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DIE NULLLINIE

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CHAPTER 1

“Nam pizda,” says Rat.

We’re fucked. He’s peeking at the sky through a gap in our pit’s entrance, which is camouflaged with trash and sod.

Nearby flows the Dnipro, father of you all, eternal, slow with heavy waters and clumps of ice, moving despite the dams submerged beneath the floodwaters’ cataracts. Overhead, the night shines with the full face of your mother the moon, and suspended in her glow is a drone, a medium-sized bomber with thermal vision.

One of yours.

One of yours, because when its black eye sees the white heat of Rat leaning out of your pit, instead of a grenade it drops an empty two-liter Coke bottle, wrapped in duct tape for some reason, and then, with a whine of its propellers, it tilts and flies back to where it came from, on the far bank of the great river. The bottle lands in the mud a few meters from our pit. Rat shakes his head, disgusted at the pilot’s sloppy work, then pauses for a moment, listening out for other, foreign drones.

The silence is broken only by the murmur of the great river and the distant thunder of incoming Russian artillery, and the even more distant rumble of yours, from the opposite bank, like a faraway storm.

“That’s our arta working,” says Rat, trying buck himself up.

“Ours,” you agree.

Work, that’s what this war amounts to now, the arta working while you two hang out in a pit and wait for their arta to go to work on you.

Rat slowly slips out of the pit, pushing aside the entrance camouflage, then crawls on the ground toward the bottle, moving both quickly and ponderously because of the mud, like a huge

amphibian, dirty gray in faded MultiCam. He grabs the bottle and hurries back to the pit, a giant newt in a bronik and a helmet.

You turn off your little red headlamp, take out the folding knife your sister gave you before you left for your forty-second birthday, though you weren't celebrating your birthday, because by then you couldn't celebrate your birthday, though you hadn't yet gone to war, you were only driving around delivering humanitarka.

It's a really good knife, you know it was pricey, you sharpen it often with a little ceramic whetstone, so now you have no trouble cutting the tape holding both halves of the bottle together. Inside are the contents of two American MRE military rations, removed from their usual multipack so they could fit inside the bottle along with a pack of cigarettes, a lighter and a little piece of paper with a handwritten note from your kombat: "Look after yourselves, boys." These words are written in Ukrainian. Because you never went to a Ukrainian school you can't read Cyrillic handwriting, only print, but Rat can, because he did go to a Ukrainian school, and he reads the kombat's disgustingly insolent words out to you.

Бережіть себе, хлопці. Look after yourselves. How can you look out for yourselves on the wrong side of the river?

"Fuck him," you say.

You don't know if the kombat wrote it out of stupidity or sarcasm, but you don't like it at all.

"Fuck 'im," agrees Rat.

Rat fishes around in the airdropped package.

"No water," he finally says.

"They'll bring water too. Or else I'll go to the river."

"You won't come back from the river."

"Probably not."

You both say nothing for a good while, knowing that what you're saying nothing about is the situation you've found yourselves in, because it's hard to say anything about it, but also hard to ignore it.

"Nam pizda," says Rat again after a while, still staring at the contents of the airdrop, as if there was something unusual in it, as if amid the silver foil of the MRE packs he aimed to spot something that could give him at least a scrap of hope into which he could dig his claws and not let go.

There's no hope in the bottle.

They both know what this airdrop means.

"Plus. Nam pizda," you say, agreeing with Rat military-style.

There are no supply boats for you two anymore, all that's left are drones. Too much ice on the river, which the boats have to go through slowly, exposing themselves to fire. Too few REBs, electronic jammers providing protection from drones to the exposed boats. Not enough boats. Not enough men. Not enough anything, just lots of pidars and lots of ice on the Dnipro, and all the biting, damp cold you could ask for.

"Nam pizda na khui," you repeat. *We're fucked to hell.*

In Ukrainian the word "pizda" has the accent on the second syllable and that's exactly how you pronounce it.

Ten minutes later, the drone comes back with a two-liter bottle full of water and again doesn't get it all the way to your pit.

"You go this time," says Rat.

"Plus," you reply.

You don't protest, because he's right. It's your turn. You crawl out of the pit. Silhouetted against the bright night sky are the ruins of the village, an individual wall with an opening where a window used to be, stumps of burned trees hacked up with shrapnel. Others like you and Rat

are sitting in the basements of the razed houses. It's cold, but above freezing, except for the wind; the ground is thawing on top, the mud sticks to your uniform. You wonder for a moment – crawl or run?

You start crawling and somewhere at the edge of hearing comes the whine, as quiet as it is terrifying, of the propellers of a night Mavik with thermal vision, and it isn't one of your Maviks, because your Maviks have no reason to be here.

You grab the bottle, leap up from the ground, you're not crawling anymore, you race back to the pit, and throw yourself down as if you were diving into water. Rat pulls the entrance shut behind you.

“Mavik. A pidar one,” you say, panting.

Rat already knows. He adjusts his standard-issue helmet on his head, tightens the knob at the back, tugs the strap under his chin. He doesn't need to adjust his helmet, but he has to do something. Simply waiting is unbearable.

You can't simply wait either. You're as low as you can be in your pit, which they exaggeratedly call a “position,” even though it's nothing more than a hole in the muddy ground, 180 centimeters deep and two meters wide and long; it used to be a basement under some piece-of-shit little hut, but the hut's gone now. The walls are made of thin concrete, and unfortunately the roof is gone – being a hut, it had a wooden one, and there are some pieces of it left. No way you could dig a position here; anyway it's hard to get a sharp shovel even back on that side of the Dnipro, much less here, where you and everything that's yours, and you yourselves, came in on boats when the ice wasn't so dense.

But the boats aren't coming anymore.

You two didn't even have chipboard to insulate the walls, like in a normal dugout on the opposite bank, so you did what you could, using plastic wrap and wooden boards. The ceiling is made of beams covered in wooden planks and camouflaged with every type of trash available

here; it's far too thin. In a corner stands an EcoFlow, its blue lights blinking. The display says twelve percent. You need to charge it, you think. In another pit a few meters from your dugout, you've hidden a small portable generator, which you're afraid to turn on at night because the warmth of the motor is easy to see in infrared, even though yours is pretty well camouflaged. Two bunks stand by the walls of the pit, one with your dirty bedding on it; weapons rest on nails hammered into the wall: Rat's old AK-47, your Ukrainian-made AR-15 with an LPVO, and an RPG-18 single-use anti-tank grenade launcher, known as a mukha – a fly.

Rat's AK now has a thin coating of rust from the damp in the pit; you've taken better care of your rifle, though you haven't fired it in combat a single time. You've had no chance to, there hasn't been anyone to shoot at. That's what this war is like. You thought things would change here, Horse, but they haven't. For now. Give it time.

The instruction label is coming off the mukha. Old Soviet equipment.

A powerbank and generator are rarities on the front line, in the infantry. The pilots had it different. With the pilots it was better. But you're not with the pilots anymore.

"What're we sitting here for?" asks Rat and he starts trembling, waiting for what will come after the pidar Mavik. First his jaw, then his hands, and before long all of him is trembling.

"We don't ask questions like that," you reply. "That's a pointless question."

"I mean, this isn't fighting," he continues, shaking. "I haven't seen a single pidar here."

"Move to a basement further out and you'll be under fire every day."

"Yeah, I'll pass, thanks. But there's not even any jobs here to keep you moving around a little. Or hiding. We just sit here and wait. Who's gonna be triokhsoty and who's gonna be dvokhsoty."

Triokhsoty – three hundred – means wounded, dvokhsoty – two hundred – is a corpse.

"Makes no difference," you reply.

"What?" says Rat, not understanding.

“If we’re dvokhsoty or triokhsoty. Makes no difference. Can’t evacuate a triokhsoty with a drone. You’ll rot there wounded ’til you croak.”

“No boat?” he asks, even though he knows the answer.

Out here it’s common to ask questions you know the answer to.

“In this ice? Why you think they flew the grub in on a drone?” you reply.

“I saw this funny-looking NATO thing driving around, this box on tracks, with a trailer on tracks too, on sort of a hitch. Couldn’t they send that again?”

“Ty dumaiesh, BvS? BvS minus,” you say with a certain sadness, because it had cheered you up a little when the BvS was getting across the Dnipro and through the riverside mud and floodwaters.

“What happened?”

“What d’you think? Got roziebanyi last week na khui. Sank in the swamp first, then blown the fuck up with an FPV-shka.”

“So how come we’re sitting here?” he keeps asking, though he knows you don’t know the answer to that particular question, while at the same time, you know just as well as he does.

“If we were back in our old spot, there’d be some point at least, you’d wait ’til you were three hundred, then they’d take you away, you’d go to the hospital, and then home. But here, since they’re not even taking away a three hundred, what’re we waiting for, Horse, huh?” he asks, to avoid waiting in silence.

You don’t know how to answer him. For Rat, this war has a totally different point than it does for you, because you sort of believe it does have a point. But, Horse, within your understanding of the point of this war, you can’t believe that there’s any point to your being here either, on the left bank of the Dnipro, father of you all.

Horse is your pseudonym, or rather your call sign, *позивний*, *pozyvnyi*. In Ukrainian it’s *Кінь*.

Rat is Rat's pseudonym. In Ukrainian *Патюк*, Patsiuk.

You don't know how old Rat is. He looks forty-something, even older in the red light of your headlamp, but Ukrainian men are starting to look forty-something before they've even broken thirty. Especially ones from out in the country. He's short, slim and sad, with a big head, sparse stubble and blue, tired eyes. He comes from some village near Ternopil. He has no education apart from what two years of war have given him. Before the Povnomasshtabna – the full-scale war – he lived as if there was no war. For a year he drove an Uber in Warsaw, he knows a little Polish. In 2021 his mom got sick, he came back to take care of her, but she died anyway. He had nobody else in the world. Then the war broke out and Rat first joined the Teroborona, he didn't even know why, then he transferred to the marines, under a good commander. You don't know any more about him, and after two years of war, even Rat doesn't know much about himself beyond that. Everything from before has disappeared, faded away in his memory like a movie seen in the distant past.

After two years of war, there are other things Rat does know. For instance, he can recognize by sound where a shell is coming in from, and instinctively, without thinking, he then can tell which direction to dive to the ground, to slightly increase his odds of survival. He knows how to shit in the woods without getting that shit on his boots. What he doesn't know or understand is how the Ukrainian Armed Forces work – differently from how you might think, since they're not quite like the Soviet army, the military his father remembered from serving back in Afghanistan, a military he'd told Rat plenty about.

On the other hand, the Ukrainian Armed Forces resembled the former Soviet army much more than you'd like to think, Horse. Or more than anyone who, when the Povnomasshtabna began – which for you was the start of the war at all – believed, as you used to, the simplistic Ukrainian propaganda about a modern, Western army full of handsome, swashbuckling young men fighting the forces of evil, like Tolkien's Gondor against the orcs.

CHAPTER 2

You also used to believe that beautiful propaganda, which, although not totally in line with reality, did represent a sort of truth, didn't it? After all, you had no doubt that both you and Rat stood on the side of goodness and justice. If any war in history can be called just, you used to say to the last of your friends, drunk in a Warsaw bar so long ago, if any war can, it's this one.

And you still believe it, Horse. But now you also see other things.

"Rat, d'you remember this place in Warsaw, this little wine bar on plac Zbawiciela?" you ask in Polish, only pronouncing his *pozyvnyi* in Ukrainian.

You ask him so you don't have to wait in silence for what will come after the Mavik.

"Where?"

"In Warsaw."

"What Warsaw, what are you talking about?" asks Rat, as if there had never been a Warsaw.

Rat's right, you think. There's never been a Warsaw. That world is so far away that maybe it never existed.

It didn't exist. There's only this, the war, the pit, you two a short distance from null, then null – meaning your furthest-forward positions, then the gray zone, then the pidars, you think.

It's a comforting thought.

But Blueberry would remember, you think, if he's ever been in it. Maybe.

You start to wonder why you two are stuck in this shithole of a basement, and not in the good basements of former houses, you wonder so that you can feel helpless rage at how unfair it is, other guys are sitting in good ones, they're dry and warm, and with cement ceilings overhead, not wooden planks, like you've got, but you have to sit in this *yobanyi* cellar *na khui*, because the good one you tracked down caved in after a direct hit from a 152 millimeter.

Blueberry's got a good basement, but you're actually thrilled about that. They split you two up not long ago, each pit has got to have one experienced soldier in it, the unit commander said, I can't keep both of you in one.

You think about that so as not to be afraid.

Let it come now. Better to be killed than to be afraid.

And suddenly, suddenly like always, unexpectedly even though it's expected, it arrives. A whistle and four explosions. Not very close, but the ground still shakes, dust rains from the walls.

Rat is still trembling.

"Vasyliok," he says, his teeth chattering.

"They're that close...?" you ask stupidly, a little surprised that they really are so close, and a little to kill the silence again, though the silence dies on its own before long, because there are four more explosions, a whole magazine of Vasyliok, closer this time. They can't be further than four clicks away, because that's the range of a Vasyliok. There's no reason for them to be further than that. Theoretically they're even much closer, that's what you think, because they definitely haven't moved a Vasyliok to null, it's somewhere one click from null, or two. Or three. So they're much closer.

"They're correcting from a drone," says Rat, stating the obvious for the sake of saying something.

Again a whistle and four explosions. *Yobanyi Vasyliok na khui*, you don't even know if you swear out loud or just in your thoughts. *Yobanyi Vasyliok, pizdiets, na khui*. Four 82-millimeter shells inserted into the mortar in a magazine, fired in a row, one after the other, and all in your direction.

If they strike your pit, you'll both be killed.

We'll both be killed sooner or later, you think, after all, no one's going to live to see the end of the war, so what difference does it make, but you're lying to yourself, Horse.

There is a difference.

Another four explosions, one after the other, bam, bam, bam, bam. The ground shakes, the shock wave forces its way through the entrance to your pit, you feel it with your whole body. Bam, bam, bam, bam.

They haven't hit your dugout.

Bam, bam, bam, bam.

They haven't hit your pit. That's the one thing in the whole world – in all its history stretching over millennia, over millions of years – that matters. They haven't hit your pit. Maybe they hit some basement and the ceiling didn't hold out, so much for the guys with good basements and a concrete ceiling. They haven't hit your pit. Nothing else matters.

Bam, bam, bam, bam.

They haven't hit your pit.

Silence.

You both wait.

Silence.

How much time has passed?

You look at your watch. The digits for the seconds flick by. Then the minutes. 22:33. Four. Five. Seven. Ten.

"Maybe they're done now," says Rat.

You nod. Maybe they are. Maybe they got scared that your counter-battery fire would come, maybe they're just packing up the Vasyliok, which looks more like a small howitzer than an ordinary mortar, maybe they're hitching it to a truck and driving to a new position before a 155 millimeter shell from one of your howitzers lands on them.

It's possible.

“Це можливо,” you say. Tse mozhlyvo. It's possible.

You could say that to Rat in Polish, but it comes out of your mouth in Ukrainian, and suddenly a memory comes to you.