

My heart is racing, the dull thumping in my ears so loud all other noise seems drowned out.

Deep breaths.

In. Out.

In. Out.

I hate this part, the calm before the storm. I glance up from the bottle in my hand, taking in the sight of Tania as she huddles on the other side of the room, clutching a satchel to her chest and holding a revolver in her other, trembling, hand. Actually her entire body is gently shaking, I smile as wide as I can manage but it doesn't seem to reassure the poor girl.

I glance to my left to see Lin finishing tying five grenades together with some scrap wire, he doesn't acknowledge me, too busy struggling with the stubborn knot, poor bastard's having a terrible time adjusting since he lost his left forefinger last week.

I turn to my right and make eye contact with Sergov, who gives me a determined nod. It's comical, watching a Dragonblooded holding a two meter long anti-tank rifle crammed into his tiny hiding place beside the apartment window. I'd probably be laughing if it wasn't so hard to breathe right now.

A small gasp from Tania manages to slip between the pounding in my ears and draw my attention back to her, where she's been joined by a breathless trooper from another squad, what was his name again? Started with a D? His frantic waving draws me out of my reverie and I realize it's almost time. I look back down at the bottle in my hand and raise my piece of sandpaper, a wisp of sulfur rises as I ignite the first match and I can feel myself making a sour face as I do the same on the other side. I glance left and Lin gives me a thumbs up, I glance right and Sergov nods a second time.

Tenderly, doing my damndest to make no noise whatsoever, I pull myself out of my sitting position beneath the window and peek over the sill with one eye. Three stories below us, the column of Sokathi tanks advance down the shattered road in single file. The first two I recognize from the training manuals, '3s' they call them, the third in line I'm not sure, the turret looks different, the fourth however is also familiar. A '4' I think is what they call that one, it's bigger than the others and the gun is significantly more powerful from what I understand. Not that any of this is really relevant right now as I watch the wretched armor creep silently up the street.

When the third in line passes under our position I raise my free hand, counting down three seconds before the 4 is in position...

"Now comrades!" I shout and we spring into action, an earth shattering boom echoes out from my left as Sergov brings his rifle to bear and fires off a shot at the rear tank, he works the bolt as me and Lin throw our grenades.

My throw is more or less on target, the glass bottle shattering against the rear deck of the tank and coating the engine vents in flames.

Lin's bundle hits the front of the tank, bouncing and falling off the far side before exploding. A second boom drowns out all other noise, the blast from the muzzle kicking up dust all around us as Sergov takes another shot.

Somewhere further up the street an even louder blast can be heard as a hidden AT gun opens fire on the lead tank now that we've, hopefully, cut off their escape.

I reach for my second incendiary before a blast of mage-lightning hits Sergov, Tania screams as the big Dragonblooded shudders violently, slumping forward. Which has the unfortunate side effect of tipping his rifle that we still need away from the ledge of the window....

"No, no, no!" I lunge forward, desperately clawing at the giant rifle as it slips forward. I manage to catch it by the locked bolt before the size and weight jerks me off the ground and towards the abyss below.

I feel desperate arms grabbing me as I dangle halfway out the window, Tania wrapping her arms around my waist and Lin grabbing the back of my shirt as they haul me away from certain death. I pull the rifle up into as close to proper a grip as I can manage on the thing, glancing down the street as I do. I spot the Sokathi infantry, led by one of their damnable mages. We lock eyes for a moment

before he raises his hand.

“Brace me!” I scream, struggling to heft the huge rifle as my comrades haul me back inside the building.

I level the sights on the mage for a fraction of a second, his raised hand glows ominously. I squeeze the trigger and the entire world disappears before my eyes.

I awaken to the sight of the terrible wallpaper adorning the ceiling, who pairs that shade of tan with purple roses? I am distracted from my criticisms of the state’s interior decorators by the fact that my shoulder is in indescribable pain.

Glancing to the right I find that is because my collar bone is currently jutting out of my chest and my arm is twisted at a thoroughly unnatural angle.

“Ow.” Is all I can manage, my throat feels rougher than that sandpaper I was using. Tania leans over me, she says something but I can’t hear her over the sound of the machineguns. The smell of antiseptic assaults my nostrils for a moment before my shoulder suddenly burns.

I scream and thrash against her but Lin appears and pins me down, I can’t hear a damn thing they’re saying, the harsh metallic tang of blood fills my mouth and somewhere in the back of my mind I realized I’ve bitten my tongue but that is at best a secondary concern compared to the agony of my shoulder.

I don’t know how long this goes on, it feels like an eternity. But eventually the pain fades to merely being unbearable and Tania presses a bottle to my mouth.

First thought; Thank the Twins.

Second thought; Vodka does not mix well with open cuts in the mouth.

I find myself turned on my side, mercifully my left, as I choke, spitting blood and alcohol all over what was once a tasteful maroon throw rug.

“Fuck!”

“Could you please go one firefight without getting yourself seriously maimed?” Lin screams at me, possibly he’s being sarcastic but I’m too delirious to tell at the moment.

“Fuck you!” Is all I can manage.

“I’ll take that as a no, Andri! Get him out of here!”

Rough hands grab me, I feel myself being pulled off the floor and hustled downstairs. Gunfire and explosions roar out, the building shakes violently, evidently the Sokath are not pleased with our ambush.

I find myself deposited as gently as Andri can manage in the basement floor of the apartment, hastily converted into a sick ward for us wounded until we can either get evacc’d to the backlines or command deigns to send a healing mage to the front.

“Good luck comrade.” I groan at Andri’s back.

He laughs. “I don’t think I want your luck Svok!”