

## Memories in Bakhmut

Machine gun fire chatter over my head as I sprint towards the command bunker, laden with the latest intelligence. Bullets whizz over my head and comrades around me drop like stones in a morbid choreography. As I enter the dugout, I am greeted by three older men, standing around a plain wooden table with a map of Bakhmut spread across it. The officer I am looking for is Lieutenant Smirnov. His face is tense, a mirror reflection of the men outside. His sallow face and sunken cheeks contrasting his six feet five frame. Lieutenant Smirnov glanced at me, his penetrating grey eyes fixated on mine.

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“Nyet Momma!” I cried, “Nyet!”. My mother ripped me from her shoulder and threw me on the couch. She gazed at me with her sad blue eyes one last time, “Goodbye, ” then disappeared out the doorway. That was the last time I ever saw her.

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Artillery shells land around the dugout, shaking dust from the rafters. Lt. Smirnov peers at me, gesturing for me to talk. “We have intelligence that the Russians are sending a platoon to flank our position.” I say rapidly. With a nod, he rolls up the map and orders the men to retreat. By noon, we had pulled back into Bakhmut. I am greeted by the sight of ruins, buildings once proud now reduced to a husk. The once bustling city is now filled only with malice and gunfire. As we enter through the shattered glass door of an abandoned gas station, a swarm of rats scurry from a dank corner. The smell of urine and decay engulfed our nostrils like a tidal wave, sparking uncertainty among the men.

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“Nyet Momma!” I whispered, “Nyet!”. I watched in abject fear through a slat in the cupboard as my father threw her to the ground, punching her in a drunken stupor. My mother gazed at me through the crack and shook her head, glistening tears leaving wet trails as it rolled off her cheeks.

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A hand grenade goes off in the lobby, instantly killing those around a campfire fuelled with old magazines and posters of bygone performances, its once vibrant colours reduced to monochrome pieces of ash. Pieces of shelving and advertisements create a storm of debris, veiling the Russian troops storming the station, guns blazing. I was in the storage room, looking for supplies. Hearing the commotion, I peek out of the flimsy plywood door and freeze like a deer in headlights. I see Lieutenant Smirnov with half of his right leg torn off, held on only by the skin of his thighs. His screams of agony are but one of many. Standing over him like angels of death were the Russians, prying him about the whereabouts of the army. Lieutenant Smirnov faces towards me and fixes me with his steely grey eyes. My knees feel weak and my arms are leaden. A cold, tight knot formed in my gut as I kneel on the ground. In an instant, the floodgates of memory burst open, flooding my mind with images that never truly left. As I surrender to the torrent, I shut my eyes, allowing the biting embrace of the harsh wind to seal my past in Bahamut.