

**MILITARY DIARIES**

**VALERIYA "NAVA" SUBOTINA**

**THE  
CAPTIVITY**

**KHARKIV  
FOLIO  
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## Foreword

Concrete, pieces of iron, dust, screams, and disfigured bodies... Everyone is in a rush; they are running, helping, and digging up debris. I am asking someone, “Where is Nava?” And I see that everything around me is destroyed, and only her bed still stands there, it is almost intact, and she is there. I rush toward her, and I can hear her breathing, she is just unconscious. I lift her and carry her away, to another end of the bunker, where the wounded people are, and I still remember this feeling when I was holding her like this as if she was a little child. That’s how light she was.

Nava was always slim and didn’t weigh much, not just back when she was malnourished. She used to be skinny, and that’s how I always knew Nava. She was easy-going, and she would take the initiative easily. She was always quite adventurous. It seemed that whenever one would give her a task she would do it and solve any problem very soon—easily and without any trouble.

I can’t remember exactly when we first met with Nava but I remember our encounter in 2022 very well. I remember a call from her and her question, “Can I come to you, to the Azovstal Plant?”

That call didn’t surprise me at all. It seemed to be pretty logical and quite expected. She was part of the Azov Battalion so she had to be together with us in this battle.

I told her to come because our “Azov” media team really needed her.

It was always easy for us to work together because I found her writing style, so emotional and raw, really relatable to mine.

She doesn't just write, she sincerely sympathizes, and she simply lives the lives of her articles' heroes. And it was really important because there were so many real and great heroes around. As for Mariupol, we had really quite a lot of them there, for sure.

It was truly a historical time for our country when she returned to the Azov Battalion and could be a participant in the most important events. That is why her texts from Mariupol were not just information reports; they were really painful and extremely powerful!

Even when we were at the Azovstal Plant, where we did not have any connection, and when the facility was under constant enemy fire, we would still find a way to spread the information. However, it was impossible to continue doing it when in captivity. Captivity is silence and muteness...

And this silence is still a reality for the majority of Mariupol defenders.

I am extremely happy that Nava has an opportunity to speak again, just as she always does. Back then, she was talking on behalf of all the soldiers, and she was talking in their voices. In the voices of all the soldiers who were fighting in Mariupol. And now, she is the voice of all those who are detained in Russian prisons.

I hope that the world will hear her!

*Major Svyatoslav (Kalyna) Palamar,  
Deputy Commander of the Azov Brigade*

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## Azovstal

I am escorted from yet another interrogation, which lasted longer than the interrogations of the others. There were no girls outside anymore, and we had to wait until they would escort me back to the Olenivka DIW<sup>1</sup>. Two Special Forces soldiers wearing balaclava hats approach me. I can see it in their eyes that one of them is definitely under thirty, and another one is in his forties. They are happy that they got an opportunity to speak with someone from the Azov Battalion in private. They can recognize me. They told me that they saw videos on TikTok featuring me, and I am thinking to myself that it was just some fucking surrealism. They saw me on TikTok and that's why they are happy about this encounter. Yet I feel I want just to puke at the possibility of having a conversation with any of them. The one who is in charge is telling me, *"You got such an interesting life. You need to write a book about it. I would read it."* And I was just thinking to myself, "What a nonsense it is. I am standing here with them, and it seems like we are having quite a normal conversation, and the situation seems to be quite normal too. However, I should really write a book about it."

Actually, just a few days ago, when I was still at the Azovstal Plant, I could not even imagine that I would see the enemy so close, that I would be actually talking with them, and yet I would be completely defenseless. That I would be in captivity and that this captivity would be not quite the usual captivity but rather a reprisal, a real massacre against people like me.

16 May 2022. We learned about the order to leave the Azovstal Plant under the security guarantees of international

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<sup>1</sup> DIW—Disciplinary Isolation Ward.

organizations, particularly the “Red Cross.” We had to lay down our weapons since we completed our task to contain the enemy forces, which were many times superior to our forces. Even if it were going to be captivity, it would be at least an “honorable captivity.” There’s a reason I am using this particular phrase here. I’ve heard these words myself. We’ve been told so.

I didn’t know how I was supposed to take it and react to it. What did this even mean? Well, I thought that at least they wouldn’t be beating the shit out of us for the Ukrainian tattoos. Or that they wouldn’t be beating the shit out of us anyway. It was hard to believe it, of course, but still...

However, I was still trying to calm myself with that order from our command. Yes, it was an order indeed. I wrote to my Andrii’s father that we were told to surrender and that I didn’t know what to do since everyone was leaving and going to surrender. He replied to me and told me that I had to be together with everyone else. He used to tell it to me before as well. He would always say so. I always had to be together with all our guys...

We weren’t surrendering because of our fear or feeble-mindedness, we were following the orders of the country’s command, and we were convinced that we would remain on the temporarily occupied territories, and that we would remain there all together, with our entire “Azov” family, and that we would stay there for about three or four months. We were convinced that they would treat us with some respect. That our appearance and our public status meant something. Because there were certain agreements, and there were certain guarantees.

On the next day, on May 17, I suddenly heard my call sign. I had to walk out together with five of my close people. I have known all these guys since 2015 because that was when I joined the Azov Battalion as a volunteer. I trusted them so I didn’t feel that scared at the time.

I had to take my belongings with me. I didn’t have much of them though. I didn’t bring much with me from home, just

a couple of sweaters, and a pair of pants... Now, that I am going into captivity, I'm taking with me even less luggage. We aren't supposed to spend a long time there anyway... I brought with me my sleeping bag, my roll mat, and a few T-shirts (one of them was a red one, with the "Metinvest" inscription on it, and I really wanted to take it with me since it became quite symbolic due to my stay at the Azovstal Plant), a bottle of shampoo I found at the plant, sanitary pads and hand cream.

Together with my favorite pants and a sweater brought from home, I also left the warm things that belonged to Alyona, a female medic who died at the Azovstal Plant. When I returned from the hospital, the girls gave these things to me. I was wearing them with gratitude and memory about her... We burnt everything that we weren't going to take with us. We burnt the Azov Battalion T-shirts with symbolic so that the enemy wouldn't be able to take them.

I was wearing the Azov Battalion multi-camouflaged uniform of one of the girls because my uniform was torn to pieces by the medics when I was injured. The uniform I was wearing now was too short for me as the girl was shorter than I was. However, it is what it is. That's all I got. I still have this uniform with me because it is really dear to me; it's a token of memory. I used to feel pride and power wearing it, and I still feel the same.

We are making our way out through the underground tunnels from the "Bastion-2" bunker, trying to get to the surface and to the point where we were supposed to be met and taken.

Moreover, it was so silent there... It was probably the first time when I could be just standing on the surface like that, without fearing the enemy fire, without fleeing, and without hiding. I was just standing there, among these broken and destroyed iron constructions towering above and around us, from all sides. It felt so weird... The Azovstal Plant was destroyed. The plant wasn't breathing anymore, and it wasn't feeling anything. This fiery dragon is now dead. We used to hide and shelter under the wings of this immense dead giant, and

now we could see it in all its scale and tragedy. We were fighting against it for such a long time when we were just civilians, the city residents; we were fighting against its harmful emissions, and its air pollution. And who could have thought that it would be this monster defending and sheltering us later, and we would be defending it? For several more months, we would be still breathing its iron dust and would get covered with this iron ourselves. So that others would start calling us “iron people”... This moment was like a snapshot from a movie. Nevertheless, it wasn't a movie.

We are going to the meeting point that they gave us where the other servicemen from various units who were defending Mariupol were supposed to gather and wait for us. The Russians are approaching us. We can see their uniforms, their insignia, their chevrons, and their flags... They are speaking with us, and they are even smiling at this point; however, we are starting to realize what is going on. I can feel this hopelessness, but it's not a total hopelessness yet. They are telling us to lay down our weapons, so I am laying down my automatic rifle and putting it in the vehicle. And I mean, it's not even my automatic rifle. My automatic rifle stayed somewhere under the rubble of the first “Bastion,” and this one probably belonged to one of my fallen comrades... And I have to give it away. I have to follow the orders of those who took the life of my husband. Bastards. And they are just smiling here, looking at me, dirty, tired but still strong, wearing my dear multi-camouflaged uniform and standing like this, among my guys.

They are looking through my backpack, searching for more weapons. But they can't find anything else. And then we were supposed to proceed and cross the bridge where they were searching for us again. And at one of the stages of this search, a Russian soldier is putting somewhere a memory card, which I've never had before. I can see that, and I told it to my guys later. We figured what it might have been, that it might have been the beginning of the traps the enemy was setting for us, the beginning of their dirty game, which has continued for

centuries already. There could be anything on that memory card, anything at all, including some doctored photos and videos that could compromise us later... It could have been even the shots of their own crimes committed by their own soldiers but dressed in our Ukrainian uniform. They have a good supply of our uniforms after they robbed several Azov Battalion bases in Yuriiivka, Hurzuf, and even Mariupol. No. I simply cannot let it happen; I cannot allow it to happen.

They are telling me to take off my uniform overcoat. They are pointing at my tattoos. They are asking for my name and writing it down. And then there was a long wait in the bus...

Through the bus windows, we can see injured Ukrainian soldiers barely walking along our buses. Those who had lighter injuries were basically carrying their brothers in arms who had more severe wounds. We were told that they would be exchanged in a prisoners' swap right away, and we were still believing it. Russian journalists are trying to film us with dozens of their cameras, and we are turning our faces away from them. We cannot see any representative of the international organizations that guaranteed our security there; they weren't present there, on that day.

Nobody was observing the rules of surrendering to captivity. Nobody was collecting our relatives' and families' contact details so that they could inform them about our whereabouts and where they were going to take us next. Nothing like that was happening there. Why wasn't anything like that happening though? There were just us and the Russians there. Moreover, if there were just us and the Russians, then who would guarantee that they would follow all the rules of treating us when we would be detained by them?

My Friend is sitting next to me. He is holding my hand. He is telling to me, "Nava, maybe they will exchange the girls soon. However, I would love it so much if they would exchange us all together. So that we would be able to talk, and so that we could calm, find peace and finally go to our families and loved ones." I agreed with everything he was saying, even though



I would prefer it if he would be the first to be exchanged. He has a family, and he had a fiancé who was waiting for him. As for me... I don't even know if my grandmother is still alive. My Andrii wouldn't meet me anymore, and that was the main thing. My city was seized by the enemy. I couldn't even manage to accept the way my city looked now. Everything seemed to be surreal as if it was just some bad dream, and if it was happening with someone else, not with me.

The bus starts moving. We can see a little “aquafresh” on an unfinished construction site in the Left Bank District in Mariupol. “Aquafresh” is what we're calling the enemy's flag. These white-blue-red stripes are painful for us to look at. They look so ridiculous. Their sizes and this placement, on the building, which nobody seems to be able to finish in so many years, and because everyone who was involved in its construction was simply killed in the end, so this site remains a ridiculous and out-of-place construction consisting of several grey concrete blocks. The Russians mark everything as “theirs,” just as a dog pisses on all the corners and trees to mark their territory. “This is mine, this is mine, this is mine,” is all you can hear looking at that trembling tricolor there. It's so out of place and so strange in this Ukrainian city. We are going forth though, and I can see their flags again, installed on the completely destroyed, burnt to the ground and mutilated buildings where there used to be life and laughter before, where people just lived their daily lives, quarrelling and celebrating holidays, celebrating births and marking deaths. However, all of that used to be a normal life scenario, while now all I could see around was death, destruction and a total common tragedy. This city doesn't even moan and howl anymore. The city just got completely silent. It is silent like a raped and beaten woman who was abandoned now and just left out in the cold. And was it even worth it at that moment telling her that you would be back, at the time when you are simply scared to even imagine your comeback? Because you went through a total and unbelievable terror together, however, this moment is still

the most horrifying one, when I was just passing by in this bus, leaving everything here behind. Leaving behind both my dead and my living family. Because I don't have another choice. Or do I?

It would be later, after I would be already released from the captivity when I'd learn about one of our guys who refused to surrender. He stayed, he didn't surrender, and he left the occupied territories to Ukraine. I would learn about him, and then later, I would also learn about other people like him, and I would never be able to live in peace since then because I didn't even try. I was scared to make this decision. But why was I scared? What was I fearing? Was it death? Was it loneliness? Maybe the reason was just that I simply didn't have any idea about what was waiting for me. And maybe it was also sort of shame... It will always stay with me. I never feel ashamed for anything except for the feeling of fear facing someone...

Shevchenko's portrait is looking at me solemnly from the mosaic facade of the old and abandoned cinema. I can see anger in his eyes, and I would even call it hatred. I would drive by millions of times, but I can swear that it was the first time when he was looking at me like that as if he was telling me, "What the hell are you doing now? Have you gone completely insane?"

But the bus kept driving, carrying my desperation and yes, my immense, my endless feeling of shame as well.

I can see people in the streets from time to time. They're pointing their fingers at us and they're filming us with their phones. Most of them are wearing the enemy uniform. And this is my neighborhood... My apartment is in a building somewhere nearby, where there's the only thing that still matters to me, my Grandmother Tonya and my cat Marusya. I felt so scared that my grandmother might learn about everything that was going on, and that she might even go out in the street and throw herself under the bus. What would I be doing then? But I can't see her anywhere. We continue our trip, and my neighborhood disappears, I can't see it anymore, and all I have left now are my hopes that someone would support her and help her, that she

wouldn't be left there alone, and that she wouldn't learn about the death of my Andryusha<sup>1</sup>, and about my death in captivity as well, when she would be all alone there.

I didn't think at that time that I would survive the enemy's captivity. Before leaving the Azovstal Plant, I didn't inform anyone about this order, I only shared it with my husband's father and with my friend. My friend was sure that we would be exchanged almost right away. I think everyone just wanted to believe in something good after all the horrors that already happened.

We were driving along the road that I knew very well. Through the occupied city of Volnovakha, where there was the "Novotroyitsky" checkpoint, which was still so familiar and so dear to me since the times when I was serving in the Border Guard unit. We would bring the journalists there quite often so they could get material for their coverage, and I would be talking to those who would cross the dividing line there, trying to either enter or exit the territory. I couldn't comprehend and accept the necessity of erecting and developing that checkpoint because it seemed to me back then that it made no sense. What for? Why did we have to build it as if we meant for it to stand there for centuries if we would need to remove it fairly soon anyway? If the Ukrainian border were supposed to be restored, these checkpoints wouldn't be necessary at all. We simply wouldn't need them.

Buhas... That's the place where we would always stop to eat some tasty *chebureks*<sup>2</sup>... We would laugh here loudly, and we would share our worries about some troubles in service. I remember how we were caught in the middle of the enemy fire not far from there, at the checkpoint. East... Death was always preying on us there, but life would prevail every time.

In the last summer of my service in the Donetsk Border Guard unit, in 2020, there was almost no movement at this checkpoint due to COVID and quarantine. It was so silent here,

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<sup>1</sup> Andryusha—intimate for Andrii.

<sup>2</sup> Kind of deep-fried meat buns.

and only sometimes we could hear the enemy fire against the positions of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, at a distance, maybe a couple of kilometers away from here. During that summer, swallows made their nest under the ceiling of our checkpoint. It felt as if nature was taking over what the people had left behind. It seemed like nature would rule here forever now, and everything would gradually come back in order. Moreover, I remember a conversation I had with a teenage boy at the checkpoint back then, and how this conversation seemed to be so distant to me now. I remember this teenage boy telling me that he wanted to become a soldier when he grew up, but he was telling me that he couldn't choose yet on what side and for whom he would be fighting. It seemed to me that that boy didn't really want to be a soldier anymore, that he wanted to be a doctor or a driver instead. That there was no division again and that there was only Ukraine. And that there were these swallows here, and that they would keep making their nests in the abandoned checkpoints here.

But no, it was different. Two years went by, and there was this boy again, and he finally made his choice, the same as his father and his older brother did. They put on the enemy uniform, and soon they would meet us in a penitentiary colony in the Donetsk Oblast, feeling like the winners over their own people here, and fighting for the interests of another country.

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## Olenivka

East of Ukraine is a location I have been quite familiar with since my childhood. Until I turned fifteen years old, and until I enrolled in the university, I used to live among all those *terricones*<sup>1</sup>, ponds, and forest plantations... The water from the well used to be the tastiest back then. However, the water well itself was right near the cemetery, but it didn't really bother anyone too much. There were two cemeteries in eyeshot there. One of them was quite small, and it was right in front of my room windows. Our apartment's balcony faced another one. The second one, on the hill, was really quite huge. I really used to like it. It was the so-called "miners' cemetery" where my grandfather was buried. The Donetsk ridge was not far from it, those monumental and beautiful cliffs and forest plantations on the *terricones*. It was so fascinating. There was a spot saved for my grandmother right near my grandfather's grave. There was a monument on the grave there, even though when my grandfather was still alive he would always make it clear that he didn't want to have any monument there. He really wanted to have a huge rock, a piece of that Donetsk ridge installed on his grave instead. However, my grandmother was a teacher so she really wanted to make it all "the right way." Therefore, she used her last savings to buy and install a beautiful monument made from the red granite on my grandfather's grave, and this monument was really beautiful, in her opinion.

Most of us usually don't really respect our deceased ones. When they die, they automatically become the possession of the living ones, so all the decisions are usually made for them

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<sup>1</sup> Terricones—slagheaps of mineral wastes around the coalmines.

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