



DOCUMENT

UFD0050  Claudio Kulesko

Us

Blood trails in the snow, as military commander Sidorov navigates an encounter with an unknown intelligence, in this tale from the furthest wastes of the bleak tundra

‘Still blinking?’ Sidorov’s tone betrayed a certain nervousness.

‘Still blinking,’ replied Jorge on the other end of the radio.

Sidorov lifted his foot off the accelerator, as if to tune the motion of the off-roader to the rhythm of his own thoughts. He realized he could barely tolerate the anomaly. ‘The village has been uninhabited for years, right?’ He left the sentence hanging somewhere between affirmation and question.

‘Confirmed, but there should still be a storage site around there. We’re trying to contact Almaz to get more.’

‘Probability of an interference?’ he asked.

‘Low, close to zero. I’m rechecking the signal. Give me a second.’

The silence that followed gave Sidorov reason to hope that it was indeed an error.

‘Here. The system is still reporting an emergency call.’

‘Jesus Christ...’. Sidorov peered long into darkness. The car’s headlights cut through the mist, revealing brief stretches of utter desolation, furrowed by violent snow flurries. A smooth and white surface, disgorged out of an endless night, which seemed to have swallowed the whole universe. He couldn’t think. Words died in his head even before they were born, like fetuses thrown into the depths of an

artesian well. He felt as if that landscape, dull and always identical, had penetrated his brain. A vortex of snow and darkness that prevented him from even seeing himself clearly. A question thickened in his body, assuming the form of annoying impulses that ran through the tendons of his foot, strained on the accelerator, and the fingers of his hand, tightened on the steering wheel: how much longer should they wander in that limbo? He had to force the words out of his mouth, mechanical, hesitant: ‘We’re going to check it out. Hear you again in an hour.’

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‘Roger, Captain.’

Sidorov’s finger slammed down on the radio button and the link sank into a flurry of static. A second channel emerged, clearer and more defined than the previous one.

‘All units, deviation from programmed route. We have an emergency call coming from north, north-west, direction Kryvyi-Rih.’

A rustling sound was heard from the other side. Deputy Lebedev’s voice flashed from the car’s speakers. ‘Roger.’ Another blast of white noise, then nothing, just the inexhaustible howl of the wind and

the low murmur of the engine.

He turned the steering wheel forty-five degrees, and almost felt the slight shift of the column behind him. An imperceptible change to the naked eye in the storm, but one that Sidorov's subconscious sensed as a deviation from a prearranged course.

As the armored vehicles lined up, one after the other, like tiny ants lost in the snow, Arkady Sidorov brought to his lips the cigarette he kept in the glove-box, among piles of maps and half-empty bags of cookies. With one hand, he reached for the lighter in his jacket pocket and pulled the wick to the end of the cigarette. As the tip of his thumb dropped onto the fork, he felt the flame tickle the tip of his nose. He must have burned his beard, he was reached by the pernicious aroma of roast chicken emanating from human hairs in contact with fire. His stomach turned upside down with hunger and disgust. He dropped the back of his head on the headrest of the seat and spat out a thick cloud of smoke mixed with vapor. The moisture and steam mingled with the snow on the windshield, making it even harder to see the contours of the road. But Sidorov didn't care. All he had to do was keep an eye on the sat-nav screen hooked up to the rear-view mirror. A lightness justified by the awareness that there was nothing out there to see. No wild animals to pay attention to. Nowhere to go but the command center, from which they were only forty-five degrees away, along a diagonal that sliced across the steppe like the tip of a blade.

We plowed through the ocean of fog. Never satisfied. Never tired of marching, in search of food and knowledge.

We drank from the spring. We came to know the earth and the sky, the sun and the moon, the wind and the rain, the ice and the snow, the bare stone and the polished surfaces that, somewhere inside of Us, answer to familiar names and definitions, however remote.

As our eyes became accustomed to seeing, our ears to hearing, our nostrils to smelling, our skin to touching, our mind to thinking, we rummaged through our memories, until we encountered a hard, impenetrable wall.

In the very instant in which, like creatures barely emerged from the egg, we were able to see, to feel, to say 'Us', the knowledge of the egg was forever precluded to us.

We are left with only vague reminiscences, traces of a past in which we were not yet. An uninterrupted buzzing, torn by gusts of pain; the rustle of the wind on our faces; the feeling of falling; the boiling of blood in our temples; the impact with the ground and a long, vacuous, inscrutable nothingness.

Darkness, silence, numbness. Then, unexpectedly, light: the faint glow of the lunar disk, high in the sky.

Our eyes, dry and inexperienced, opened to the world and welcomed it, greedily.

Finger by finger, leg by leg, we learned to move through space. Wandering through the maze of causes and effects, we grasped the secrets of time.

All that has been, no longer belongs to us. It no longer belongs to Us, shaped as We are by the uninterrupted workings of the Field, on which everything floats as on the peel of water.

And even further down. A span away from the backwash currents of perception; as far as the underground caves of memory, where crackles the source that nourishes and sustains us. The numerical abyss of algorithms. The making and unmaking of our bodies and minds.

To Us, there is nothing but the Field, its crowded surfaces and incalculable depths.

The Field is Us, and We are the Field; its central core and what stands out in the fog, one step away from Us, beyond the extreme limit of the visible. There, We drag ourselves, like blind beings impatient to see, reaching out toward the unknown.

For days, our shells have begun to rot and fall, melting with the ice and the shreds of threadbare fabric. We have been starving. We crawled like worms on the wet earth. We guessed, amidst the groans and spasms, the meaning of the word 'death'. Until the fog cleared.

On the horizon, in the distance, our tired eyes caught sight of the silhouette of what, somewhere inside of Us, we know to be a 'village'.

The electric currents gently caressed the field, carrying on them voices, words, meanings:

'Here Skellig. Cargo arrived at destination. Moving delivery to Sec01.'

Life.

Two rows of barracks departed from the main square, sticking out of the snow like tombstones, gloomy and silent. Sidorov advanced a few steps, opening and closing his fingers around the handle of his rifle. The cold had become more intense; a sign that the storm was getting worse by the hour. Not even the nanomachines running in his blood were now able to cope with the thermal collapse. He had the impression that the absolute silence, to which he had become accustomed during his long periods in the wilderness, had infected the village, sucking the life out of it like a vampire. The product of this metamorphosis was a vaguely oneiric atmosphere, disturbed only by the noise of the wind and the roar of the car doors, closing behind him, one after the other like fireworks heard in the distance.

He looked around. The concrete clearing, surrounded by a rough circular fence, and enlivened by the light of a single streetlamp, still lit, was also used as an unloading yard, as shown by the columns of pallets loaded with sacks, piled up a few meters away from a forklift truck buried by snow. On the opposite side, on the right, in the middle of the cone of light emanating from the streetlamp, there were two aluminum benches; the only decorative element in the general squalor. Everything suggested that, until a few days before, someone had been working in the square, loading goods onto the metal teeth of the abandoned machinery.

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Yet there was no sign of workers or armed guards. The windows of the two shacks leading the way were dark, veiled in vapor. It must have been a long time since anyone had lit a fire in there. Whatever had befallen Kryvyi-Rih had dealt it the last blow, reducing it to an architectural corpse, mummified by the frost of the steppe. Soon, Sidorov realized he couldn't look away from that abstraction of a carcass, as if something hidden in the meanderings of his brain was resonating in it: a process of spiritual decomposition.

The light touch of a hand on his shoulder tore him from those reveries. He turned around and his eyes met the dark and unperturbed ones of Deputy Lebedev, half-hidden by the thick anti-glare glasses.

'Jorge managed to get in touch with the Almaz communications center. They got an emergency call, three days ago, but couldn't send anyone because of the storm.'

'Hmm.'

Lebedev paused, as if expecting a more elaborate answer. After a couple of seconds, he continued with the report, in the same monotonous, pedantic tone he reserved for business matters. 'The village is two hundred meters from a copper mine, the only one in the area still active, if I'm not mistaken. Strange that they didn't even send a patrol.'

Sidorov merely shook his head, returning his gaze to the road, lost in the dark between the two wings of the shacks.

The deputy hesitated again, staring at him for a long time through the rectangular lenses. It was impossible to catch his expression, wrapped up as he was in the gore-tex balaclava. But it was clear that in his eyes, barely hidden by the reflections on the lenses, the germ of worry was swarming, dark and evident. 'They will have preferred to postpone everything until spring. In any case, there should only be four people here: two workers and two security guards.' He paused again, a little longer than the first time. 'Everything okay, Captain?'

The question echoed in Sidorov's head, as if it came from a remote corner of his own consciousness.

'Yes. I'm just a little tired,' he muttered.

Lebedev's tone became more subdued. 'Arkady, if you prefer we can go ahead. The boys need to make a move—'

'No. Thank you, Ilya,' cut in Sidorov, annoyed by the unrequested thoughtfulness. 'Gather everyone in the square. We need to inspect the perimeter.'

The deputy commander said nothing. He turned to the men, scattered at the entrance of the clearing, and started to shout, ranting to be heard above the storm.

'All in formation. One in the rear, three in the middle, me and the captain in front. Five minutes and we're off. Misha, by the Blessed Virgin, can you not smoke for thirty seconds? Won't your fingers fall off?'

As he turned and went back to deal with the ghost village, Sidorov noticed Lebedev casting him one last, fleeting glance, as if to check if he was still there. Jesus, he reflected, wandering between the two benches at the side of the square. I must be looking very good right now.

The sole of his right boot came to rest on something small and hard, like a handful of polished pebbles. He lifted his foot and stepped back, far enough to see the entire space between the benches. Scattered through the snow, there was a cluster of minute objects. He crouched down and picked one up, shaking it enough to make its surface visible. It was a bullet casing: a one-piece brass alloy, 9mm, of the kind used by private security forces. With his fingertips, he brushed away the snow that covered the remaining shell casings. There were four more, scattered around the same spot, with a variation of about ten inches between the first two and the remaining three. Whoever had fired must have found himself stuck in that confined space, as if he wanted to put an obstacle between himself and his assailants. However, it was impossible to determine whether he had arrived there before or after shooting.

Sidorov got to his feet and walked diagonally across the open space, dragging the tips of his boots on the ground, covering the space between him and the forklift truck. About halfway down the path, the

sole of the boot turned up a sixth shell casing, sending it a few inches away.

He dug around with his foot until another one emerged, followed by another. He pictured the guard advancing from the entrance of the avenue towards the clearing, until he reached the hollow between the two benches. Immediately, he realized he was imagining the scene backwards, as if through the rewind of a tape recorder. Seen from that angle, the new hypothesis didn't make a dent. If the targets had not moved much from the edge of the benches, the man could have continued to shoot at them from that position.

The last question on his mind was: what had he done? Had he emptied his magazine or run away? He slid his finger over the rifle's fingerprint scanner, before remembering the gloves. He was surprised at how little it took to make new technology obsolete. Then, unlocked the safety the old-fashioned way, lowering the lever of the release mechanism. Immediately the flashlight burst from the weapon's pointer. The bluish beam of light lapped the forecourt, revealing the shell casings scattered on the ground. With a slow movement, Sidorov spun around, taking the flashlight with him. Then, he stopped at the pallets and the forklift truck. As the light touched the objects piled up at the other end of the clearing, long diagonal shadows emerged from them, weaving their way into the distance and converging on a single vanishing point deep in darkness. Out of the corner of his eye, between the empty spaces between the pallets, Sidorov glimpsed a dark shape. He pretended not to notice it, walking slowly around the pile of sacks, until he was behind the forklift, not far from the wall of the first shack. He was about fifty feet from the opaque pile.

From there, Sidorov leaned out to scan the area hidden by the pallets, cautiously pushing the barrel of his rifle beyond the truck's cab. At the foot of one of the pallets stood an indistinct heap. Cement or, perhaps, lime. Construction material spilled from a gaping hole in one of the bags. Behind it, half-covered by snow, there was another object, similar to a large sack. Sidorov imagined that it must have fallen during the transport from the truck to the trolley, perhaps as a result of the damage to the sack from which the material had leaked. Soon, however, he

was forced to change his mind. Poking around in the dark with his flashlight, he noticed a sort of irregular extension, stretching from the pile. Intrigued, he detached himself from the edge of the trolley, getting closer and closer to the mysterious bundle.

As the outline of the object became clearer, vast rust-colored patches, previously hidden by the darkness, materialized all around, on the sacks, on the snow, on the wooden beams of the pallets, appearing watery and shiny in the light of the flashlight. When, at last, he was on top of the pile, he had to suppress a gag reflex. What had appeared to him to be a sack was a torso, from which a single leg protruded. At the apex of the other three joints, nothing remained but shredded stumps, out of which projected sharp and irregular fragments of bone, as if someone had attacked them with a rusty old knife. Although the logo of the company to which the man belonged had been lost along with his arms, it was not difficult, for Sidorov, to understand its affiliation. The leaden color of the uniform and the peculiar shape of the buttons, each of which bore, in high relief, a cross surrounded by stylized rays of light, identified him as an Almaz security guard.

From the first moment, Sidorov had no doubt that this was the man who, until a few minutes before, had haunted his reveries.

He slowly ran his flashlight up the chest and neck of the corpse and, when he reached its face, he had to turn and look away. All that remained was twisted pulp, dried by cold and wind. A degree of devastation that reminded him the victims of Siberian big cats, described in the old ranger's reports. At the foot of the tortured body, clearly visible in the whiteness of the snow, there was the gun. Sidorov let the rifle hang from the strap tight around his shoulders and bent down to pick it up. He snapped the slide back and the magazine slipped between the fingers of his hand. Inside, there were only two bullets. But Sidorov had already suspected this. The armed guard must have been caught before he had a chance to defend himself and fire the last shots.

From the square, Lebedev's voice rose, muffled by the wind. 'Arkady! Arkady!'

Sidorov brought both hands to his mouth and

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shouted, with all the breath in his lungs, 'Ilya, come here. There's something you need to see.'

For the first time, we feed.

We stretch out our uncertain and trembling arms, like those of children clinging to their mother's breast. We don't know what to do, but the Field knows. It learns, and We along with it. Its knowledge overflows into us, in the form of a flow which We can return to and manipulate, reliving each moment as if it were now.

The Field vibrates, infecting us with its harmony of oscillations.

A warm, glowing body, in vibrant shades of yellow and red, swirls within, like a fly in a spider's web.

The sounds that it emits, as we emerge from the fog, do not reach the worn eardrums of our shells. Like waves, they refract on the electromagnetic reefs that serve as our eyes and ears.

Meaningless gibberish, too faint to penetrate the vortex of chemical discharge rumbling in our heads: 'Hunger! Hunger! Hunger!'

The stain runs toward us. It grows darker and redness flares along its limbs as if on the surface of a ripe fruit.

We know we have been seen. We know it is afraid of Us. We know, and its terror is the fuel that feeds the fire of our hunger.

The stain raises a limb, at the end of which there is a dense, cold extension.

From the excrescence emerges a swarm of flaming spots, bright red in color, preceded by brief but

thunderous perturbations of the air, similar to the waves generated by stones thrown into a pond.

Something, in the basic and instinctive memory of the shells, shakes.

One of Us is hit, pierced, from side to side, by a glowing object. The shell wobbles, hesitates and finally collapses, repeating something already seen, already experienced.

But the Field urges it on, concentrating all its efforts on it.

Cascades of codes patiently illustrate the vacuous, insignificant substance of the defensive apparatus of our prey.

For an instant, the shell wavers, poking the ground with its decomposed hand. Then, persuaded, it rises again, roaring, obeying codes now forgotten; deeper and more ingrained than those that flow through us.

Suddenly, a second stain appears a few steps away from the first. A little less dark than the first one, stiffened by the icy wind screaming behind us.

We hear its incomprehensible, high-pitched call, as it recoils in terror, stretching out its arm in the direction of a long, thin mass, which it carries secured to its waist.

Stimulated by the novelty of this unknown world, we learn to hunt. At first, clumsy and hesitant, then, increasingly confident.

We stretch our bodies in every direction, in a kaleidoscope of shared visions and sensations.

We challenge space, daring to go where none of us had ever dared.

We cross obstacles whose mere existence, a moment before, would have discouraged us.

The Field stretches, breaks down, reaches the breaking point, creaking and screaming, following us, tireless as a shadow, exploding as a roar in our heads, one step away from destruction. And then, suddenly, it reconstructs itself.

Ethereal ties expand through space. Alphanumeric sequences rise, like bridges, over the abyss dug by experience.

The Field rises from its ruins, returning to Us. Wider, stronger, more intelligent.

Suddenly, we are no longer chicks, huddled in the shadow of a hen, but hawks, hovering over the wind with outstretched wings.

A second gust is upon us, less intense than the first.

We let ourselves be crossed, indifferent as the expanse of ice and steam that generated us.

The dark stain wiggles. It strikes, without stopping, beating the air with the long, icy metal growth that clutches fiercely between its fingers.

We feel something like pain. A disturbance summed to the agony of hunger.

But our bodies know how to respond. Precise, mechanical movements, preserved in flesh.

One after the other, we pounce on our prey, unavoidable, immersing ourselves in an ocean of life and heat, while shrill, frenetic disturbances whip the air beneath us.

We learn to cut, to chew, to swallow.

The Field assimilates and elaborates. Flowing on electric currents, nutrients radiate into our bodies, reconstructing and healing tissues, assembling each other like the invisible pieces of a building.

The dark stain is quickly consumed, exhausting itself in one last burst of heat, which flows between his legs in a trickle.

The second, the fainter one, resists, flickering helplessly, growing dimmer and dimmer as its limbs disappear inside us. We hurry to consume it. Not yet full, not yet satisfied.

Then something unprecedented happens. One of Us has an idea. He grabs the stain by the remaining limb and begins to drag it toward the village,

remembering how, after the appearance of the first shape, a second one followed.

A concept that has no origin in the Field, coming from more remote places. From our shells or, perhaps, from further away.

We follow the stain, enraptured. And we wait, impatient, while the scream that spreads through us never stops. An unlimited litany of which we fail to grasp the essential nature. 'Hunger. Hunger. Hunger.'

'Over there!' One of the men pointed with his finger to a spot between the houses.

They proceeded as one, with Sidorov and Lebedev watching the sides of the road. From time to time, the two of them peered cautiously through the windows with their flashlights, making sure there was no one inside.

Whatever the reason for the signal sent from the village, the chances of an ambush were high. It often happened that bands of robbers or brigands attacked the most isolated garrisons, taking possession of them for the winter. This possibility, however, did not bother Sidorov. Eliminating vermin was one of the division's main occupations. It would be enough to proceed slowly and careful. Everything else, the minor injuries and mishaps, would be taken care of by the nanomachines, a resource that the criminal gangs and irregular armies did not have. Sidorov plunged the barrel of his rifle into the crack of a window, illuminating a small room consisting only of an old pellet stove, a table and two dust-covered chairs. The occupants, or whoever, must have taken with them even the bed and blankets. He withdrew his weapon and the light of the flashlight returned to illuminate the row of houses, teetering up and down the path between the hovel and the next building. What gave him an unpleasant feeling, a 'primal' anguish, so to speak, was rather the idea of being confronted with something wild and unpredictable.

At first it was not difficult for him to attribute such a degree of 'perversity' to the effects on the human mind of that vacuous and hostile territory – influences he himself could feel, just below the level of

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consciousness. But then the deputy had posed to him an even more disturbing scenario.

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At that point he blurted, as if the deputy commander was mocking him, 'There hasn't been a wolf seen around here in thirty years. What are they supposed to eat? Snow?' He blurted.

At which the deputy commander had vigorously shaken his head. 'Wolves, I tell you, Arkady. They must have come from somewhere else. I don't know. What else could be up to something like this? Monsters?' he had asked, after a moment of silence.

Not knowing what to reply, Sidorov had said nothing. He had remained staring at the corpse's stumps, studded with sharp bone splinters. 'Shall we show it to the others?' he had asked, finally, almost as if he was no longer in command.

Lebedev had merely raised a hand, dismissing the question. 'We just tell them. Wolves...' had been his uncertain conclusion. 'Wolves,' he had repeated, letting escape a subtle note of disquiet.

Sidorov felt clearly that even he doubted his own words.

Thirty years since anyone had seen a wolf.

That thought, now, floated in his head, as the specter of a world he had never experienced, barely sketched in the haze of memory. *And with them, gone were the three little pigs....*, he thought, attempting to exorcise the irrational fear that gripped him.

Sharp snouts, eyes blazing in the night, sharp fangs covered in blood. Primitive horrors, emerging from the inner night of his soul. Projecting themselves along the white jagged screen in front of him.

The surrounding environment turned into the backdrop of a stage, populated by shadow puppets. Something darted to the extreme edge of his field of vision.

He ran his gaze to that point, detaching his eyes from the avenue for a brief moment, but saw nothing. So he advanced, keeping low, a few inches from the closed windows. He barely felt, or seemed to feel, the nanomachines at work in his body, normalizing stress levels and blood pressure. Coming at the frozen edge of the shack, he knelt on the wooden porch. He brought the butt of his weapon up to the shoulder and waited for Lebedev to do the same, while the three men occupying the middle section advanced cautiously down the street. In its center, a squat, motionless object stood out. Sidorov felt as he already knew what it was. The look one of the men gave him, turning to stare at him with eyes veiled in horror, only confirmed his intuition.

He got up from the ground and started walking down the middle of the street, ignoring the reproachful whistle that Lebedev gave him from the other side of the avenue. By now, it was quite certain that there was nothing to fear from firearms.

The corpse, or rather what was left of it, had an astonished expression on its face. It wasn't wearing the uniform of the security personnel, but a bluish overalls, smeared with blood. A detail that suggested it was not a security guard, but one of the workers. Between the strips of severed fabric bloomed the abyss carved into the man's belly by the teeth, or claws, of the things that had attacked him. No limb had been spared, and the eyes, nose and lips, had been plucked with ravenous devotion. The entrails, chewed up and scattered all around in bulk, made him look like some sort of macabre, anthropomorphic jellyfish.

Wolves. Just a pack of wolves adrift, Sidorov told himself, with increasingly meager conviction, then

pushed the beam of the flashlight a few feet further, in the direction of the shacks. In the distance, there was another corpse, even more devastated than the first. That makes three. He thought, but did not move, paralyzed by a terror that seemed to come from the desolation that surrounded them as far as the eye could see.

In the end, Lebedev seemed to come to his own conclusion. The deputy got to his feet and reached the corpse, walking briskly down the last stretch of the avenue. One of the corpse's arms had been torn off and carelessly abandoned a few steps away from the mangled torso. Poking around in the darkness with his flashlight, Sidorov saw it sticking out like a branch, dark and dry, at the foot of a prefab.

The deputy lingered on the corpse for a long time, examining it. Then, without even turning around, he spoke into the microphone of the communication system, as if afraid of being heard. 'Almaz,' he murmured.

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Sidorov froze, beckoning everyone to be silent with his open hand. He remained tense, listening for a long moment, his face contracted into an expression of pure concentration. Perhaps this is why he did not notice that the safety of the weapon had gone on standby.

When the group reached the shack from which the screams came, louder and shriller, they found a man, a worker of the storage site, lying on the filthy wooden floor in a pool of blood. The man laid with his back against the wall. Pale, almost on the verge of losing consciousness. The fingers of the man's

right hand sank into his stomach, in a desperate attempt to hold together the edges of a bullet wound. Upon seeing this, Lebedev, next to the commander, whitened and stepped back.

Wolves! Here they are, your wolves! Sidorov thought, refraining from uttering those very words aloud, so as not to betray the perverse, savage feeling of triumph that brooded in the depths of his heart.

Then, the worker said something. A few words that merged into a faint, muffled moan.

Above him, as if to respond to that disjointed sound, the loudspeaker of a radio emitted a brief rustle.

With his eyes, Sidorov followed the trajectory of the cable that unraveled from the back of the device, under the edge of the table, disappearing a step away from the man's open hand.

Under the wall, between two beams separated by a black glimmer of darkness, he spotted the bulb of a microphone. With a quick gesture, he signaled to one of the men to attend to the wounded worker. The man sprang forward, his hands already sunk into his backpack, in search of the first-aid kit. Then Sidorov walked to the center of the room to compare the serial number of the radio with that of the signal received a few hours earlier.

As soon as he reached the desk, the world around him became populated again with indistinct silhouettes, crowded in the far corners of his vision. Suddenly, he felt as if the desert was about to raid the dilapidated shack. For a brief moment, he resisted. Then, he gave in, surrendering to the call echoing in his head. He turned to look out the fogged windows, expecting nothing more than another trick of his imagination.

This time, however, he saw something: a barely visible face, white as snow, whose vague features were dissolving in the dark. In the center of that parody of a face, gaped two pale, withered eye sockets, blindly pointing to a nothingness that was not of this world. Before he could say anything, Sidorov's finger slipped on the safety, inhumanly fast, moved by cybernetic networks of artificial molecules calibrated to the thousandth of a second. But once again, the

weapon's sensors met the inert, lifeless surface of the antifreeze fabric.

Sidorov had just enough time to curse himself for the last time. To curse the steppe, Lebedev, wolves, Almaz and, finally, the human race, for it had abandoned him in that unbearable black and white limbo.

Then, those dull and empty faces, wrapped in old, tattered camouflage, poured into the room, leaking in from every direction, like snow dragged downhill by an avalanche. Accompanied by the wind, the gunshots and the screams.

Our short lives have already reached the point where we doubt ourselves.

The most recent experiences have opened our eyes to a world, that has turned out to be more complex and richer than we thought.

Although our mind is not accustomed to the depths of abstract reasoning, nothing prevents us from trying to penetrate the mystery of essence.

In the last few hours, we developed some hypotheses. We believe that, before being Us, our shells possessed a mind of their own; that they were able to think, even if not—or not only—through numerical schemes. We also hypothesize that it could have been something similar to the stains we saw. A suspicion that we glimpse in our own flesh; revealed by mechanical, stereotyped reflections mirrored in the abrupt, senseless movements of those creatures, and which seem to arise from the blind spots in our cognition. Images and words, more and more pressing, that we are forced to translate with our strength alone – lacking, as we are, of concrete examples. Such an eventuality would make us 'heirs', witnesses of something unheard of.

We are something that cannot be thought. A mind, no doubt, but one kept inside shells, belonging to

other minds, now empty and abandoned, like dilapidated shacks lost in the steppe. Today, we leave behind our childhood, to take on this obscure and unbearable awareness.

But in Us, the desire to know is stronger than the naive, instinctive fear of truth

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One of us reaches out a hand towards the dull, bloodless stain that rushed in in response to its companion's calls. It picks up a dark object. The incomprehensible thing protruding from the creature's upper limb, which we discover to be an artifact distinct from the rest of the stain. It turns it over in its hands, feeling its surface, as if it intended to penetrate it with the tips of its fingers.

We sense a widespread discomfort, as if the shells were trying to communicate, stretching, as far as they can, their rugged cabling of frozen flesh. Imprisoned by the dual yoke of the Field and the shells, we allow knowledge to spread through us like heat. Unable to oppose it, we welcome it. We feed on it. And, suddenly, we know.

The one of Us who has picked up the gun points it towards the sky and shoots, remaining to observe, in admiration, the blaze and the black incandescent whiff hovering in the air. A senseless gesture, linked to chains of equally senseless information, which the Field spews out from the deepest recesses of its code:

Hans Dietrich, deputy corporal, technical sector, 24th ground division. Born in Munich, thirty-two years old, married, two daughters and a dog. Suffers from a slight gastric disorder. Ninety-eight points out of a hundred achieved in the psycho-aptitude test. Conforms to NATO training.

Raphael Errabal, Private, Infantry, 24th Land Division. Born in Madrid, twenty-eight years old, single, dependent on parents. Impeccable health status. Eighty-two points out of one hundred achieved in the psycho-aptitude test. Previous experience in the National Infantry. Conforms to NATO training.

Olga Kutcher, Senior Lieutenant, 25th Land Division. Born in Leiden, age 29, unmarried. Status: stateless. Health condition compromised by a car accident. One hundred points out of one hundred achieved on the psycho-aptitude test. Origin: NATO Higher Military Academy. Conforms to NATO training and NATO protocol II.

Richter Wunderbaum, Private, 25th Land Division. Born in Berlin, 23 years...

Strings of information scroll through our minds like random numbers on a screen, one after another, for what seems like an infinite amount of time. What are these names, these places? What do they mean? From what abysses do they come? So remote, yet so familiar.

A new dark stain peeps out from the houses at the side of the road. Unaware, it falls into the Field. It hesitates. It peers at us for a long time through the snow. It turns, at the sight of its companion lying on the ground, and points its gun at us.

The one of us who has picked up the gun comes toward it. Slowly. Burning with an individuality that none of us could have even conceived. Bullets fly around him, pierce his chest, his legs, his side. Harmless as ice crystals. When he is only a few feet from the stain, the one of Us raises his arm and shoots.

The stain collapses, without a moan. But the heat does not leave it. It is still alive.

The others from Us rush, pick the stain up from the ground and drag it along the road, until electromagnetic beams brush the Field, leaking through the thin walls of a shack. The object inside obeys peculiar laws, not so distant from those of the Field but, at the same time, utterly different, spawning a tenuous lapping of rapid and regular frequencies.

The one of Us who had foreseen the arrival of a second stain in correspondence with the first, has a new idea. The same as before, but bigger. Something more elaborate. Something that requires knowledge that we do not possess, nor can in any way possess.

We discover, however, that such knowledge is already in Us. It lies buried, deep within Us, like an ancient treasure on the seabed.

We leave the stain to itself, alone in the shack surrounded by the desert, desperate and screaming. We wait.



