

## CLIMB MOUNT NARODNAYA

*"Mount Narodnaya — 1,895 meters.  
Its name comes from the Russian word **narod**:  
the people."*

### ## PART ONE: RETREAT

The snow came horizontal across the ridgeline, driven by wind that cut through every layer Antonov wore. He pressed himself against the trunk of a birch and raised his hand. Behind him, five men stopped moving.

The forest was silent except for the wind. No birds. No engines. That was worse than hearing them.

"Kirov," Antonov said quietly.

The sniper moved forward without sound, his white camouflage making him nearly invisible against the snow-laden trees. He was Yakut, from somewhere near the Lena River, and he moved through winter like he'd been born into it. Kirov dropped to one knee beside Antonov and raised his rifle, scanning the valley below through the scope.

"Clear," Kirov said after thirty seconds. "No movement. No heat signatures."

"Drones?"

"Not yet."

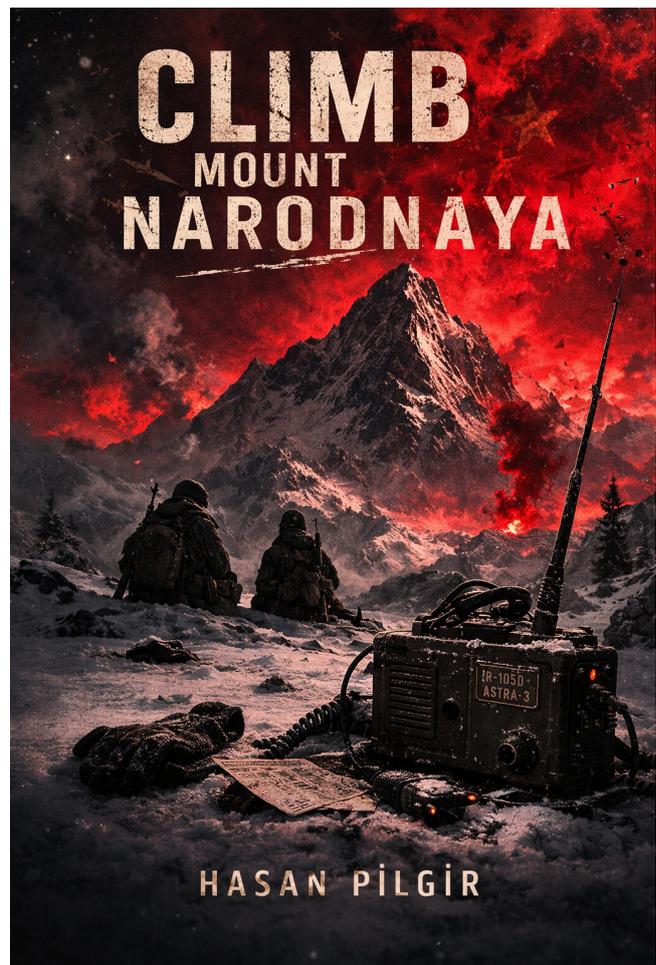
Antonov checked his watch. 1340 hours. They'd been moving for six hours since the artillery barrage that morning had announced the collapse of the defensive line. The Chinese had broken through near Ivdel, and everything east of the highway was now contested ground. Command had ordered a general retreat to secondary positions, but the radio had gone silent two hours ago, and Antonov didn't know if there were any secondary positions left.

He looked back at his men. Volkov, the heavy gunner, was breathing hard, his PKM machine gun slung across his broad back. He'd been a miner before conscription, somewhere in the Donbass, and he had the build for it—thick shoulders, hands like shovels. But he was forty-three, and the pace was wearing him down.

Beside Volkov stood Dmitri, the field engineer, thin and nervous, constantly adjusting the pack that held their radio equipment and the portable drone jammer. He was maybe twenty-five, with a technical degree from some polytechnic institute. He understood frequencies and circuits better than he understood soldiering.

The conscript, Pasha, looked terrified. He was nineteen, from Perm, and he'd been with the unit for exactly eleven days before the invasion started. His rifle shook slightly in his hands. Not from cold. From fear.

And then there was Yefimov, leaning against a tree with his left leg wrapped in a field dressing that was already soaked through with blood. He'd taken shrapnel from a cluster munition that morning. He could walk, barely, but he slowed them down. Antonov had considered leaving him. The thought had lasted maybe three seconds before he'd dismissed it.



"We keep moving," Antonov said. "Another eight kilometers to the old logging road. We follow that west until we find friendly lines or a working radio."

"Captain," Dmitri said, his voice tight. "The radio's picking up Chinese tactical frequencies. They're close. Maybe two kilometers south."

"Then we move north," Antonov said. "Volkov, help Yefimov. Kirov, take point. Pasha, stay in the middle and keep your eyes open."

They moved through the forest in single file, their boots crunching through the crust of old snow. The temperature was maybe minus fifteen, cold enough that Antonov's breath froze on his beard, but not cold enough to kill them. Not yet. The real cold would come after dark.

The trees thinned as they climbed higher into the foothills. The Urals weren't tall mountains—nothing like the Caucasus—but they were old and worn and endless, ridge after ridge of pine and birch and stone. Antonov had trained in these mountains years ago, back when the threat was hypothetical and the enemy was a set of coordinates on a map.

Now the enemy had drones and artillery and satellite reconnaissance, and they were pushing north through the resource fields with the kind of momentum that came from desperation. The Chinese needed the oil, the gas, the minerals. They needed them more than they needed peace. And Russia, weakened by decades of corruption and climate collapse, couldn't hold the line.

Antonov had stopped believing in the war three days after it started. But he still believed in his men.

They reached the logging road just before 1500 hours. It was overgrown and barely visible under the snow, but it was flat and it ran west, and that was enough. Antonov called a halt and let the men rest for ten minutes while Dmitri tried to raise anyone on the radio.

"Nothing," Dmitri said, pulling off his headset. "Just static and Chinese chatter. I think the relay stations are down."

"Keep trying," Antonov said. He pulled out his map and spread it across his knee. The paper was worn and damp, the grid lines fading. He traced their position with one finger. They were maybe forty kilometers east of the main highway, deep in the wilderness. If the front had collapsed completely, they might be behind enemy lines already.

"Captain," Kirov said. He was standing at the edge of the road, looking south. "Smoke."

Antonov stood and followed his gaze. A thin column of black smoke rose from the valley below, maybe three kilometers away. It could have been a vehicle. It could have been a building. It could have been anything.

"We don't investigate," Antonov said. "We keep moving."

They walked for another two hours as the light began to fail. The forest grew darker, the shadows longer. Pasha stumbled twice, and the second time he fell to his knees and stayed there, breathing hard.

"Get up," Volkov said, not unkindly. He reached down and pulled the boy to his feet. "You stop moving, you die."

"I'm tired," Pasha said.

"We're all tired," Volkov said. "Move."

They found shelter just before full dark—an abandoned hunting cabin, half-collapsed, its roof sagging under the weight of old snow. Antonov checked it carefully before letting the men inside. No tracks. No signs of recent use. Just rotting wood and the smell of mildew.

They couldn't risk a fire. Dmitri set up the radio in one corner while Volkov and Kirov cleared snow from the floor and laid out their sleeping mats. Antonov checked Yefimov's leg. The bleeding had slowed, but the wound was ugly, and there was nothing he could do about it except change the dressing and give him another ampule of morphine.

"How bad?" Yefimov asked.

"You'll live," Antonov said.

"You're a terrible liar, Captain."

Antonov almost smiled. "Get some sleep."

They ate cold rations in silence—compressed meat bars and stale bread, washed down with melted snow. Pasha sat in the corner with his knees pulled up to his chest, staring at nothing. Kirov cleaned his rifle with methodical precision, his movements slow and deliberate. Volkov lay on his back with his eyes closed, but Antonov could tell he wasn't sleeping.

"Captain," Dmitri said quietly. "I'm picking up something."

Antonov moved to the radio. Dmitri had the headset pressed to one ear, his face concentrated. "It's Russian," he said. "But it's not tactical. It's... I think it's a distress beacon. Automated."

"Where?"

"North. Maybe fifteen kilometers. Near Mount Narodnaya."

Antonov knew the mountain. It was the highest peak in the Urals, just over 1,800 meters. There was nothing up there except rock and ice and old Soviet infrastructure. But a distress beacon meant people. Or it meant a trap.

"Can you tell how old the signal is?"

"No. Could be hours. Could be days."

Antonov looked at his map again. Mount Narodnaya was northwest of their position, deeper into the mountains. Away from the highway. Away from any chance of linking up with friendly forces. But if the front had collapsed, there might not be any friendly forces left to link up with.

"We'll decide in the morning," Antonov said. "Get some sleep. I'll take first watch."

The night was long and cold. Antonov sat by the broken window with his rifle across his knees, watching the forest. The wind had died down, and the silence was absolute. No engines. No gunfire. Just the occasional crack of a tree branch breaking under the weight of ice.

He thought about his daughter. She was sixteen now, living with her mother in Yekaterinburg. He hadn't seen her in eight months. He wondered if Yekaterinburg was still standing. He wondered if she remembered what he looked like.

At 0300 hours, Kirov relieved him. Antonov lay down on his mat and closed his eyes, but sleep didn't come. He listened to the breathing of his men and the wind outside and the distant, almost imperceptible hum of drones somewhere in the darkness.

When dawn came, it came gray and cold. Antonov woke the men and they ate the last of their rations. Yefimov's face was pale and sweating despite the cold. The morphine was wearing off.

"We're going north," Antonov said. "Toward the beacon. If there's anyone alive up there, we link up. If not, we find shelter and wait for the situation to stabilize."

"And if it doesn't stabilize?" Volkov asked.

Antonov didn't answer.

They left the cabin at 0700 hours and headed north, climbing higher into the mountains. The terrain grew rougher, the trees thinner. By midday they were above the tree line, moving across open snowfields with nothing but rock and sky around them. Antonov felt exposed, vulnerable. Any drone with thermal imaging could spot them from kilometers away.

But no drones came.

They reached the base of Mount Narodnaya just after 1400 hours. The mountain rose before them, its peak hidden in low clouds. The snow was deeper here, sometimes up to their waists, and they had to break trail one man at a time. Yefimov was barely conscious, supported between Volkov and Pasha.

"There," Kirov said, pointing.

Antonov followed his gaze. Halfway up the mountain, barely visible through the snow, was a structure. Concrete and metal, built into the rock face. A radar station, probably from the Cold War. The distress beacon was coming from there.

"We climb," Antonov said.

## ## PART TWO: THE MOUNTAIN

The approach took three hours. The slope was steep and the snow was unstable, and twice they had to stop and dig Pasha out after he broke through the crust into a hidden crevasse. By the time they reached the station, the light was failing again and all of them were exhausted.

The station was larger than it had looked from below. A main building, maybe thirty meters long, built from reinforced concrete with small, narrow windows. Beside it stood the remains of a radar array, its dish collapsed and rusted, half-buried in snow. A smaller outbuilding, probably a generator shed, leaned at an angle, its roof caved in. Everything was covered in ice and decades of neglect.

The main door was steel, frozen shut. Volkov and Kirov forced it open with a pry bar from Dmitri's pack, the metal screaming in protest. Inside was darkness and the smell of mold and old oil.

Antonov went in first, his rifle raised, his flashlight cutting through the gloom. The interior was a maze of corridors and rooms, all of them empty. Broken furniture. Stripped equipment. Graffiti in Russian and English from soldiers or explorers who had passed through over the years. The walls were concrete, thick and solid. The windows were small and defensible.

"Clear," Antonov called.

They brought Yefimov inside and laid him on the floor of what had once been a control room. Banks of dead monitors lined one wall, their screens shattered. A map of the Soviet Union, faded and torn, hung from another. The room was cold, but it was shelter. It was more than they'd had in two days.

Dmitri found the source of the distress beacon in a side room—an old emergency transmitter, still connected to a solar panel on the roof. Someone had activated it, maybe weeks ago, maybe longer. There was no way to tell.

"Can you shut it off?" Antonov asked.

"Yes. But if anyone's listening, they'll know we're here."

"They already know we're here," Antonov said. "Shut it off."

The beacon went silent. The sudden absence of its rhythmic pulse made the station feel even more abandoned.

Kirov and Volkov did a full sweep of the building while Antonov studied the layout. The station had been built to last. The walls were thick enough to stop small arms fire. The windows were positioned for overlapping fields of fire. There was a basement level, flooded with ice, and a roof access that gave a clear view of the approaches. It wasn't a fortress, but it was defensible.

"Captain," Kirov said, returning from his sweep. "There's bodies in the basement. Russian. Maybe a week old. Looks like they froze to death."

Antonov went down to look. Three bodies, soldiers, their uniforms marking them as part of a signals unit. They'd died huddled together in a corner, probably trying to stay warm. Their faces were peaceful. Freezing wasn't the worst way to go.

"We leave them," Antonov said. "We don't have time to bury them."

Back in the control room, Dmitri had set up the radio and was scanning frequencies. "I'm getting Chinese tactical chatter," he said. "They're consolidating positions in the valleys. Sounds like they're preparing for a push west."

"Anything from our side?"

"Nothing clear. Some encrypted bursts, but I can't decode them without the proper keys."

Antonov looked at his men. They were exhausted, hungry, cold. Yefimov was dying. Pasha looked like he might break at any moment. But they were still alive, and they were still together.

"We hold here," Antonov said. "We rest, we fortify, and we wait for orders or for the situation to change."

"And if it doesn't change?" Volkov asked again.

"Then we hold anyway," Antonov said.

They spent the rest of the evening organizing their position. Volkov set up his machine gun in a window overlooking the main approach. Kirov found a position on the roof with clear sightlines in three directions. Dmitri rigged the drone jammer and set up motion sensors using spare parts from the old equipment. Pasha, under Antonov's direction, inventoried their supplies.

The inventory was grim. They had ammunition for maybe two sustained firefights. Food for three days if they rationed carefully. No medical supplies beyond basic field dressings. No cold-weather gear beyond what they wore. The station had no power, no heat, no running water.

But it had walls. And walls were something.

That night, they took turns on watch. Antonov sat in the control room with Yefimov, who was drifting in and out of consciousness. The morphine was almost gone.

"Captain," Yefimov whispered. "You should leave me."

"We've had this conversation," Antonov said.

"I'm slowing you down. I'm using resources."

"You're one of my men," Antonov said. "We don't leave our men."

Yefimov was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why don't we leave our men? What difference does it make? We're all going to die anyway."

Antonov didn't have an answer. Or he had too many answers, none of them good enough. So he said nothing, and after a while Yefimov fell asleep.

Outside, the wind picked up. Snow began to fall again, heavy and thick. Antonov watched it through the narrow window and thought about his daughter and about the bodies in the basement and about the question Yefimov had asked.

What difference does it make?

## PART THREE: THE SIEGE

The Chinese found them on the third day.

Antonov was on the roof with Kirov when the drone appeared, a small quadcopter, black against the gray sky. It circled the station twice, its camera lens glinting, then disappeared back down the mountain.

"They know we're here," Kirov said.

"How long until they come?"

"Depends on how important we are. Could be hours. Could be days."

Antonov climbed down and gathered the men in the control room. "We have contact," he said. "Drone reconnaissance. They'll probe us, test our defenses, try to figure out how many we are and what we have. We don't waste ammunition on probes. We hold fire until we have clear targets."

"What if they bring artillery?" Pasha asked. His voice was shaking.

"Then we die," Volkov said flatly. "But they won't. Artillery is for strategic targets. We're just five men in an abandoned building. They'll send infantry."

"Or more drones," Dmitri said. "Armed drones."

"Can you jam them?" Antonov asked.

"Maybe. Depends on the frequency and the range. If they're military-grade, probably not."

"Do what you can," Antonov said.

They spent the day improving their defenses. Volkov reinforced his machine gun position with furniture and broken equipment, creating a makeshift bunker. Kirov set up secondary positions with clear fallback routes. Dmitri placed the motion sensors on the approaches and tested the jammer. Pasha, under Antonov's supervision, filled sandbags with snow and ice and stacked them in the windows.

Yefimov died that afternoon. He simply stopped breathing, his face turned toward the window, his eyes open. Antonov closed them and covered him with a blanket. They didn't have time for anything else.

"Four left," Volkov said quietly.

The first probe came at dusk. Six soldiers, Chinese, moving up the slope in a loose formation. They stopped at two hundred meters and observed the station through binoculars. Antonov watched them from the roof, his rifle ready, but he didn't fire. After ten minutes, they withdrew.

"They're testing us," Kirov said. "Seeing if we'll shoot."

"Let them wonder," Antonov said.

The second probe came two hours later. This time it was a drone, larger than the reconnaissance model, with what looked like a grenade launcher mounted underneath. It approached from the east, flying low and fast. Dmitri activated the jammer, and the drone wavered, its flight path erratic, but it didn't crash. It fired twice, the grenades exploding against the concrete wall, then retreated.

"Jammer's not strong enough," Dmitri said. "I can disrupt them, but I can't bring them down."

"Keep trying," Antonov said.

The third probe came just before midnight. A full squad, maybe ten men, advancing under cover of darkness. They reached the generator shed and took up positions, firing sporadically at the station. Antonov let them waste ammunition for five minutes, then nodded to Volkov.

The machine gun opened up, its muzzle flash lighting up the night. Volkov fired in controlled bursts, walking the rounds across the shed. Two Chinese soldiers went down immediately. The others retreated, dragging their wounded.

"Cease fire," Antonov said.

The silence that followed was profound. Antonov counted the cost in his head. Volkov had used maybe two hundred rounds. They had perhaps three thousand left. The math was simple and brutal.

"They'll come again," Kirov said. "Bigger force next time."

"I know," Antonov said.

The days blurred together. The Chinese probed them twice more, each time with more men and more firepower. Each time, Antonov's team held them off, but the cost mounted. Ammunition dwindled. Food ran out. The cold became a constant, gnawing presence, sapping their strength and their will.

Dmitri kept the radio running, scanning for any sign of friendly forces, but there was nothing. Just Chinese chatter and static and the occasional encrypted burst that might have been Russian or might have been nothing at all.

Pasha stopped talking. He did his job—standing watch, filling sandbags, cleaning his rifle—but his eyes were empty. Antonov recognized the look. He'd seen it before, in other wars, other men. The boy was breaking.

Volkov grew quieter too, more withdrawn. He sat for hours in his machine gun nest, staring out at the snow, his hands resting on the weapon. Once, Antonov found him talking to himself, a low murmur in Ukrainian. When Antonov asked what he was saying, Volkov just shook his head.

Kirov remained steady, fatalistic. He took his watch, made his shots, ate his rations. He didn't complain. He didn't hope. He simply existed, moment to moment, like the mountain itself.

And Antonov held them together through discipline and routine and the simple fact of his presence. He made decisions. He gave orders. He rationed the food and the ammunition and the morphine they'd taken from Yefimov's body. He kept them moving, kept them focused, kept them alive.

But at night, alone on watch, he felt the weight of it. The futility. The slow grinding down of everything they were. He thought about Yefimov's question: What difference does it make?

He still didn't have an answer.

On the seventh day, the Chinese brought mortars.

## ## PART FOUR: THE QUESTION

The first round hit the generator shed, obliterating what was left of it. The second hit the roof, blowing a hole in the concrete and showering the interior with debris. The third hit the east wall, cracking it but not breaking through.

"Basement!" Antonov shouted.

They scrambled down the stairs, dragging their equipment and weapons. The mortars kept falling, methodical and precise, walking across the station. The building shook with each impact. Dust and concrete chips rained down from the ceiling.

Then, as suddenly as it started, it stopped.

They waited in the darkness, listening. Footsteps above. Voices in Chinese. The sound of equipment being moved.

"They're coming in," Volkov whispered.

"Positions," Antonov said.

They spread out in the flooded basement, taking cover behind the frozen bodies and the old equipment. Antonov could see the stairs, a rectangle of gray light. He aimed his rifle at it and waited.

The first Chinese soldier appeared at the top of the stairs, silhouetted against the light. Antonov fired once, and the man fell. Two more appeared, and Kirov dropped them both. Then grenades came tumbling down, and Antonov shouted for everyone to take cover.

The explosions were deafening in the confined space. Antonov's ears rang. He couldn't hear anything except a high-pitched whine. But he could see the Chinese coming down the stairs, and he fired until his magazine was empty, then reloaded and fired again.

Volkov's machine gun roared, the muzzle flash blinding. Dmitri threw a grenade up the stairs, and the explosion brought down part of the ceiling. For a moment, everything was smoke and dust and chaos.

Then silence.

Antonov counted bodies. Five Chinese soldiers, dead on the stairs and in the basement. He checked his men. Dmitri was bleeding from a shrapnel wound in his shoulder, but he was alive. Pasha was curled in a corner, his hands over his ears, rocking back and forth. Kirov and Volkov were unhurt.

"They'll regroup," Kirov said. "Come again."

"Then we hold again," Antonov said.

But he knew they couldn't hold much longer. They were down to maybe a thousand rounds of ammunition. Dmitri's wound needed treatment they couldn't provide. Pasha was gone, mentally if not physically. And the Chinese had mortars and drones and an endless supply of men.

They climbed back up to the control room. The station was wrecked. The roof was half-collapsed. The east wall had a crack wide enough to see through. The windows were blown out. But it was still standing.

Antonov set up a new watch rotation and tried to rest, but rest wouldn't come. He sat in the corner with his rifle across his knees and stared at the map of the Soviet Union on the wall. All those borders, all those republics, all that history. Gone now, or going. Replaced by something else. Something smaller and meaner and more desperate.

"Captain," Kirov said quietly. He was sitting nearby, cleaning his rifle. "Can I ask you something?"

"Go ahead."

"Why are we still here?"

Antonov looked at him. "We're here because we have orders to hold."

"We don't have orders," Kirov said. "We haven't had orders in a week. We're here because you decided we should be here."

"Would you rather be somewhere else?"

Kirov thought about that. "No," he said finally. "But I want to know why. Why this mountain? Why this building? Why do we keep fighting when there's nothing left to fight for?"

Antonov didn't answer immediately. He looked around the ruined control room, at Dmitri bandaging his shoulder, at Pasha staring at nothing, at Volkov sleeping with his hand on his machine gun. He thought about Yefimov's body, frozen in the basement with the others. He thought about his daughter in Yekaterinburg, if she was still alive.

"I don't know," Antonov said finally. "I don't know why we fight. I don't know what difference it makes. But I know that if we stop, if we just give up and walk away, then we're nothing. We're just meat waiting to freeze. At least here, we're something. We're soldiers. We're a unit. We're together."

"Is that enough?" Kirov asked.

"It has to be," Antonov said.

That night, Volkov came to Antonov during his watch. The big man sat down heavily, his breath misting in the cold.

"I had a son," Volkov said. "Did I ever tell you that?"

"No," Antonov said.

"He died when he was six. Leukemia. We couldn't afford the treatment. My wife left me after that. Said I should have done more, should have found the money somehow." He was quiet for a moment. "I joined the army because I didn't know what else to do. Didn't have anything else to live for."

"And now?" Antonov asked.

Volkov looked at him. "Now I have this. This mountain. This gun. You and Kirov and Dmitri and that broken kid in the corner. It's not much. But it's something."

"Is it enough?" Antonov asked, echoing Kirov's question.

"I don't know," Volkov said. "But it's what I have."

The Chinese came again the next morning, a larger force, maybe thirty men. They had learned from their previous attempts. They used smoke grenades and suppressing fire, advancing in

coordinated teams. Antonov's men fought from the ruins of the station, falling back room by room as the Chinese pushed forward.

Dmitri was hit in the leg and went down. Pasha, in a moment of clarity or madness, charged the Chinese with his rifle on full automatic, screaming. He killed three before they cut him down.

Antonov, Kirov, and Volkov retreated to the roof, the last defensible position. They had maybe two hundred rounds left between them. The Chinese were regrouping below, preparing for a final assault.

"This is it," Volkov said. He was bleeding from a wound in his side, but his hands were steady on the machine gun.

"Yes," Antonov said.

"Good," Volkov said. "I'm tired of running."

But then Dmitri's voice crackled over the radio, weak but urgent. "Captain... I'm picking up something... Russian... close..."

Antonov grabbed the radio. "Say again?"

"Russian forces... five kilometers west... they're pushing east... counterattack..."

Antonov looked at Kirov and Volkov. For the first time in days, he saw something other than resignation in their eyes. He saw hope.

"We hold," Antonov said. "Just a little longer."

## ## PART FIVE: THE CLIMB

The counterattack never came.

They waited on the roof for two hours, fighting off sporadic Chinese probes, burning through their remaining ammunition. Dmitri's radio picked up more Russian chatter, but it grew fainter, not stronger. The counterattack, if it had ever existed, was moving away from them, not toward them.

By noon, they were down to their last magazines. The Chinese had pulled back, but Antonov knew they were just waiting, letting the cold and the exhaustion do their work.

"We can't stay here," Antonov said. "The station's compromised. They'll bring up heavy weapons and flatten it."

"Where do we go?" Volkov asked. He was pale from blood loss, leaning heavily against the wall.

Antonov looked up at the mountain. The summit of Narodnaya was maybe five hundred meters above them, hidden in clouds. The slope was steep and exposed, but it was the only direction the Chinese weren't.

"Up," Antonov said.

They climbed down from the roof and found Dmitri in the control room. He'd dragged himself to a corner and propped himself against the wall, the radio clutched in his hands. His leg was badly wounded, the bone probably shattered.

"I can't walk, Captain," Dmitri said. His voice was calm, matter-of-fact.

"We'll carry you," Antonov said.

"No," Dmitri said. "You won't. You need to move fast, and I'll slow you down. We both know it."

Antonov knelt beside him. "I don't leave my men."

"You already left Yefimov. You already left Pasha. You'll leave me too, because that's what you have to do." Dmitri held out the radio. "Take this. Keep listening. Maybe you'll hear something."

Antonov took the radio. He wanted to argue, to insist, but he knew Dmitri was right. They couldn't carry him up the mountain. They could barely carry themselves.

"I'll stay here," Dmitri said. "I'll keep the jammer running as long as I can. Maybe I can slow them down, buy you some time."

"Dmitri—"

"Go, Captain. Please."

Antonov stood. He looked at Kirov and Volkov, and they looked back at him with understanding. They'd all made this calculation before. They'd all left men behind.

"Thank you," Antonov said to Dmitri.

"For what?"

"For being a good soldier."

Dmitri smiled weakly. "I was a terrible soldier. But I tried."

They left him there with his radio and his jammer and a pistol with one magazine. As they climbed out of the station and started up the mountain, Antonov heard the jammer activate, its high-pitched whine cutting through the air. Then he heard gunfire, brief and final.

The climb was brutal. The slope was steep and icy, and they had to use their hands as much as their feet. Volkov was struggling, his breathing labored, his movements slow. Kirov moved ahead, finding the path, testing the snow for stability.

They climbed for an hour, then two. The station fell away below them, a small gray smudge against the white. Antonov could see Chinese soldiers moving around it, tiny figures at this distance. He wondered if they'd found Dmitri's body yet.

The clouds closed in around them, thick and gray. Visibility dropped to maybe ten meters. The wind picked up, driving snow into their faces. Antonov's hands were numb, his face raw. He couldn't feel his feet anymore.

"Captain," Kirov called from ahead. "There's a crevasse. We need to go around."

They detoured east, following the edge of the crevasse. The ground was unstable here, the snow hiding gaps and drops. Antonov tested each step carefully, his rifle slung across his back.

Behind him, Volkov stumbled and fell to his knees. Antonov turned back and helped him up. The big man's face was gray, his eyes unfocused.

"I can't," Volkov said. "I can't keep going."

"Yes, you can," Antonov said. "Just a little farther."

"Why?" Volkov asked. "What's at the top? What are we climbing for?"

Antonov didn't have an answer. He just pulled Volkov to his feet and pushed him forward.

They climbed higher. The air grew thinner, colder. Antonov's lungs burned with each breath. His legs were lead. His mind was starting to drift, thoughts fragmenting, memories bleeding into the present.

He saw his daughter, younger, laughing, running through a park in summer. He saw his ex-wife, her face hard and disappointed. He saw Yefimov and Dmitri and Pasha, their faces pale and still. He saw the bodies in the basement, frozen together, and he wondered if that was how they'd end up, the three of them, frozen on this mountain, forgotten.

"Captain," Kirov said. His voice seemed to come from far away. "Captain, we're here."

Antonov looked up. The clouds had thinned, and he could see the summit, a flat expanse of snow and rock maybe fifty meters above them. They'd made it. They'd climbed Mount Narodnaya.

He didn't feel triumph. He didn't feel anything except cold and exhaustion and a vast, empty sense of futility.

But he climbed the last fifty meters anyway, because that's what you did. You kept climbing until you couldn't climb anymore.

## ## PART SIX: THE SUMMIT

The summit of Mount Narodnaya was a plateau of snow and exposed rock, maybe thirty meters across. The wind was fierce here, unobstructed, cutting through their clothes like knives. Visibility was poor, the clouds swirling around them, but in the brief moments when they cleared, Antonov could see for kilometers in every direction.

To the south, the valleys were filled with smoke and the distant flashes of artillery. To the west, the mountains stretched endlessly, ridge after ridge fading into gray. To the north and east, nothing but wilderness and snow.

They were alone at the top of the world.

Volkov collapsed as soon as they reached the summit. He lay on his back in the snow, his chest heaving, blood seeping through his jacket. Kirov knelt beside him and checked his wounds.

"Bad," Kirov said quietly to Antonov. "He's not going to make it."

Antonov knew. He'd known since they left the station. But knowing didn't make it easier.

He sat down on a rock and pulled out the radio. He scanned through the frequencies, listening to the static and the distant chatter. Chinese tactical communications. Russian encrypted bursts. Nothing clear. Nothing close.

"Anything?" Kirov asked.

"No," Antonov said.

They sat in silence for a while, the three of them, at the top of the mountain. The wind howled around them. The snow fell. The world below continued its war without them.

"Captain," Volkov said. His voice was weak. "Why did we climb?"

Antonov looked at him. "I don't know."

"That's not good enough," Volkov said. "I need... I need to know why. Why we fought. Why we climbed. Why any of it mattered."

Antonov was quiet for a long time. He thought about all the answers he could give. Duty. Honor. Country. Orders. Survival. But none of them felt true. None of them felt like enough.

"I think," Antonov said slowly, "that we climbed because we're human. And humans climb. We fight and we struggle and we keep going, even when there's no reason to, even when it's futile. Not because it matters in some grand sense. Not because we'll be remembered or because we'll change anything. But because that's what we are. That's what we do."

"Is that enough?" Volkov asked. The same question they'd all been asking.

"I don't know," Antonov said. "But it's all we have."

Volkov closed his eyes. "I had a son," he said again. "Did I tell you that?"

"Yes," Antonov said.

"I wish I could have been a better father. I wish I could have saved him."

"I know," Antonov said.

Volkov was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "Thank you, Captain. For not leaving me."

"I didn't have a choice," Antonov said. "You're one of my men."

Volkov smiled slightly. Then he stopped breathing.

Antonov and Kirov sat with his body for a while. They didn't speak. There was nothing to say. Finally, Kirov stood and walked to the edge of the plateau, looking out at the mountains.

"What now?" Kirov asked.

Antonov stood and joined him. "I don't know. We can try to go down the north side, see if we can find friendly lines. Or we can stay here."

"And freeze to death like the others?"

"Yes."

Kirov nodded slowly. "I think I'd rather freeze than get shot. Seems more peaceful."

"Maybe," Antonov said.

They stood together, looking out at the endless mountains. The radio crackled with static and distant voices, none of them close, none of them clear. Antonov thought about turning it off, but he didn't. He let it play, a reminder that somewhere out there, the world was still turning, people were still fighting, life was still happening.

"Captain," Kirov said. "Can I ask you one more question?"

"Go ahead."

"Do you think anyone will remember us? Will anyone know we were here?"

Antonov thought about that. He thought about the bodies in the basement of the radar station, the soldiers who had frozen there a week before. He thought about Yefimov and Dmitri and Pasha and Volkov. He thought about all the men who had died in this war, in all wars, forgotten and unmourned.

"No," Antonov said. "I don't think anyone will remember us."

"Good," Kirov said. "I'd rather be forgotten than turned into propaganda."

Antonov almost laughed. It was such a Kirov thing to say.

They sat down together on the summit, their backs against a rock, sheltered slightly from the wind. Antonov pulled out his last cigarette, the one he'd been saving, and lit it. He took a drag and passed it to Kirov. They shared it in silence, watching the snow fall and the clouds swirl and the distant war rage on without them.

"What do you think happens after?" Kirov asked.

"After what?"

"After we die. Do you think there's anything?"

Antonov thought about his daughter. He thought about all the people he'd lost, all the men he'd left behind. He thought about the question that had haunted them all: Why does a human being live?

"I think," Antonov said, "that we live because we're here. And when we're not here anymore, we're not. There's no grand purpose. No cosmic meaning. Just the fact of existence, brief and fragile and precious because it's all we have."

"That's bleak," Kirov said.

"Yes," Antonov said. "But it's also freeing. If there's no grand purpose, then we get to choose our own. We get to decide what matters. And I decided that my men matter. That you matter. That holding that station mattered, not because it changed the war, but because it was something we did together. Because we were human, and we fought, and we climbed."

Kirov was quiet for a long time. Then he said, "I think I understand."

The cigarette burned down to nothing. Antonov flicked it away and watched it disappear into the snow. The radio continued its static whisper. The wind continued its howl. The mountain stood, indifferent and eternal.

"We should try to go down," Antonov said. "We should try to survive."

"Should we?" Kirov asked.

Antonov looked at him. The sniper's face was calm, resigned, almost peaceful. He looked like a man who had made his decision.

"No," Antonov said finally. "I suppose we shouldn't."

They sat together on the summit of Mount Narodnaya as the light began to fail. The snow fell heavier now, covering them slowly, gently. Antonov thought about his daughter one last time, hoped she was safe, hoped she would survive this war and build something better from the ruins.

Then he stopped thinking. He just sat, breathing, existing, being human for as long as he could.

The radio crackled one last time, a burst of Russian, clear and close: "...any units in the Narodnaya sector, respond..."

Antonov reached for it, his hand slow and clumsy with cold. He brought it to his lips.

"This is Captain Sergei Antonov," he said. "We're here. We climbed."

He waited for a response, but none came. Just static. Just wind. Just the mountain.

He set the radio down and closed his eyes.

The snow continued to fall.

The mountain stood.

And two soldiers sat at the summit, together, until they weren't anymore.

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Бери шинель, пошли домой.

...

...

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“...Bagrets-95... Bagrets-95... please respond!...”