

Winter 1930

Village of Vyriv – Western Ukraine

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The distant figure was little more than a dark smudge on the steppe. The land was flat and white and cold; a vast sea of nothing with just that single blemish on the landscape, drawing the eye. During the war, an imperfection on the horizon would have halted a company in its tracks. Boots would have ceased their struggle, and the chatter of rifle slings would have fallen silent. Fear and curiosity would be felt in equal measure.

And in that silence, would be the long wait to see what might come of the lonely fault in the otherwise faultless beauty of the steppe. A single stain that could multiply into an army, bringing with it only violence and ferocity and death.

But the war was over, and red had crushed all colours that stood in its path, yet the blurred stain in the distance still brought fear and curiosity. It shouldn't have been there.

Staring against the wind, bitter tears welled and clouded my sight. I wiped them away and squinted against the few flakes that had started to fall. I contemplated the figure, watched it shift and blur, then I moved to the edge of the tall grass, wading through snow as deep as my calves, dropping to one knee and resting my elbow on my thigh. I blinked hard, touching a cheek to the cold stock of my rifle, and brought one eye close to the scope.

Magnified as it was, the dark spot was still just a stain on the brilliance of the drift, but I could see it moving towards us as the wind blew across the surface of yesterday's fall, whipping the soft snow into a powder that floated in a swirling mist.

‘You see something?’ Viktor said.

My sons moved behind me, but I kept my eye to the scope.

‘What *is* that?’ Petro asked, coming alongside. ‘Some kind of animal?’ His face was almost hidden, his hat pulled low, and only his eyes were visible above the scarf that covered his mouth and nose. Petro was just a few moments younger than his brother. Two boys, seventeen years old and almost men; born together, raised together but as different as the seasons. Summer and winter. One coarse and hardened, with an outlook that saw no subtlety. The other younger, more complex, more in tune with who he was.

‘Could be.’ Breath clouded around my face as I spoke, misting the scope lens. I wiped the glass with a finger of my glove.

‘Let me see.’ Viktor slung his own rifle over his back because it was without a scope and useless at this distance. He squatted beside me, his thick coat moving against mine.

I nodded, letting him take the rifle, and Viktor remained silent as he watched the magnified shape.

‘What’s it look like to you?’ I said. ‘An animal?’

‘Hard to tell. The wind’s picked up again; it looks like there’s a storm coming.’ He took a breath and steadied the rifle as the icy wind gathered strength, making him shiver despite his thick clothes. ‘No, wait. I think it’s . . . yes, it’s a man. I’m sure of it.’ He took his eye from the scope and stared out into the oncoming blizzard. ‘Someone’s coming,’ he said.

‘Who?’ Petro asked. ‘You think it might be activists? Red Army?’ It was the threat hanging over Vyriv: that one day the activists would come with soldiers to our village and take everything we had.

‘There’s just one person,’ Viktor said.

‘Give me that.’ I took back the rifle and scoped the figure once more.

It was closer now. Not just a dark stain, but a person; the movement was clear. A shambling gait, head down, shoulders hunched, bent at the waist. A solitary figure without an army to

follow it, but I eased back the rifle bolt and reassured myself that a cartridge was pushed home.

‘Petro, I want you to go back,’ I said. ‘Warn your mother first. Then tell the others.’

‘What about you?’

‘We’re going to wait here. See who’s coming.’

Petro didn’t want to go, but he knew argument was useless, so he went without another word, raising his knees high as he lifted his feet from the snow.

I watched him until he was gone, disappeared below the lip of the hill, then I turned to watch the figure once again.

‘Take this.’ I handed my rifle to Viktor, knowing the rare scoped weapon would be more effective to cover me from a distance. ‘I’ll use yours. Watch from the trees.’ I nodded in the direction of the forest which grew along the steppe to the right. A line of leafless trunks, dark and barren against the grey sky. Their crooked fingers were heavy with icicles which glinted in the rare days of sunshine but now hung in shadow. The uppermost branches of the trees at the periphery were filled with the black spots of clumped twigs and forest detritus the crows had used to build their nests.

Viktor didn’t take the rifle. He looked across at the trees, then back at me, indecision in his expression.

‘You’ll be safe,’ I told him. ‘Stay at the edge of the forest, that’s all.’

‘I’m not afraid. I just don’t want to leave you alone.’

‘I won’t be alone. You’ll be watching me with this.’ I put the rifle into my son’s hand. ‘Do as I ask, Viktor. I need you to watch for me.’

Viktor sighed and nodded before he turned away and struck out for the edge of the trees.

When Viktor was gone, I adjusted my scarf and took up my son’s rifle. To the right, crows shifted in the trees, snapping their bleak cries into the afternoon as Viktor approached, but it was cold and they were as embittered by it as we were. Once they had

voiced their displeasure, they became quiet, and the only sound was the wind against the wool covering my ears.

Out on the steppe, the figure approached.