

Scars by Kate Brazendale

Death lurked in every doorway, with hell at one dark window. The house shuddered under the blanket of thick dust, rubble and grime, as the shot rang, resonating through the walls. He pulled me tight, his arms wrapped around me, an embrace that could never be broken. His breath quivered, in an attempt to collect himself, from the wreck of a life that this created. A dull light filtered in through the cracks in the boarded windows, as he pressed his chin into my head.

“This world is full of selfish and cruel people Yuri, but you have to promise me that you will never turn into one of them,” he muttered under his breath, trying to conceal his fear, though it was painted like a terrified sky within his eyes. Fedir used to admire my eyes, he’d gazed into the blue abyss, captivated by the rise and fall of the tones and streaks of light entwined within them. But I can’t remember the last time he studied my features, showering me with compliments, and peals of laughter at my babyish faces.

He enrolled a few weeks ago. They were in desperate need of strong, young men to protect us, the ones who couldn’t protect themselves. As soon as he read the multitude of signs plastered all over the town, he jumped at the chance, the chance to repay for what we had been given. Well, what used to be the town anyway. It’s now just piles of what used to be; the library, the school, their homes, and the memories of the life we used to lead. The road that led to the market, the base for the weaponry. The garden centre, the enrolment facility.

Our Fedir. Even though he was younger than me, he was the mother we never had.

The mother I never had.

He knew her, in the time before me.

Sometimes I wish I was like mother. Maybe it would be easier if I was like mother. Without the thought of the next meal, the sleeping place, the home.

When life was different, Fedir used to tell me stories of her, the beautiful woman, the talk of the town. Her eyes were like mine, icy blue like a cold winter’s morning. Her skin was olive, dewy and young. Her touch was soft and comforting like the feeling of a summer’s day upon your face.

But one day she was gone. Forever. My life, for hers.

He said that the pain of labour was prison to her mind. In that jail cell of fear and confusion, the time passed without her being able to keep track. Her stomach tightened, she heard her own scream without being aware of making it. She lay still as the medication was administered, waiting for the agony to subside. But it never did. It became a flurry of people, needles, noises and cries, but she didn’t come out of the other side. Fedir made it clear that her beauty never faltered.

He said that Dad just sat there and cried. He cried for three whole days. His face grew blotchy and his eyes red. Then one day he just stopped...

I would plead and question but Fedir would never snap. He never told me why.

“Father, where did you go last week?”

“I went to look at the housing, for us.”

“But you said it was safe here.”

“Not anymore my child, not anymore.”

His voice blunt, like the knives in the kitchen, the ones that scarred Dad's hands when he was a little boy, like me. I can never imagine dad as a boy, he's so... mature. A sudden pounding echoed from the front door.

"Who is that Dad?"

"We'll have to find out."

He paced towards the door, his head drooped into his chest, fiddling anxiously with his hands. The door swung open, revealing a man dressed formally, in a suit paired with a black tie.

Dad beckoned him over, through the bleak house, sitting him down at the two chairs that sat with table.

"I have some news from the front." He said. "I am sorry I have to break this to you," placing his hand on Dad's leg, "your eldest son was killed five miles south of Kiev. I'm so sorry."

Silence. Dad just sat there, his face blank.

"This note was found with him. Only read it when you're ready ok?" he said as he walked himself out of the house. I glanced over to Dad - but nothing. He rose from his seat, walking emotionless into the other room. As soon as he was out of sight, I reached for the note, the paper damp and crinkled, the handwriting looping and feminine:

'Protect Yuri. He is my precious one. Your father does not know how to control himself. You are my only hope.'

Sometimes his memory can make me sad. Brothers can get you like that, like nothing else. Fedir- fiercely loyal and overprotective. The pillar that stood between me and my father's fists. The watchman upon whom vicious words rained down from my father's mouth. The wish for him to be here fills me with such rage that I don't know what to do. One day I will grieve him, but first I have to accept that's he's gone. There's a part of me that can't believe that he won't come bouncing back around the corner to tell me ghost stories at the end of my bed, or to defeat me at thumb wars.

The house shuddered under the blanket of thick dust, rubble and grime, as another shot rang out, resonating through the walls. My Father.

They both took a piece of me with them in death. They took the question and the answer. Leaving an open wound. Never to heal, only to scar.