

Light for the Lost Traitor explores grief through the emotional landscape of my characters. In writing this piece, I wanted to examine the kind of grief that comes from witnessing death, causing harm, and losing one's sense of identity in the midst of war. Harlan's journey reflects a form of grief that isn't tied to a single person's death, but to the systemic loss of innocence, morality, and the version of himself he once believed in.

Creating this work allowed me to explore how people confront the consequences of violence, betrayal, and irreversible choices. I used writing as a way to understand how grief shapes decisions, relationships, and the desire to act differently. Through Harlan's attempt to save villagers and protect a young boy, I explored how grief can become a catalyst for courage and transformation in many cases. Creating this piece was emotionally intense; I had to step into the mindset of characters facing fear, death, and impossible choices. Writing it required me to imagine the emotional weight of loss and moral conflict, which made the process heavy but meaningful spiritually.

Writing this story helped me think more deeply about the emotional weight of loss—how loss isolates, reshapes identity, and pushes people toward forms of redemption reflective of their character. Crafting this narrative helped me empathize with those who carry grief and better understand how communities can be changed by acts of compassion in the face of death.

Light for the Lost Traitor

The snow lay thick over the village, softening the edges of ruin. Smoke curled from broken chimneys, burning black against the dull, gray sky. Harlan trudged through patches of snow, his boots leaving thick prints that the wind quickly attempted to smother. Blood had been smeared from his hands, but today he could not. The orders to execute civilians had come down, crisp and unquestionable, in the pretense of the morning fog. His hands sagged from the weight of rifles; the hollow echo of obeying commands and cold certainty of executing orders without question tormented him. Today, he could not.

He dropped his rifle and ran, boots trudging against the freezing snow seeping into his feet.

The houses were barrages of splintered wood piled under collapsed roofs stained by clunky patches of war-ridden ice. A flicker of movement emerged from the far distance: a small figure, crouching beneath some rubble while wearing a torn leather jacket, trembled in the cold. A boy, no older than twelve, trembled, clutching a map that lay crumpled with frayed edges and frozen corners.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Harlan yelled into the frosty atmosphere, though his voice cracked.

The boy pressed his lips together. He shook his head silently. A spark of fire lingered in the boy’s eyes. Harlan trudged towards the boy as his chest tightened. The map crinkled under the boy’s frozen fingers. Harlan noticed the tiny smears of dirt and dried blood staining the corners. Each line on the paper detailed trench positions, artillery coordinates, and the route of the enemy’s infantry columns; each inked arrow pointing to enemy trench lines, each circled village marking supply depots, each numbered infantry column a hidden gauntlet of rifles and bayonets. The boy, with clattering teeth and fogging breath, whispered,

“I slipped past the sentry at the north hall and into the armory. I found the maps inside the lieutenant’s wooden drawer.” Harlan saw the frost on the boy’s eyelashes and the sweat drying on his temples. This was a warning—an imminent ambush on another village. Hundreds of lives would be lost if they did nothing. Harlan swallowed and crouched beside the boy, saying,

“We have to move.” They silently trudged through the snow, absorbing the crunch of ice beneath their boots. Harlan’s mind churned. Turn the boy in, flee alone, or act? Each thought felt like a stone tied to his chest. The child’s gaze never wavered, yet the weight of trust lay heavy.

By nightfall, they had crossed two patrol lines, secretly sidestepping the harsh glare of searchlights and the snap of distant rifles. Harlan’s fingers were numb, and the child’s small hands shook as he clenched the maps. Hunger gnawed at their bellies. They took refuge in a hollowed-out barn. Harlan tore strips from his coat to wrap around the boy’s wrists.

“You’re strong,” Harlan said quietly. “You shouldn’t have to be.”

The boy met his eyes. For the first time, he spoke. “I have to stop it. If I don’t...” His voice faltered as he shook the maps. “I saw what happens.”

Harlan nodded.

They moved at dawn. The wind had turned cruel. Snow whipped at their faces, stung their eyes, and coated their eyelashes with numbing frost. They climbed over a shattered stone wall stacked mountains high and trudged through frozen fields dragging down their legs. Every sound—the distant bark of a dog, the sharp crack of ice, the creak of a half-collapsed barn—dug at their ears. The ghost of bullets loomed over Harlan, with past decisions and failed comrades weighing on every step.

In his twenties, Harlan dreamt of honor—carrying the flag with pride across snow-laden streets. That was before the orders came, before the terrorizing screams in the villages, before he learned that honor was often defined by obedience, not morality. Now, the snow and wind and excruciating silence of the wilderness tugged at his heart.

At night, they huddled in an abandoned cabin. A frozen hearth and scattered hay offered only a sliver of warmth. The boy shivered beneath the coat Harlan had wrapped around him.

“You’re Harlan,” the boy said softly. “You’re... different.”

Harlan smiled faintly. “Different is dangerous.”

“I like dangerous,” the boy said. A grin cracked his frozen lips. The following day, along the road, the boy asked curious questions.

“Why did you leave your army?” Harlan’s fingers brushed the map.

“Because sometimes following orders makes a man lose himself. And I want to hold on to who I am.”

The boy nodded. Harlan thought of his German comrades who would call him traitor, who would hunt him down for this “despicable” act, who would afflict disgrace upon his name. He thought about the Führer, Adolf Hitler, and felt the icy pang of disappointment press on his chest. The man who had entrusted him with uniform, orders, and purpose—who had willingly promised glory and power—would see his selfish betrayal as a stain on the Reich. He imagined Hitler’s piercing gaze, the curl of his mustache tightening in fury, the voice booming across maps and barracks, and Harlan flinched.

By dusk, they had stumbled into the low village situated near the neutral battalion's dominant command post. Snow crunched beneath their boots as lanterns casted wavering light across mud-streaked walls. Harlan's hoarse voice pleaded for an audience. The map lay open on a rough-hewn table where ink glistened in the lamplight. He circled tiny villages, marked artillery positions, and followed columns of advancing men.

"Here," he whispered, voice tight, "here the ambush waits. Hundreds will die if they march blindly."

Two Jewish citizens from the eastern battalion leaned close to Harlan, whispering in clipped Yiddish. One, eyes wide and tense, said urgently,

"We must instantly escape! The eastern column is pressed. We are being attacked!"

"Move now, or the northern ridge will be overrun!" another said. Harlan's chest tightened as he traced the map with his finger, feeling the deadly precision of the approaching German battalion. Beside him, the boy's gaze never wavered. Harlan said aloud, voice firm,

"We have to get everyone out before it's too late." The officers exchanged uneasy glances and nodded.

Harlan imagined Hitler's face above the map—the Führer's eyes narrowing in fury, the mustache twitching, the voice booming over maps and officers, demanding loyalty, glory, obedience. A chill ran down his spine, that the man who had granted him rank, uniform, and power would see this defiance as a stain. Yet, he could not turn away when death waited for the unaware.

Finally, the orders came: hastily scrawled papers pinned to doors, nailed to frosty trees in the village square, fluttering in the cold wind. Smoke spiraled from crooked chimneys, twisting into the dark night, as families clutched children and spilled into snow-packed streets. Lanterns swayed across mud-streaked walls as doors banged open with ice-crusting snow sparkling under frantic feet. Harlan moved among them as he overheard the sharp calls of alarm, the scrape of sleds, the whinny of terrified horses, and the crackle of frost under boots. Families poured from half-collapsed cottages, clinging to bundles of lanterns casting dancing shadows on frost-encrusted walls. Smoke mixed with their breath and the hiss of sleet on tin roofs. Harlan's boots sank into snowdrifts as he ran beside the fleeing villagers, catching glimpses of terrified faces and shivering hands. The boy,

cheeks red from wind and cold, clutched the map. As they slowly dimmed in the distance, the boy waved, and Harlan smiled.

The snow began to thicken, as gray clouds curled low over the forest. Lantern light from distant villagers flickered like distant stars, but subtle German boots echoed behind him. Harlan turned around as he saw shadows moving between the trees. Those shadows hid gleaming rifles. Harlan pressed into a hollow, his eyes scanning for movement. His breath crystallized in the freezing air.

A sudden shout pierced the wind:

“Halt! Intruders!” German soldiers burst through the snow-laden underbrush. Harlan’s hands shot up. He spun to face the soldiers. Bullets pierced through the night, ricocheting off icy trunks.

He ran with snow clinging to his hair and uniform, but the circle of soldiers enclosed immediately. A rope of rifle barrels cut off every exit. He stumbled hard into the snow and scrambled to rise. His boots sank into icy drifts as hands gripped him from all sides.

The last thing he saw was the forest, dark and silent, stretching beyond the village, and the disappearing glow of lanterns dancing on fleeing villagers in the distance. Then a rough yank threw him to his knees. A rifle butt pressed to his shoulder. The snow swirled in blinding spirals. The night swallowed his cry. Harlan, a traitor to some and savior to others, was caught—his fate was unresolved and suspended in the brittle silence of winter.