

faded, tautened. They were running out of ammunition. The food they were stealing from the local farmers was poisoned. At night the drones came and killed them one by one in the dark. Buran-30, the @RUTranslator said, was asking for reinforcements, supplies, evacuation plans, the time until relief. Some wags in Sweden had been jamming his frequencies — whenever he came on, within minutes, they would flood his channel with the soundtrack to *Super Mario World*: the underwater theme, the fortress theme, they had a microphone and laughed and whispered utterances that the @SwedishTranslators told her were extremely, extremely dirty. She did not know Buran-30, his real name, where he was from, how old he was, if he had a family, if he were still shaving or had let his stubble come in, what his least favorite ration was, why he hated the Ukrainians so much, whether he loved his country or was grasping at the only opportunity his broken society offered him, was he loved, was he missed, did his men respect or despise him? But she knew that he became, day by day, more and more frightened, his transmissions wavering, his terse, workmanlike radio discipline slowing, until he seemed to spend minutes with the transmit button keyed, saying nothing, projecting only the hiss of noise out across the planet. Did he know they were listening to him? Did he imagine that, six thousand miles away, in Springfield, a 24-year old civilian named Stacey was thinking of him, not with pity, exactly, or sadness that he was going to die — but that she knew he was there, in foreign woods, surrounded by his dead battalion, whispering into the radio, “Это Буран-30. Приём? Это Буран-30. Приём?”

Another voice cut into the line — young, accented English: “Buran-30,” he said. “Hey, Buran-30.” He whistled along to the Forest of Illusion theme — quick, eerie, lurking disaster. “Go home.”

“Это Буран-30.”

“Buran-30, go home, motherfucker,” the voice said. “It’s better to be a deserter than fertilizer.”

“Это Буран-30. Приём?”

The next night Buran-30 was silent. They never heard him again.