

Lev Vlasenko (www.refantasy.com), 2017

To End All Wars

The wine was perfect, white, and almost transparent inside its elegant glass vessel. Shurup was too young to appreciate it but he was still delighted to see the bottles on the table. Not only because it meant celebration but also because it was made of real grapes, unlike chemical-produced synthetic vodka.

“Will there be juice? Or fruits?” He asked the old man sitting next to him. He never knew his real name since all soldiers referred to this battered veteran simply as Ivanych.

“Nah, they probably cut our rations because of the bad crops. This year hot winds are blowing from the badlands where blast sites are still glowing at nights.”

Shurup loved the old man and was happy to be his henchman. Ivanych was talkative and he learned a lot from him. He remembered the first time they went together on a patrol with orders to suppress enemy artillery.

They found a suitable hill, deployed their mortar, and prepared ammunition. Oblong old-fashioned mines looked like a pack of metal eggs laid by some bizarre mechanical animal.

“Be careful.” The old man warned while Shurup loaded the mortar.

“Why? Nobody died because of the blast for at least twenty years.”

“Died because of the enemy fire.” Ivanych corrected him. “Yet there are more than enough careless grunts maimed by their own negligence.”

Veteran extracted his notebook and began to estimate distance and wind. In the past handheld computers were used for such calculations but now they were rare and Ivanych was not even an officer.

“A little to the left.” The old man ordered and Shurup followed his instructions.

Mortar spitted fire, mine landed somewhere behind barren hills. Shurup hoped only lion-lizards and snakes suffered from the explosion. They packed their mortar and hastily left the compromised position. No one expected an immediate response but it was better to follow regulations.

“Are they even there?” Shurup asked once they were safely away.

“Who?” Ivanych was confused by the simplicity of the question. Shurup had to go into a lengthy explanation.

“Foes. No one ever saw them in two hundred years. Maybe we nuked them all. Their mortars can be automata.”

Ivanich frowned then spitted.

“Bet they’re thinking the same way about us. It changes nothing. We have to suppress their artillery. Automata or not – they will get bolder if we don’t return fire.”

It was two months ago. Shurup proved to be useful so Ivanych decided to let him stay and even allowed him to attend the War Day annual feast.

...Heavy metallic door opened signaling the return of the daily patrol. Tired infantrymen were carrying the most useless armaments soldiers had – assault rifles.

“You must oil your gun at least once a month,” Ivanych observed.

“For Hristos’s sake, they haven’t been used in years.” Rifleman moaned and sat opposite to them. “I bet there’s no ammo left for the damn things anyway.”

“I have some.” Said Shurup “We can go shoot some lion-lizards if you want to.”

“Thanks, kiddo. Better sell those rounds and buy yourself some apples. Twenty-fives are scarce. Where did you get those?”

“Found some.” He didn’t go into details.

One day Shurup discovered an ancient dugout reinforced with tree trunks and leftover materials. The roof of the shaky old shelter collapsed under his feet and he landed directly into the open ammo crate. He nearly broke his legs but otherwise, it was worth it. Besides rifle rounds, he found crates with real canned vegetables and two withered skeletons. He inspected remains with great care and respect for they were wearing antique Pre-War uniforms. He recognized it by the obsolete three-colored badges and insignias with the two-headed bird.

“Have some beef.” Ivanych returned him to the present day.

“It’s not beef.” Boy complained.

He never liked synthetic protein pasta no matter what color or texture. Labels claimed it was beef, pork, chicken, or other animals. Shurup could tell difference between flavoring and real flavor in a heartbeat.

“Oh, well. Guess you’re big enough now...” The old man poured him some wine. Shurup was ecstatic when he tasted it. It was like drinking bottled summer. Or bottled happiness.

“Ivanych?”

“What is it, boyo?” The old man replied.

There was a question he had to ask after reading about the Old days and after finding those poor lonely skeletons.

“We celebrate the day when War started but we never celebrate Victory day.”

“Cause there is none. One day clashes just... ceased. Shells are still fired but less with each passing year. And inaccurate, as if they don’t want to hurt us”.

Shurup remembered how they managed their mortar. He knew that the old man was brilliant with numbers. And yet he never calculated distance correctly.

“Why have we never met to sign a treaty?”

He read about truces and treaties in his history textbook.

“It is better the way it is now,” Ivanych claimed. “Safer.”

“How so?”

“Treaty is about talking and negotiating. And textbooks say we blew our chances to understand each other far too many times. As long as they leave us alone, we do them the same courtesy. No winners, no losers, no treaties. No nothing.”

“There’s war.” Shurup objected.

“Yeah, there is one. You probably know from your teachers that every big war claimed to end all wars, aye? And I’ve been thinking. Maybe this one really is the last. If it doesn’t end there is no way to screw again and start some fresh fight. So, as I said – it’s safer this way”.

Shurup fell silent, his head heavy with thoughts. Ivanych gave him a pat on the back and poured some more wine. It smelled of grapes, of sun and green. Life was returning to the badlands. Slowly, but inevitable.

“Happy Nuke Day!” one of the infantrymen toasted and others gladly joined.

Somewhere in the distance enemy mortar rattled. Nobody in the room even flinched because it was not their shift. People were cheering, toasting, and celebrating. The only reaction to enemy fire was the sound of party firecrackers and popping wine corks.