Mila frowned at the book in her lap, then glanced up at the yellow sky dubiously. One billion times one trillion, it said. She wondered if there was some kind of hyperbole or metaphor to the number it had printed, but it was not one of her father’s religious texts. This was one of her mother’s books. Usually they were very literal, or at least so her mother said.

She looked down at her hand. Five; that number had one digit. The number in the book was twenty two. That was easier to understand. She could name twenty two people from her tribe, though she might be guessing at a few. If she could imagine that one held up a 1, and the others held up zeros, she might be on the right path. If the first held a single grain of sand, and the next held ten, the last would hold enough to account for what the book was saying. It was a lot more sand than a hand would hold.

“Get down from there!”   
 A sharp voice broke her line of thought. She turned around to see her father, Mikhail, standing at the base of the outcropping she had climbed to read in solitude.   
 “You are making a target of yourself!” He scolded.

Mila glanced around. There was no danger here, she was sure. The frontline was over 200 kilometers away, and who would waste munitions on her anyways? She was just reading a book.

“Now, Mila!” He barked. “That is an order. Besides, I bring you a present.”

Immediately Mila perked up. As intrusive as her father might be, he always brought good presents. From her mother Mila typically received books or clothes, and more of the latter now that traded goods had become scarce. The clothes were functional, of course, but hardly exciting and rarely in the latest fashion. Her father, meanwhile, often brought her tools, puzzles, and curiosities. His long absences might be nerve-wracking, but at least she could soothe herself with thoughts of what he might bring home.

She scrambled down the rocks in leaps and bounds, much to her father’s amusement.   
 “Keeping fit, I see?” He asked as she approached. “That is good. I worry all those books will turn you idle.”

“Father, I have not been idle!” Mila protested. “I am learning about the cosmos! It says in here that the stars number as many as one billion times one trillion! Stars, father, as big as Ra above us!” She pointed up at the pale orange ball of light hanging in the midday sky.   
 Mikhail raised an eyebrow. “That is… quite the claim.” He said, “One wonders how anyone could know such a thing. Or why God would have made such a vacant place.”   
 “All the better for us to understand his magnificence, yes?” Mila tried, still enthusiastic. “To have us be so small within his grand creation?”

Mikhail laughed, “That is good. Where did you hear that?” He reached down to ruffle the top of her head. “In another life, you would have made a good preacher.”

Mila deflated a little. She had only wanted to share with him how she had felt reading her mother’s books. Her father however regarded them with detached amusement at the best of times, and she had learned not to press further when it came to their importance.   
 Mikhail gave a conciliatory smile. “Come on, then. Come with me. I have something important for you.”

“The gift?” Mila asked hopefully, perking up once more.

Mikhail nodded “More than that, my daughter. But yes, there will be a gift.”

Mila followed her father uneasily back through the village. There people went around their ordinary chores, but hints of the war were everywhere. Most people on the streets were wives and children, and many of the small workshops were hard at work welding mortars and mending rifles. Gasoline generators ran through the night while the houses stayed dark, tirelessly powering the scavenged lathes and presses that kept the incursion at bay. A freshly repaired drone passed overhead, rotors whining under the strain of its payload for the front.

Mikhail led her down the valley towards the river, and to a bank on the far side. There a small line of dummies had been set up, as well as benches and tables in the mud. Mila looked up at her father as they stopped.   
 “Practice?” She asked. “I did not bring my sling.”

Mikhail shook his head. “Not your sling.”

He reached into his robes and pulled out a small cloth package, placing it on the table. Mila leaned in, unable to help her curiosity as he began to unfold it, carefully pulling back each bit of silk.   
 Inside was a pistol, well made but battered, its once matte black slide polished bright silver by decades of sand and kydex. Mikhail stepped back, and Mila was left staring in confusion and awe.   
 “Pick it up,” he ordered when she failed to take initiative. “You know how to do that, yes?”

Mila swallowed. She did, of course. He knew that. She had handled many dirty and disrepaired rifles that had come from the front, but never with live ammo. This was not just a machine to be cleaned or fixed. It was no longer dead metal in need of her care. This was different.

“Do it.”

Mila’s hand snapped forward, snatching the pistol up from the cloth. Reflexively her thumb went to the magazine release and she racked back the slide, sending the brass round within flying off into the mud. She was an inch from hitting the break-down lever when Mikhail slapped the back of her head.   
 “Idiot!” He snapped. “Did I tell you to unload it!?”

Mila froze. It was what she had done with every gun she had ever touched before. It was just part of the motion to her. Of course there had never actually been anything in them before.

“Put it down! Go find that bullet and clean it off!”

Mila placed the gun down as quickly as she could with the proper reverence and dove into the muck, feeling for the wasted round. Mikhail watched impatiently.

“You will just bury it more if you splash around like that. Move carefully.”

Mila paused, then began sweeping slowly with her hand. Soon enough, she felt something cold and hard hit her fingers. She pulled it out and held it up to show her father.

He smiled. “Good. Now clean it up, and load the gun.”

Mila looked confused. Not knowing what else to do she took it to the river and began to wash it off. Carefully she dried it in her shirt, rubbing it until the brass looked shiny once more. She brought it back gingerly, as though she were holding an egg, and laid it on the table.   
 Mikhail laughed. “It is a bullet,” he said. “It will not go off if you drop it. Not even if you throw it. Now load it into the magazine.”

Mila’s hands shook as she handled the magazine, but soon she had managed to squeeze the round back into place. She looked back at Mikhail expectantly, but he only continued to watch. Hesitantly, she seated the mag and slapped the bottom like she had seen the men do, then racked the slide. This time the little glint of brass disappeared into the chamber, and a tingle ran down Mila’s spine. She held the gun out like it had a bad smell.   
 “Good. Now, take aim.”

Mikhail’s arms came around her, guiding her hands out into a shooting stance.   
 “Legs apart. Squat down and lean in a little. Do not worry. It will not kick that much, but it pays to be stable.”   
 Mila stared down the back of the gun as it was brought into line with her eyes, the dummy appearing over the sights.

“Level them out,” Mikhail instructed, pressing her second hand up to the grip. “You want to see equal light on either side of the front, and the tops all level. Put the top of the middle on the center of his chest.”

Mila brought the front post down to the dummy’s tattered carrier, centering on the faded name tag.

“Good.” Mikhail whispered. “Now, fire.”

The air in front of Mila erupted in light. A sharp pain struck her like she had been clapped over the ears, and the pistol jerked back in her hand. She staggered, but Mikhail was there to catch her. He laughed.

“Very good!,” he said, helping her to put the gun down again. “You hit dead center!”   
 Mila cupped her ears, which had begun to ring. Her father’s hand rested on her head.   
 “Here,” he said, holding out his hand. In it were two wads of cotton, roughly the right size for Mila’s ears. “Put these in, then do it again. This time, no help. Try to hit his helmet.”

She only stared at him, still holding her ears.

Mikhail sighed. “I needed you to know what it was capable of. What you are capable of, now. You have to take seriously what you have in your hands. Take the plugs, pick up the gun. All on your own now.”

Shakily, Mila inserted the cotton and picked the pistol back up again. She held it out with elbows locked, her head craned back as far as she could get it. It’d   
 She squinted as she began to pull the trigger once more, feeling it creep along its old, dirty track. It felt like it would take all her strength, when she knew it took only a twitch. Nothing at all in the heat of the moment, but it seemed impossible now.   
 She was taken by surprise when the hammer finally dropped and the pistol jerked back in her hand. A plume of dirt kicked up in front of the target, and the bullet whizzed as it spun off into the dirt berm beyond.

Mikhail’s rebuke was sharp, his hand skipping off the back of her head as he yanked the pistol from her.   
 “You flinched!” He snapped. “Why?”   
 Mila cowered, lowering her head and backing away. The display however only infuriated Mikhail, and he advanced on her threateningly.

“Are you afraid of it?” He shook the back of the pistol at her. “Does this scare you? Do you think it will hurt you if you use it?”

Mila stumbled and fell into the mud. Mikhail bent down to pull her up by the collar.   
 “This…” he shook the pistol in her face. “Is not what you should fear.” With a shove he pushed her face down against the table, slamming the gun down beside her. “Only the weak fear their own strength. The gun is your power.” He shoved off, slamming her face down before letting her up. “Show me you are not afraid.”   
 Mila stood up, turning to look at Mikhail. He stared her down until she looked back at the pistol.

“Come,” he said. “I had Rolan down here just yesterday and he put all 7 rounds in the vest. Are you telling me my own daughter cannot do better? That she will not even try?”

Mila snatched the pistol off the table and thrust it out. She remembered how he had held her hands the first time and the sights dropped into place. She fired and the helmet rang. A rush of adrenaline ran through her, and the sights came easily down back into line again. It was almost automatic to pull again the moment they were in place, and within seconds the gun was empty.

Mila stared down the slide, now locked back on the empty mag. Heat rose and shimmered off the exposed barrel, dancing in the still air. She didn’t know exactly how many shots it had been, or how many had hit, but the helmet now lay perforated in the sand.   
 Mikhail laughed. “See? Nothing to be afraid of! Not when you can wield it well!”   
 Mila placed the pistol down, a bit more roughly than she had the first time.

“May I have my gift now?”

He nodded, beaming at her. “Of course.” He reached behind himself and pulled a fresh magazine out of a pouch, holding it out for Mila.

She stared at it. “What? What is this?” She backed away a step, uncertain.

Mikhail sighed, but stepped to pick the gun up off of the table.

“You didn’t think I would give it to you empty, did you?” He asked, taking out the old mag and dropping the slide on empty. He slipped in the replacement and held the gun out to Mila. “Would do you no good, then.”

Mila shook her head. “What? The gun? You cannot… Men need those on the front…”

Mikhail sighed. “And so will you,” he insisted. “The fronts are close, Mila. The war involves all of us now. It involves you.”

“I am not a fighter!”   
 “Are you not? I talked to Nyasia. She says you challenge boys near twice your size. Says you do not always lose, either.”

“I do not want to kill!”

Mikhail’s face darkened. “Oh… I see. You do not want to kill.” He asked, advancing on her once more. “Is this a new stance you have taken? ”   
 Mila frowned. “A new stance? What do you mean?”

“You always liked making traps, didn’t you?”   
 She shuffled nervously, avoiding his gaze.   
 “You took great pride in that.’ He continued. “You loved your little hidden spikes and pressure plates. You were so proud to show me what they could do. What do you suppose happened though, to the men who found those surprises you prepared in the old village? What do you think happened to the old shells you carefully fuzed?”   
 Mila lowered her head. She had only done what they wanted. They had rewarded her for all her most devious ideas and subtle craftsmanship. They had brought her valuable tools, because she was valuable. How could she have thought they wanted anything else?

“When you used to play out by the supply roads, you always brought back the best notes you could on movement. No detail ever escaped you. So many things others would ignore, you saw a way to exploit.”

She only did what he had asked. He said it would help the tribe. She remembered how she had smiled and waved to the soldiers passing by. She had known they were not her friends, but the physical harm had been far from her mind.

“You are not afraid of killing, Mila.” He said. “You are afraid of guilt. You are afraid of having to face the reality of what you have already done. That is not compassion, only cowardice. That is weakness, but you are strong.”

Mila was numb, looking at the ground as she took faltering steps back from her father.   
 He stooped, squatting down to bring himself to eye level. “I remember the grin you gave me the first time you won a fight, blood streaming down your face. Nyasia practically had to pry you off of your opponent. You didn’t want to stop.”

Mila shook her head. She could still feel the sting of her raw knuckles, and the dry burning in her chest. She remembered the shock and disbelief of realizing that she had won, and for the first time proved herself superior. Vitya had taken a long time to recover, but he had recovered. She could still speak with him, if she wanted. The gun would not afford such a chance.

Mikhail stood up slowly, staring down at his daughter with a heavy sigh. “You made the choice already.” He said, shoving the gun against her chest. “You always wanted to be a boy, Mila. Now, it is time to be a man.”