, I am always finding myself in denial; I refuse to think about potential answers, however it only worsened my mind’s uncontrollable nature to question, to think, and to reason.

Our approach to the house was accompanied by the sounds of our steps on shattered glass, Maksim circled around to the front door, while the rest of us ducked through the opening of a corrugated fence. I was trailing behind, cradling the AK in my arms, noting the cold midnight scenery.

“Alright, let’s break into the house!” Maksim made an unusual gesture with his hands, presumably picked up by the media, then he kicked the door down.

We found many secondary pieces of evidence of the former inhabitants. There are piles of clothes lying astray on the floor of the living quarters, luggage cases, blankets, jars of vegetables. It’s obvious, people lived here and fled their home, but there was something surreal about the lack of people in almost every place we went, they fled with great prejudice and haste in fear of us, and it was my first time ever having to be part of that reason.

I look over to the hallway branching off to the bedroom and I find Maksim scrounging about the closets and its containers, pocketing handfuls of trinkets, anything that was small enough went into his pockets and utility pouches, and anything bigger went into his rucksack, which is what he intended the left-over space for. Dmytro started recording and narrating everything as Maksim ransacked the house, joking about how the ‘weight of all that loot will get him killed’, catching onto the horseplay, and murmuring comments about the Ukrainians’ lifestyle, his remarks were riddled with scorn.

“Viktor.” Artyom sounding as if he’s conceded from the mischief with Maksim and Dmytro, and into a genuine tone, “You seem troubled.”

“I’m well, I just feel—” I pause to recollect my thoughts.

“Feel what?”

“Nervous.”

“Mm, I see.” Artyom was eating chocolate from a jar, still savoring the taste and continued after setting it down, “Why’re you nervous? You have this whole town to yourself and this operation is a way for you to become a *man*.”

“It’s not about becoming a man.”

“Is it death that worries you?”

The thought of death has resided as a subconscious thought, but now that Artyom mentions it, it only gave me another scenario to overthink, “Yeah— death is a scary thing.”

“It is, Viktor. But you will get over it eventually, and find it as an opportunity to be a ruthless beast.”

“You seem very stoic.” I chortled, though still uneasy.

“In here, it is the law of the jungle, and with your gun—” Artyom ignored my reply, “Everyone will line up their sights and lay their fingers on the trigger… the only one who still stands is the one who pulls it last.” He imitates the pulling of the trigger.

“Listen, Artyom, this whole *special military operation*, it’s— it’s bullshit, alright?”

“Viktor—”

“No, you listen here. Russia already seized Crimea in like, what, 2014? And now we’re invading the homes of Ukraine, that’s a special military operation to you?” My stature grew with confrontation.

“We’re here to denazify Ukraine.” Returned Artyom, his brows furrowed and his eyes cast a look of irritation.

“To denazify what? Look outside, there’s abandoned baby strollers and a damn playground outside!”

“Viktor, these are orders we’ve received, the directive does not revolve around your insignificant feelings! You cannot desert anyway.” He gestured Dmytro and Maksim out of the house, who seemed to have been eavesdropping.

“And so what if I get sentenced to prison for it? We’re practically cannon fodder; we’re animals sent off into a slaughterhouse!” My voice cracked out of instability, Artyom sat back, seeming to have conceded.

“I don’t want to die either, like you said earlier, ‘getting out in one piece.’” Artyom sighed, “But I am willing to sacrifice others for that chance.”

“We are only boys, Artyom. Maksim just turned nineteen last month, and they’re sending people like him to war. Everyone always wants a little more of something and will disregard the expenses of others!”

I was searching for the answer in Artyom’s face during the silence, he was looking down at the floor— contemplating, he always created something out of nothing with his humor, it was like his puns and jokes always had its place in every scenario, except this one. His face holds a mutual connection however, *‘it is wrong, I know it too*’, is the expression on his face, but simultaneously taken aback, perhaps the dreaded reality is brought to him; where no amount of escapism would relieve him of his mental friction.

A roaring is heard from the sky and it grows every passing second, eventually blaring into our ears. It was an artillery shell, and the sound of it cutting through the air overpowered the sounds of the faint breeze. We instinctively dove for cover with hands over our heads, only to find out the impact was hundreds of meters away, and then, the quake was followed by a single discharge of a rifle. Maksim yelped and eventually transitioned into howls of agony.

Artyom and I rush outside, our rifles ready. Maksim is rolling on the ground, his uniform had an ever growing blood stain and his hand stained red. We find Dmytro briskly tending to Maksim, fumbling the tourniquet and swearing, Maksim went from agonizing cries, to hoarse and labored breaths, and then to gurgling. “Turn him over, on his side!” Artyom reprimanded Dmytro as he sprinted with an initial teetering burst to cover whilst returning fire back to the ambushing forces.

I set myself up against the remains of a concrete structure with its steel rebar digging into my thighs. I take a brief look and all that I could see are silhouettes and the lens flares of flashlights, blinding me, and the muzzle flashes. I returned fire, however I was too nervous to aim to get a clear shot. I grow tunnel visioned, everything becomes insignificant, blurred, indistinguishable, it goes bullet after bullet until I hear the trigger make a clicking noise. In constant panic, I repulsively keep pulling the trigger, *click, click, click,* coming to the realization that there are no bullets left, so I resort to a frantic search for another magazine in my pouches as my hands constantly shook and mishandled the ammunition. The Ukrainian operatives call out to each other and disperse about the surroundings like a fluid, creating periodic bursts of gunfire, the bullets sounded like whips being lashed, whizzing past my cover. I kept relocating to different positions although I knew that it served no use, I did not know where the enemy was, I was caught in the haze of combat, but if there was something I am certain of, it was death.

Dmytro was forced to fixate his attention onto the attackers instead of Maksim, leaving him to bleed out. I raise my head out of cover to scan for Artyom but there is no trace of him, and then I felt a blunt force on my helmet, causing my vision to be disoriented and becoming victim to an excruciating headache and a constant ringing. I looked at Maksim, presumably deceased, Dmytro in the last few minutes of his life, and then to the tree line behind me. To Dmytro, it’s abandonment and betrayal, and to Artyom, it is shame. I recall Artyom said he was willing to sacrifice others so he can get a chance to live, he is right, and so I attempt to dash for the tree line as I feel one— two bullets penetrate through my thigh, and then a final one, into the abdomen. I burst through the opening of the tree line like the eruption of a volcano. The adrenaline didn’t want me to look back, between grief of leaving everyone behind and surviving, my mind focused on the latter. I limp across the endless steppes until my eventual collapse, hoping a hospitable stranger will find me. At the least, the last thing I will be seeing is the starry night sky of a happy new year— fading to black.