

REVOLUTIONARY PRINCES, PAUPERS AND PRETENDERS

MJ Politis

mjpolitis@yahoo.com

copyrighted, June, 2017

Chapter 1

According to the authorities in Moscow and St Petersburg, Father Vasili was just Vasili, an old man with long beard who tilled the land for six days a week and then played at being a Priest on Sunday. The Church he had built to preach his faith and serve his peasant parishioners in 1772 had been found out by Catherine the Great's Army, converted into a storage house for weapons, then a whore house for the soldiers, then into a heap of rubble when the unit got reassigned to protect Law and Order in the New Russian Empire elsewhere. But such was not new to Old Believers, priests who refused to accept Nikon's so called reforms in 1666 in Church Doctrine and practice which ultimately served the Czar rather than God.

"So, Vasili Antonowich," the forty-five year old priest with the white beard and mane of a man twice his age said to himself as his eye was held hostage by a reflection of himself in a pot hanging on the wall of this third shack which he called a Church rather than a Temple from which he very illegally continued to teach and be sustained by Old Traditions in a world and new Church gone mad. "What can I tell the peasants today that will make their lives tolerable, or perhaps if I am convincing enough, meaningful? And what to put on the gravestone?" the wrinkle skinned, balding clergymen with a muscular body made stronger than any laymen he served, by necessity, continued to a sparrow that landed on the windowceil as he offered his late autumn visitor a small handful of bread. "Unlike the painfully departed, I was born to noble birth, and therefore allowed to have a last name. To a land and people owning father named Anton who would probably not approve of me giving up the priviledges he struggled, killed and died for. Then again, the law that served his pocketbook and my comfort in my younger days says that these peasants are not allowed to have last names, unless of course the landowners who own them decide to adopt them as special servants."

The avian messenger seemed more interested in listening to Vasili than the food, as he did look up at him between bites.

"It is ironic that you are a sparrow," Vasili commented to the bird. "Jesus, whose presence is not as strong if you pronounce it the way the Czar's approved priests do, said that we humans should not worry about living day to day, as God provides for you sparrows, and if those of us with arms rather than wings do our best to do His Will, He will provide for us also. Yet..."

Vasili waited for word from the sparrow as to how and why living so true to the land and the Spirit of the Lord ABOVE yielded such bitter fruit below. He needed answers to so many questions, such as why the epidemics and famine in Moscow two years earlier were being blamed on peasants here. According to the Lords and Ladies who overtaxed these

landless and often breadless workers of the soil, serfs were lazy as well as stupid, and therefore were unable to produce their quotas of wheat, barley, milk and livestock. Indeed, perhaps they were soulless as well, functionally anyway. And instruments of the devil when allowed too much free expression of thought and action.

Vasili looked at the coffin holding the most recent demonically-possessed savage who 'jumped out off the roof' after daring to bring a petition to Yakov Boris Dmitrovich, a man rich enough to not only have three names, but own forty people who had only one. "Sonya," he whispered to the scarred and mutilated body in the best clad in only white clothing her family could provide. "I told you that after Catherine the 'Great' disallowed people like you, and me, the right to bring ANY petition to her, by law, the unwritten law was that you are not allowed to petition your landlords either. And that your earthly Master can do whatever he wants to you, even when he is sober, without any consequences, according to Catherine's new law. I warned you, your sister, your father and so many others of this!"

The bird chirped on its ancient songs, joined by another of its kind, while Father Vasili's tears of rage mixed with those of shame, streaming down his cheeks from different sides of his face, and conflicted Soul. "To do God's Work effectively, we have to use the brains he gave us as well as the courage we give each other, and are supposed to access!" he continued while trying to restrain himself. He looked at the body of the slain woman he decided to take into his own house, as there was no immediate family left to inter her body with for the three days the departed needed as 'sleeping time.' "But, I will set a place at my table for you, in forty days, as your brother Ivan and mother Anna will not be coming back very soon after what they said to the soldiers," he continued, gently stoking the face of the gentle, naive 26 year old maiden who would not have the chance to grow into a cynical, voluntarily-sexually experienced old woman. "Maybe if you were born as a Cossack, or if you presented your suggestions to improve the efficiency of the Estate to Count Dmitrovich while Peter the Third was in power ten years ago when I was a younger man and you had just come into womanhood, we could have this conversation from the same side of the Veil."

Vasili self-observed himself thinking about 1762, and the 6 months during which Peter III, the ENLIGHTENED, not Peter the Great, was ruler of Russia. The German born 'import' to the Emperor's throne spoke little Russian but who understood the needs, and Souls, of the Russian people. He instituted 200 laws which freed rather than confined human behavior and aspirations. They included abolishing the Secret Police, allowing mortals to worship constructs of an Idealized Supreme beyond them as they wanted or needed to, giving the serfs freedom and land in exchange for the service they provided for the country or so many centuries and insuring that nobles would have to answer to authorities on EARTH for killing, raping or in so many 'colorful' ways torturing their serfs. As for the nobles, compulsory long terms of involuntary Military Service would be abolished, and the 20 year terms required for 'special' groups such as Cossacks and Jews would be severely minimized, making for willing soldiers who fought more effectively fight for their families. The Duma in Saint Petersburg, the closest democratic entity to the Communal Assembly in regions still ruled by the Yiak Cossacks on the

foothills of the Urals, and the Congress in the distant land of America that a few brave (or desperate) souls fled to but never came back from, was about to make a gold statue of Peter in 1762. The grateful and regal Monarch said that 'the gold is better used for other Purposes'.

"No wonder Peter the Third came down with the pox that disfigured his face, and was murdered by his wife, Sonya Augusta Fredrick, to take over the Throne and call herself Catherine the 'Great', instead of 'the Demoness'," Vasili muttered softly enough so that Sonya the slain would not be awakened from her restful slumber. "We Russians are a masochistic people," he said to her as he readjusted her feet in front of the Icons on the wall, so that her Soul could more easily pray to it, in the manner of the Old Believers rather than putting the head closest to such as was the 'reformed' requirement. He adjusted the belt put around her waist, which still fit very loosely due to the inability to eat what she and her family took out of the ground, sensing that it still was doing its job of keeping away evil spirits. The sun moved its way up to the morning sky, approaching the noon day time when Sonya the Slain would be put to rest in the ground, then afterwards spoken to and about by the rest of the village.

"If only Peter the Third could resurrect from the grave, as well as you did," Vasili dared to ask the likeness of Jesus on the icon hung on the wall. "Or maybe Peter's spirit could inhabit the body of someone who was in a position to understand what we are going though, AND do something about it? Or maybe Peter is still alive and in hiding, waiting or the right time to lead a Cossack revolution that will WORK this time, and not fail like all the others did? Do you think you can arrange that?"

As usual, Jesus gave the same answer.

"Have faith, yes I know," Vasili said, after which he crossed himself in the Old Believer way, bending his middle finger slightly, an offense that would cause his hand to be cut off if he attempted to do such in one of Catherine's Churches. Or incur a severe beating on the wrist if done in the presence of a most Cossack Priests.

For this funeral, Vasili would do SOMETHING public and defiant, in the service of the one True God and his fellow man. All forty of Count Dimitrivich's wards were in attendance. Their numbers included Sergei the carpenter, Natasha the cook, and Andre the music teacher. Sonya's previous owner, Count Dmitrovich, his wife, and children were present as well. As always, it was hard to tell who would inform on any transgression Vasili would make against Catherine's secular laws, or the Arch Bishop's clerical codes. Still, Vasili insisted that the procession move in a clockwise rather than counter clockwise direction en route to the burial place. And that any attempt to sing prayers to send Sonya off was monotone, in service of the True God, rather than in harmony, in service of the singers' vanity. Honoring some of the traditions common to the Old and New ways, Vasili put a paper crown atop Sonya's head, then invited all of the attendees to put something in the grave prior to entrusting the body to the earth.

Everyone, even Count Dmitrovitch, followed Vasili's instructions and example. It was a start anyway. And the start of something important for the village, and Mother Russia. The emaciated and overworked bodies of the other peasants buried in the graveyard, their place marked with a cross and no surname on the stone, seemed to agree.

The sun set over the Volga river, taking Sonya to a better place. Vasili felt and saw wind going through the trees. "You be well, Sonya," Father Vasili said. "Look after yourself, and if you can, send word to someone to help us," he continued. "And if at all possible, me, in the meantime." With that Vasili rose up and turned around, facing the ghosts behind him that materialized into real form. "Am I allowed to know where you are taking me?" he asked of the two horsemen in Imperial Army uniforms, visors covering their face and eyes. Their guns were pointed at his head. They were accompanied by an enclosed wagon from which sounds of struggle penetrated the Silence of the oncoming night, no doubt being taken for a midnight hayride because they didn't see the reason or value in having to give five bushels of wheat to their aristocratic superiors for every four bushels they took from the ground. "Wherever it is, I'll pray for all of you," Vasili said to the horsemen with a playful yet sincere smile. "But I need to know your names so that the True God can deliver to you good health, good fortune and..."

Before Vasili could offer the wishes of good children, good eating or a good roll in the hay with their sweethearts at home so somewhere FAR away from his home, he was pushed to the ground, his face tasting dirt. A Cossack hiding in the brush instructed him to pray hard so he could fight well.

CHAPTER 2

Vasili's bearlike rescuer was both a common Cossack and an exceptional one. Within a few days after said creature emerged from the comfort of his mother's womb into a snowy and cold world outside of it, his family hung an arrow, bow, musket, cartridge and bullet on the wall above his crib. When he was three, he was shown how to make his two small feet extend into four longer and stronger ones atop a horse. When he was 7, he accompanied all of the grown-ups on hunting, fishing and supply obtaining trips to places where one couldn't get what one needed from the bush. When he was 16 he was able to sprout a respectably-thick mustache on his upper lip. Due to his continued and escalating prowess as a hunter and bravery against Turkish mercenaries hired by the Sultan to do his dirty work upon Slavic Infidels when he was 17, the razor was applied to his head, the sides of it shaved down to the skin, leaving a thick lock which on top that extended down to the nape of his sunbaked neck. When he was 18 the fire behind his eyes experienced the warmth of love when they set upon the face of Sophia, who he introduced as his fiancée to the democratically elected Cossack assembly and then married in the village Church, as such was the legal requirement instituted by Peter the Great for the union and legitimacy of the children to be recognized in the rest of Russia.

When he was 19, he answered the call to enlist in the Imperial Army of the Czar, for a 20 year hitch, as doing such would insure that his village and the other Cossack communities

nestled on the Volga would continue to be allowed to maintain the autonomy from the bureaucrats in St. Petersburg and less visits from the tax collectors. At his farewell ceremony he was given a pouch of his native soul to hang around his neck, which he always honored and never took off. He made a sacred vow to the Russian Orthodox sanctioned village Priest, Father Michael, to be true to his Faith, and a pledge to his wife and unborn child to return home as soon and often as he could. When he was 22, he found out that more leaves to come home were granted to Cossacks who evacuated unarmed Jews and Indigenous Siberians from their villages than for winning battles where the Russian Army was outnumbered by Polish, Swedish, Prussian or Turkish troops.

By the time he was 23, he decided that he would only fight battles against enemies of his own choosing, as did his father, his father and all of the other fathers all the way back to 1565, and the Czars were not rulers given the right by God to defend Orthodox Christianity but minions hired by the devil to corrupt it. Fortunately, Stefan Ilonovick's time table of realizations were in synch with enough fellow Cossacks. Using the smarts in his head he inherited from his father, he paid off the men under him and his superior officer with money he had saved, as well as booty taken in his many conquests, to related to the Imperial authorities to spread the word that that he was killed in combat.

Two weeks later on a cold morning on his way back home to the Western side of the Urals, Stefan sensed that he was being followed as a November flurry escalated into a snowfall. When he turned around, his most faithful subordinate, who now wore Lieutenant insignia, was leading a party of Imperial soldiers in search of deserters, at least ten of them caged in a wagon behind them. Killing young Lt. Fyederov was the hardest thing Stefan ever did. As was liberating the deserters in the wagon so they could find their way back home to places as far away as Vladivostock. As was hunting down every Imperial Soldier left standing, most of whom met their end with Stefan's bullets, arrows or sabre. It was the start of 'Stefan's Rebellion', an event that would be imprinted the Soul of the originator of it, but unfortunately not into any history books. But perhaps the combat inexperienced Imperial Privates who ran away after the first battle, leaving their boots and breakfast behind, would recall and relate the events to their grandchildren. One of the liberated prisoners decided to stay access the opportunity to have a conversation with Stefan rather than take an Imperial Army horse back home without any delay.

Like, Stefan, he was another disillusioned officer, a low born Cossack by the name of Yemelyon Pugochev. Unlike Stefan, he had the ability to sell sand to a man stranded in the desert. Stefan knew that half of what came out of Pugochev's mouth was fable in celebration of himself. The rest was a mixture of hatred for the Czarina and love for his Native Cossack homeland. But such was far more effective than anything that came out of Stefan's mouth when he and Yemelyon stopped in to water their horses in Cossack settlements and give peasants money they had stolen from rich landowners and all manner of booty from Imperial Army supply wagons.

Pugochev was a better talker than a fighter. He could recruit more disgruntled peasants and hot under the collar Cossacks in their very mobile village than Stefan or anyone else

could, which he did by never revealing his real name. Only God and Stefan knew the real truth behind how he and Pugochev had liberated Serfs, Cossacks and other undesirables from being carted off the Siberia, and how the pair of rebel bandits robbed the rich and gave to the poor between skirmishes. But Pugachev was better at relating tales of heroism of those who had joined their band of 15 rebels than Stefan was. Indeed, when trying to gain more recruits to push the Imperial Army back to their side of the Volga, Stefan's speeches made those who signed up take early leave of their new Calling. Maybe it was because Stefan told the truth about the realities of fighting a Revolution, while Pugachev never let the truth stand in the way of a stirring story, particularly when that yarn glorified him. And related tales of bravery and prowess performed by Stefan or someone else that he took credit for when they were not within ear range.

"I know," Stefan said on this Spring morning to his horse Big Wind as Pugachev worked his way to the center of a village square filled where peasants gathering around a shack they used as a tavern and secret meeting hall. Those unfortunate, half starved, half naked unfortunates were now supplied with food, drink and new clothing Stefan had procured with the barrel of a his gun from a passing supply wagon destined for aristocrats in Kiev. "As my father informed me on his deathbed as well as many times before, 'God values those who do his work, but men value those who do the talking. Yet the Creator requires both doers and talkers to have His Will be done on earth,'" Stefan continued.

As usual, the horse answered with a snortle which Stefan took as a 'yes, I feel what you are saying but don't quite understand it'. Such was not atypical of Stefan's conversation with his two legged comrades, who these days were anyone who was either trying to get back home to their family, or remain in the field to defend them from Catherine's Army or Secret Police.

Stefan looked upon that band of recruits that included Cossacks, peasants, Indigenous Pagan peoples who were thrown off their land by Christian Cossacks, and even a few Islamic Tatars. Many of them had worked their way into the crowd of unassuming peasants, blending amongst them with regard to clothing and temperament. They cheered whenever Pugachev made another promise of land and freedom for all those who decided to join his Revolution. They yelled out questions as to how it would be done which were answered with well rehearsed, and some improvised, answers by Comrade Pugachev. Eventually the peasants clenched their arthritic, worked well to the bone fingers in fists of unified rage, vowing their support and promising that they would fight bravely and effectively, though in truth few had fired a gun nor grabbed hold of a sabre handle.

"Now it's our turn to go on stage," Stefan said to his Big Wind, after which he rode him forward, pulling into view out a supply sled loaded with weapons taken from the Imperial Army, as well as 'we just want to be left alone' anybodies who refused to raise up arms against them.

Stefan counted the number of men who grabbed hold of the weapons, and the number of such weapons. As a man of the world who just wanted to live a happy life with his

family at home, he was well aware of what happened in previous revolutions, dating all the way back to Stenka Razan a century ago, and countless others before that. For every warrior in Pugachev's Band of Rebels there were at least ten soldiers in the Imperial Army. An Army that was better trained, better armed, better fed, better experienced and more effectively motivated. Stefan couldn't figure out what was missing, until he noticed at least five peasants grabbing hold of an old musket, bent sabre or pistol then gazing back at the Church as if to ask if this was the right thing to do. The Priest, a government sanctioned New Believer, gave his approval but certainly not his consent. And if asked to give his blessing, he would no doubt refuse or be unable to convincingly lie about his convictions. Soon five more peasants looked to the bearded man in black clothing that had no tears in it and a belly underneath that seemed well fed. Then five more. Eventually, all eyes fell upon this man who seemed to have Godlike power over his flock, and, to be fair, probably more compassion for them than the Heavenly Father did, in Stefan's very private estimation anyway.

It was then that another man in Black spoke out. "Do not listen to this anarchist who speaks from a defective faith that calls itself new or reformed!" Father Vasili, as he now proudly called himself, hobbled to the highest platform he could find, a pile of junk wood, and began to preach the Doctrine of the Old Believers. He pointed out with rigor and enthusiasm how Archbishop Nikon in 1666 was completely wrong about everything. His arguments about what the proper name of Jesus is, the sinfulness of singing religious chants with harmony, the direction of processions and the manner in which one should do the sign of the cross fell on confused, deaf, then ridiculing ears.

"Maybe I should have not rescued that old coot from the Imperial Guard, so he could drive them crazy," Stefan mused to his horse. "Or we can send him to the Czarina and at least collect some money for turning in an Old Believer religious fanatic who, we know, is harmless, but she thinks isn't. But he is providing these people with some needed entertainment," he continued, referring the most talked with life form in his life to the joviality of the peasants. Indeed, the caste of souls who were the butt of ridicule from the upper classes, and emerging middle class, now were laughing at someone else. One of their own got behind the white haired Old Believer and mimicked his gestures to the crowd. Everyone was laughing at the farce of it all, until Father Vasili reached into his pocket and retrieved a fist full of bones.

"These are children's bones. From children who died because the Church that you attend is in service of the Czar, and not you," he proclaimed. Before the younger Priest whose title was official could answer, Vasili began to explain step by step, how the New Believer Clergymen and Churches were as responsible for their impoverished and enslaved states as the landlords, aristocrats, and the Czars. All except for one Czar, Peter III, who was not killed, but remained in 'hiding' till the right time. And who has returned to give them land, freedom and dignity in the form of their new leader, none other than Yemelyan Pugachev.

Vasili went on to explain how the rebel bandit resembled Peter III, showing them sketches of the Enlightened Czar whose 6 month democratic rule was ended by the evil

Catherine, who was now heralded as ‘the Great’. Vasili didn’t specify whether Pugachev was Peter III emerging from hiding, or having resurrected from the dead. But the peasants didn’t seem to care. Each believed what needed to, as it beat believing that the rest of their lives and the lives of their children would be as miserable as they had been in the past.

When Vasili invited Pugachev, or rather Peter III, to come up to the top of the pile of village garbage, the illiterate, low born Don Cossack carried himself with more confidence, assertion and charisma than any Monarch Stefan had ever seen or imagined. In his camel hair coat and tilted blue hat, Pugachev waved to the crowd of new converts and, by the appearance of it, re-enthused old convert with what seemed to be a halo around his head, as the sun pushed its way through the clouds to illuminate his face, his dark brown eyes acquiring a glow that no one could look away from.

“So, whose idea was this, Pugachev’s, Old Fart Vasili, or God’s?” Stefan asked of his horse as the illusion became reality. The village that had suffered in its own hollow silence for generations was now transformed into a boisterous celebration of Freedom, Assertion and Compassion. Even Stefan felt a smile taking over his tired face as he allowed himself to ponder that maybe the Old Believer was right. At the very least more Old Believers would be brought into the Revolution. And maybe a New Belief that went beyond religion could come of it.

Yemelyon Pugachev, if that was his real name, lived in a world of illusion rather than reality, thinking himself to be Peter III, resurrected from the dead on some days, emerging from hiding after having escaping his wife Emperess Catherine’s ax on some days but not others. But enough people believed in such an illusion, as perhaps that was necessary to established a permanent Cossack Republic completely independent of Russia or any other ‘civilized’ country which was ruled by aristocrats rather than hard working people.

CHAPTER 3

It was just another day at the estate for Svetlana Lazinski. Soon after the sun reached its assigned place in the sky in the sky, she awoke from a restless slumber and tended to duties in her assigned place in life. As assigned by her noble-born father, who everyone said adored her from the time she was an infant, the 23 year old Countessa pointed to the dress that would make her natural beauty even more magnificent, to him as well as the suitor who would be a breakfast guest. As assigned by her foreign born and hard of hearing mother, who was worried that her daughter was approaching an age when she would have a limited number of well-stocked suitors who could bail the family out of its clandestine debt. As expected of her, Svetlana sat rigidly and expressionlessly at the mirror. The young Countessa allowed one balding servant to curl her hair while another, whose face had been robbed of its natural beauty by too much exposure to the elements and an accident with a sharp swather, do her make up. As assigned by God, Who she was supposed to be grateful to for her station and privileges, Sventlana looked outside the

window at the peasants tilling the field. Their bodies suffered the agony of another day of back breaking work but whose spirits were spared the deadly lifelessness which permeated every corner of the lavish estate inside the brick walls that they built, no matter how many paintings from talented artists of lower stations were hung on the walls.

“Is something wrong, Countessa?” the balding house maid doing Sventlana’s hair asked, with more concern for her Mistress’ welfare than Sventlana had for herself. “You look more melancholy today than usual. And you were screaming in your sleep rather than merely moaning. Should you wish, I can provide to you an old family recipe for it.”

“The real remedy would be to find another family to be born into for me, one rich in Spirit rather than money, and for you to be free of my family, and me, Maria,” Sventlana replied. Providing action as proof for her convictions, the young Countessa fired her anger into her feet and pushed her body upward, rising out of her cushioned chair as if resurrecting from a grave made even more deadly by the expressionless comfort of it all. “I am going for a ride!” she asserted, grabbing hold of her riding boots herself, rather than ordering a servant to fetch them for her.

But before Svetlana could do so, the strong, moderately blistered hand of the old hairdresser who was never supposed to be addressed by anything except her Christian name, pushed the young Countessa her down into the chair, her face locked back into position for the disfigured younger house maid to continue painting the remainder of her Mistress’ face.

“I heard that there is another Revolution afoot, Irena,” Svetlana asked the young housemaid, as she was known to be looser with her tongue about the way things really were than most of the servants on the estate, perhaps the reason for her deformities, or perhaps not. “A Revolution started by Cossacks to form a democratic Republic for themselves, and example for the rest of Russia.”

“A revolt, that will fail, just like the twenty others that failed in your lifetime, and ten more that fell into pieces in my lifetime. All fought so that those illiterate savages can drink vodka, resist any new industrial invention beyond the wheel, fornicate with their daughters and rob from those who God has deemed worthy of being rich,” Maria interjected before any words could come from Irena’s opened mouth. Shutting down Irena’s spirit as well as her mouth with her consternating eyes, Maria continued. “Like these books you have here and have read, my dear and gentle Countessa. Which those ungrateful rebels would use for cartridges for their guns, and kindling for their campfires.”

“And the books that I write, or that they will write ?” Svetlana challenged Maria, while pushing aside Irena with the abruptness of a noble born woman to a mangy dog, or a slow moving fly. Such left in its wake behind on Svetlana’s face lip stick marks that made her appear to be a Pagan warriorress rather than a Christian aristocrat. “Perhaps books that come from their mouths, that I can put into words that my people will understand?”

Svetlana said somehow pleased at the new image of her face the accidental movement had produced.

The old woman who had been with Svetlana's family for as long as she could recognize faces pulled her volcanic fire back behind her eyes. Maria smiled sadly, then put her hand on Svetlana's shoulder, with more caring than her natural mother had ever shown her. Or perhaps was allowed to. "God has assigned me the job of protecting you from your imaginations, Svetlana," the old-low born woman said, addressing the young high-born one as if she were her own daughter, with as much love as any person or even horse had ever shown the Countessa. "It is also my Sacred Honor to protect you from saying or doing something that would be destructive to your people, and mine," Maria continued with a voice that Svetlana felt came from a place of Truth. Or rather, maybe only accuracy.

"So, we go on with life, your people and mine, and do nothing to change it?" the over-read but under-experienced Countessa challenged Maria, as well as the Fates and perhaps the Deity who she was representing.

With a nod of an aristocrat and the verbal-less conviction of a Mother Superior Nun, Maria instructed Irena to repair the splotched make up on Svetlana's face. "In its own mysterious way, Heaven watches over all of us," she said by way of her final explanation for it all, her eyes feeling and accepting as a gift, the pain in her prematurely arthritic body.

"And earth works!" Svetlana grunted between her ears, saying nothing with her mouth, as her lips were being prepared to be something she hated, yet everyone else on the Estate wanted to be.

CHAPTER 4

It had been a long and tiring day for Major Alexi Stralnikov in Moscow, most particularly because he was still on leave. Finally the day was done, the evening meal having been eaten. The dishes from which that bountiful fare was eaten were being cleaned by himself and his wife Olga. She was a woman who Alexi married when they were young who he hardly recognized now, despite the fact that she had not changed the manner in which she wore her hair nor the clothing she wore over her still shapely body in a decade.

All day, the muscular, smart, handsome and decorated Major who had climbed up the ranks in the Imperial Army on that rare-rewarded quality of merit had listened to his wife rant on about the faults and foibles of other Imperial Officer's families, relate more dirty laundry about half of her own, and righteously assert how she detested anyone who gossiped about anyone else. Whenever Alexi would try to examine, with any intensity of thought and feeling, the reasons for what threw her equilibrium off balance, or his honest opinions about anything, she would blast at him, saying that he was talking like he was

crazy. “If you say those things to anyone and carry on like that, you will be taken to the sanitarium and be locked up for being insane!” Olga screeched out like a banshee. Of course when Alexi laughed at what Olga thought was humor, she opened her soul up and felt a spark of life in her. But when he tried to kindle that spark into a sustaining Soul-affirming fire, she clammed up again, saying that she wanted a stressless, and uneventful life. Clearly she was afraid of her own Inner Fire and Vitality, and even more so of someone who wanted so much to open it up so she would not die between the ears before she expired below the neck.

“What do you want of me?” Alexia asked of Olga as she over-scrubbed the last of the dishes this third night of a two week leave which was probably a prelude to being stationed in Moscow for the next 3 months or longer.

“I need you to not be expressive in front of people,” Olga barked back at him with volcanic rage. “Or in front of me.”

“And the children?” Alexi asked calmly, wanting to scream it. He looked at their faces in the adjoining room reading their books, the piano Alexi had bought them still not being played because the music from it was too disruptive to the quiet that Olga seemed to be in more need of with each passing year. “We gave them birth, but we have a responsibility to provide them with life!” he exclaimed with vim and vigor. “Like you and me had when I played the violin and you played the---“

“---you are ranting again!” Olga sneered. “Like the men in your command who say whatever they think, and whatever they feel, without thinking of others. Men you KNOW should be disciplined rather than encouraged so they don’t become disruptors and destroy everything GOOD people have built. Christian people. The Czar’s people!”

Olga went on and on about the dangers of being too expressive, be they caused by too much vodka, books written by French and American Anarchists, or more access to more violins than Bibles. She was thankful when Catherine the Great imposed Law and Order in Russia, as what would follow would be domestic tranquility, with emphasis on the tranquil.

Alexi was no fan of Catherine the Great, knowing her personally to be egotistical, vane, and ignorant, and worst of all, a German-born anti-expression monarch who allowed expression only for herself and those under her who she could play with as toys when she was adventurous, and control when she felt threatened. In short, Catherine had become Olga and Olga wanted to become Catherine. But Alexi knew that the masses were not ready for Enlightenment. Indeed, though he knew that an unexamined life is not worth living, and that God’s Ultimate Will was for all of his children in Russia to share equally in the Bounty her provided them the opportunity to obtain, he also knew that such was a slow process. And that every Cossack rebel who tried to pass himself off as a Savior back to Stenka Razin a hundred years and fifty failed and/or corrupt revolts ago was opening up a candy store for hungry children who would eat themselves sick, then fight viciously amongst themselves as to who would be the next Candy King.

Alexi had heard about the revolts organized by a misfit Cossack whose origins were not confirmed clearly by any source. But the news about Pugachev's rebellion was kept within the confines of military ears. When one of Alexi's men blabbed about it in a tavern frequented by low level aristocrats in Minsk, he had him sent to Keiv with a demotion in rank.

A trusted Sergeant in Alexi's command who had relations in many places between the Urals and the Don river had shared the story with a newspaper publisher who had lost an arm valiantly defending Mother Russia and Christianity from invading Turks and personally saved the life of Peter the Great, according to his service record. Both patriots, who sought to alarm the civilized people of Russia from the growing revolt, were deemed lunatics in public, then subversives in military tribunal headed by Alexi, who was promoted to his current rank because of the manner of discretion he used to send one of the men to a sanitarium in Siberia, and the other to a grave, presumably by his own hand.

It gave Alexi no pleasure sending well meaning men to undeserved deaths, or worse, fates worse than death. In every decision he made, Alexi Stralnikov was the kind of officer who wanted the best for everyone under his command, and because of his dedication to such, they often got the worse fates imaginable.

Situations at home were even worse, as the letters Olga sent Alexi at the front seldom honored the truth, or him. As for the present, he kissed his children good night, promising them that he would be at home now, for a long time, and make everything Right for them, and their mother. They did not completely understand what he was thinking, but they finally felt like he was their father again. Such was the greatest victory Major Alexi had achieved in a long series of battles in all corners of the Russian Empire. For his heroism, he was rewarded by a knock on the door after everyone had gone to bed.

Upon opening the door, two young soldiers, each a foot taller than him, stood at attention. Between them stood a short man with greying hair combed over the burn scars on his left temples, a limping left leg. "As you know, my good friend, Alexi," the veteran Corporal who chose to not advance up the ranks as he would lose any real power or self respect said with a smile hiding a constellation of emotions. "No good deed goes unpunished."

Corporal Michael Kosinko apologetically removed his civilian coat, revealing a chest filled with medals, and fresh insignia on the shoulder pad. "They've promoted me to being an officer and you to being...useful again, Colonel," he said with a courtly bow, handing Alexi a letter. "So, do you think that you or our men will still respect me, now that I've been promoted?" the old peasant-turned hero soldier grumbled out of a face that only a mother could love, and a blind one at that.

"I suppose we'll see," Alexi said as he read the details of the honor bestowed upon him, signed by Catherine herself.

“You seem only half pleased, Alexi,” the elderly veteran said to the middle aged super soldier, reading the mixed expression on the man who he raised from a young, green aristocrat officer into one of the most valued leaders in the Imperial Army. “But look at the bright side,” he continued with an unbridled grin that Olga would ban from anyone entering her house. “You are relieved of the duty the Priest gave you at the alter fighting your wife, a losing battle.”

“Which I was just getting the courage and insight to win this time, Lieutenant Michael Kosinko,” Alexi replied, with a pit in his stomach that he knew he has to suck up into his gut. “But,” he continued, looking at the details of the assignment. “If we don’t destroy this revolt, it will destroy us. And everything we are trying to build here in the civilized portion of Mother Russia.” Alexi looked up at his bedroom window, his wife staring down at him with a mixture of rage and fear, accusing him with her eyes of everything wrong in her life and her children’s. “What I’m trying to build anyway,” he continued, showing his wife the insignia regarding his new promotion. She showed him the back of her head, then rammed closed the window behind her.

“Lesser minds always desperately try to dominate over greater ones, Alexi,” Lieutenant Michael offered by way of explanation of it all, as was the old low born sage’s habit in so many combative situations involving sabres rather than tongues. “Let us just hope that we are the tortured, overworked and exhausted ones with the greater minds. Most particularly where we are going now.”

By the look in Lt. Michael’s eyes, and according to everything Alexi knew about this insurrection promising freedom, land and bread for the oppressed, he knew this would not be any ordinary campaign to protect Mother Russia from foreign invaders. But at least he knew which side of this conflict he was on. For the moment anyway.

CHAPTER 5

The Cossack Army rode into the Tatar city without resistance, and without seeing a soul. Greeting them were the spring flies amidst the dust, fumes from smokestacks that towered from brick buildings four stories tall, and an old olive-skinned man with slanted brown eyes, sporting a white beard that framed a face with wrinkles that went down to the bone, a turban wrapped around his head.

Mustafa Babayev could trace his genetics back to Ghengis Khan, but then again, so could tens of thousands of other Tatars living within the borders of the Russian Empire who had temporal loyalties to the Czar, spiritual commitment to Allah as Sunni Moslems and a distrust of any hard core Christian Cossacks who invite you into a revolution where everyone on the winning side would get what they wanted. “I see that you have convinced some of my men already, Captain Stefan Ilonovick, ” the highly-literate Mullah said to foul smelling, most probably semi-literate Cossack field commander

bearing a large crucifix around his neck regarding the twenty Tatars amongst his diverse army of 200 strong who were wearing attire that displayed their allegiance to Allah.

Mustafa had been their spiritual mentor at the Mosque to all for most of their still young lives, and their employer at the metal works factory in the village he had converted into a modern city, something no Cossack would even know how to do in their homeland, no matter how many rubbles they had earned, extorted or stolen. Half of the Tatar volunteers in this latest Cossack led rebel army had been restless workers in Mustafa's factory who had quit their jobs, pledging with their hand to Allah and on the eyes of their horses that they would never return again. Smelling the mercury-tinged smoke coming out of the kilns behind Mustafa's back, he knew exactly why his workers had returned home as revolutionaries, and what made them bring their fellow rebels with them. "So, Captain Ilonovick, I assume that you came here to purchase or steal baklava, a dish common to us and considered exotic fare by Russian Christian who consider putting anything other than salt on your food a gateway to the depths of hell," he said with a wry smile to the Cossack leader. "And cutlery for dining on the Steppes of course."

"Cutlery that can chop the Imperial Army of Catherine the Terrible into pieces," Captain Stefan replied in a monotone, expressionless voice with even less life in it than the 'joyous hymns' of a Christian Orthodox Priest. "Guns, cannons, swords. Anything you can donate to a common cause."

"Or anything you can steal for your cause, if you dare to?" Mustafa replied with a courtly bow, after which the Army of 200 Cossack-led revolutionaries was welcomed by the business end of forty muskets from windows above them, accompanied by as many archers, along with loaded cannon the millinery shop on their right and the mill on their left. "Taking my city and our factories will not be as easy as taking the backwater villages of Iletsk or Rassypnaya," the Mullah informed his uninvited Christian guests. And if you are even thinking about converting our Mosque into a church like you Christians so love doing, or into a brothel after you've drunk too much sacrificial wine."

"Our intention is for you to join us, not fight us," the Cossack leader continued in a monotone voice that sounded more like he was reading a procedural manual than a proclaiming a revolutionary decree.

"We know what you Cossacks get, or are promised anyway, in exchange for fighting for Pugachev," Mustafa said. "A title that sounds as impressive as any in Catherine the Sadistic's Army. Unlimited use of the Ural River. Free salt. Twelve chetvi's of corn. Twelve rubbles each year. Free use of pasture lands for your livestock. Freedom to raise your children to be grow up like your ancient ancestors did. Freedom to worship in your own way, God, who you completely misunderstand, but think you do erroneously do." He then turned to the serfs, most of whom were either on foot or uneasily atop the slowest horses, identified by the rags they were wearing so proudly. "And you serfs! You were promised freedom from any master. The right to never be owned, nor to have any member of your family sold away from you by their owners to settle a poker debt or as gifts to their fiancés or mistresses. The right to own your own land rather than die

working someone else's." Mustafa's next glance was towards the most heavily bearded men in the Army, all of whom were clad in black from head to toe. "And you, Old Believers! You were promised that you would be allowed to preach from your own Churches again. That no New Believer would steal your congregation from you. That no Peter the Great admirer would cut off your beards. That no one would ever mock you for holding on to what you believed is the..."

Mustafa halted himself, realizing that he had just talked himself, and most of the still emerging inhabitants of his city within ear range, into believing in this revolt, and that it had somehow become a Revolution. A Revolution that would maybe include followers of Allah as well as self-liberated puppets of the Christian Czar. This Revolution that seemed to have a well organized militia, according to its record in the field thus far, and could turn into a victorious Army if it were armed with guns, sabres and shot produced by his factories. But there was one thing that this Army needed which did not arrive on foot, horseback, or wagon.

"Your leader, Pugechev? Whatever or whoever he really is," Mustafa asked Captain Ilonowick, within range of his ears only as the air filled with the clammer of rebels who prior to this had been at each other's throats, now cursing the Czar in unison, sharing expletives in at least three different languages. "Where is he now? Before I give my blessing to this experiment of yours, I will need to speak to him. When can you arrange that?"

The Cossack Captain who most probably measured time at home according to the sun's rising and falling in the big sky above him retrieved a watch from his breast pocket. "In ten minutes," he said, after which he looked up and provided Mustafa with a vitality-packed smile, accompanied by a rolled up parchment. "Read this aloud, in your language and ours."

"Only after I know who wrote it," Mustafa informed the Captain while perusing the document. "I never read any of the Czar's proclamation here. Even when they put a gun to my head."

"Which is why he chose you to read this one, in your own language, please," the Cossack Captain said, after which he pointed to a single rider atop a cliff overlooking the village, the sun behind him making him look more like a god than a man.

"So, this is Pugachev," Mustafa noted. "Who, according to THIS legend, escaped Catherine's axe, went into hiding for ten years, and if finally back to liberate his people."

"And yours," the Captain informed the Mullah.

Holding the proclamation in hand, Mustafa felt himself cast as a prime actor in a play that he had been given the honor of being conscripted into. Passing up on that honor would incur the wrath of Captain Ilonovick's militia, the soldiers behind Pugachev who followed him down the hill, and most of the Tatar citizenry of his own town, who had

been turned into converts. Punishment for not doing the right Revolutionary thing was also guaranteed by the proclamation Mustafa was charged with reading.

Mustafa looked towards the direction of Mecca and silently asked Allah what he should do. He allowed himself to believe that the answer to the invitation to join the Revolution was 'yes', ignoring for the moment the ancient saying that 'I would not want to be a member of any club that would have me as a member.'

CHAPTER 6

No matter how many times Colonel Alexi Stralnikov rode around the city of Kazan, he saw the same thing. "Eight hundred Imperial soldiers AND their officers who don't take their jobs or positions seriously, no matter how many time I remind them they are defending the largest trade and transportation route from Moscow and St. Petersburg to the Middle East," he grumbled to his horse. "Everyone back to the Norsemen knew that whoever controls the Volga River at this point in its tributaries controls the fate of Mother Russia. But, the Volga and Kazan still belongs to us, for the moment."

"The river belongs to the people, who will soon reclaim it as their own," the rider next to him reminded him in a soft yet authoritative female voice.

"And which people is that, Countessa Svetlana Lazinzki?" the middle aged, cynical, life-experienced Imperial Army officer inquired of the young, destructively naive and book-smart woman. "The Cossack thieves and Tatar bandits who I rescued you from?"

"It was you who kidnapped ME!" she barked back. "And killed ten Revolutionaries who----"

"----Were going to steal your virginity after they helped themselves to your jewels," Alexi interjected, feeling the pain of his most recently obtained wound on his left thigh. "*That is if your virginity is worth taking,*" he thought but did not say to the Countessa whose inner rage at her own kind and her ignorance of everyone other than her kind made every aspect of her goddess-like physical beauty seem ugly. "Besides, I made a promise to your father to get you here safe and sound."

"My father the Imperialist Thief who steals bread out of the mouths of starving peasants so he can eat Caviar, smoke expensive cigars and tell war stories around the fireplace about how he and you saved Mother Russia, the Czar and Orthodox Christianity single handed against the Poles and the Swedes!" the Countessa barked back.

"And so you can read books written by world famous authors, write uneducated opinions about the world without knowing anything about it, and ride expensive, well groomed horses while the steeds who have the misfortune of being between my legs get..." Alexi halted his horse, having felt another bout of lameness in his right front, not able to attribute it this time to rocks that had fallen from the still not repaired wall on the

Western side of the city. He dismounted, unwrapped the dressing around the leg and then flexed the limb. He noted that the tendon was swollen, and the stitches on the skin were filled with pus.

“I can re-sew the wound,” Lieutenant Kosinko offered, preparing to dismount from one of few horses in Kazan not rented out or sold to civilian shopkeepers or farmers by economically-creative supply sergeants who pocketed the money.

“No, Michael!” Alexi shouted out to his trusted second in command, and old friend. “You be sure that the Countessa Sventlana has an enjoyable ride, and that this green horse she is on doesn’t run away with her,” he continued, transferring the lead line to the Countessa’s horse to Kosinko’s firm hand grip. “I’ll wait here with Socrates, while you and this revolutionary, who is alive because this horse got its leg torn to pieces, come back here with the special lotion the Tatar Doctor has which I have been hearing about, which swears by the Honor of Allah works better than anything we have.” Alexi patted the neck of the horse he had ridden so long and so hard in the service of a two legged species who considers him and his kind beasts of burden while alive, and tasty filler for perogies when slain. “You, me and Socrates still have important work to do here.”

“The only important work to be done in this area of the world for an Imperial Soldier is on the Turkish frontier, defending the border there,” the Countessa said. Noting that she finally barked something out of her mouth that found a vulnerable hole in Alexi’s psychological armor, Sventlana turned to the handsome, ‘perfect’ Colonel’s homely, aged junior officer. “Anyone sent here to this nowhere, nothing happening town is here because someone important in Moscow wants them out of the way, and out of their lives. And because it’s cheaper to send them here than Siberia. And they give you promotions in military rank here so you don’t figure out you’ve been demoted everyway else.”

Alexi looked behind him at the citadel of the city populated mostly by Volga Tatars, ethnic-Turks who Turkey didn’t want nor care about. Then there were Bashkir Moslems who the Tatars could give two shits about. Added to the mix were ‘big fish in small pond’ Christians who failed to establish themselves back home in White Russia. He pondered the matter of Pugachev, leader of a revolt that he was told was too be a revolution. He recently found out that the Cossack Revolutionary had a bounty of 500 rubbles on his head, a sum which would not be worthy of a third class real estate swindler in Kiev. Then Alexi considered all the well-intended remarks made by the soldiers under his command here, and the officers above him. All told, and sometimes warned, the vigilant and hard working Alexi that ‘for his health’, he should not work nor worry so much.

Alexi did a quick assessment of the defenses around and in Kazan. Nine cannon and 800 soldiers could be turned into active service if the bugal called them. He could also count on the support of a citizenry of well fed Tatars and associated outpost misfits who had far more to gain by staying loyal to the Czar than joining ranks with famished rebels. Besides, an egotistical Cossack bandit who was not worth a bounty of more than 500 rubbles could hardly raise an Army that could amount to anything. Still, there as that

matter of duty, and of all the tasks Alexi was good at. Worrying about the welfare of his men, and his enemies (who one day could become allies), was what he always did best.

Turning around to the river, Alexi asked the Volga for an answer. As always when he consulted its soul, it gave his mind an answer. But instead of being delivered in the Ancient language of Silence, it was in the form of galloping hoof behind her.

“Alexi!” Lieutenant Kosinko asked as he grabbed hold of a nearly escaped Countessa Sventlana, who had cut the lead line keeping her with him.

She made a run for the river, running her horse at full speed towards the banks.

“What do we do with her?” Kosinko said as he spurred his horse on after her.

“Let her go,” Alexi answered, holding Kosinko back. “She’s an educated girl. On an educated horse. And the Volga protects those who protect her.” A smile came to his face, moments before the event he predicted happened.

“You bastard!” Countessa Sventlana yelled at the horse as he made a quick stop at the river, tossing her over his neck and into a pool of cold water. “And you too!” the elegant, voluptuous Countessa, now looking like a rain soaked scarecrow yelled back to Alexi and Michael, followed by expletives in several languages directed at them, her earthly father (who was making deals to get even richer in the Kazan citadel), the Heavenly Father above, and finally herself.

CHAPTER 7

Stefan Ilonowick settled in for an evening meal of roast lamb, cakes, and French brandy at the mobile camp he was put in charge of, which was shared equally with everyone under him, irrespective of social rank or accomplishment. The Yaik river Cossack would have preferred to be eating dried fish, hard bread and vodka made from potato peels at home with his wife and children, being told by all of them what he should be doing with his life. As the sun set over the Volga, he imagined seeing their faces, smelling shit from his own horses, and feeling the warm caress of his loved ones as he wished them dreams about better lives than they would wake up to the next morning. But Stefan doing what he was doing here, in the service of the revolt which now felt like a revolution, could make such dreams possible for his family, and other families.

His fellow Crusaders in this Revolution that had as many agendas as it had members were a varied lot. The Christian Cossacks under Stefan’s command were all equipped with muskets, pistols and the best sword that could be forged from iron and steel. The Islamic Tators were armed with bows, arrows and lances. The agricultural and factory serfs had staffs, pitchforks and stones to wield battle against Catherine’s Imperial Army. The Jews, if present at all, kept their religious beliefs and affiliations confidential. Their motives were thus far trustable, and perhaps integratable into the New Republic that

would be established under Pugachev, or as the clandestinely illiterate Cossack now required everyone to call him, in public anyway, The People's Czar Peter III.

The Revolution invited most anyone to join, but tolerated no one who chose to abstain from the endeavor. Five of the most suspicious volunteers, whose bellies were grumbling with hunger while everyone else dined on food stolen from, or rather back from, the nobles in Samosa, were being shorn down the scalp, with the exception of a single forelock that made them look identical to born and bred Cossacks. "If you were a private, corporal or even sergeant in the Imperial Army, and given the choice of joining the Revolt, or dying an 'honorable' death in service of the Czar what would you do?" Stefan asked the observer whose back was leaning against a tree behind him.

The observer said nothing, the moon illuminating his eyes and making his white, expressionless face glow in the dark.

"And when the Czarina's soldiers, some of whom are Cossacks themselves, God curse their turncoat souls, start firing bullets and cannon at us, will these former soldiers of the Empress who were not killed along with ALL of their officers rush to join her Army again, run away and hide in the woods like scared schoolgirls, or stay loyal to this Revolution?" Stefan continued.

Again, Stefan's dinner companion said nothing.

"I see it in your eyes," the under-appreciated but always trustable Cossack said to the corpse hanging on the tree who had been a healthy and happy Aristocratic nobleman and Army officer that morning. "The fear you experienced when we hung you. The guilt you felt when you observed your wife raped in front of you after her servants ripped off all of her jewelry, and most of her hair. The looting of everything your family stole, or even earned, over three generations. Please know, wherever you are, that if it was up to me, this revolution would be more civilized. But, civilized men can seldom motivate uncultured ones to do Revolutionary things."

"And your Cossack world is more civilized than mine?" Stefan felt the corpse answer him.

"I heard that!" Stefan barked back at the ghost still lingering in and around the lifeless corpse. "Yes, I know that Cossack justice for murder, theft, disloyalty and murder, even if drunk, is a rope with a stone around the belly and a dump into the deepest portion of the river, but at least we elect our governors, executioner and..."

Stefan was about to say 'liberators' but he was not completely sure that such fit his friend Pugachev. No one was sure if the low born Don Cossack who was nearly hung by his own community for alleged horse stealing. His inability to read any printed material was detected by Stefan on more than one occasion, really believed that he was Peter III, having escaped Catherine's axe, coming back from the 'dead' to liberate Cossacks, Tatars and everyone else who would follow him. But there was something 'regal' about

Pugachev. After conquering a city, village or fort, he would sit on his chair elevated above everyone else, expecting and getting everyone to bow to him, kiss his hand, and give him offerings of salt and bread. The most worthy, or wise, converts offered the heads or scalps of recently-slain supporters of the Czarina. Or the tongues of anyone they claimed said anything against 'The Great Pretender', as some called him now.

Stefan reached into the pocket of the nobleman whose hanging he had officiated at, retrieving four books he had inside his coat. "Hmm...Plato's Republic, Don Quixote and Emmanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason," he said regarding the books which were translated into Russian by some miracle. "And Utopia," he continued, noting the Roman letters in French, a language he vowed that he would continue learning if he found a nobleman or noble lady who was fluent in the language of Catherine's Court. "I better keep these for myself, and my children, before someone who thinks 'practically' turns them into cartridges for rifles or fuses for cannons."

"Are you alright, Colonel Ilonovick?" Stefan heard from voice behind him, recognizing his Surname but feeling at odds about the very non-communal Cossack prefix to such.

Hiding the books inside of his own coat, he turned around and answered the woman behind him. Her voice sounded like his wife loving and patient Sophia back home. And what his beloved daughters would sound like in twenty years, if of course they were allowed to grow up as a free, expressive Cossack woman rather than a servant of a 'White Russian' from the more 'civilized' areas of the Empire. The moonlight on the recently liberated female serf's illuminated, revealed to Stefan's outer, tired eyes, that underneath the torn dress and industrial soot there was indeed the figure and potential essence of a lady of high breeding and even higher ideals. She felt like Stefan's imaginary vision of Aspasia, the courtesan-philosopher in Athens who had been Socrates' muse as well as mentor. Stefan's inner eye made this goddess in the guise of a wench appear to be an idealized image of Stefan's loved ones back home as well, somehow, including the best features of all of them within one face. She reached behind her neck and untied the band around her long, blonde hair, shaking her head. Her golden locks fell down around her breasts. Tatianna, as the surname-less 26 year old maiden who was determined to not be a wench called herself, took Stefan's bear like hand into her small, thin fingers.

"Your husband---." Stefan said, gazing at a white rim around her wedding ring finger.

"Vladimir. Who was tortured then butchered by the foreman two days ago, when they found Peter III's proclamation and promises in his pocket," Tatianna related with anger. "A piece of paper he couldn't read, that he picked up while doing litter cleaning patrol," she continued breaking down in tears, falling into Stefan's open arms. "Please, I can't bear to go through another cold and lonely night without him, or someone like him"

"Tatianna will be under my blanket, Vladimir, but no part of me will be under her skirt," Stefan mouthed with a silent voice to a gust of the wind blowing through the trees behind the woman's back. "And if she bears any children in the next nine months, be assured

that they will be yours. My hand on the eyes of my own children on that!" he pledged to the ghost he imagined, and felt, in the wind, but couldn't see.

The wind subsided, indicating its approval of the proposal to Stefan. He told himself that Vladimir the Slain was a day away from being in Heaven. A state of Life and Mind which Stefan was determined to establish on earth, for anyone who had suffered under yolk of the Nobles, Aristocrats and Czarina. And, if at all possible, for those oppressors themselves. After, of course, they had dined on hunger, despair and poverty for a prescribed time as part of their education.

Stefan looked up to the moon and the stars for an answer to his moral dilemmas. They didn't answer him, as winter clouds blew in from the north which smelled like snow, then started to drop white flakes on the October ground that turned into balls of white that spelt out an early and challenging winter ahead.

CHAPTER 8

It wasn't what recently promoted Lt, Michael Kosinko did that brought him to the military tribunal in Kazan, or what was thinking, but what he was wearing. The first of his judges and possibly executioners addressed that very matter in a room whose doors and windows were closed to the public, both military and civilian, and if He was indeed watching, God Himself.

"So, how did you get that peasant dress you were wearing when you were arrested strolling and skipping around the pub in the snow, then towards the gates of the city?" Major Bostnov, the man now assigned to look after the city's well being inside its walls asked from his high perched chair behind a large, oak, spit polished desk mounted upon a platform of scrap lumber.

"It was the only thing left in the village that was supporting the rebels that was left for me to loot, after my men were given permission by the high command to loot most everything else, to substitute for their late official pay," replied the old and wise military veteran of more military campaigns replied to the Major who had seen as many years on earth as he had, but had taken part in only one tenth of the battles, if any at all. "This dress that you still have me wearing, that fits not too badly all things considered, and a bottle of vodka that the arresting officers confiscated as evidence, and is probably gone now, Sir."

"So you are blaming your disgraceful, degenerate and/or possibly cowardly attempt at desertion on this bottle of vodka," the second inquisitor, a man of equal rank as the previous one but half his age, who Kosinko didn't recognize or know about inquired in a harsh, accusatory tone.

"Or something in the bottle that the rebels left for we Imperial Officers to drink when we stole it, so we would look baffoons to our men, degenerates in front of civilians and fools

in the eyes of God,” the old man explained gently but affirmatively to the young one as a possible explanation, appending it with the outer rims of his lips gleefully upturned, and a sparkle of humor-fed independence in his ancient but still very open eyes.

“And this is proper behavior for a man who has been given the honor of trying to restore order to Mother Russia so she can grow according to God’s timetable into a country that can serve the needs of everyone in it, as well as their wants?” came from the third judge in a calm voice that was intended to sound like fatherly advice to a petulant child, but to any really listening ear sounded like a confused child asking a secretive parent why he was seeing the world from a different point of view. This mortal to decide what would happen to Michael Kosinko’s immortal soul was none other than Captain Alexi Stalnikov, who had been a major two days ago. Perhaps his demotion was due to Lt. Kosinko being under his command and being entrusted to so much more than a junior officer usually is entitled to. But most likely it was because Alexi told the truth to his superior officers about everything instead of what they wanted to hear. “I’m waiting for an answer, Lieutenant Kosinko!” he barked at man who he called Michael, and who called him Alexi, when and wherever possible.

“Who was your Sergeant a few weeks ago, as I understand, CAPTAIN Stalnikov,” Major Bostnov noted on paper and said with his mouth to the demoted Colonel.

“And no doubt private today,” Kosinko replied, bowing his head as a show of repentance, but really doing so because he didn’t want Bostnov and the young brash Major besides him to not see that he was laughing at them. Most importantly, Michael had to disallow Captain Alexi from seeing what he was thinking, and plotting, as perhaps Alexi was not yet smart enough to let him continue with it. “A private who will serve Mother Russia in the stockade, or a labor camp, if you so require, but perhaps would be most useful as a soldier serving outside of the city walls so that he can, with his life should God require such, defend this city from the rampage outside of it.”

“Under whose command?” Bostnov inquired. “The deserting Corporals and Sergeants of the Imperial Army who the villages and forts they were supposed to defend?”

“Villages and forts which the rebels have taken over, sacked or perverted to their cause,” the young peach-fuzz mustached Major pontificated as if he was a middle aged monarch with a face filled with a large, greying handlebar mustache.

“Because the Empress in Moscow has not taken what is going on here seriously yet, and her ministers have not fully appreciated the needs of her potentially loyal subjects here,” came out of Alexi’s mouth.

With head still kept bowed, hopefully re-assigned Private ‘Professor’ Kosinko thanked God with a whisper for his life student Alexi finally having used the brain God gave him instead of the moral codebook the Priests at the Military Academy rammed into his head. Still cognizant that a wise man who wants to be an effective one has to learn to hide his knowledge and wisdom for a time, Kosinko forced his smiling face into a repentant

frown, and turned to the left, allowing the tribunal to see the more disfigured and wrinkled side of his face, accentuating the roundness of his clean shaven chin, a feature which both on stage and in real life seemed to denote being servant rather than a master.

“So, how are we to get this demon possessed soul out of a dress and supervise this old pervert’s redemption into manhood?” Major Bostnov asked his uniformed colleagues.

“At a time when we are still short of fighting MEN here, while most of the regular Army is away fighting the Turks on the frontier, where is still warm enough to fight all year round, instead of being stuck here, where no one in their right minds dares to fight in winter, except to lay siege, if they can,” the younger officer asserted like an old Baron. “We should hang him by his neck in his bloomers and petticoat as a message to all who would think about neglecting their duty to their country, and manhood!”

“Or perhaps use him, by allowing himself to prove himself as a man?” Captain Alexi offered. “Doing something...important.”

“By sending him, and you as his educator, to the Turkish front, where you can regain your rank and glory in a war that will go down in recorded history instead of this backwater police action?” Major Bostnov barked at Alexi. “Not as long as I’m wearing this insignia, Captain. You and the rest of us have been exiled here, not assigned here! By people who do not want nor need us in their lives anymore.”

“But who need us to be here, so they can be safe, and not overrun by the rebel mob back home. Us being here keeps the Great Pretender’s mob from stampeding all over Moscow!” Alexi asserted with a clenched fist. A moment of realization later, he loosened it, one finger at a time. He looked into Professor Kosinko’s eyes, communicating gratitude to the old man still dressed as a slutty woman.

Michael Kosinko would explain to Alexi Stranlikov why he donned a dress, and plotted to get himself demoted to private. “To serve the Court most effectively you have to be outside of it, at the lowest rank,” the private would explain to the soon to be promoted to General Captain at the right time. But, for the moment, the game still had to be played according to the Court’s rules.

“Captain, and when you soon redeem yourself to be Major, or even Colonel, Stalnikov,” Major Bostnov said. “There is a band of Irregular Troops in Kazan who Private Kosinko is now assigned to. Men who do the kind of work that will go into no military report, but is, to tell the truth, the most essential unit of any Army, even ours. Their officer had brains to resign command of them. You have the honor to take over that command.”

“How many men?” Alexi asked, his back arched with aristocratic pride, and the kind of self respect based in hard earned experience.

“You mean how many scoundrals, deviants, misfits and ne’er do wells, and honor-less adulterers” the younger Major who had never got a scratch in battle scolded the Captain

who had scars on both his skin and soul from doing what Mother Russia required, or perhaps better stated, asked of him. “Of which you are one, Alexi Stralnikov. From what I heard about what you did with, then to, my cousin Tanya in St. Petersburg. Who had to change her name and chosen profession after all of it happened. Who now belongs to the Secret Police now.”

Kosinko didn't know the details about what the nameless young Major was pontificating about, but Alexi certainly did. Anger, shame and fond remembrance competed for domination of his mind, and soul. Alexi got lost behind his blank stare.

“Captain? What's going on?” Major Bostnov asked him, gentleman who had made an arrangement with his own past transgressions to another who apparently had not. He offered Alexi a glass of water.

Alexi declined the water, rose to his feet, put his hat upon his sweat soaked head, then stood at attention, after which he bowed to his superiors. “I humbly accept this honor to serve the Homeland, as does Private Kosinko, and swear in front of God that I will complete my duties as assigned to my death if necessary.”

It was one of those pledges that everyone makes when trying to save themselves from the axe, the bullet or the noose. But the look in Alexi's eyes when he brought his head upward and looked towards his old friend and comrade Michael Kosinko revealed a man possessed by something far more than duty. Alexi threw his own floor length coat to his old professor and always trusted friend, instructing him abruptly to put it on till he could get something more appropriate to his new rank, station and duty. What those were was a mystery to Michael Kosinko, as he had inadvertently turned a truly noble man accepting his earthly assigned limitations into.... something else. Whether it was for good or evil, he would soon find out.

CHAPTER 9

Svetlana was pulled out of another intense writing session when a cold, snow covered, Private Kosinko knocked on her door, then used his key to enter her locked from the outside warm, well furnished house in Kazan which had an abundance of food in it. Food that that every time she tried to give it away to the poor, was replaced by twice that amount would be snuck into the next morning. After unlocking the key to the only exit door, other than a three story jump out the window, Kosinko presented Svetlana with the only key to that door, swearing on everything holy or truthful, that it was hers now, as ordered by Alexi. He dropped a large bag he was carrying over his shoulder on the floor. Then he shook the icicles off his oversized enlisted man's coat and juggled the excess snow from the recesses of his Imperial Army cap. He handed Svetlana another key, asking if there was a matron in an adjoining room who would do the honors of opening up the chastity belt he admitted to putting on her when she was in a deep sleep, under

Alexi's orders, as requested by her father. A father who was still away on business back home, snowed in by an early winter that few expected.

"I can liberate myself, PRIVATE Kosinko," the young Countessa growled at Kosinko, pulling the key from his hand. She struggled with all of her might to unlock the key to leading to the body part every proper non-political woman lived for, but which she went beyond in both her mind and heart. Yet, there was still the matter of principle. "I DO and SHOULD have the right to marry or get pregnant with any man I want to. "

"Or horse, according to Catherine the Great," Kosinko stated after breaking into a wide smile.

"So then why are you working for that oppressive bitch? Who attempted to kill her husband, Peter III, the only Czar worthy of the office," Svetlana blasted into Kosinko's face after throwing the chastity belt into his belly. "A husband who was never killed, and who WILL liberate every man, woman AND horse in Russia!"

"I know," Kosinko conceded, guilt plastered all over his weather-beaten, wrinkled face. "And to honor him, and the new man, or some would say the new woman, in me, I am authorized to liberate you, so you can join them before this blasted winter prevents anyone from traveling." He went to the window, pointing downward three stories to a saddled horse. "The best horse I could steal from the military stable."

"Major Alexi's?" she sneered.

"Captain Alexi now, and I pray to God not corpse Alexi, after he finishes with his plan to hand over this city, without a fight, to General Pugachev."

"You mean Czar Peter the Third, who refused to be called the Great!"

"And who turned down the offer of the Duma to build a gold statue in his honor because---"

"There are better things to do with gold than to waste it on honoring rulers who are supposed to share it with the people," Svetlana replied, joined in each word and gesture by Michael Kosinko. A man who now looked more like the father she wished she had than the one who keep her cloistered from anyone who threatened the Order and Division of Wealth dictated by Empress Catherine.

"Here, you will need this to appear to be on the outside what you are on the inside," Uncle Michael said to Svetlana, tossing her a large bag he had brought with him.

Svetlana opened the bag carefully, first smelling horse on the garments inside, then feeling the coarseness of the fabrics, then grasping the firm leather over-garments enclosed. She pulled them out, observing brightly colored designs imprinted on the weather-beaten coat, blouse and excessively loose trousers that went down to the ankle.

Underneath all of it was a pair of boots, along with a two pistols and a traditional curved sword. “So, where’s my Cossack hat?” she barked out.

“Cossack women wear scarves over their heads, and not hats,” Kosinko replied.

“And if I wanted to wear a hat on my head like a Cossack man?” Svetlana pressed, deepening her voice as much as she could.

“Then we’d have to style the hair underneath like this,” Kosinko answered, removing his cap. He flip-flopped the four inch lock of hair originating from the front of his head over the rest of his head, which was shaved bald down to the wood. “Which I can do if you like,” he offered, pulling out a knife from under his belt.

Svetlana was willing to do anything to leave behind her privileged Aristocratic past in exchange for a historically significant future, but shaving off her long, blonde hair was not one of them. “Maybe the Revolutionaries would let me join their band of woman warriors?” she inquired.

“Or they will let you educate and lead them,” Uncle Michael, the only man who never lied to her, projected and pledged. “Our revolution will need change of minds, and a change of wardrobe,” he continued, unbuttoning his Imperial Army coat. “So we can face the world, our God and ourselves naked, as we really are.”

Svetlana braced herself to see either a buck naked Uncle Michael, or perhaps an Auntie Michaela. He shed the coat containing the insignia and colors which honored Mother Russia as ruled by Empress Catherine, then spit on it. Underneath was the uniform of a Yaik Cossack, which was no uniform at all, bearing no insignia except for a cross around his neck, which he pulled out and held in his hand with fond reverence.

“You do know what it means to desert your Army, your sovereign,” Svetlana said. “And your old friend and commander, Captain Alexi, still Private Michael Kosinko.”

“Who have all dishonored themselves and the people we serve them,” he replied bitterly. “And I am sure that you know what it means to honor your Cause, Convictions and God, Countessa Svetlana Lazinski,” he said with a slanted and slight bow of an wilderness warrior to an independent shield maiden.

Svetlana felt something penetrating through her body for the first time in months. It was not cold from her feet, nor was it hunger from her intentionally underfed stomach.

“Fear,” Kosinko said, giving words to that feeling overcoming Svetlana as he edged closer to her and gently put his strong hand on her shivering shoulder. “Fear that is our friend, as long as we transcend it.”

Svetlana didn’t believe that a man with Kosinko’s limited education knew or understood ‘transcend’. Indeed, when she looked into the low-born old veteran soldier’s eyes, she

saw not only a comrade she could trust, but a whole country that was now ready to redefine itself.

“So, what do you want, or need me to do?” Svetlana said as she began the process of stripping off her aristocratic garments to put on, and become, someone completely different.

“Our rebel units to the North of the city, where General Pugachev is,” Kosinko replied, putting on his Imperial Army uniform, for the last time. “Join them, and tell our leader that I’ll be bringing more men from the city with me, soon.”

“The Army and the General are in the East now, and more than just scattered units,” Svetlana answered, after which she put aside the elegant dress made by raggedly clad peasants. “I’ve seen them from the window, and get information about what I can’t see from sources that....hmm.”

“What sources?” Kosinko inquired.

Svetlana gazed at the white-laced, embroidered dress in her arms, saying goodbye to it and all of the good memories she had wearing it. “There is a particular woman, by the name of Anna, in this city, who had a figure more shapely than mine, hair that was allowed to go unwashed till it fell out due to malnutrition, and a beautiful face made old, ugly and deformed by hard living who I would like to have this. You can find her in---”

“---every serf, Cossack wife, or Tatar daughter who is taking up arms against a very common enemy,” Kosinko replied, vengeance and hope in his voice. “But if there is a particular woman who you think should get this, I will see to it that she gets it.”

While completing her transformation into a Cossack woman who would be rejoining the band of renegades Alexi ‘rescued’ her from, without her consent or blessing, Svetlana provided Kosinko with the particulars about the most deserving of the serfs assigned to serve, and confine, her in her tower of luxury. Kosinko assured her that though her name was a common one, lacking a surname, he would find her and offer her the dress, as well as an exit from the city so she could be with people who would let her wear it as a free woman rather than a tastefully-clad slave. The weather seemed to help as well, giving way to a warm fog that would allow Svetlana to exit the city before the latest single Aristocratic supper guest her father had invited to dine could start boasting about how rich and prestigious his pedigree was.

On the way to the horse, and the gate of the city, and the woods beyond it, armed with her Cossack attire and weaponry, as well as the books about freedom she had written and absorbed in benevolent captivity, Svetlana felt, for the first time, that she was not being watched by people. But that she was under the scrutiny of a more important eye. One named Providence.

CHAPTER 10

Though the calendar said it was November, the wind blowing the knee high snow on the ground into drifts said it was December. If one asked the horses who were asked to carry people on their backs, or sleds behind their frozen asses, it was mid January. From atop his prematurely furred out horse half a days' ride from any village, even the ones burnt out by Pugachev's Rebels or his own Imperial Army, Captain Alexi Stralnikov looked up at the a sky of darkening grey clouds that were cold as well as wet, addressing either Mother Nature moving within them or perhaps the Heavenly Father on thie other side of them. "So, does this mean that you don't want anyone to win this war, because both sides will be battling Winter above anything else? Losing more men to starvation, frostbite, and cannibalism than to bullets or bayonets," he continued, clapping his muffed hands together to try to get feeling back into his fingers. "In the civilized parts of Europe East of the Danube, and even the savage wilderness of the New World, Armies have the good sense to call an end to war after the first deep freeze, then resume after the first thaw. Why is that?" he asked the rider next to him.

"Because they aren't as masochistic and self destructive as we Russians are, Alexi," Michael Kosinko replied while inserting another layer of wool between his Cossack outercoat and the Imperial Army tunic hidden under it. A tunic he still wore with Purpose, but not as much pride as he did before the campaign out her started. "And because blood tasted better when frozen into ice than melted into spring mud," he mused with an affectionate grin and chuckle that emanated clouds of white smoke from his freeze dried lips. "Our blood, or theirs."

"And the difference between them and us, today, on this godforsaken frontier?" Alexi inquired and contemplated. "Preparing for skirmishes that will be just as deadly as battles, but will never be recorded in any history book."

"I suppose so," Kosinko replied as he motioned the detachment of 100 partially uniformed Imperial Soldier behind him to emerge from the woods slowly, and in single file so as to not reveal their true numbers, special skills learned in internationally-sanctioned wars as well as illegal street fighting, and the cannons hidden in a civilian supply wagons.

"Except for what the Countessa Svetlana will write after she finds out that we let her go to the rebels so we could follow her there to kill them rather than join them. Assuming we can prevent her from getting killed by our bullets, or a sword wielded by a rebel who things she led us to them," Alexi continued.

"I suppose so," Kosinko replied, looking straight ahead at the horizon, seeming to smell with his eyes and see with his nose.

"And Svetlana's books...boring, procedural, lifeless and inaccurate, according to what we have been ordered to tell her, and paid off some of her most trusted servants to tell her as well. They do in truth reek of Passion, Commitment, Intensity and humor, forcing you to

think differently than you want or are trained to,” Alexi said while his outer eyes looked at the tracks she left in the snow probably an hour or so ago, his inner oculars re-reading the unpublished books he had read bearing her name as authoress. “Don’t you suppose so?” the Middle Aged Aristocrat continued, looking to Old Army Veteran, forcing him into saying something other than his standard phase.

“I KNOW so,” Kosinko replied, for only the third time in Alexi’s memory of such one sided ‘discourses’. “Just as I know that by the tracks ahead, and the way the birds are flying around that valley over the ridge, and the map of this place that the locals made instead of what the Army issued us, that we have to encircle this rebel camp from the sides.”

“And Pugachev?” Alexi replied. “He escaped capture from the Imperial Army for desertion three times, as one of the tortured prisoners we took said, proudly, before we were merciful enough to kill him.”

“And slipped out of his own home town before he could be hung for horse stealing, stirring up unrest in people who wanted to left alone, being unfaithful to his wife and being a liar who believes his own deceptions,” Kosinko added, not naming his sources but sure of their validity. “Pugachev is the most dangerous kind of leader to go against. One possessed and protected by the devil, though charged by God with leading Revolutions that could liberate all of humanity, even us Russians, who never knew what real freedom is and probably wouldn’t know what to do with it once we got it. Pugachev, and the resurrected from the dead Legend he has become, sends men into skirmishes that become battles. He emerges without a scratch while those most loyal to him and dedicated to him get killed, or become wounded, to be eaten by the crows or mutilated by the enemy.”

Alexi knew such men first hand, and saw the worst of them whenever he looked into a mirror. He felt the medals on his tunic, earned for bravery in the line of fire in numerous campaigns where despite riding in front of his troops, he emerged with little more than just saddle sores. The winter wind blow coldness into the medals, imprinting them upon his chest like hot coals. Meanwhile, Kosinko led the detachment of Imperial troops who had been given not only precious feild cannons, but special permission to disobey all moral standards of conduct when confronting rebels or civilians who just wanted to be left alone to battle winter instead of Armies, or each other.

CHAPTER 11

“It is a clever strategy and an effective one,” Mustafa Babayev thought as he peered through his spy glass over the snow-covered Steppes from his position atop a hastily re-constructed tower in the rubble that had at one time been a fort and village two rebel and one Imperial Army lootings ago. “Make everyone thinks that Pugachev is here because we have gathered all of these recruits, and converts,” he continued to his five heavily armed co-observers. “Recruits who won’t insult you, desert when the first bullet is fired,

or turn you in to the Catherine's Uniformed Infidel Goons for a couple of rubles, don't you agree?"

"And where is General Pugachev?" Svetlana, the only one on the tower other than Mustafa who had a body that was alive, and functional, replied as she warmed herself by the fire he had set up for her. "I was told he was here, so that's why I came here."

"As did they," now Lieutenant Babayev said of corpses being used as dummies to make the re-constructed fortress look both well armed and well-supplied. "Some Imperialists came to kill Pugachev, for glory," he said of a corpse still wrapped inside a spotlessly clean young junior Imperial officer's tunic. "Some to join him," he noted of a fellow Tatar who could have avoided becoming corpse if had been issued a rifle, as was afforded Christian recruits rather than a bow and ten bent arrows, as was standard issue for Islamic fighters in this revolt. "Some to fight for a new Messiah resurrected from the presumed dead," he fondly said regarding the lifeless body of a Christian Serf whose left hand clenched the handmade wooden crucifix around his neck, the right holding onto the pitchfork issued by his Master that was the only weapon he carried with him into battle, on foot, behind the mounted warrior he believed to be Peter III. "Which brings me to you," Babychev said to the runaway Countessa whose book he picked up to re-read. "God has given you many gifts. Including the ability to very colorful and convincing. And to challenge His Divine Purpose in print."

"And His, or Her, Existence," confidently replied the young woman who insisted on fighting with the men instead of cooking, nursing and providing 'private entertainment' like the other women in this 'unit' did.

"And you are aware that every day, Mass is held for the Christians in every one of the General's camps, including this one?" he replied, pointing to the procession going into the largest building in the fort, the Christian leader of camp, Stefan, amongst them. "And that five times a day, my people are allowed, and encouraged, to pray to my God." He referred the Countessa who, for all but the long locks of hair on her head and lack of hair on her upper lip, could pass as a man in appearance and temperament, to smaller huts where worshippers removed their boots and bowed in the direction of Mecca. He turned his own body towards that Sacred City, bowed a few times, said a quick prayer, then returned to his duties as lookout, feeling somehow that he had been given a better set of eyes, and ears.

"What happens if you don't do that ritual? Or stopped believing in it? Or experimented with not believing in it? Would that not be something a Creator who gave you a mind with the ability to think would want and require you to do in the service of Truth?" 'Professor' Svetlana pressed, leaning back upon the wooden wall shielded by the wind, and made warm by a small wooden stove.

"I've read Plato's dialogs of Socrates," Mustafa grumbled back, his eyes focused on something moving on the horizon. "From before the time you could say either of their names. And have experienced the world outside the cave, and the library," he continued.

“A world in which most people are terrified to not have something bigger than themselves that they can believe in. Someone who is stronger than them who will take care of them if you serve Him.”

“Or Her, if Catherine has anything to do with restructuring the liturgy,” the Professor-Countessa mused with a defiant, yet still playful smile. From a wrinkle-free, well fed face that had never experienced a slash on the forehead, the biting winds of summer or winter that would dry the skin to the bone, or even a slap across the cheek. “Isn’t it necessary for us to seek the Truth, whatever it is?”

With the eyes in front of his head focused on the strange movement of four legged creatures on the other side of the woods, and the eyes in the back of his head on Sventana, Mustafa thought long and hard on the matter. It was both wise and necessary for him to sequester the eager philosopher Revolutionary under his wing so she would not get killed, or banished, by everyone else in Camp, who would react to, rather than listen to her. Such reactors included Stefan Ilonivick, now Captain and leader of the Pugachev-less Army that was fighting in the most dangerous front line in his cause. After looking into the Countessa’s eyes, and being unable to stare obedience or fear into it, the Islamic Scholar answered her bold and Enlightening challenges with words. “The people here, all of them, by my account, need to believe that God will protect them if they do the Right thing.”

“And punish them if they do what the Old Believer Priests like Father Vasili or you say is the wrong thing?” Svetlana replied, with far more respect than Mustafa thought possible from her.

“YES!” he barked back. “Most people’s minds and emotions are not as trained as yours and, perhaps, mine are. The fear of hell for doing the wrong thing, or giving in to weakness, is far less than the terror of living in a world without morals, rules and God. And what scares people more than a world without morals, rules and God is...” he continued, after which he turned around and stared into Svetlana’s eye and soul. “...Someone who has no need to believe in God. For the moment, anyway.” Mustafa confessed as he beheld an army of perhaps 100 or more civilians with two very heavy sleds that looked more like cannons than food. The main column split up into three forks just beyond the woods, with precision military, approaching on both sides of the fort as well as moving towards it head on. His suspicion that they were Imperial soldiers was confirmed when ten of the men unbuttoned their Cossack coats, revealing Russian Army tunics underneath that they adjusted with pride, and three Cossack hats fell off others, revealing a full head of hair.

Mustafa handed the spyglass to Sventana, allowing her a view of the herd approaching from the distant woods under the cover of an incoming fog. “I don’t know what I believe with regard to what is beyond us,” he said. “But I do know that you will find out what you believe, very, very soon.”

Mustafa saw and fear penetrating every bone in Svetlana's shaking body. Maybe it was because of what she saw at the other end of the spyglass, or who she saw. Putting theology aside in the service of humanity, and the Truth that he hoped God was, he put one arm around her shaking shoulders, and with the other rang the alarm bell. He prayed to Allah for a successful resolution of the battle to come, offering up everything he did that was noble to Him. Or Her. Or it.

CHAPTER 12

The loud silence permeating the windless air from the fog covered snow was broken by cannon fire. It blasted ice covered gravel into the air on the former side on the East side of the fort, converting a horse-sized slab of solid wood splinters on the West wall. From the south, came horseman at a full gallop some looking like Cossacks, the rest wearing the blue and red of the Imperial Army, their true numbers hidden by the fog as well as the snow their horses kicked up in their wake. At the north end of the fort, selected riflemen and archers poised their weapons so as to discourage any of the rebels from seeking safety in retreat, or Salvation in the woods someplace beyond any fighting.

Captain Stefan mounted his horse, instructing the men at the cannon on the tower to fire a round into what looked to be the left flank of the cavalry charge. Mustafa yelled out to his men in Tatar fire the cannon on the other side of the fort to the uncountable riders on the right flank. Both men discovered very quickly that there was enough powder and mortar for only two shots. Meanwhile, the enemy's cannonballs came closer, blasting a hole in the ice, snow, ground, cabin and cellars under it in the middle of the fort.

Father Vasili crossed himself, thanking the Lord that the building used as an eatery, tavern, barracks, nursery and brothel had been vacated for Christian Mass and Islamic prayer prior to the attack. He cursed the devil, and the priests who followed the new Christian liturgy, for the cannon ball having destroyed the storehouse of food and small arms. Everywhere around him, worshippers who pledged their faith that God would protect them through prayer less than a minute ago, were putting their trust in their ability to take cover, and hopefully fend off the attackers with their guns, bows, swords or pitchforks. At least ten parishioners offered Father Vasili a weapon, but insisted that they keep them for themselves. He refused to take cover even when pulled away towards it by well meaning and brave parishioners. Standing proud amidst the continuing cannon fire and then the onslaught of bullets from riders who had found cover in the low lying snow covered brush outside of the fort, walking always clockwise, he continued saying Mass. He asked the one true God to bestow his blessings on the Christians who were brave enough to believe in the Old Liturgy, save the lives of the Christians whose minds were perverted into thinking the New Liturgy was His Word. He also asked Jesus to look after the Islamic Tatars who had joined in their cause, thinking and hoping that their courage under fire would be rewarded by an opening of their Souls so they would convert to Christianity willingly very soon. As for the young Aristocratic woman who dressed like a seasoned Cossack man, Vasili pitied her Godless soul, as it was doomed to spend

an eternity in hell if killed in this, her first battle with something other than a pen, or finger-waving governess who admonished her for how she used it.

As an observer of battles and people, Vasili knew all too well that when confronted with battle, those virgin souls would become reactors who did what they could to kill the enemy to protect themselves, or, if overcome with that accidental quality which some had and some didn't, protect their comrades without thinking or feeling anything. Some would be transformed into scared rabbits who would either run for the hills or put a bullet through their own head before a charging horseman or infantryman would do it for them. Others would freeze into catatonic statues that could be blown into the wind and the grave by whoever passed by. Then there were the ones who would find after killing their first man that it was something they enjoyed, and would soon become addicted to.

Sventlana had become an alcoholic after tasting her first drink of blood. Everytime she fired her Cossack issued musket, or Tatar acquired bow, and a man on the other side of it fell to his death, or worse, she smiled with delight. She was particularly pleased when the demise of the rider was due to the arrow or shot going into his horse first. Father Vasili had seen men sprout third legs between the two they used to ambulate whenever they inflicted death or suffering on a Soul who had been dehumanized into being considered nothing more than 'the enemy', and he wondered what was going on in Svetlana's reproductive anatomy. He prayed for her safety and Soul as she got bolder, or stupider, with regard to not trying to get herself killed, particularly when her hands figured out how to wield the sword strapped to her waist with enough strength to chop off a man's hand, leg and head. He also prayed for the well being of this band of mismatched Revolutionaries who he was responsible for in ways that none of them could imagine, since with each oscillation of attacks and counterattacks, Svetlana survived them all without a scratch, growing an even bigger and more blood thirsty smile. Her battle cry of "We are free. With no master on earth or in Heaven" got louder and louder each time God saw fit to protect her from being killed, often because a God loving, and fearing, Christian or Moslem had put a sword, arrow or pitchfork into the chest of an Imperial Soldier in then niche of time.

"Where's Captain Alexi Stralnikov? And Uncle Michael Kosinko?" the blood covered maiden-scholar would demand of the dying, and the dead Imperial soldiers.

Perhaps it was the lifting of the fog, perhaps the biting North Wind that replaced it, perhaps the intervention of God, or perhaps the contagious madness of the atheist Aristocratic shield maiden, but after an hour that felt like days, the attack on the fort resulted in a 'victory' for the defenders. The Imperial Army detachment retreated into the woods, taking most of their wounded with them. Those who remained in the fort were at the mercy of the victors. Stefan, Mustafa and Father Vasili accompanied now Seargent Sventlana to each of the not yet dead, offering them a chance to say where there leaders were, what was the troop strength beyond the woods, and what were they next intentions. None of them knew, or would tell. Dimitri had trouble this time discerning which was the case. As was not the case with captured rebels, all of the Imperial Army prisoners were spared the rack, and the noose. One was spared the sword, given a fresh

horse, and told that General Pugachev, who was seeing to the wounded elsewhere in the fort, wanted him to take a message to Imperial Army General Mikhealson as well . “We are growing stronger every day, and will offer you an honorable surrender if you are smart enough to do so, and value the lives of the soldiers under your command,” Stefan told the scared and grateful Imperial Army Corporal, after which he handed him several notes upon which those words in Russian and Tatar, were put into print. The letter bore Pugachev’s signature. Father Vasili blessed the letter, the rider and the horse, sending all three on their way with confidence that God was looking after them all, despite the rolling of Svetlana’s eyebrows and the condescending sighs emerging from her mouth.

As the Corporal and the cream colored horse upon which he rode disappeared into the snow covered horizon, Mustafa turned to Stefan at the gate of the ‘fort ’ which was now little more than rubble. “So, where is the illiterate low born Cossack who I hear believes that he is Czar Peter III more than ever?”

“Here,” Stefan replied, pounding his blood-soaked hand on his heart. “And here,” he continued pointing to his still attached head. “Because as we know, or should know, Revolutions that believe in legends succeed more than those that are based merely in facts,” the commander of the ‘decoy’ battalion continued, after which he went back to what was left of his tent to gather his belongings, and prepare to move the Army to the next destination. One which would be disclosed only to those who needed to know. By the way Captain Stefan walked, and the way he rehearsed General Pugachev’s gestures and speech, and allowing himself to be taken over by that role, Father Vasili knew that he was not one of those entrusted to know.

CHAPTER 13

“So, what happened, for the moment, ‘Captain’ Stralnikov?” a comfortably-seated Major Lariunov, the new commander put in charge of the defense of Kazan asked a very rigidly standing Alexi in his office in the citadel, the curtains closed, the hallway outside vacated of anyone except his most trusted men. He took a large puff out of his pipe, got on his feet, and strolled around the room, speaking initially in a soft and cordial voice, “I give you an entire company of my most vicious men, two cannons, and the best Yaik and Don Cossack clothing our troops could steal after they stripped the rebels down in the cold, then threw them into river so they could float downstream and remind their Comrades what arrogance and ignorance buys you. And with all of this you come back with a dozen of men, no cannon, no bullet wounds on you or that super soldier spy of yours, Kosinko, and no Pugachev!” Lariunov ended with a triple fortissimo blast of his tobacco-stained mouth into Alexi’s face.

“I didn’t see him there, Sir,” Alexi replied, looking straight ahead with his legs and arms locked into attention. “Someone must have given away our plan to approach the fort as rebels, give homage to the Great Pretender, then hold him hostage. Perhaps some of the men in the ranks who displayed their uniforms before the attack, and who declined to get Cossack haircuts, like even I did,” he said, feeling the cold air against his mostly shaven

head. "I told them that this is not a gentleman's war anymore, but they insisted on fighting as soldiers, wearing their own uniforms, keeping their own hair," Alexi continued, recalling the lifeless faces of those academy trained officers and enlisted men who wished they could have gone to academies who now lay dead in the snow, their bodies to be breakfast for the ravens, lunch for the wolves or dinner for hungry or vicious rebels. "And neither I nor Seargent Kosinko saw Pugachev in the fort during the attack!" he blasted, this time directly into his Superior's face. "We looked everywhere!"

"Including the root cellars where the women, children and infirmed were hiding?" Lariunov suggested, as he ambulated his battle inexperienced body towards a table on which the players in the game had been carefully placed just prior to his being rudely interrupted by the news of Alexi's arrive. . "A pawn protects a bishop, a bishop protects a rook, a rook protects the queen and the queen protects the king," he pointed out. "And the king in this game, Alexi Stralnikov, is Pugachev, who if he is as smart and cowardly as my intelligences says he is, is well hidden and protected."

"According to all the information I have been given, Sir," Alexi replied. "Pugachev is more of a showman than a genius. He likes to be in front of his Army. He would never hide during an attack."

"Then maybe he made a hasty retreat, at the advice of his pawns, bishops, rooks and queen?" Lariunov blasted back, throwing the hand carved chess pieces into Alexi's chest. He then grabbed hold of the insignia and medals off the Imperial Army uniform Alexi had put on after taking his Cossack garb off. As each indicator of Alexi's loyalty and accomplishments were removed from him, he felt progressively naked, till he envisioned himself no more than a skeleton. "Now, thankfully not yet PRISONER Stralnikov. I am giving you a new command. A suicide company of EXCEPTIONALLY despicable unworthy cowards, idiots and scoundrals who will be under your command. A Command where even though the soldiers are wearing uniforms, the ranks on them will mean nothing to the Real Army. A suicide company that doesn't officially exist, whose only rulebook is that victory means life, and surrender means certain death."

"And will this suicide company also include Michael Kosinko?" Alexi inquired regarding the man who seemed to be more in command of the Mission to capture or kill Pugachev than he himself was, both when it seemed like the plan could work, and when it was clear that it didn't. "He is very well experienced. Far more than me, or even you, Sir," Alexi put forward.

"Experienced in what is the question, my dear Alexi," Lariunov said. His tone of voice was understanding, matching the feel of his open hand on Alexi's insignia-lacking shoulder. "But there is one question I must ask you, between us, as men, both marooned out here to stop a madman. And, this time, it is not about what excuse we will have to tell our wives when we volunteer for another Mission away from them so we can get a good night's sleep, and, on occasion, a great night of love," he continued with a cordial smile, offering Alexi one of his pipes.

As Larienov lit the tobacco in the pipe, Alexi felt the warm aroma of his favorite brand of tobacco, and where he first experienced it. "Saint Petersburg. I remember the shop where we bought it."

"And the woman we both met afterwards," Larienov said. "Tell me, how is that magical combination of intelligence, courage and playfulness? She always said that when we saved her from that ignorant thug born into a Count's body who claimed he owned her mind, body and soul, that she will do anything for us. Do you think that she is still willing to keep that promise?"

"Willing and able, as long as I have anything to say about it," Alexi related to his old friend, and pledged to himself.

CHAPTER 14

The sun shed its rays upon the Steppes longer each day after December 21, but with less intensity, frequency and effectiveness. A snowy December gave way to a cold January then a frigid February. But as Stefan Ilonovick saw it, winter was the Revolution's friend rather than its enemy. It was a season when most serfs and peasants were hungriest, and most of their Masters were too busy being comfortable inside to chase after them when they ran away. Letting potential allies and enemies across the countryside let him think he was Pugachev, Stefan had liberated, on average, three villages a week, holding court after his enemies had been defeated, or had converted to his Cause prior to his arrival. Sitting atop an elevated chair above his subjects, he received all manners of gifts from those pledging homage to him. Those offerings included everything from bread and salt, to prize breeding horses, to sons and daughters who their wards claimed would fight and die for the honor of their families. All such offers had to be made while kneeling, the bearers of such kissing the liberator's hand rather than looking into his eyes. As the resurrected Philosopher-King Czar Peter III, who he resembled facially as much as Pugachev, 'Lord Stefan redistributed wealth wherever he went, saying that 'there should be as little gap between the rich and the poor as between my battle weary ass and my trusted horse's saddle.'

Continuing to hide his face as much as possible the upturned collar of the camel skin coat worn by the head of the rebellion, a scarf and the duplicate blue Kalmyk cap given to him by Yemelyan Pugachev, Stefan would shift administrative power around as well, so as to insure that justice rather than greed would be served, then move on to the next town, city, or village, then ride on with his special envoys to the next town, bait for any Imperial Army detachment or turncoat rebel who wanted to collect on the reward placed in 'the Great Pretender's' head.

At least three companies of Imperial Troops had met their demise trying to do so, and three times as many rebels. Some were silenced by a bullet in the head, followed by hanging. Others were allowed to run back to their masters to report on the mercy or invincibility of the Rebel Army. That Army had now swelled to 10,000 strong, in part

because of Stefan's ability to liberate towns and instill democratic rule there, and in part because the real Pugachev, the 'real' Pretendor, could not be found by the Imperial Army or its snitches.

Stefan's most trusted advisor, protector and friend in this interesting but dangerous game was his horse. The brown steed with the long yellow mane, whom he named Mosh Veter, meaning Mighty Wind, had been between his legs for longer than any woman, and looked out for him far more effectively. Mosh Veter would allow no other riders on his back other than Stefan, or his children or, if she was in a non-nagging mood that day, his wife Sophia. On more than one occasion, Mosh Veter was more determined to charge a battery of cannon than his rider, crushing the soldiers manning that position under his hoofs. And on the three occasions when Stefan was shot off his horse, Mosh Veter would run to him, kneel on the ground, and allow him to more easily mount him.

On this ominously warmer February day, when riding alone through snow that had turned into slush, and puddles of water rather than sheets of non-negotiable ice, Veter smelled something ahead in the bush that caused him to come to an abrupt halt, put his ears back and kick out at the unseen intruder.

"I know, I saw him too," Stefan whispered to the horse, pretending to whoever was behind the brush that he saw nothing. "Though you saw him first, I admit but..."

Whoever was behind the clump of trees that were finally raining water from their branches rather than holding onto icicles moved behind them. Veter's eyes followed the course of the travel, his nostrils sniffing out whatever, or whoever it was. Stefan's eyes saw what Veter was smelling.

"That's blood alright," he whispered to his four legged companion as he snuck his hand under his Pugachev camel coat, blue cap and sash, to get a handle on the musket hidden underneath it. Pretending to be lost in song, and the bottle of water on his saddlebag which he pretended was vodka, Stefan sung a Cossack tune to himself and walked Veter onward, following the tickle then trail of bright red snow. It led to a thicker patch of woods, and three bodies on the ground. They were all human, being tended to, expertly, by someone he least expected to see.

"Tatiana!" Stefan gasped, addressing the woman stitching a mangled arm back the shoulder it was hanging from on a man whose head was shaven in the manner of a Cossack, while two corpses next to him lay dead in the snow. "What happened?" he screeched, jumping off his horse.

"They ambushed us, and the medical supply wagon I was taking to the next village," Tatianna replied with heavy breath, after which she turned around to adjust the tourniquet on the man's leg, revealing a deep wound of her left arm. "Imperial soldiers accompanied this time by some of our Yaik Cossacks. Ten maybe fifteen, whose cowardly faces I didn't see, who went---" She pointed to the West, her breath held hostage by pain in the

arm she used to indicate that direction, the wound just above her wrist spouting out a trickle then a stream of blood. “So they wouldn’t kill me, I played dead and couldn’t---“

Before she could apologize for not killing the assailants, or identifying them, Stefan whipped off his sash, using it as a tourniquet and bandage on the wound incurred by the doctor who was more concerned with her patient than herself. “You saved yourself,” Stefan informed Tatiana as he examined the wound on the arm that had been instrumental in saving countless rebels and civilians from dying. “That is being smart.”

“But it’s not being brave,” she said, looking with tearful eyes at the mutilated corpse that had been a very alive boy not long ago. “I could have saved that boy! He insisted on coming with me, so he could learn how to be a doctor. And I could have made him stay in the fort!”

“And he would have found a way to follow you!” Stefan yelled back at runaway serf ‘nurse’ who was a better doctor than any man he knew, more concerned with her still living patient than herself. “Now hold your arm still!” Stefan blasted out, grabbing hold of the needle and thread she had been using on her patients. “You know that if you lose this arm, we lose another hundred wounded this month.”

“Yes, I know, but...” Tatianna conceded, pulling her arm away from Stefan’s. “My patient!” she insisted, taking the needle and thread from his hand, placing it into her shaking fingers.

“Your patient is stable right now, Doctor. You aren’t,” he noted, seeing her cheeks paler than he was comfortable with. “And my hand is firmer than yours now!” Stefan said, grabbing hold of the needle and thread with one of his bearlike paws, and Tatianna’s slender arm with the other. “It’s MY job to take care of YOU!”

“Because I have medical skills that you need, or can’t buy or are too cheap to pay for anywhere else!?” Tatiana blasted back. “Or because...”

Something softened in Tatianna’s voice, and battle hardened heart. As did something in Stefan’s. Somehow he saw his wife’s soul in her eyes, and felt his beloved Sophia’s heartbeat in the pounding of the arteries in her arm.

“I know,” Tatianna said, in answer to his unspoken question. “We’ve lived and shared more facing death in the last six months out here than we did, or could have, at home where---”

“---We have to return after this is over?” Stefan asked, fearing the answer.

CHAPTER 15

Winter gave way to an early spring. It was a time when plants and trees felt secure enough to rise up towards the sun and say hello to their provider in the heavens with offerings of blooming flowers and fruit. A season for birds and four legged wildlife to consider the intricacies of courtship and mixed joys of parenthood rather than remain preoccupied with protecting themselves from the cold. Springtime also afforded an opportunity for snow to merge with the ground below it, to create mud.

That naturally-created covering over the earth made it difficult for sleds and wheels, being inventions of men rather than nature, to traverse the Steppes, especially if they were carting cannons, even if they were pulled in the traditional Russian manner of having three horses abreast to avoid making ruts in the paths they made, and used. Mother Nature also provided other challenges for the species which was supposed to, by God's mandate anyway, preserve and protect her. Her rivers, whose waters now moved rapidly to the sea, carried floating carcasses of rebels and Czarists who had died in the snow days, weeks and months earlier. They numbered well into the thousands, the causes of their demise including debilitating famine incurred after being made homeless and breadless, mortal wounds making them armless, legless or headless, and a host of diseases that afforded neither prince nor pauper a meaningful death.

In an attempt to thwart the natural and unnatural delivery of death, Captain Stefan, as both himself and the ever mobile General Pugachev, put Tatianna in charge of a series of hospitals. This time she was guarded by the men under his command who were the most proficient in combat rather than the ones who were good with words or medical instruments. "Care given according to need, not money or birthright, or political affiliation," was clearly carved into signs in front of every one of the facilities, signed by General Pugachev himself of course. Compliance with three rules was required to access the 'touched' and talented serf-surgeon's care. The first was that all weapons were to be surrendered at the door. The second was that all alcohol drinks were to be consumed only by patients who required anesthesia, and not by the doctors, even when they wanted to celebrate performing medical miracles. The third was that a badly injured and savable horse was always put in front of the line of any moderately diseased or wounded human. The fourth was that each patient was allowed to pray or otherwise communicate with God though whatever faith or emotion he or she saw fit or necessary at the time. Those four mandates in these hospitals were well known countryside, by both sides.

It was an unusually warm and rainy afternoon in April when a plainly-dressed exhausted beyond measure old rider, who had heard that tale rode into gateway of the half tent, half-hastily reconstructed wooden facility. He was AWOL from his assigned detachment, a mud soaked one axeled wagon behind him. Though he was not clad in any uniform, Rebel Cossack or Imperial Army, he was greeted by a Tatar aiming his musket at his head, a Cossack with an arrow intended for his heart, and a serf pointing the business end of an Imperial Army lance at Kosinko's groin.

"What do you have there in the wagon!" the Cossack with the large wooden crucifix around his rope burned neck barked out in a raspy voice in Yaik Russian.

“It’s a ‘who’,” Michael Kosinko replied, throwing his pistol, knife and axon on the ground, putting his hands up in the air.

“And you are one of ours or one of theirs?” the turbaned Islamic Tatar inquired through a thick mustache in a voice reeking of Turkish diction.

“I heard that here there are no ours and theirs,” Kosinko answered. “But if you must know, he’s a---”

“---Good friend of yours?” the middle aged serf who now carried himself as a spry and young Aristocrat, said as he helped himself to a look under the canvas of the canvas, discovering a barely breathing body under it.

“How did you know?” Kosinko asked.

“Because only a fool, or a loyal comrade, would risk coming here through the Western woods and swamps like you did,” the Tatar commented. “A swamp that swallows up many refuges.”

“And deserters,” the Cossack suggested, examining the perhaps not totally worn down insignias on the handle of Kosinko’s Army pistol, knife and hatchet. “The lowest species of human no matter what side he ran away from.”

“Or converts, who after having their eyes open to what we are really about, would be sure to fight for us once we give them back a body they can fight with,” the empowered serf offered, while examining the wounded man in the wagon.

“And which one are you?” the Cossack forced out of his still intact throat, pressing the barrel of his musket onto Kosinko’s chest, while the Tatar let the seasoned veteran feel the sharpness of his arrow on his chest. “A deserter, a refuge, a civilian White Russian recruit to our multi-racial Russian cause, or---“

“---A fool, who I insisted on leaving me to die, so he could save himself,” the barely conscious man in the wagon slurred out regarding the very healthy one still atop his horse, who was one smart assed remark away from being shot down from it. “Where are we?” he inquired through glassed over eyes that seemed to be able to see nothing but fog, shadows and forms, some from the land of the living, most from the realm of the departed.

“Where I told you we will be going, Alexi,” Kosinko said. “To be rescued from dying.”

“Maybe, perhaps...” the serf said, crossing himself, having examined the fresh wounds on Alexi’s body, and the emerging bumps on his skin, then feeling the hot fever on his forehead. “If we’re lucky. And if we aren’t.” The apparently low born man, probably illiterate, middle aged man began giving the last rights to Alexi in the manner of a well-

read ancient one. Midway into the prayer his droning, defeatist voice was halted by that of a defiant young woman.

“We will make our own luck, like we always do,” Kosinko heard from female voice behind him. “Especially for this one,” she insisted, charged with purpose and determination. “Bring him inside, now! The front of the line.”

“Thank you,” Kosinko said to the young woman clad in a red-stained white smock, her long, auburn locks were specked with blood, her determined bloodshot eyes defying badly needed sleep. “I knew I, no we, could count on you to---.”

“--- put this man in detention, alive and well treated, till we figure out how he found us, and who he really is,” she said, of Kosinko, while Alexi was taken into the hospital in a stretcher by two women, the door to the facility closing before Kosinkov’s disbelieving, but grateful eyes.

CHAPTER 16

The ghost, anticipating the Soul’s ultimate destination, emerged from the body leaving behind just enough of its Essence to keep that hunk of flesh, bone and slushing-around fluids in between going. It found its way past human obstacles and trees, blowing a wind in its wake to make itself known to any who had the kind of eyes that would notice, the gift or curse of seeing such bestowed by fever, disease and delirium. Those very human onlookers in their hospital cots or on the operating tables had one question for the ghost. “I don’t know where I’m going either,” the ethereal body said in several tongues that could be felt, but not quite understood. “I’ll see if I can let you know after I get there.”

The ghost set its course for heaven, which it thought was above the clouds. But the darkness of those mountains of cold, windy vapor set the ghost to finding another port of entry which was better lit. En route, the ghost, lacking a body, felt no connection to his former manhood or the fascination with womanhood, decided to follow an eagle who seemed to be able to walk, run and dance on the areal paths created by the clouds. The winds blew the eagle and the ghost into more clouds, but ones created by man, not nature. They smelled foul, felt hot and made all who got trapped in them lose orientation as to where North, South, East and West were, as well as which direction was up and which was down. Recalling stories regarding what happened to Souls who went in the latter direction after leaving the body, the ghost decided to settle in on a tall tree. He was joined by the eagle, who looked down below at the muddy earth with another agenda.

Both airborne observers saw men in red and blue uniforms charge to the tune of a bugle from the woods to their left onto an open plain in which the creatures of the wild were the warm sunshine and gentle rains of Spring. To the right, rebels who were all dressed differently from each other galloped their horses to greet the mounted Imperial soldiers. Behind the cavalry on both sides, infantry ran as hard as their legs could carry them through the muck, some losing their boots in the mud, others losing their courage when

seeing what was ahead. Behind the infantry were riflemen and archers, shooting those who did not move forward. Behind them, cannon fired in the general direction of enemy troops, but on more than one occasion blasting their own men and horses into oblivion.

Horse clashed into horse, then riders into riders. Then metal into flesh. The ghost saw amongst the non-uniformed combatants women, some of whom fought more fiercely than the men. Those female combatants, some of whose shorn heads bore male warlocks, yelled out pledges to avenge the taking of their husband's arms, legs, eyes or lives with the cutting off of an Imperial Army soldier's head. Cossack and Tatar militia fighting for the Imperial Army pledged similar revenge on the rebels, with equal justification. The brown mud turned into a river of blood. Finally, bugle calls from the woods on the Imperial Side called back the few soldiers who could still walk, ride, or crawl back. Horns reminiscent of Nordic Vikings from the rebel woods summoned back the even fewer remaining rebels into the woods. The eagle swooped down and smelled the corpses. Flocks of crows, ravens, hawks and vultures joined him. "Hey, our plan to get rid of the two legged idiots and assholes worked," the eagle, whose likeness was on the banners and insignia on both sides, cawed back to the ghost in a voice that sounded more demonic than avian. "Want some?"

"No," the ghost replied. "I have somewhere else to go now. Even though I know I should---"

Alexi Stralnikov woke up abruptly, realizing that he was back on a straw covered wooden slab in the rebel-run field hospital, remembering every portion of the dream, AND vision, seeing all of the faces of the combatants. He knew the names and history of most of the Imperial soldiers. Some of the rebels he now knew by name as well as face, given his vantage point in the 'dream', as well as his experience trying to force them into a reasonable surrender while he was still able to use his legs and arms. As for those appendages now, they throbbed with something he had never quite experienced before, at least to this degree. It got worse when he tried to move them.

"Pain. Good for the soul. A reminder that we are Alive. And a pre-requisite for any kind of real achievement, accomplishment or Bliss, especially for we Slavs," Alexi heard from the Head Doctor, Nurse, Earth Healer and perhaps Witch as she examined the wounds that had been stitched up while he was asleep, and perhaps opened up while trying to run away from himself in the nightmare. "Extend your leg for me, and by that I do not mean the one between your two hindlimbs," she continued, seeming to be smiling behind tightly pursed lips.

Alexi extended his right leg, then his left, recalling the first time he had set eyes on Tatianna in St. Petersburg so many years and experiences ago.

"Now flex them," she commanded.

Alexi complied with his Savior and now Mistress, recalling what it felt like to dance with her at the tavern where he fell in love with her mind as well as the beautiful body her hard working soul was assigned to inhabit by the Creator.

“Now, the arms, please,” she continued, extending her hands to him. “Grab hold of my hand as hard as you can.”

Alexi’s fingers wrapped around Tatianna’s wrists. Such brought back the memory of walking her home after a long discussion of matters Platonic and Playful at the tavern in St Petersburg. The pain in his wrists, shoulders, and left chest in the present reminded him of what had happened when a large-framed Aristocrat more muscular and rich than Alexi pulled Tatianna into the house, then pushed Alexi down the stairs onto the cobblestone streets, followed by three of the servants sent from the house delivering punches, kicks and warnings to him as the door to Tatianna’s house closed shut.

“This is good,” Tatianna said regarding the musculature in Alexi’s hands. “You can let go now,” she continued, this time breaking out with a smile.

It was the same smile that Alexi recalled when he had picked himself up off the bloody pavement, then broke into the back door of the house, and then proceeded to pull Tatianna’s master off her just before he was about to punch a black, bloody hole into both of her eye sockets. It was returned by the same smile that Tatianna gave Alexi, and his friend, then Captain Lariunov, a thank you for giving her ‘godfather’ the beating he was about to give her. The same smile that low born Tatianna, blessed and cursed with the body of a beautiful Countessa, displayed a few years later to Alexi at the ceremony where graduated from Medical College, made possible after he and Lariunov privately paid her tuition, then set her up in private practice afterwards. Such was followed by paying off or intimidating jealous male doctors, magistrates and politically-powerful priests who sought to burn the gifted earth healer and uterus-bearing scientist who saved countless people of all classes from plagues, diseases and beatings at the stake for being a witch. That smile that said also ‘thank you’ for the very married Alexi’s being too smart, or virtuous, to accept Tatianna’s offer to become his Mistress. That smile which Tatianna had each time Alexi visited her for Platonic visits between campaigns and administrative assignments which he yearned to have been far more intimate.

“There is one thing I would ask of you, Tatianna,” Alexi dared to inquire, considering the balance of trade between them.

“I saved your life, then didn’t tell anyone about you being a senior officer in the Czarina’s Army, which would require me to send you to General Pugachev,” she replied, in French, softly, so that the behind-the-scenes rebel guards in the hospital would not notice, after which she dismissed the orderlies assigned to help her. “What else do you want?”

“Well, as long as you asked,” Alexi said, feeling himself to be in St. Petersburg again, away from assignment from his no-brain, flabby breasted wife, enjoying the company of

a big-brained, and by coincidence, tastefully breasted future doctor. “You can get me a glass of cider.”

“A mug of water,” she replied, dipping the scoop into the barrel of water and pouring it into a clay mug which she handed Alexi. “Anything else?”

“My friend, the one who brought me in here,” Alexi said after whetting his parched mouth with badly needed fluid. “Where is he?”

“On his way, probably back to your troops, with a fresh horse, more rations than any of our men, or women, have in their saddlebags, and information we want him to know,” she replied.

“You mean lies that you want the Imperial Army and the Czarina to believe,” Alexi acknowledged. “Which is very smart, and---.” Alexi pushed his back up from the straw covered cot, then painfully swung his feet over the sides, so as to see if they could support the weight of his body. “There is one last favor I would ask. To help me up.”

“Not yet,” Tatianna replied, laying her outstretched fingers onto Alexi’s aching chest. “You’re not ready.”

“I know when I’m ready!” Alexi grunted, pushing his aching body onto his shivering feet. It was a bold, determined struggle that resulted in failure to stand, landing Alexi into Tatiana’s arms.

“You planned that, Alexi,” Tatianna said, apparently feeling the same affections for Alexi as he was now feeling again for her, but this time in the flesh. “Is there anything else you want from me? Maybe asking me if I can have some of my Rebel friends kidnap your wife, implant a warm heart where her cold soul is, or pay a liberated serf to steal her away from you so we can finally be together?”

“Something harder and more complicated than that,” Alexi inquired of Tatiana in his best French, which he knew was no match for her mastery of that academic tongue. “An answer to one question.”

“Which is?” she replied, musicality in her voice, welcome in her awakened blue eyes.

“Why did you go over to the rebel side, when we sent you there as a spy?” Alexi whispered into her ear. “Don’t you know that you can’t and won’t win? And that no matter how many Imperial Enlisted men’s lives you save, you will be hung as a witch and a traitor?”

“I’m doing what I have to do,” she answered, in French. “As, after you are healed, you will do what you have to do.” With that, Tatianna pulled her arms away from Alexi and laid him down in his cot. “But in the meantime, there is one rule here that supercedes all others.”

“Don’t shit where you eat?” Alexi mused.

“Each gives according to his abilities and takes according to his needs,” she declared as doctrine, having chosen her words and clandestine strategy to achieving such.

“In matters of the heart or body?” Alexi felt like asking but didn’t, fearing that he would be told the real answer.

CHAPTER 17

Rumors about who Yemelyan Pugachev was, where he was, were as rampant as siphillus in re-populated cities, wartime romances that replaced allegiances at home, and vodka. According to some, the real Pugachev, as Czar Peter the III gone rouge, had fallen in love with a young Cossack maiden who he tried to marry and declare his Empress. Said bride and her parents asked what his wife Catherine would say about it. The local Priest said he not allowed by law to marry Peter III to his new betrothed until he was legally divorced from Empress Catherine, God himself having protected said clergy from Pugachev’s sword. Others said that Pugachev had returned home to his wife in Zinoveiskaya, who was still angry at him for not fulfilling his obligations to her as a Cossack husband at home and for making life extremely difficult for her when he DID come home. The appearance of Pugachev in what seemed to be two places at once afforded him the legend of being the fastest horseman alive, or a ghost who could never be put down by a metal bullet or confined in a steel cage. That ghost required any Imperial Forces to spread out into several directions at once, diluting their already small numbers relative to the escalating army of rebels, and rebel sympathizers.

The journalists busied themselves getting whatever information they could get on the battles which seemed to occur daily now that summer was approaching, knowing that whatever news they were able to deliver to their publishers in Moscow would be outdated history by the time they got into print, if indeed they were allowed to be put into print. Any real news about putting down the rebellion that had become a very real Revolution would not only discredit Catherine in Court and the history books, as well as invite the Poles, Turks, Swedes and the Prussians to form an alliance to invade the Russian Empire and get back land that Peter the Great had taken, and whatever else they could grab while they were at it. But there was one fact that everyone with a thinking brain agreed on.

“The battle that decides who will win Russia will be won here,” circumstance-appointed General Stefan Ilonovick, said while pointing to a map in his tent, as himself rather than his Pugachev persona, to the members of his closest circle. In front of him was a stolen Imperial Army map of the vast expanse that was Western Russia, displaying to the best of his information towns, cities and wilderness areas along with who had control of them now. “Kazan. He who controls Kazan controls the Volga, and he who controls the Volga---”

“---Can feed Count Lazinski and his minions to the fish, to be eaten alive!” now Captain Svetlana growled, anger emanating from every streak of Pagan red and blue paint on her face and the shaven sides of her head. “When do we charge the city!?” she barked at her mild mannered commander.

“We lay siege to it first, which is how we captured Orenburg, Svetlana,” Stefan explained, now certain that her surname was Lazinski, and that her new and ONLY family was the revolution now. “We want to give the inhabitants a chance to repent for their sins of greed, cowardice or ignorance, so they can join us.”

“And if they don’t join us?” Svetlana challenged. “The REAL Pugachev would have had them hanged! Anyone who lets them go on their way as ‘neutral’ refugees, and allows them to take food, horses and wagons with them that WE need, is soon to be found out as being a Pretender,” she continued, in the manner of a scholar who had all the cards with regard to knowledge, and an orator who was just as good, or better, than the real Pugachev in convincing people of his point. “Is that not so?” she said to the other five members of the War Council, convincing even Mustafa and Father Vasili of her claim. “We have to be vicious in the short term to be kind, and effective, in the long term?”

“And the servants and soldiers who are more terrified of freedom than their old masters, or present officers? And those who were born rich but do not know the Bliss of struggle and sharing,” Stefan countered. “Most of them do not know what freedom and self-determination are. We have to open their eyes slowly, so the light coming in to them from the bright sun above does not terrify these blind, and secure in their misery, cave dwellers. Is that not so?”

To that argument, Mustafa nodded in approval. Father Vasili considered the proposition, keeping his hand on his chin. The other members of the council looked at each other, confounded and confused. Svetlana, the leader of the new Women’s Brigade on the battlefield, and a growing movement to abolish need for as well as freedom of religion from the Revolution’s mandate, lost no opportunity to rule from below.

“Then we should plan a siege of Kazan,” she suggested, in the manner of Stefan’s wife back home when plotting his overthrow with regard to a decision about what to repair first on the house after a storm, what mare to breed to what stallion, and what would be appropriate books for ‘his’ children to use when learning how to read, and challenge their parents’ values. “The kind of siege we did in Orenburg,” she continued, possessed by something far more powerful than hormonally-fueled assertion. “Where the Czarist puppets and their human lap dogs ran out of hay to feed their horses, cats to eat the rats and medicine for their diseased bodies. But they still had enough firewood to warm up the corpses of the dead so they could sustain the ‘living’. Good eating. Yum...Yum.”

“And what will happen when the gods, or God, stop looking after you,” Stefan said to himself as Svetlana rambled on about the joys and necessities of being as vicious to those loyal to the Czarina now as she and her predecessors had been to generations in the past.

“She has a point,” Stefan finally said, outloud, with his eyes to his horse, Mosh Beter, feeding his face with late spring grass outside the tent afforded by nature and grain that, so far anyway, was in abundant supply in the mobile camp. “The nine cannons our scouts have counted in Kazan, and the uncounted men behind the city walls can do a lot of damage to you, and us, if we charge the city. But...as for the people inside who can be converted to our Cause---”

“---WILL be converted, especially the serfs and servants, who outnumber the masters ten to one!” Svetlana asserted. “They will be inspired by ideas and ideals!” she continued, holding up a copy of one of her manifestos.

“That is assuming those serfs and servants in Kazan are literate enough to read your Revolutionary prose,” Mustafa suggested. “And understand it, even if they are read to them.”

“And that they are brave or stupid enough to believe in a People’s Revolution instead of God,” Father Vasili added. “Rightly or wrongly, oppressed people today believe that God has ordained their Masters as their rightful rulers.”

“Which is one of the things we are fighting for!” Svetlana barked back. “Freedom from kings on earth as well as God or gods above us.”

The debate over what the Revolution was all about, and for, started all over again, involving every member of the council. Would the deserving get more land than the lazy? Could civil law replace God’s Commandments? Would power be given equally to men and women, or would one gender have domain outside of the home and the other be able to rule only inside it? Would the Czarina and her supporters be invited into the New Russia, barricaded into a small portion of the Empire, or be thrown in the river with a rock around their waist? If the majority rules on one issue or another, what provisions would be made for the minority who opposed such?

Such debates were healthy and necessary, as Stefan had always seen it. But this time, Stefan abstained from them. And he was hit by the harsh realization that such debates rarely happened when the Real Pugachev was around in the early stages of the revolution, and never took place now. Particularly as Stefan’s good friend and drinking companion Yemelyan Pugachev now seemed to really believe that he was Czar Peter III, never allowing anyone in his inner circle to address him as Yemelyan. Yet even the dumbest horse in the corral, or drunk Cossack in the taverna tent knew that if Catherine’s troops were victorious, it would doom all of the Russias to a fate worse than death.

CHAPTER 18

Michael Kosinko had left the Rebel Hospital a convert to their Cause, having seen so many non-rebels being given medical care, food and real information about their Imperial masters. Promising to ‘go and sin no more’ with the blessing of the hospital preist, he

rode away a new man, armed with a gun that he said he would use to hunt deer to feed the wounded, rather than creating more wounded with that implement of destruction.

But being someone who listened rather than talked during his benign captivity, Kosinko was armed with something far more powerful than a metal rod that could fire metal into the flesh of four legged fur bearing creatures. It was knowledge that empowered Kosinko now. Knowledge that Pugachev's home village was Zinoveiskaya. That he had a wife, three children and a very interesting home life.

A mere five days' ride away from Tatianna's hospital, Kosinko deposited the deer and rabbit meat he had shot at the Zinoveiskaya village church, saying it was for the wives and children whose fathers were off fighting the Revolution, and the widows and orphans of those slain in such. He was told by the Priest that there were few widows and no orphans of the Revolution in the village, and that most of the men in town were out hunting and fishing for their own families. "They have the good sense to know what Pugachev and his Revolution is really about," the seemingly Good Father related. "As does his wife, Sofia, God preserve her learned, caring and tortured soul," he continued, crossing himself in the manner of the Old Believers, then the New Ones.

"And where can I avail myself of this good sense?" Kosinko inquired in his best Don Cossack diction.

The priest pointed Kosinko in the general direction of the dwelling, gave him some specifics regarding the terrain, then warning him that it is well guarded by God now. And that if he was an ungodly man, he would be slain in the saddle faster than he could utter a blasphemous word.

The road led to a straw-roofed house in front of which sat a man smoking a pipe on the porch. On his lap was a musket. On his belt a pistol to the right and a sword to the left. On his head a Kalmyk cap, tilted to the left. In his lips was a pipe. From his vantage point on a small hill, Kosinko noted the details of his face as the sun elucidated all of its rough, middle aged features, all of which were the spitting image of the leader of the Revolt. "I'm not Yemelyan Pugachev," Kosinko heard to man say before he could devise a plan to kill, wound or kidnap him. "Come closer and identify yourself," he continued, after which Kosinko noted four Don Cossacks on horseback who had followed him, undetected.

Kosinko was escorted to the house that was not much bigger than a hut, then addressed by the gentleman on the porch. "I am Yemelyan's brother. My name is probably something neither you nor history think important, which is fine," he said with a sincere and life-tested smile, after which he took a few more puffs on his pipe. "And you are here to see my sister in law. For what purpose I wish to and need to ask."

"To make an offering," Kosinko said with bowed head, pointing to the bounty of game strapped to his saddle and travail.

“We have enough meat to eat,” the man who resembled the Great Pretender in body, but not in temperament or essence replied with gentle humor regarding the wild game Kosinko had bagged. “ We need some real truth for our weary heads.”

“And hurting hearts,” Kosinko heard from a not bad but not really good looking middle aged Cossack woman who opened the door, an empty water bucket in each hand. “As, by your eyes, and the soul behind them, you do as well.”

Kosinko addressed her with his eyes, having established an instant conversation with her without words. And with more truth than lies.

Seeing something in Kosinko’s soul, bypassing the thoughts in his mind, she waved off the mounted protectors. After they had left, she invited Kosinko to dismount and take a stoop next to her on the porch. She instructed her brother in law to go inside and get some tea “I am Sofia Pugachev, and you are?”

“Someone who wants to end this war even more than you and everyone else here does,” the battle weary veteran of too many wars replied.

Pugachev’s still unnamed brother came out back outside with two mismatched mugs, a pot of tea, and a dish of bisquits.

“And who would you like to see win this ‘war; between a Great Pretender and a Power Hunger bitch?” Sofia, said as she poured tea for her guest. “Who should be the victor in this war?”

“Truth, humanity and sustainable freedom,” Kosinko replied, both glad and worried that he had not yet been asked his name or political affiliation as he sat down on the log and took off his hat.

Sofia watched the way Kosinko drank the tea and ate the bisquits. He did his best to maintain his knowledge of Cossack custom, diction and deportment. It was not enough.

“So, as a White Russian, who knows how to give himself an authentic Cossack haircut, why do you give a shit about us Cossacks?”

“Because of them,” he said regarding three children atop horses in the corral behind the house, their feet barely able to reach the stirrups in their saddles. “What are their names?”

“The boy is Trufm,” she said of the boy who looked to be eleven, who seemed protective of his younger sisters as would a father. “And the girls, Kristina and Agrefena.”

“Who seem look after each other like my two sons and daughter do,” Kosinko said with a warm smile. “Or did, until...” he continued, sorrow overcoming his face, hiding the thought behind it as he brought his mug up to his face. “God in His wisdom created

man. Then man in his folly and ignorance created War. And Wars created rulers who work their way up to power on the bodies of slain children.”

“And a deluded husband who I did turn in to the authorities here, when he tried to start another noble and needed revolt that was doomed to fail.”

“Who I heard is engaged to marry a Cossack girl in Yaitsk. By the name of---“

“----Ustina! I know!” Sofia growled, after which she rose on her feet and yelled curses towards her beloved absentee husband through a porthole in the sky. “Your new ‘Empress’, Yemelyan, who you’ve adorned with jewels, finery and handmaidens while your own children, and wife----“

“---Who can save him and the rest of this country from destruction,” Kosinko offered.

“And what miracle can you pull out of your White Russian ass to make this happen?” Sofia replied. “Do you have an Angel who you know who can talk him out of his delusions?”

“A doctor who can I think medicate him into being the loving father and husband who he used to be, and should be,” Kosinko offered. “And powerful connections in Moscow and everywhere along the Don River who want to end the bloodshed, and the oppression that made it happen, who can---“

“----All I want is to have my Yemelyan back,” lioness Sofia said with tears in her eyes as a lamb. “I love him, and I know he loves me, and his children. So help me God.” She crossed herself, verifying that contention with a prayer.

Kosinko crossed himself as well. “Jesus, I know that I’m a Jew, who’s pretending to be a Christian to protect what’s left of my family,” he whispered to himself. “But if you could talk to your Dad and make this plan work, I will be your most dedicated convert, for real.”

CHAPTER 19

Mounted upon his ever faithful steed Mosh Veter nestled in a wooded vantage point outside of Kazan, Stefan Ilonovick considered the nature of the most essential and valued quality for any Cossack in war or peace. “Courage,” he said to the horse while feeding him another apple, and feeling to his own empty stomach churn. “Some say it is something you are born with, some say it is something that is thrust upon you, but perhaps it is being afraid of everything but doing what you have to do anyway.” It was something that he had never read in any of Svetlana’s poems, novels or children stories, but knew now more than ever.

Though isolated from his troops, and unnoticed by the city that his men, and now women, had surrounded, the normally stoic Stefan felt everything. The gentle summer winds felt like tornado force Arctic winds. The smell of bread, fresh meat and sweets being prepared in the rebel camp below him, intended to feed his own troops as well as to lure hungry citizens of Kazan to desert their city come out and join them, felt so strong that it made him yearn to go on a five day fast. The feel of horseflesh on his battle-scarred calves seemed to open up old wounds rather than heal them with a sense of Purpose. The voice of a young woman joined by older men singing a song from his Yaik homeland evoked silent tears running down his cheeks, a stream that became a river flowing uncontrollably under his hypersensitive skin in directions he could not determine nor control.

“You are alright?” Stefan heard, or perhaps merely imagined, Mosh Veter nicker.

“We have to be,” he replied, in human words, re-forced by a gentle stroking of his neck. “And by all logical means, should be,” he continued, taking in a deep breath so that the tightness in his chest would be dissipated into the winds, blown away into the Volga, and carried to the sea and baptised into something useful. During his rider’s most intense internal moment, Mosh Veter heard a rider approaching, alerting his master, friend and mounted student to such.

“Mustafa,” Stefan said, greeting the rider who was clad in a black dress, crucifix and shawl. “What did you experience in the city, aside from what it is like to face the world without hair on your face?” he mused.

“Hunger, desperation and fear,” the Old Man who volunteered to infiltrate the city as an Old Woman replied, whipping off his shawl.

“Their military strength?”

“Difficult to say. The soldiers kept civilians away from the ramparts. Even Old Widows wearing black dresses who want to offer them the last of their food, and their most solemn prayers,” Mustafa replied, taking reaching down to a canteen on Stefan’s saddle. “The dead can look much like the living, and pipes can be made to look like cannon. A trick we did and they learned.”

“And how many converts?” Stefan asked, ignoring for the moment the churning in his belly at seeing Mustafa’s well muscled and always true knife throwing arm moving slower and less steadily than it had two days ago. “How many people can we count on joining our Cause in response to the pamphlets you let fall from your petticoat? And how many will join the Cause when we send in troops?”

“Your Cause, or Pugachev’s?” Mustafa replied. “They have become quite different with regard to how this war should be fought, as well as who will win in the ‘peace’ to come. But, there is another problem we didn’t anticipate.”

Mustafa reached into the balls in his chest and pulled out a pamphlet printed in Russian and Tatar. “This was sent out by riders who were issued suicide pills, the only horses not being eaten, and white flags. I stole one from a drunk cavalryman who thought I was his mother, sister and wife.”

“I know, I got one of those pamphlets too,” Stefan said. “But the real question I have is HOW Sofia Pugachev, her three children and brother in law got kidnapped. And how they were smuggled into the city.”

“That’s not as important as what she is doing there,” Mustafa replied. “She’s been given permission to roam the city, and tell everyone that her 33 years deluded husband is neither Peter III nor the second coming of Jesus. As is Christian Bishop Veniamen and the Islamic Imams who will not be mentioned in the history books, for better or worse. And when those neutrals who want to just be left out of this War make their decision--- ”

“—They will join or support the Czarists,” Stefan concluded. “Which means we have to attack, soon.”

“Yes,” the Old Islamic Tatar said to the Young still-Christian Cossack. “ But with you as Pugachev or yourself?”

Stefan considered the inquiry very carefully. His still Christian mind said that people will follow intelligent, humble, kind and logical leaders who consider Right as Might. His experience with Russian and Cossack politics said that more people will follow the strong, charismatic and cruel. The manifestation of that appeared on the horizon, alerted to Stefan by Mosh Veter.

“So, he’s finally come back to bite at the bait,” Mustafa said of the real Pugachev after noting a single rider in a camel coat and blue cap emerging from the Western woods, his head up high, a chorus behind him chanting his name. Behind him was an Army of that filled the horizon with thousands of men, carting with them no less than 20 cannon. Mustafa then turned to Stefan. “And no doubt here to congratulate you, and us, for being the decoy company that kept Michaelson’s Imperial Army on our tails instead of his.”

“Or wanting his Revolution back,” Stefan pondered, and found the courage, or stumbled on the stupidity, to give voice to. “Which I am very good with!” he continued, envisioning a future where the only pretending he would be hide and seek games with his children, and who would be the boss of the kitchen and the woodshed at home with his wife. “Yes, the people can have their Revolution back!” the not yet 30 year old Cossack declared, celebrating his soon to be retirement from warfare.

“A Revolution that we are certain to win now, finally, for good this time,” Mustafa replied with a wide smile, after which he galloped his horse down the hill. “For land, freedom, and the right to free expression. Even if it is for a man to express the female side of himself. In the line of duty, or entertainment at the victory celebration afterwards of course.”

Stefan urged Mosh Veter forward at a walk, then a dignified trot. Just before he reached the outskirts of a celebratory Rebel camp, his progress was stopped by two riders nearly twice his size, flanked by men of equal size on his flanks. “You are coming with us,” the head rider, the smallest in stature, asserted in high pitched voice.

“Then going for a swim in the river,” the largest of the Behemiths added, pulling out a rope.

“On what charge?” Stefan inquired recalling the list of offenses punishable by death by democratically elected Cossack assemblies everywhere. “This really is my horse. And I have been faithful to my wife. And I have not murdered anyone except in the line of duty. And...”

Stefan lightly touched that special spot on Mosh Veter’s flank which meant ‘attack’. The same point that he had used in countless charges against Imperial Cavalry, cannon placements and heavily defended walls. With the assertive precision of a trumpeter blasting out notes of an Ancient Victory tune, Stefan’s horse reared up, kicking the lead horse and rider to the ground. Not losing a beat, Veter cow kicked the rider to his left off his mount, then with a quick turn of the head, spooked the steed to his right so as to dump his rider on his ass and probably busted back. Three jumps later, the first being the horse’s idea, the second being Stefan’s, horse and rider had broken loose from their potential captors.

Stefan galloped between the Camp and the oncoming Army of Rebels unnoticed, disappearing into the brush. He was finally free. Of everything. Something that would require a lot of courage to endure, and utilise effectively.

CHAPTER 20

For the Revolution promising Freedom, Land and Dignity, it was a victory march in the Park. Lacking reinforcements from General Michaelson, the 2000 soldiers in Kazan armed with only 9 functional cannon were overrun by the now 20,000 strong Cossacks, peasants, Tatars and Old Beleivers who voiced their declaration of Liberation loudly with 20 cannons. Being the mobile commander of now three women’s companies, Svetlana saw it all. Despite Sofia Pugachev’s informing the citizens in Kazan that her husband was a deluded Pretender and illiterate fraud, most of them joined in the revolt once the walls came tumbling down. Some participated in the burning of houses, looting of dwellings abandoned by the nobles. Some took up arms against their masters. Some of them joined the retreat of retreating soldiers scattering into the woods with whatever or whoever they could carry on their back. Svetlana’s mind calculated the numbers as she was determined to write the history of this liberating event in the service of Truth, as well as the mandate of the new Revolutionary Regime which was soon to take over the Empire ruled over by the Czars.

A special group of prisoners were gathered into the center of the burnt rubble that was once one of the Empire's richest and proudest multicultural cities. Some walked up to the ropes which awaited their necks with pride and dignity, requesting that the sacs covering their heads be removed so they could prepared to meet their Maker with open eyes. Some staggered up the rubble constructed as stairs, trying with all of their might to get away from the Tatars, Cossacks, or peasants who were escorting them. Some had to be carried, as fear of the present and what awaited their greedy, sinful and cruel souls grabbed hold of their urine drenched and fecal stained asses. Father Vasili passed by them all, giving them the Last Rights in the manner of the Old Believers doctrine in a fast, lifeless and procedural manner while the crowd poured in. The officiator stepped up on the platform of rubble that had been a statue of the Czarina several hours ago and announced the verdict.

“The democratically elected leader of our democratic assembly after hearing the decisions from a democratically elected jury has determined that these violators of democratic rule, law and honor be hung,” Svetlana proclaimed, limping on a bandaged leg which had been injured during the battle, the first time her flesh had been violated by metal or male reproductive organs. “It is my duty, and honor, to hang these men, and women, as an example to all of their brethren. But before we the people do this, in the service of the people, we ask you, the people, if YOU have any final words to say.”

From somewhere deep inside the on-looking crowd, which had become an angry mob, a high pitched voice rang out “I want to see their faces.” Svetlana was not sure if it came from a woman or a child, but it was soon joined by other voices requesting the same thing. She turned to the hangmen, who made no attempt to hide their blood splattered faces, and motioned them to remove their hoods. They removed the hoods and blindfolds on the soon to be departed. A roar of jeers, curses and insults emerged from the crowd, followed by rocks, manure and rotted human flesh being thrown in their faces.

Svetlana observed her attention being drawn to an older aristocrat who received more offerings of insults and abuse than the others. “I’m sorry, my daughter,” Count Lazinski mouthed to his daughter, who had trained to read lips due to her mother’s often bad hearing. “Forgive me,” he begged.

Truth be recalled, there was a lot that Count Lazinski required forgiveness for. His abuse of his serfs, who, but for the ‘special’ ones, he considered as sellable as cattle and expandable as houseflies. The ‘accidental’ injury to his wife that left her with an inability to hear properly. His insistence that his daughter be married to a man of means who could pamper and protect her, while of course refilling the coffers of the Lazinski family that he had emptied sometimes legally, and sometimes not. Svetlana should have felt anger for the old man, but instead something else overcame her. Tears ran down her cheeks, as she recalled the few good times she had with her father. Good times that perhaps didn’t exist as she remembered them but which permeated her consciousness now. She observed her feet carrying her onto the platform, knife in hand, prepared to cut the rope, but she was held back by two Cossacks and one Tatar all ten times stronger than she was. Count Lazinski hung on the gallows, choking slowly.

Someone in the crowd broke into song. To the rhythm of that tune, each of the accused was hung, their bodies swinging back and forth in time to the music. Finally, Svetlana got loose from the men who she had fought so hard with over the last six months. Stealing one of their swords, she worked her way up to where her father was still hanging, pulling back her arm, which she now discovered has been wounded, prepared to cut the rope, or his throat. Both plans were halted by another man behind her, clad in black.

“We need you alive, and the Revolution needs him dead,” Father Vasili said by way of explanation as he pulled Svetlana back from liberating her father from an agonising death. With that, he pushed Svetlana to the ground just before the crowd made its way up to the accused with knives of their own, taking ears, eyes and fingers from the still living enemies of the people.

She lay on the ground, wondering one thing. “Why did Vasili say that the Revolution needs them dead and not God?” she asked herself. She then looked up to the sky. “If all of this was really Your idea, it’s You who should be hanging on a noose now,” she blasted out to the Creator who she claimed in print and voice never existed. A Heavenly Father who she hoped would become the kind of Papa that she imagined possible, and perhaps at one point in her life, had had.

Bringing hell closer to earth, Svetlana saw a man who resembled but was not Pugachev at the city gates, accompanied by a woman and three children on horseback, being escorted by three Cossacks on each side of them to the hills beyond it. The woman, who had introduced herself to Svetlana as ‘Sofia’ and nothing else in the heat of the battle when she was liberated from an open jail cell, looked at the real Pugachev holding Court in the town square, clad in his camel coat, tilted blue cap and trademark sash. Hate, love and pity seemed to be competing for which would take over her soul. Before the contest was concluded, her escorts moved her forward. Before doing so, Sofia, or whoever she really was, mouthed ‘help us’ to Svetlana. “I will,” Svetlana pledged, hoping and now praying that she could honor that commitment.

CHAPTER 21

It had been a long ride from where he had been to where he was, wherever that was. But both Stefan and Mosh Veter were still alive by some miracle. They both shared a meal of apples, derived from a tree which somehow had not been burnt to a crisp by one of the fires perhaps he had set himself. “So, where do we go from here?” he asked his horse. “And by what names shall we go by? Yours is as famous or infamous as mine now,” he said. “So, what do you want me to call you and what do you want to call me? Maybe ‘fool who should have known that no good deed goes unpunished’ or ‘servant of the Lord who really did enjoy playing God and resurrected Enlightened Czar too much’.”

Mosh Veter answered with a snurl of his muzzle, more relieved to be chomping on apples and freshly grown grass than concerned with Stefan's welfare. Or so it seemed to Stefan now, as he considered that for the first time, he was really alone. Unless he could find his way home to his Yaik family undetected, convince them that he would look after them and not the Revolution this time, and get them to leave everyone and everything they knew. And of course be able to hide his love for Tatianna, who was the woman he really sought to run away with.

"Tatianna's away, doing what she can and has to do, Veter," Stefan said to his horse, realising that the steed could read his better than his mind could. "And we have to do what we have to do."

"As do I," Stefan heard from behind him, from a voice he didn't recognise. Before turning around to see who it was, he looked to Veter, asking with his eyes why his equine protector had not warned him of the intruder's presence, whose shadow cast an impression of himself as well as what looked like a well aimed musket.

"I mean to do no harm," Stefan said raising his hands in the air. "And I will pay you in money or labor for the apples I ate from your tree."

"I have a better idea," the shadow answered, after which he lowered his weapon and approached Stefan from the side. "We work together for once," the man whose shadow had nearly scared the piss out of Stefan offered.

Stefan recognized the face of the man clad in a Cossack shirt, the tattered trousers of a country serf, mismatches shoes of a factory worker and Tatar turban. "Major Alexi Stralnikov, I presume?"

"Just Alexi now," he said with a warm smile as he led his horse into the campground, picking one apple for himself from the tree for his horse, and one for himself. "And what brings you here to this place and circumstance, Colonel Stefan Ilonovick?"

"Just Stefan, or some other unnoticeable name now," Stefan replied.

"On your way to where?" the man who had perused Stefan, thinking that he was Pugachev at times, and as himself during other times. "Where are you heading to?"

"A place and circumstance where there is more Truth and no pretending, Alexi."

"A place and circumstance I aspire to as well, Stefan. But as for particulars relevant for the moment..."

Stefan listened to what former Major Stralnikov of the Imperial Army had to say about why he had converted to the Rebel Cause. Stefan recognized all of the ideals, slogans and truths of his explanations. But it was the human source of those so poetically and

accurate phrases that interested him most. “So, how is Tatianna?” Stefan asked. “Still practicing medicine.”

“More like performing miracles, Stefan,” Alexi related.

“Yes, indeed, Alexi,” Stefan replied with a warm smile, vicariously enjoying the only good thing to come out of this Revolution.

“Performing miracles of the heart as well as the body,” the reply.

As Alexi went on about the runaway Serf who Stefan thought he had liberated, the Cossack realized that that place he occupied in Tatianna’s heart was now occupied by someone else. He considered that maybe there was another Tatianna under the one he knew. Further explanations from Alexi about her background, familial origins and how she acquired her medical skills convinced Stefan that perhaps he never knew Tatianna at all. His love for her turned into hatred, as being yet perhaps another pretender, just like his once beloved Comrade in Arms Yemelyan Pugachev.

Stefan felt called again to the battlefield, in which people fought with believable lies as well as sharp swords. The former cut into the soul the latter merely into the body. But for the moment, Stefan felt ‘connected’ again to something, his connection to that new Cause, whatever it was, being former Imperial Army Major Alexi Stralnikov, now ‘just Alexi’.

CHAPTER 22

Micheal Kosinko’s lungs were hungry for air, but his broken ribs kept those organs on a low oxygen diet. He breathed lightly and cautiously as he waited atop the designated location three miles outside of Kazan, atop a horse whose left hind leg now as permanently damaged as much as his was. Finally, the horizon was spotted with troops in bright red and blue uniforms, then covered with such. “Just in time, General Michaelson,” the Old Veteran clad as a common beggar barked at the Imperial Army commander. “If you hurry, you can join the wiener roast,” he continued, pointing to the black smoke still emerging from the looted and burning city that used to be Kazan. “Did you bring any bread to go with the rotting and burning human flesh?”

Michaelson’s Aid de Camp withdrew his pistol, aiming it at Kosinko’s head. “No one insults my Czarina’s General like that,” he blasted out sternly.

“But maybe it’s time that someone should,” the Commander who was the living portrait of military grace, style and accomplishment interjected, motioning for the Captain to put away his weapon. He then turned to Kosinko. “But in the meantime, where is the Great Pretender’s wife. Who you said would draw Pugachev, the real Pugachev, here. For a siege in which he wouldn’t dare attack, as it would cost the lives of his family.”

“Someplace neither you, me, her husband, or history will ever know, to the best of my knowledge, Sir.”

“And this is because...”

“She started to turn the people in town against him,” Kosinko replied, knowing fully well the price one paid for responding to one of Michaelson’s questions with an answer to another question, particularly the one the General was secretly thinking about. “Which forced the Rebels to attack before a citizen Army could rise against Pugachev. When in fact, most of the citizens just wanted to be left alone to endure and enjoy their lives as best as they can, Sir’.”

“And you? CAPTAIN Kosinko,” Michaelson said, after which his other Aide threw the raggedy clad officer hating soldier a fresh uniform. “Do you want to be left alone to endure or enjoy life? To read history and not make it.”

“I’ve made too much history already, Sir,” Kosinko replied, looking at the Uniform, and thinking about everything it stood for. “But I somehow feel called to make more history,” he said, speculating on what would happen if a People’s Revolution was allowed to come to his still beloved Russia on God’s time rather than madmen like Pugachev’s. “Starting with...”

Kosinko looked over the mostly non-mounted troops Michaelson had brought. Some were uniformed Imperial soldiers, many with young faces that had never seen a razor blade or certainly the sharp end of a sword. Others were a mixture of Cossack and Tatar militia.

“We have ‘real’ wars going on with the Turks, Swedes and Prussians. This is all the men and horses I could get,” Scholar-Gentleman-Soldier Michaelson said, apologetically.

“Which will be enough, if we spend them wisely,” Kosinko said as he stripped off his beggars garb and proceeded to put on his new uniform.

“And what of Major, or as I am authorized now to deem him, Colonel Stralnikov?” Michaelson asked.

“Some alliances and friendships, end before we are ready for them,” Kosinko said, as he took out his new pistol and took the reins of his injured horse in his hand. “I never bargained for this, and I am sure you didn’t either.” With that, Kosinko wiped the tears away from his left eye which were shed for the horse he had known raised from a Colt, then put him out of his misery. As for the tears streaming down Kosinko’s right cheek, shed for Alexi, who he had raised since the Aristocrat was a young Lieutenant, that would be dealt with later.

CHAPTER 23

As Mustafa saw it from the observation tower in a city now manned by enough live rebels to not have to use dead corpses as decoys, the Imperial Army's approach to Kazan was too neat. Too clean. Too organized, even when the now 30 cannons in possession of the Rebels were firing at them. It was as if they were doing a drills at a canter rather than a flat out attack, diverting themselves in the exact pattern that Mustafa feared most. "Some has told them about where we're weakest."

"Which is right goddamn here!" Svetlana screamed out as a cannonball that seemed to come from nowhere pounded a hole into the ground next to the tower, causing said tower to lean then fall to the ground. Protecting Svetlana from breaking her neck on the fall was Mustafa. He held Svetlana in his arms just long enough for her to stumble back on her good foot, then drag her injured one along for the ride. "Can you ride?" he asked her.

"I can fight," she barked out.

"Better that you can ride," he said, grabbing hold of a horse whose rider had spooked him into a fatal fall. "Get on!" he insisted, pushing her atop the saddle, directing her to go to an area of the city where he knew there were no cannons placed. After she left, Mustafa watched three of the camouflaged cannon on the walls above blown into scrap iron in as many seconds. He climbed atop the fourth one, took command away from the wounded operators and aimed as best as he could at the a clump of trees on the North side of the city that seemed to not have natural foliage to it. After firing at that orderly arrangement of leaves, he looked up and saw the debris of one long range cannon and the remains of five Imperial soldiers who had been operating it.

Father Vasili prayed over the dead, then when the Imperials weren't looking, whipped out pistols and sabers from under his robes, killing them dead. The Priest who had previously considered all Souls sacred or savable then spit on their bodies and doomed them to hell. His new career as a one man killing machine ended when a stray bullet, from a Cossack Rebel's gun, hit him in the head, disabling him from saying prayers to save anyone else's soul, including his own.

Pugachev, driven by Passion, conscience, battle smarts, or 'invisible' elixir in his private stash of vodka lead charges against the Imperials and traitorous militia on what was left of Gogol street. Michaelson did the same. Each of the generals engaged in battles all over the city, some which they had planned on, most which just happened. No clear winners had emerged after three days of fighting except the carrion and rats that fed on the dead. Finally at the battle of Arsk Field, Michaelson's industrially equipped and modern trained army caused more damage on the 1500 rebels who were left than Revolutionaries inflicted on the Imperials.

Chaos ruled, then the instinct for self preservation. On July 18, Pugachev, who days earlier could count on 20,000 souls to fight and die for the Revolution, escaped across the

Volga with 500 of his men on horseback. Michaelson, having all of thirty horses worthy of anything beyond a painful walk, did not pursue. But two riders from the chaos did chase after Pugachev. One of them halted her horse just before hitting the banks of the Volga.

“I can’t to any further,” Svetlana said to Mustafa, her leg aching, unable to deny the stench of gangrene coming from it. “I’m done for.” She threw a bag to the man who found and rescued her from torture, execution or worse from the Imperials. “Save them.”

“Which I will. And the brave and intelligent soul who wrote them,” Mustafa asserted regarding the books Svetlana had written before and during her sojourn as a real Revolutionary. He dismounted, tied secured her to the saddle with a rope, then mounted his own steed again just as a detachment of Imperial infantry approached.

“Now ride!” he commanded, slapping Svetlana’s horse on the ass, then telling the mare in Tatar that she better carry her human passenger to the other side of the river, or she will get hell from him, and Allah. The fear of God, Mustafa or the barrage of bullets coming from the Imperial Infantry send the horse across the river, carrying Svetlana with her.

By some miracle, for which Mustafa was grateful, horse and rider made it across the Volga. As did he on his mount. But not without acquiring a bullet into his chest that he now felt moved close to his heart. The blood spurting out of his mouth told him that the shot had reached the chamber of that organ which he valued second only to his brain.

“Go!” he told Svetlana as she tried to tend to his wounds. “A writer can live still change the world without a leg, but an Iman, well, he has to have a heart as well as a brain.”

“And a Soul,” she said as hard as nails, cold as ice intellectual rebel said with tears in her eyes. Tears that Mustafa knew would make her a better writer, and Revolutionary, than she bargained for.

Svetlana offered a prayer to Allah on Mustafa’s behalf, after which his Soul rose from his body and took stock of what she had become. “We did a good job with her,” that Soul said to the Messenger clad in White Light coming down to greet him.

“Yes, we did,” the Etherial Voice said to the Soul, reminding him that heaven and earth always work together. “But as always, you know the rules in case you want to sneak some help to her without my permission.”

“Yes,” Mustafa’s now disembodied soul said as he saw the body it had used for sixty years left behind being mourned by once Countessa Svetlana. Then the faces of the rebels on the other side of the hill, still determined to see the People’s Revolution succeed, somehow. “Heaven watches. Earth works.”

CHAPTER 24

The jails set up by the Imperial Army were run more humanely than Stefan and his cellmate Alexi thought they would be. Stripped of his knife, horse and saddle, but not his Cossack warlock, Stefan Ilonovick looked outside the window into the parade grounds of the fort as the latest group of rebels who had been captured walked proudly to their assigned stations. “Getting shot is better than being hanged slowly, like we used to do to you for the last year,” Stefan noted.

“Or eviscerated and skinned alive, which is what we used to do to you, for a lot longer than that,” Alexi, put into a peasant dress so as to humiliate him in front of any of the men who had served under him, added. “Something the history books and newspapers will never be allowed to report. For the well being of the Empire, of course.”

“I know,” Stefan said, as angered at his cell mate as himself. “But Pugachev is still out there. And the Great Pretender is deluded as ever. The latest I heard, before I was betrayed by my own people who handed me over to yours, for ‘special consideration’, he’s still able to convince serfs with pitchforks that they can beat Imperial Army soldiers with swords.”

“Or guns from Cossack militia still in service to the Czar,” Alexi countered.

Both men found themselves exhausted again from the ideological discourses that had previously sustained them while incarcerated. As the firing squad prepared to send the rebels on the parade grounds to their final reward in Christian Heaven, Islamic Paradise or the Pagan equivalent as such for the Indigenous peoples who had joined in, Alexi and Stefan contemplated what was beyond the final bullet into the head. That speculation was delayed by dead silence outside for a minute or more. Such was followed by a visitor coming to the cell door. The Major, decked out in a spotless dress uniform cluttered with metals, requested a stool from the guards and sat down in front of the prisoners.

“Nice dress,” Kosinko said to Alexi. “And colorful haircut,” he continued to Stefan.

“And interesting uniform, Major Kosinko,” Alexi sneared.

“A potentially benevolent accident, which occasionally can happen to Jews in the Imperial Army,” he said by way of explanation. “As is another potentially benevolent accident,” he continued, as he got up, the keys to the cell accidentally dropping onto the floor from his right hip pocket.

“Pick them up, one of you braver than smarter idealists” Kosinko commanded, his back turned to the men whose eyes accused him of every crime he was sworn to fight against.

Being born as a gentleman and trained as a scholar, Alexi offered the honor to Stefan. Being a man of the earth who learned about its operations through experience rather than reading, Stefan deferred to Alexi.

“Please! Pick up the keys!” Kosinko pleaded. “And the pistol from my belt! Or those men out there will be shot in places a lot more painful than the head!”\

Stefan lifted up the keys off the floor. Alexi pulled the pistol out of Kosinko’s belt, noting that his old friend had gained a few points since re-enlisting in the Imperial Army.

“And this,” Kosinko added, his back still turned away, pushing two documents onto the floor from his left hip pocket.

Alexi looked at one of the documents, seeing that it was meant for Stefan. Stefan did the same. After the exchange was made, their eyes beheld the impossible, as well as the inevitable.

“It’s all legal and binding,” Kosinko assured both men. “If the two of you can find Pugachev, and deliver him to us, you and those you care about will be rewarded.”

“What if the people I care about are more than just my Cossack family?” Stefan inquired.

“And if the people I care about are more than a super smart doctor-healer lover, and a nagging wife whose genes infected half of my children’s minds and souls?” Alexi asked.

“Mercy will be given to those people, my word on it!” Kosinko assured him.

“And Czarina Catherine’s word on it?” Alexi pressed.

As if on cue, Kosinko turned around and pulled out another document from his breast pocket. He handed it to Stefan, who shared it with Alexi.

“It is in the interest of the Empire and ALL of the people in it that things go back to the way they were before the revolt.”

“You mean when Peter III was in power?” Stefan said.

“The only Russian ruler who had the people’s interest in heart and mind?” Alexi added.

Kosinko took in a deep breath. “Look, Alexi. You know how many people I know and am capable of knowing, and Catherine is willing, unofficially, to make certain concessions in exchange for---.”

“---us finding and turning in Yemelyan Pugachev,” Stefan interjected. “Who used to be my good friend.”

“Who is now ALL of our enemies while this revolt continues. And, as we all know, if he wins, our oppressor. Worse than Ivan the Terrible.”

Finally all three men came to an agreement. The deal was struck, starting with a good will gesture of the men about to be executed on the parade ground being given back their freedom, horses and whatever material possessions they or their family had lost at the hands of the Imperial Army.

CHAPTER 25

History recorded that Pugachev was turned into the Imperial Army by his own me. Who found and turned in the most fascinating and dangerous man of the 18th century was never clearly recorded. Where those two, or more, men went after he was hung in Moscow and the journalists wrote their accounts of it, history will never know. But a century and half later, a People's Revolution did finally happen in Russia, fueled to a great degree by another Stralinkov. That Revolution is still in progress, we all People's Revolutions are.