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Tank Man

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Background Information - This story is set in 1989, Tiananmen Square in China. Mass protests had taken place here and on June 4th, soldiers (PLA) cleared the protests via a violent crackdown resulting in hundreds to thousands dead. This story is told from the perspective of 'Tank Man' - the name for a protester who stood in front of a line of tanks which were used to kill the protesters.

People buzzed around the road like flies. A volley of metal pelted through the air stalking their targets with deadly accuracy. Some dashed behind buses and cars, others into the only buildings left standing, but still relentless storms of metal were released into the crowd, each time catching an unfortunate soul. A few braved the barrage of bullets and rode rickshaws, which were practically falling apart, searching for any injured that they could take with them, but for every life saved, two or three more were lost.

My ears were flooded with a cacophony of noises - deafening screams, echoing gunshots, rupturing glass and splintering wood. I was amid the fray, running and screaming. I didn't look back, already knowing what was behind me. The People's Liberation Army - The PLA. The hardened soldiers, indoctrinated with the commands of the Communist Party, looked straight ahead, guns trained on the students frantically scrambling about. The soulless men stepped over bodies crumpling beneath their weight, hunting feverishly for more shooting practice.

The wall of men pushed into the battleground showing not a hint of emotion. I knew there would be similar groups of forces around, systematically separating and suffocating the protests one by one. I turned a corner and ran down a narrow alleyway hoping beyond hope they didn't spot me. As I ran, my mind raced back in time to when this all began.

It seemed like years had passed, not months, when Hu Yaobang passed away in April. The only man trying to make a change in the corrupt government overrun with nepotism and abuse of power for the good of the people was gone. The country mourned.

I ducked into a wider section of the road and vaulted over an upturned car, without a glance at the people hidden behind it, their faces a mask of fear.

Only a few months later protests were being held by students and workers and now the crackdown had begun - and I was in the thick of it.

A few more twists and turns later, I came to a stop when the alley gave way to the main street. I scanned the area spotting a few bodies strewn across the ground like ragdolls, limp and lifeless, but I discovered that further up the road other people were gathered behind buses and buildings awaiting the inevitable march of enemy soldiers. I joined the throng who were apparently listening to one student - a young man wearing what was left of an ebony-black coat and the tattered remains of a blue pair of jeans. He stood in the centre of the road, making heads turn towards him.

"Fight with me!", he screamed at the crowd, "Help me kill the PLA scum and bring honour to Hu Yaobang! He alone opposed the Communist Party opting for reform. It's time to return the favour!" A sudden uproar erupted amongst the crowd yelling their agreement to him. Not a second later, a group of men emerged from an alleyway and distributed long metal pipes as well as bottle-bombs and Molotov cocktails throughout the crowd. Others picked up large stones and rocks when the weapons ran out.

The only functioning bus was then driven onto the road creating a barrier of steel. The driver ran out of the bus and picked up a Molotov, lit the cloth at the top of the bottle and hurled it at the vehicle.

I turned away and heard glass cracking before being hit with a wave of heat. I turned in awe of the massive bonfire now developing before me. Fire devoured the bus and greedily engulfed anything flammable: chairs, seating covers, items of clothing. The tendrils of flame reached the engine compartment and moments later sheets of metal flew away with rocketing speeds revealing the inner workings of the bus and a cloud of dust and debris exploded outwards. The explosion seemingly got the attention of the enemy forces because just a few minutes later, I could see a squad of men in camouflage-green, sporting rifles and stern expressions marching towards us. Silence took over for an instant and was broken by the sound of rifles reloading. I found myself in the same situation I was in an hour earlier but this time I was prepared.

The soldiers stared unblinking at the crowd and in one swift motion rifles were trained on each person in our group. However, as their fingers moved to the triggers, a gang of men, each armed with a copper pipe, ambushed them from behind and swung blindly. A loud *crack* sounded through the air when the heavy metal pipe connected with the back of one soldier's head. He went down as another man struck a soldier in his chest and another was knocked down as their feet were swept up from beneath them. The soldiers weren't given time to react as more metal pipes came swinging from each direction, taking one out at a time.

By now the rest of the crowd had recovered from the initial shock and were picking up their own weapons. A trio of students launched rocks at the soldiers occasionally hitting their targets, but most of the attack was being led by the armed men at the front. However, the soldiers had also recovered, and they struck back - fast. One soldier, cornered by two bulky men brandishing huge copper pipes like clubs, whipped out his rifle and fired at point blank range at them. The bullets drove into one man's chest and he was down in an instant. The other stood still, immobilised with shock, and received a bullet to the head.

The tides were quickly turning.

All around us, the troops were recuperating and were driving the protesters back. One bullet whizzed straight towards me and barely missed, clipping the hem of my shirt which was now covered in mud, grime and speckled with glistening droplets of ruby-red blood. I ducked behind a pile of rubble and waited with bated breath. The enemy had reassembled and continued their onslaught. Protesters: men, women, students and workers alike were screaming. My eyes were drawn to the same man who had given the short speech earlier. He was hidden beside the bus out of the line of sight of the enemy. For a second, I thought he had given up like me and realised that it was all in vain. His head turned around and caught my eyes and in that brief moment, I knew. He wasn't going down without a fight. I saw the glass bottle concealed in the sleeve of his coat and before I could do or say anything, he stood up and launched the projectile directly at the line of soldiers. In an instant, a wall of fire sprung up in front of the enemy, the flames hungrily licking their faces when they got too close. The men tried putting out the fire, but their efforts were futile. Slowly but surely, the protesters around me regained their confidence and began approaching. They no longer had weapons, but they were prepared to engage in fisticuffs if needs be.

Then it happened.

The first sign I saw of it was the soldier, who was leading the assault, speaking into his radio-receiver. As he nodded to the voice talking to him, his grim face slowly revealed the faintest hint of a smirk. I already knew whatever was about to happen next could not be any good. And sadly, I was right.

The whirring of the engine could be heard from miles away. The metal tracks crushed everything beneath it as the heavy, armour-plated, metal mountain trundled along. The behemoth of steel rolled into view, commanding the attention of everyone around.

Eyes were fixated upon the beast. Slowly, the turret rotated with a creak. The barrel of the gun was pointed directly at the young man in the coat. He visibly shuddered but stood his ground. A look of defiance was plastered on his face, covering the fear that coursed through his blood. He opened his mouth to speak, "GLORY TO -"

The tank fired.

A white flash blinded my eyes for a moment. A blast of hot air shot towards me and the shockwave that followed almost knocked me off balance. My eyes blinked open and I could see utter carnage unfold before me. The remaining protesters had huddled behind the burning bus but a few stayed. I didn't know if it was because they were incredibly brave or incredibly stupid but either way, they all were picked off by the enemy's rifle fire or crushed to death by the tank's metal tracks. The tank itself rolled down the street - physically immune to the futile attempts made at stopping it. Including the bus. The two metal giants collided with each other and for the briefest of moments the tank stopped, but without another second's hesitation it pushed on. The bus's wheels gave way even with the added strength of the dozens of people behind it. The flames of the bus lashed out at the armoured plating of the vehicle but left no damage.

After a minute or so of struggling, the tank had cleared a path down the road to the Square. A few of the protesters, me included, managed to stay hidden from the soldiers but the rest that couldn't make it in time were shot. The soldiers made it look like sport. I didn't know how it was possible, but their unmoving faces told me more about their emotions than anything else could possibly have. They showed no remorse. No sympathy. They were inhuman and saw everything else like they were too. As the tank and the soldiers marched past, I breathed a sigh of relief and waited a good few minutes before the whole street was clear. I cautiously stepped out from behind the rubble and began slowly but surely making my way back home.

As I walked, I truly realised the horrors that I had just been witness to. I walked past the battlefield and could still see smoke pluming out above the smouldering bus. The bodies lay motionless on the floor. Most had bullet wounds, but never one, there were always multiple shots taken at each poor man and woman. Even the ones with fatal blows to the head were shot again for good measure. I could not tell whether it was the soldiers being methodical or blood-thirsty, but either way it made my stomach wrench. I didn't only have to deal with the death of the protesters, there was also a surprising amount of enemy fatalities. I thought I would have felt something when I saw them. Most of them were simply clubbed or beaten to death, others had fatal burns from the Molotov's, but I felt nothing for any of them. No sadness. No anger. No satisfaction. I only felt one nagging feeling at all of this. At everything that I had been through today.

Disgust.

I awoke to the sunlight filtering through the gas in the blinds. The light revealed the dust floating around the room like raindrops with a mind of their own. I got up and threw on the only clothes that I owned that weren't tattered or sprayed with blood. I stepped out of the apartment and walked down the staircase leading to the ground floor. I didn't want to have to go. I already knew what would be happening later this morning and I didn't want to see it.

I didn't sleep a wink last night. I was listening to the lullaby of gunfire and it did not help. It was a miracle I even got out alive let alone made it to my apartment without being caught and I felt guilty for it. So many others were with me there. Demanding rights to freedom. An end to nepotism. Power to the people. So many of them died for our cause and would never be known for it. I survived.

I left the local store with three bags full of shopping. The cashier and I didn't exchange a word and he handed me my groceries with a defeated grunt. It seemed as if the whole world was mourning. So many innocent lives had been lost and no one could do a thing about it except grieve.

I stopped at the North-east edge of Tiananmen Square - Chang'an Avenue. People were lined across the street, and dozens were standing on balconies of towering hotels. I could make out a few foreigners hidden away in nooks and crannies trying to film. Each one of them wore dark, ominous expressions.

It was happening again.

The familiar shrill screeching of the engine rang through the air. The clacking of the sprockets turning the metal tracks resonated within my head. The clinking of metal on metal echoed through the Square. These heralded the arrival of a row of camouflaged tanks. The metal hounds trundled through the street, proud of successfully hunting down their helpless prey. People looked on with mixed emotions of anger, fear, sorrow and loathing. Yet not even one of them acted. Then it dawned on me.

I knew why I survived the crackdown on the protests. I knew why I was a witness to those atrocities. I knew why I was here on this day at this street. I knew who I was. I was the one to act.

I set my jaw. A rush of adrenaline surged through me. Guiding me. I took a first, small, tentative footstep out onto the street. Then a firm step. Then a determined stride. I walked up the street, now having attracted the attention of the onlookers. The metallic monsters continued their parade, but the lead tank slowed down as he saw me approach. They all waited for me to cross the street, but as I neared the centre of the avenue, I stopped. I turned around to face the towering machines before me. I could still smell the blood although it was washed off. Not all the oceans in the world could wash off the stench of death emanating from those tanks.

We were at a standstill for a few seconds, or years, I couldn't tell. I swung my arm over, the plastic shopping bags rustling in the wind, signalling to the tank to turn.

It turned right. So did I.

I signalled to it again telling it to turn. After a moment's hesitation, the tank followed my signal and turned left.

So did I.

We were at a standstill again. A minute later, I decided I had had enough. Every single one of those tanks had taken countless lives - innocent lives and the men inside, operating these machines, did so with no hesitation. I wanted to know why. I regained my senses and with a deep breath I climbed up the tank. I scaled the mountain of metal until I got to the hatch. I knocked rapidly at the top, and I was answered. A man in his late 20's dressed in a khaki uniform lifted the hatch and greeted me with a face of granite. For a moment, we said nothing.

"Why?" I eventually asked.

The soldier waited for more of a question and received none.

"Why?" I repeated. He replied with silence.

Suddenly, the radio inside the hull beeped to life and barked out an order in harsh Chinese. The soldier nodded and replied to the voice in a hushed tone.

“Remove yourself from this vehicle. This is your first warning,” instructed the soldier. This man had killed and torn apart families of innocent people and denied me a simple answer as to *why*. I had attempted to reason and failed, so I knew taking a stand was all I could do.

And so I did.

I hopped down from the top of the tank, now calm and composed and stood once again in front of the tank. I could feel the seething anger of the soldiers radiating out of the tanks. But I stood my ground. A minute passed and the tank in front had not moved an inch. I could feel the cameras of the hidden reporters and journalists, taking pictures and recording the scene playing out before them, believing they had struck media gold. Through the deafening silence I could make out another barked order of guttural Chinese from the lead tank, but this time the voice was oddly calm and relaxed. Confused, I looked around and then I spotted them. A group of men wearing regular clothes, blending in perfectly with the onlookers. One of them rode a bicycle out towards me. He leant forward and whispered into my ear.

“You should’ve run whilst you had the chance.”

Two other men both dressed in dark blue tops ran out towards me, hands in the air showing the tanks they meant no harm. I understood why. They had to make it look believable. One of the secret police officers held my hands to my back and the other put a seemingly friendly arm around me and held me down with a vice-like grip.

They marched me off the street through the crowd of onlookers and kept walking. They dragged me over to an old, dilapidated building on the outskirts of Tiananmen Square and hauled me inside. They put my back to a wall and held my head down. One man clothed in black held an M-16 at his side and stared at me, his eyes boring through my skull as he studied his target.

He warned me in muffled Chinese not to move, but they didn’t have to say a word. I would meet the same fate as the other protesters who died before me for a righteous cause. They would never be remembered, in fact most wouldn’t even be recognised as a fatality in the crackdown in Tiananmen Square. They would be lost to the fictions and falsehoods of the People’s Liberation Army - the same soldiers who shot them down - and hidden by the lies of the government. The man lined up his gun with me and twisted a silencer onto the end of the barrel of the gun. The others walked out of the room and shut the door. However, unlike the thousands of protesters who stood with me, I made myself known. I showed the public and soon the world that the people of China would stand against corruption.

I made myself a name...

Tank Man.

He pulled the trigger.