

SIM

A ghost story for winter

I am half of the man I once was. I once stood proud, carefree. I was once the light that shone into the lives of other people and lit them up. I was the rock, a solid anchor for my comrades, their stability. All of that is gone, blown away as if by the wind, merely a skeleton of my past. My name is irrelevant, and so are my thoughts. Nobody knows that I exist, and nobody should care. I live my life as a spectre, the ghost of the man I once was, the one that died inside of me.

I carry a heavy backpack on my good shoulder, green camo, the standard issue for the Ukrainian army countless years ago. The backpack digs into my shoulder, and it pains me to move forward. The intrusive damp has eaten away at my clothes that now hangs wet from my necrotic body. There is no snow, but a thin layer of untouched frost on the ground. My boots are mostly dry, but I can't feel them anyway. Something about the alpha radiation and its effect on the nervous system and the muscles in my legs.

I walk as the only resident in this lonely town, I, the single soul. Moving ever closer to the epicentre of the disaster, the reactor, the fate of all too many lives, including my very own. I often see spectral faces and figures passing by, judging me. Jealous of my human flesh. Even though I am still alive, I am a sad corpse of a past time. They were lucky, they need not suffer the way I do.

Emerging from the stagnant fog is what was once a building, a home to some, and the place of many memories. Not anymore; Mother nature has wrapped her arms around this concrete skeleton as if to nurture it from any further harm to shield it from its past. Once well-kept gardens come to mutant life, the essence of chemical vitality shows in the deep greens of the gargantuan vines, and the size of the frail ferns that riddle this past home. It is only home to forgotten shadows of secrets now.

My stiffened feet lead me to a place I know too well. My old school. The armies of stagnant mist linger between the crumbling soul of this concrete behemoth. The structure itself seems melancholic as if it knows of the silent horrors of this town, and the rest of the area around reactor 4. I can almost smell the airs of past victories, dead love, regrets, and failures.

I was still alive back then. My heart still beats, and my lungs still breathe, but my soul is dead and my flesh is a burning reminder of the futile existence of mine. I have no purpose. I have been nobody since the disaster; I was among the first to clear up the deadly chemicals the spewed out of the plant that day, and I was also one of the first to feel its effects. If only I had joined my brothers in the afterlife. The joys and pains of this

place hit me like needles, piercing my cracked skin. Love, joy, and passion, blown away one fateful day.

My stumbling mind wanders its way through the thick fog. The damp still hangs to my skin and lays heavy on my weary shoulders. The cold grasps my limbs with invisible fingers, holding me back from the place where I lost my soul. I drag my corpse-like body to my final resting place. I died here the first time. Strong elm trees in the park, either side of the overgrown paths and tall grass patches remind me of the sheer force of nature, its ability to retaliate. Despite what happens, it will always continue, dwarfing the lifetime of a mere human.

I release the weight of my leaden backpack onto the park bench, barely recognisable from the place it once was. The fog around me takes a breath, and the plants hold themselves still, as if they have performed their duty. I am the only one they left behind to a world of suffering, my mind poisoned by the present. I have come years too late. My soul died together with her, her and the rest of them. Surely, I hope and pray, that they may rest easy. I lay my weary head down to rest, a ghost of who I was once before. As I take my last breath, I hope that I will be the last nobody to die here.

I am awoken by the sound of loud chirping, children playing. The world is tinged in an ethereal bliss of golden rays of sunshine. The light dances through the trees and plays on the gravel path with a gentle breeze. It is warm, the lawn is well-kept and the beds of flowers blossom in the warmth. The skies are blue; I sit up my youthful body on the park bench and look about. And there she is, auburn hair like the autumn leaves, her face shining in the sunlight.

Finally, I have joined them.