

THE PRICE OF KNOWING

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CHAPTER 1

Freedom. Katerina considered what that word really meant as she felt the brisk West wind blowing into her hair while the noon sun warmed her face. It was a mixed awakening from one of those half-sleeps she indulged in by necessity amidst the wooded riverbank of the Steppes which still held onto its brightly colored yellow leaves and withering brown ones.

Yes, she was free now. Free from the German POW Camp where her timely escape from the Commandant's bedroom occurred before she was raped. Free from a head shave, beating or free mastectomy from her fellow Red Army soldiers for entering Colonel Holtzmann's private quarters on her own two feet instead of being dragged in like every other captured 'Untermench Wench'. Free from the men in her Unit who decided that surrendering to the invading and better armed German Army was smarter than trying to resist them, for the sake of the lives of the women of course, rather than to save their own skins. Free from Soviet Army male sergeants who refused to obey or respect orders she had given them as a Major, even though she was better at the essential skills required to fight any enemy walking on two legs, or delivered by the elements. Free from her Comrades in the field who she warned about where snipers would be next, and who they would shoot first. Free from the 'learned' doctors who ignored her, as a semi-literate Cossack Nurse, when she warned them about an artery that was about to be accidentally sliced open by their scalpel or aggressively moving hands. Free from the reach of Comrade Stalin, who had sent her brother to a Siberian re-education camp for his philosophical novel entitled 'What Comrade Lenin really meant', which he hoped would be appreciated by the next generation of Soviet Citizens. Free from her well meaning nieces and nephews who found the manuscript before they were able to acquire enough brains to keep it private. Free from a 'loving', now most probably dead, husband who had insisted on keeping her adorned with all the perks acquirable by merit or manipulation in the Soviet Union, as long as she served his every need when sober and sadistic whims when drunk. Free from the child who had died in her womb by natural causes, the ghost of the fetus she killed so that he would not grow up to be anything like his father, the toddler who had been killed by stray bullets in the earliest 'battle' between the invading Germans and the fleeing Russians and her favorite son who died from causes she dared not share with anyone. Free from a home to go back to, unless she wanted to rebuild the village the Red Army had burnt down while retreating, so the Germans would have nothing left to plunder. Free from having to serve any man, people, or Cause.

Such delivered terror into the over-experienced, red haired thirty year old beauty, as Katerina Petrovich still lived to serve others. Though the 25 year old was slow with books, she could feel anything that Mother Nature had in store for the people traversing its way through her backyard, as long as it wasn't her of course. The old-well-before-her-time young woman had one of those faces that anyone could see anyone he or she wanted to in it, a curse and a blessing. It, along with a conscience that was ruled more by compassion than intelligence, trapped the still-wrinkleless daughter of one of the last true

Cossacks in Ukraine into a life where she was diverted from her own as yet undiscovered Divine Purpose by voluntarily over-pleasing others.

But there was one connection to her ‘mastery in servitude’ past which the Doctor-Warrior Major lay eyes on as she tried to make sense of the world. Such occurred after a well needed late morning nap, having travelled all night by the light of a half moon and the third eye between her two oculars that had saved her ass and those of so many others. “Yes,” she said to the large beast looking over her as he woke her from slumber. “It’s just you and me now,” she continued to the steed who had kept watch over. “You who Commandant Holtzmann swore would be broken to a German saddle or cart, or become stew. You who dared him to keep trying to ride you, yet threw him into the dirt on just enough occasions to be considered a ‘challenge’ rather than another ‘untrainable four legged Slav’. You who, well, I knew would throw Herr Hotzmann off of you while he was showing off his horsemanship skills to me. And you, who broke through the fence, liberating the rest of the captured Slavic horses from being enlisted into the German cavalry, or put into stew, who then decided to come to me, requesting that I join all of you.”

The horse didn’t answer, not with his mouth anyway. But with his eyes he said very clearly that he was Katerina’s servant now. And friend. And master, though only as she wanted him to be. The feel of the steed’s fine white fur as it was blossoming into a winter coat reminded her of her father’s horse, and its rider, before he had set out to hunt deer 12 winters ago. “Life without Purpose, especially one that only you fully understand, is death. Worse than death,” he would tell her again and again without it having any connection to what she said or did, or even consciously thought at the time. The speaker of those words, which etched its mark with white mist into the cold blue sky at their last voicing, made no sense to young Katerina. He had come home in a closed box as prey rather than predator, his body an unrecognizable collection of dismemebered flesh. Shot multiple times by the Red Army as it advanced into the Ukraine to extract all of its food to feed the Russians in Moscow during the fall of 1930, and all of the land for Collective Farming. On the day after he posted a letter to Comrade Stalin, Cossack to native born Georgian, that he should not make any alliances with the up and coming author of Mein Kampf and that he would cause the death of his own son in a war with that deluded yet charismatic German corporal. But Katerina always suspected something other than political ideology as the reason for Nicholi’s absence, despite the finger with his wedding ring sent back to his wife as a warning.

But there were other enemies that Katerina’s father, otherwise known as ‘Crazy Nicholi’, had. Not because of the Passion he had to keep Cossack land free for Cossacks, and whoever wanted to SHARE it with them, but because of his ability to predict what someone would say before they thought it. Or where a bullet would land from an enemy before it was fired, or loaded. Or when a Commissar from Moscow would be knocking on the door demanding more taxes, another bushel of wheat, or the ‘voluntary’ services of another young Cossack in the Russian Army to protect the country from foreign invaders.

During his youth, Nicholi had spent many a summer with the Yakut natives in Siberia, returning in the fall with new medicines that cured the sick, and others which he saved to empower the already Enlightened. The Christian Priests called him a Pagan warlock. The scientists called him a quack. The doctors, his father, and his siblings called him a delusional lunatic. The Old Gypsy in the village, who still retained her connection to her ancestral 'alternative Christian' roots, dubbed him a name in Old Ukrainian which loosely translated into 'one who always lives in the future, but not far enough'. Someone who was unable to predict the Holocaust of 1931 that killed a third of the Ukrainians in a single year. And who was not blessed, or cursed, to be one of its survivors, according to the all reliable accounts.

As for her own survival, Katerina had been lucky, many times. Lucky enough to be handed purpose by others. She smart enough to accept it, but not wise enough to find her own. On more than one occasion, Katerina said that she had nothing to live for. Such was the explanation for her being so 'brave' in combat situations. Yet somehow she survived attacks by German soldiers, rearing by 'killer' horses no one else dared ride, and every manner of abuse inducible by larger, muscular Russian men on small framed Ukrainian women. This as well was both a curse and a blessing.

The young woman who just wanted to die was, on more than one occasion, the only one alive after an attack by the Nazi bullets on the ground, or bombs from the air. Both here and in Spain, where she earned her stripes and clusters in the fight against Franco. And somehow she survived the Stalinist purges afterwards. Purges that, thankfully, removed her husband Ivan from 'civilized' society. Maybe, Katerina thought at some point, she was 'touched' with the ability to see the future before it happened with her innermost mind and her soul, seeing the need to continue living within and with her body, adjusted all of her actions appropriately. Like there was a 'guardian angel' inside of her that was always on guard. Especially when she tried to look out after others.

But now, in the fall of 1941, all of 'the others' were missing. But one thing remained. She still had a small amount of the herb in her ever-present medicine pouch willed to her by her father, passed onto her by her mother before she was taken away to the asylum. And replenished by the Gypsy Anna, who was verified as dead now, courtesy of a German bullet between her ancient, tired, yet still wide open eyes. A sweet smelling and pungent tasting herb that Katerina was told would 'connect her to her ancestral roots and Divinely ordained destiny', as long as she took in only what fit between her small thumb and smaller third finger, then crossed herself, to confer magic power to it.

But what to do now, as the magic in everything was fading away? Who would Katerina survive for now? The horse, who she dared not name, seemed to be the best candidate for the moment. Both him and her could survive if they kept going East, well behind the Soviet lines. And further East into Siberia, on purpose. Such was the best place to be forgotten, and perhaps forgiven, for being cursed with survivor's guilt, and that thing most servants of others fear most of course, freedom.

But first, came the all too familiar call of responsibility, and the duty to fix what someone else broke, which mortal women who aspired to become godlike healers always did. The horse's left front leg was in no shape to continue onward given the stone bruise on the sole, and the other three appendages were not much better above the fetlock. Yet, the proud cut steed kept going. And he came down with colic the night before, either from drinking too much of the wrong water or too little of the right kind.

As long as Katarina walked him, hugged him, and sung to him, there was a reason for the thirty year old horse to not depart the land of the living, like he was supposed to. Such was enough reason for Katerina to hold on to...tomorrow, whatever that was.

CHAPTER 2

“So, what is your name?” the white-haired barkeep with the overgrown mustache and face that was more wrinkle than surface asked the customer sitting at the only occupied table in the establishment.

“You’re supposed to ask me what I’m drinking, then what I’m doing, here, then my name, Comrade bartender,” the customer replied, relieving his travel-broken back of the knapsack containing all of his current earthly possessions. “But if you give me the first drink free, I’ll play you a song,” the three decade old wanderer continued as he pulled a harmonica out of the only intact pocket on his coat. “Which is?”

“Silence,” the old barkeep requested of the young patron as he reached for a jug of vodka. He pour a generous portion of its contents into a clay ceramic mug with a broken handle. “Or a poem, explaining why you aren’t in uniform, like every other man your age now, and any woman who isn’t pregnant.”

“I’m on special assignment,” the young blond haired, blue eyed customer said to the white haired tavern owner with the angry eyes as the old man retrieved the only other mug which was not broken.

“On assignment for which Army?” the old man asked the young one, as he poured an equal ration of firewater into the second mug.

“I speak Russian with a German accent because I was born and raised in Bessarabia, Comrade Barkeep,” Gustav Vogel answered, recalling that while he was talking, his Berliner Hoch Deutch accent had come through, yet again. “A town in a region that’s as Russian as you are.”

“Yes, I know. Katherine the so called ‘Great’ two hundred years ago decided that the Russian Empire would become stronger and more European if we gave away good land to undeserving and untested German losers, peasants and n’er do wells,” the old Russian replied with a sense of cultural superiority rivaling anything the reps of the Master Race in the German Fatherland said when describing anyone else. The ‘Untermench’ Slav then sat down across from his host, raising his mug in a toast. “Prost!” robustly proclaimed with a Frankfort accent decorated with a hint of Bavarian.

“Lachaem!” the very non-Jewish Gustav Vogel said, raising his glass, hoping that second lie would be accepted by his host.

The vodka tasted exactly like rubbing alcohol smelled, like most Russian vodka did to Gustav’s palate. While thinking about the next lie he would have to tell his host, Gustav tried to let his palate hold onto the hint of potato flavor in the home grown hooch. Under normal circumstances he would have preferred German Schnops, Austrian beer or Scottish Ale, the latter being promised in abundance to every German soldier once the Invisible Armies of the Reich got around to absorbing the Highlands into its newly

acquired Empire. An Empire that had, as far as Gustav and anyone else with a brain, or a soul, knew had reached its limit. And was about to undergo a severe reduction down to, eventually, the ashes of what would be left of the Fatherland after paying for democratically electing Hitler to office. But, such was a theoretical calculation in a War in which even the basic laws of mathematics were being converted, diverted and inverted, along with the ‘what goes around come around’ rule that always had the final say in matters moral amongst mortals.

The barkeep set bread on the table, a loaf of baked brown grain that put up resistance to being cut with the old coot’s knife. Its ornate handle was caked with blood. But whose blood? That of German soldiers who had, under orders they could not disobey, had tried to occupy this still standing tavern or burn it to the ground after taking all of its still-remaining alcohol-rich booty? That of low born drunken Red Army goons who were promoted to officers after their leaders had been killed by the enemy, or their own overused and ‘expendable’ draftees? That of the dogs, horses and people whose skeletons littered the road to this tavern, their meat having kept this solitary old man’s fat belly fed, and his muscles strong? But, fate delivered Gustav to this place, whatever it was. And when fate calls, one must answer. Especially if you don’t want to.

Gustav exchanged complaints with the old man about the weather, and the shifting agenda of the Creator who made it possible. “Fate,” the commoner barkeep said as he became more inebriated, sounding more like a Socratic scholar with every drink. Gustav felt the old man reading his own still young mind, seeming to be more learned than any of the Professors the overeducated yet under-learned German wanderer ever experienced. “Fate is something we make, with every decision we make, at turning points in our lives that we cannot go back to, but which will appear to us again, on their time table,” the tavern owner said at the conclusion of three discourses about such, leaning in towards Gustav’s ever attentive face. He then went on to another point in the lesson plan.

While the old man talked about decisions the world should make in the future, if it survived the present, Gustav recalled decisions in his past. His decision to join the SS in 1933 to please his ailing mother, make his veteran father proud of him, and ensure that his dirt poor younger siblings got a chance to grow up with full bellies and prospects worthy of their previously unappreciated abilities. His decision to sneak his girlfriend’s family, then her, out of the country in 37 after he found out they were Jewish. His decision to decide to not follow her, so he could ‘humanize’ the system from within back in ’38. His decision to transfer to the medical Corp as an orderly under a different name, after faking his own death, so he could save lives for his country rather than kill any more Untermench foreigners. And so he could somehow fight against Stalin, a worse demon than ‘Jew killer’ Adolf, who exerted his cruelty to anyone he wished, irrespective of religion. And finally, Gustav’s decision to not partake in the very manly rape of captured Russian nurses. And when being accused of being homosexual by his fellow soldiers because of his abstinence, replying with a punch into their faces and crotches.

Afterwards, Gustav had been ordered and dared to do something ‘courageous’ to prove his manhood somehow, to restore his rank and honor. A dare that led him to being a

wandering deserter with no home to go back to, nor to defend. Serving and being served by...fate. Who manifested itself this time in the form of a red haired woman in a Russian Major's coat which was now stripped of its insignia. She hobbled into the tavern while her horse whinnied outside.

"Water, please, for my horse," she requested with a parched voice. The Barkeep nodded in a servantly manner. He blew the dust out of a metal bucket and rebelliously negotiated with the water pump till it gave way to more clear than merky water.

"And for you?" Gustav asked the woman. He rose to his feet and moved the chair away from his table. "I'm buying."

"With what?" the Barkeep said through a wide, warm smile after emitting a condescending chuckle.

"Everyone has something someone else wants, or needs," Gustav put forth.

"And something someone else doesn't want, or need," the retort, delivered into Gustav's face, and trembling soul behind it. The Barkeep, who still had not given Gustav his name, or anything about his personal history or political affiliation, stared at Gustav, daring him to confess the true secrets of his soul, and his real purpose for allowing "Fate" to deliver him to his tavern. It was then that an idea occurred to Gustav while the barkeep watered the lady's horse.

Gustav reached into his pocket, pulling out the last coin left in his tattered trousers, bearing the face of Lenin on one side and a schlep laborer with no face at all wielding a sledgehammer on the other. He would set a wager for the coin which, depending on how he flipped it into the air, came up as heads or tails, according to his determination. He would bet the coin against a drink for the lady as the first wager. The coin and drink for a change of clothing, to something warmer and more 'ethnic'. Then the wardrobe and accessories for one of the horses he saw in the coral behind the tavern. Then perhaps the tavern itself for the final bet, which he would be able to retain for himself. But just when Gustav opened his mouth, the lady spoke for him.

"You'll lose the first three tosses, then win the fourth, losing everything you own, or will ever have, unless you heed my warning," the young woman warned the barkeep in Russian grammar which was as inaccurate as Gustav's Hoch Deutch was ultra-correct, her blue eyes seeming to be more witchlike rather than womanly. "But you," she said accusingly to Gustav, abruptly turning around to him. "Will lose a lot more in the bargain."

"What is this thirsty wood wench talking about?" the barkeep inquired of Gustav, man to man, seeing something foreboding in the red haired lady's angelic face.

“This,” Gustav replied, tossing his coin in the air. True to his convictions, and predictions, he gave the barkeep the opportunity to call tails rather than heads, betting the coin against a drink. True to his prediction, it came up heads.

The barkeep asked the woman what she wanted to drink. She requested more water for her horse and apple cider for herself. The next wager was for the clothing hanging in the sparsely provisioned kitchen of the tavern. It was won by Gustav, despite the fact that the barkeep changed his call after the coin had been tossed. Gustav quickly changed into the Slavic shirt that was more fiber than holes, and the Russian-made coat made of fur rather than deteriorating wool.

As for the wager for the horse in the coral, the mare was in season, bolting out of her enclosure as soon as the coin was tossed into the air. It was her idea to jump the fence and make friends with the proud cut gelding the lady, wench and/or witch rode in on. The barkeep cursed the mare for breaking down the fence he had built, threw a rope around her neck, and threatened to turn her into stew if she didn’t go back to the coral, ‘like the rest of your friends’, referring to piled of equine bones scattered amidst the woods behind his establishment. His rants turned into submissive silence when the lady pushed the barrel of gun into the small of his back. Gustav, meanwhile, gently took hold of the rope, allowing the mare to have her head, then back her ass into the gelding she mistook as a stallion.

“That castrated stallion can’t do anything,” Gustav said warmly to the mare. “No balls. See?” he continued, pointing to where the horse’s surgically removed manhood had been.

The mare seemed to understand what Gustav had to say. She turned her adoring attention towards him rather than a possible equine companion. She nickered, nodded her head in what seemed to be a ‘yes’, then edged her way into his chest, flexing her head into it.

“That means she likes you,” the unwashed yet sweet smelling Slavic beauty said as she took hold of the reins on her gelding.

“Or maybe the carrot inside this coat,” the German academic who always went with the logical rather than mystical solution to any problem said, reaching for the contents of the front pocket, finding that it was filled with rocks. “Or the smell of something in----“

“Shhh,” the lady interjected, hearing something in the woods that neither Gustav nor the Barkeep could hear. She discretely pointed Gustav and the Barkeep to move to the left, behind a wall of wood that had once been accompanied by three other walls and a roof. Gustav, out of curiosity, complied.

The Barkeep, out of defiance, didn’t, choosing to walk towards the woods. He pulled out a sawed off shotgun from under his coat, pointing at the invisible intruder. “I don’t take kindly to ghosts or cougars coming into my yard unless I invite them in,” he

growled. Three seconds later two shots from the real world came from the brush. The first went into the tavern owner's chest, the second into his head.

Just as the invisible invader moved the barrel of his rifle towards Katerina, Gustav pulled a revolver from the pocket of his new coat, shooting the sniper dead. His lifeless body fell from the trees then rolled his way down the hill into the yard in front of the tavern. He was clad in a Red Army coat, and a German hat. His face lacked any hair, or indication of age beyond boyhood. The men behind him scattered, retreating in terror.

"We have to move on," the woman said to Gustav, repacking then mounting her horse.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Somewhere else, the same place you seem to be heading," her reply as her shapely ass hit the saddle. "And as for me predicting where that is, or anything else in the future, I can see what is going to happen, sometimes."

"But never change it?" Gustav inquired as he mounted the mare, preparing to go in the opposite direction.

"A curse and a blessing," the woman's reply as she rode away, inviting Gustav to follow. His decision to head West while the woman headed East was checkmated by the mare bolting out towards her beloved gelding, or perhaps its enchanted rider.

CHAPTER 3

Colonel Erik Holtzmann was furious when he looked at his leg after the doctor unwrapped the dressing. Other than his ego, it was the portion of him that received the most damage after being thrown off the captured Russian horse. Still, the short, under-muscled and over-groomed SS Officer was determined to find and subjugate the proud cut Cossack gelding prize German mount that had escaped his corral in the POW Camp. “You are supposed to be a Doctor in the most technologically advanced Army in the world!” he screamed at the white coated, calm, barely thirty-year old physician he had entrusted with his wounds. “And I have blood lines to the Master Race that go back to Fredrick the Great! I commanded pain and diseases to go away all of my life, and they obeyed! What went wrong, Doctor, and for the moment, Captain Schmitt?”

“The lower species decided to establish superiority, biologically that is,” replied the head Physician at the POW Camp which was about to be transformed into a main transportation center for yet another influx of German troops that seemed to be needed to finally put out the defiant fire in the Ivans on the front who still didn’t have the good sense, or courtesy, to surrender. “Yes, you have become, Sir, a victim of the lower species.”

“The Slavic ‘staff’ who you thought you could trust to take care of our men! And me! Give me their names!!!” Holzmann pulled himself up from his bed. Upon making contact the floor, he felt the pain of his puss-emitting left leg. The shattered bones were now clearly visible between the fragments of muscle that had to be stripped away by scalpels as well as the hard rocks when he had hit the ground after the horse fall. “I demand to know who is responsible for this mess that was, and still is, my leg after I allowed you to put me to sleep!” he screamed, turning his pain outward.

“Staphylococcus Aureus, Clostridium Chauveni and...” Doctor Schmitt took another whiff of the wound. “Yes, their not too distant relative, Psuedomonus Aeruginosa, who--”

“---Are Jews, Communists, Gypsies or maybe Homosexuals who found their way into YOUR hospital! Who will I will see killed!”

“Unless they kill you and the rest of us first,” Schmitt replied, dipping a sampling syringe into the wound to bring back to the lab. “These bacteria are new to us here, and stronger than the ones we’re used to. They don’t respond to the drugs we usually use. But I think we can...hmmm.” The young Doctor scratched his chin, gazed at the injured limb, and pondered the options.

“You are not taking it off!” Holzmann barked back like a rabid and terrified hound.

“You can still ride, command a tank or engage in intercourse if we cut it off here,” the good Doctor said to the, by all accounts from both Armies, bad Commandant as he glided his index finger four inches below the knee. The Doctor’s second digit was grabbed by

Holtzmann with more strength than the AWOL horse who had thrown him had in his entire body.

“You will save this leg!” the command from Holtzmann. “Any way you can, or have to,” he pleaded, lowering his voice so that no one else in the ward would sense his vulnerability, or any more of his secrets. “Please,” he appended in a hushed tone, more of a prayer to the Almighty than a request from one helpless yet hopeful mortal to another.

“Using anyone I can?” the University trained and conditioned Doctor inquired, with professional and personal detachment.

“And anything you have to,” the Commandant who had manipulated, maneuvered and murdered his way up the ranks replied, letting go of the Doctor’s finger. Colonel Holtzmann recalled the retribution he would get at home if he was sent back as a cripple. Or worse, a Prussian Aristocrat who had not completed the Mission assigned to him by High Command, or the one he set out to accomplish beyond such. No, just like the Ivan’s who were determined to fight to the last man, woman and child to defend their homeland, Holtzmann was going to return home a hero among heroes. And to do such, he needed two good legs, as well as balls in between them that were big, strong and unconquerable.

Holtzmann took in a deep breath, finding somehow a place in his head to hide and cover the pain of what was happening below his very bruised neck. He looked out the window at the overworked, half dead, but still not beaten prisoners. He focusing on an Old Woman amongst them, a small framed bag of bones wrapped by a covering of wrinkled skin whose advice was heeded by the still living, and ignored by the now dead. “What did you say that old Wench’s name was?”

“Brosh, Sir, which in Slavic means Doctor.”

“Her last name?”

“The same, Sir.”

“And her Christian name, the same as well I suppose.”

“Yes, though she is not a Christian, Sir.”

“Is she a Jew?” Holtzmann said, feeling the pain in his leg returning to full consciousness again. “Between us, Jews make the best lawyers, bankers and doctors. And as for the latter, I heard that you were one of the best Doctors in your University. Who learned from Jews? And carried on their medical traditions?”

Schmitt turned his eyes downward. By his Silence, he was guilty as charged. But Schmitt was the best medical mind available for a hundred miles. And the young Physician had on more than one occasion saved a German life by consulting with the Old

Woman. Finally, Schmidt answered the question, but the one Holzmann was thinking rather than the one he had asked. “Broch’s methods are said to be witchcraft. But medical science before it became accepted was considered witchcraft as well, Sir. And....” The young Doctor scanned the ward at the beds filled with living and breathing German soldiers, and a few Slavs who had enough brains to reject Communism and the Soviet ‘Ideal’. “She said that her job was to keep people on both sides alive long enough for God to decide who is to die.”

“This Pagan witch believes in God?” Holzmann asked.

“Medically speaking, she is God. Or at least a goddess, with herbs that seem to be more powerful than anything I’ve used, or read about, Sir.”

“And she can cure my leg? Give you the healing potions which you seem to have so much faith and trust in? After I jailed half of her village and slaughtered, out of necessity, the other half?”

“I can...make another special request of her, on behalf of another patient,” Schmitt offered.

“Or YOU can tell her that if I lose my leg, I’ll see that another three villages of people she knows are all jailed, then worked to death!” Holzmann grunted out through clenched teeth, his voice silenced by another thunderbolt of pain. “We don’t negotiate with these Slavic sub-humans. Even though---“ This time the Commandant’s leg commanded his mouth to shut up, and listen.

“---These Slavs have something we want, and need?” the Doctor intervened, confidence growing in his eyes with every word, evolving into arrogance. “Like that slow witted, ‘special’ and touched red-haired Major who laughed when you got thrown off your horse did?” Schmitt packed up his instruments, preparing to move onto three new stumbling German soldiers whose breath smelled of vodka, injuries reeks of pus and penises no doubt filled with siphilus. “Katerina was her name, Sir, as I recall from the screaming you did when you went under anesthesia, and the crying you did as you came out in recovery. An entire range of emotions ranging from anger, to grieve, to fear, and vulnerability---“

“---Which you will keep private, Doctor!” Holzmann commanded, then pleaded. “Patient client confidentiality. You took an oath, correct?”

“Yes, I did, Sir,” Schmitt replied, both as a Doctor who was obligated to keep affairs between himself and his patients private, and as a soldier in the Third Reich who had also sworn allegiance to Hitler when drafted into service. “But for the moment,” Schmitt said as he took another look at the leg. “I’ll retrieve Doctor Brosh’s medicine. You should be walking in two days, running in three, riding horses in four.”

“And able to drive a private car in one, to find, and bring home that horse for stew, and the woman who rode away on him for many breakfasts, lunches and dinners to come,” Holtzman thought to himself, daring to not tell Schmitt anything else about what was really going on between him and Katerina, and what he had to make her do, and become, so he could become who he wanted, and needed, to be.

CHAPTER 4

“Are you a boy or a girl?” Katerina asked the blacksmith as the gender neutral ‘something’ put the third shoe on ‘Boris’, the name she now gave to the horse she had stolen from Commandant Holtzmann’s spurs and/or stew pot. “A man or a woman?” she continued, as the sun cleared its way from the clouds, illuminating wrinkles on ‘its’ hairless face, framed by well combed breast length wavy angelic light brown hair.

“Whatever you need me to be,” the Blacksmith, surrounded by completed metal works hanging on her open aired shack seemed worth of being in any museum, replied in a voice that seemed to be male while pounding the last nail into Boris’ fourth hoof. “Or need me to be,” the appendum in what felt like a softer, maybe higher registered tone as he/she and or ‘it’ messaged the pastern of the horse, rubbing special linament onto it with an aroma Katerina did not recognize. It made Boris ‘brrrrr’ with enormous satisfaction and joy. “My name is Sasha,” the Blacksmith who was recommended by everyone encountered as the best farrier within two hundred miles said with warm smile, pulling up the sleeves on his/her firmly yet not bulky muscular hairless arms. “And yours?” the beyond world class ‘hoof wizard’ inquired.

“Nnnn....Natasha. Natasha...ah...” Cossack born Katerina replied, searching her brain for a respectable name that would be believable.

“Natasha Ivanovitch,” Gustav interjected in his best accentless Russian, after which he wrapped his long arm around her narrow shoulders. “My wife.”

“And you?” the Blacksmith whose shop, home and sanctuary was away from the rest of the village inquired of Gustav. “Who come to me with a horse whose hoofs have been neglected for months! Who, with the right kind of shoeing, I may be able to make ridable for you,” Sasha growled at Gustav as an angry mother and disappointed father.

“I acquired this horse by accident,” Gustav asserted.

“Saved him from being worked to death by the Germans. And...out of necessity for our own Army’s survival, us as well,” Katerina added, recalling what had happened on the Front, one week of hard riding to the West. The banter of well meaning argumentative discussion down the hill drew her stare away from trying to figure out what gender Sasha was, why this ‘freak’ seemed to have a magic touch with metal and horse flesh. She noted three old men and no older than fifteen year old woman in the village below still in partial Red Army uniforms, building a barricade with sandbags. By the way the old men were hobbling on what was left of their legs, they had experienced more wars than they could handle, deserving the refuge that this, for the moment, back line posting afforded. By the way young woman danced more than strode, singing out of tune to her own rhythm, she was being looked after more than taking care of by everyone she thought she was protecting. So far, the horses in the village seemed well fed and not too lame. Unlike those at the front.

“Yes,” Katerina said, in as upscale Natasha voice as she could. “Our horses are our most easily abused and lost assets,” she said as profoundly as she could, guessing at the grammar with which the words were supposed to be spoken.

“A concept that you embrace as well, apparently, Sasha,” Gustav appended, sounding like one of those academic snobs who were smart with words but dumb with life. Who could survive any debate or examination about Arctic biology in a classroom in Moscow but who didn’t know how to survive even the mildest snowstorm in the woods. He went on about how noble the horse was, showing off his literary skills to Sasha to such a point that it seemed that he was flirting with her, assuming she was a her. Or maybe thinking that she was a ‘he’.

Though Katerina had been riding with Gustav for three days, she still knew little about him. Yet, out of necessity, rather than any real emotional interest, she knew she should get to know him better. Even if he was a man who liked women, but really loved men. A ‘condition’, which her ‘touched’ Cossack father Nicholi said was something someone was born to rather than acquired. An ‘opportunity for beyond ordinary thinking’ that would get him castrated or killed in the Nazi as well as Red Army.

So, why was Katerina still with Gustav? Did she feel somehow responsible for him? Probably. She now had two horses and one person to look after. True, the latter felt like he was looking after her, even though the only skills with horses Gustav seemed to have was how to ride them. And how to take care of their wounds. And take care of the residual pains and still healing injuries in Katerina’s own aching body. And quote poetry from Goethe, Shaekspere and Puschkin. And who wrote his own poetry on trees at every campsite, for ‘whoever now or future generations is intended to pass them on’.

As for the rest, Gustav was as useless as teats on a boar, a metaphor he said was overused and simplistic. But Sasha, whatever or whoever the Blacksmith was, seemed to be anything but useless. Her ‘finished and ready to go’ coral was filled with 100 percent horses who had feet that were trimmed and shod, immaculate artistry done with the cheapest of materials that matched each equine’s natural conformation rather than an indiscriminately drawn straight line between hoof and pastern. And as for the pots, plows, car parts, firearms and swords which cluttered the establishment’s walls above the piles of scrap metal from which they were constructed, they looked functional and felt artistic, each proudly bearing Sasha’s signature. Clearly, this eccentric Sage had learned that to not be burnt at the stake by non-eccentric villagers, one has to have a skill that said ‘commoners’ need, or be able to entertain them.

“On my eyes, and any parts of the body I still value below the neck, I promise you, Gustav and you, ‘Natasha’, that this mare with rotten hoofs that you rescued from a rotten owner will be ready to go anywhere you want or need to go on your honeymoon,” Sasha pledged, as a grandmother and/or grandfather well before reading the age for such hallowed functions. “But as for payment, I am obligated to request something. Comrade Stalin is not giving me the supplies or personally compensation that I normally would be getting to serve the people’s needs. And even though I can see by your blistered and

naked fingers that you both have pawned your wedding rings. I need and would like something. Anything. If possible,” Sasha said, oscillating between being a Party Line Communist, a hard Core White Russian Capitalist, and a decentralized fellow refugee who had responsibilities to the Collective as well as whoever was left of her family.

“How about this?” Gustav said, reaching into his pocket. He pulled out his lucky flip coin, then tossed it to Sasha’s feet with the pinache of a skilled gamester.

This time Katerina was the one rolling her eyes, and praying to God that Gustav wouldn’t pull off the same ‘wager’ that he did back at the tavern.

“It seems...to be an interesting coin,” Sasha commented, picking up Gustav’s ‘lucky’ coin. The Blacksmith weighed it in the palm, then the fingers, feeling for its sense of balance. “And a...hmm...rare issue. I used to collect coins and this one is...” Sasha retrieved a half-broken pair of spectacles from the pocket of his/her leather apron, eyes opened wide with delight and wonderment when viewing the coin. “Very, very...”

“Valuable,” Gustav said of the coin he always kept secure in his pocket, playing along with the unexpected finding which fell into his lap. “Worth a lot more than what it was minted for. Maybe...hmmm...”

“More than I have, or can give you. Or need. But you’ll need it for your children,” Sasha said after careful consideration. The Blacksmith threw the coin back to Gustav. Then pulled two slabs of metal from a hidden box next to the kilm, throwing them to Katerina. “Wedding rings, ‘Natasha’, from two souls who won’t need them in the afterlife. Please hold onto them longer than they did, or were able to.”

Tears came to Sasha’s eyes as the Blacksmith took Gustav’s mare’s lead line. Sasha instructed him to hold onto the rescued horse while carving out the dead tissue from the sole, sparing the potentially injured areas. Then the Wizard of Metal and Horseflesh sang away his/her sorrow, transforming it into something joyful, somehow. Or such is what Katerina allowed herself to feel. Particularly when Gustav gave her several ‘we’re all we have right now, and possibly forever’ looks. Offering her something that some would call love, some would call survival. And something that got anyone who Katerina trusted, or maybe loved, killed.

CHAPTER 5

The route East towards still un-bombed Siberia was simple, theoretically. All one had to do was follow the rising sun. However, Mother Nature provided many obstacles to this dead reckoning which included hills that presented themselves as mountains. Rivers had sprung up or dried up without informing the cartographers in Moscow or Berlin. And as for other landmarks such as roads and bridges, most of them had been buried and blown up by the Red Army.

Each forward push into the safe side of the Urals (CHECK) presented a fork. As to which fork to take, Katerina left that to Gustav, who let his lucky coin make the decision. Or so Gustav believed anyway. At each fork in the ever-disappearing 'trail', he let her call heads or tails, the former being left, the latter right. Somehow the combination of Katerina's future telling, the coin and (according to Katerina anyway) God worked together, as both riders and both horses were still alive. Still they were very tired. And Gustav needed to have more say in the matter. His survival, and Katerina's, required it, a fact that he knew all too well as the gentle drizzles coming down were turning into heavy snowflakes.

"What, you Aryans can't handle a little Russian winter?" she mused as Gustav fashioned yet another strip of blanket into a scarf to insert under his buttoned up fur coat. "You have to open up your skin so it can grow winter fur inside," Katerina continued as she unbuttoned her coat, then her blouse, exposing her large breasts to the snow-filled wind blowing into her chest. The colder the wind got, the more she embraced it with a warm smile that normal maidens usually direct so thankfully to the sun during the spring thaw.

Gustav didn't know why. Maybe it was the 'Cossack parsley' in her ornately decorated, weather-beaten medicine pouch which Katerina periodically put onto her tongue like clockwork, so he thought. He downed another swig of the vodka in his flask, wishing he hadn't drunk all of the schnops he had taken with him when departing his fellow Germans and the Cause which still kept them obedient to their country. "Maybe we can trade, Katerina?" Gustav proposed, for the fourth time. "A swig of this marvelous liquid potato derived bubble-less champagne in my canteen for a pinch of that parsley."

"I would like to, but I'm not allowed to share it with you," Katerina said, finally providing some kind of answer. "I made a sacred pledge."

"To someone who is not here now," Gustav offered through shivering lips and shattering teeth. "I don't see anyone here except you and me."

"That's because you are only using the eyes on either side of your nose," Katerina replied, with an all knowing grin. "Isn't that so, Grandmother?" she asked the wind as it blew through a cluster of long branched pine trees. "And what do you say about this burden who I have been so 'privileged' to be taking on, Father," she asked of the clouds as they danced with each other on the South by Southeast, according to Gustav's compass anyway, horizon. "Will he ever be able to go home again?"

“Will you?” Gustav advanced. Such cut off the conversation Katerina was faking, or really having, with the ghosts, but not the memories of the people who they once were. She pulled her horse to a halt, then looked downward at the rock hard, short-grassed ground as the snow put its first and maybe permanent layer of white on top of it. “I’m sorry...I---.”

“---Had to ask me that, as I was cursed to predict before you even thought it,” Katerina replied, still keeping her face hidden from Gustav. She reached into her leather medicine pouch, reaching deep for another pinch of her favorite ‘chewing tobacco’. “Almost the last pinch of this, well, the name of the plant loses all meaning and magic in translation,” she commented. “From a field in a special valley. That my father took me to. A long, long time ago.”

“The taste of it reminds you of him?” Gustav advanced.

“Yes,” she replied fondly, head now in profile.

Gustav walked his horse in front of her, finally seizing on the opportunity he had been waiting for since they had met at the tavern. “Tell me about your father,” he inquired, trying to be a friend rather than a therapist, but slipping into that latter role all too easily. “And the valley you called home.”

“A valley HE called home,” Katerina replied bitterly, placing what seemed to be the last remnants of the Cossack parsley back into the pouch. “And wanted me to, when I was ‘ready’ for it that is.”

“But still a home none the less?” Gustav offered. “A place where you had hard times that now seem like golden ones? And golden ones that even I they didn’t happen, could be made to be such in that place?”

“I don’t want to talk about that place! It’s gone now!” Katerina barked back, throwing her medicine bag onto the ground, “And why did you tell me to put that parsley on my tongue to remember it, Grandmother?” she demanded of the wind. “And why, Father, did you give me new eyes to see, then went out of my sight forever?” the usually sane, practical and non-poetic Cossack-born Major yelled up to the clouds, or perhaps the Deity behind them.

Gustav waited for the emotions of anger, grief, love and indifference to finish jockeying for Katerina’s consciousness. After three episodes of shaking, four contortions of her usually emotionless face, and a final deep breath indicating that she was finally left alone by the ghosts, Gustav gently laid his fingers on her hand. This time, she didn’t pull back. “The horses need some grazing and resting time. They aren’t perpetual motion machines. And neither are we.”

“Yes,” Katerina conceded. She dismounted, pointing to where the campsite should be, then to where the best wood was. Then she slung a rock into the bush to her right, putting an old rabbit out of its misery.

Over a meal of rabbit stew, without ‘Cossack parsley’, Katerina finally talked about the man she had been thinking about ever since beginning the journey. “My father wasn’t a loving man, but he was kind. As kind as someone with a big brain and expansive mind could be anyway. I heard him make many smart jokes, that made you laugh as well as think. But I never heard him laugh. He was always living in some kind of future.”

“He must have been happy to have you as a daughter to share his jokes with, and a son to share his knowledge with,” Gustav advanced. “Very happy.”

“‘Happy’!” Katerina barked out. “No, he said he didn’t know what happiness was.”

“Everyone has been happy, at some time,” Doctor, Pastor and now friend Gustav advanced.

“Maybe when he was younger, and less...’enlightened’.” Katerina put down her stew, gazing into the lost space behind her blood shot eyes. “He said he experienced bliss and accomplishment. Pitying the rest of us who he said were ‘stuck’ in being happy. And having ‘fun’. And...” the hard assed Major finally broke out into a free flowing chuckle, then a dark, sardonic laugh. “It was me, and my mother, and grandmother, who pitied HIM! Pitied him for always living in his head, and not his compassionate but under-expressed heart. Pitied him for when being asked how he was doing, always saying with defensive pride what he did. Pitied him for instead of being grateful and accepting of what God gave him, insisting on making it better. Pitied him for not being able to share anything fun with me, or the wife he should never have married. Always needing to do and know more, and more and more. Until...hmmm.” Katerina froze in mid self-examination, her face becoming motionless, her eyes terrified.

“Until what?” Gustav asked several times as he walls between Katerina’s mind and soul kept getting higher and thicker. He removed the faded map he had stolen before his departure from his Aryan Comrades, which had demarcated where each of the common born front line Storm troopers would get a plot of land for their new estates, once they rolled their tanks over it. He showed it to Katerina. “Tell me where this special valley is. We can go there, and you can face your demons. Dispell them. And maybe---”

“---Turn them into angels?” her abrupt yet welcomed reply, quoting loosely from one of the poems Gustav had recited to her to ease her mind, and show off his literate accomplishments on the trail. “Yes,” she said several time, after which she rose to her feet. She looked at the map. “Home was, and maybe will again be...here.” She seemed relieved, connected to Purpose. A shared Purpose, perhaps, as Gustav felt it. And needed to make happen, for reasons he would explain to Katerina at some time in the future. At a time which the clairvoyant peasant Major would not predict, perhaps, or perhaps not.

CHAPTER 6

Sasha looked at the pictures in front of her bloodshot eyes, apparently thinking hard about what her answer would be to the question put before her for the third time. “You are sure you haven’t seen this woman, with the long red hair, and this neatly mustached gentleman who is now no doubt looking like a hairy, down on his luck, trapper?” Comrade Captain Mikael Deshevski asked the she-he, or perhaps she-he farriar for the third time at her station at the top of the hill overlooking the village, dropping the address of Comrade. And finally adjusting his tone to someone who was neither male nor female, but perhaps something beyond such external distinctions which limited internal expansions.

“I don’t know...maybe. They came through here,” Sasha conceded. “Or maybe not,” the soot covered Blacksmith affirmed. The Master Farrier and Metallic Artisan then turned full visual attention, and a lingering apologetic stare, to the ornate metal crucifix in the kiln about to be transformed into something more immediately useful to man, woman or horse. “But I probably didn’t see the people in those pictures you’re showing me. I must be thinking of someone else, Comrade Captain,” Sasha’s final word on the matter while banging the calligraphy on the metal onto a flat, moldable sheet. “All men and women look much the same to creatures like me these days.”

The freshly shaved Red Army Officer in the freshly-pressed uniform turned to the Old Man clad in his least torn going to Church suit, shrugging his shoulders. “The Blacksmith says she doesn’t recognize them,” the young Ukrainian Captain said in a loud voice to the Old Civilian with exaggerated lip movements, and sign language.

“Press on further!” the Old Man said with his hands, and determined eyes.

The freshly shaved Red Army Officer in his new freshly-pressed uniform recalled his days as a furniture salesman when he was a furniture salesman in Kiev took in a big, deep breath. He then turned to the Smithy, as the transformed crucifix in his/her hands hit the bucket of water, about to be re-incarnated as a long dagger. “Do you have any idea where they went?” he asked, kindly this time.

“That is assuming they were here in the first place,” the reply as Sasha pounded the plowshear into a sword. “Next question, Comrade Salesman?”

Vladimir Deshevski looked to the deaf-mute old man again, requesting that he provide the next inquiry. This time Colonel Holzmann motioned back to the paroled Ukrainian prisoner yet another gibberish comment in sign, which meant, in any language, “You figure out how to make this bitch and/or bastard talk, or this gun in my pocket will put a bullet through your head. And my fellow SS Officers will see that whatever family you have left in the Ukraine will be sent to a Concentration Camp worse than any Gulag.”

Rather than dwell on the negative, Deshevski considered the positives regarding the deal he had made with Holzmann back in the POW Camp. A deal made to a private from the

Ukraine conscripted into the Bolshevik Red Army, who still hated Stalin for what he did to his fellow Ukrainians in 1930, starving a third of them to death that winter after taking away all of the food. And who, very privately, considered the German invasion a liberation. A liberation which would make him a King back in Ukraine if the Mission to find the 'specially gifted' Katerina succeeded. And maybe in the bargain, a Ukraine that would finally be freed from Moscow's iron fist. A Ukraine which also could become independent, after the German Army wore itself trying to invade Russia. But that latter possibility, like all other worthy achievements in the future, required innovation in the present.

"It is only logical that they came through here, Comrade Sasha," Deshevski proposed. "They were on horses that needed the best shoeing possible for a hard ride during winter. Innovative shoeing that only you provide," he continued, looking over the extensive outdoor equine footwear display on the wall behind the Artisan. He noted the signatures on the bottom of each shoe, each of those signatures being different. "Customized shoeing, personally signed."

"And designed personally for every horse," Sasha boasted, approaching the wall. "Which I try to give another lease of life to, anyway," the apologetic appendum.

"And succeed in doing!" Deshevski exclaimed with a proud boast. "I have heard that every horse who has four legs, no matter how deformed, foundered or bruised, can be miraculously fixed here in Doctor Sasha's hoof hospital! And with funding that I can see comes your way, with a position of authority in the Veterinary College in Moscow, Leningrad and Vladivostok." The former Ukrainian furniture merchant put his arm around Sasha as a proud father would to a son, or daughter. "And it is said, in places of power and influence, that you can bring back to life anything made of metal."

"Like that car you came in here with, that you want me to fix?" Sasha replied, staring directly at and into Deshevski, gently pushing away his congratulatory arm from the shoulders. "For a generous supply of more compliments? Or another shipment of 'first rate material for a first rate Artisan' never got here? And has an even lower chance of being delivered now, now that Moscow is about to be put under siege as well as Leningrad?"

Sasha hobbled around four piles of what even the poorest serf would call 'metallic junk' then to a chair made of as many parts as it had legs. Then sat down, and pulled out a jug of cider. "You want me to repair that car you chugalugged in here with, or anything else, you'll have to pay me something. And with more than just survival, Comrade Captain, if you're thinking of shooting me with your pistol or having me relocated to an 'education camp'."

By the way the Blacksmith drunk the cider, and the empty stare in the face afterwards, this Artisan clearly was the most difficult kind of witness, or suspect, to break. One who didn't care if he or she lived or died. But, Deshevski thought, and recalled from his thespian Uncle Vladimir, that those who care nothing about their own lives somehow care

about others. Recalling that golden summer where he learned the craft of being someone else, while still being yourself, Deschevksi strode over to the Old Man who had accompanied him there from the POW Camp.

“You see before you, a father, who has escaped the worst kind of tortures at the hands of the Germans imaginable,” Maestro Deschevski offered as the first portion of his opera.

“Yes,” Holzmann replied, with a headnod. And a face that emanated sincerity. He took hold of the picture of Katerina, placing it on his heart. Tears ran down his face, like rain. Such melted the first layer of cynicism from the hard-bitten Blacksmith. Seizing the opportunity, Holzmann signed another batch of kinetic gibberish to Deschevski. His tone turned from fondness to anger, defined very clearly when he grabbed hold of Gustav’s picture and spit on it.

“And the man she came here with, her husband, is not who he says he is,” Deschevski translated. “He’s---”

“---Someone who you want, and need, to find, so he doesn’t do any more harm to his daughter, Comrade Captain,” Sasha surmised. “Someone who is a---“

“---Spy. German spy!” Holzmann slurred out of his mouth in his best imitation of a deaf mute he could muster. Collected no doubt within his mind from having to examine, process, institutionalize and sterilize biologically inferior humans, in the service of future generations. “Mmmust cccatch.”

“And find,” the affirmative reply from the Blacksmith who picked up a slab of paper and writing down what seemed to be Chinese lettering. “By following the hoof prints of these horses. Who you may be able to catch up with in this.” Sasha whipped a blood-stained tarp off one of the junk piles, revealing a motorcycle with a side car. “I was going to use it myself for my own getaway from the Germans, but as I’m able to, I’ll avail myself of a more honest kind of transportation.” With that, the Ferrier looked towards the coral of horses, whistling to them. A white steed galloped towards Sasha, nickering when reaching the fence. “Not yet!” the legendary freak Master Craftsperson said to the horse. “We have to get these people on the road first.”

Deschevski looked to Holzmann, requesting his approval for the proposition. He got a lot more. Such sustained, and scared him. Particularly because, to Holzmann anyway, this seemed to be about more than bringing back into captivity a special girl with special future seeing abilities. No, it was a lot more personal than that. It was about family, one which would consider Deschevski as a disposable stranger. Unless he of course learned the family secrets first.

CHAPTER 7

Gustav's elongated facial stubble gave way to a bush that he could run his fingers through and store berries in from one stop to another on the way East. Below him, the hard ground gave way to snow, then ice then, just as it seemed like winter would freeze everything that breathed air or sprouted from the ground, mud. Hard mud emerged into softer mud that still retained long green grass, in a valley that had now seen more than a foot of snow for three winters, according to his Guide.

"We stop here and walk in front of the horses," Katerina said while dismounting in front of a knarled tree which seemed even to a non-ghost believer like Gustav to be guarding a swamp. An ecosystem teeming with ribbing frogs and other fair weathered creatures who seemed to not know what winter was, or who had fled from it.

Of particular concern to Katerina was the botanical life here, particularly a purple flowered plant. Gustav did not recognize it, despite three semesters of Anatomy at the University of Berlin. When she smelled the plant, it put a warm, happy and loving smile on her face. A taste of the white pedaled muddy weed that she fondly greeted as Yokiva confirmed that she was home.

"What do we do now?" Gustav inquired, feeling as out of place in this spring-like Eden as he did in his former, and he hoped still alive, Jewish fiancée's Passover table.

"We walk on water, then let the horse follow us," the reply as Katerina stepped onto the swamp, finally finding with her feet amidst the rocks an underwater ramp. Gustav followed, noting skeletal remains of horses, coyotes and people who did know about the passage.

"So, this explains one of Jesus' tricks? Walking on water that is, skipping when his Dad wasn't looking," he mused. "And Moses. Leading the Hebrews across the Red----"

"---In fifteen steps you'll lose your boot, and cut open your leg," Katerina interrupted. "I can't see how painful it will be or what you'll do about it."

"Or maybe not," Gustav said, challenging once again the predictions that Katerina said. Predictions that always came true. But what Gustav noted was that it took fifteen steps and as many seconds. Her predictions when on the trail and sparingly munching her medicine bag were five seconds ahead. When eating a generous sprinkle of the magic herb, she could predict what would happen in ten seconds. It was then that something flashed on Gustav. It wasn't Katerina who had special powers, but whatever herb she kept to herself that was able to do something for, or to, her.

But such speculation would have to wait, as fifteen seconds happened the way she predicted it, no matter what Gustav did to prevent the mini-prophecy. Yes, Gustav did lose the boot on the hole in the wooden plank which he thought was an intact surface barely two feet away from solid ground at the other end of the swamp. And he did cut

open his leg. But it didn't hurt. He pulled his bootless left hind-limb out of the water, wrapping it up with his now useless scarf. "So, you can predict the future, but not how anyone reacts to it."

"Or is changed by it," she confessed. "But fate rules us all. The law of karma, cause and effect, that we must obey."

"But we don't have to react to," came from a voice in the woods. Its speaker emerged, his face like nothing Gustav had seen. He had seen Asians at the Olympics in Berlin back in '36, but had never seen one who was so dignified, and authentically 'Indian'. A carbon copy of what Karl Mai, the German writer who wrote so authentically about the West, put into print. Nearly identical to the pictures of the Old West that Gustav had read a kid, along with most of his friends as well as Adolf Hitler himself. But this high cheek-boned, long haired, beardless brown skinned Shaman lacked the happiness and 'being in the moment' aura which, in his imaginations and readings, always accompanied Red or Brown skinned Natives. His face was fraught with worry lines, more than any masochistic, overworked White man killing himself daily in the industrialized world.

"Welcome," the North American Indian, or most probably Siberian Yakut, said to Katerina in Russian, then to Gustav in German. "We've been expecting you," he said to Katerina with a deep sense of purpose.

"I know, Uliti," her reply. She followed the Yakut Elder towards a clearing behind the bush.

"You thought, but didn't know," he admonished. "Just like you didn't know what we'd be serving for supper at your arrival."

"No, I didn't," Katerina admitted. "But----" she paused in mid retort, noting the piles of shattered lumber, scattered bricks and half buried metal appliances that had been a well built and functional village.

"---A tornado. Then rainstorm," the old man said with not a single bit of sadness, nor anger. "Mother Earth telling us that if its inhabitants become too smart, they have to be put back in their place."

"Why?" Gustav challenged, remaining what he thought was a safe distance behind.

"So we can become more adaptable, and provide a home for you that is more mobile, and comfortable," the Elder Uliti said, opening his hand to the newest of the Yurts that had been put up behind the rubble. "Where you slept well tonight, after having eaten a full meal, and after appending it with romantic dessert of----"

"---Alright! Enough!" Gustav barked out. "Allow me, and Katerina, to enjoy something before knowing what it is!"

The old man sized up the young man from head to toe, three times. He then nodded his head, saying something in his Native non-Russian tongue to Katerina.

She smiled with delight. “He said that we’ll have----“

“---I don’t want to know how many children you’ll give me! Or I’ll give you!” Gustav protested. “I just want to know, right now---“

“---Who will win the war?” Katerina interjected, with a knowing smile.

“Whoever can predict the future better, and first?” Gustav self observed coming out of his mouth, scaring himself. “Which, God help us, has to be us,” the conclusion to a very complicated series of questions coming into his head. He squatted, then picked up one of the strange white-pedaled weeds. “To be a god or not be a god, that is the question,” he said, moving a twig of the herb to his mouth, finding it foul to his nose.

“It’s an acquired taste,” the Elder offered. “Which must be taken in small amounts After being acclimated to it, and us.”

“And if I take larger amounts? To make the good more powerful than the evil?” Gustav said, after which he put two pedals onto his tongue.

“You’ll become one of us,” the Elder warned the Promethian Crusader with a foreboding stare, and the deepest of sorrows and regrets. “Unable to live in the present. Or to leave this place, unless it’s as that,” he continued, pointing to a collection of tombstones representing as many religious dominations as departed souls. “Too much Yokiva, when prepared the way it was supposed to be, and or your body becomes conditioned to the raw form, will do that,” he continued, gazing with affection as well as distain at cluster of plants below him with some of the white pedals opened up to the sky in flowing splendor, the others shut closed.

“I knew you’d say that,” Gustav smirked.

“No, you didn’t,” the stern retort from the Elder. “Tell him what is about to happen to him,” he requested of Katerina.

“He’ll find out on his own, in ten seconds,” she replied, counting down from nine, along with the Elder.

Gustav anticipated being transformed into some kind of Deity, or spirit animal. Or both. Instead, he barfed up not only the two pedals, but his breakfast and lunch. Then then was plummeted into the worse hangover he could remember.

“So, now that your belly is empty, time to feed it!” Elder Uliti exclaimed with joy, friendship and goodness. “And I promise that I won’t predict anything else that will

happen to or for you tonight. And neither will my adopted niece, Katerina. Right?" he requested of her.

"Of course," her reply as she took Gustav's hand, gently pulled him into an upright position and kissed him on the cheek. "Hmmm...I didn't see that happening," she admitted. "Thankfully."

With that, the travelling companions walked hand in hand to the dinner that was prepared in their honor, arriving at the table amongst the other inhabitants of the Valley. Where there was a place set for three absent diners, who were toasted by name, as was the custom for those who had departed this life unexpectedly, one way or another by their own hand, according to Katerina's translation of the ceremony. One of them being an overly adventurous Crusader named Nicholi.

CHAPTER 8

“So, tell me what number will come up on the count of five, Comrade Visionary,” the newly assigned Red Army Captain said as he spun the roulette wheel for the geriatric voluntary subject sitting in the chair in front of him in the windowless lab surrounded by barbed wire and machine gun towers. “Or at the count of ten?” the well groomed, handsome and, for the moment, well fed young officer requested again. “Just tell me again what number will come up on this wheel?” The Captain looked to the mirror/ He felt all too well on the other side of the one way mirror window the stares of his bosses who no doubt were considering what rank to demote him to, or where he would be sent to experience a glorious death for the Motherland.

“Null,” the beaten but still not compliant Old Man in the chair said to the Officer.

“There is no zero on this wheel,” the well fed young Officer apologetically whispered to the famine old test subject. “And before I allow you to eat today, along with your fellow prisoners and, truth be told, me as well, I need you to tell me the number that will come up if I randomly spin it, Nicholi.”

“I will tell you on one condition,” the Ukrainian Cossack who had been a ‘guest’ of the Soviet Research Center for Paranormal Research for the last five years demanded through a parched throat. . By some miracle, Nicholi was able to withhold the real secret about how he was able to tell the future. Somehow, his ‘protectors’ and handlers believed it was something in his cerebral biology rather than something eaten from the ground that gave him that occasionally active gift. He smirked with delight at the prospect of manipulating his captors yet one more time, a game of mischief.

The Old Man closed his eyes, pretending a Vision was coming in to his feet, wriggling its way up his spine, and into his head. “Yes. I think I can feel something coming up now. The ethers coming into mind, into brain, which can get us closer to the answer of how to tap future telling if I can...If I can...”

“Ride my Commander’s horse again, connecting with your past lifetimes as a Mystic? Preach the Old Believer Christian doctrine to the guards, feeling the vibration of the words the way the Old Believers said them? Working in your garden again growing flowers, and feeling what the rays from beyond the sun say to them, with soil that we need to raise corn, potatoes and beans to feed starving people? That I---?”

“---Tell you how I WAS able to tell the future?” Nicholi said the Captain, shifting personalities yet again into a mere mortal. He then turned into himself. “And wasn’t able to figure out that you were the wrong man to marry my daughter, before it was too late, Ivan. Who---”

“---loves Katerina more than you ever know!” Ivan Petrovitch whispered to his father in law, in Ukrainian, in a diction that Party Line Russians on the other side of the one way

mirror could not understand, and didn't have an interest in learning. "And knows that she is in danger now. The worst kind!"

"And you want to save her," Nicholi inquired.

"Yes!" the reply.

It seemed sincere to the Old Cossack who, as a youth, encountered Yokiva by accident. But he knew this kind of day would come. He knew that in the wrong hands, the herb, especially when processed in the way he had discovered while with the Yakuts in Uliti's valley, would destroy not only the Steppes that allowed it to grow in specific places, but the rest of the planet around those selected havens. But maybe in the right hands, it could save the world. And most importantly, it could save the part of the world he cared about most.

"I have not heard from Katerina in a long time," Nicholi noted to his son in law, 'Captain' Ivan. "And it was a fortunate accident that my protective custody brought me to you. Tell me, did you have any children with her?"

"Three, who are doing very well," the reply.

Nicoli found himself believing Ivan. He posed the next question.

"And Katerina, how is she doing?"

"Not so well," the reply. "She was captured by the Germans."

"Who are no doubt trying to use her to find out how to do future telling research," Nicholi surmised.

"And who escaped, so I heard, and is being relentlessly pursued," Ivan informed Nicholi "Who would be heading, where?"

Nicholi thought long and hard about what to answer. He looked into Ivan's face, seeing a loving husband who wanted his wife back. He gazed into the mirror, feeling his bosses devising his son in law's end, along with no doubt ill fates for his grandchildren, if they were still alive. Then the Old Cossack looked within himself. He had put himself up on the cross for crucifixion for breaking the code the Elders said to keep secret, and trying to warn Comrade Stalin of a world war that perhaps could have been prevented, and the demise of his own son in that conflict. A good deed that no doubt resulted in Nicholi revealing in his sleep during captivity, or a stupor induced by the spiked vodka he was given, the power of the future seeing herb, but not its dangers. And other good deeds, such as predicting what would happen to his fellow prisoners and a few kind guards by predicting which way the railroad car would topple over in the accident he saw before it happened. Then Nicholi recalled what he said to Katerina the last time he spoke with

her. The time he entrusted a map to and of the Yokiva valley to her, and none of her siblings, or her mother. But for the moment, there was Ivan to contend with.

“Well, can you regain your special abilities and save both Mother Russia, and your family? As we both know, very few people get that option.” Ivan said in very authentic and sincere Ukrainian. As one of the oppressed rather than a voluntary or involuntary oppressor. As someone who was, because of such, about to be made a prisoner himself if he didn’t achieve results.

“Alright, I think I can feel a prediction happening,” Nicholi said after intense consideration of mind, brain and soul. “Which is helped along by first doing this.” The old man reached his hand behind his back, slipping it around his anal cavity. “There is a special point that has to be rubbed, messaged and...then you take your finger and...” He dabbed his finger with manure, put it into his mouth, and smiled with gustatory delight. Though brown lips, shown with pride to the mirror, he voiced his next prediction, as a god once again. “In ten seconds, this building will be destroyed. By an electrical accident from within. Everyone in it will be dead.”

After somehow pushing a flood of tears from his eyes, Nicholi turned away from the mirror, did a ‘magic dance’, pointed towards a loose wire, and winked to Ivan. “My secrets will be yours and only yours in thirty seconds, my son,” he pledged to his interrogator between Yakut incantations.

How and why Ivan accidentally slipped on the floor and caused the electrical cord to shut out the lights, then cause lightening storms in the room, Nicholi did not know. But what he did know, and saw in his mind, was he and Ivan escaping from the facility, as ‘dead’ men. Whether it was a prediction based in residual Yokiva extract from the plants he secretly grew captivity, or a gift from God, who knows the Future, Past and Present, the Old Cossack didn’t know. Or care to know.

CHAPTER 9

“So, why do you get to extract Yokiva elixir now that it’s in full bloom, and I get to watch?” Katerina asked Gustav as he poured petrol and vodka into the generator that Nicholi had brought to the Yokiva valley a decade ago, before it was a proper village.

“Because Uncle Uliti said that it’s time for me to bleed for a just Cause,” he continued, after which he revved it up. He then dripped blood from his cut hand into the vat of swamp water containing a healthy fistful of the freshly harvested weed. “And Uncle Uliti said that---“

“---You can’t call him Uncle!” Katerina blasted into Gustav’s face. “You aren’t allowed to do that until we are officially married, and as for being married to a German Army deserter who wants to go home after the War---“

“---IF there’s a home to go back to, which I am sure there won’t be,” Gustav shot back, with anger and sadness in his eyes. “Something I know as sure as the fact that whatever anyone says I am, or wants to say I am, I love you. For reasons that I don’t know but have to accept. Now, hand me that electrical wire. Holding it with the insulation gloves and NOT your hand this time. The hand I’ve pledged my life to, and don’t want to be more burnt than it already is, from your previous marriage and your attempts to screw up this one.”

It was the first time that Katerina heard a man say he loved her in a way that he both meant and, sort of, understood. Indeed, she herself was unsure of what love was. Given her last husband Ivan’s expression of that complex emotion, ‘love’ meant for the man yelling at, screaming into and hitting his beloved, followed by passionate sex and flowers the next morning. For the woman, it meant turning the pain inflicted by the man into some kind of internal pleasure. And of course suffering ‘points’ acquired while on Earth so that God, yet another man, would reward her in Heaven.

But as she gazed then allowed her eyes to linger on Gustav electrocuting the plants in the vat, and hopefully not himself, she pondered the idea that maybe Gustav was her reward. A man who wanted to get away from the world as much as she did. Yet who, under the orders of Uncle Uliti, the head Elder in the reclaimed village and swamp-protected valley, was making more Yoliva extract, an herb that could change the world at a critical time. So that it could be used by ‘good people’ for the Cause of ‘good’. But, who would these good people be? Katerina knew nothing about what was said in the Tribal Council meetings between the men. Their mostly brown or yellow skinned wives knew something, but told her half truths about what their men were doing, thinking, and feeling.

Yet there was something else that concerned Katerina even more. Ingesting Yokiva extract or sucking hard enough on the pedals enabled you to see what would happen to others, but not yourself. In the last few glorious weeks, something ominous had happened. The self-discharged Russian Army Major and circumstance-liberated loyal

Soviet wife was becoming unable to see the ever-clumsy-in-body Gustav cut himself with a kitchen knife twenty, ten or even five seconds in advance. During Yurt raising and fence building gatherings where she and her new man were invited to join the Yakuts born to that ancestry or the Caucasian misfits who were adopted into it, she would normally foresee Gustav inadvertently boasting about the wonders of White European technology. He would go on and on about how it would revolutionize Ancient noble cultures, unless she stepped on his foot before he had the chance to voice them loud enough to be heard by his potentially-angered Yakut hosts. But now, no matter how much Yokiva extract she ate beyond the ration Uncle Uliti, under her departed father's orders, ate, Katerina was as blind to what would happen to Gustav as she was unable to predict what would happen to her.

"Maybe it's because me and this still insecure culturally-superior ex-Aryan have become one," she considered as she watched him turn up the electrical juice in the vat containing Yokiva roots, impatient that the color of the green stem was not turning blue fast enough. "Maybe if I force myself to be indifferent to Gustav as I was to the soldiers I was ordered and obliged to protect when I was on the Front, I could predict what will happen to him. To not make the universal compassion we're supposed to have for our fellow citizens of the world less personal," she thought. As a mental 'trick', she actively tried to see her thankfully gone husband Ivan's immaculately clean-shaven face in Gustav's heavily bearded mug. But, alas, that didn't work because Gustav's eyes got in the way of that futile deception.

Meanwhile, Gustav yelled out curses at the generator that worked intermittently, the wires that obeyed their own rules rather than the laws of physics, and of course the Yokiva plants that had been snatched from the ground in his native Germanic tongue. He commanded the current to work on the plant and for the innocent looking weeds to obey 'a species who is more evolved than you'. Then he reached into the vat with his bare hands. Certainly an act of defiance against nature that would cause him to receive a lightning rod shock which carried with it the chance for a heart attack, which Katerina DID see happen. Till something else happened.

She self observed herself reaching into the vat of swamp water, blood and electrified botanical material, pulling out Gustav's hand before it hit the electrodes. The maneuver cut a slice into her own finger, courtesy of a the sharp edge of the metallic container. Her blood merged with Gustav's in the vat, somehow making the plant stems turn the kind of blue she had never seen before. A hue that fluoresced like the eyes of a horse at night, or a watchful wolf lingering in the woods after dark. The extract coming out of the top end of the stems at the cathodal lead was different too. It seemed to dance rather than merely bubble to the surface. And after tasting a generous portion of it, seemed to sing to Katerina. She didn't understand the words, but she felt the music, and the message. A message that seemed to come from Mother Nature herself saying 'in reward for your persistence, compassion and applied intensity, I grant you access another magical secret.'

Katerina found herself instantly seeing new Visions insight her aching head. Her body below the neck shook like a frail autumn leaf in a brisk winter wind, offering no resistance to the wisdom and/or power surges going through it. The Vision had a face from her past that materialized in front of her stare at the ceiling in the very active present. Her weather-beaten lips broke into a wide smile upon seeing and then smelling the apparition.

“Are you alright?” Gustav said, grabbing hold of her with the kind of concern only animals, noble love-emitters that they are, could convey. The kind of compassion she felt from only one other soul in her life as a human “Are you alright!”

“We will be,” Katerina assured Gustav, doing her best to limit the shakes and jolts, so as to not worry those still in the land of forms. “Right?” she asked the ethereal visitor.

Her father Nicholi nodded a cautious ‘yes’. “Thank you for keeping me alive in our dreams,” he whispered as his old face lost its worry wrinkles, and he became the carefree, fun-loving and Cossack she recalled from her early and nearly forgotten childhood.

“Our dreams?” Katerina answered, partially noting that Gustav was gazing at her like she was ‘off’. Like so many had looked at Nicholi when he was most Alive between the ears. “Where are you?” she asked her beloved father, who frustrated her daily when he was alive. “Tell me when you will get here.”

“Who is coming here, when?” Gustav asked, terrified. “Who are you talking to?” he asked, pleaded than demanded to know.

Katerina looked to the man who she dreamed about night after night after his disappearance, and well documented death. Assuring her that he was still alive, but, for the moment, only to and for her. “Well?” she demanded of the now younger Nicholi, as an equal, hands on her hips in the manner of an assertive wife rather than an obediently worshipping daughter.

Nicholi replied with a lifting of his four fingered left hand to his nose, saying ‘shh, not yet’. Then he vanished, leaving Katerina in a very normally illuminated hut, the magic of the moment replaced with procedural chirping of birds, a light rain coming down upon the roof an oncoming wind from the North. With the smell of Gustav’s sweat emanating into her ears. He dipped his finger into the vat, attempting to taste the new variation of Yokiva elixir that seemed to have been created.

Katerina self observed herself slapping that hand. “No cookies until you’ve had your supper,” she said in a playfully scolding voice.

“And supper is, when?” Gustav asked.

“Now. Very much now and IN the now,” Katerina replied with widely upturned outer lips, which catapulted their way onto Gustav’s. Through those sensors, she felt his soul,

deeper than she ever felt anyone else's. As his chest met hers, she felt as one with him. Diving into the depths, and soaring beyond the clouds, both at the same time. Yes, it was a very good time to be Alive. In the moment, feeling a future which she could not see but knew would lead to a magical Eternal Now, for everyone concerned, including the children she envisioned coming out of her now life-seeking womb.

CHAPTER 10

Gustav Vogel was frustrated beyond earthly and metaphysical measure as late fall gave way to an abrupt onset of deep winter, at least outside of the swamp surrounded valley. His assigned job was to hunt for food there, barter for whatever supplies could be had, and of course to find out what was happening in the world outside of the valley protected by an impenetrable swamp and, perhaps, 'elements' beyond those created by Mother Nature on earth. The over-trained and finally useful Ph.D. in botany had also been assigned the job Nicholi once had, Chief Scientist in charge of examining the effects, and side effects, of new extracts from the humble and, thankfully for a power hungry world, rare Yokiva weed. Yet, no matter how much Yokiva Uliti gave to Gustav as his 'handlable' ration, or Katerina snuck into the cookies she specially baked for him, or how many finger-licks he put into his mouth when extracting in his private laboratory, the most 'Professor Vogel' could predict about the future was 4 seconds ahead, and his predictions were wrong half of the time.

"Maybe everyone's been giving me placebos," he commented to his horse en route from where winter rules to where it was abolished, packed with supplies packed in his saddlebag, newspapers stuffed under his coat and stories in his head he had heard from refugees, soldiers on the way to the front, and those deserting such. "Or maybe there's something in my biology, or 'superior' Aryan genes, that prevents me from being able have the gifts of prophesy that Uliti was born with, Katerina has, and 'Saint Nicholi' developed after he got here. Or maybe it's still something in my brain that won't let my eyes see what's really there." It was then that Gustav horse's attention was held hostage by an old pine whose branches seemed to be so different from its overly symmetrical surrounding trees. "Like that tree there, that you see and feel some kind of special soul in," he said to the mare he had rescued from the Black Marketeer innkeeper so many experiences behind him, stroking her neck to calm her down. "To me, I see a collection of bark, water canals and nutrition delivering vessels whose abnormal appearance can be explained by wind, water and sunlight access, which my mind automatically tries to figure out. A mind that, yes, sees what my brain is conditioned to see, and not what the eyes, the ones on the side of the head, or the ethereal one above the bridge of my nose, deliver to my overly analytical mind. One that is obsessed with understanding, rather than just accepting."

"Connected to a mouth that talks too much," Gustav heard from behind him, in a very human, earth-based voice. "Both here and in town," the intruder continued, edging his way with a loaded German Mauzer rifle into Gustav's face. "Now, get off that horse and report what you have seen, after your very long absence from duty, soon to be Captain Vogel again," Commandant Holzmann commanded, the business end of that marvel of science and engineering pointed at his head.

Gustav beheld the German Commandant who, but for his neatly trimmed mustache and clean shaven cheeks, looked more like a Russian refugee peasant than anyone else Gustav had seen, or become. From behind, another intruder from Gustav's secret past emerged. "Vladimir Deshevski," the German Army deserter said to the former and perhaps still

Ukrainian POW with whom he had shared a cell, and so many other secrets with, prior to their scheduled execution. “How did you find me?”

“This!” Vladimir Deschevski, clad in a Red Army uniform plastered with medals no doubt stolen from slain heroes, said, pointing to a hoof-print in the snow left by the mare. “Sasha’s special signature she puts on every shoe. The she-male freak also told us other things about you, and Katerina.” With his eyes and a Russian Army pistol, he ordered his former cellmate to dismount the horse.

Before Gustav could absorb the anger at the “Two Spirited” Master farriar who he both liked, and trusted, Holzmann reminded him about something more personable, and self-prosecutable. “And the love poems you wrote on trees, before, apparently, they were written about Katerina, my beloved daughter, soul mate, friend and lover.”

“In your imaginary family!” Gustav barked back. “Katerina, who is NOT your daughter, is dead.”

“Yet, believable legend says, she can still predict the future,” Vladimir replied.

“Because of the gift she was born with, amongst others,” Holzmann added with fondness, and pride.

“She’s dead, I swear!” Gustav replied, trying to convert the anger at himself for having been who he was, into grief.

“As will be your father, mother, brothers, and sisters, if you don’t tell us where this special girl with the gift of prophesy she was born with is,” Deschevski asserted. He pulled out a dated photograph of Gustav’s family, showing it to him proudly.

There was little to be thankful for at the moment, but one of them was that Ivan, an opportunist for his own sake if there ever was one, had not figured out that it was Yokiva that made Katerina able to foresee the future and not her biology. That most anyone, except if he was an explanation obsessed scientist, could predict the future if give the right amounts and strains of Yokiva. An ability that could save any army from decimation in the field, or make any deserter with the herb a rich man at home if he had access to the stock market reports still active in Berlin, New York, and London. An ability that, being brutally honest about it, Gustav had been contemplating using himself. Which perhaps is why the Yakut Elders, Mother Nature and perhaps if He hadn’t retired permanently after ’33, God had prevented Gustav from becoming a future seer.

“Enough contemplating,” Deschevik barked out, as Gustav had anticipated with his non-prophesying brain. “Where are you delivering these supplies to?” he inquired while rummaging through the sacs attached to Gustav’s saddle, curiously assessing the significance of the metal tools, dismantled electrical appliances, medicines and hard candy.

“People,” the reply.

“What kind of people?” the dis-grunted Red Army corporal now ‘promoted’ to Captain in Holzmann’s private Army replied while rolling his thick, brown eyebrows.

“People who just want to be left alone,” Gustav volleyed back. “And deserve to be.”

“Which includes most everyone these days,” Captain Deschevski chucked somberly, as POW Corporal Vladimir. “Especially us Ukrainians,” he asserted as he defiantly looked at the medals bearing the Russian Red Star on his uniform.

“Katerina is, I mean, was Ukrainian,” Gustav offered, realizing all too late his use of the present tense. “I say she IS because---“

“---You have feelings for her?” Deschevski said, more in the manner of an Gestapo Officer rather than a Red Army Interrogator, no doubt rehearsing for his position as ruler of three Russian districts once the German Army had finally overrun Stalingrad and Moscow. A future that the still very German expatriate prayed very intensely at this very moment would not happen. “But you don’t have as deep feelings for Katrina as Colonel Holzmann does...” the Ukrainian turncoat, or perhaps anti-Soviet Nationalistic ex-Patriot, continued, pointing Gustav’s attention to the sobbing Commandant, his face buried in two handfuls of fresh tears.

“His feelings are misplaced,” Gustav offered regarding the hard-line Nazi who really did seem to have a vulnerable heart underneath all of the Party Line breeding and conditioning.

“Something else that most people share these days,” the introspective retort from Deschevski. A man who wanted, and needed, to share his inner secrets with someone. But such would have to wait for later. He pulled out another picture from his breast pocket. “These twenty people will die unless you turn over Katerina, as she calls herself anyway, to us.”

“No,” Gustav affirmed.

“Then these fifty,” Deschevski countered, retrieving another photo, featuring in the front row three children. “Will die unless you deliver Katerina to my custody. And, more importantly, Colonel Holzmann’s care. Which is a lot kinder and more reliable than anything her former husband or you can provide.”

“As long as she doesn’t ask to leave, or doesn’t want to be his daughter, lover, friend, confidant, soul mate, or---“

Gustav’s accounts of what Katerina really experienced while under the deluded Commandant’s custody were pistol whipped into bloody silence. As he hit the ground, he felt two teeth falling out of his mouth. Then a kick in the chest that cracked three ribs.

He felt his testicals being grabbed next, Deschevik's dagger poised to sever them off, and feed them to on-looking hungry coyotes.

"Manhood is between the ears, not the legs," Gustav replied with a smart assed grin, feeling both relieved to know that he was not a coward under pressure, and that he could be both scholarly and witty at the same time. "Lunch time, on me!" he said to the coyotes as they approached.

At the wild canines edged in closer, Deschevik growled at Gustav, the coyotes, then at the wielder of fate above him. "I will have Katerina as my own personal Prophet or whatever she takes to make her into one!" he pushed out as a whisper between gritted teeth to Gustav. He then grabbed hold of Gustav's now elongated top knot, pointing the edge of the dagger at his left eye, then the right.

"The one in the middle of them is the key to it all," Gustav smirked. "So I'm told," he shared.

"So be it," Deschevik grunted, after which he edged the blade between Gustav's eyes, tearing out a chunk of flesh, throwing it to the coyotes. "Now! You will tell me what I need to know or---" Deschevik continued, wielding the tip of the dagger like a screwdriver between Gustav's eyes, into favorite body part, slowly, squeezing his finger into the ocular socket on ride side of the hole, covering the left with his sweat-soaked palm. "Tell me where Katerina is," he requested in now well accented and arrogantly talkative German, repeatedly.

By the fourth 'request', Gustav heard two shots, then a third. He opened his left eye, and squinted with what remained of his right. Deschevik's lifeless body lay on the ground next to him. Holzmann was atop Gustav's mare, heading back on the same hoofprint-laden path in the muddy snow that he had used as his exit route from the Yokiva valley. Along with the map in the recesses of the saddlebag that showed the way through the swamp. Then, a large, dark ghost from the woods emerged behind Gustav, firing a thunderbolt at the fleeing rider.

"Shit...I missed, again," the rescuer from the realm beyond the veil said as he, or she, reloaded the musket. Sasha looked at Gustav, picking him up off the ground. "I had no idea who they really were, until now," the highly valued Soviet Two Spirited Blacksmith, now looking and smelling like a refugee, confessed. "Or what you really are," Sasha blasted into Gustav's face, and the soul behind it.

"Someone who is hurting," Gustav's reply as used every ounce of strength left to sit upright, then hobble onto two feet that he both felt, and could ambulate. "And someone who I'm asking you to trust, even though I have no right to. Because...."

With that, Gustav's legs gave way, along with everything else below his neck, landing him still breathing face down in the muddy snow. Followed by Sasha, whose bullet

hole in the back had reached the front, sending the Soul within to a place where gender identification is both fluid, reversible and not judged. Hopefully anyway.

CHAPTER 11

Nicholi always felt he was born smarter than the average bear, bore or being that pretended to be human. So why for every business or personal transaction did he put in 100 rubbles or blood, sweat and compassionately applied smarts, and come out with maybe 27 rubbles of reward? “Because each gives according to their abilities and takes according to their needs,” he told himself, yet again, when his fellow ‘blown up in the fire beyond recognition’ migrant Comrade, Ivan, his son in law, dipped into the stew at the campground en route to the Yokova valley, helping himself to 80 percent of the meat in it. The evening meal was made from roots and berries that Nicholi had collected, supplemented with three wild hares that Nicholi had snared, skinned, cooked and now apologized to for having been sacrificed to feed such an undeserving and over-weight son in law. A son in law who, according to Nicholi’s best intuition, was very skillful at lying. But a son in law who got him out of custody, after a faked death, then onto fresh horses that he conveniently found at an abandoned farm once out of the range of the Research Institute’s guard tower.

True, as a man cursed and blessed with more natural intelligence than those who were most often around him, Nicholi learned how to twist, distort and fabricate the truth as much as any man born of woman. But Ivan seemed to be a master at perverting the truth, as well as a boastful liar who believed his own ever-foul smelling bullshit. Especially when he talked about how he loved Katerina, Nicholi’s favorite daughter.

“I gave your daughter everything I could, and everything she wanted, but still she felt entitled to more,” the officially-dead Red Army Captain said to the paranormally-talented future teller. “Like at our wedding, when Katerina wanted everyone in the community hall to be looking at and talking about her, when, to tell the truth, I was a far more handsome groom than she was a beautiful bride. But that is something women do, as we both know.”

“Of course,” the still very Ukrainian NON-ex Cossack noted regarding the celebration he wanted to attend more than any other, which he was unable to because of his being detained by the Red Army for being a subversive, future telling visionary, or both. “Yes, of course,” Nicholi repeated. He handing Ivan the jug of specially formulated ‘road wine’ that had been fermenting a full week, which the Old Man had only pretended to imbibe.

“And it wasn’t my fault that I was arrested after your daughter Katerina, due to not looking after herself, lost what was to be my favorite son,” Ivan continued as he slugged down another gulp of spirits. When putting the jug down, Ivan’s eyes became possessed with the demon that disables any filter in the mind or mouth that holds anything back. “But Katerina was special. And still is, according to what I found out from my secret sources.”

“Of course,” Nicholi said, for the twentieth time.

“But now, I suspect, and know, she is special because of something you have, do and gave her,” the glossy eyed Captain slurred out of his inflammable breath, accentuating the accusation with a finger pressing into Nicholi’s chest. “And I now know what it is!”

“Of course,” the Old Man said, hoping the young man would finally show his cards in the game of poker he had been playing ever since becoming the newly assigned Interrogator-Research Associate at the Institute for ‘Special’ Soviet Citizens. “And that is?” Nicholi inquired, calling the bluff, or boast. Terrified at what the answer would be, he held his face firm, his nine shaking fingers as still as he was able to keep them.

The Aristocratic born Bolshevik Prince burped several times, farted out a cloud of flatulent gas, then turned his green gilled face to his father in law. “I’m going to be a rich man! Who can predict investments at the banks. And a genius in battle, because I’ll be able to predict where the bombs and bullets will go,” he boldly pledge to the sky. “And not the coward and subversive counter-revolutionary I was arrested for being when I was taken away from the family I had a right to make into anything I want to!” he screamed to the North, in the direction of Moscow, to the ‘Counter-intellectual Bolshevik technocrats and Communist Bean-counter’ who the high born Ivan cursed ever since escaping the Institute. “Yes, I will be on top again in this everyone is equal Ideal Soviet Society, once I get the recipe for the special cookies that Katerina didn’t let me have because she said that ‘your son is more adult than you are.’”, he continued turning his attention to Nicholi. “A five year old who always finished my sentences and avoided every wack of my stick when it came time for correcting his ‘special’ behavior. Who he snuck into the kitchen and ate too many cookies one Easter, went to the cliff by the river and fell to death.”

“Or jumped,” Nicholi thought, but didn’t say, with extreme guilt. Guilt for not being stern enough with Katerina regarding the toxic effect of too much Yokiva. Guilt for not being around when she was ineffectively learning how to use her future telling ability to predict bad weather, or abuses by her loving husband Ivan. And guilt for giving it to her as an engagement gift, before she was ready for it. Add to that the guilt of fixing Katerina up with Ivan, a presumably great catch at the time, and allowing himself to be captured by the Red Army for ‘special top secret paranormal assignments’ a month before the wedding. And of course not figuring out how to escape his captors and stature as a secret weapon. And then riding or if necessary crawling back home at full speed to tell everyone who read the article about him being killed in a hunting accident that is was a gross fabrication.

“You are thinking something very interesting about this magic...elixir of yours,” Ivan said to a confounded and yet again self-punishing Nicholi. “And...” he chuckled.

“Ours?” the tense reply. “Future telling elixir of ours?”

“And Katerina’s, once we find her. For her own good, and everybody else’s, after which bring her back home.” Ivan of course did not specify where that home was, and who could occupy it. With a grin of self confidence going well over the bounds of arrogance,

he retreated to his pup tent, wishing his Old Cossack Guide a good evening, appended by “We’ll take my route to where we’re going tomorrow. I know a short cut, lacking human or natural obstacles.”

Nicholi pondered why and how Ivan learned about Yokiva, or figured it out on his own. Flashing into his mind were the many want tos and have tos in his past, and present. And the knowledge, and perhaps wisdom, that when one is truly Alive, and useful, have tos and want tos in life merge into the same Agenda, and sense of constant Urgency. But all of that merged into dealing with fear, and terror in the moment for the future telling man whose ability to do so was gone now, but who still thought about the future more than the present. What frightened the Old Cossack most was the possibility that the young Red Army Captain knew more about the future than he did, which, given its unpredictability in different people, was very, very possible. Sneaking away from Ivan was the logical thing to do, and the most futile. Ivan was one of those people who could find anyone, always five steps ahead of where the prey was going, or wanted to go. No doubt, Katerina had fallen victim to such many times when she had tried to make her ‘final this time’ getaway when married to him.

Without the herbally-conferred gift of knowing what would happen next before it happened, Nicholi waited for Ivan to emit his trademark snoring from inside the tent. He quenched the fire, scattered the remainder of the rabbit stew around the slumbering Captain’s tent, then whistled to the wolves lingering in the woods. After informing them that there was free supper in exchange for keeping Ivan stranded in his tent, the arthritic but still defiant Cossack mounted one of the horses, leading the other away from camp. Under a full moon, he gently walked, briskly trotted, then flat out galloped through the snow towards the warm, sundrenched Yokiva valley where that white precipitation never settled in for very long. Though he knew that upon arrival there he could get a cold reception, even though he had to warn the Yakuts, and Katerina, that their secret had been discovered.

CHAPTER 12

Katerina couldn't believe her ears, eyes and the other senses beyond those normally used by those who dwelled exclusively in the material realm. "What do you mean, you want me to go back home, to get medical treatment from Doctors who, you yourself, said are blind, deaf and dead themselves?" she asked a concerned Uncle Uli as the flicker of the fire in the Community Meeting Lodge was conveying to her songs about the future she could see and visual images of the present she could hear. "And why are the rest of you looking at me like I'm a defective piece of meat?" she inquired of the stoic male Elders sitting at their usual spots around the fire. She then turned to their pensive wives and daughters, seated a foot behind them "Tell your husbands, brothers and lovers that I'm not crazy, just on my way to becoming my father Nicholi's Visionary, and that I'm incubating some kind of Woman's intuition, which as you know, scares the shit out of most men."

"Like Gustav, who you think is still alive because you've seen him in your dreams, when I saw him die with my own two eyes," the latest Honored Guest said as he partook of another bite of elk meat, flavored with herbs that were magical only to the taste buds. "Who trusted me with the map to get through the swamp to get into here."

"A map you stole from him, Colonel Commandant Holzmann!" Katerina blasted back to the newest face around the communal hearth.

Holzmann cracked a sad, solemn chuckle. "She's promoted me to a Colonel and Commandant from being a humble psychiatrist, and---"

"---NOT my father!" Katerina sneered into his warm, confident and sincerity-emitting face. "You are NOT my biological father and I am NOT your daughter. You are...you are---" the words remained stuck in Katerina's throat as she saw Holzmann turn into demons far scarier, and cunning, than the Christian Satan and the demons the Yakuts prayed to the Earth Goddess to not be tempted by. "Get back!" she screamed at the messengers of evil who emanated from Holzmann's mouth with every warm smile from his earthly lips. She snatched a hunting knife from Uli's holster, defending herself against the carrier of such demons' advance. The aroma of the latest batch of experimental Yokiva she had made with and for Gustav still lingered in her nostrils and throat as she felt three headed snakes entering arm. In an attempt to cut the heads of the snakes coming out of Holzmann's eyes, poised to poison his gracious Yakut hosts, Katerina inserted a slice into her left arm which pulsed all the way up to her shoulder.

"Yes, as you said, she has become danger to herself and others, Doctor Holzmann," she heard Uli say while five Yakut hands from kind faces with blindfolds around their eyes secured her cutting arm, and put pressure on the one that had been sliced. "Can you help her?" the Old Yakut Chieftain asked the recently arrived German Commander.

"Yes, now that I finally found her," Holzmann said gazing into Katerina's face in a very fatherly way. "I can and will bring her back to health."

“And us?” a small framed woman behind a large, muscular male Council Member asked as she advanced towards the visitor, displaying purulent pimples on her face and a yellow palor to her temples. “And our children, who have come down with diseases from the outside world that we can’t cure?”

“And I think I can,” Holzmann offered in a perfect performance of a ‘good doctor’. “Or would like to try anyway,” he continued with very paternal concern. “But first, I’d like to have some time alone with my escaped but finally found patient, and ward, medically speaking.” He gently requested that the human ropes holding her down be released. The restrainer asked Uлити permission. It was cautiously granted.

“I’m Master Chemist Nicholi’s daughter,” Katerina asserted.

“A man who, by all reports we have, including pictures I showed her, and you, killed himself because he went from being Enlightened to Mad,” Holzmann solemnly reminded Uлити.

“You all know who I am!” Katerina pleaded to whatever Tribal family she still had left, not knowing where or how Holzmann had obtained copies of the, she now hoped anyway, fabricated newspaper clippings about her father’s death. “You all know who I am!”

“We remember who you were, as a child,” the eldest of the Council, said a kind woman with bright blue eyes, brown skin and long, still thick, white hair.

“And still don’t know why you came back here as an adult,” added the most Warrior Like Council member, a Eurasian half-breed with scars on both arms, his one good leg, and left cheek.

“Or who you brought with you,” Uлити declared. “An ex-soldier in a War we have nothing to do with, who you say is now a Pacifist, who wants to do no one any harm, but whose experiments in Yokiva extracts seem to be very dangerous.”

“While using my patient as a guinea pig, or an n value” Holzmann said.

“What kind of pig?” Uлити inquired. “And what’s an n value?”

‘Professor Holzmann’ did a ‘Nicholi’ to the backwoods Mystics, explaining the basic concepts of scientific practice and assessment in the industrialized world to people who really did need someone from the realm of Hard Science to stay Alive, and Relevant. Meanwhile, Katerina pondered something terrifying. Something even scarier than her being taken back to Holzmann’s ‘treatment’ center at the POW Camp where he would love her to death, literally, like he had done for and to his own long lost daughter. ‘Good Doctor’ Holzmann was three inquiries away from figuring out Yokiva’s ability to make any mortal a godlike and indestructible future teller. Especially Nazi Storm troopers who

felt superior to the Russian 'Untermenchen' in the present and would envision themselves as more powerful than God in their future seeing visions. Though Mother Russia under the Czars and now the Soviets was the most abusive Mama imaginable to her 'beloved' children, she was still beloved by those children. And perhaps if those children saved her from being swallowed up into the German Fatherland, she would exert the kind of kindness, equality and generosity so many Ukrainian Cossacks and horseless Russian Peasants fought and died for since the time of Ivan the Terrible.

As for the 'how' of preventing the Germans from getting their Aryan paws on the most powerful weapon available in the War, and seeing that the wrong Red Army Officers didn't get it, Katerina needed advise from someone who did unto others rather than was done unto by others. She glanced into the fire, looking for the face of Nicholi, a man who she trusted above all, even herself. Or Gustav, who the young widow knew was alive, somewhere, despite what Holzmann reported about his well deserved demise after having been a Nazi's Nazi before the War and during the early stages of it.

Yet Katerina swore she would find out the truth about Gustav even if she had to beat it out of him, or failing that, his ghost. But all she saw in the flames now was burning wood, the smell of which evoked a future vision with charred bodies of brown skinned Mystics and idealistic Caucasians who were trying to do the right thing. It was then that she decided to be someone who did unto others, defying the law that kept her safe, sane and connected to humanity as it was. And to defy Fate itself. Someone had to.

CHAPTER 13

Time passed. Enough time for the cold winter outside of the swamp protected Yokiva valley to turn into a frigid one. Enough time for the German Army to advance to the gates of Moscow and Leningrad, and to enter Stalingrad. And enough time for Uli to see 'real world' reason. Reason that said that the Soviet Dream of a Workers' Paradise was a Nightmare for all hard working laborers in the cities, as well as those who lived off and on Cooperative terms with the Land. Reason that said that as soon as the Collective Farm system got around to throwing independent Caucasian farmers off the land their hard working families have owned for centuries, the Bolsheviks would get around to acquiring land looked after, but not owned by, the Asiatic Yakuts. Reason that said that there were differences between people which dictated that some rule and others accept, for everyone's sake, the direction of others. And that the Yakuts, cousins to the Indians in North America, were in line for and deserving to be at the top of the racial totem pole. Along with their Aryan brothers, who would liberate them soon enough from the Communist yolk.

"We both know there will be less killing this way," Holzmann said to Uli while observing the newly built assembly line to mass manufacture Yokiva extract in the factory operated by Uli's isolated tribe and a few selected German advisors the former Commandant of the POW Camp had brought in. "And who better to be able to tell the future than those who will be the future!" the avid reader and fan of the German Western author Karl Mai asserted with a boisterous voice. "Your people, and mine!"

"And what your people want from this is what?" Uli asked Holzmann, for the tenth time.

"Open space," the officially-dead German Colonel replied, for the twentieth time, while looking over the big, wide, open spaces outside the window of the newly constructed facility. Wild grasslands that had not been desecrated with the plow, replaced by artificially-planted botanicals assigned to exist nice neat rows, Wooded wilderness not forced into straight, symmetrically arranged trees which seemed to be everywhere in the so called 'forests' of Germany. "Open space for you, who honor things wild and bold, and us, who do the work of defending them."

"Defending them against the Soviets and who else?" Uli inquired as the latest batch of extract hit the packaging terminal of the wooden walled structure.

"The American and British Capitalists," Holzmann shot back. "And the worst enemy of all, who is--"

"---Ourselves," interjected the Elder who chastised everyone, no matter what skin color, ideology or place of earthly birth for interrupting anyone else. The Chieftan sniffed the latest batch of future telling elixir with his king sized nostrils. "An intense batch this time, which has to be distributed in small doses, and selectively." Uli looked at

Holzmann's German advisors, seeming to size them up yet again with his ever worriful and watchful eyes.

"My men and the ones coming can handle it," Holzmann insisted. "We come from good stock. Strong and steady family genes."

"Like the genes you passed on to Katerina, your biological daughter?" Uliti pressed.

Holzmann thought long and hard about how to answer that accusation to the belief that was to him as strong as the contention that the sky was blue. On an afternoon when grey clouds prevented the sun from expressing itself for the third day. Still, the resemblance of Katerina his thankfully dead wife, and the picture of his daughter the day the moralizing bitch he married too her away said to all certainty that the misfit Russian Major who accidentally wound up in his POW Camp was sent by Fate. By Providence. More importantly, by God. And both God and his representative on Earth, the Fuhrer, demanded that parents look after their children. Even if they were only half Aryan.

Holzmann tortured himself with another glance out the window at the well built Cottage House guarded by two of his most trusted men. Men who saw to it that the temperature inside was the warmest in the Valley, and that the chains on Katerina's bruised and cut wrists were released three times a day, so that she could dine on the best cuisine findable and cookable. Men who would not believe Katerina's rantings about being born to an Untermench Ukrainian Cossack family. Men who insisted that she take the medication to calm her down from wild and no doubt painful hysterics, even if they had to force them into her throat. Men who now stood by the front door, who, on closer examination, seemed to be leaning against the wall. Men who were now motionless.

Suspecting that they were asleep, drunk, or both, the former Commandant and unofficially-assigned Developer of New Weaponry for the Third Reich excused himself from examining the latest batches of Yokiva extract and marched towards them. With each step into the cold mud en route, Holzmann prepared what he was going to say to his Comrade from the last War, Fredrick, and Hans, the son of Heinrick, to whom Holzmann made the promise to 'make a man out of' to his dying father. Holzmann took in a deep breath of the humid, borderline freezing, air, prepared to remind those hand selected guards of the death penalty exerted by the Romans for being asleep or drunk while on duty. And to follow it up by sneaking them some more of his private stock of Pervitin, the 'power juice' drug that allowed German soldiers on the Front to stay awake for days and alert for weeks, thus maintaining the impression that they were born superior to everyone else. But when Holzmann was within angrily delivered whispering distance from them, he smelled something other than vodka, homemade rum or Yokiva extract on them. Looking for the source of the stagnant blood odor and intestinal juices on their lifeless bodies, he discovered that they had been eviscerated from behind. The door behind them was open. Upon entering the most luxurious suite in the valley, Holzmann found the protective anti-suicide constraints broken.

Under a plate of uneaten roast elk, potatoes, seasoned beans and buttered corn bread was a note in German and Russian. “The only real Father I have is in Heaven. And he already has forgiven me for what I have done, and what I have to do next. I will see you in Hell.” Holzmann looked out the blood stained holes in the wall that Katrina had created with her own two, perhaps still intact, hands. “I will find you!” he pledged, anger and love competing for ownership of his tortured soul. A monsoon of tears flowed from his bloodshot eyes down his cold, beet red face. “And make everyone, everyone pay for what they did to you, and us.”

CHAPTER 14

“So, why should I trust someone who was sent to bring me back to ‘Papa’ Holzmann?” Katerina blasted at a semi-conscious Gustav as she ‘accidentally’ found him at the outer perimeter of the Yokiva Valley.

“Because he didn’t, and could have,” the Earth Healer taking care of the German Army deserter reminded her.

“And how and why did I find YOU here?” the former people-serving and pleasing-women who had taken her first two lives, and enjoyed it, asked the Doc. “After according to everything I was told, you were dead!”

“Because I was,” Nicholi replied. “And for your own good, I had to let you think I was.”

“So ‘they’ wouldn’t try to find me, right. Whoever ‘they’ were,” the merciless comeback.

“And still are!” Nicholi blasted into the hard, cold, cynical face of the young woman who was once his wide-eyed wonder-seeking daughter. “But more miraculous than our meeting here, is this man still being alive. And keeping himself alive with so many injuries. This man who somehow avoided being stripped naked by fleeing Red Army soldiers, captured by German patrols or taken back into a wolves’ den as dinner.”

“A ‘man’ you call him,” Katerina sneared at Gustav after which she spit at his face, kicked him in his bruised chest, and accidentally stepped on his broken, frostbitten left leg. “A ‘man’ who abandoned his own country then tried to earn his way back home to the Fatherland by volunteering to find me!”

“Enlisted by force to do so,” Nicholi admonished his daughter as he poured the last of his anti-putrification powder into the exposed flesh in the leg that by some miracle was still holding on to Gustav’s torso. “And with great reluctance.”

“Right. Because if he didn’t find me, his own family would bear the consequences. The most fashionable excuse to betray someone these days,” she ranted on in an embittered voice that Nicholi had never heard. “But I guess that ‘life was teaching me another lesson’. A smart woman should never trust a man. Especially one who picks and approves someone for me.”

“I’m sorry about Ivan,” Nicholi said regarding the suitor who he both encouraged and manipulated to marry his daughter before he himself was taken away. “I didn’t know who he really was.”

“Or who I really was, and wanted to be?” Katerina blasted into every fiber of Nicholi’s being.

Nicholi absorbed the accusation, recalling everything from his past. A golden past where he could plan a wedding worthy of his Cossack Ancestors, and of Katerina, and of Ivan, the dream-mate who could bring his daughter into the 20th Century and be a liaison between whatever Cossacks were still left and the new government that was still far away in Moscow. An alliance in which Ukrainian Cossack mothers would not have to sacrifice 25 years of their sons' lives in the Russian Army so the rest of their children could be left alone to deal with the 'normal' problems challenging those who chose to live with the Land in its terms. Cold, hunger, disease, and of course, each other. But that was then and this was now.

As whatever part of Katerina's brain that could devise a plan was baked into mush by some kind of hallucinogen that had nothing to do with the future telling abilities conferred by Yokiva root, and Gustav was in no condition to travel anywhere, or fight anyone, it fell to Nicholi to come up with some kind of agenda to make things right. Of course, everyone would criticize him for what went wrong with it, but such is what Nicholi was used to. 'When things go right the people thank God, when they go wrong, they blame the doctor, inventor and misfit who volunteered to help them,' he recalled from his own father. 'And when you take on a job to fix something, everyone assumes that it was you who broke it', echoed through his mind from his Grandfather. But for the moment, time was passing. Time that had to be transcended. And predicted.

Finally, Nicholi finished treating Gustav's leg, then moved onto seeing what he could do for his chest. "I'm alright now," the German said in now accentless Russian. He tried to rise to his one and a half feet, with the help of a crutch which a small tree generously provided to him. Three steps later, he fell on his face again. But he got up, pushing into the snow, revealing under it something which Nicholi thought was lost forever. Doc Nicholi pulled patient Gustav out of white muck before it swallowed him up entirely. Beneath and around him was an underground spring which pushed heat as well as water up to the surface. Further investigation revealed a Spring-time valley it fed which contained botanical richness over warm, slowly-melting snow.

Never had Nicholi been so thankful to see something green, or actually now, blue. Somehow, Yokovia roots and stems had survived outside of the valley bearing its name, and its normal growing season outside of its natural habitat. And within a hundred yards of those still vibrant plants, many others. "I can convert this into something..something--"

"---Necessary now?" Gustav offered. "Right?" he asked Katerina.

"I suppose so," she conceded, averting her eyes from her two latest 'handlers'. "But for now, I need some sleep," Katerina said through a yawn which Nicholi thought, or hoped anyway, marked the end of her hallucinations. And the closing of the open door in her Soul to the demons that had turned her into a killer. One who seemed to enjoy it by the way she had described the means by which she effected her escape. Such was not uncommon in this War that was far worse than any Nicholi had remembered, or even imagined possible.

“So, what do we do now?” Katerina asked her father, more like a nagging wife than a re-found daughter.

Nicholi pondered the issue, letting all of the events and projected consequences seep into the brain on its own terms. Thinking that maybe giving voice to the seemingly most important ones would lead to those that were really important, he rose up on his two still working yet increasingly arthritic feet. He looked around him at the snow covered woods in all Four Directions, then at the hut of branches Gustav had built for camouflage as well as shelter, then to the path leading to the corridor to the valley. “Fact one, which I hope is not a hallucination, Uliti has bought into the Germans being liberators for his people.”

“Some of my own countrymen see it that way, and they are very convincing,” Gustav added. “By training, and natural proclivity, and---.”

“—Fact two,” Nicholi interjected. He edged closer to Katerina, smelling the rags that could still be called a coat, her breath gently laced with aromas of some kind of Yokiva extract, the blood of the two slain guards still under her fingernails. “You’ve been able to make my formula even more powerful, and long lasting, Gustav,” he continued to his newest son in law.

“We’ve had some happy accidents in the lab,” Katerina said, with pride while examining what was under the pile of hacked away animal skins and pine branch blankets in the back of Gustav’s ‘cabin’. “But if you think this German deserter isn’t going to desert us when he gets the chance----“

“---And all of us here know that any future telling effect of Yokiva extract doesn’t work if you’re trying to see what will happen to you, or someone you care about,” Nicholi reminded his two perhaps new apprentices, getting back to the business of planning for the future rather than avenging the past.

“Which means that because I have NO feelings for Gustav now, I’ll be able to tell you exactly what he’ll be doing in five seconds, a minute AND a year from now, Katerina blasted into the cold air, hit hard by the abrupt realization of such.

“But which more importantly means that Yokiva won’t work on common, draftee German Army soldiers because most of them are brothers in arms in the trenches who don’t want to be there, God bless and help them,” Gustav realized given the fourth brain that had evolved between him and his two Comrades in ‘Whatever’. “But that the Nazi officers who don’t give a shit about their men, 95 percent of which are not Party members, will be able to see what will happen to their enlistee pawns. Which means---”

“---That we have to get Yokiva extract to the shithead Officers in our Army who don’t give a crap about the men under them, so they can out-predict the German shithead Officers,” Nicholi asserted. “And by that ‘we’ I mean me, who the Bolshviks will believe without wasting valuable time.”

With hands made painful from cold, age and beatings for not telling the Red Army scientists (whose minds were not wired to be able to access Yokiva's powers) what they wanted to hear, Nicholi withdrew Ivan's stolen hunting knife from its regulation Army sheath. On knarled knees the officially dead paranormal 'freak' began gathering as much Yokiva weeds as he could from the soggy ground, stuffing them into the satchels on his saddle. "Which leaves one very important job for both of you."

"Drink Yokiva root while standing on our head, so we can go back in time so I never had to fall for this shithead German egghead botanist?" Katerina growled to Nicholi, blasting a thunderbolt of heartache into Gustav.

"And come out of the womb on the other side of the planet so I would not have the 'honor' of choosing between serving Stalin, Hitler or a crazy woman who somehow has been able to acquire the worst traits of both of them?" Gustav volleyed back, his mouth held back from further accusations against Katerina only by the excruciating pain in his leg and chest.

"Your job, Comrades in a still common cause, is to keep each other Alive," Nicholi advised, and ordered, as the last of the plants went into the overpacked satchels. He mounted his horse, appending his declarative wish with, "And if you can't do that, just don't kill each other. Not yet anyway."

"And these other plants here?" Gustav asked, referring to the multitude of plants still lingering and thriving between the warm underground spring and the blanket of snow on top of them. "What do we do with them?"

"What will happen to them, and the extract within them?" Katerina pressed, this time not taking no or another philosophical credo for an answer.

Nicholi halted his horse. He took in three deep breaths, and prayed to a God who he predicted would materialize soon. Finally, he gave voice to a plan that came to him from the gut either from heaven above, hell below, or perhaps just the rumbling of his empty stomach, which had been acting up lately in strange ways. "Extract out whatever Yokiva you can from this meadow, using and distributing it...selectively, and wisely. Using it to destroy the greedy, and support the giving."

With that, Nicholi rode North, into where winter ruled. He was well aware that Gustav and Katerina knew what to do in his absence. But he realized all too well that there were the two people left behind on earth most likely to find a way to screw things up, by accident or passion driven intension. A self-sabotaging behavior that only one other living human on the planet had---Nicholi himself.

CHAPTER 15

“I thought that your people knew the land better than you knew yourselves,” Holzmann said to Uлити when the Yakut Chieftain came back from the last supply and intel gathering expedition out of the valley, a look of failure and exhaustion in his yellow-brown high cheek-boned face. “That you could locate a rabbit in the middle of a thorn filled meadow without stepping a foot into it. Spot an aging elk in the brush before it decided where it was time for him to stop, lay down, and allow himself to die. Then why is it so hard for you to find a cowardly deserter from the German Army that’s about to liberate you from the Communist Vultures who forced you out of your own ancestral homes after their ‘People’s Revolution’?”

“Gustav probably decided to go home, or find a place to die,” Uлити muttered through dry lips chapped red with cold. He slowly dismounted, then unloaded the latest supplies from the abandoned villages and farms that had not been burnt down by their fleeing Slavic inhabitants into the newly constructed built warehouse. The food, blankets and clothing seemed to be most valued by the hungry, cold and inadequately clad German ‘advisors with the onset of winter in the valley which was supposed to be protected from that season. “And if Gustav decided to let the earth reclaim his body, and soul, the wolves would have left something of their bodies for my search parties to---“

“---And my daughter! Your niece,” the assertive German Commander reminded the finally submissive and surprisingly complacent Tribal Chieftain. “You aren’t afraid of what Gustav or the coyotes have done, or are about to do to her?”

“Yes, I am afraid of that, and a lot more.” Uлити replied with downturned eyes. He shuffled off to his ‘thinking tree’, leaving the unloading of supplies from the four horseman caravan to the other riders. Yakut and White Riders who now looked at Uлити like HE was the useless, outdated and ready to go off into the woods to die Old Elk, according to plan. Holzmann’s plan anyway.

The Aryan Colonel’s next in command walked up to him with a three new bags of Yokiva extract for storage in a location known only to Holzmann himself now, so that it would not be squandered before the time was right for it to be used. And so that that no more unapproved ‘accidents’ would happen with over-exposure to the Vision-evoking herbal extract. Some of the hallucinations experienced by supervisors who were power hungry, and technical advisors who were personally curious, had resulted in hallucinations which made most of them mad enough to kill themselves before Holzmann had them killed. Holzmann blanked on what the name of this newest second in command, as it was not important.

But what was now important was that the unspoken, ancient and usually obeyed law that the extract could be used by only those approved by the Tribal Council was in full effect now. After the valley had been fully liberated, then made rich in comfort-conferring possessions acquired from abandoned Slavic villages, the only person allowed to imbibe the future telling herbal extracts was Holzmann, in doses carefully calculated and never

exceeded. The German Commander who envisioned jumping from Colonel to beyond the rank of General was able to predict the exact time the non-watch carrying Uli had ridden in on his horse from the expedition out of the valley. Holzmann could also see with his future telling third eye, the exact number of bags containing looted materials stolen back from the White Man. He then looked to Uli in the present, counting down to when the stoic Chieftain who never showed his emotions to other people or the 'living woods' would walk into the woods outside of Camp, begin to cry, then emit 6 sobs, which happened, as predicted. Then, as relished in Holzmann's preview in his head and finally materialized in the real world, three slams of Uli's fist went into the 'thinking tree'. Such was followed by two rolls in the newly fallen snow, leaving the democratically-deposed Philosopher King catatonic, his back perched against a tree.

"Yes, the future I've seen is stronger than the one you saw," Holzmann said to himself as he stared at the once bold and kindly rebellious Uli, whose glazed over eyes seemed to be seeing nothing, as the Old Chieftan became...nothing.

But there was something Holzmann cared about more than Germany becoming the country that liberated Russia from the Communist. More than him becoming second in command to Hitler, whose failing health and irrational mentation would put him into the grave within three years time, or sooner, according to anyone's predictions. More than the opportunity for Holzmann to buy his way into Heaven by playing a game of poker with Saint Peter at the Pearly Gates, aided with a dose of Yokiva herb slipped into his coffin.

Holzmann desired above all to be reunited with his daughter, Katerina. To save her from the world, and herself. Having figured out that the future telling visions enabled by Yokiva didn't work with regard to those you care about, Holzmann was helpless to see where Katerina would be in the future, and thus backtrack to where she was in the present. No matter how hard he tried to hate or detach himself from her, the normally self-disciplined Prussian Colonel drew a blank. Still, he vowed to God, the fates and to his own guilt-ridden soul for leaving her when she was a young child, that he would make things right for and with Katerina.

Turning to the woods himself for refuge, and maybe some answers beyond any magic herb or Angelic intervention, Erik Holzmann recalled that day when he departed from his beloved daughter and a wife who had become impossible to live with, or for. There were so many reasons why he left her. The memories had been so faded and distorted that no one could be certain as to what he had thought, or did. But one thing was certain. Erik Holzmann loved his daughter, then and now, beyond worldly measure, and 'normal' standards. Standards which he was determined to outlaw.

CHAPTER 16

Gustav stirred the metal box containing the most recently gathered Yokiva plants, straining his eyes to see if the color of the stems was blue enough to begin the extraction process. The roof of this most recent laboratory consisted of not only thickly needled pine branches, but, for the first time, something not found in the woods which had become his new 'home'. The green canvas above him that had blown off an abandoned German transport truck that got stuck in the snow, or ran out of petrol. The walls, on all four sides now, were insulated by patched together coats whose Russian Army and civilian wearers had given up the ghost. The frozen blood, a key ingredient for maximal yield of elixir, which he put onto the vat of gently heated roots was a concentrated mixture obtained from those who had worn those garments.

"Maybe the spirits of you people whose coagulated blood we collected will resurrect in whoever eats this batch," Gustav mused, as he gently heated up the battery from the abandoned German truck, preparing to zap the extract from the root to the flowering end of the plants. "Which makes me wonder why God allowed these plants to contain something that allows whoever eats them to see the future." He heard the rustling of what smelled like a small herd of deer outside of the tent. Trusting that his intuition was right about that hunch, he peeked outside the flap of the well camouflaged tent. He took special note of a Mama deer grazing on whatever grass was under the snow for lunch, her fawn choosing to have a hearty meal of his mother's milk. Papa, or perhaps older brother, deer, rotated his well antlered head around, watching for any prey who would disturb the rest of the surprisingly well nourished herd. His eyes met Gustav's, yet his head remained steady.

"So, how is it that you are eating so well, when so many of us are not eating well at all, unless we humans resort to eating each other?" Gustav asked the deer, in his Native Tongue. "And why is it that you aren't afraid of me?" he inquired of the still staring buck. "Maybe it's because you weed eating deer have a breakfast of Yokiva weed, so you can predict if a meat eating wolf, of one of us, will be around the corner by late morning ready to turn you into our lunch?"

The buck remained in his place, his big brown eyes showing no fear.

"Yes, knowledge is power," Gustav said, confirming to himself the reason why so many well nourished animals around this Yokiva valley and so many starving humans. "Which I will test by lifting up this rifle," the German expatriate backwoods scientist said while lifting up one of the guns gathered from the dead, so he could save perhaps some of the still living. "Which I will aim at you," he continued. "In ten seconds. In ten, nine, eight..."

As predicted, on the count of 2, the buck quickly turned away, leading the rest of the herd with him with leaps and jumps through the brush which defied all laws of physics, at least the ones Gustav studied and, until now anyway, thought were the only ones in operation. "Good for you," he said with a warm smile. He turned his olfactory, then

visual, senses to the vat of Yokiva weeds, taking wires in hand and giving this most recently-picked bundle the appropriate calculated zap.

“And bad for us,” he heard from behind, from an embittered Katerina, having entered into the tent from behind, gazing with frustration at the herbs. “You’re supposed to simmer these herbs gently, not fry them like you Germans overcook sausages and potatoes.”

“It’s the battery,” Gustav growled as the sweat smelling aroma of the herbs turned into bitter, putrid smoke, leaving behind black ash as useless as teats on a bull. “Or the plants,” he postulated, looking at Katerina’s latest botanical expedition. “Are you sure these aren’t a variant strain of Yokiva? Along with the other ones you’ve collected there? They smell----.”

“----Like they are supposed to!” Katerina screamed back at Gustav. “Like I remember them anyway,” she confessed, and related. “I don’t know, maybe you should go out and collect these plants. You’re the trained botanist who gives plants growing in ‘uncivilized countries’ Latin names. Ignoring the names the locals give them, or the plants give themselves.”

Gustav took in a deep breath, preparing to remind Katerina that science, when applied right, can empower Nature rather than destroy it. And that he was doing everything he thought was right to extract as much active Yokiva extract as he could. And that it was her father Nicholi who had said, as the last words during his departure, that “‘this reinvented misfit Bavarian German deserter’ is a better scientist than he or any other Russian ever was, or could be.” But when looking at Katerina’s snow caked face as she wiped off the freshly fallen frozen water crystals, Gustav saw fresh tears. She looked at her belly, then felt it.

“You’re...”

“Pregnant, again,” she said, a smile pushing its way up her lips to crack open the rigidity of her normally stoic face. “And this time I wouldn’t lose you! Or give you up!” she yelled at the now visible bulge under her fur coat. “Me and your father command you to be healthy, happy and...not hide out in there, or in the ethers. Though coming out of the womb is no great bargain either, I know.”

“It will be,” Gustav pledged, his right hand gently wiping away Katerina’s tears of revisited grief, then the anger underneath it. “It will be a magnificent experience joining me and your mother in the world as it will be,” his left hand assuring the child he thought he would never have. “No matter how bad we think it is now,” he assured his now even more than ever beloved wife.

“And you can predict that because you dipped your finger into those vats of Yokiva extract?” she asked with a warm, gently lilt in a voice made foggy by the cold air.

“Maybe,” Gustav said, wondering if maybe Yokiva vapors while in preparation were as powerful as the extract after it came out of the ‘cooker’. “But more importantly, I know it. Here,” he continued, putting his hand on his heart. “And here,” he went on, self observing a warmth come out of him he had never felt, nor experienced as he placed his hand on hers. “And here,” he concluded to his first child, whose gender he would intentionally not try to predict, with a smile that cracked upon his frozen face and all of the icicles under it.

With that, Gustav, Katerina and, in his or her own way, went back to work extracting as much Yokiva elixir as possible. Indeed, they were now outlaws in the woods being hunted by Holzmann’s henchmen, his new Yakut recruits and Mother Nature, who seemed to want to cull the human population on both sides of the War even more so than any other winter. Gustav and Katerina realized more than ever now that survival is only possible if there is a reason to live. And that success is inevitable if there is a Purpose to achieve. And that the most important successes are manifested under the most challenging conditions.

CHAPTER 17

There was one thing that the technologically advanced Germans didn't know that the culturally primitive Russians did. When snow rules the ground, anything on wheels is the slowest to move. And that the fastest moving object, other than the ever changing mind of a woman at that special time of the month, is a horse, or sled pulled by such. It therefore didn't surprise Nicholi that he had worked his way to the newest headquarters for the Institute for Special Abilities Research faster than the Germans could find it. It was now a mobile institute, housed in tents rather than insulated walls, buried within and under the temporary 'protective' command of the newly formed 237th battalion of Red Army troops consisting of those who were left from at forty others.

It didn't surprise Nicholi that most of the scientists from the original ISAR were still alive, and, all things considered, very well, as he 'saw it' a day before arriving there, courtesy of raw Yokiva eaten on the road, along with hastily simmered and electrified root that he was able to prepare en route.

Such was easy, as Nicholi hated all of those very Soviet Scientists, and, as he discovered all too painfully now, predicting actions of those you despised were the easiest to see before they happened. And no matter how carefully you extracted Yokiva extract, seeing what would happen to those you loved was forbidden by whatever biological effect it had. No wonder why Uliti, his fellow Yakuts, and self-exiled renegades from other races in the valley could not anticipate being invaded by the Germans, or anyone else for that matter, as they conferred compassion given equally to family, friends and strangers.

But for now, it was an 'us' vs. 'them' world. And if Nicholi was to send the Germans back to their beloved racially pure Fatherland, he would have to consider everyone else 'them' for the extract to work effectively.

It was no surprise that he knew exactly how many troops were in the 237th. When passing by them on the way to deliver a 'special message' to the newly appointed General, he could see their futures. Like a Seer of old, telling fortunes of the commoners with tea leaves in the cups they drank out of, the very much out of uniform Cossack warned whoever he could about when and where to dodge the bullets, hide from the bombs, or disobey the orders of their officers sending them ahead at a full charge. After predicting to soldier A what soldier B would do or say in ten seconds, Nicholi was listened to as an Ancient prophet rather tolerated than an old, entertaining coot. Yes, he would give these young uniformed lads and ladies whose injuries he could see, and feel, a chance to defy Fate.

Word got around the undersupplied Camp faster than Nicholi could walk, or talk, or even think. Finally, a stoic Morale officer with a clean shaven face and cold eyes approached him, shooing the freedom loving troops around him away in the manner that all Secret Police have done, all the way back to the first Romanoff Czar. "You're coming with me, Comrade," he announced. "To.---_ "

“---The large tent by the telephone wires,” Nicholi answered, literally taking the words out of his mouth. “Which is about to carry a phone call in 20 seconds,” he continued. “Which will tell you to relocate the Camp twenty miles to the East, the announcement to happen in two minutes.”

“And you know this because?” the officer inquired, raising his chiseled chin up.

“Because of this,” Nicholi said, showing the Officer the Yokvia weeds and extract in his saddlebags. “And if you imbibe of this, you will know where the Camp is going, before it gets there. And what will happen to your men, and women, when you do.”

“You are coming with me,” the Officer said, this time as one of the doctors who put Nicholi in asylums for those who see too many Visions or who know too much about the world as it is. “Now,” he insisted, pulling the defiant old Cossack by his muscular arthritic rein grabbing arm, somehow knowing where to grasp it to induce the most pain. .

“But first, a cookie,” Nicholi insisted, reaching into the depths of the satchel and retrieving an all too rare treat for anyone of any rank in the Red Army now. “Which I am sure you will find very tasty.”

Nicholi’s prediction came true in 20 seconds. The officer ate the cookie, heard the announcement to the troop regarding the withdrawal, then saw something in his own mind, which had been changed forever. The now future seeing Morale officer looked over the troops who he was in charge of keeping motivated, unexpected compassion for them emanating from his terrified eyes. “We shouldn’t go there,” he muttered to himself through shaking lips.

“But you will, and armed with what you know now, you maybe can prevent what will happen next, Comrade Sir,” Nicholi said with a respectful bow.

The terrified Morale officer whose job it was to show no fear, and allow no one to be held captive by the primal emotion, rammed his hand into Nicholi’s saddlebag for another cookie. Nicholi held it back with a swift motion that rendered it temporarily useless.

“Powerful medicine in here has to be used selectively, wisely and through the right channels,” Nicholi said to the newest convert in the ‘Yokiva’ brigade. “Now, who is in charge here?”

Nicholi was whisked off to the General’s headquarters. It was a modest dwelling, maps, documents and personal items being rushed into special boxes, mounted on the best looking horses in Camp. The prematurely grey-haired, stubble bearded man in charge looked exactly as Nicholi predicted. His breath smelled of the whiskey and bootleg Schnopps. The sweat the calm commander tried to hide under his coat reeked of worry. From atop a hill in a position where he could not be heard by his men, and women, he

listened to Nicholi's claims about Yokiva. He openly let Nicholi write down what was about to happen around him in five, ten, twenty and forty seconds, after Nicholi ingested small portions of the raw herb. At Nicholi's request, the General sampled pinches of the herb, which he observed gave him the same gift of Vision as to what would happen in the near future. Particularly when it came to arrogant, fat officers under his command who he wished the Germans would shoot, or he had planned on putting in the line of fire himself, even if it was from his own gun.

After the last of the scant medical supplies had been loaded onto the sleds for the predicted and necessary relocation of Battalion headquarters, along with the still valued wounded, the General was ready to hear about what was happening in the Yokova valley. Nicholi informed him about Holzmann's factory there, and the German Army he was arming with the future telling herb. The Commander, who was known to his troops as Comrade General, emphasis on 'Comrade', looked at the location of the Yokvia valley on the map, instructing a special team of pilots to blow it up, and spare as many civilian lives as possible. He drew out instructions for making more powerful extracts, which the General memorized, then handed to his second in command, instructing him to keep it in a special place and to carry on the manufacturing and distributing of the herb strictly according to Nicholi's instructions. To his third in command, the General dictated the location of the Valley.

The German artillery shells and planes got closer, allowing one to feel as well as hear the ground below them being blown up. As the earth under Nicholi shook, the old before his time General stood a rock. He allowed himself a final look, smell and, small pinch of the magic, top secret herb that would be to a around to the Old Coot before joining his evacuated troops.

"So," he said with a sardonic chuckle. "This doesn't tell me what will happen after I die. Which will be... soon?"

"We could only see the bullets, where they go, not what they do, or how we react to them," Nicholi said. "But I find it interesting that you can see what will happen to you."

"Dual personalities as a child," the General replied by way of explanation as he got on his horse. "And being someone other than me now.," he continued. "Someone who, is passing you and this herb on to someone now higher than me."

"God?" Nicholi thought, considering no other man, or woman, of more wisdom, compassion or potential effectiveness than this young General. A young senior officer who would not grow old, unless the doctors could repair damage done by a bullet shot into the brain and a bayonet stabbed into the heart.

"No. Not God. But me," Nicholi heard from behind him, just before he was to make reference to the Almighty with his mouth. It was delivered by none other than Ivan. The man who he had left horseless, to the wolves and the elements so man Visions ago.

“Take care of this old man, he’s very valuable,” the General said to Ivan as his parting words. Before Nicholi could warn the compassionate and therefore vulnerable old before his time General, Ivan discretely punched Nicholi in the belly, at the exact site where a hernia had materialized due to one of the many ‘interrogations in the name of science’. While Nicholi collected his thoughts, perspectives and perhaps guts spilling out into the herniated lump, the General rode away into the deep woods before they would be turned into splinters of broken trees and, if the evacuations went fast enough led by specially future telling officers, no splattered human limbs. “This old Cossack is an essential part of our family, Comrade,” the General yelled out as is last words, with the kind of reverence conferred on Noble Commissars before the Revolution, and those continuing to rule now.

“Yes, family,” Ivan said while showing Nicholi a big, Comrade smile. He stroked his neatly trimmed beard with an arm bearing wolf claw marks and bites, the latter no doubt making his normally rabid son in law even madder, as well as possessed. And as Nicholi, and his fellow Slavs had know for centuries, the only people God protects from dying more than drunks and fools are possessed, power hungry madmen sent up from hell by the devil himself.

CHAPTER 18

“You’re sure that my father said you should have this extract?” Katerina asked the bearded man in the Red Army enlisted man’s coat and officer’s tunic who found her searching for any remaining Yokiva weed that was still hibernating under the ice-covered snow. “How do I know that you’re really a General, and really a Russian?” she pressed, pulling a pistol from her pocket, aiming it at his head. “And that my Cossack father sent you!”

“Because I found you here,” the shabbily bearded ‘General’ calmly replied as if it was his plan and destiny to do so, his cold hands straight up in the air.

“As have several Germans who tried to pass themselves off as Soviet soldiers,” Katerina growled. “Sent by the Commander who thinks he’s my GERMAN father.”

“Who you sent to their just reward without their ears, and tongues, I see,” this newest ‘stranger’ encountered in the woods, ‘by coincidence’ replied to the now famous renegade ‘Vision telling’ woman, gazing at the accessories hung on Katerina’s belt and neck. “Which...disturb me,” he said, with an even calmer voice.

“If you had any brains, they’d scare you,” she replied, hiding her fear under anger. And trying to hold on to that anger, as any ability to predict what he would do next would be nullified if she allowed her heart to develop any feelings for him. She pressed him against a tree, pointing the gun directly at his forehead, her normally future-telling brain unable to tell her ANYthing about what he would do or say next. “Now, you WILL tell me where you stole that uniform and what ‘Papa’ Holzmann is really up to.”

“Something you predicted or intend?” the reply, delivered with ominous calmness. As if this man was dead already and feared nothing. A trait that none of the Germans or the converted Yakuts sent to find her, Gustav, and their mobile herbal extract factory had displayed. “Which means that you do want to trust me.”

“We all want to trust each other,” Gustav said, emerging from the woods behind this latest ‘stranger’ who ‘accidentally’ ran into them. “Even a Russian General who comes here alone, without his troops.” He laid the latest batch of Yokiva herb in front of Katerina. “The last plants out there,” he said. “We have to work with what we’ve got now, until Spring anyway.”

“And you’re letting this prisoner hear this because?” Katerina blasted at her new husband.

“He’s going to wind up dead, like the others,” Gustav noted.

“But not until this battle is over,” the Russian General said with that look of ‘yes, I do see the future clearly’ in his eyes, made possible through the herb which was delivered to

Earth by either the heavens above as a gift, or as a trick from the devil below. “And as your Ukrainian father said, and always lived by, ‘people who value nothing are less than people are dead. Less than dead’,” he delivered through Katerina’s weary eyes directly into her Soul in accentless Ukrainian. “And if the price for being able to tell the future is intentionally not allowing us to love those we tell the future about, the price is too high.”

Those words echoed from Nicholi to Katerina in the past, brought present and future together into a frightening, and assuring, realization. Before she could force the truth about why a Soviet General would personally come on foot to find her, he pulled out a note from his pocket, gently handing it to her.

Yes, the handwriting was Nicholi’s. Upon first reading, the words made her smile, gasp then reflect.

“What does it say?” Gustav inquired.

“You’re to give the herbs and extracts to me,” the Red Army General replied, putting his hands down, clapping them together to see if the fingers still were connected to his palms. “Send Gustav, who is fluent in German, into Holzmann’s camp to steal or destroy, but not ingest, any extracts there, and get any information you can about its export to Germany,” he continued, pulling out a German SS uniform from his pack, throwing it into Gustav’s unwelcoming arms. “Being sure that he grooms his beard and hair to match. And radios me regularly.”

“I’ll still be recognized by Holzmann,” Gustav said, finding a radio buried between the trouser legs of the sharp-looking uniform, the blood-tinged bullet holes in it immaculately sewn up.

“A risk we’ll have to take,” the General replied.

“Yes, ‘we;’” Gustav sighed, looking at the uniform like it was toxic, then recalling gleeful memories of his youth for which he now felt shame and regret. “And her, my wife?”

“She comes with me,” Comrade General replied.

“Why?” Gustav asked.

“Fate requires it,” the final reply. “Which we are now able to see, and hope we can change.”

CHAPTER 19

The Fatherland Gustav had loved and pledged his allegiance to as a lad came back to him now that he was a man. By anyone's standards, it was a scientific wonder, particularly because it was built in the middle of what all Germans and most Russians would call 'nowhere.' The Yurts in the Yakova valley were now replaced by houses, each with running water of some kind going into the house, and a waste deposit system whereby excrements could be deposited within the walls rather than in the woods. Dysentery, pox, arthritis, congestion, heart failure, diabetes, tuberculosis and even dementia seemed to be absent from the population. Off duty clothing was worn for comfort and style as well as warmth, worn by diners who had access to every kind of delicacy that could be transported from the civilized portion of Europe. Schnopps had replaced wild berry moonshine. Cake occupied the table tops at meal time rather than bread. And every one of those tables had China plates on it rather than metal tins or wooden bowls.

Everyone shared equally in the technology-enriched Paradise, thanks to what was delivered by low flying planes or parachutes, and not all of them had the swastika on their rudders. All except the aberrant outlier who was assigned to be guarded by Gustav, a rotating chore that each new officer in Camp had to endure, and report on.

"I told the last 'nurse' assigned to look after me, that I wasn't hungry," Uliti said to Gustav, pushing away the meal put in front of him at the table to which he was handcuffed, in the repaired hut Katerina had described to Gustav so accurately, and painfully. "If there's any eating to be done, it's me who should be fed to the wolves," said the thin and frail man Yakut who was once a proud Chieftain, healthy in all ways below the neck, between the ears and, according to local gossip and the many children in the valley bearing resemblance to him, between the ears. Uliti looked out the single barred window, howling to the wolves outside. "Come and get me! So I can repent for my mistakes, sins and miscalculations!" he said in English and what Gustav perceived as 'Wolf talk'. Yet again, he got no answer.

"They're too scared to answer," Gustav replied, showing his face to the confused, broken and now demented former Chieftain. "But maybe not all of your people are," he whispered, delivered six inches from Uliti's blank stare. "There are a few of them who, I think, are pretending to be happy Nazis, waiting for the right time to..."

From the corner of his eye, Gustav noticed two enlisted men who carried themselves off as officers, staring through the other window at him. "And I have been commanded to make you eat!" he barked out to Uliti, pretending to kick him in the leg, then the belly. "And if you don't, we will starve two more of your people, and shoot another one of your horses!"

Uliti seemed to believe the threat. He looked at the food, smelled it, then spit into it. "More toxins," he sneered. "That kill me slowly!" he said, looking at Gustav.

“You’re delirious, you racially inferior piece of meat,” Gustav boasted, followed by a confidence-building laugh, as he had done when he learned how to ridicule Jews back in ’33 who predicted the end of the Reich within 12 years of its glorious inception. “But this meat is not defective, Uli,” he whispered. Gustav discretely took a bit of it himself after seeing that his ‘assistants’ outside had diverted their attention to the attractive anatomical features of a scantily clad Native woman passing by. “I cooked it myself. It contains herbs that will get your mind right again, and energy that will get your body strong enough to get out of here.”

“Who are you?” Uli asked, as a drunk would inquire of an apparition sent by Heaven, or Hell.

“Someone who you brought to life, and more importantly, renewed Purpose,” the reply. “And someone who...”

The Old Man’s climb back up to reality was pushed back into a downslide into the no doubt drug-created abyss by the sound of a young woman outside the hut. Uli looked outside the window, seeing that Yakut woman gleefully accept the advances of the German soldiers. “My favorite goddaughter!” he grunted in Yakut, anger raging in his face. “Now dead,” he muttered, the fire in his belly replaced by sorrowful weakness that overcame his emaciated body. “Like I should be, dead,” Uli asserted with the last ounce of his strength. Enough strength to push Gustav away, then grab hold of his Regulation Army dagger. He yelled out Yakut War cries to creatures surrounding him that only he could see, swinging the blade at them. “But I won’t kill myself until I kill you first. You, you, and you!” he ranted on in Russian, Yakut and the little bit of German he had acquired while bringing his people into the 20th century. Though chained to the table and the wall, Uli fended them off the demons with one hand with more ferocity and skill than any mortal, god or anyone in between.

“You go get them!” one of the soldiers outside the window yelled out to the Old Man. “You’ll slash them to pieces this time, right Captain!”

“Yes,” Gustav replied, in the manner of a Superior Race Minion, secretly hoping that maybe Uli’s battle with these demons in the world inside his head would lead to defeat of the devils in the world of forms. And praying that the affectionate smiles and chuckles coming out of the young woman who was about to be courted by the second soldier was obtained by threatening her relatives, or forced ingestion of mind altering drugs he knew the German Pharmaceutical Industry was developing to make unwilling inferior populations yield to the Superiority of Aryan Wills.

This time Gustav’s prayers were answered. The woman, who he finally recognized as one of Uli’s twenty goddaughters, Joliteh, winked at him. With a sweeping movement of her arm under German suiter number one’s elbow, she turned him around. With the other, Joliteh caressed his older buddy on the neck, turning his face and attention from the window. “Fredrich, Hermann, come,” she said as a loving German whore, mother, wife and mistress, all at the same time. “Enough work time, now play time.”

Like good Germans, and horny men, two of Holzmann's most trusted and large framed henchmen slipped into the woods with their new tiny mistress. Gustav turned around to Uliti, hoping to do the same with him, to make a quick getaway. But the Old Man had taken a final swing at the demons in front of his glazed over eyes, falling to the floor in exhaustion, barely conscious but still breathing. He and Gustav was interrupted by yet another visitor.

"Captain Schmidt!" Holzmann announced at the doorway, surrounded by three well armed soldiers, one of whom was of Yakut ancestry. "I see that you gave Uliti his medication. And it is working."

"Yes, it seems so," Gustav replied, hiding his face as best as he could.

"So, time for us to get to work, yes?" Holzmann said, walking into the hut, looking face to face at Gustav. "Building an Empire for the Reich, and something special for us as well, yes?" he continued, putting his arm around Gustav's in the manner of a father, brother or friend about to share something very special and secret that no one outside the family would ever find out about.

Gustav was not sure if Holzmann, or the Yakut soldier, had recognized him. Indeed, the Commander was in a world of his own behind his own eyes, as maybe was the seemingly converted Yakut. And a glance at a mirror on the wall revealed to Gustav that without his beard, long hair and Cossack attire, he looked like someone completely different. Someone who even he didn't recognize. Something he hated, yet still felt some kind of connection to, somehow.

CHAPTER 20

“So, not everyone in Holzmann’s holiday camp is buying Commander Holzmann’s bullshit?” Katerina said to Gustav as he unloaded a sackful of booty he had pilfered from the valley the German Colonel had taken over. “Or are they scared of standing up to him like I did.”

“They have other people who would pay the consequences, if they did,” Gustav muttered as he continued to place the rest of the food, clothing and weapons in front of the cave he carved out of the hills. One of ten rotating well camouflaged homes and, when he was around, Yokiva extracting laboratories which afforded more warmth and security than any hut in the swamp-surrounded valley, even in good times.

“What, the Germans have so much faith in their own superior products that they have to steal the best of from everyone else?” the Russian General wearing a private’s coat said as he noted the first of the contents unloaded. “Belgian Gouda, French wine, and Russian caviar, the kind we uncultured Slavs throw away, in good times anyway,” he muttered. “But there is this,” continued the scruffy-faced General who carried himself off as a civilian, his body posture completely lax and unmilitary, his cap slanted on his head just like the enlistees who wore them in that manner to tell everyone, especially themselves, that their bodies belong to the Army, but not their minds, or souls. “So this is what the Germans are using to shoot unarmed prisoners with here,” he said of the newest model of Lugar.

“And Jews who allowed themselves to get caught back home, or who believed that God would send an angel to Hitler informing him that he had best treat the Chosen people with some respect,” Gustav replied, guilt emanating out of his voice. “Yes, Adolf. Who we elected into power by a show of outstretched arms and clenched fists.”

“Something we will both deal with after the War is over,” Comrade Iliya, as the General now wanted to be called said. “Just like we let our own moral miscalculations or masochistic obsessions put Stalin in power,” he lamented. “The Man of Steel who disappeared into a locked room for a week after the Nazi invasion he insisted wouldn’t happen did. But for now,” he continued, reaching into the bag of booty Gustav had stolen. Of primary import were three of vials of newly extracted Y root from ‘Chief’ Holzmann’s Yakut run and German owned factory, labeled with a date two days from then, and three different enlisted men’s names.

“Extract that the common German soldiers will get, just before the battle starts,” Gustav informed the Red Army General as Comrade Iliya sniffed the vials, comparing their color, aroma and weight with the standard issue vial for Russian soldiers bearing Nicholi’s signature. “By calculations and some selected experimentation, it gives them the ability to predict what will happen in ten seconds from the present. Twenty if they are brainwashed into thinking you Russians are vicious cannibalistic demons who eat human flesh and if left alive will rape their wives, daughters and mothers back home. Or drugged with enough Piraten to not give a shit about their fellow Comrades in arms.”

“While we Russians, most of us anyway, consider every one of our countrymen beloved Comrades, even if we don’t buy into Communist party propaganda,” Comrade Iliya re-discovered, and lamented. “Which inactivates the future telling effect of Y for most of the men, and women, who take it. The untrained ones anyway.”

“And speaking of women who SHOULD be taking it,” Katerina blasted out. With a cat-like burst, she reached for the vials in Iliya’s hand, determined to snatch them. Gustav, perhaps out of knowing her, or the Vision of seeing who do such, put his arm and leg between her and the magic potion before the snatch could happen, making her slip into a pile of snow.

By the time Katerina picked herself up off the deep, white powder, spitting pine needles out her mouth, Gustav and Iliya had completed the ‘coin toss within the stare’ between them. “We can’t let you have any of this because---“ Gustav, the loser of that toss said, kindly but still protectively.

“---I know, I’m not supposed to take any future telling herbs when I’m pregnant because, as you SAY Nicholi says, any baby in the womb who knows what the future holds for him, or her, when exiting the womb will want to make him stay inside that cozy chamber forever,” the young fortune telling Major who was now demoted to living in the moment mother growled out.

“And other biological side effects which Professor Nicholi is still examining,” General Ilya informed Gustav. “Which thankfully, YOU survived after you self medicated yourself with a higher dose than prescribed,” he said to Katerina.

It was common knowledge that Katerina had hallucinations that made her mad in the world between her ears, and non-integratable in the realm that mortals had to endure, serve and somehow improve. But there was someone else, other than Nicholi, Holzmann, and a few missing Yakuts who had experimented with larger doses of the fortune telling herb. Katerina recalled having given Yokiva dosed cookies to her children, so they could foresee where their father’s hand, stick or hot iron would make hard contact with their flesh, or that of their mother. It worked, foregoing many vodka fueled beatings, for a little while anyway. Until the day 7 year old Igor was left alone at home, leaving the house and the special, usually locked, cookie jar empty. His body found with slashed wrists at the bottom of a cliff he swore to never jump from, no matter how bad things got.

“I want to be alone,” Katerina requested of Gustav, held hostage by the past, regarding the herb that allows one to see into the future. “So I can do some...chores,” she informed Comrade Iliya, feeling herself becoming lost behind her bloodshot eyes.

“I have orders,” Iliya said. “From Nicholi.”

“Who isn’t here!” Katerina blasted back. She picked up a cooking pot, preparing to bring it inside the cave. “It’s time for me too cook rabbit stew. To feed my two male protectors, and,” she continued patting her belly. “The child who wants to continue the conversation we started earlier. Whose gender and fate I’m not supposed to know, thank God. But who wants rabbit stew.”

“Which will require fresh rabbits, no doubt,” Iliya surmised.

“Old ones, in particular, the three and a half legged pair of hares who settled in 5 minutes up the creek,” she said, pointing to a rapidly running stream of water flowing under the ice. “Before the wolves get them. Please.”

Self-assigned protectors Iliya and Gustav looked at each other, deciding between them who would voice the decision.

“That’s an order! To be carried out now! From a Major in the Red Army who still hasn’t been discharged, and who according to both of you, is going to be promoted to a position above General once this war is over,” she belted out in her best military voice.

“We’ll be back in 20 minutes, Comrade beyond General,” Iliya assured Katerina with a snappy salute, after which he grabbed hold of the snaring kit and headed into the bush.

“Which is half an hour in real time, as measured by German clocks, Frau General,” Gustav appended with a courtly bow, at rigid attention, after which he followed his new Russian Comrade.

“And in the meantime, we’ll make life interesting for you father when he returns,” Katerina said to her constant yet to be born fetal companion. She edged her way towards the cooking pot, pushing aside the cake and canned meat, deciding that watering the dehydrated potatoes would work for the evening meal. After looking at the pathetic shape of the potatoes, even after being invited to expand with added water, and wincing her nose at the putrid blandness of them, Katerina reached for the bag of special spices she had been asked to keep inside that container. She cut them up into small pieces that found its way into the pot. “Some extra garlic and onion for his ‘adventurous’ Aryan palate that considers a pinch of salt and mayonaise exotic spice.” Still, the contents of the pot reeked of ‘bland’. A flock of sparrows flew by her, settling into a small clearing hidden within a clump of woods behind her, dining on something under the snow. By the way they were eating, it was not normal fare. With the heightened sense of smell in the present which now replaced her diminished ability to see anything in the future, a familiar odor entered into her lungs, brought in by a brisk East Wind.

“Yes, I knew it was there!” Katerina said, getting up on her feet, addressing the passenger she was carrying for another free ride from point A to B. Slipping a pine branch behind her so it would cover her track, she worked her way through the low lying bush to the clearing, following her nose as well as the path of more sparrows walking their way to the site. “A nutritious vegetable and herb that hasn’t been shackled or

sterilized with a name any of Gustav's professors in Berlin gave it, or one they even know about. Which your great grandmother said has no other functions than to allow you to experience awakening of the palate in the here and now."

Upon finally reaching the gathering of plants which found a way to survive, and thrive, under the snow, Katerina knelt down to retrieve them. She reached down into the snow, the white camouflage ski suit making her arm indistinguishable from the glistening white powder. She self-observed herself thanking God for the find, and the ability to recall memories of past times collecting the root with her grandmother and father. The first wiff brought back her inner vision into memories of old. A taste enabled her to hear her Grandmother's voice advising her as to what to do with her life, and the counterpoint from her father Nicoli with regard to embellishments of such. A third sense was activated on as many swallows of the orange and purple root.

It was a touch on her shoulder, from what felt like a real hand this time, that heightened Katerina's sense of the world, and her place in it. "I'm alright, really, Gustav," she said reaching for the hand. Katerina felt light headed, in a good way. Every ounce of tension in her chest was whisked away, carried off with a gentle South wind. "I really am, very okay."

"Maybe, but soon you will be much better," the reply, from a voice that did not match the German expatriate in timber or temperament. "But it's time to make it better," the intruder pledged.

Upon turning around, she saw the chest of a Russian Officer's uniform, covered with more medals than any she had ever seen before. When looking up, the face belonged to none other than Ivan, the 'loving nightmare' who was taken away by the Soviet Authorities in the purges of 38, perhaps because of her framing him for sedition, or perhaps because God finally answered the request she dared not ask of Him in her spoken prayers.

Ivan's face was as handsome as ever. As was the look of possession in his black eyes. But this time, she could not detect the stench of whisky, rum or vodka from his mouth. Instead, emanating over his lips was the aroma of Yokiva extract.

"Yes, I've come back for you," he asserted in the same voice he used on their wedding day. "To be sure that you are safe during this war. And very, very comfortable afterwards, no matter who wins. Or the world says wins," he pledged.

There were a thousand questions Katerina could ask, and needed to have answered. But one predominated them all. "Where's Nicholi, my father?" she asked.

"He is being taken care of," the concise and, to Ivan anyway, comprehensive reply.

"Taken care of WELL?" Katerina pressed.

“That depends on how well you take care of me,” Ivan smirked, taking her hand, placing it on his chest. “Here,” he said, pointing his heart, over which were military and civilian ‘salad’. Katerina’s real-world hands felt the sharpness and coldness of the artistically decorated medals that came with the kind of guarantees few Soviet citizens could count on. “And here,” he continued, pulling her hand to the hard third leg emerging between his two ambulatory limbs. “And here,” he went on, pulling her into a bear hug, pressing her lips against his and silencing any more inquires with a kiss.

Katerina feared that either she was dead, sent to a private hell shared with Ivan alone for allowing her children to die due to ignorance and/or cowardice. Or, worse, that her ‘returned-home’ husband was very much alive in the land of the living. With her eyes wide open, and his closed, she clenched her fist, punching Ivan in the belly with all of her might. She found the surface to be as hard as a rock. While Ivan, with eyes still shut, groaned in playful pain, she reached for his revolver, then pulled away from him. This time, she was prepared to empty the chamber into his chest, without hesitation. “One more step and I’ll---“

“---shoot?” he laughed in his trademark condescending tone which to outsiders seemed colorful, and charming. “A gun that has no bullets in it because I pre-saw you pulling it out and aiming it at me?”

Katerina called his bluff, squeezing the trigger with a hand whose fingers felt broken, or at least very bruised, emitting nothing other than clicks.

“With a hand that you broke yourself after hitting me here in the belly? Well after I saw you do it in MY future telling head?” the towering Handsome Prince of the Soviet Republics boasted as he pulled a metal plate from under his tunic. “I can predict a lot more. For the benefit of you and that child inside you, if you’re smart.” He unzipped his trousers, then cut a hole into Katerina’s, preparing to stick his penis into the vaginal temple which she only recently decided was sacred.

“Not all the time, theoretically anyway,” Katerina pondered, but didn’t voice. Living very much in the now, fueled by past memories, a plan emerged. Maybe in the throws of lust, which Ivan considered love, he really cared for her, disabling him from seeing what she would do in any kind of future. She began stroking his cheek, then licking his neck. True to past memories, and ongoing nightmares, his muscle tone relaxed. He would soon become a limp puppet, with closed eyes, imagining Paradise as his penile appendage edged his way into her clitoris. It was then that she would grab hold of the real knife on his gunbelt, cut off that symbol of manhood between his legs, then work her way up to the neck, slitting his throat. And let him, in his fear and hatred, see future visions of his descent into hell, where he would be raped, humiliated and whipped senseless forever, as partial payment for offenses on earth. Yes, Katerina would have her revenge and the world would be spared one of the most deceptive and evil demons on the planet, armed with the ability to see the future and perhaps change it, for his benefit only.

As Ivan rose to sexual ecstatic heights, Katerina, opened her eyes, seeing and feeling his decline. It did happen, as she wished and maybe predicted. After a thunderbolt released by a man made gun rather than Divine thunder, he fell to the ground, lifelessly, bringing her with him.

“Thank you,” she said as she pulled herself up from the bloody snow, to the sky and to whoever the shooter was.

“You are very welcomed, my beloved,” Holzmann replied, in German behind a smoking gun. “It will soon be time for us to go home, finally,” he continued in his native tongue, which Katerina understood all too well. Thinking that maybe she could run away from this slow moving ghost, she turned around, seeing two real German soldiers behind her, one of whom had Yakut features. They stood in her way. Slowly she turned around to ‘Papa Holzmann’, whose loving smile seemed genuine, caring and angry.

Again, a thousand questions came to her aching head. One came to her mouth. “How did you find me?” she inquired.

Holzmann pointed her attention to the woods to her left. A battered, beaten and gagged Gustav, held in place by two German soldiers twice his size shook his head in a firm and resolute ‘no’. While Katerina was gently escorted to Papa and Hubby Holzmann or whoever he thought he really was, she found her heart believing Gustav. As her brain tried very hard to veto that assessment.

CHAPTER 21

“So, Joliteh, what do you get out of this arrangement?” Gustav asked his interrogator through the blood spilling onto his still good right eye while tied to a twisted chair in the most recently built, and windowless, holding hut. “You used to be Chieftain Uliti’s favorite god-daughter,” he continued to the Yakut woman whose slightly slanted eyes, thin face, just shapely enough figure and long, dark hair registered ‘perfectly beautiful’ German-conditioned esthetic more than any female inhabitant in the valley, including, truth be told, Katerina.

“And will be again, once he sees reason,” the winner of every ‘between the ears’ beauty pageant in the valley replied while drawing up another injection of pain enhancement elixir to express itself in Gustav’s veins. “Or until you tell me how much Yokiva extract the Russians have, and where those Untermench Paleface, land-hungry Bolshevik bastards have it stored.”

Gustav had heard Joliteh describe Caucasian Moscovites such as Comrade General Iliya and even Paleface Ukrainian Cossacks like Nicholi with many non-complimentary, and accurate, descriptors, but ‘Untermench’ was a new one. Little did she know that the new German term to describe ‘subhuman’ based on race, was used between Aryans to describe, and ridicule, her people as well. Apparently, such jovial conversations between the Germans in the valley were kept very secret. But even if Gustav could get to Joliteh a recording of what was really said in the Germans-Only Beer Hall half a ‘block’ away in the Yurt-less ‘city’ of “Yokiva” that comfortably housed everyone, she would say that it was a doctored tape. Or a faked conversation. Or ‘fake news’. Like the stories about what was really happening to the Jews in Europe in the ‘holiday camps’ they were moved to which Gustav told her about, and witnessed the day he decided to burn his uniform and fake his own death. Still, Gustav had to try.

“The Russians, yes, eventually want to steal your land,” he said as the needle came closer to his vein. “But the Germans want to own your souls. They are the worst kind of Whites you can imagine, particularly to you Brown, Red and Yellow Skins.”

“Wrong! False! Fabricated Bolshevik lies!” the Yakut beauty whose features were, truth be told, more White than Native blasted back. “In America, it was the Germans who made peace with the Comanches. And kept their word. And when the Comanches went on the Warpath in Texas, they told the Germans to smoke pipes when farming their fields so they would not be spared the wrath that the rest of the Whites deserved, and got!”

“Refugee Free Thinker Germans who had fought for freedom and liberty years earlier in 1848 Europe and had to flee,” Gustav replied, recalling the history books he had read as a pre-teen idealist, and burnt as an adolescent Nazi. “Free thinkers who, when it came to being forced to join the Confederacy which supported slavery refused to---“

“----Karl May says different now!” Joliteh blasted back, pulling out a new edition of *Winneteu, Chief of the Apache*. “He says that ‘The Indians and their Siberian ancestors were a race of Aryans who, according to the Wise Old Chief, Many Eyes, will get their freedom, land and power back in the middle of the next century’. Which is now! See?” The multi-lingual Yakut maiden who, despite her beauty, always sought a career in teaching or research of some kind showed Gustav the book, as proof.

Again, there were many things Gustav could have said to refute the hypothesis she presented. Including the fact that he had read every book in the *Winneteu* anthology in its original form, recalling no such passage. And that the original publication date on this book was several years after May went on to the happy hunting grounds. And that the most powerful arsenal in the Nazi machinery was not better guns, bigger tanks or more agile planes, but a highly advanced ability to invent lies that smelled, tasted and looked like truth, particularly through emotionally-engaging novels and movies.

Trying to take his mind off the perverted and perhaps irreversibly lost ‘one’, Gustav allowed his mind to imagine what was about to happen the ‘many’, and the expense the German press had invested in re-writing Karl Mai’s books about North American Indians for Russian reading Yakuts. Then again, anyone who knew anything about geography and geology knew that the riches of the USSR were not in the bank vaults in the Kremlin, but under the ground in the vast continent of Siberia. No doubt a primary prize resource-poor Germany wanted after storming over Stalingrad, rolling into Moscow and letting the millions still stuck in Leningrad die of starvation.

But such would be later. For yet another ‘final’ time, Gustav had to hold on for just one more round of torture before being rescued by General Iliya, who by all accounts and intuition, had avoided capture. “Yes, his Army will be here soon,” Gustav said to himself in that silent voice he became fluent in during special ops training, as he felt the first wave of heat moving up his arm. “These demonic, morally-perverted Germans, of which I used to be, wouldn’t be asking me where the Red Army and the extract is if they didn’t fear both of them,” he reasoned to himself as the wave of heat became a snake with barbs on its skin, ripping him up from inside. He closed his eyes as the snake spawned pain-producing babies which crawled into his spine, then into his legs. “I don’t know anything,” he grunted through gritted teeth which felt, this time, like they were all going to fall out. “And even if I did---“

“----You wouldn’t,” he heard from a familiar voice. He felt another needle go into his vein. Within seconds, the barbed, fire-breathing snakes became small worms, which shrunk into small beads. He lost all feeling in his arms and legs. His nose could smell bread, his half closed eyes seeing nothing but a throbbing White Light emanating from the depths of a pitch black, starlit sky. Opening his eyes, Gustav beheld the Doctor, thinking that perhaps it was an angel, sent to terminate his tour of duty his life so he could end his life as a tight lipped hero rather than a babbling coward who spilt the beans on the whereabouts of the most powerful weapon available in the War. “I came as quickly as I could,” the Liberator from Beyond said by way of explanation, and apology. “And brought some friends with me.”

Gustav knew that the Grim Reaper had associates, messengers and snitches, but not friends. His curiosity about the Beyond overcoming his terror of it, Gustav somehow forced his eyes open, able now only to see blurred images with them. “My legs and arms,” he reported to the large, blob of what looked humanoid in front of him. “I can’t feel anything.”

“You will,” the assurance from the large-framed Liberator. The still foggy image seemed to be of a Priest, part Orthodox Christian, part Yakut Pagan, in a black, hooded robe, his face hidden within its dark shadow. He placed a communion wafer into Gustav’s mouth, under his tongue rather than on top of it. Seconds after considering that maybe this was a ‘reverse’ communion ceremony, preparing him for entry into the underworld rather than a Christian Heaven or a Nordic Valhalla, Gustav felt his legs and arms, and was able to wiggle those still painful yet functional appendages.

“Now the eyes,” the multi-denominational Priest said, blowing some kind of powder from a horn into his oculars. After feeling the pain of that white dust, Gustav’s eyes could see forms rather than blobs and orbs. And the clear outline of a face under the hood.

“Uliti?” he asked. “You’re...dead. Weren’t..aren’t you?”

“I was resurrected with this,” Father-Shaman Uliti said by way of explanation, his face as calm, confident and defiant as ever. “The meat you left me when you were ‘guarding’ me. I did eat it. It awakened my mind, but as for the tastebuds...” The literally born again Chief untied Gustav. Two fellow Yakuts clad in German Uniforms and two Palefaced Bavarians secured a gagged Joliteh to a post, then locked her into a closet . “You Germans are the Master Race only in the Olympics of Bland Cooking, Gustav. Maybe second to the Canadians,” Uliti continued.

“So Katerina keeps saying, speaking of which, where is she?” Gustav asked, flexing his wrists for the first time since his capture.

“About to be flown out of here, along with Holzmann and enough Yokiva extract to make every bland cooking Kraut in the Fatherland a future telling Visionary,” Uliti said. “We have to work fast.”

“With an antidote that might work, or might not,” a newly arrived Yakut Pagan Monk suggested after he opened up the hut, locking the door behind him, his face hidden under a hood. “Anti-future telling Yokiva, which makes you dwell in the past,” he declared in scientificeze. He threw several vials of elixir from the inside of his robes, handing it to the other soldiers and monks, who loaded them into dart guns pulled out of his sac. Two were shiny delivery tools, manufactured by 20th century factories. Another looked like they had been designed or retrieved from traditional Yakut mini-crossbows. The third was a direct replica of what Gustav envisioned from his own reading of Karl Mai, the original versions.

Gustav felt his gaze to be captive by the newly arrived humpbacked Pagan with a severe limp, who seemed to have that future telling gaze his bloodshot, worried eyes. Those portholes were surrounded by an old, bruised and battered very White face “And you are?” he finally asked.

“Elder Nicholi,” Uli proclaimed, proudly, while catching a traditional Yakut mini-crossbow in his large, lacerated and finally re-empowered paws. “Returned from the dead.”

“Temporarily,” Nicholi replied, with a knowing aire that was both assuring, and terrifying.

CHAPTER 22

The landing craft set its specialized wheels on the ground, requiring only a forty foot diameter circle to find the ground. “A Flying Saucer that doesn’t require an airstrip to land on, or to take off, my dear, Elsa” Holzmann boasted to Katerina with his size giant arm around her sized-small torso. The latter was adorned with the finest furs importable from Siberia, and underneath it, a dress from the most famous designer in Paris. “Which verifies what I did see in the future, Elsi.”

“I’m not Elsa or Elsi,” Katerina gently reminded the Commander, who was now clad in a business suit which priced at four month’s salary of a German Colonel, four years of wages for a Russian officer of that rank, assuming he would live that long of course. “I really am not Elsa, or Elsi, or Elise, no matter how much you need me to be, or I want to be.”

“You were, and will be again,” Holzmann assured her with a warm, sincere smile. “Like in this picture.” He showed her that photo yet again. The one he kept in his breast pocket for 20 years. The one that sat on the desk at the POW Camp from which Katerina escaped. The one which was reproduced and placed in every direction of her wandering eye in the holding room where he kept her prior to her escape from the Yokiva valley, and the escape proof bedroom where he lay next to her, fondling her most private parts while singing happy nursery songs to her. The one which, after looking at it long enough with blurred vision after drinking specially formulate tea, really did show a 9 year old girl who could very have been Katerina. The one Katerina, aka Elsi, Else or Elise, hoped her unborn child would never see. And the one that Holzmann pasted on the door of the newly designed ‘hovercraft’ when it opened up, dubbing the flying machine that needed no runway ‘Elsa’s Express’.

The ground crew instantly hopped to the duties of loading the hovercraft cargo. A flying ship which, according to Holzmann, was designed with the help of ‘advisors from countries most people on this planet can’t see or visit’. Goods loaded onto the craft it included suitcases, authentic Yakut clothing, and well-padded foot lockers with locks on them which reeked of Yokiva herb through the cracks.

Holzmann looked at his pocketwatch, then his private Army of German soldiers and enlisted Yakuts as they gathered in formation in the center of the Camp, in full battle gear. Two medics carrying a stretcher lay their cargo in front of them. “One vial to each man, Major Ranseloff!” Holzmann ordered the second in command. “And two for you and every officer. And no more, or you, and them, will pay the consequences.”

“Extra doses of Peritin?” the young, inexperienced Academy trained Major asked the old, life-seasoned Commander regarding the ‘magic fuel’ which allowed men to stay awake, warm as well as immune from hunger and exhaustion for days on end.

“Something more powerful than that,” Holzmann yelled back.

The young Major and all but one of his inferior officers smiled with delight, the enlisted men, and women, in the ranks feeling even more elated.

“And deadly if you take too much, which you, Captain Klassen should recall, yes?” Holzmann pointed out in a loud, assertive voice.

Every one of the troops looked to the white haired Captain who had the experience of five not yet grey Generals, as he nodded a very affirmative, and somber ‘yes’. The previously Periton-addicted and still not fully recovered “Pappy” Klassen then proceeded to warn the troops of what happens when one takes too much of a good thing, or allowing one’s friends to using his natural gift of relating bad war stories feel horrific. Most of the troops believed him as they received their ration of ‘warrior fuel’, placing it firmly and sacredly into their breast pocket, then moving on to get the rest of their more material realm ammo. As Katerina felt it, in the moment rather than before it happened, Holzmann seemed assured that his orders regarding doses of the herb that only a few of his troops really knew about would be followed to the letter.

“So, now we proceed, to the future, and the final battle of this war which should arrive here in ten minutes time,” Holzmann proclaimed with blissful finality, anticipating an infinity which would last forever. “Which I of course saw in my head an hour ago,” he boasted to Katerina in the manner of a boy showing off the first A on his report card to his mother or the first soccer trophy to his dad.

Katerina wondered who would be the parent and who would be the child in this ‘relationship’. One which had to end quickly if her child had any chance of a healthy adulthood. And if she protested against too assertively, would be ‘rewarded’ with an involuntary abortion. She looked around, for the opportunity to jump Holzmann, kill him, or perhaps take the pin out of a grenade from one of the guards, to blow up the shipment of Yokiva as well as the deranged madman who would retire as a rich General back ‘home’ in Bavaria, along with herself, if necessary. “I’ve got to do this,” Katerina muttered to her belly, after which she grabbed hold of the grenade, then Holzmann’s collar.

“That was what your mother tried to do to me, and you when you were inside her,” Holzmann growled. “I won’t let you do that to us,” he pledged.

Delivering on that pledge, Holzmann pushed Katerina into the hovercraft, throwing the grenade outside.

Pagan-Christian Elder Nicholi, accompanied by apprentice Priest Uliti, and Gustav, clad as a Yakut Priestess in training, had meanwhile been doing the officially sanctioned ritual of shaking special ‘Sagebrush’ vapors into the faces of the Yakut troops wearing Nazi uniforms and some ‘gone native’ Germans who had switched religions. All now knew that it was time to betray the vows they took to the Fatherland and Adolf Hitler. Two of the gone native Germans had taken Yokiva extract without permission, and saw the future. One of them, Johan, didn’t need to have any pharmacological help to figure out

the inevitable, in part due to some truths, and a few well placed lies, Gustav had told Johan about the War outside the valley while he was posing as his commanding officer .

When the grenade Holzmann had snatched from Katerina's hands went off outside the hovercraft, Nicholi turned to Uli.

"The signal. It's early," Nicholi noted.

"Is that the signal?" Uli inquired.

"It is now," Priestess Gustav declared, seeing Katerina placing her foot in the still open door to the hovercraft, Holzmann attempting all manner of force and gentle persuasion to pull that appendage and her into it. "It is very much right now!" he growled, shooting three rounds towards Holzmann's head, one of them nicking his hand.

Against Nicholi well drawn out plan, and the pharmacologically-dictated timetable it depended on, the self-reinstated Chieftain reluctantly waved his arm. He yelled out an Ancient War Cry that made him feel alive, awakening the Spirit in all of his troops. And the civilian Yakuts who had not been locked inside the factory, listening to a lecture on safety at the workplace.

The detachment of 'gone native' or 'still native' soldiers clad in German Army uniform opened fire on Major Ranselhoff's troops while they were enjoying pre-victory schnaps. Some of the bullets hit their mark. None of the anti-Yokiva darts did, due to the short range of the weapons they were loaded into at first. With better aim and more advanced positions, they missed their mark because of the ability of the German troops to predict where bullets and darts would fall, after having taken their ration of Yokiva.

Uli, Nicholi and the rest of the converted from being perverted troops took cover. Nicholi ordered them to not give a shit about themselves or others, and Uli inventing stories about their Comrades that would make them hateable, so that the Yokiva they had ingested and the extra ingredient in the Sagebrush smoke would allow them to predict where the bullets and mortars would land. They had, by Nicholi's calculation, a three second prediction ability, at best. Meanwhile, the Germans under a wounded but very hate inspired Major Ranselhoff advanced toward them, surrounding them on all sides. From inside the factory, Yakut workers tried to get out, but were boltlocked inside.

"By my calculations, they can predict what will fall down on them in ten seconds ahead of when we fire," Nicholi said from behind a wagon wall that was two volleys away from being blown into splinters.

"Twenty," Uli added. "Any pharmacological or other suggestions from you, Gustav?" he asked, not seeing the former German patriate anywhere. "Gustav! Where are you?" He screamed out to the twelve men still alive around him, then saw a lump of Priestess robes under which he was hiding.

“Gustav!” Johan screamed as he scuttled across a barrage of machine gun fire to the blood soaked robes which was stuck in the ground. He shook it shaking it as hard as he could, but the body underneath it didn’t budge “Gustav!” he yelled out again, receiving a round of bullets shot by Holzmann himself. Rounds which put Johan into the dirt, his body rolling into his final resting place. In the process, he took the Priestess robe with him, revealing a pile of mud under it and a slain wild hog.

“Where did your son in law go?” Uliti asked Nicholi regarding the absent German. “Against my orders and yours.”

“God knows, or those Yokiva dosed Nazis will predict,” Nicholi lamented. “As they may have predicted or observed from the air, that.” Nicholi pointed to a small swarm of Red Army soldiers emerging from the East and South side of the valley. Most of them were caked in swamp mud, indicating that many of them could not stay on or find the underwater bridge leading to the valley. Or perhaps that bridge was destroyed by the German or Russian planes now engaging in dog fights above them, some by stray bombs and some by aircraft that couldn’t hold onto them anymore.

The Russian troops seemed more terrified than the Germans. Nicholi considered that such was due to less ability to access the future telling ability of Yokiva, due to the close Comradeship with each other. But there was some other emotional element with its associated brain chemical that made them, under General Comrade Ilya’s command, advance further, and stay alive in the process. “Defiance, intensity and determination,” former Professor now Elder Nicholi said to Uliti as the overly trained, well armed German troops fled their positions in mad chaos, made even more hasty by the escape of the Yakut factory workers from the ‘safety’ lecture inside, the students finally taking arms against their professors, some of those students paying the ultimate price for their insolence. “Defiance, intensity and determination, Uliti” Nicholi repeated to his collaborator in Liberation. “Which I’m sure stimulates some as yet unidentified chemical in the brain, and mind, which---“

“---I hope he has,” Uliti interjected as his private battalion of 12 got up and joined the fight against Holzmann’s ‘invisibles’, pointing to a single rider in a dress galloping towards the hovercraft. Brandishing a Yakut spear whose head had five grenades on its head.

“Brunhilde charging the walls of Valhalla to destroy the god’s seat of power,” Nicholi said regarding Gustav’s unrelenting charge. “Though I wish he would do it with a Cossack sword.”

“The spear has more protective magic in it,” Uliti asserted.

“You really believe that?” Nicholi challenged.

“On a good day,” the Tradition Honoring Chieftan related, and confessed.

As to whether it was a good day or bad one, such depended on a man in a dress now. And how fast he could throw the spear into the hovercraft's engine to blow it up. And how quickly Priestess Gustav could rescue Katerina from the belly of the beast before it blew up. Then again, as Nicholi told Uliti, in Wagner's Twilight of the gods, Brunhilde is engulfed by flames while seeking revenge on her slain lover, Seigfried, and somehow is resurrected. Such was not an option, even for the trusting Spirit before Flesh Uliti.

As for how to opera took place in real life, Gustav's Yakut 17th century spear armed with 20th century grenades did blow a hole in the hovercraft, its engine falling to the ground. As did he after he did a flying dismount from the horse, which thankfully had no bullet holes in him. Ironically, the horse which Katerina had stolen from Holzmann when she escaped the POW Camp. The steed which was said to be unridable by any man, but only a woman who saw into his real Soul.

"Open this door!" Gustav, ignoring a bleeding leg and mangled arm, screamed as he tried to pry it open. "Give me Katerina and you can have everything else!" he asked, demanded, then pleaded.

"Yes, I can agree to that," Holzmann finally replied. A moment later, an auxillary engine in the flying saucer turned on. "Yes, me and my associates do agree to that," the secondary pledge, and promise.

"But I can't" came from Katerina in a voice that was strong, assertive and emotionally detached from any soft sentimentality. Three seconds later, Gustav heard, unexpectedly, an explosion from inside the craft. It blew open every sealed wall on the ship, throwing Gustav onto his back. All he could see above him was a burning inferno. One that burst into a volcanic eruption as soon as he was able to get on his feet. The rest of the 'opera' was not seen, felt or heard by Gustav.

CHAPTER 23

“So, how did you get out?” Nicholi asked the woman in the field hospital set up by Comrade Iliya before he departed for another Mission after she had woken up from a long overdue sound sleep.

“Friends from other places, maybe,” Katerina answered, looking up at the night sky through the very open window. “Friends who...” She sniffed the air, finding it foul and disturbing. “What is all that ash? Did someone set a sacrificial forest fire?” she asked, and confirmed with a gasp when beholding the charred grasslands that had once been a lush Yokiva valley. “Who did that?”

“All of us, maybe, one way or another,” Nicholi confessed. He glanced down at a pouch of Yokiva in his trembling hand. “Maybe whoever dropped this down here, or discovered its properties, should have known that time travel in Visions is something we’re not ready for. Not yet anyway,” he said, putting a match to the leaves. “If we can’t live constructively in the present, none of us have the right to know the future.”

“And what does Comrade Iliya have to say about this?” she asked. “He predicted that there would be a bullet in his head and heart.”

“Which happened already,” Nicholi said, presenting a newspaper picture of the General’s dead body. With a headline reading ‘executed in the line of duty’.

“Executed because he delivered Yokiva to the wrong people?” Katerina asked.

“Or maybe because he didn’t deliver it to who he thought was the right people,” Nicholi related. “Denying ‘special gifts’ that are toxins in disguise to Comrade Stalin will get you killed, no matter how much you reason with him.”

“And you’re telling me this because---“

“---I’m telling you nothing!” Nicholi interjected, putting on his hat. “And if anyone asks you, the last time you saw me was when you were a loyal, Ukrainian 17 year old girl and I was an absentee father who left to seek his fortune, fame and female company other than your mother in Siberia. Unless...” Nicholi gently placed his large palm on Katerina’s enlarged belly.

“Your son grows up to become a better ruler of the USSR than anyone else who had that job?” Katerina gave voice to.

“Or better, if our daughter becomes the first Real Philosopher Queen of a REAL Worker’s Paradise?” came from a cute nurse with a German accent whose face bore the traces of a five o’clock shadow. “How are you doing?” Gustav asked his wife.

“I suppose alright, considering I have a husband who looks better in a dress than I do,” she smirked.

“A necessary diversion until we can get some lawyers who can arrange for a pardon for the atrocities Holzmann said he did when he was Nazi,” Nicholi offered.

“Which I didn’t do!” Gustav asserted back through gritted teeth.

“But which the Soviet authorities believe, thanks to Holzmann’s testimony on his death bed, and the files he wrote up and sent to Berlin,” Nicholi reminded his son in law.

“Which leaves us, again, with job of finding somewhere to live that no one knows, cares about or would ever think of going to,” Gustav noted.

“Which I already thought of, and arranged,” Nicholi replied with a warm smile, appended by Gustav sneaking a note into Gustav’s bra.

“Saskatchewan?” Gustav said, pronouncing that exotic word as best as he can. “I never heard of a town in Siberia known as Saskatchewan.”

“It’s in Canada,” Nicholi added, sneaking a blood stained, overstuffed envelope under Gustav’s skirt. “I got you VISAs, some money and some land there.”

“Where you’ll be joining us?” Katerina asked. “I see it in our future!” she mused.

“Or we’ll make it happen, despite what Fate has already decided,” his final words. With that, Nicholi slipped out of the hospital, three steps ahead of a newly assigned Camp Commander with very official looking assistants.

CHAPTER 24

Yes, as you probably predicted, possibly without Yokiva herb in your tea, cigarette or biscuit, I was born on a ship crossing the Atlantic in 1943. I spent my first winter in a small farmhouse outside of Saskatoon, in what even most Canadians would say is a place of exile. My mother, Katerina, who really WAS adopted by a Ukrainian family rather than being born into it, gave birth to three other children, and went on to write science fiction books about visitors from other planets who were a lot more human than any of the people I got to know, or maybe ever will. My father, Gustav, went to work for the Canadian Military in a special biological research unit which he never talked about at home. And pledged to not tell me about, or his grandchildren about, until the world is ready for it.

Uncle Nicholi, we are told, disappeared one night when gazing at the stars in Siberia. I still talk to him in my dreams which means, I suppose, that he'll be at our doorstep, in one way or another, very, very soon.

As for our ability to predict the future, maybe that requires us ALL learning how to compassionately and intelligently live in the present. Including me. Who became a tour guide after the War was over, managing trips to everywhere for everyone. Except for a small banana belt valley East of the Urals whose geographical location will remain...a family secret for now.