A FATE FAR SWEETER

Shadow War in Ukraine

ROGER TURENKO

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Title

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By Roger Turenko

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Chapter 1: Attack of the Drones

When a man is slain,
Words cannot resurrect the dead.
But, for the sake of life,
Must we bow and obey?
The dictates of a tyrant?
For death is a fate far sweeter than tyranny.
Source: *Aeschylus' Oresteia (458 BC), Agamemnon*

The first thing they don't tell you about war is how it smells. Cordite, diesel fuel, and fear-sweat create a cocktail that burns your nostrils and brands your memory. The second thing? How quickly you learn to love that stink, because it means you're still alive to smell it.

I would smell that stink in the air that day. But before it came, thick fog enveloped the southern Ukrainian shore, making everything moist and slippery. Relentless rain fell from the heavens with no sign of stopping—typical for this region in springtime, they tell me. It was deep into the night, hours before dawn, and darkness prevailed. Even the moon was obscured by gloomy clouds. For a while, there was an eerie quietness.

Then the shrill scream of air raid sirens ripped through the atmosphere.

"Take cover!" a soldier nearby bellowed.

As I sprinted toward the bunker, muscle memory from twenty years of military service taking over, one thought cut through the chaos: What the hell am I really doing here? Fourteen months ago, I was Colonel

John Kovalenko, retired U.S. Special Forces, living quietly in suburban Virginia. When President Zelensky's call for volunteers reached me in March 2022, I'd planned to come as a trainer—help prepare Ukrainian forces with my expertise, then return home to my comfortable retirement.

My Ukrainian grandparents would have been proud. They'd fled this land at the turn of the century, but they'd raised me to remember where I came from, to understand that the blood of this soil runs in my veins.

But training recruits behind the lines hadn't been enough. Not after what I'd seen in that field hospital outside Kharkiv. A young medic, barely nineteen, dying from shrapnel wounds while still trying to tend to others.

"Tell them we existed," She'd whispered in accented English when she learned I was American, "Tell them we fought."

That's when I'd stopped being a trainer and started being a fighter.

I ran with a contingent of Ukrainian soldiers stationed on night duty toward the entrance of one among many fortified subterranean bunkers, meticulously constructed for moments like these. Most of us sought refuge. But a small group of brave electronic warfare specialists ventured forth, knowingly exposing themselves to the perils of shrapnel from the oncoming rain of bombs and missiles. They did this to defend the base.

These specialists were always our second line of defense, the first being automated. They were armed not with normal rifles, bazookas, or any other projectile launching equipment, but with futuristic electronic gun-like contraptions that looked very much like props from a "B" rated science fiction movie. Such rifles carried no bullets, but they were among the most powerful anti-drone weapons we had. They sent out electromagnetic signals capable of jamming, immobilizing, or taking actual control of unmanned aerial drones.

The air was already filled with the earthshaking explosions of drones being brought down by our first line of defense. The noise was deafening,

making it hard to think, let alone talk. But in the chaos, I knew one thing for certain: this was war, and in war, survival is everything.

There was a young Ukrainian officer standing just outside the entrance of my bunker, shouting into his radio in Ukrainian. He was trying desperately to overcome the deafening noise, anxious but determined. His voice cracked with the strain.

"Alpha Squad, hold your ground!" he yelled. "Don't let the bastards through! Choppers on the way. They'll be here in a minute or two... meanwhile, defend the base! Bring down any damn drones that get through!"

In that moment, listening to this kid trying to hold together a defense against overwhelming odds, I understood why I'd made the transition from trainer to frontline fighter. It wasn't just about my Ukrainian heritage or honoring my grandparents' memory—though those mattered. It wasn't even about the dying medic's words, though they haunted me.

It was about these young people, who should have been able to start their lives. Instead, here they were, along with older men and even some women, learning to coordinate life-and-death decisions, while Russian drones tried to grind them into hamburger meat. After Kharkiv, after Bakhmut, after seeing what these people were capable of when their backs were against the wall, how could I have stayed safely, behind the lines, teaching weapons maintenance?

His radio crackled with an answering voice.

"I got one, I got one!" the voice cheered in Ukrainian. "Another! Two direct hits! But there's too many of them! I've never seen so many at one time!"

"Good job!" the officer said. "Keep at it! Use the tracking systems. They're online. Don't panic. We have to stay focused, stay sharp. Bring them down!"

Another voice cut in, loudly: "Incoming! Take cover!"

A deafening blast shook the ground. One of the Russian kamikaze drones had hit the sand near the Ukrainian soldiers who were busy firing their anti-drone weapons. Sometimes that happened, even if the drone's targeting system had been successfully disabled, if the specialist couldn't induce the drone to explode itself in mid-air.

"Wolfman!" the officer called out the soldier's code name, worried. "Wolfman! Talk to me! Talk to me!"

There was no answer, and the officer seemed desperate, forgetting for the moment that he was supposed to use only the man's code name.

"Are you hit? Are you okay? Sergey!..."

"Sergey!"

The lieutenant's slip from code name to real name hit me like a physical blow. In that single word, I heard every squad leader I'd ever known, every friend I'd lost, every time the radio went quiet when you desperately needed it to crackle back to life.

Part of me... the rational, survival-focused part that had kept me alive through two decades of Special Forces operations, whispered that I'd already done enough. I'd helped train thousands of Ukrainian soldiers, I'd fought in Kharkiv when we pushed the Russians back, held the line at Bakhmut when everyone said it was hopeless. I could return to training duties, or even back to complete safety inside America, with my honor intact even after the plea from that medic.

But then, there was that other part of me, the part that carried my grandparents' genes. The same genes that energized these people bravely defending their country. And, stories from my grandparents, that told of fleeing this land a century ago at the points of Russian Communist rifles. The other part knew better. Evil doesn't recognize borders. Tyranny doesn't check your family tree before it kicks down your door.

He wasn't a soldier serving under my command. I didn't even know the young man. But, I was relieved to hear the voice of the same soldier come back onto the radio, and say, in Ukrainian.

"I'm OK, lieutenant, I'm OK," the voice said, "That was close. I'm setting up again. Not done yet. Got plenty more of those bastards to take down! Don't worry!"

The men and women of the Ukrainian armed forces are mostly volunteers, but many have also been drafted. They come from widely different backgrounds, regions, and professions. Some are very young. A lot are older than anyone who'd be accepted into the American army. Yet all share a common bond. They love their country as much as I love mine. They want it free from Russian tyranny. Ukraine is anything but a perfect democracy. It still struggles with the legacy of Soviet corruption and mismanagement.

But every soldier in the Ukrainian armed forces, and every civilian, knows how they want it to change. They want Ukraine to join the community of Western democracies. They want it to prosper. They want a better life for their children, and for their children's children. They want nothing to do with the old-style Soviet universe or the new-style Russian fascism that has been embraced by their neighbor.

The Russians could bomb the place, terrorize it, kill people, and destroy things. They are very good at that. But they could never break the spirit of the defenders. Nor could they penetrate this particular base with anything they could deploy, save nuclear weapons. The base was well fortified with steel-reinforced concrete lined caves, which sheltered all the critical equipment and supplies. That made it virtually impossible to destroy the Ukrainian sea drone fleet, which was mostly safely hidden deep within the reinforced caverns.

Those small Ukrainian "Sea Babies," "Kozak mamais," Magura V5s, and other unmanned watercraft are small but powerful kamikazes. They can strike anywhere in the Black Sea. They are the bane of the Russian Navy, lurking in dark waters, waiting for the right moment to strike. When they strike, they inflict serious damage on ships both in port and on the sea. The Russians tried many times to destroy this base. Each time

they failed. They were trying again with everything they had. But the Ukrainians were ready for them. They always were.

There was a rumbling noise, an increasingly loud hum, almost like that of a huge number of mopeds converging together on one destination. It echoed the approach of the surviving Shahed drones. These had made it through our first line of defense, the automated weaponry, as well as our second line, the electromagnetic radiation guns. So, now the night sky erupted in another mesmerizing spectacle, as manned anti-aircraft guns unleashed a barrage of tracer rounds, illuminating the darkness, turning it into a canvas of flickering lights. The relentless dance of destruction continued, punctuated by thunderous explosions, as drone after drone met its demise.

Our defenses were slowly but valiantly conquering the drone onslaught, but a darker truth loomed. Cruise and ballistic missiles were always an imminent threat in every attack by swarms of drones. Cunning Russian strategists employed the cheap drones mostly as a diversion, hoping to overwhelm our anti-missile defenses. Knowing that our critical facilities were built of reinforced concrete, their ultimate goal was to get heavy missiles through the defense grid. They had learned this technique from us. Meanwhile, one drone and missile after another succumbed to our kinetic defenses. They were pulverized in the air. Reduced to ashes.

Then, suddenly, the earth seemed to shatter under our feet. The ground quivered as if an ancient beast had been awakened and was clawing its way out from under the earth. Dirt and rocks cascaded down from the precipice. A heavy Russian missile had evaded all of our defense systems. It had struck the high ground, shattering the newfound sense of invulnerability that had arisen from the mostly successful operation of our defenses.

That one's going to leave a big hole, I thought.

The taste of concrete dust filled my mouth, gritty and bitter. My ears rang from the concussion blast, and for a moment I was back in Afghanistan, watching a Humvee disappear in a cloud of smoke and

debris. The same helpless rage, the same desperate prayer that somehow, impossibly, everyone had made it out alive.

The Russian leadership has no decency. If it had, it would not have invaded Ukraine, a country whose only "offense" was aspiring to join the community of free, prosperous nations. There is little doubt that they would deploy nuclear weapons if they could. But, they cannot use such weapons in Ukraine despite their intentionally frightening rhetoric and apparent willingness to do so.

This reluctance has two key sources. First, Russia's strategic goal is to transform Ukrainians into obedient, hard-working laborers. That objective that would be impossible if the population were devastated by radioactive contamination. But, the primary deterrent is environmental. The Earth's west-to-east rotation, combined with Europe's trade winds and the Gulf Stream, creates weather patterns that work harshly against Russian interests. More warm air flows northward from the equator than cold air flows southward, even in winter, resulting in prevailing winds that blow from southwest to northeast across the region.

Ukraine is southwest of the most populated regions of western Russia. If they went nuclear, the radioactive fallout would heavily contaminate Russia's farmlands and cities, including the place that the leadership calls home—Moscow. As a result, they restrict themselves to the use of conventional warheads. But by May 2023, they were running low on precision conventional weapons. They were beginning to use whatever they could find, including relics of the Cold War, like intermediate-range ballistic missiles rearmed with conventional warheads. The big hit on the escarpment had to be one of those. A long range ballistic missile armed with a heavy conventional warhead.

But, it doesn't have to be a nuke to make you lose your hearing. The explosion of a large conventional warhead makes enough noise to wake the dead. And, the sound of the Ukrainian choppers cut the air and the pace of the smaller explosions grew faster. The helicopters were shooting air-to-air cannons at the Russian drones. Shahed drones are susceptible

to this, and the chopper gunmen know their job. The intensity of the Russian attack began to go down quickly. Most drones were destroyed. Then it was all over. Only one kamikaze drone and one missile had gotten through the gauntlet.

The full extent of the damage wouldn't be clear until morning, but I doubted it would be severe. There would be a huge crater on the high escarpment, but the area was empty land anyway. As for the drone that had hit the beach, the ebb and flow of water would bring in new sand and even out the old. The crater would fill itself in a matter of days.

Such ordeals are nerve-wracking to those new to war. But war is not new to me. And I like to look at the silver lining inside every dark cloud. I could hardly keep my eyes open before the attack, but now the adrenaline rush had made me hyper-alert. No coffee needed. And, I needed that, at the time, because I was due to embark on my mission, so it saved me from resorting to caffeine.

A new siren emerged from the speakers, giving us the comforting "all clear" signal. Everyone not directly engaged in defending the base began emerging from the bunkers, including me. I took a deep breath. The air was foul because of the lingering stink of scorched explosives. The drizzling rain, which had been unwelcome before, was gone. It would have been welcome now because it might have washed away some of the stink. It would stay stinky for a while.

As the all-clear siren wailed across the base, I emerged from the bunker feeling something I hadn't experienced in years. Purpose. A reason for being. The acrid smoke burning my lungs, the adrenaline still coursing through my veins, the knowledge that I'd just survived another night in hell... Yet, somehow, it all felt right. I know that doesn't make much sense, but somehow it did make sense, at least in that moment, for me, back then.

The cool damp breeze was still blowing, tingling my scalp under closely cropped hair. I glanced around and up at the sky. You still couldn't see any stars or moonlight through the thick layer of clouds. Everything

was very dark again. It was hard to see. But, to the extent that I could see anything, it seemed like everything was back to exactly the way it was before the Russian attack.

The makeshift marina was seemingly unscathed. As far as the darkness would show, all the little boats remained securely fastened to the docks. That's what I needed because soon one of those boats would take me on a journey to Crimea.

But, there was something that had changed during those minutes of chaos. Somewhere in that hell, between the screaming missiles and the crackling radio chatter, a new sense of resolve grew inside of me. In less than an hour I would board a tiny craft that would take me on a mission so dangerous that even battle-hardened Ukrainian officers would shake their heads, think me crazy, and call it suicide.

An infiltration deep into Russian-occupied Crimea.

But, after tonight, after Kharkiv, after Bakhmut, after seeing what these people were willing to sacrifice, and knowing the history of my own family, I knew for sure why I was here, in this foreign country, fighting this war. The medic's dying words echoed in my mind:

"Tell them we existed. Tell them we fought."

Sure, I would tell their story. But, now, I was also ready to start telling mine. And if I was very lucky—or very unlucky, depending on how you look at things—I might even live to tell it.

Chapter 2: The Road To Crimea

The Black Sea doesn't care about your mission. It doesn't care if you're fighting for freedom or revenge. It's not afraid of ghosts. And, it doesn't give a shit about right and wrong. It just wants to kill you. Twelve hours in a jury-rigged submarine the size of a coffin will teach you that.

My name is John Kovalenko. It's not my real name, of course. I've invented it for the purpose of telling this story in a confidential manner. That's because, even in retirement from twenty years of U.S. Army service, some secrets must stay buried. But the name fits this mission, because it's a Ukrainian name and it carries the weight of my grandparents' blood and, maybe, even the promise I made to the dying medic.

Her words had been echoing in my cramped metal tomb since I'd left the Ukrainian coast before dawn. The mini-sub's hull groaned, now and then, maybe with each wave, although that was impossible given that, most of the time, at least, I was underneath the waves. But, it reminded me that this contraption had been cobbled together from salvaged parts and pure Ukrainian brilliance and determination. The engineers who'd built it had done their best, but their best meant I was piloting what amounted to a torpedo that happened to have "delusions of grandeur!"

The submarine was designed to reach a maximum velocity of thirty-two knots while fully submerged. That's about sixty kilometers per hour on paper. Or, in the terminology understandable by Americans who aren't sea Captains, about 37 miles per hour. That's very fast for a submarine. But, it's the theoretical maximum. Reality, as always, proves

more stubborn than theory. After twelve hours and two surface charges using diesel generators that made the cramped space reek somewhat, of fuel fumes, I was finally approaching Cape Tarkhankut. My knees pressed against my chest. Salt water was seeping through hull joints, and I was breathing recycled air that tasted like diesel and desperation.

This wasn't how I'd imagined spending my retirement.

Three days ago, I'd been in Kyiv, standing before General Rutanov's desk like a soldier reporting for duty. The general was an unusual military leader. A lawyer by training who'd earned his stars through competence rather than connections. He was short like President Zelensky, and many other Ukrainian men of his generation. That was the legacy of post-Soviet malnutrition. But, in spite of his modest height, he commanded respect through sheer force of will and tactical brilliance.

He'd looked up from his war maps with eyes that hadn't seen enough sleep since the invasion began. His simple green T-shirt, which he wore in preference to a uniform fit for a general, was the same informal style favored by President Zelensky. But, contrary to what you might think from hearing that, it actually made him seem more formidable, not less.

"I need something spectacular," he'd said without preamble, sliding a worn folder across his desk.

Inside was my own proposal from over a year ago. It was a plan to infiltrate Russian-occupied Crimea and destroy a critical missile storage facility. I'd written it during quiet moments between battles, a theoretical exercise that had seemed almost academic at the time.

"My predecessor thought you were insane," Rutanov had continued, his English flawless despite never having left Ukraine until middle age, "Dumped it in the trash, from what I can tell... well, not literally, of course, or we wouldn't be here, would we?"

"And you, sir?"

His smile had been sharp as a blade.

"I think you're insane too. But I also think you're right."

He'd leaned back in his chair, studying me with calculating eyes.

"We need both a real and an informational victory. The counter-offensive... well, you know as well as I do how deeply the Russians are dug in. The minefields, the trenches. It's going to be brutal, and we can't guarantee success. But we still need to show our Western allies that we're taking the fight to the enemy."

I'd nodded, understanding immediately. War isn't just about armies clashing on battlefields. Morale, propaganda, and the perception of vulnerability were all things can be as decisive as any tank or missile. In a conflict where foreign assistance played such a crucial role, demonstrating Ukraine's capacity for bold, proactive strikes could mean the difference between continued support and war fatigue.

"The goal," Rutanov had explained, "is to cut Russian supply lines and make them feel unsafe even in their stolen territories. We want them in panic mode, constantly looking over their shoulders. A thousand little cuts instead of one big blow. That'll save my men's lives and eventually, hopefully, break the Russians' will to fight."

He'd paused, his gaze drifting momentarily before snapping back to focus with renewed intensity.

"It's your plan, of course, but your American accent could be a problem. We have Ukrainians who can speak Russian like natives, but none with your particular skill set. Scuba diving, explosives, covert operations, submarine piloting—you're uniquely qualified for this type of assignment."

Back inside the little submarine, as I thought back to my conversation with General Rutanov, the weight of that last qualification was pressing against my ribs, right at that very moment, as the submarine's sonar pinged softly. Cape Tarkhankut was dead ahead. But, there was nothing I needed to do immediately, so the memories kept flowing back to me.

"I don't have the manpower to send a squad," the general had continued, "And I don't think it would do it even if I had the men. Because this is a job for one very capable man with local partisan support.

The partisans... they're patriots... but they're not professional soldiers. They'll need your leadership. You'll need to teach them a lot. Show them how to place explosives for maximum effect, and how to use whatever equipment you bring. That sort of thing..."

I hadn't hesitated.

"I'm ready to go, sir. I appreciate your confidence."

He'd stamped my orders with the official seal that made it real, then looked up with something approaching paternal concern.

"Do you have a wife? A steady girl?"

"No, sir."

"Of course you don't," he'd chuckled, "Because if you did, she wouldn't have let you come here in the first place."

The smile had faded as he returned to his maps, mind already shifting back to the enormous weight of command.

"God speed, Colonel."

Now, suspended in the murky waters off the Crimean coast, I understood why he'd asked about wives and girlfriends. This wasn't the kind of mission you came back from if your heart was somewhere else. But my heart wasn't anywhere else. It was right here, right now, in this war, with these people who'd shown me what courage really looked like.

I surfaced just enough to extend the periscope, scanning the coastline through the green-tinted lens. The cliffs of Cape Tarkhankut rose from the water like the walls of an ancient fortress, their faces scarred by centuries of wind and wave. The Tatars who'd originally inhabited this land had called it "Tarkhankut." That literally translates into "The Devil's Corner." Staring at those jagged rocks through the periscope, I understood their logic.

But the forbidding landscape also meant concealment. Towering cliffs, mysterious caves, and treacherous waters made casual surveillance difficult. Russian patrols couldn't see everything from up there, and the rocky shallows were very dangerous even for modern boats to navigate. Hazardous enough to discourage boat traffic. It was the perfect place for

a covert insertion. But, of course, part of the risk you took, when you came this way, was being smashed against the rocks by the next wave.

The submarine's electric motor hummed as I maneuvered closer to shore. According to my briefing, partisan contacts would meet me at the narrow beach after nightfall. But nightfall was still hours away, and staying submerged in this cramped space was becoming unbearable. Every muscle in my body screamed for movement, for space, for air that didn't taste like machine oil and recycled breath.

The decision to exit early wasn't tactical. It was entirely psychological. I just couldn't stand it anymore. I needed to move, to stretch, to feel something other than tiny metal walls pressing in from all sides. In the Special Forces, there's an old saying:

"Comfort is the enemy of alertness."

But, frankly, cramped up in that coffin of a submarine, discomfort was the enemy of sanity.

Getting into my wetsuit was an exercise in contortion. The submarine was designed to transport equipment. That is, a big bad warhead that would blow up big manned Russian naval vessels. It was not designed for human transport or habitation. Every movement was a negotiation with physics and claustrophobia. But finally, I was suited up, diving gear checked, and my waterproof equipment bags were secured with nylon rope.

The mini-sub's only exit was through a modified torpedo tube. That was a detail that had seemed almost funny during the planning phase. Now, wedging myself into the narrow cylinder with my gear trailing behind me, it felt like I was loading myself into my own funeral cannon. The space was so tight I could barely breathe, let alone move.

I activated the internal mechanism. The hatch sealed behind me with a mechanical thunk that reverberated through my bones. Then the outer door cycled open, and suddenly I was expelled into the cold embrace of the Black Sea like a bullet from a gun.

The shock of cold water was immediate, even through the wetsuit's neoprene protection. For a moment, I hung suspended in the murky depths, watching the submarine's dark silhouette fade into the gloom below. In spite of its drawbacks, which were many, that submarine was my lifeline back to Ukrainian-controlled waters, assuming I survived long enough to need it.

The water was murkier than I'd expected. But, that wasn't bad. It was a good thing. Good for concealment, terrible for navigation. Eventually, muscle memory took over, and I began to swim, and the freedom was intoxicating. After twelve hours of claustrophobic confinement, being able to extend my arms and legs felt like a resurrection. I moved through the water with long, deliberate strokes, working out the kinks in my muscles while staying deep enough to avoid surface detection. A large, colorful fish glided past, oblivious to my presence, and then, it disappeared into the murky depths like a good omen.

I had two air tanks. Ninety minutes of breathing time total. But I needed to save one tank for the return journey, assuming there would be one. That left me forty-five minutes of underwater time before I'd be forced to surface, exposing myself to observation and potential detection.

When I finally broke the surface, the first thing I noticed was the silence. No air raid sirens, no explosions, no crackling radio chatter calling out grid coordinates and casualty reports. Just the rhythmic sound of waves against rock and the distant cry of seabirds. It was almost peaceful—if you ignored the fact that I was now deep in enemy territory, alone, carrying enough explosives to level a city block.

The narrow beach at the base of the cliffs was exactly as described in my briefing: a sliver of dark sand and pebbles barely wide enough for a man to stand on, squeezed between towering rock walls and the restless sea. Perfect for a clandestine meeting, terrible for everything else. The cliffs rose at nearly ninety degrees from the waterline, offering no escape route except back into the water.

As I pulled myself onto the rocky shore, water streaming from my wetsuit, I couldn't help but think about the journey that had brought me here. Not just the tactical decisions and strategic planning, but the deeper currents that had carried me from suburban Virginia retirement to this remote corner of illegally occupied Crimea.

My Ukrainian grandparents had fled this land at the turn of the century, driven out by Russian oppression and the promise of freedom in America. They'd raised me to remember where I came from, to understand that the blood of this soil ran in my veins. Now their grandson was returning, carrying explosives, in what most normal people would call a death wish.

There was a odd symmetry about it. It almost felt almost like destiny. That is, if you believed in such things. I do. But sitting on that narrow beach as the sun began its descent toward the horizon, I could almost hear my grandfather's voice:

"Sometimes a man has to go back to where his story began to understand how it ends."

The partisan contact wouldn't arrive for hours. I had time to think, to plan, to prepare mentally for what came next. But too much thinking is dangerous territory in this business. Thinking leads to doubt, and doubt leads to fear. Fear leads to hesitation, and hesitation leads to death. Better to focus on the mechanical aspects of the mission: equipment checks, route planning, contingency protocols.

The missile depot was a long way away, heavily guarded, and packed with enough ordnance to flatten half of Ukraine if the Russians ever managed to launch it all. Intelligence suggested they were stockpiling for a major missile offensive, probably targeting critical civilian infrastructure in Kyiv and other cities. Getting in would be difficult. Placing the charges without detection would be nearly impossible. Getting out alive would be a miracle. Why had I come here? Why was I about to do this?

But as I thought about these things, I methodically checked my equipment, which was a habit honed by years of experience. The explosives, detonators, drones, invisibility cloaks, communication gear, backup weapons. Everything I needed for the mission had made it here safely. I thought about the medic's words again and focused on that, to avoid the possibility of succumbing to fear:

"Tell them we existed. Tell them we fought."

If I could destroy that depot, if I could prove that even the heart of Russian-occupied territory wasn't safe from Ukrainian determination, then her death would mean something. Maybe it all meant something. The young officers I'd seen blown to bits in Afghanistan, the patriotic Ukrainians who risked it all in Kharkiv and Bakhmut, the electronic warfare specialists risking shrapnel to defend their base, the countless others who'd chosen to fight rather than submit. All of it meant something.

The sun was setting now, painting the forbidding cliffs in shades of gold and crimson. The temperature was dropping, and I could feel the chill seeping through my wetsuit despite my body's efforts to warm the trapped water. Soon, the partisan would arrive with local knowledge, equipment, and hopefully a way to get me closer to the target without walking all the way through enemy territory.

Chapter 3: The Fire in Our Eyes

The Crimean coast has a stark beauty that reminded me why my grandparents had spoken of this land with such longing, decades after their exile. These weren't the gentle, rolling landscapes of suburban Virginia where I'd planned to spend my golden years. This was raw geography. It was stone and sea locked in an eternal battle, neither willing to yield completely to the other. It was the kind of place that forged hard people.

My grandfather's voice echoed in my memory, words spoken in the broken English he'd never quite mastered:

"The land... it gets into your blood like iron. Makes you strong or kills you. No middle ground."

He'd been right about that. Sitting here, surrounded by the ghosts of Tatar fishermen and Soviet political prisoners, Ukrainian patriots and Russian occupiers, I could almost imagine that iron seeping into my bones. It wasn't just another mission. It was a homecoming.

A sudden clatter of falling stones broke my reverie. Above me, perhaps two hundred feet up the sheer face of the cliff, a figure had appeared against the darkening sky. Even in the dim light, I could make out the silhouette of a man descending with practiced ease, his headlamp cutting a narrow beam through the gathering dusk. Rappelling gear, methodical movements, no wasted motion. Either this was my contact, or I was about to have a very short conversation with Russian special forces.

But no Russian would approach so openly, I reasoned. They'd have already put a sniper's bullet through my skull or called in an airstrike.

This had to be the partisan General Rutanov had promised. Still, I kept my rifle within easy reach. Paranoia is a tool in the survivor's med kit. I'd learned long ago that the price of misplaced trust was measured in blood.

His descent took nearly twenty minutes. Whoever it was, he knew the cliffs, finding handholds and anchor points with the confidence of long familiarity. As he drew closer, the beam of his headlamp occasionally swept across my position. It was dark, but at a certain angle, when it wasn't pointing directly at me, the light reflected against the water and back onto the man. I caught glimpses of his weathered features, beneath a shock of gray hair. Older than I'd expected, but moving with the fluid grace of someone half his apparent age.

When his boots finally touched the rocky beach, he paused at the base of the cliff, his headlamp's glare momentarily blinding me. I raised a hand to shield my eyes, and he immediately switched it off, plunging us both into the deep blue twilight. A moment later, a softer lantern at his waist cast a warm glow that allowed us to study each other properly.

He was perhaps seventy, though the kind of seventy that came from a lifetime of physical work rather than comfortable retirement. His face bore the deep lines and weathered texture of someone who'd spent decades under the Crimean sun, but his eyes held an alertness that spoke of intelligence and, more importantly, competence. He wore practical climbing gear over what looked like traditional Tatar clothing.

"You are John Kovalenko?" he asked.

His accent sounded to me, at the time, as Russian, but since then, I've learned to recognize the distinctive cadence of a Crimean Tatar speaking Russian. His voice was steady, controlled, and had an undertone of authority to it that suggested this man was accustomed to being obeyed.

"I am," I confirmed, rising from my seated position on the rocks.

My joints protested briefly. Sitting still for hours after the submarine ordeal hadn't done my middle-aged body any favors.

He smiled, a genuine expression that transformed his weathered features, and without untethering himself from his climbing ropes, he extended a calloused hand.

"Welcome to Qırım!" The Tatar name for Crimea rolled off his tongue with obvious pride. "I am Mustafa. Mustafa Azmetov."

His grip was firm, the handshake of a man who'd built things with his hands and broken things with them too. Maybe, a few Russian necks, I'd have wagered. Looking at him more closely in the lantern's glow, I could see the subtle signs of a warrior disguised as a craftsman.

"Zdravstvujte," I replied in Russian, opting for the formal greeting.

First impressions matter, especially when your life depends on the competence and loyalty of people you'd never met.

"Zdravstvujte," he echoed, but his smile suggested he appreciated the courtesy while finding it unnecessary.

"You know my name, I see..." I added, fishing for information about how much he knew about the mission.

"It's in my mission brief," Mustafa explained matter-of-factly, "It's an honor to have you fighting alongside us. We'll have much to discuss."

Relief washed over me. It wasn't just because contact had been established, but because his words carried the ring of genuine respect, rather than mere politeness. In my experience, local fighters could go either way with foreign advisors. Some saw them as saviors, others as meddling outsiders. I would later learn that Mustafa fell into a third category: a person who judged people by their competence rather than their passport.

"Thank you, Mustafa," I said, "I've heard a lot about your successes down here and I'm honored to meet you as well."

It was a white lie, of course. My briefing had contained precious little information about the local resistance beyond the fact that they existed and had agreed to help. But diplomacy are as important as explosives in this business, maybe more so. The small deception had the desired effect. His eyes sparkled with pride at the idea that an American military

professional had not only heard of his operations but was impressed by them.

"It is night, John Kovalenko," he said, gesturing at the towering cliffs above us, "and the path up is difficult. You are, no doubt, tired, and there will be no one watching us here, now, or in the morning. No one ever comes to this place."

He paused, studying my face in the flickering lantern light, and then continued. "Halfway up, there is a cave, carved into the sandstone in ancient times. Some say it was the Amazons, a race of women warriors, who carved out these caves. I don't know the truth of that. But I do know the way to one of them. I doubt anyone else knows it even exists. We can eat and rest there. In the morning, we can continue our journey."

The suggestion made tactical sense. I was exhausted, both physically and mentally. More importantly, climbing an unfamiliar cliff face in darkness was exactly the kind of unnecessary risk that turned successful missions into cautionary tales.

"Just lead the way, Mustafa," I replied.

He had come prepared. From his pack, he produced an array of climbing equipment—extra rope, a supplemental harness, pitons and a hammer, carabiners, even a second headlamp. Everything was old and worn, but well-maintained, the kind of gear that suggested competence, attention to detail and expertise.

"Here," he said, helping me into the harness with practiced efficiency, "you probably won't need most of it. Follow close behind me, use the same holds. But you have the pitons and hammer if you need additional anchor points."

As he spoke, he gathered my scuba gear and equipment bags, consolidating everything into a larger canvas pack. His movements were economical, purposeful. There were no wasted motions, no fumbling with unfamiliar equipment. Watching him work, I revised my initial assessment upward. This was someone with genuine tactical experience.

The climb began in earnest as full darkness settled over the coast. Mustafa moved up the cliff face like he was walking up a flight of stairs. I followed as best I could, my muscles straining against the unfamiliar demands of vertical movement. Rock climbing had never been my specialty. I was out of my element, but hanging by my fingertips over a hundred-foot drop that was distinctly outside my comfort zone.

"Don't look down," Mustafa called softly from above. "Look only at the next hold, the next move. The rock will tell you where to go if you listen to it."

His advice was sound, but my body was already telling me things I didn't want to hear. The submarine voyage had left me stiff and weak, and twenty years of military service followed by comfortable retirement hadn't prepared me for this kind of physical challenge. My fingers were beginning to cramp, my shoulders burning with the effort of supporting my body weight plus gear.

"How much farther?" I called up, trying to keep the strain out of my voice.

"Not far now," came the reply. "There... do you see that ledge?"

I looked up and spotted it: a horizontal break in the cliff face, perhaps six feet wide and deep enough to stand on comfortably. More importantly, I could see the dark mouth of a cave opening just to the left of where the ledge ended. Mustafa was already there, unclipping from his rope to help guide me up the final few moves.

When I finally hauled myself onto the ledge, every muscle in my body was screaming. I lay there for a moment, breathing heavily, while Mustafa efficiently set up a pulley system to haul up our equipment. The cave mouth beckoned invitingly. Shelter, rest, and hopefully something to eat.

"Welcome to my home away from home," Mustafa said with obvious affection as we entered the cave.

The space was larger than I'd expected, perhaps twenty feet deep and half that wide, with a ceiling high enough to stand upright. More

surprising were the obvious signs of long habitation: a fire pit lined with stones near the entrance, neat stacks of firewood in one corner, even what looked like a crude chimney carved into the back wall. Someone had spent considerable time and effort making this place livable.

"Did you do all this?" I asked, running my hand along the smooth wall where the chimney opening had been carved.

"My father and I," Mustafa replied, his voice carrying a note of pride. "I discovered this place as a young man. I was, maybe, nineteen or twenty years old. My father was... impressed. We spent many summers improving it, making it a proper shelter. A place where a man could think, plan, prepare for whatever came next."

He was already moving with practiced efficiency, building a fire in the stone-lined pit. The wood caught quickly, filling the cave with dancing shadows and the comforting smell of burning pine. As the flames grew, I could see more details of the space: sleeping areas marked by flat stones, storage alcoves carved into the walls, even what looked like a primitive but functional ventilation system that drew smoke up through the chimney and brought fresh air in through cracks in the cave floor.

"This is impressive work," I said, meaning it. "How long have you been using this place?"

"Forty-six years," Mustafa replied without hesitation. "More than half my life. It has been my refuge, my planning room, my armory when needed."

From his pack, he produced what looked like a metal grill, which he positioned over the fire with the casualness of long practice. Sealed pouches of seasoned meat followed, along with fresh bread wrapped in cloth and a bottle of something that looked suspiciously like homemade wine.

"Sit, please," he said, gesturing to a large, flat stone that had obviously been positioned as a chair. "Rest. We have time to talk, to get to know each other. Tomorrow the real work begins."

I settled onto the stone seat, grateful for the warmth of the fire and the chance to finally relax. The cave felt secure, defensible, and completely hidden from the outside world. As hideouts went, it was close to perfect.

"Tell me about your people, Mustafa," I said as he tended the cooking meat. "I'd like to understand their history, their struggles."

He didn't answer immediately, instead adjusting the meat on the grill with careful attention. The silence stretched long enough that I began to wonder if I'd offended him somehow. Finally, he turned to face me, his weathered features serious in the firelight.

"There is so much to tell that there is nothing to tell," he said at last.

"What do you mean?"

He removed two portions of the meat from the grill, placing them on wooden plates he'd produced from somewhere in the cave's depths. The aroma was incredible—spiced lamb with herbs I couldn't identify but that spoke of traditions stretching back centuries.

"Eat first," he said, settling cross-legged on the cave floor with his own plate. "Food is sacred. Stories can wait."

The meat was exceptional. It was tender, perfectly seasoned, cooked with the kind of skill that came from a lifetime of practice. This wasn't field rations or survival food; this was the cooking of someone who understood that a good meal could be the difference between despair and hope, between giving up and fighting on.

"This is excellent," I said, and I meant it.

"My mother's recipe," Mustafa replied. "She taught me that food is love made physical. Even in the worst of times, even when we had almost nothing, she made sure we ate well whenever we could. 'A man who has forgotten how to enjoy a good meal,' she used to say, 'has forgotten how to be human.'"

"Smart woman." I commented, from the heart.

"The smartest," he agreed. "She survived Stalin's deportation, raised six children in Kazakhstan with almost no resources, then had the

courage to return here when it was still dangerous to be Tatar in Crimea. She died in 1998, but I still hear her voice sometimes, especially in places like this."

He paused, staring into the fire, then looked up at me with eyes that held depths I was only beginning to fathom.

"Our history is long, John Kovalenko. For centuries, we faced oppression, forced deportations, the constant threat of losing our culture, our language, our very identity. The Tsars were bad enough, but the Soviets tried to erase us completely—scattered us across Central Asia, forbade our language, destroyed our mosques and schools. They brought in Russians to take our homes and our farms. They made us strangers in our own homeland."

He took a drink from the bottle, then offered it to me. The wine was strong, with a complexity that spoke of careful aging.

"But we survived," he continued, "Not all of us, but enough. And when we had the chance to return, we took it, even though we knew it wouldn't be easy. Even though we knew the Russians who'd taken our places wouldn't welcome us back."

"I've read about Stalin's deportation," I said, "1944, wasn't it? Accused your entire people of collaboration with the Germans."

"May 18th, 1944," Mustafa said, his voice taking on the cadence of someone reciting sacred text.

The bitterness in his voice was old but undiminished, passed down through generations like a family heirloom no one wanted but everyone kept.

"My grandfather was seventeen then," he continued. "Swore he'd return someday, but he never made it. My father did, though. Came back in 1975 with my mother and me. I was twenty years old. Bought a small house far from the city where we could keep our heads down, practice our traditions quietly, wait for better times."

"Were they better times? After the Soviet Union fell?"

Mustafa laughed, but there was no humor in it.

"They were different times. Not necessarily better. Independence meant chaos, opportunity for some, disaster for others. We thought maybe, finally, we could be Tatars in Crimea without fear."

He refilled his cup, offered me more wine.

"Then 2014 came. Little green men, they called them. Russian troops without insignia. Everyone knew who they were. Then, there was the fake referendum. Suddenly we were Russian citizens whether we wanted to be or not."

"How did your people react?"

"Many fled. About 15,000, maybe 30,000 Tatars left Crimea in the first two years after annexation. Those who stayed... well, we learned to keep our heads down again. Tatar television channels were shut down, cultural centers were closed, mosques were raided. Anyone who protested disappeared. Some came back eventually, but usually as broken men. Others didn't come back at all."

The fire crackled in the silence that followed. I could see the pain in his weathered features, the weight of accumulated injustices that had shaped his people's experience for generations.

"But you didn't leave," I observed.

"Where would I go?" he asked simply, "This is my land, the land of my ancestors. The Russians simply stole it. But, father's blood is in this soil, and his father's before him. The Russians can occupy it, claim it's Russian land, but they can't make it Russian. Ever."

"At some point, you decided to fight..." I commented.

"Yes," He replied, "Not in 2014. There wasn't any organization. But, when the full-scale Russian invasion of mainland Ukraine began, in 2022, I knew it was time. Not just for Ukraine, but for us. It's a chance to finally drive out the occupiers and reclaim what was always ours. I don't mind sharing this land with the Ukrainians. But, I'm tired of Moscali scum!"

"So, that's when you joined the resistance?"

"Not only joined it," he corrected, "I helped form it. There were six of us at first, all Tatars, all old enough to remember the deportation stories from our fathers and grandfathers. We started small. Gathered intelligence, helped Ukrainian agents, passed messages. But as the war developed, and it became clear that this wasn't going to be another quick Russian victory, we became more ambitious."

He stood up, stretching muscles that had grown stiff from sitting, and moved to a storage alcove. This time he returned with a detailed map of the Crimean Peninsula, marked with symbols I recognized as tactical notations.

"We know this land better than the Russians ever will," he said, spreading the map on the cave floor between us, "Every back road, every hidden path, every cave like this one. The Russians control the cities, the main highways, the military bases. But the countryside... that's where we shine!"

I studied the map, noting the careful detail of his markings. Supply routes, patrol schedules, defensive positions. It was professional-level intelligence work.

"How many are in your group now?"

"We have members all over Crimea now," he said with obvious pride. "Tatars, Ukrainians, even a few ethnic Russians who know right from wrong, and chose the right side. Young and old, men and women. We've sabotaged supply convoys, provided targeting information for Ukrainian strikes, helped prisoners escape. Small victories, but they add up."

"And now?"

His eyes met mine across the flickering firelight, and I saw in them the same determination that had driven his ancestors to survive deportation, exile, and decades of oppression.

"Now we stop playing small games," he said. "Now we show the Russians that even the heart of their stolen territory isn't safe. That occupation has a price, and we're going to make them pay it. With your help!"

The fire was burning lower now, shadows growing longer in the cave. I could feel exhaustion beginning to claim me. The submarine voyage, the climb, the emotional intensity of Mustafa's story was all taking its toll.

"Tell me about tomorrow," I said.

"Tomorrow we climb to the top of the plateau. My car is hidden there. It's not much to look at, but it runs. And, it doesn't attract much attention. We drive south to meet the others. They're all eager to meet you, eager to learn what you can teach them."

"And are you aware of the target?"

His smile was sharp as a blade in the firelight.

"The airbase and, most specifically, its missile depot. But, as I'm sure you already know, it's heavily guarded, and filled with enough bombs to level half of Ukraine if they ever manage to launch them all. They're preparing for a huge attack in the next month some time. That's what we've heard from our moles inside the Russian military. A major bombardment campaign. They intend to concentrate on civilian targets, infrastructure, everything they need to break Ukrainian morale."

I nodded, understanding the strategic importance. Disrupting that stockpile could save thousands of Ukrainian lives.

"I'm not going to lie to you," I said, "Getting in won't be easy. And, getting out is going to be a lot more difficult. Are you willing to take that risk?"

He was quiet for a long moment, staring into the dying embers of our fire. When he spoke again, his voice carried the weight of generations.

"My grandfather died in Stalin's labor camps. My father spent his whole life dreaming of freedom he never lived to see. I'm sixty-eight years old, John Kovalenko. I've lived longer than any of them, seen more than they ever could. If I die fighting for my people's freedom, for the land of my ancestors... there are worse ways to end a story."

The cave had grown quiet. The fire reduced to glowing coals that cast everything in shades of red and shadow. Outside, I could hear the distant

sound of waves against stone, the eternal rhythm of the eternal Black Sea, which had witnessed tens of thousands of years of humans on its shores, but cared nothing for their struggles, hopes or dreams.

"Get some sleep," Mustafa said, finally, unrolling sleeping pads from his seemingly endless supply of equipment. "Tomorrow we begin the real journey."

I settled onto the surprisingly comfortable bedding, surrounded by the warm stones of the ancient cave. As the fire died to embers and the darkness settled peacefully around me, my thoughts began to drift. The Black Sea whispered against stone outside. It was the same sound that had no doubt lulled the anxieties of many an ancient Amazon warrior, thousands of years before me. With that timeless rhythm in my ears, I drifted off to sleep.

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