



FIRST PLACE

The Ghost of Kyiv

Привид Києва

By Thomas L. Harper

Один (One)

The high-pitched alarm shrilled incessantly, demanding his immediate attention. Light and sound blurred together in a discordant symphony as Artem's mind drifted. Had he replied to Rob's questions about trial exhibits? This was the second time in 24 hours that he would be giving the same answers to the same queries. Rob's apparent distrust in his preparation nagged at him. But his annoyance faded as his mother's voice softly echoed in his mind. "Trust yourself, love family and cherish home."

Два (Two)

February 21, 2022

Monday's sunrise bathed the Center City buildings in stunning color. Artem stared out at the natural portrait from his massive office window. He had been awarded this coveted space months earlier — spoils of war from several long years of laboring in the trenches at Fitzpatrick Bishop LLP. Despite the view, Artem couldn't recall a single time he'd paused to take it all in. After all, blazing a trail as an associate at one of Philadelphia's largest firms didn't leave much

time for fanciful contemplation. He stared blankly, unable to focus on the beauty before him.

"She's gone."

Artem's phone sat behind him with the message from his Uncle Pavlo, seemingly burned onto the screen. His immense desk was anchored by a name placard that read Andrew Petrenko, Senior Associate. He had long since dropped his Ukrainian name in favor of its American equivalent. Apart from a modest plaque awarded to him during his time in the Ukrainian Air Force, his office was devoid of anything referencing his home. A sea of meticulously organized notebooks and folders consumed every inch of available desk space.

As he stared into the distance, Artem shook his head. His uncle had a way of delivering bad news with all the grace of a sledgehammer. For all his faults, Pavlo was Artem's only source of news from back home, although it usually came in profanity-laced bursts of text messages every few months. He couldn't remember the last time he'd asked Pavlo about his mother. He hadn't spoken to her in years — both entrenched following an epic fight over Artem's decision to stay in America. He had repeatedly promised her that he would return home after law school. But the job offer from Fitzpatrick changed everything. Artem had proudly shown her the offer letter, with its impressive sign-on bonus and eye-popping starting salary.

How could anyone turn that down, he had asked her incredulously. It was more than any Ukrainian could dream of, after all. She'd replied with a deafening silence. He'd reacted by angrily hanging up. They hadn't talked since.

Artem's phone buzzed again.

"Funeral is Wednesday. You were her only son. Come home."

"No ..." Artem spontaneously uttered aloud, his eyes darting to his calendar as his stomach sank. A bit of bold text sat emblazoned a few days away:

"OMNIWARE v. CRS LTD TRIAL START"

The trial was the culmination of a titanic clash between two tech giants. Omniware, the world's leading software company, was the firm's largest client. This legal battle had raged for years, with an enormous sum of money at stake. Now, after countless depositions, mountains of discovery and seemingly endless posturing, the trial was set to begin in just over a week. The firm's future hung in the balance.

Eighteen months earlier, Artem had been selected for the case's elite trial team. No Fitzpatrick associate had ever gotten such an opportunity. For the firm, it was a major gamble — something Robert L. Bishop IV, managing partner and descendant of one of the firm's namesakes, had made abundantly clear to him. Rob was the trial team lead — a fearsome litigator with a reputation for ruthlessness. For him, victory was everything.

For 18 months, Artem had poured himself into the task, existing at Rob's beck and call around the clock. For 18 months he grinded toward the looming trial date. Soon, his efforts would culminate inside the federal courthouse on Market Street. For Artem, the case was a once in a lifetime opportunity to cement his legacy and land on the fast track to partnership and the untold wealth that came with it.

This cannot be happening, Artem thought.

His eyes lingered on the mountain of trial materials on his desk. No, he thought, his frustration building. He couldn't go home. There was still too much to do for the trial. This was his golden ticket and he couldn't jeopardize it. Besides, no one back home would even miss him, he reasoned.

A wave of shame washed over him. He fought back a raft of memories of his mother. His mother had raised Artem alone after his father died unexpectedly when he was just a baby. She fought every day for their survival, doing her best to hide her struggles so that he would only know love and happiness as a child. Artem took a deep breath, pushing away the swell of emotions. He could make it all work, he decided. The trial team was locked and loaded. A short trip home wouldn't cause any disruptions. His golden ticket would remain intact.

Artem typed out an email to Rob explaining things. They were ready for trial, he argued, and the team wouldn't be affected by losing him for a short time. He'd be back by Thursday night, with three days to spare before the trial — plenty of time, he declared. He exhaled and hit send.

Less than two minutes later, his inbox chimed.

"MY OFFICE. NOW."

He could hear Rob's thundering voice in those three words. A pang of fear hit Artem as he straightened his tie and hurried to Rob's office. He was only three steps inside when Rob launched a furious salvo.

"Ready?! Exactly who the hell are you to tell *me* when a case is ready?" Rob spat, his hands balled into fists and his jaw clenched. Artem opened his mouth but was immediately cut off.

"Shut your damn mouth — that was rhetorical." Rob's icy gaze pierced Artem. "Do you have any clue the risk you're exposing the firm to here?" he demanded.

Before Artem could answer, Rob put his hand up and motioned to the leather couch to his right. There sat Frank Thompson, a salty old ex-Marine and the head of firm security. Frank pointed a remote toward a TV on the opposite wall, turning on cable news. "Are you up on current events in your country?" he asked. The headline on the screen read,

INVASION FEARS GROW AS RUSSIAN FORCES SURGE ON UKRAINIAN BORDER

Artem had only loosely followed news of Russia's latest stunt. The Omniware case had completely consumed his life lately. Besides, Artem thought, this sort of saber-rattling from Russia wasn't anything new.

"All bark, no bite. The Russians won't do anything. They prefer letting others do the fighting for them," Artem said, offering an unconcerned shrug. "Russians aren't bright, but they're smart enough to know not to try an invasion." During his time in the Air Force, his fellow fighter pilots constantly joked about Russia being too cowardly to take on Ukraine directly.

"Tens of thousands of Russian troops along the border suggest otherwise," Frank remarked.

Artem retorted, "They won't do a thing. Plus, I'll be in the capital where it's totally safe."

Rob waived a hand dismissively. "Enough with the geopolitical debate. Here's the bottom line: Losing a parent stinks. I appreciate that, I really do. But with all due respect, your mother could have been the Blessed Virgin Mary herself and I would *still* tell you that this trial is the single most important thing in your life."

Hands clasped behind his back, Artem stared straight forward. Rob continued, "Go. Bury your mother. Then get your ass on a plane and back here — your future rests on it. Am I clear, Andrew?"

Artem nodded. As he turned to leave, Frank handed him a device. "Take this. It's one of

our firm's satellite phones. I'll be in Berlin this week at our Germany office, but you can reach me on it 24/7." Artem thanked him and headed back to his office.

Три (Three)

February 23, 2022

Artem lay awake, staring at the ceiling of his room at the Intercontinental Hotel in Kyiv. The sun had not yet risen. He had been up for hours, punished by terrible jet lag. He felt like a fog bank sat over his brain. The soft glow of his laptop offered the only light in the expansive suite. His thoughts drifted to his mother. He imagined their tiny apartment, which you could easily fit two of in Artem's suite. There she was in their microscopic kitchen, cooking her famous potato pancake recipe while he played at her feet. In the quiet of the room, he could hear her voice, softly singing as she worked the stovetop, occasionally pausing to blow him a kiss. Sorrow seeped in along the edges of his mind.

He sat up, abruptly shoving the memories back down. Looking around the luxurious suite, Artem scoffed. He had been lucky to escape that sort of life. How could she not have seen the promise held by his American career? How could she not have wanted that for him? His sorrow was suddenly gone, replaced by indignance. With no hope of sleep at this point, he decided to venture out and clear his mind.

A blast of cold hit Artem as he stepped outside, a reminder of the Ukrainian winters he'd happily let fade from his memory. A column of armored vehicles rumbled past the hotel, breaking the morning calm. Artem had often visited Kyiv as a child to see family — grand adventures to what seemed like a magical metropolis. Now, troops and military equipment twisted the grand city of his memory into something alien. The government is really taking the Russian bait hook, line and sinker, Artem thought.

He spotted a 24-hour café across the street and dashed toward the warmth and caffeine inside. Coffee in hand, he grabbed a corner table and pulled out his phone. The top headline notification read:

WORLD LEADERS MAKE DESPERATE PLEA FOR PEACE AS RUSSIA ON THE BRINK OF INVASION

Artem paid it no mind, his attention instead caught by a new message from Uncle Pavlo. His uncle reminded him of the family gathering that was scheduled ahead of the funeral later that morning. "Everyone would like to see you there," Pavlo said. "When you are here you always lift spirits. Please come. 9 a.m." The apparent emotion in his uncle's message took Artem by surprise.

Uncle Pavlo was a classic product of his Soviet-era upbringing, complete with a usual lack of any emotion. So Pavlo *does* have a heart, he thought, smirking. He replied,

"Thanks Uncle Pav, see you there."

As he sipped his coffee, his email chimed with something from Rob. His pulse quickened. Maybe he's seeing how I'm doing, he thought. Instead, he was greeted with a veritable cross-examination, complete with a lengthy list of tasks and pointed inquiries about a range of trial matters. This was a test, he thought as his anxiety bubbled up. The email ended pointedly:

"NEED ASAP!!!!"

Artem immediately stuffed his phone into his coat, grabbed his coffee and hurried back out into the frigid cold. He strode into his suite, tossing his coat off into a heap as he beelined for his laptop. If Rob wanted to test him, Artem would silence his doubts in resounding fashion. Artem dug himself in and worked furiously.

After a time, he sat back and rubbed his eyes. His thorough and carefully crafted response sat on screen. With a satisfied yawn, Artem clicked send, content that the only thing Rob could possibly respond with was

a sincere thank you. Probably time to start getting ready, he thought. He threw open the curtains, letting light flood the room. Fishing his phone out of the coat pocket, he checked the time. It was 9:40 a.m.

"No ..." he uttered in panic as a mixture of anxiety and guilt rushed through his veins. How long had he been working? With no time to think, Artem tore his suit out of the closet and began throwing it on. The funeral started at 10 a.m. at a church on the city outskirts. He could make it, maybe with a bit of time to spare if the driver was quick. He made it outside in a flash, jumping headlong into a taxi. Artem tossed the driver \$50, telling him there would be more if he stepped on it.

As the cab squealed off, Artem let out a sigh of relief.

Чотири (Four)

"Can't you go around?!" Artem shouted in Ukrainian.

A sea of brake lights stretched in front of them.

"What do you want me to do, take off like a helicopter? Traffic everywhere is like this. Everyone is trying to leave."

Artem's phone showed 9:50 a.m. Multiple new texts from Uncle Pavlo sat unread. Artem checked their route, which showed a 10:05 a.m. arrival. Artem exhaled nervously. Five minutes was nothing. Most people would probably still be getting settled.

His phone buzzed again. Yet another message from Pavlo, which he ignored.

They moved at a seemingly glacial pace. Artem nervously bounced his knees. Their estimated arrival time crept to 10:10 a.m., then 10:20 a.m. As they finally cleared the traffic bottleneck, Artem rubbed his temples in frustration. This wasn't his fault, he reasoned. He had work to do, after all. All these fools trying to leave the city

were really the ones to blame, he assured himself.

As the cab arrived, Artem threw money to the driver and bolted out. He glanced at his phone as he opened the church doors. It was 10:29 a.m.

П'ять (Five)

As Artem walked inside, everything went still for a moment. Thirty sets of eyes looked toward him. After a moment, the priest resumed, causing the crowd to turn back around — save for one person. There from the front row, Uncle Pavlo's intense stare remained fixed on Artem, momentarily freezing him in place. Even from the back of the church, Artem could see the exhaustion and sadness carved into his uncle's face. Artem averted his eyes, barely sparing a glance toward the casket.

As Artem settled into a rear pew, the service was in its final minutes. He felt his phone buzz several times in rapid succession. His concentration broken, Artem surreptitiously glanced at it. Four new messages from Rob. What now, he thought. He hunched forward to pour over the messages, oblivious to the start of the final prayer.

Artem was still hunched over when the sound of guests leaving recaptured his attention. Uncle Pavlo was stone faced as he strode out, not sparing so much as a glance at Artem. Alone now, he stared at his mother's casket. All at once, the weight of grief and guilt pressed down upon him, unlike any weight he'd ever felt. Fighting back tears, Artem suddenly realized he had a vice grip around his cellphone.

It buzzed with a new message. Rob again. He sharply inhaled and rose up, tossing his phone onto the pew with a clatter that rang out in the quiet sanctuary. Artem went to his mother's side. She lay there, still and serene. It was the first time he had seen



her since he left. Artem stood there for a while, unmoving.

"I'm so sorry," he softly uttered.

He lingered for a while before backing away. After fetching his phone, he slowly walked out of the church, looking back at his mother one last time. As he walked out, a familiar voice caught his attention.

"Artem?"

He looked over to see Brigadier General Dmytro Bilyk. The general, who flew under the call sign "Bear," had been his lead instructor at the Ukrainian Air Force fighter pilot academy. Bear had the look of someone who'd been chiseled from stone, but his face now bore deep lines carved by the years. Bear was a legend in the cockpit, as relentless as he was cunning. He had a reputation for mercilessly whipping trainee pilots in dogfights until they either rose to his high standards or washed out.

"Sir ...," Artem sputtered.

Bear raised a hand, smiling with a trademark glow in his eyes. Despite his

uncompromising approach, Bear was universally beloved — a pilot's pilot who cared deeply for his aviators.

"Please, you're not some trainee anymore. It's Dmytro now. I'm so sorry for your loss."

Artem nodded in appreciation, although his sadness and guilt still hung like an invisible yoke around his neck. He hastily pivoted, "... So how are things?"

"Endlessly boring, as always," Bear replied with an exaggerated sigh and a weary chuckle that telegraphed his sarcasm. "I thought they would have tossed me in a bin long ago, but somehow I landed in charge of the 40th," rotating his shoulder to show a 40th Tactical Aviation Division patch.

Bear raised an eyebrow. "I hear you're a hotshot American lawyer now? Are you as good in the courtroom as you were in the cockpit?"

Artem chuckled, "I try, sir ... er, I mean Dmytro." Even after all these years, calling Bear by his first name felt profoundly weird.



Bear continued, “If you’re half as good a lawyer as you were a pilot, your boss is very lucky indeed.”

The thought of Rob being grateful for anything almost made him burst into laughter.

Bear added, “You know, you’re *still* the only trainee that managed to beat me in a dogfight?”

Artem waved him off dismissively, “We both know it was luck. I was four seconds from ending up just like everyone else.”

“No luck. Skill.” Bear said sternly.

Artem started to speak, but Bear cut him off.

“Do you miss it? ... Flying, I mean,” Bear said, studying Artem.

Artem paused, then quickly deflected, “How’d you know my mother?”

“I didn’t. But Marko here did.” Three other Air Force officers stepped out from around the corner. Artem immediately recognized one.

“Marko?” He exclaimed in bewilderment.

Marko Azarov, now Lieutenant Colonel Azarov, had been Artem’s best friend. The two grew up just a few apartments from each other. Artem was a year older, but the two had been inseparable. Marko followed Artem everywhere, as if they were tied at the hip. When Artem decided to join the Air

Force to be a fighter pilot, Marko followed right behind.

They hadn’t spoken since Artem left.

Bear continued, “When Marko told me about the funeral, I figured I’d see you here.”

Artem looked at Bear quizzically.

Bear stepped close to Artem, his expression darkening.

“We need flyers. Badly.” He motioned around. “You can see. War is coming — this one will be for our very survival.”

Bear’s words collided with Artem. “I ... um ...,” Artem stammered.

Suddenly, Bear’s broad smile returned as quickly as it had disappeared. “It’s time for me to get back to work. I’m sure you have many important lawyer things to do. Be safe getting home,” he said warmly.

He then pulled Artem in and clapped him on the back. “So good to see you, Captain Petrenko. I am very proud of you and I’m certain your mother was, too.”

Bear started to leave but paused. “You know, we moved the squadron to Vasylykiv Airbase, just south of the city. Take care.” Bear turned and walked away.

Marko stood there, arms crossed.

“The legendary Ghost returns.”

Artem hadn’t heard his call sign in years.

“I’m sorry. It’s ‘Andrew’ now, right? That’s what you’re called in America?”

Artem rolled his eyes, shaking his head dismissively.

“... I’m honestly surprised, ‘Andrew.’ With all your important work, I didn’t think you could be bothered with something like this.” Marko gestured at the church, his voice dripping with contempt.

Artem was in no mood to engage.

“You know how he got his call sign — Ghost?” Marko said, turning to the others.

“He was good, for sure — a real phantom behind the stick. He was the best we had, not including me of course. But he always had a knack for disappearing right when you needed him. That was the Ghost. That was the *real* Artem.”

Marko’s words stung.

“Why don’t you tell them the story of your finest hour, Ghost?”

A mix of anger and guilt swirled in Artem’s gut as he gritted his jaw.

“Don’t worry. I know it well.” Marko continued.

“2014 — *hell of a year*,” Marko said, smirking.

“Stuff hit the fan quickly right after New Year’s. Crimea gets invaded. Separatists start a war out east.”

“We got orders to deploy and fight — time to do what we’d trained for, right?” Marko narrowed his eyes. “Not for Ghost. While we prepared, he dropped his paperwork to get out. Said he had ‘the opportunity of a lifetime’ and was going to be a lawyer in America.” Marko exaggerated a pair of air quotes.

He continued, his tone thick with disdain. “Of course, this was all news to me. He

hadn't bothered to say a word, even though we've known each other for what, our entire lives, Ghost? But hey, what's a friendship compared to a nice stack of cash?"

The smirk now vanished from Marko's face.

"We went to war while the Ghost performed his last vanishing act."

Artem's fury burned white hot now. He raised a finger to shove into Marko's chest, readying a verbal fusillade.

Marko cut in before Artem could unleash it.

"You know, Fedir and Andriy wanted to be here, but they couldn't make it," he continued. The two were their closest friends in the squadron.

"They're buried somewhere out east. Both shot down in the first month."

Artem's stomach dropped, his fury vanishing. A thick silence hung in the air. Marko smirked again as he looked Artem up and down, nodding in mock approval.

"Nice suit, my friend. Seems like you made the right choice. Take care of yourself, Ghost. You've always been good at that."

Marko and the others brushed past, leaving Artem there alone and numb. When he finally made it back to the hotel his mind was seemingly detached from his body. He pulled the shades shut, darkening the room before falling headfirst onto the bed.

Шість (Six)

February 24, 2022

Thud. Thud.

Artem opened an eye. What time is it? He groggily wondered as the pounding outside continued. He picked up his phone, which showed 2:30 a.m. How long had he been asleep?

Thud.

Fifteen new messages from Rob sat waiting for him, the last of which read simply, "HELLO?????" Artem dropped the phone and rubbed his temples.

The thudding continued.

What moron is lighting off fireworks? Now fully awake and thoroughly annoyed, Artem sat up. His flight didn't leave for another four hours. "Fantastic," he muttered. He snatched the room phone and mashed the front desk button. They could at least tell him what was causing the racket.

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The phone rang endlessly.

The thudding continued, louder now. Sirens wailed.

Serves them right, Artem thought. Hopefully the police would put a swift end to this nonsense. However, the noise persisted. Artem huffed in frustration. Sliding out of bed, he trudged to the window and drew back the thick curtains.

For a moment, Artem froze, unable to process the scene. There were no fireworks. Instead, the city stretched out beyond his high-rise window, dotted with raging fires and sporadic explosions. Glowing lines of tracer fire streamed into the air from the ground below. The unmistakable wail of an air raid siren rang out. An icy wave of fear cascaded through his body.

Artem stumbled backwards, fumbling for the TV remote. The headline on the screen was equally impossible for him to process:

RUSSIA LAUNCHES FULL SCALE INVASION OF UKRAINE

Staring at the screen, he felt as if he were floating above his body, a mere bystander in his own life.

Suddenly a shrill sound snapped him back to reality. The sound was coming from inside his suitcase. He threw open the bag to find the firm's satellite phone, nestled amongst his clothes and incessantly ringing. A loud thud rang out, causing him to instinctively duck. His hand shaking, he answered the phone. "H-h-hello?" he stuttered.

"Andrew?"

It took a moment for Frank's voice to register.

"It's Frank from firm security. Are you OK?"

"I ... yes, yes I'm fine" Artem replied, slowly regaining his bearings. "Are you seeing this? I need to get the hell out of here!" he exclaimed.

Frank calmly replied, "Roger. Listen to me carefully. I'm inbound to Kyiv on the firm's jet. Rob wants you on it ASAP. Things are going to hell, so we only have a narrow window."

"How do I get to you?" Artem demanded.

"A driver is headed for your hotel. Black SUV. ETA 10 minutes. See you on the tarmac."

Artem's heart raced. Instinctually, he lunged for his work laptop, tossing it into a small attaché. As he scrambled, the room shook from a deafening boom. He rushed to the window only to see a nearby building gashed open and fully ablaze. Horror filled him. That was a high-rise apartment building, not some military facility. He reeled backwards and bolted for the door, his heart pounding in his ears.

Chaos reigned in the lobby. Glass and debris lay scattered across the floor. People scrambled in every direction, some bleeding and injured. Screams and frantic shouting pierced the air. More people poured inside by the second, desperately seeking refuge from the destruction outside. Artem shuffled through the madness, seemingly in slow motion.

A massive boom shook the lobby, setting off a fresh wave of panic. Suddenly Artem's senses came into sharp focus. He checked his watch. Two minutes until the driver arrived. As he looked back up to the chaotic scene, his eyes were drawn to a woman across the lobby. She was huddled against the ornate concierge desk, using it as a makeshift bit of cover. She looked around frantically, a young boy clutched close to her chest. Judging by his size he couldn't have been more than five. For a moment they locked eyes. He saw an echo of his mother in her eyes. He wasn't sure what she saw in his. Artem quickly looked away, clutching his attaché and scanning for a clear pathway through the madness.



Cim (Seven)

The satellite phone buzzed, its ring barely audible above the din. Artem answered, plugging his other ear in a vain attempt to block out the noise. The driver was two blocks away. Time to move. Artem weaved his way through the crush of the crowd, like a fish swimming upstream. He turned his head back toward the concierge desk. He could just barely make out the top of the

woman's head, still huddled there. When he finally emerged onto the street, his senses were bombarded. Acrid smoke hung in the air. The staccato sound of gunfire echoed through the street, punctuated by the boom of explosions. The air raid siren wailed, unrelenting.

Kyiv was unrecognizable.

Artem's phone vibrated in his pocket. He impulsively reached to check it. Six new messages from Rob within the last 90 minutes, all case related. The most recent read "EXHIBIT P-36 STATUS UPDATE???"

Before he could form a thought, a black SUV screeched up. The driver yelled out the window, "Mr. Andrew Petrenko?" Artem nodded vigorously. "Get in, sir!" Artem threw open the door, tossing his attaché into the back seat. With one foot in the vehicle he stopped, looking back at the lobby.

"Sir?"

Artem didn't acknowledge him.

"Sir, we must go, NOW." The driver barked insistently.

For a moment, Artem didn't move.

ВІСІМ (Eight)

The Gulfstream jet sat on the tarmac, engines humming. Frank stood in its doorway, scanning the horizon. Explosions illuminated the nearby Kyiv skyline. He suddenly spotted the SUV tearing onto the blacktop and called for the pilots to prep for takeoff.

As the vehicle came to a stop, Frank jogged down the aircraft's stairs. Reaching to open the door, Frank began to address Artem,

"Rob wants you to call as —"

Frank trailed off as he stared into the back seat. Andrew Petrenko, senior associate, should have been sitting there. Instead, there was only a frightened Ukrainian woman clutching a small boy tightly. She



reached out to him, offering a piece of folded paper.

At a complete loss for words, Frank unfolded it. The top of the page read,

FITZPATRICK BISHOP LLP
Every Challenge, A Solution.

It was a page from a firm notepad. There was a hastily scribbled message on it:

Frank — tell Rob I'm taking time off.
Please take care of these two.

- Artem

Дев'ять (Nine)

The sun peeked over the horizon, its light slowly creeping toward the runway. A pair of afterburners glowed red hot just beyond the reach of the sun's rays. The twin engines roared, G-forces slamming Artem back into his seat. It felt good. Really good.

There had been little time for reunions. No sooner had Artem embraced Marko and Bear than a flight suit and helmet had been thrust into his arms. Tens of thousands of Russian troops were pouring into Ukraine by the minute. The capital city was buckling under a relentless barrage of air attacks, its defenses rapidly crumbling under the pressure. Every available Ukrainian pilot was being scrambled in a desperate all-out defense.

If Kyiv fell, the rest of Ukraine would quickly follow.

Artem's MiG-29 Fulcrum rocketed into the dawn sky. Sitting in the familiar cockpit he'd

spent countless hours flying, it was like putting on an old warm sweater. Artem felt like he had never left. The sunrise now spilled across the ground below. Artem looked out the canopy, imagining that he was flying over a painted canvas. He could hear his mother's voice,

"Cherish home."

For a moment, the carnage and chaos felt like it existed only in a dream. Suddenly, shrill alarm tones snapped Artem back to reality. His radar lit up like a Christmas tree, full of targets. Artem banked the jet toward Kyiv, taking a deep breath.

Time to go to work, he thought, ramming the throttle forward. ⚡



When asked which came first, the setting, the characters or the storyline, fiction contest winner Thomas L. Harper replied, "Oddly enough, the nickname 'Ghost' came first. In the first days of the Ukraine war, there

was a viral story (likely just a myth) of a Ukrainian pilot who downed six enemy aircraft in the first day of the conflict (for reference, five air-to-air kills qualifies a pilot as an 'Ace'). At the time, there was still a very real threat that all of Ukraine could collapse, so it was a sort of David and Goliath type of story that worked to inspire hope. The story set the internet ablaze, and the nameless pilot was dubbed 'The Ghost of Kyiv.' Although it was probably more fiction, it really resonated with me and was a great example of how powerful stories can be in inspiring hope in the darkest of times."