

Snow screeches as he pushes the bottle into the drift. Tiny, delicate crystals dance in the clouds his breath leaves behind. In the cold, clear air, the view is spectacular: the mountains white like broken teeth; the fractured city below a maze of orange rooftops; church spires; minarets. When the rifle's scope pulls his eye instantly down to street level, his head spins.

"Here, have a drink" he says. The kid shakes his head.

"Your father's not here" he says scornfully. "You want to be a soldier? Soldiers drink."

Janko watches the kid pull the bottle carefully from the rooftop snow, tentative as a snake charmer.

"Easy, Damir" he says as the kid begins to drink. "That's vodka, not cola. Just a little, each time."

Damir wipes his wet lips. He looks pale, but he doesn't puke. One quick cough, like a small dog's bark; that's all. Janko laughs.

"That'll put some hair on your balls, kid."

You would think the vodka would hinder his aim. In fact, the opposite is true. Up to a point. A sharpshooter's aim is a function of how well he can relax, even under enormous pressure. While shells explode all around, while smoke stings his eyes and gunfire rattles past his ears, the sniper exhales, lives for a moment breathless and aloof, and squeezes a slow trigger. Vodka helps. It helps him to relax, to calm the whirring in his brain, to steady his lethal hands. Up to a point.

"We watch, and we wait" Janko says over his shoulder.

"What are we waiting for?"

"For targets."

"What targets?"

"Anyone who crosses that street." Janko nods at the wide boulevard that cuts through the city, just below the frozen rooftop. The street is quiet; it's cold, and it's still early.

"What if no one comes?" asks Damir. Janko snorts.

"They'll come. They always do."

"Why, if they know we'll kill them?"

"They still have to live. Get food, visit relatives. Try to escape. They always come."

Like Tarik. Janko won't tell the kid about Tarik. About how just last week, the short man in a suit who went scuttling like a beetle across the street coalesced in his rifle sights into Tarik, Sara's brother. He had the range worked out perfectly, but he didn't shoot. He saw Tarik fall, and several seconds later heard the bark of another marksman's gunshot. His finger slowly uncurled itself from the trigger. Janko has lived his whole life in this city.

Tarik's body is still there, sprawled on the shell-scarred concrete. No one dares come to take it away, knowing they could end up lying beside it themselves, breathless and cold.

Janko drinks from his vodka bottle again.

The kid looks startled at a sudden low growl from the quiet street.

"Armoured car" Janko says as explanation. "You watch. They'll all be scuttling behind it like rabbits."

"Who will?"

"Targets."

The armoured car rolls slowly into view, a bright blue logo emblazoned on its roof. It drives at walking pace. A small group of harried people creep low behind it; a man, two women. The women wear headscarves. Janko rolls away from the rifle's sights, propping himself up on an elbow in the snow.

"Don't shoot at the cars" he says. "The bullet will just ping off the armour like rain, and you'll give your position away."

"What about the people behind the cars?" Damir asks.

"You can try" Janko shrugs. "Probably I could hit them. But you? No. We need to start you off on something a little easier. We can wait. It's still early."

The armoured car crawls slowly on like some great blind insect in search of water, the people huddled in its shadow ducking and darting their heads fearfully, waiting for the crack of a rifle. Foolish. You don't hear the one that kills you; bullets are faster than sound. Being a sniper is ten percent lethal precision and ninety percent waiting, in the cold.

"Tell you what, kid. I'll take the next one, show you how it's done. Then you'll do the one after that. Sound good?"

Damir's lips quiver in the cold, but his pale head nods.

"Ok" he says, "sounds good."

Janko was like this, a few bare years ago. Not as young as Damir – the kid's seventeen at best – but every bit as green, every bit as eager and stupid. He'll learn. Janko's an old hand now, able to teach the next generation. He's no superstar; he can't put his name on the wall with a tally beside it, like some of the other snipers. On a good day, he might make three or four targets, not the eight that Miroslav makes, who puts his name on the wall of every abandoned building in the city. But Janko's a solid performer, which is why Command let him train. And Miroslav's a fucking psycho.

Janko lies back in the snow like it's a feather bed, his eyes reflecting an Adriatic blue from the empty winter sky. A few wispy clouds roll slowly past, looking like they've been combed. You get used to the cold. You stop noticing snow. And in the frozen stillness on a bed of whispering ice, Janko pretends he can hear music, and then he can.

Damir's watching the street through binoculars. Bored, he swings the glass away over the city, dialing shattered buildings into focus. Janko watches the boy watch the city, the blue mountains, the birds that sing from the bare branches. Just a boy.

"Target" Janko says, and rolls over onto his stomach. "Watch."

Damir swings the binoculars down towards the street.

"You see him? In the brown coat?"

"Yes, I see him" answers Damir.

"Ok. So. No wind today, so it's easier. All we have to worry about is bullet drop." Janko reaches up with a gloved hand without taking his eye from the rifle's scope. The man in the brown coat is walking fast down the street, keeping his head low. Janko blindly feels the slight clicks of his scope's turret. He adjusts the sight.

"When he reaches the third streetlight, he is four hundred meters away from us, exactly" Janko says.

"Exactly?"

"Almost exactly. The scope is set to four hundred meters, so when he reaches the light, I fire. Watch, kid: this is how we shoot. Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out – and hold. Then we

count. One, two three – shoot. Squeeze the trigger slowly, slowly – don't pull. And follow through. Don't stop squeezing when the gun fires. Squeeze the trigger all the way back, then nice and slow, let it go back to where it was. You'll know you did it right if the sight settles right back on the target again."

The man in the brown coat is almost running now.

The bullet waits in its cold cell.

"With a moving target, you have to shoot in front. Let him run into the bullet. Almost there. Watch."

The man walks right into Janko's crosshairs. Janko's entire focus shrinks down to the black halo around the man and the delicate black crosshairs that point now at the man's body. It is this focus, Janko sometimes thinks, and not the hot bullet that causes the man to crumple underneath his brown coat onto the scarred street.

The rifle's sights jump back to the fallen man. He does not get up. Janko draws the bolt back and ejects the cartridge. The hot metal hisses quietly in the snow.

"Where did I hit him?" asks Janko.

"In the stomach" says Damir.

"Almost. Lower left abdomen."

"Why?" asks Damir.

Janko takes another drink that makes him narrow his eyes. Miroslav probably has three or four kills to his name already this morning, each one perfect and perfectly recorded.

"Doesn't matter" he says. "It's a competition. We pick an area of the body that we'll be trying to hit that day. Today, lower left abdomen. Tomorrow, it could be upper right. The heart." The winner of the previous day's game – Miroslav, almost always – chooses the next day's target. "But don't worry about that for today. Just worry about hitting them. Aim for the middle of the body. That's the safest way."

A bullet aimed that low will not kill instantly. The man Janko shot will have time to think about it. Time to realise he's dying. But the shock will kill him very soon. A large caliber bullet in a dense tangle of veins will quickly erase the man in the brown coat's first kiss; the time he got beaten for stealing cigarettes; the faces of his children. Janko does not consider this. He can't.

"Now we wait?" asks Damir.

"Now we wait" says Janko. "And drink." He passes the bottle to Damir. "Next one's yours."

The clouds cross the sky like they always have, bunching now in swelling ranks, preparing for an assault on the mountains. The birds sing stupidly; nothing bad could ever happen. From time to time, armoured cars growl along the streets below. Janko looks up at the sky. He loves this bright blue wartime sky. The no fly zone keeps the sky clear of shimmering planes and their slow-fading contrails. It's mediaeval, his great great grandfather's sky. It's an ancient sky, the domain of birds and clouds and weather, with stars like autumn apples, stars you wouldn't believe. The city's electricity has been cut off for months. Janko has always had this ability to drop out of the world, like switching levels, he describes it. Down on the surface, time races quicker than up above. Janko's mind is somewhere out in the clouds now, so far out that everything looks tiny and sort of sped-up. This is what makes him a good sniper. He has patience. He can slip out of normal -

"Target" says Damir.

Janko rolls over onto his stomach.

Damir has been looking through the scope, trying out the turrets that adjust the cross hairs, though Janko won't let him shoot. There's really no risk of answering fire, not here, on this rooftop surrounded by others that his comrades hold – that's why they train here. Here, you can afford to miss your shot. Still, no sense wasting bullets. Besides, Janko doesn't like a lot of noise and chaos. He likes a single shot, a single kill, and a quiet hour or two to watch the sky.

He snatches up the binoculars, brushing snow from the glass with his sleeve.

He sees the targets.

Two girls, crossing the street. Not running, but walking fast. Janko watches them move.

"What's the range?" he asks without taking his eyes from the binoculars.

"What?" asks Damir.

"The range. On the turret. I heard you fucking around with it; what's it set at?"

"I...Uh...."

"Fuck's sake. Take your eye off the fucking scope and look at the turret on top. What number is it set to?"

"Six."

"OK. That's too far. Dial it back to four, for four hundred meters, remember?"

"OK. Yes."

The turret clicks.

"OK. Four."

"OK. So. Four hundred meters. Where's that?"

"The third streetlight."

"That's right. So when they reach the third streetlight, you shoot. Where do you aim?"

"At the middle of the body."

"No. The targets are moving, so...?"

Damir thinks.

"I aim in front of them?"

"Good boy. Aim in front. But they're not running, and we're not that far away, so don't overdo it. See those dots on the horizontal crosshair?"

"Yes."

"Half the distance between those. Maybe even a little less. A little less, if you have to choose. Aim the crosshair a second in front of them, ok?"

"OK."

"And Damir?"

"Yes?"

"You're not aiming at *them*. You pick one – doesn't matter which one – and you aim at *her*. OK?"

"OK."

"OK. Nearly there. Which one are you aiming at?"

Damir pauses before answering.

"The one in black."

"Ok. Good. They'll reach the light in a few seconds. Listen. Breathe in. Breathe out. With me now. Breathe in. Breathe out – and hold. Nice and still. Nice and calm. With me now – three, two, one, fire."

The rifle cracks. Janko watches the bullet's vapour trail in the tiny still moment in which all snipers live, suspended breathless between life and death: the distant asphalt coughs dust beyond the women's feet. Damir pulled too far right: Janko watches the bafflingly slow pause as the women freeze, then stupidly talk, then, finally, realizing what just happened and how nearly they nearly died, start to run.

"You missed" says Janko. "But you were close. Probably aimed just a little bit too far forward. It's ok. Plenty of time. Watch this."

Janko tosses the binoculars carelessly at Damir and slides into position in the boot-stained snow, pushing the younger man off the rifle. Damir's sights are all over the place. Janko pulls back from the scope.

"Now it comes down to judgement" he says, watching the women run, no glass between him and them now, just the distance and the limpid air. "Now they're at four hundred and fifty meters. But that's not where I'll take them." The scope's turret clicks again, and again. "See that parked truck? The blue one?"

Damir watches through the binoculars.

"Yes" he says.

"That's five hundred meters. That's where I'll take them" Janko says.

Back to the scope. He watches their progress. The running is slowing already. They think they're safe. These women have never shot a rifle. Janko watches. He waits.

Not long now. The women are almost walking. Unbelievable. This siege has gone on too long, if people are this fucking complacent at the sound of gunfire.

Almost, now. Almost at the truck. Close enough that Janko could shoot. But he doesn't want to take chances. After pushing the kid off the rifle, he needs to make the shot.

The women stop. Janko swallows, and breathes slow. They're breathless, and he imagines their young bodies radiating heat and girl-smell, the soft skin and the sweet sweat; the bouquet of blood his bullet will make bloom on the black street. The women don't move. Come on, he urges silently. Move, he pleads. Twenty feet more, and you're mine.

He zeroes on the one that Damir picked, the one in black. She stands isolated in the scope's black circle, refusing to bow or break under his fearsome focus. Her friend is gone now, cast out of Janko's mind like Satan from Heaven. He waits.

She's talking. Stood in one spot, recently shot at, she stands still in plain view and argues with her friend. She's raging. He doesn't need to hear to know what she's saying. He watches her hands, her lips, as she explodes in a fountain of curses for the snipers, for all snipers and for him in particular, calling him a dog, a viper, a piece of shit; he's watching a beautiful storm. Her friend tugs at her sleeve; she snatches her arm back. And turns on her heel. And faces the rooftop, faces Janko, her invective rising in pace and ferocity, looking right at him, right down the scope. He knows that's not possible. She can't see him. But she's staring right down the scope, eyes flaming, arms spread now, challenging, daring him to take another shot. Fuck you, she says. Daring him, as he squints down the scope and watches her ribcage rise and fall, rise and fall with each outraged breath; daring him to do his worst. Fuck you. Fuck you. She tosses her head like a horse, her free hair floating in the tornado of her rage; they know the sweet power of flicked hair. And this costs them nothing. Janko smiles.

He's lived in this city his whole life. He knows this street, this wide open boulevard; the one that leads to the airport, to the rest of the world. These shell-scarred streets were perfect once, and endless. The bright sky, though criss-crossed with planes, was harmless, every rooftop innocent. He remembers this in the motion of her head, her wind-harassed hair; it strikes sparks in a corner of his brain that has stayed dark too long. Janko's finger relaxes on the trigger.

The calm one tugs again at the angry one's sleeve. The girls move on.

"You didn't shoot" says Damir impassively.

"No. I didn't" says Janko, and rolls away from the rifle, on his back in the snow. His fumbling arm finds the vodka bottle, and he drinks, staring up at the sky.

A dog yawns in a distant yard. The birds are singing still. A big Baltic sun hangs in a big blue Baltic sky. Janko breathes deeply, and feels his lungs expand, feels himself expand, the essence of this bright blue day seeping into his tissues, into his bones, each breath a miracle, each heartbeat a pulse of warmth, a gift from the smiling cosmos. He smiles too. He smiles up at the smiling sky, and Damir watches, and the rifle lies inert and forlorn, its long nose buried in snow.