

Yakutia  
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## CHAPTER 1

The Siberian sky was even bigger than the day before, the mountains around the rolling grasslands even higher, and the amount of grass on those grasslands even shorter than yesterday, and the ten ‘yesterdays’ before then. This morning, it was the wind that rose up bright and early to greet Alexi on his way from ‘back West’ to somewhere over the horizon. It felt cold, but had a strange kind of warmth to it. Alexi felt a chill on his skin and a tingle of Fire inside his chest. Strange that it was a ‘tingle’ of Fire. It was something, anyway. He’d find a word for it to put into his report, perhaps a colorful phrase for his diary. Yes, changes were afoot for the adventurer whose first journey away from his Native Moscow brought him to a land where few really knew much about Moscow, and even fewer cared about it. But one thing never changed on this autumn day in what the calendars back home said was nearly half way through the nineteenth century, the century of Industrialization in the rest of Europe. The stench of sweat on deerskin and wolf-hides from the heavily bearded Cossack trapper sat next to him atop the supply wagon.

“So, this is Yakutia?” Alex muttered, staring at the small map that didn’t fit the landscape in size or proportion of named elements, yet again. “When will we get to our destination?” he dared to ask.

“When we get there I suppose, Captain,” the Cossack replied in Ukrainian to his Russian superior. He appended his assessment and proclamation with another spit aimed at the ground, some of which was blown onto the young Captain’s newly-issued uniform.

Alexi blamed it on the wind. Nature and man seemed to be conspiring to make him look rustic and ratty when he reached his new post, snow, rain, mud and treks through thorn-laden bush already having taken its toll on his uniform. He rubbed the sputum off the wool, then took out his handkerchief and polished the buttons and various other pieces of metal on it which made the cloth, even if stained, seem both special and sacred.

“Metals, Captain?” The skunk-smelling, dirt-encased Ukrainian trapper who seemed as insistent on not looking after his appearance as Alexi did to take care of his commented. “You know that if you shine them, it will scare away the game, and attract the kind of animals who want to put US into their stew.”

“Perhaps,” Alexi replied. “But the Natives here are Christian. And I represent a Christian Nation. And if we don’t take pride in who we are and what we represent---“

“---What did YOU do to be exiled to this place?” The Ukrainian interjected, homesick, lamentful and bitter, all at the same time.

“I was promoted, by General Rosminkov himself!” the twenty-five years aged, but not old, Alexi answered, contemplating the riches he would bring home to his betrothed Elena, or the palace he would build for her once he reached the civilized region of this ever-increasingly uncivilized place. “I was promoted, above many, many other candidates, to Captain!” he added.

“Because someone in Moscow didn’t want you to be a Lieutenant, or a Major, or anything of any importance in any place that is important, or...home.” The trapper kept his eyes forward on the team of horses under his reins. He pulled up his sleeves and unloosened the leather straps around his coat and wiped the sweat off his brow. On his wrists, imprints of shackles. Around his neck, rope burns. They looked very old, but seemed to also be very fresh.

Alexi couldn’t help but stare at them. He had stared at them for over a week, his indiscretion allowed by the man who bore them. It was as if the Ukrainian trapper wanted Alexi to see the evidence of his pain, torture and, perhaps pride. He always remained silent while Alexi did his ‘stares’, but this time, the trapper conscripted, or perhaps contracted, to be a guide demanded something other than silence. “What deed or merit or mischief did you do to be banished out here?” he asked Alexi. “You don’t look wise enough to have done anything revolutionary, at least on purpose.”

The trapper stopped the horses, inspired by the wind blowing through the patches of low-lying birch and pine that had learned to grow bent and small. His eye seemed fixed on something behind, or within, the trees.

“I was promoted!” Alexi insisted that the driver of the wagon, who looked more like a horseman than a team driver look at his insignia again. “To Captain in the Czar’s Army. See...Captain Alexi Korsikov!”

“So...that’s it!” The Cossack smiled. “You were banished from Moscow because you took the Czar Alexander’s name as your own.”

“I was baptized as Alexander, you...you...” Alexi had formulated the words to yell back at the guide who was his inferior but, out here, was his superior, and only source of knowledge about how to get from where he came from to where he was supposed to be.

“You were cursed with your name, Captain Alexi Korsikov. As you were cursed whenever you did whatever you did to be posted out here in no-man’s land.”

“And what is your name, ‘Vladimir’?” Alexi inquired of the man who didn’t quite seem to fit the label given to him when assigned to him at the supply fort back in Yeniseysk.

“Ah...so you know who I am NOT!” The Cossack replied.

“So...who ARE you?” Alexi asked, kindly and openly. Not aristocrat to peasant. Or employer to employee. Or even officer to enlisted man. But man to man.

The Cossack finally took his eyes off the ‘tree spirits’ he seemed to be speaking with within his mind, crossed himself, and turned to Alexi. “When you come here, or are ‘promoted’ to being sent here, you stop being who you were. And can never be who you were, ever again.” His voice was kind, understanding and scarier than any Spirit of Demon in the woods. Not that Alexi was scared of such things. After all, he was born to aristocracy and had earned his rank. His father had been wounded fighting the Catholic Poles for Mother Russia and nearly died in an artillery barrage defending the Motherland against the Islamic Turks. Alexi swore on the Orthodox cross that hung around his mother’s neck till the day she died that he would honor his father’s memory, and legacy. And bring what they were in Moscow to this land...so far away from Moscow. In service of the Country and God that sent him here.

Alexi could feel the Cossack talking to him well beyond the words, but didn’t want to listen to what he had to say. Something had eaten up the better part of his mind, or the sane part of his Soul, and diseases of the mind, like maladies of the body were contagious. He had to remain healthy, and focused on his agendas. The young Captain’s agendas were set in Holy Stone, and he needed only one answer, firmly yes or no. “When will we be at the Fort? Which by my calculations should be one day’s ride.”

“One day’s ride away, I suppose,” the Cossack replied. “God help us.” With that, he spurred the horses forward at a brisk trot, the short-grassed plains providing ideal footing for their hoofs and smooth traveling for the wagon which had no more than another day of stability to its wheels.

Alexi’s journey Eastward led to places where the grass gave way to rock, then the rock hard ground to snow. The kind that made the wheel, an invention of ‘civilized’ man most impractical. “We’ll have to leave the wagon here,” the Cossack spit out through his frost-covered mustache, as he tried, once again, to get the horses to move the load of supplies forward. They were mostly useless supplies anyway, at least according to him. Machines that served no clear purpose to him other than to make the wagon heavy, or impress someone from Moscow out here with what was in plentiful supply back there. All sorts of machinery that told time or measured distance, once way or another, in a place where ‘life’ and ‘death’ were the only measures of anything that mattered anyway. “The only idiots who care about what time is it have too much time on their hands, or their hands scratching their balls because they have boring lives in comfortable houses that keep out the wind, rain, snow AND sunshine,” he repeated. And as for the soil sample analyzers that Alexi insisted as being part of his cargo of ‘essential supplies’ for the fort he was to

be posted, the Cossack grumbled the same response, yet again. “Captain Alexi, the Natives here let their horses and cattle eat grass and they drink mare’s milk with their steak. It is only a fool or an arrogant bastard who thinks that they will ever learn to grow wheat, or anything else.”

“But what if one day, they need bread?” Alexi countered, putting every ounce of energy in his miraculously non-frostbitten body into pushing the wagon wheel out of yet another rut in the ‘road’ which was claimed by the kind of snow he never saw in Moscow, St. Petersburg, or anywhere he had been during his training as an academic geologist and, by professional necessity, military engineer. “Civilization cannot exist without bread,” he asserted with as much conviction as Newton’s Law of Physics, upon rested most everything he else he thought or dared to think about. “It is as basic as F equals M A squared.”

“Squared, you say?” the Cossack laughed, letting his half of the wagon fall into the snow, helping himself to a bite of dried Siberian rabbit, ever plenty if you knew where to find it, washed down with Ukrainian rum, for which there was always room on every supply wagon sent to the still uncharted East. “What is squared?”

“To YOU square is the basic unit of measurement, which makes it possible to grow corn and barley, which makes that ‘communion wine’ you are getting drunk on even possible!” Alexi fumed.

“Professor Captain Alexi, I can make rum out of anything, God help me,” the Cossack wagon driver asserted, with a deeper brand of indignation than he had ever expressed to his assigned human cargo. He pulled all manners of roots and berries from under the snow and crushed them into liquid with his thick, muddy, blister-covered fingers, most strongly by those digits from which he had lost a portion to what was most probably a human knife. “I can make this rum from these roots, these berries, these twigs, and if it is necessary, a branch from this tree that I can use to knock you senseless and make wine from your own flesh and blood. Just like Jesus, you would be made immortal, Captain-Professor Alexi! I would call your rotted, fermented and maybe a little bitter tasting liquid flesh ‘Alexander the Grapes’.”

“An impossibility,” Alexi noted with a condescending grin. “Human flesh does not contain enough sugar in it to produce ethanol. Which is the main ingredient in rum, or anything else in this wagon which I am officially declaring expendable.” Alexi removed the three barrels of rum from the wagon, finding twice as many more hidden underneath them. “Besides, men under my command must be clear thinking. Moral. And be dedicated to serving God, country and---“

“---themselves,” the Cossack asserted, making his point and intentions very clear with a hand pistol aimed directly at Alexi’s head.

“You are going to shoot me?” Alexi challenged.

“If you don’t put that load of rum back on my wagon, yes, I will,” the very fatherly reply.

Alexi put the barrel of firewater down. There was something very fatherly about this Cossack. Like his own father, who he remembered as being kind when he could, hard when he had to be, but always caring. Always reasonable. Always in the service of a Higher Cause than Alexi appreciated. A Decembrist Revolutionary who stood up to the Czar’s Ministers in defense of what the good Czar stood for, or should be standing for. A father who disappeared one night after being acquitted of all treasonous charges against him, only to have his throat cut by common beggars in the streets for his gold pocket watch and a handful of kopeks. A father who saw to it that Alexi be given the best education possible after his death, and all the contacts needed afterwards to implement what he had learned. A father who seemed to be inhabiting this Cossack’s bloodshot eyes, scared and deformed body and assertively ‘eccentric’ mind, somehow.

“What are you looking at?” The wagon driver asked.

“I don’t know,” Alexi said, seeing the Light around the Cossack’s head turning black and ‘common’, as was the case when his father inhabited others before. “I don’t know...” slurred out of his quivering lips, now very much feeling the cold.

“No, you don’t know much,” the Cossack, now possessed by his own ghost of ignorance and cruelty, grumbled. “But I tell you this. You arrive at the fort without this rum, and whatever soliders you still have in your command will desert you, or kill you.”

“So...these are an essential part of the cargo?”

“Not anymore,” the Cossack said, taking all the barrels off the wagon and laying them in the snow.

Alexi breathed a sigh of relief. He gave his precious engineering tools a pat of assurance, and stroked the boxes of his most treasured cargo. These were leatherbound books, some written by old masters, others containing ideas about chemistry, engineering and ‘political’ science he had been writing himself, the ideas in search of a laboratory in which they could be implemented. After, perhaps, the detail of seeing it they were actually true. What better place to make a name for himself on his own terms in Moscow than the wilderness of Siberia, which he referred to in his maps as ‘Moscow East’! He would be the master out here, and was trusted by Masters. Why else would he be sent out here? And with all of this equipment, and orders from High Command that said nothing more than “In Your Father’s memory, make something of yourself, and this place We will be waiting to hear from you, soon.” Suddenly, Alexi felt like he was where he should be. That he very soon would be in the place where his destiny had led him. A place where he could and would excel all of his teachers in Moscow, most importantly, his most revered mentor, his father. A place where there were other pioneers as well, cultured, educated and Visionary. And a place---without rum, or a guide to get him there, by the looks of the make-shift ‘non-square’ wooden sled the Cossack was loading the supplies onto, and the horses he was hitching up to them.

“What are you doing?” Alexi asked.

“Relieving you of this brew that, as you said, ‘distorts the mind, and weakens the spirit’, Professor-Captain Alexi,” he smirked. “And relieving you of me.”

Alexi was speechless. The Cossack had much to say, in his own language---Ukrainian, with a Siberian diction and phrases he didn’t understand. But with a subtext that said “I quit”.

“I will leave a horse for you, and this wagon of essentials,” he said. “East is that way, where the sun rises. West is the other way, where sons of bitches send bastards, bitches and whores to the East. You go East...Straight East. A few days if you are lucky. A week if you are smart. Never if you are too smart, or very unlucky.”

“And you go?”

“Further North,” the trapper-mercenary-wagondriver ex-convict repeated. “But before I do, I will permit you to ask me one question, which I will answer truthfully, on my mother’s grave and butchered children’s eyes.”

Alexi thought about what to ask the ever-elusive pain in the ass, teacher, and sometimes friend. A question about the past, perhaps? Like what he did or was accused of doing that caused him to be the victim of so much government cruelty, and the perpetrator of such in the world the government doesn’t recognize as legal, or know about at all? A question from his present, such as if he was also being paid off by the British, Turks, the Hudson’s Bay Company or others who sought to own, control or profit from still unmapped wilderness that Russia had ‘legally’ claimed as its own as a result of 600 Cossacks and 9 Missionaries viciously cutting down Native rebellions 200 years earlier---in a land where the KNOWN Native population still outnumbered Europeans by at least two hundred to one. Or a question about the future, such as where he was going? What was the real potential of this endless wilderness that looked so small on the maps back in Saint Petersburg or Kiev? Was this place where Nature was free to express her most extreme manifesting, blistering summers and bone-numbing winters, deserts and swamps, steep mountains and endless flatland, created by God as heaven for bold, intelligent pioneers, or by the devil as hell for those who were exiled here, by the hand of others, or miscalculations they had made themselves. Or perhaps, what was his real name?

“Come on, Captain Alexi,” the Cossack asked again. “I am waiting for your one question, which I will answer honesty. A promise I have made to no man, ever!”

“Why?” Alexi’s mind found his mouth asking, without clarification in words, linked to so many questions in a mind that wanted, and now needed, answers.

“Because that is the way it is, was and always will be!” the trapper shouted back. With that, he disappeared into the woods. Alexi looked to the East, where there were no woods anymore, but there was ‘open’. The kind of ‘open’ that he yearned for in Moscow. And which scared the crap out of him now.



## CHAPTER 2

“Time is measured in experience, not the passing of minutes, hours or even years,” Alexi remembered from the Cossack guide who had deserted him to the elements, and worse, himself. Or maybe it was his father. Or the wind, that seemed to speak with his father’s voice saying nothing he could clearly interpret. Some days he thought he could hear, and he wrote about that, and more, in his diary. The first day he wrote two pages, half of which was for his military commanders, half of which for the generations beyond who could be cajoled into reading them by their literature and geology professors. The second day, a paragraph and a half. Mostly fact, some poetic speculation. By the third day, brief phrases, mostly describing his outer feelings than his inner convictions. “Colder today. Wind getting stronger. Snow deeper. Rock too hard to analyze.” For the days that lingered on into weeks, “Continuing forward to best of abilities”, several times, the only deviation in the entry the date. Pictures occupied some of his descriptions, mostly engineering designs for innovations that he knew in his innermost convictions would be built someday... perhaps... maybe.

Keeping him moving forward was the memory of Elena’s smile. The sound of her gentle yet self-confident laugh. The smell of her long, auburn hair. The touch of her soft skin upon his lips. The portrait of her which he carried on the back of his pocketwatch, and the full-canvased painting in the back of his mind of their future together. He repainted it daily, with ever-enriching colors. Some days it was about him returning to Moscow after the assistants in his Siberian laboratory had built in the real world what he had imagined in expansively-thinking scientific brain. Other days it would be about bringing his betrothed, and her disbelieving society-conscious father, to the Paradise he built for Mother Russia, and the palace he had built for his ‘Empress Elena’. Some days he envisioned her whisking along the rivers of this vast land in boats carrying engines designed in his own head, faster than any current or horse, could carry anyone. Some days he dared to dream that his flying boat would actually be built, get off the ground, and whisk his beloved on a warm Easterly wind to him, or if Nature and the fates saw fit, a Westerly wind bringing him to her. But Elena’s face was in every picture, as he could never envision any kind of future without her.

Alexi’s inner eye thought his brain saw something, or was it his ears this time that saw it? A reindeer emerged from the woods, as if from nowhere. His horse spooked, nearly breaking the wagon he had rebuilt now for the fifth time, determined to outdo Nature with the best physics modern engineering or his own expansions of it could provide. Each day, Nature seemed to be winning. Taking its toll on the metal bearings, the wheel axels and the wood that connected them. The latter was now in plentiful supply, the ever changing forests providing trees that seemed to be well designed for strength, or even more needed fuel to keep Alexi’s frost bitten passions on fire---Firewood.

The trees were getting bigger now, a good sign according to scattered botanical reports he had read of the region around the Fort. But some trees seemed to speak louder than others, particularly when Alexi brought his agenda to their homeland.

“No”, the giant tree seemed to say when Alexi took at axe to a lower limb that looked as if it could be spared.

“The wind will take you off soon enough, or if there are any people here, someone else for firewood. May I please have some wood to keep my body warm and to keep my wagon moving?” Alexi inquired of the wooden giant, in words this time.

Still no answer. Then the sense that it was all about a joke. Finally, the answer to it seemed inside of him---the right one this time. “Alright, father. I think I do get the riddle you always tested me with. What do you get when you cross Ivan the Terrible with Jesus, or Saint Nicholas? A masochist who enjoys inflicting pain on himself.”

“Or a Moscovite who thinks he owns whatever he puts his finger on with a map,” the reply, from a trapper with a high pitched voice that penetrated his ears as sharply as the green-feathered arrow poised to do the same inserted into her hand-crafted, silver plated bow carried by the larger, speechless escort. “Who gave you the right to cut off the arm of Al Loch Mas?”

The trapper approached the tree, revealing a Crucifix around her neck, and all manner of very non-Christian icons around it. And leather from head to toe that were adorned symbols of something important, and very Pagan, and fierce. But the face was kind, vulnerable and female. "This tree speaks, you know. It needs to be honored, and spoken to with respect," she said as she brushed the snow off the six-foot diameter arbor 'giant', revealing ribbons, scarves and a few coins at its wooden 'foot'. She bowed to it, cut off a fistful of her hair, and placed it within a carved wooden horse not much unlike what young Alexi had played with as a child himself.

Alexi moved closer into the tree to see for himself. There was something very strange and familiar about this young woman who seemed to be so old behind the eyes. Perhaps a familiar spirit, speaking to him again.

"Speak to me, please. We didn't finish our conversation," he asked the Yakut woman with a White Russian nose, wildly flowing black Mongol-like hair and slanted eyes. She didn't fit any race of people he had knowledge of. He continued in his usual 'double speak' of conversing with the 'real world' owner of the body and the ghost of his father Basili who so often 'rented' space in those around his only son.

But this woman wasn't fooled. She stared through Alexi's façade, and he felt found out. And to make matters worse, it was only her behind her Asiatic-slanted eyes. No one else.

She said something in her Native tongue. An elder male archer behind her laughed, his face emerging from his hood, showing a triangular brand on the right cheek, recent slash marks on the left made by a fork, and rope burns around his neck. He said something that sounded like a joke. At least to the woman. And maybe to the tree. Everyone seemed to share the laugh, except Alexi.

"Look. My name is Alexi. Alexi Korsikov," he said, continuing his conversation with the still poised archer and the woman who seemed to be his most valued companion. "I have been on the road from Moscow for a very long time. I am trying to get to the fort, ah, I mean trading post at..." He took out the map he was provided in Moscow, noticing yet again the inaccuracies.

"Your map is very wrong," she noted.

"As I have known for the last...I forgot how many miles, and days, and weeks."

"This area is Sakha. NOT Yakutia," she asserted, again in perfect Russian, made colorful by an accent Alexi had never heard, from a race of people who, until now, he had never seen. At least face to face. "Your Salgit," she continued.

"My what?"

"Your horse, you idiot. It does not look so good." She approached Alexi's Polish Arab steed, a hand taller and a lot thinner than the heavily haired Mongolian-bred ponies she and her escort rode through the snows to the 'talking tree'. She said something that made the horse feel less tired, less hungry, less lame, and closer to life rather than death. She then reached into her saddlebag and pulled out a powder that made the horse snort when put into its mouth, then walk out with a stride stronger than Alexi had seen in days. "For now, he looks better," she continued, turning around to Alexi. "But you do not look so good. And seem to be the kind of idiot or asshole who does not want to get better."

"Oh, and what makes you say that?" Alexi countered, sticking out his chest, being sure that his rank, station and medals were in full view.

"You look almost as starved as your horse, you still think that shiny medals on your chest brings Light to your heart, and you talk to trees, and people, like they were ghosts."

Alexi bit his lip, took a deep breath and prepared his last ditch defense when dealing with people of power and influence---the truth. "I am told that I see things that aren't there. Hear things that no one

else does. My mind, when it is weak, turns such visions into ghosts. When it is strong, and disciplined, it turns such aberrations of normal perception into scientific discoveries.”

“Such as this ‘sled’ you have forced your horse to be pulling?” the female Inquisitor asked, commenting on Alexi’s newly designed cart. “I think it would better without these,” she said, pointing to the wheels under the railings.

“The wheels? The wheel is the foundation of European civilization, science and technology.”

“Such may be true, but you are in Sakha now.”

“You mean Yakutia,” Alexi felt like asserting to the woman who reminded him of Elena, perhaps because she did, or because he wanted her to.. “But I suppose I am in Sakha now,” he muttered, his lips shaking with fear this time, not cold. Mostly because the tree was NOT talking to him now. Neither were the rocks, wind or eyes of the reindeer beyond the leafless trees who seemed to laugh at him. Neither were the two ‘Yakuts’ who mounted their salgits and invited him to mount his horse, and follow them.

Reason told Alexi that it would be wise to accept the invitation, but there was one question he needed to know from his guide. The question he never asked his previous one. “What is your name?” he asked the Shameness.

“You Russians call me Katerina,” she asserted.

“And what do you call yourself?” Alexi inquired.

“You couldn’t pronounce it,” she smiled. She uttered something to the Elder. He lowered his bow, patted Alexi on the back, and offered him a piece of dry meat. Alexi voraciously swallowed the meat, giving little thought to how it tasted or what it was, though what little Alexi chewed rested like chicken on his frozen and dried out tongue. Perhaps it was ‘Ukrainian chicken’, the ‘meat special’ fed to prisoners in the Labor Camps after one of their number went missing, or violated one of the Commandant’s laws. Such were the tall tales told by the Cossack guide who had abandoned him, and perhaps it was poetic justice that he become ‘meat’ in his own tall tale.

Perhaps these Natives had caught him selling rum to their brethren and instituted some frontier justice, as it was in the Wild Wild West of America, another country with more land than people, a sense of cultural inferiority about itself and a need to make up in land it owned what it lacked in social refinement and scientific advancement. Maybe the Americans had moved into Yakutia, or as these Native ‘Injuns’ still insisted on calling it, Sakha. And by the way the Elder archer sneered and cursed the goods on Alexi’s wagon, they were not any more welcomed than the Ukrainian Cossack’s rum. Or more Cossacks. The Elder pulled out a four inch wide knife and prepared to convert Alexi’s books, engineering equipment and thus far inventions into firewood or scrap metal.

“Wait!!!” he screamed out. “We come in peace,” Alexi asserted. “To bring prosperity and wealth and a better way of life here.” He turned to Katerina. “I do, anyway,”

“Perhaps you do, perhaps you don’t,” Katerina answered, instructing the Elder to push aside the most valued tools in the cart and cut open the main floor board. Still intact after hundreds of miles. Under them---a cargo Alexi never knew he was carrying.

“I didn’t know there were guns there. Really,” he said, crossing himself. “I swear to God and Jesus and everything else, that I didn’t know there were guns there.”

“Perhaps you did, perhaps you didn’t,” Katerina smirked as the Elder examined the weapons. She helped herself to a view of them herself. By the way she took apart the loading apparatus on the British made rifles, she was better trained in firearms than ‘Captain’ Alexi ever was. “You will use these for what purpose at the fort?”

“To hunt game. Keep men, women and children fed. Christian, women, Katerina.” Alexi countered, pointing to the cross firmly around Katerina’s neck, the opposite side of it revealing very Pagan artwork.

“Such is what Simion Dhezan said when we let him keep his muskets for 600 Cossacks and 7 Missionaries. To hunt game, to feed hard working men, but at that time, no women or children,” she lamented. “Christians in service of the devil, and demons, who hunted down US, after we showed them where the game was to feed the children they said they would someday need to feed.”

“But Simion Dhezan was a hero,” Alexi protested, opening up one of his books to prove his point beyond any shadow of a doubt. “A God fearing, merciful family-oriented pioneer two hundred years ago who---”

“---Simion Dhezan”, the Elder sneared, motioning a chopping action against his neck with the kind of anger Alexi had not seen since he asked his Cossack guide what he thought about the Czar.

“But it’s in here! In print!” Alexi asserted, proving his point by referring to a well-read page in one of his books.

“And the spirit of Tygyn is out here, thank God,” Katerina insisted, crossing herself in the Orthodox style while offering a Native Pagan chant of homage to the sky.

“Tygyn,” the Elder repeated, clenching his fist around one of the rifles entrusted to Alexi for safe delivery to the fort. “Tygyn” he asserted, proclaimed, then yelled out with vengeance.

Alexi didn’t know who Tygyn was. Or what it was. Whatever or who ever it was, the crucifix-less Elder and the seemingly-well educated Pagan Shameness had different opinions about how Tygyn should be served.

Eventually, the Elder gave in, handing back the rifle to Katerina, who put it in with the rest of the armaments of the wagon, but with one modification.

Alexi gasped as Katerina dismantled every firing device in every weapon except two, one of which she kept for herself, another which she threw back to the Elder, along with a bag full of shot and powder. “What are you doing?”

“Survival of the smartest is good, right?” she grunted. “It beats survival of the strongest, or stupidest, Captain Alexi.”

“Yes, but...”

“If your men are smart enough to put these guns together again, they deserve to be able to shoot game and feed their women and children.”

“And what about those who are hungry, and need food? One civilized people doesn’t let another people go hungry!”

“No, Aiyy-toyan would not allow it,” Katerina replied, gazing at her crucifix, contemplating the moral arithmetic of it all. She went to her saddlebag and opened it. Before Alexi could ask her any more about her Spirituality, People or personal reasons for being such a an internal contraction, she had supplied Alexi with enough food for two weeks, medicines for the Polish Arabian ‘salgit’, and a redrawn map showing how its owner could get to his destination within three days. She asked the Elder to modify the reloaded wagon to be better suited for the snow, which involved demolition of the wheels---“for the sake of the horse who had to pull it,” which she stated in strained accent-less Russian.

The Shameness with the Christian name and the Warrior Elder with the very non-translated hidden agenda disappeared into the woods as quietly as they arrived. Indeed, the quiet, the Silence, was louder than ever in Alexi’s ears. Normally something which sustained him, but now something that told him to

move Forward towards his Mission of making Russia and Yakutia a better place, despite the fact that the specifics of that Direction and Mandate were getting cloudier and ever more critical to determine.

### CHAPTER 3

The route to the fort led past many other fortresses between the large herds of horses and surprisingly much smaller numbers of cattle. They were conical in design and seemed to pop up out of the sparsely wooded terrain as naturally as the rocks and craters did, smoke emanating from their 'roof'. Nothing around them, even the corals, containing the 90 degree angle with was the cornerstone of 'civilized', or scientifically sound, engineering. By the looks of it, the Natives who lived in these settlements of 5 to ten 'cone houses' seemed contented enough, going about their business of riding their horses to the woods to get firewood, to the river to get water and never to Alexi to get or ask for anything. Aside from the now absent ghost of his departed father, Colonel Korsikov, Captain Alexi had no companions to boast to, or to be taught by, other than his own horse, who he now named Salgit. Fortunately, Salgit knew where the grass was under the snow, and by accident or pre-designated good fortune, there was now enough rust-colored green grass under the snow to now sustain the steed. Unfortunately, Alexi couldn't join in the feast.

"Salgit, how wondrous it would be if we two legged horses or jackasses could feast on grass. When I can, I'll find out what you have on your stomach which makes you able to turn this grass into muscle and what makes us turn it into vomit, or plugged up assholes, assuming we can swallow it at all," he related to his only companion on the journey to his new post. Maybe people there would talk to him. Certainly no Yakuts, or whatever the Natives called themselves, seemed interested in Alexi, and it was their disinterest in him which bothered him most. His skin was white, his eyes round, his chest covered by a military uniform which he kept polished, and he was carrying goods that would change this land forever. He should have been hated, respected, loved or at least feared. But he was merely ignored, by everyone, except for Salgit, who snorted into his face whenever he was thinking most intensely.

"These people must be very stupid," he said to the horse on the downslope a hill which, according to Katerina's map, was one valley away from the fort---finally. "I represent, and am, one of the most powerful instruments of change in this wilderness. I was sent here to do important things by important people. Yet, to these people I seem so unimportant. Either they are very stupid, or..." Alexi dared not even vocalize the alternative hypothesis. Could he be the fool here, or worse, the idiot? The most ignored people in the village in which he grew up were the village idiots. But, they seemed happy. "No," Alexi thought to himself, giving voice to the chain of reasoning. "Village idiots are happy, I know I am not happy, therefore I cannot be an idiot."

"You are worse than that!" an echoing voice rang out from the woods. Its bearer, a man in a long black robe emerged, his beard down to the middle of his chest, his eyes sorrowful and angry, yet defeated. "You are late!"

As he approached, Salgit's ears went back with fear at the sight of him, and forward with anger at first whiff of him. "Your horse has the look of the devil in him," the Priest commented.

"And your robe smells like it was just used to wipe up a butcher shop, or a morgue, or a brothel after a knife fight," Alexi smiled. Neither the priests nor the bearded soldiers behind him got the very burrowed and stolen joke dared to laugh at it. But some of the axemen behind them with half-shaven heads and chains around their legs did. Some had the right sides of their heads cropped down to the scalp, others the left. An equal number from both groups of prisoners seemed to appreciate Alexi's 'humor, the first utterance he said to a White man in a week.

"Get back to work!" the Priest yelled at the prisoners with the half-shaven heads. "And if you even think about using those axes to cut off your chains, we will shoot off what is left of your testicles, by God!"

The prisoners got to work chopping down trees, the ones that were still alive and thick. A pack of soldiers beat a prisoner who dared to take his axe to DEAD tree that a man could actually chop down with an axe. "Dimitri! There is no redemption without hard work!" the prisoner who refused to cut down living trees was 'informed'.

“Which is futile, perhaps,” Alexi said, opening his coat and letting the Priest see the ensignia that re-stated his rank, and the medals for engineering achievement that he seemed to get just before he was transferred to another post. “It makes more sense to cut down dead trees first. The wood cuts better, and easier. And has far more uses.’

“The most important purpose for wood here is to occupy men’s time in cutting it, Captain,” the Priest grumbled back. “Let me see your papers.”

Alexi produced his orders. They seemed in order to the Priest who seemed to think that he was in charge of everyone. Including Yakut Natives who were entering a building just over the hill. Closer examination from a high-laying rock revealed there was a cross on top of it.

“The Natives here go to Church?” Alexi asked.

“Freely, and of their own will,” the Priest asserted as he looked through the goods Alexi had brought with him, avoiding the threatening whinney of the horse hitched to the several-times-modified sled.. “They are loyal Christians, these Yakuts. Who we excuse from the fur tax for selling their furs as a way of thanking them for being Spiritual Christians.”

“And if the Natives chose to not be Christians, or not go to Church?” the young officer inquired.

“They get fined five kopeks,” the defiant prisoner who loved living trees shouted out while his arms now chopped monstrously large chunks from a green fur-pine tree which he seemed to be mourning. “Or they get to be shot, I suppose. All three of their souls become reunited with Aiyy-toyan, or if they slip a jug of brandy into the Colonel’s office, Jesus. Tell me, Captain Alexi, what have YOU done to be exiled here with the rest of the convicts?”

A portly man with mismatched bulging eyes, a twisted nose and a sloped forehead who looked like the highest ranked non-commissioned officer fumed. “YOU are the convict, prisoner 246D2!” he grumbled back at the half-shaven prisoner who still seemed to have an intact physique under his rags and blood-stained scars. “You are convict number 246D2, who has no friends who even think about you back in Russia. A wife who was given permission to marry after you were declared deceased. And two sons who will never even know your name! Yes, YOU are the convict here.”

The remark hit ‘246D2’ hard, but there was still some strength behind the tears streaming down his wrinkle-laden 35 year old face. “I know what I have, and don’t have. But what do YOU have, stationed here, Sergeant number ‘one’, that you still can really value. Or used to value. Really.” He turned to the enlisted men, or more accurately conscripted ones. “And what do YOU have, Jewish conscript number two? And you, Polish conscript number three who also ‘volunteered’ to serve in the Czar’s Army for 25 years? And you, underpaid Ukrainian Cossacks four, five, six and seven?”

Prisoner 246D2 put the mirror in front of every soldier in the work detail, and the view was horrifying for all of them. Some broke down in tears, others took out their rage on the other prisoners, others pulled out their canteens and drove the demons even deeper into their souls with more demon rum.

“People who value nothing are less than people. They are less than dead,” Alexi remembered his father telling him when he gathered the family around the table and told them of his decision to stand up to the Czar. He said it with pride on the eve of the Decembrist’s Revolution first meeting. He repeated it with shame and regret the night he went out for a ‘constitutional’ a week after he was acquitted by the Courts for taking part in the ‘revolt’. How odd it was that this prisoner who would be punished by being left ‘alive’ and unbeaten would be saying the same thing. How ironic that these soldiers and prisoners were now under Captain Alexi’s command.

“I want this stopped immediately!” Alexi barked out, displaying his rank immediately as Prisoner 246D2 sang out the Czar’s Anthem with mocking ‘pride’, with notes farted out of his rotting mouth, and frozen ass.

“I am Captain Alexi Korsikov!” Alexi repeated to a still not listening detachment of prisoner and prisoner soldiers. He brought them to swift attention by his firing his last bullet from his hand-musket. “By the look of the unpolished insignia on your shamefully kept uniforms, I am your Superior officer!”

“Who brought no rum with you,” the Priest smirked, speaking to Alexi in a soft whisper. “And guns that...” The Priest looked at the guns which were as good as broken, unless someone could fix them. “Maybe can help you out, and keep those of us in charge fed, still in charge and alive.” The good father pointed to none other than 246D. “He has special talents,” he related by way of his only explanation. “But they can only help you, and us, if you don’t tell Colonel Put-it-off about it, ”

“You mean Colonel Putinov!” Alexi barked back, taking out his pencil and notepad. “Father---?”

“---Bishop!” he insisted. “I used to be, and still am, Bishop Petroff Lesenko!!!” His cheeks fell below his chin, sweat from his forehead pouring down into his beard. He clenched his fist around his crucifix, holding it like a knife. “I am and always will be BISHOP Petroff Lesenko. No matter what the Colonel, you, the Czar, the Yakut clan chiefs, their witch daughters, or even Prisoner 246D tells you!”



## CHAPTER 4

One look at Colonel Putinov's office and command center told Alexi why he was dubbed 'Put-it-off'. Reports to High Command dated one, two and three years ago marked 'Urgent' lay on his desk, said desk held up by two diagonally placed good legs, a log and a hole-ridden rum jar. Manuals delivered by some other 'Alexi' lay unopened next to engineering and surveying machinery which was at least five years old. Most importantly, release papers for prisoner requiring signature of the Commanding Office remained on the unoccupied desk, unsigned, said release dates going back as long as a decade. The roof was intact, though the floor had been repaired many times, with pink stains embedded into the wood. Alexi knelt down to smell them.

"Red paint, Captain," a Sergeant said as he walked into the room and helped himself to a bottle of Napoleonic brandy from a newly arrived box marked Medical Supplies, taking two hand blown snifter glasses from the unlocked cabinet marked 'Secret Documents'.

"Blood, Sergeant," Alexi commented as he inspected the Sergeant's 'uniform'. That ensemble was half Native Yakut fur, smelling of horse, fresh blood and even fresher semen and vaginal secretions. And half military issue uniform, from three different Armies. "Blood, Sergeant---" he barked out at white haired man who smiled with a fatherly grin.

"Sergeant whoever I want to be," he said, offering Alexi a drink. "Or whoever you need me to be, Major-----?"

"Captain." Alexi asserted, pointing to his newly polished insignia. "Captain Alexi Korsikov."

"Keep thinking like that, Captain Alexi Korsikov, and you will be a Lieutenant, a corporal, or even worse, a civilian, or a corpse in someone's stew." the Sergeant smiled, insisting that Alexi partake of the Brandy with him. "Most people call me Ivan."

"Seargent Ivan?"

"Or whatever other title suits them, or me. Not that titles mean anything here." He stared out the window at the vast terrain Russians called wastelands but 'Natives', wherever they came from, called 'home'. "No, Captain, nothing means anything out here unless you give it meaning." He turned around, staring into Alexi's soul a moment after Alexi got a quick glimpse into his mad yet still thinking soul, and noted something very familiar about him.

"You seeing ghost already, Captain Alexi? If so, that would make you a General out here!!! Assuming those ghosts are your friends, or allies."

Alexi pondered telling Sergeant Ivan about seeing his father in the faces of people, hearing his voice in the wind, feeling his touch from the trickle of tree branches. He had made that mistake before with the wrong doctors in Moscow, and swore he would never confess his madness to anyone else. Yes, Seargent Ivan was mad, but not in a way that the shameness Katerina was. Katerina's madness was based in a divinity bigger than herself. Ivan's madness was about being himself, his own man, and respecting others only if they had the balls to do the same. "Where is the Colonel?" the young Captain and aspiring Visionary asked.

"Away," Sergeant Ivan replied, taking off his hat and rubbing his fingers through his long white hair and overgrown mustache, helping himself to a smoke from the Colonel's supply of cigars.

"Where away?" Alexi inquired.

Ivan filled the room with cigar smoke, the only odor which Alexi hated, and would cough whenever he was near it. The louder Alexi coughed, the more the smoke the Ivan 'smokestack' let go. He opened up a map, drawn up by a mining engineer according to the look of it, unsigned but dated less than six months ago. "Our fearless leader is, I think, here," he said, pointing to the Northwest corner of the map.

“Or possibly here, he continued letting his finger find its way to the Southeast quadrant. “Or here to the East,” he continued through several burps and belches. “Or here to the West. Or...perhaps. Here!!!?”

Ivan’s finger pointed at his own forehead and laughed. Alexi was not amused at the joke. He needed answers, as he was already late for his own timetable of turning Siberia into a shining Paradise, scientifically and politically, then perhaps re-naming its new capital after his father. It would make his departed mother happy, his father proud, and honor the memory of his siblings, all of whom had died before he himself was born.

“Is Colonel Putinov alive?” Alexi asked the ‘laughing fool’ who seemed to know as much about the Russians here as Katerina knew about the Yakuts. “And if you tell me that the Colonel and the other officers who SHOULD be here are alive only because I want him to be I’ll----“

“---You’ll do what, Captain Alexi?” Sergeant Ivan asked sternly, and compassionately. “Write me up in that notepad of yours so your superiors have me exiled to...maybe... Siberia? Write me up as a villain in your diaries which will become ‘literature’ when you get home so that lords, ladies and scholars can vilify me after I’m dead? Or maybe shoot me with guns that are no good for anything except clubs until you get someone smarter than you to fix them?”

Alexi thought that Father Lesenko was the only one who knew about his defective cargo. The Priest had given his word, but not perhaps as a Bishop. Such was the world of the military. But as for Alexi’s diaries, and inner thoughts that went into them, how could this half-literate anti-literature old coot know so much about his so very young Soul? Perhaps Alexi’s father, Colonel Basili Korsikov, was hiding within Sergeant Ivan’s brain, in disguise. It certainly felt as such, and though Alexi’s last memories of his beloved father were over ten years old, they were as fresh as if they happened yesterday.

But as for today, answers, and clear co-operation to the fullest were needed from one man.

## CHAPTER 5

Elena's promise to marry Alexi was the only one he could rely on, the only one that had not been betrayed, so far. The 'laboratory' the geologist-engineer was told would be waiting for him either did not exist, or was in fact little more than waste products of what was used to build a fort that seemed to be crumbling away from one season to the next. His 'trained assistants' were prisoners whose knowledge of chemistry was confined to the hardness of rocks they had to hammer into sand, or soldiers who knew only the science of cruelty. All except one.

"That Yakut bitch Katerina really does have kucon in her fingers," Prisoner 246 slurred out of his mouth as he repaired the first of the Russian 'thundersticks' she had rendered powerless. "She also turned around these trigger devises so that they would blow up the face of the Russian soldier who fires it before it even has a chance of taking down an angry bear, a drunken Yakut or an escaping prisoner. Interesting trick."

"Yes, interesting," the Alexi noted 'calmly' to the man with the half-shaven head, mostly-starved body and completely mad eyes.

"And I also find it interesting that she spared your life," he continued, completing the re-assembly process, far more skillfully with his shackled arms and rifle-butt crushes hands than Alexi could have done. "She must think you are a fool. Some kind of visionary. Or that she wants you to fuck her one day, and make you think it was your idea, and even trick you into thinking that she loves you."

"I meant her no harm, she meant me no harm," Alexi asserted as he went to the 'window', little more than slits in the walls of the Colonel's office, which was now his. So far, no one was within listening or viewing range, orders he gave Sergeant Ivan personally, and which he feared Ivan himself would violate once he was through 'trading furs' with the Yakut woman in the Chapel across the compound. "But there was a man with her who seemed interesting."

"Triangular scar on one side of his face, scar left by a fork on the other, probably holding you hostage with an arrow before you got a chance to unpack your pistol or musket?" 246 continued, completing the assembly on the rifle, shaking his chains to draw Alexi's attention to the blood stained chain cutters next to the Colonel's brandy.

"You know him?"

"Of him. Basili Manchury, Captain Alexi," he smirked.

"He had interesting eyes," Alexi commented.

"I'm surprised you still have your head on your neck after you looked into them, Captain Alexi," he smiled. "He escaped more times than any prisoner I know, or know of, or heard about. "

"For what crime?" Alexi asked.

"He has a dream," 246 smiled, fondly.

"Having a dream is not a crime," Alexi countered.

The prisoner shook his head in that way Alexi's father always did when he said something stupid. But this time, with a very hidden agenda behind the 'lesson'. "Basili Manchury's dream is to have a war with you Russians, we Georgeons, the dumbass Ukrainians, and even the Swedes where the weapons are the bow and the sword. No thundersticks. A noble war with weapons that men fought with before Simeon Denzhen and his fucking merry band of fucked up Ukrainian Cossacks built the first White fort out here and brought 'Christ's Love' to the Natives here with the thunderstick."

“And fueled by Tygyn’s thunder, or love?” Alexi said, remembering Old Man Basili’s clenched fist, and Katerina’s loving eyes when they evoked his name. “What is Tygyn?” Alexi pressed.

“Wrong question, Captain Alexi,” the still chained prisoner replied. 246 continued to do his job, asking for more bread this time, a request that was granted. By the way he let its flavor rest on his tongue, it was the first civilized food he had enjoyed in a long time. He asked for, and got, another glass of brandy, then continued to do his job, nothing more.

“It’s Captain Korsikov!” Alexi asserted.

“Fair enough, and I am Petros, Captain,” the prisoner whose papers said. According to his papers, he had been interned for theft, smuggling and murder aimed the now repaired and loaded weapon straight into Alexi’s forehead.

“Petros what?” Alexi found himself asking, amazed that for the second time in his military career, he his head was being used for thinking when threatened with extinction.

“Petros WHO, WHO is the right question, Captain.” Petros handed the rifle to Alexi and took hold of the next disabled weapon to be made safe and useful again. “WHO is Tygyn, you are probably asking.”

Petros remained silent, saying nothing with his mouth or his eyes.

“A man who doesn’t answer real questions is part of the problem for all men,” Alexi declared.

“Spoken like a true Decembrist,” Petros said.

“My father. Basili Korsikov,” Alexi answered, fondly.

“Colonel Basili Koriskov?” the Georgian inmate asked bitterly, in a way that arouse Alexi’s suspicion, a glimpse of a hidden agenda behind Petros’ eyes.

Alexi tried to stare into Petros’ soul, but the convict who Alexi needed to have as an trusted ally, and perhaps friend, shut the walls down. Unfortunately, Alexi never developed such a skill.

“I’ve heard that he was a good man. A noble one,” Petros smiled.

“Yes, he was,” Alexi replied, taking hold of another one of the weapons, trying to repair this one himself. “If it were in his power, or mine, we would not only give deserving prisoners food, but freedom. Freedom to walk, or ride, out of here, back home.”

“So we can freeze to death on our way back in winter. Or drown in mosquito-infested swamps in summer. Or be captured by bounty-collecting Yakut Natives, who decide to make you THEIR slave for a while until they turn you over. Make you collect their hay while their horses get fat, skin their animals while you starve, and build yurts they use to keep themselves warm while you huddle in a dug out tied to a tree.”

Petros’ account seemed real enough. He tossed the now completely repaired rifle on the desk and grabbed for another. Alexi took the keys out of the Colonel’s desk and inserted them into the locks on Petros’ chains.

“Please don’t, Captain Alexi,” he said. “Until you unchain everyone else’s chains, or your own, taking off mine will mean nothing to me, or you.”

The Czar’s prisoner continued to repair weapons which were intended to be given to the Czar’s soldiers, or guards. Alexi clearly was unable to guarantee his freedom with safe passage back home, but he could offer him a portion of something that might be more meaningful.

“I have a dream for this place, you know,” Alexi related as the Vision in his intuitive brain found their way into his fingers, converting the chore of repairing the rifle into converting it into an improved design which he was sure had never been designed, or implemented. A redesigning of the trigger spring such that it fire and reloads with the same action with another hundred yards of unimpeded trajetory. “With science, I can turn cold , dark wind into heat, and light. And then move water from the wet swamps to the dry deserts.”

“And create mud?” Petros grumbled with a smile that seemed to crack his weather-beaten cheeks.

“Food...For everyone. An agricultural Paradise. For us and the Yakuts.”

“Turn these Yakut horse herders, bear slayers and drunks into farmers?” Petros smirked. “Easier to turn a bull into a cow, a dumbass Ukrainian Cossack into a man who can actually think, or Ivan the Terrible into Saint Nicholas, who by the way is the only Saint these Christianized Yakuts accept, no matter what ‘the Bishop’ or the other priests tell you.”

“Alright. Then some agriculture in some places. It will work for ALL of us! Food for everyone. A free, fabulously happy new land where everyone will be well fed. In body, mind and spirit.”

“And how many labor camps will you, master engineer, need to build to make such a free and happy Paradise? How many back-broken horses, oxen, men, women or children, Captain Alexi Korsikov?”

“Electricity!” Alexi exclaimed. “Provided by Nature. And God!”

Having completed his newly designed rifle for hunting game for the women and children in need of the meat it provided, Alexi showed Petros his plans for the New Frontier. “We get metals we need from the earth by these devises I have designed. And place them together as shown here. With a little bit of power from flowing water, blowing wind, or the sun itself, we create lightening bolts which used to belong to the heavens, and create them here on earth! We harness them into the thunderbolts of electricity!”

“And how do we take the thunderbolts from where ‘we’ make it to where it is needed? The back of a fast horse?” Petros mused.

“With towers that bring energy to everyone,” Alexi said. “Connected by wires, for now.”

“And how you can build these towers?”

“With this!” Alexi grabbed a piece of useless thin metal ‘rope’ from the floor that had at one point been connected to something useful. “Wires for now, towers without wires for later!” he exclaimed to the convict who had become his secret ally, and was now on the way to becoming a friend, perhaps the only friend here who understood the most important part of himself---his mind.

That dream, like that of Petros returning home to Georgia a free man, was shattered when Alexi looked at the loose piece of wire from the blood-stained floor which he had used to demonstrate his point. It was barbed, a design developed to deep cattle inside pastures, men inside prisons, and humanity separated from its most noble possibilities.

“I’m...sorry,” Alexi said to the friend who became a convict again, at least in his eyes. “I didn’t mean to...”

“The Decembrists didn’t mean to screw things up for everyone else either,” Petros said. “I will finish repairing the rest of these weapons and go back to my normal work detail, telling no one what I was doing, Sir?” he continued.

“If you wish,” Alexi said.

Apparently such was Petros’ choice, for now. He continued to repair the guns needed for survival of the fort and, so Alexi was told in his marching orders from Moscow, for the villagers of settlements

which would soon have women and children in them. White women and children like himself. Perhaps his own Elena as his own wife. The girl who became a woman in the year he left, the woman he yearned to marry and raise children with in his New Paradise. Inspired by the Vision, Alexi got an idea about how to improve upon what Petros had made merely functional. Perhaps with an added spring and rod, and lever connecting the trigger to the explosive device in the chamber, it could fire faster and more accurately. He envisioned redesigning the barrel as well, making it shorter but more tighter with regard to the number of curves per centimeter.

Alexi looked at the rifle he redesigned behind his eyes that perhaps could be installed on the one Petros had repaired, naming the brilliant new invention after Elena. It would be a marvel, establishing his name as the best officer in the Engineering Corp. A source of pride to his father as well. A weapon which would be used only to hunt needed meat, or if required to, in righteous wars to end all wars. He aimed the 'Elena' toward the West, in as accurate a direction towards his father and mothers' final resting place in Moscow and pulled the trigger in tribute to them. The weapon fell apart in his hands.

Petros' back was turned to Alexi, thank God, Alexi's attention on a very official decree addressed to the young Captain-Engineer that he had been carrying with him all the way from Moscow with almost as much reverence as Elena's picture. Alexi pulled it back from his view, but not before Petros smirked.

"My promotion to Captain with honors! And my special orders!" Alexi proclaimed regarding the decree. "To use my initiative and scientific skills to transform this land into Paradise for all people"

"Signed by a liar, and a fraud, Sir," Petros said.

"General Boris Alexander Rosminksov!" Captain Alexi proclaimed with respect for his superior and pride in himself.

"Who only signs his name in that way, with his middle name, 'Alexander', when he is EXILING someone to Siberia. A fact I know from very hard experience, and many people. Some who wear prisoner coats and have half shaved heads, and others who wear soldier suits with orders that, in one way or another, keep them from ever going home again." Petros said with sincerity, laying the calloused palm of his chained arm on Alexi's shivering shoulder. "Or..."

"Or what?" Alexi asked, terrified.

"Consider this God's way of throwing you out of Eden, so you can turn hell into something better than Heaven ever was." A sorrowful tear flowed down from his angry eyes.

Another letter from under the piles of papers on the desk found its way to Alexi's eyes. It was unopened, surprisingly. He looked at the return address, smelled it, and stormed out of the Colonel's headquarters to read it alone.

## CHAPTER 6

Alexi took a self-assigned post at the lookout towers being dutifully guarded by soldiers who were sound asleep. It made no sense for them to stay awake anyway. It occurred to Alexi very quickly that Siberia was a place where the ‘nothing’ was the worse thing that can happen to you. A place where inactivity and boredom made the mind atrophy from disuse, and worked its way into killing the spirit. No great pieces of literature were ever written here by political dissidents who were exiled to this ‘experience’ of being left alone by the world of bean counters and petty bureaucrats. No musicians ever wrote great songs about it, at least that could be played by violins, pianos and horns. Personal revelations and experiences here seemed even less meaningful to the world which made its declaration known to Alexi through the letter.

It wasn’t what was she said, but how she said it, with the kind of script that was very ‘official’ in the letter that awaited him upon his arrival to the fort. Elena’s penmanship in matters of love was always very feminine, more swirls than definition to the letters, as if she was inventing her own alphabet. But this time, the manner in which the words were written was very precise, the script lacking all manner of artistry, or emotion.

“Dear Alexi”, it opened, the characters in ‘dear’ being smaller than that of Alexi’s name. It continued...“I have been informed by sources which I am compelled to trust that some of your activities have been treasonous to Mother Russia and have betrayed the trust of people who I, and my father, respect very much. A betrayer to the Czar and a disappointment to those working with, or against, him in the service of our people.”

“I didn’t say or do anything that wasn’t respectful to Mother Russia and in the spirit of the Reformer Decembrists, and my father’s memory!” he yelled back to the letter. “At least I don’t think I did,” Alexi muttered to himself, then the wind, then the trees outside the fort as another layer of late fall snow descended upon their every lowering branches. He read on.

“It is acknowledged that you are a genius with regard to devises of your own imaginings, but your science, as you call it, is more a matter of optimistic fiction rather than fact. The recently revealed fact that you cheated on your engineering examinations only supports this contention.”

Alexi’s jaw dropped. He had never cheated on his exams. And he knew no one who would benefit from telling anyone that he did. He read on.

“One can only imagine, ‘Captain’ Korsikov, the other fraudulent activities you have done in the attempt to make your useless, and apparently untalented, mind seem useful to those who depend on it. Your fellow scientists are no fellows to you at all, when I speak with them. They, like your superiors, consider you a poet with no sense of reason or scientific logical capacities, on the best of days. On the worst of days, a deluded fool.”

Alexi thought about who Elena knew who could have told her such things. None of his colleagues or professors at the University. None of the Comrades in arms in the Army seemed capable of telling such things, but then again, Alexi always did feel like a loner. An outsider. But such was the fate of Visionaries such as Galeleo, DaVinci and Newton, who saw expanding curves in a world boxed in by squares. And his father, a founding member of the Decembrist reformers, who considered gently applied intelligence the most powerful political force possible. He read on.

“Alexi...My once dear Alexi. Siberia is a place for Visionaries, and if indeed you are a visionary, then you will survive it. Or it will survive you. General Rosminksov said that in twenty years from now, the answer to this dilemma of yours will be determined.”

Alexi recalled that his term of duty in Siberia was two years, with the option to renew his special commission assignment afterwards. How dare whoever had renewed his contract on his behalf for another 18 years done so! How dare the people he strove to serve, those who loved the Czar and those who hated

him, to betray him in the same way! Dispose of him like a piece of useless or defective garbage! And how dare Elena write what she put to paper next.

“The good General has a son who has found favor with my father, and who I favor as well. In the ways that matter at least. He is a good man while you are still in the process of perhaps becoming a man. What kind of man, I do not know. I hope it is one who is happy with himself.”

Alexi felt the life drained out of him. His stomach churned, his aching chest felt empty. His eyes wanted to cry but couldn't, as his shocked mind still was held hostage by conflicting emotions warring with each other for which would paralyze his soul. Elena and her family, even his impossible-to-please father, had been the only family Alexi still had. Except the ghost of his father, who now chose to remain silent, no matter how hard he tried to see him within the snow-covered trees, on the faces of the reindeer which feasted on berries underneath them, or his horse 'Salgit'. All seemed to be laughing at Alexi now, or worse, ignoring him.

Alexi tore the letter and let the wind take it where it would from the lookout tower on the West wall of the fort. distance between himself and what used to be home, which had measured by miles escalated to dimensions of infinity. Straight ahead was indeed a painful direction to look at. He lowered his head, his bloodshot eyes came face to face with the hard ground three stories below, as measured by Moscovian units. He calculated how fast a human body would take to reach it, and how hard it would hit the rock-hard ice, given Newton's mathematics or perhaps his own. With the right kind of dive, everyone's problems would be over. With the wrong twist, he could wind up paralyzed in body as he was in the mind. But if the latter was God's fate, perhaps the wolves would take care or the rest. Or perhaps a hungry prisoner. In any case, dying within an instant or even by inches within a longer time frame beat living.

“Colonel!” he yelled out, again and again, to the wilderness that listened to no man, and cared for nothing except itself. But Colonel Basili Korsikov didn't answer, either as a father, a political reformer, a scientist, or friend. “Colonel!” Alexi yelled out to the West, East, North and South, but the guards still slumbered on in dreamland, fondling their antiquated rifles like women they missed, or imagined still missed them. “Colonel!” Alexi continued to scream out in the hopes that his father's spirit would tell him something of the truth, or even a relevant lie.

“You're on your own now, Alexi,” a voice echoed from behind. Alex felt a warm jolt go down from his shoulder to his heart. He turned his head around, slowly, to confront it directly. From the corner of his eye he saw a gloved hand, the size and shape of one which looked and felt very familiar. “The Colonel is gone now,” the fatherly voice continued.

Alexi decided it was time look at the ghost straight in the eye this time. Something he never really did, at least for more than a moment. He smelled something from it this time. A familiar scent of rum which had been his father's favorite, offered now in a mug, held by a man who was very much of the 'real' world.

“We're on our own now,” Sergeant Ivan continued. “All of us, God help and bless us.”

Alexi accepted the mug of rum, and the spirit of bondship from Ivan, by rank his inferior, but by other standards, the only mentor, teacher or friend he had now. The alternative was for Alexi to accept the fact that he was promoted to be mentorless. Both prospects terrorized him.

“Why are we here?” Alexi asked his most trusted subordinate, a new gold-coated knife strapped to his belt. “Is there really wealth out there in the wilderness? The kind that we can value here, and they value back home, Ivan?”

“Perhaps, Captain.”

“Alexi...Please.”



“Of course, Captain.” With that, Sergeant Ivan strolled over to the slumbering guard on the South tower, stole a swig of his rum, and moved on. Mother Nature answered Alexi’s other questions with Silence. A windless silence followed by a chill he had not experienced.

## CHAPTER 7

By the measurements of the portable cold weather humidity-recording thermometer Alexi had built in Moscow but could not sell to anyone there, it was drier and colder than anything he had experienced. The indicators for cold that he brought with him fell below the lowest notches he had given numbers to. As for the humidity, it was dry as a desert, but without the heat. Such was the climate for 'early winter', which got worse as mid-winter came, then the dreaded but amazing enough survivable 'deep' winter season. Time seemed irrelevant, as it became more counter-productive to try to be productive in doing anything more than fetch wood, melt snow for water, and wait. And wait. And wait some more.

Thankfully, there was enough wood to keep the Colonel's office warm while he and the other officers were, officially anyway, on 'field assignments' conferring with the Natives on matters neither Sergeant Ivan nor Petros shared. The soldiers at the fort were now re-armed with weapons that could shoot game for food, and protected the fort against suspicious Yakut bandits or 'lost' Hudson's Bay Company trappers sent by various governments to see what the fur-trading Russians were really up to in Siberia. Every day seemed to be a copy of the last. The 'why' of Alexi being exiled to this place remained unexplained. Though he was their 'keeper', Alexi had as many chains around his life as any long-term prisoner condemned to hard labor. Still the mathematics of his inventions made sense to him, no matter how disapprovingly Elena or her father's voice said it was childish non-sense, manipulative fraud or reason-less arrogance. But as for matters more immediate, the arithmetic of how wealth came into and out of the fort created many missing parts to his equations, the key numbers not revealed by anyone he spoke to, and never consistently when any data was provided.

Still, and wisely, Alexi would try to write something in his diary, the entry reading. "Same as yesterday", with no details as to the inner or outer details of such. As to where Colonel Putinov and the other officers who were officially listed as being on duty for each day at the fort in the Sergeant's roster, another day of "they may be here tomorrow, perhaps." Meanwhile, extra rations Alexi allocated for the prisoners wound up in the guards' stomachs, no matter how many inspections he made. He dared not leave the fort, for fear that he would be shot by one of the men under his command. But, he was still alive, for reasons he could not ascertain. There was plenty of opportunity for the soldiers to kill Alexi, and certainly enough room in the 'reindeer stew' which was the yearly winter meal, for the body to be disposed of discretely and effectively.

Again, the service oriented Visionary found himself caught between serving those in authority and those who were its victims. The Colonel and his officers had left with a good number of men, all of which were no doubt well armed. If Alexi were to take charge of the fort as if it were his own, he would most certainly do something to justify being arrested by Colonel Putinov et al once he returned, with no 'Put-it-off' to his hanging slowly on a noose, as was the fate of the 30 Decembrists who Alexi's father called Comrades, and young Alexi called 'Uncle'. Most importantly, anyone aiding Alexi in his reforms would also be dealt with by the authorities, even more severely than their revolutionary leaders, a hard earned lesson Alexi's father taught him very well before his untimely death. "Stagnant terror", Petros called Siberia as it was, or as he experienced it, amplified by Winter.

But one day, the cold did break. And without the warm grey clouds that dumped snow upon the forests and grasslands below. It was a Sunday, an easily travelable day for the 'Christianized' Yakut traders to come to Mass, be counted, and noted by the Bishop so that they would be excluded from the yasak fur tax, and not fined the usual five kopeks for not showing up. A perfect reward and punishment system for a society in which you were a trainer, or were being trained. But which was which? Prisoners trained guards as much as the guards tried to train them, and by that mathematical extrapolation, Alexi was the one who was being most controlled, though he was provisionally 'in command'.

Alexi looked at the long line of Yakuts greeting the Father Petroff Lesenko on their way into the Church, an armed soldier taking down names next to the demoted Bishop, or frustrated priest who needed to be one. The Natives seemed happy to be Christians, or happy enough letting Lesenko think they were. It was good business for both Commoner Yakut as well as their toyon clan leaders. "A shepherd who

thinks he is in control of his flock of sheep is a happy shepherd who isn't dangerous," Alexi remembered from one of the political science lessons shared with his father while they waited for the fish to bite on the lines cast into lake on his Uncle Dimitri's farm. "Tell that shepherd that his sheep are actually wolves, or dogs who can feed themselves, and the shepherd will find a way to turn them into dead sheep, or sheep who wish they were dead," he continued. "But above all, remember the golden rule. That it is not he who has the guns, but he who has the money who makes the rules."

Alexi's father was right, most of the time. But what about these Yakut cheiftans and commoners? Who of them was making the rules, and which of them were the ruled? Maybe each was ruler and ruled at the same time. It seemed so in their faces. The toyons, easily identified by their silver-embroidered saddles and bridles on the mounts they rode in did not bow to 'Bishop' Lesenko with any more or less pride than those of lesser wealth who lived in dugouts rather than traditional yurts or European style log cabins. Amongst them was 'Doctor' Katerina, fresh from a visit to the fort infirmary after being paid by a now ambulatory soldier whose crushed leg seemed deemed for the chopping block a few days ago if not for her intervention. Accompanying her, a hooded man who looked very much like Basili Manchury, carrying under his cloak green arrows said to be his trademark. They, and the toyon clan leaders, seemed to walk, talk and laugh much as the 'commoner' Yakuts did---at least in front of Father Lesenko.

Despite the stories about how they should be feared, managed or economically exploited for the good of Russia, and themselves, these people seemed fascinating to Alexi. The only thing in his life now which didn't frustrate, terrorize or bore him.

Alexi felt something strange come in through his window, a strange tingling sensation shining on his back and finding its way into his spine. He finally identified it. "Warmth, and from the sun," he commented to Sergeant Ivan behind him, drying his winter underwear by the wood stove, fresh out of a much needed bath as the now fully bearded old man tallied up figures in the reports in the books that would accompany the messengers carrying requisitioned goods out from Moscow and furs back, or perhaps other measures of wealth. "Do you supposed any of us will ever get rich, and be able to spend that wealth as we want to happily bring back home?"

"To be rich, home and happy?" Ivan laughed, his well developed muscles and varicose veins visible for the first time to Alexi. "You DO ask too much of life, Captain Alexi."

Questions about home were already talked about, and re-opening memories of them led to more sadness than could be endured. As for 'happy', old 'Uncle Ivan' had learned to distrust that state of mind, and Alexi's attempt to understand happiness through philosophical inquiry would lead him into even more suicidal misery. "Do you suppose it is possible for soldiers, such as ourselves, in the Czar's army to be rich?"

"Only when the Czar isn't looking," the ageless yet rapidly aging Sergeant who knew more than any officer Alexi met smirked.

"So if we don't exist out here, in the eyes of the Czar, or his ministers, it is possible for us to get rich," Alexi 'reasoned'.

"There are many ways of being, 'rich'," the reply. "There is rich between the ears, in matters of the brain. Rich between the legs and under the sheets. Rich in---"

"---Rich in pocket!" Alexi pressed, demanding answers to questions he dared not ask.

Ivan smiled. "First you have to have pockets, then you can think about filling them, I suppose." With that 'Uncle Ivan' put his ledger into the right draw of his desk. He changed his clothing, as if a ritual, starting with a fresh, lighter suit of underwear, then a new shirt, shirt, and then recently-cleaned trousers. He then gathered his aired out leather and fur non-regulation attire which he would need when the 'warm' broke, along with another bottle of firewater hidden in yet another hiding place behind the walls of the Colonel's quarters. He whistled the Czar's National anthem and strolled to his hut at the far end of the compound, recently expanded into a house by workers unofficially transferred for other details while, as

senior commanding officer, Alexi had been sleeping in Colonel Putinov's bed of rotted wood and dried rat terds in the small room behind his broken-down desk.

Alexi sought to find refuge and purpose in his books again. Perhaps a re-reading of Voltaire, Cervantes or his recently-translated copy of Last of the Mohegans from America would give him some answers as to what to do with the next twenty years of his life but, again, the pages said nothing new to him. He opened his notebook and took pen in hand, hoping that innovation and Purpose would come to his fingers, but they didn't do so. Not in the language of words, engineering diagrams or mathematics anyway. His eye caught a glimpse of a violin, owned by one of the 'still on patrol' officers or soldiers under their command, to the best of his reconing. How Alexi yearned that he could speak to someone, even himself, in the language of music.

As for music, such was coming from the Chapel. Though unusual for the Orthodox Church to have anyone except the Priest on the alter drone out hymns originally intended as music, the liturgy was being sung by a chorus, half in Russian and half in a language he did not understand. Not so much because that tongue was Yakut, but because it was the language of hope, and optimism. Were the prayers of praise and thanks put into song being delivered to God? Jesus? Ayii-togon? Tygyn, whatever or whoever he, or, is? Certainly 'Bishop' Lesenko didn't know, and if Sergeant Ivan knew, he didn't care. Neither did Petros or the other prisoners, whose mass had already been held. Their assigned Spiritual duty on this Lord's Day of rest was to use the unexpected warm climate to repair the Church walls and begin constructing barracks for still more prisoners to come who violated the laws of God and his earthly representatives, the Arch Bishop and the Czar.

Alexi contemplated the nature of God again, tempted to open the Bible Colonel Putinov had in the left draw of his desk, but it was the right drawer of that oak structure that interested him most. The half opened drawer which contained Sergeant Ivan's ledger. Frustrated at the numbers in it that made no mathematical sense, Alexi banged on the drawer, loosening a flat piece of wood that he had mistaken for the bottom of the drawer. Under it were maps underneath it which he had not seen since his arrival. With red dots indicating where Colonel Putinov and the others may have been, he postulated, and hoped.

An examination of the map laid there by the accidental hand of man, or perhaps the Purposeful Hand of whatever Deity, or devil, was in charge of Siberia stirred up the young engineer's curiosity. He recognized the route, and noted something interesting about the terrain. If the geological representations on the map were correct, the over-ground rivers and underground streams all met in one place, the outline of what looked like it was once a gold star marking its location. Red or black stars on other areas of the map, but, but gold on this one, unmistakably. The only other marks on the map were fingerprints along the margins, their mark dried into the paper with red ink which felt like blood.

## CHAPTER 8

It was risky leaving the fort, but necessary. Captain Alexi had told Petros that he was on a secret patrol to find four 'escaped' prisoners before the Sergeants found and shot them. The convicts were due to be released a year ago, and it was only fair to give them each a horse, rations, and papers of release with the Colonel's signature personally forged by Alexi's hand. To keep Sergeant Ivan's lips sealed about Alexi's absence and real purpose for leaving the fort, Alexi offered to retrieve a Yakut woman now carrying 'Uncle Ivan's' baby en route to intersect with one of the mail delivery stations where, according to Alexi, she intended to send a letter about it to his wife, sisters and daughters back home. Perhaps the others in the fort would honor Alexi's 'do not disturb, feeling poorly' sign on the office door. Those who didn't respect his privacy would perhaps fear disease. With the Fort Doctor amongst the missing 'patrol', no one wanted to risk small pox, diphtheria or any of the other diseases that spread from one Siberian location to another on the tails of those who travelled there.

As expected, the locations of the rivers and trails between them were suggested rather than described by the map found under Ivan's ledger. A lucky thing that the weather got even better, the ground easily negotiable by horse and foot. A good thing that Alexi brought his personally-designed soil analysis sampler with him, a devise that measured mineral distribution, moisture and vibrations under the ground. A better thing that he was met by an unexpected Guide along the way who used a more biological tool to locate the route to the drainage point of the rivers and streams in question.

Katerina dismounted her horse, threw off her moccasins and walked the ground under the now thinning layer of soft snow. She closed her eyes and laid on the ground, feeling the earth with the tips of her fingers. She then pointed one of those fingers firmly and confidently to what Alexi's compass said, South by SouthEast.

"Twenty two degrees, to be exact," he said, adjusting the markings on the map appropriately. "My calculations from my mineralometer said it was twenty."

"Fine," Katerina said, re-mounting her pony. "Listen to your mineralometer. You go where your twenty degrees leads you and I'll come pick up your dead body in the spring. After the beasts get a hold of it first. You know, the straightest distance between here and there, wherever 'there' is for you isn't a straight line."

"I know." Alexi said, humbled by something bigger than himself. "It's a curve, which follows a different kind of mathematics. Ayyi-toyan help me."

"Don't you mean 'God' help me?" she asked.

"Same thing, right?" Alexi's answer. He showed Katerina the map.

"Our destination is here 24.2 degrees by 33.8 degrees by this revised calculation of ours."

"Known to otherwise as..." Katerina turned silent. Something in the brush moved, catching her eye, disappearing before Alexi's could see what they both heard.

"This place is known as what?" Alexi asked. He pulled out his rifle and aiming it at the woods as the wind picked up.

"It loses all its meaning in translation," Katerina replied, shaking two old horseshoes converted into a ritualistic castinet in the 'demon's' direction. Three shakes and two chants later, the wind stopped and the fear left Katerina's eyes. "It's safe now."

"So we can proceed?" he asked.

"You can," she said, handing him the clanking metal castanets. "You will need these."

“Thank you,” Alexi replied.

“And this,” Katerina continued, redrawing the map correctly on the other side of the one found in Sergeant Ivan’s map, abruptly turning her back to a hawk which perched itself on a branch to her left. She slipped the map in between two pieces of dried meat and placed it into Alexi’s saddlebag, and threw another portion of meat up towards the bird. The offering was accepted, the hawk caught it in mid air, then proceeded to make its hunting rounds from a higher elevation in the sky. Katerina galloped her horse away, disappearing into the brush in a cloud of white powdery snow. Alexi’s horse snorted, relieved some how. Its rider wasn’t.

Something happened to Alexi’s perspectives about Siberia en route to the destination bearing a faded gold star on the map and an unspoken Yakut name Katerina respected and feared. What was cold seemed warm. What was lonely felt sustaining. He somehow felt at home here in the ‘big open’, as it was during the Winters where he grew up, surrounded by his cousins, his mother, his father or his dogs, Plato, Aristotle and Socrates wherever he went. His investigative metaphysical mind imagined them in the reindeer, foxes and other creatures thankfully still keeping their ‘fifty-kopeks a hide’ furs on their skins who came out of the hibernation holes to indulge on nuts, berries and grasses under the snow which eagerly received the warm sunlight and reflected it back in magnificent tones which could not be described in any language spoken in Moscow. If they were saying anything to him, it was in a language without words. A message to be absorbed now, translated later, used at some time in the future. Even the ghost of Alexi’s father obeyed this mandate of the spirits, and Spirit. “Maybe God does exist,” Alexi said to himself reflecting on the traditional religious beliefs held by the part of his brain that honored his mother and the critical portion of his mind trained by his father. “Perhaps to see God, we have to stop looking with our eyes. Stop trying to hear Him with human ears. And stop trying to paint a picture of ‘Him’ in the image of an earthly father we had, or wished we had,” he commented to his horse Salgit.

Horse and rider simultaneously turned the corner on a reindeer trail to what looked like a valley with abundant grass under the snow which seemed very green. Protected by mountains on all sides which was all but bare of snow on all three sides of it. Loose wood that could easily be used to build a fire near a river that seemed to be teeming with fish, its surface glistening in the sun with a richness he had not seen in any river. “Golden Siberian Sunshine” defined as it could be to the human eye, a volcanic sense of warmth coming from the ground below him.

“Paradise” he thought. “A place where I could have built a mansion for Elena,” he lamented. “Or maybe where, if she is interested, ‘Doctor Katerina’ and I could built a yurt big enough to house her patients and my laboratory,” he dared to speculate. A place where the rocks in the mountains seemed to speak, their language nearly understood by Alexi until he noted the ‘mouth’ on his father’s ghost look very real, and disruptively familiar.

Closer examination of it reveals that it was a cave, chiseled out of the side of the mountain by hand picks, one of the them stained with blood and containing a human finger between the repaired hinges. On its floor were pans, mostly filled with black pebbles, some containing specs of yellow within them. When examined in the sunlight the specs glistened in the same way the river below did.

Alexi looked at the maps given to him by Katerina and stolen from Sergeant Ivan. Whatever this location was, it was close to but not at the destination point hidden by Ivan and feared by Katerina. From the vantage point of the cave, it lay two valley ahead, clearly marked by red flags on the trees, bones of animals or perhaps gold prospectors with missing fingers.

## CHAPTER 9

While the trail to the mine was easy on Alexi's horse's feet, it wrecked havoc with Salgit's nerves. The smell of burning wood, earth and flesh combined into a foul odor which was baked into the ground, the air above stagnant. Though Alexi was used to the smell of industrial misery from the slums and tenements of Moscow, his Salgit was not. He became barely workable at a trot, then spooked with every step at a walk, and then refused to be led by a halter even from the ground. A ground littered with metal of a different kind now. Iron mixed with steel, in the form of worn out horseshoes. Blood-stained shackles containing bits of burnt human flesh tangled amidst the attached chains. Most bearing the Czar's Army's signature.

"A little further," Alexi said as the rugged natural beauty of the virgin landscape became that of a land raped by miners with machinery that remained unmanned, and unwatched. Though the drainage canals were intact, the pumps and water-driven pullies that were designed at least a century ago to feed them were sawed in half. Belts and ropes that connected the poorly constructive shoveling and drilling machinery were severed. All around the abandoned mine were crushed pebbles of many colors, some black, some white, some red, some mixtures of hues geologists studied but did not name. None was the same as the others with one exception...the look, or feel, of yellow specs within them.

"Extractable with better science, or much human work. Or more human slavery," Alexi muttered to himself, calculating the efficiency of the mining 'machinery' should he be put in charge of redesigning it. Those factors included the power that could be harnessed from the waterfalls, rivers and electricity-promoting non-gold elements in this mineral-rich draining basin. And the number of horses who could freely roam the pastures to eat grass while Mother Nature did the work that otherwise would break their backs. And the number of prisoners who could be freed without being missed by whoever was in charge of this undocumented, and by even the most conservative calculation, money making endeavor.

Ahead lay what looked like the headquarters of the camp, or what used to be such. Loose wood, nails and a plethora of bones on the ground. This time, all of them were human, and still attached to their flesh, and clothing over it. Indeed, this once-productive mining camp was a graveyard, haunted by ghosts who were as tortured as they were terrifying.

Alexi let his horse go. Tethering Salgit to a tree would certainly cause the horse to break its neck in the attempt to get free, and bringing it closer in was now a psychological impossibility for the terrified beast. The horse was hungry and would feed itself on the bails of hay laying about under the snow. Such was the only option as the young, and now rapidly aging, Scientist-Captain moved closer to the pile of bodies, firing his gun in the air several times to scare off the buzzards and wolves still helping themselves to whatever flesh was left on their eyeless faces. The scavengers moved on to a more lavish meal on the corpses which had been recently buried under platform over an underground mine.

The floor and walls of the pit containing the only recognizable face amongst the dead was the only location which was not littered with rocks and pebbles that seemed monetarily valuable. Had it not been for the indigestibility of human cloth, metal and weaponry, they would go unrecognized forever. That clothing, emptied of all belongings from the turned out or torn pockets, clearly revealed their identity.

Alexi saluted the corpse bearing the brightest colored uniform with the most impressive insignia, which was still polished, the eyes and face around them frozen in an expression of pride, and defiance. "Colonel Putinov, reporting for duty. Sir...And Sirs," he continued to the corpses immediately around it, which by their insignias were Majors, Captains and Lieutenants. The bodies of enlisted, or most probably conscripted, soldiers of lesser rank littered the rest of the camp. What was left of their scalps indicated that their heads had been shaved in various patterns, some with numbers burnt onto their foreheads, the impression of which was evident on their bones. The smell of death had elements to it that were very industrial, and 'metallic'. It reminded Alexi of someplace else he remembered from his very urban youth. The hatter's factory on the way from the opera house to his home, operated by an owner who had gone madder and madder with every hat he manufactured, and every coin he had earned for his efforts. A strange, unexpected, and perhaps merely perceived smell to Alexi's nostrils confirmed it. Along with the

feeling that the rocks around him lining the mountain were laughing at him, sadistically this time. Ridicule, the kind of laughter that was very Russian, but which he had never seen in the Yakut Natives, even when he deserved it. Perhaps Alexi's father could be given voice if Alexi listened hard enough for it. Or perhaps if Alexi asked it to speak using the scant vocabulary of Yakut words that he had learned at the fort when Native horse traders, trappers and medicine woman Katerina DID talk to him. But such seemed inappropriate, given the only constant aspect about the death here, clearly evident to all of the senses in virtually every slain body. He pulled the evidence of such from the body of a small framed private in an oversized uniform, barely fifteen by the look of his terrified eyes. Next to him, for reasons that didn't make sense, was an ornately designed Yakut bow, left as perhaps more of a boast than a mistake.

"Basili Manchury," he growled, noting the green color in the arrow's feathers after pulling out of the Private's chest, grasping it into a clenched fist that shook with shock, then anger, but for reasons beyond his logic, not fear. "For what reason? Why? To-yo?!!! To-yo, you son of bitch! There's enough room out here for everyone!" he yelled up to the rocks. "You crazy, o-yon-n-ok! Stupid tuos! Vicious and dumb....!" He continued, trying to find a reason why the Native people here he had learned to respect, then yearned to love, would do such a horrible deed. "Did you do all of this for money? Revenge? Honor? Or in the selfless service of Tygyn! Tygyn? Aiyy-Toyan curse you! Aiyy-Toyan curse you. Aiyy-Toyan curse you to---"

Before Alexi could think of the right word for hell in a language Pagan Yakuts could understand, thunder answered him from above. It echoed in the canyon, defying even the most skilled physicist the ability to ascertain its source. Two more shots rang out. Alexi took cover amidst a pile of burnt mining platforms. He pulled out his rifle and hand musket, which he hoped Petros did not rig to fire back at his own face, and let its barrel 'smell' the intruders from the East entrance to the canyon. He fired one round at what seemed to be a single rider wearing a Yakut bearskin coat complimented with a Russian Army hat atop a long haired Mongolian white horse with a black star on its forehead. The rider turned around and loped into the woods, joining the horsemen behind him, unrecognizable in detail to the eye, twenty yards beyond rifle range of the weapon Alexi had in his shaking hands. By the looks and feel of it, the riders were talking about their next action. After a nod from their hooded commander, they turned their horses back towards Alexi.

Alexi had been spared the wrath of Manchury before, and maybe he did possess a madness the local Natives feared. According to something he read someplace, "courage was madness carried out to its most extreme expression", and it was unstoppable once put into action. Such would make sense. Putting that hypothesis to the test, he grabbed hold of fistful of green feathered arrows from the dead corpses and the bow. He stood up tall, and proud. With a proud arch in his back, he inserted an arrow into on to the string off the, as he now found it to be so, powerless bow and advanced on the intruders, still keeping his double shot hand-musket under his belt. "Bol yoi!" he screamed out at the horsemen hiding behind the trees, walking up with a confident stride, bow in hand, confident his mispronunciation of 'watch out!' was clearly understood. When he spoke the words with anger, the riders' horses spooked. When he echoed them with other-worldly madness, the riders talked again. When he added laughter to the madness, they trotted away, their leader on the white horse with the brown star on its head leading the way. 'Mad hatter' smell permeated into Alexi's nostrils and now very light head, and perhaps brave heart.

"To-yo!" he screamed in their direction, Alexi's tongue grasping the Yakut diction perfectly around that word. 'Why' was the most important yet least used word in Russia, and apparently its new colony, Siberia. 'Why', one of those questions which is rarely asked, and even less often answered. "To-yo?" he asked the riders who had now disappeared to his right. "To-yo!?" he demanded of rocks to his left, and the spirits who remained silent, even that of his father. "To-yo?" he pleaded to the sky to God, Aiyy-toyon, Mother Nature or whoever else might have any degree of real power, or wisdom.

"Why?" a very human voice said from behind Alexi. It spoke in Russian, and when it approached, it was on horseback. With three horsemen behind him. Four horsemen of the Apocalypse? Perhaps. And maybe the rider was Alexi's father, come back from the dead to inform him about how to handle the land of the living. It made as much sense as anything else. And, as always, ghosts preferred to be spoken to man to man, rather than cowards to spirit.



Alexi put on his most confident and respectful smile and turned around, bow and arrow in his left hand, his right hand extended in bondship. It was met with a fist, held firm by a Yakut scout next to a white horse with a black blaze on its forehead. Alexi's other hand was grabbed by a Russian soldier, freshly assigned by the clean shaven cheeks around his trimmed mustache and blemish free uniform. Alexi tried to make out the face of the leader of the group, the bright sunlight behind his head clouding his ability to see clearly.

"Father?" Alexi dared to say to the officer in charge of the detachment that rode in from nowhere. "Is that you?"

After being wrestled to the ground, relieved of his hand-musket, and valuables, Alexi's view of the leader in front of the Apocalyptic Platoon was far more clear. They were real men, armed with very real weapons, led by a man whose stern autocratic air made him seem far worse than Colonel Putinov ever could be, or probably was.

"I found them here, Colonel," Alexi screamed out in his defense to the officer whose face he did not recognize.

"You put them here!" he barked back. "Along with how many of your other escaped convicts or Yakut bandits!"

"But I..." Before Alexi could explain anything, he was stripped of his uniform, tied to board, and gagged. A Corporal with an embittered face and cruel eye retrieved a bullwhip from the supply wagon, snapping it inches in front of Alexi's feet, chest, testicals, then eyes. The Colonel conferred with the Yakut scout, whose face was Native but eyes very Russian. From what Alexi knew could make out, the Yakut was describing Alexi with like the word for 'crazy', suggesting an agenda other than what the Colonel had in mind. When an enlisted man presented the Colonel with Alexi's papers, and mentioned his name, there was even more rage in his White Russian's coral blue eyes, for reasons Alexi could only imagine now.

But this officer, unlike so many others East OR West of the Urals, seemed to care about his men and seemed very worried about their fate. He was clearly a veteran of many Campaigns. By the way his men vomited at the sight of the dead around them, they were far less experienced. By the way the Colonel looked at his map, he was lost. By the way his Yakut scout searched the pockets of the dead behind the back of his commanding officer, and no-doubt well paying employer, he didn't care.

Meanwhile, Alexi contemplated his own fate. Winter clouds gathered in the East, edging their way towards the canyon which didn't exist on any official map. Perception overcame reality again, as Alexi looked to the trees and visualized Salvation. As Jesus was busy taking care of sick children in Moscow, or trying to get His blessings through the beaurocracy at the Hospitals there, it was up to a more immediate Savior, or helpers of such.

He imagined Elena riding in with an letter personally signed by the Czar naming all of the scoundrels who framed him for dereliction of duty or activities in violation of it. And behind his beloved Elena, her father bearing a wagonful of rubbles to fund Alexi's dream of establishing a scientific and political paradise with, even more importantly, a warm hug and the magic words 'welcome to the family'. Or anyone inviting Alexi into their family for the orphaned only child who only had himself and his Work to sustain him now. Perhaps his work would outlive him. It had to. The diaries he wrote as literature, the inventions he proposed for a new society would live on. As would his logically-constructed designs for a Utopian political future in which men, and women, would share in the bounty of what God intended, and yearned, for them to have. Yes, his writings would survive him. Such is what he envisioned, hoped for and then prayed for as a sadistic Sergeant brandishing a hot branding iron approached, the Colonel strolling in him.

"I am Captain Alexi Korsikov, Sir." Alexi said as the first word after the gag was ripped out of his now parched mouth as painfully as the Corporal could perform the task.

“If you are, Captain Koriskov, then you are in as much trouble as if you were any of the other deserters, or convicts,” the Colonel said, his pacing boots stepping on pebbles richer in gold specs than any others Alexi had collected or noticed “Or perhaps you work for another party, ‘Captain’?”

“I serve my country!” Alexi asserted.

“Yes, but which country, ‘Captain Alexi’?” the Colonel asked. “Sweden? Turkey? Britain? France? Perhaps the United States. Or perhaps the Pagan country of Salka, as these Yakut natives seem to want to call it.”

“What you see here is what I saw here, Sir. Today, Sir. For the first time, Sir. Discovered when, by necessity, I was away on a Mission to find my commanding officer Colonel Putinov, Sir,” Alexi continued.

“You call me Sir too much for me to trust you, Alexi,” the Colonel smiled, sadly.

“It is a bad habit he has, Sir. The result of inexperience, I am afraid.” a voice rang out from the woods. Its bearer was none other than Sergeant Ivan, riding in alone, ponying Alex’s horse behind him, packed with all of the equipment Alexi had brought with him. “Sergeant Ivan Ustinov reporting, Sirs,” he said saluting Alexi and the Colonel. “With your horse, which I found, as ordered, Captain Korsikov. Which I suggest we get on and get out of here, fast, Sir,” he continued, looking at the mountains around him with the most extreme caution, and fear.

“Ah yes, Sergeant Ivan Ustinov,” the Colonel smiled with respectful recognition bordering on admiration. “I see you are not wearing the medals of valour which Colonel Putinov has bestowed upon you. He has written much praise about you, you know.”

“I will put them on again when we have avenged my Colonel’s killers, Sir. And get you safely to your destination, Sir. And my Captain back to his.”

The Colonel twirled his handlebar mustache in contemplation of it all and ordered his interrogation-expert Corporal to release Alexi. The command was obeyed with a grimacing grumble, intended for Alexi’s eyes only. Ivan looked at the Colonel’s map, made the appropriate adjustments and handed it back to him. “You had better ride East by NorthEast. Fast. And quietly. Single file along the river if you can so you can cover your tracks. We will go South by West here, making the Natives think we are you. If we may burrow three of your horses to make it look like we are an army rather than---“.

“---Take five of them,” the Colonel interjected, insisting that the embittered Corporal carry the command out with the utmost urgency, and gratitude. “Please.”

With that, the Colonel who never gave his name gathered his men and slithered out to the East, the Sergeant whose name was finally known to Alexi to the South, with his now embittered, once idealistic commanding officer.

## CHAPTER 10

Alexi thought he had found friends amongst the Yakuts. A people who he could trust, and for Alexi, trust was an all or none dynamic. Elena had told him more than once that trusting or not trusting is the mark of a child, whereas trusting in degrees with respect to specific tasks or contractual arrangements was a sign of being a responsible, mature adult. No matter how many philosophical arguments based on logic which he very expressively argued with, Elena held her ground. Perhaps she was right, after all. Sergeant Ivan was clearly a man who only a fool would trust completely, and an idiot would not trust at all.

'Uncle' Ivan took Alexi back to the fort along an unfollowable route not related to the Colonel, after making several comments about how one good horse could buy three good Yakut whores, or perhaps one passable wife. "So, you found my mistress?" he asked.

"We had a talk," Alexi's reply, delivered with downturned eyes so that Ivan could not see the hopefully not obvious deception behind them. "She will be no trouble to you, or anyone else."

"How did you find my map, Captain Alexi?" the next question.

"It found me, I suppose," the answer. "And how did you find me, Sergeant Ivan?"

"I let my horse smell your farts," he smiled. "No shit."

Such was how it went, each question answered with a half truth, or an answer which allowed Alexi and his had-to-be-trusted companion to not face the truth. The terrain on the trail leading more West than South, the direction Ivan told the Colonel he would be going, became twisted as well. More rocks than ground.

More ice than melting snow. But one look at the walls of another mountain, by Alexi's calculation on the other side of the 'golden valley', revealed Ivan's real reason for keeping him alive, and letting the elements or the Yakut Natives have their way with the new detachment of soldiers sent out by High Command.

"Those caves were put in the wrong place, you know," Alexi said.

"And with the wrong equipment," Ivan confessed.

"If by that you mean convicts with two year sentences who were written in your ledger for being dead, so you could work them to death without being found out by High Command---" Alexi blasted back.

Ivan put a stop to Alexi's tongue with the business end of his rifle aimed straight at his head. "We did what we could. I did what I had to," he related, sincerely. Or perhaps with delusion. Or with the skill of a liar who knew how to tell a lie better than Alexi knew how to relate the truth. "I could kill you now, and NO one will miss you, you know, Captain Korsikov."

"And you will have no geologist to tell you where to dig your next set of tunnels, and no engineer to show you how to build equipment that will make such a dig possible, and undetectable, Sergeant Ustinov." Alexi looked at the exploded rocks, scattered lumber and pieces of military hardware converted to other purposes. "You know," he proclaimed through a bold laugh. "You could make money from this mine. Sell tickets for people to see the Sergeant Ivan Gold Mining Museum. A showpiece of two, no, three hundred year old technology which boasts the least efficient yield of gold, or even silver, or anything else of value, in the world. You idiots were sitting on perhaps the biggest gold mine in Yakutia."

"WERE sitting on a gold mine? Not just a deposit of copper, nickel and...less valuable things?" Ivan grumbled, fear gripping his lips. Still, he held the gun squarely on Alexi's head.

"'Could be' under a few conditions," Alexi said.

“Now we talk,” Ivan said with pride, lowering his gun and placing it back into its saddle holster. “What percentage of this improved operation do you want for yourself?”

“Half,” the reply.

“Impossible!” Ivan yelled back. “Half of it for YOU! A newcomer to this place where I have been stuck for nearly ten years!”

“A quarter for me then. For the advancement of science.”

“And the pleasures and comforts of the scientist, I hope, Alexi!” ‘Uncle’ Ivan chuckled, taking out a flash of rum and two tin cups to toast the new arrangement. “This I think can be arranged. I have to talk with my other partners first, but such seems acceptable, and----”

“---A quarter of the yield for the prisoners and soldiers who work the mine.”

“Why?” Ivan steamed. “You think you are Karl Marx or that other German lunatic, Engels? You think you can create a Workers Paradise here!”

“Why not?” Alexi challenged, keeping to himself his surprise that the semi-literate Sergeant had even heard of Marx or Engels. “It is, or should be, the natural order of things that each should give according to their ability and take according to his, or her, needs.”

“HER needs as well!” Ivan laughed. “Now you sound like a DRUNK Revolutionary. Or worse, a pussy whipped Decembrist. Bloody lunatics.”

“A THIRD for the workers who take the gold out of the mountain, a third to advance the cause of Science and Enlightenment, then.”

“And a third for ME?!” Ivan belted back, not knowing why his insulting remark about the Decembrist arouse Alexi’s rage, and dignity. “I, my pathetically naïve and arrogantly aristocratic Captain, am the only one who can keep this gold mine a secret from the bankers, lawyers and politicians who will take it away from us! And the only one who can see that the gold we take out of the ground can turn into food for a man’s belly, furs for his back, or a woman for his---“

“---Understood, and appreciated,” Alexi interjected, not wanting to hear any more of Ivan’s exploits about being the most missed husband in Moscow and the most sought after source of sperm and pleasure amongst women in Siberia.

“So, we have an arrangement?” Alexi asked. “In thirds for our new mine?”

“With one problem to these numbers,” Ivan replied, reaching for his gun again. “Who will get the one percent left over? Which could be a very big one percent, or small one, depending on who is doing the counting.”

“The Czar” Alexi smiled back. “If WE choose to tell him.”

“You just be sure those ghosts you talk to don’t tell anyone either,” Ivan laughed. Finally, Uncle Ivan poured the rum from his flask into the two tin cups. It was the best of the best by the taste of it. A pure gold and silver bonanza toasted with two hundred year old brandy drunk out of rusted tin cups.

## CHAPTER 11

It was the opportunity of a lifetime for an idealistic, perhaps delusional, Visionary geologist-engineer in a country whose science was three centuries behind the rest of Europe. Mother Russia had only begun to extract gold from its own soil two generations ago, and even then the engineers in charge of the operation were using techniques straight out of the Middle Ages. Perhaps it was because Russian Dukes and Duchesses had enough expendable serfs to conscript into Armies which could steal what Mother Russia needed from Poland, the Balkans, Turkey or their new colony of Siberia. All science did, according to those who were really in charge, was to save human time and effort, freeing laborers to aspire to something other than mindless labor. As such, science, and scientists, were not only expendable, but potentially dangerous.

Alexi's knowledge of chemistry was poor relative to those of his contemporaries in Germany, France and even backwater Spain. But as for geology, he came to Siberia very smart, then became instinctively bright, perhaps because he began to talk to rocks rather than just study them. Something he attributed, at least in part, to his exposure to the Yakuts, a people whose vicious massacre of the Russians at the old mine had turned into his love for them into blind hate. But he had learned another instinct from his old friends and now enemies. Somehow his theoretical approach to physics and engineering made better sense when he started to orient the structures to the land he was building on, or with, rather than the aesthetics of the people who would live in them. Such a revised education began to take place when he observed the conical and lumber efficient yurts that kept the Yakuts warm during winter, while European-style log cabins remained cold and were more log than cabin. Perhaps it was the curves and flexibly gentle angles in the designs Alexi put on paper those long months of his first Siberian winter which replaced the harsh 90 degree angles never seen in Yakut engineering, nor in any created by Nature Itself.

Accompanying a wagonload of supplies with four very well armed guards on all sides of it, Ivan trotted his horse through the snow-sprinkled grassland valley which now had become mostly knee-deep mud, inspecting the newly designed mine which sprang up by mid Spring faster than the plumage on the trees chopped down to construct it. "It looks very impressive, Alexi."

"That is because it IS very impressive, Sergeant," Alexi answered, stroking his mustache, a handlebar design which was bordered by a now always clean shaven face, a uniform under it which was spotlessly clean every day, no matter how dusty or muddy the air was.

"Sergeant?" Ivan barked, in his usual non-regulation attire, the only item identifying him as being Russian, or Army, being a hat under his hood and a shirt under his reindeer buckskin coat. "It is me. Your friend and partner, Uncle Ivan!" he said, slipping off his horse and examining the week's take, giving his approval and praise with a thumbs up.

"You and your men are out of uniform," Alexi grumbled.

"And I suppose that we should wear our best Sunday uniforms with buttons polished so they can be seen for miles around so that the Yakut bandits know who we are?" he mused, as his men, soldiers under their civilian Hudson Bay trapper coats, unloaded the supplies.

"Yes," Alexi countered. "This mine is ours."

"But the land is theirs," Ivan noted.

"Land belongs to no one," Alexi asserted. "Except the one who claims it, and improves it."

"Or rapes it?" Ivan smiled, wiping the caked mud off his boots, sniffing the foul air. "But like any other woman, Mother Nature does allow for, and enjoys being fucked. And we have been given the dirty, and important job, of being the fuckers. Speaking of which, 'Captain' Korsikov." Ivan pulled out a map with a photograph of a very White Russian within it, taken with one of the new toys he had snuck into the fort through his black market genius, operated by a prisoner he acquired from another labor camp through means that he kept very private.

“I am not interested,” Alexi barked back, his attention drawn to a water and wind powered about to drill another hole into the mountain face where his instinct and all of his previous experience here said there was gold, silver or perhaps diamonds.

“But she likes you,” Ivan said, showing Alexi the picture of a woman.

“All Yakut bitches like assholes who have money, or the ability to get them guns.”

“This bitch isn’t Yakut, or a bitch, Alexi.” Ivan continued.

“I’m still not interested, Sergeant,” Alexi affirmed, looking at the over and underground maps of the mine which changed, by his own design, almost daily. Nodding to the head foreman, Petros, his final approval to blast away.

“Just look at her picture, Captain. Please.”

Giving in to the weakness that he called charity, or stupidity, Alexi indulged ‘Uncle Ivan’. “She’s white.” The woman’s smile was reminiscent of former but still yearned for fiancée Elena. Her eyes revealed an intelligence perhaps equal to that of Yakut physician-Shameness Katrina, but without the viciousness or cunning, now banned from treating any injured prisoner-worker or soldier, no matter how severe or hopeless the injury appeared to be. Starved of companionship of mind and plagued with loneliness of spirit, Alexi dared to look at the black and brown likeness of the woman, envisioning the best of the perhaps colorful Soul behind it. “She is...”

“Here. In Yakutia!”

“A convict?”

“An adventuress. Who looks like one of the women from back home. Where you used to call home, anyway.”

“Who you kidnapped, Sergeant?”

Uncle Ivan rotated his head in that same way he did when he was telling a half truth in service of someone who would be hurt, or endangered, by knowing the real truth. “She read letters about this place, the men in it, and...”

“Where is she from?” Alexi enquired in the manner of an officer in the Czar’s Imperial Army.

“Kiev.” Ivan smiled back very much as the civilian who he dreamed of becoming after his official enlistment was over.

“And she is telling her relatives that she is doing what here, Sergeant?”

“A schoolteacher, Sir. Who is looking for a husband. And who will be under your command. ”

“MY command!” Alexi was not happy about yet another administrative order sent to headquarters on his behalf.

“Captain,” Ivan said, taking his business partner and friend, aside for a discrete Uncle-Nephew talk. “You want your workers and my soldiers to learn how to read. Those who read think. And those who think work together. And those who work together are not destroyed by anger, jealousy and greed. And those not held hostage by those lower emotions are---”

“---Fine. A good idea.” Alexi interjected.

“Me bringing a schoolteacher out here for you? And the men?”

“You reminding me of my own ideals, in my own words,” Alexi said, gratefully. “Thank you.”

“You are very welcomed. As will she be...Sir?” Ivan asked.

“Of course. In my, our, classroom, Comrade Sergeant,” Alexi smiled. “And someone else’s bed,” he asserted, giving the picture back to Ivan.

“But, you know, I already have a wife, and a, you know...” Ivan answered with a lustful smirk.

“That’s two ‘you know’s’,” Alexi noted, with an aire of benign superiority. “Comrade Petros!” he yelled up to the technically-skilled prisoner who was now in charge of the soldiers who had nearly beat the brains out of him prior to Alexi’s arrival. “Come here, please.”

Alexi grabbed the picture of the schoolteacher from Ivan’s fingers and gave it to Petros. “You like her?”

“She has interesting eyes,” the Forman-Convict noted.

“Fine...She is yours, IF she agrees to it!” Alexi ordered.

Petros smiled.

“She has sisters. And cousins. And friends.” Uncle Ivan said. “Shall I....”

“Yes, yes...I suppose so,” Alexi said as he strolled over to the his observation site. With the stroke of his finger, he gave the approval for his Promethianly-designed blast. Thunder from the inside of the earth emanated into a volcanic blast. Water burst out of rock, and from the rock, golden-tinged nuggets. It was a good day for the camp, a productive one for Captain Alexi.

## CHAPTER 12

The fading of winter blossomed into full Springtime, then Summer. Yakutia was now a place of unprecedented beauty and prosperity for all, excluding the trees and rocks, which as any sane man or rational scientist knew, had no souls, or at least souls that were not expendable. Though extracting gold from rock was hard and slow work, there was no shortage of raw material containing the speckled powder that could make a pauper a prince, a broke eccentric into an recognized genius. Alexi didn't understand the anatomy of the economy of it all, and he certainly knew that gold was the most useless metal for any kind of machinery or inventions known to man. But given the yield being produced in the service of the Czar's people, but certainly without his Majesty's consent, perhaps it would be appropriate for Alexi to design a gold-powered wagon, boat or perhaps flying craft of some sort. Legends of old told of crafts from other worlds which got to earth powered by gold, which was mined by slaves who were the ancestors of modern man. Perhaps those Sumarian tales were based in real events which took place in Prehistoric Siberia. But gold was king now, and while his kingdom remained unrecognized, it could be the richest in the world. And the place from which scientific and political innovations could originate that outdid Atlantis, or even the places alluded to in Plato's Republic, Thomas Moore's 'Utopia' or suggested in the writings of Marx and Engels which found their way to the fort hidden amidst the pots, pans and Bibles smuggled in by Uncle Ivan and company.

With Petros looking after the mine, and Ivan doing whatever he did to insure that its yield and existence were still known only to the those who had to know about it, Alexi took a fortnight for a 'study week' in the fort, converting Colonel Putinov's headquarters into a laboratory for scientific exploration. Such was appropriate, as 'Philosopher King' Alexi was secure in the knowledge that all outside the walls of Soul-expanding monastery were secure, and for his Comrade subjects, happy. Everyone seemed to get what they wanted. The Comrade-prisoners now freely talked, walked and laughed with the soldiers who had been their guards, who themselves had been tortured by their own officers. The Comrade soldiers' pay finally matched the work they did and the place they had to do it in. The "schoolteachers" very enjoyably taught their new husbands, part-time lovers and curiously-sexually-disinterested male students reading, writing and arithmetic of the heart AND mind. Even 'Bishop' Lesenko benefited from the arrangement, as long as he taught the gospels of moral propriety, inefficiency of cruelty, and benefits to be drawn by the scientific mind and method. To help insure his success, Alexi increased the fee for Yakuts not attending Church to ten kopeks, and made them recite the liturgy in Russian, not their own tongue.

Alexi wanted to cut out the tongues of those savages, but it was the Bishop and Petros who kept him from doing so. The memory of the arrows from his 'Siberian people' slaying his 'Russian people' festered in Alexi's heartbroken soul. How dare these Native people betray him, when he tried to do everything he could for them, while he was still in 'provisional', command. Helpless to change policy while he thought Colonel Putinov would return with the Czar's iron-fisted policy towards anyone who wasn't White Russian, then Captain Alexi had bent the rules as much as he could. He had secretly returned the five kopek fees collected by Bishop from the Natives for not attending Church by lowering purchase prices for items at the fort the Yakut needed and wanted from the world the Russians brought in with them. Guns, knives, tobacco and sugar all became part of the Yakut's Stone Age life, available for less furs, meat and botanical goods than ever under Alexi's command. Yet, as memory served him, the Yakuts remained mostly silent when he walked into the trading post in his uniform. Even more silent when he asked them about 'Tygyn', the Diety, ideal or hidden agenda which no one explained to him, even Katerina. And as for her...how dare she deny knowing Basili Manchury after he found his green arrows in the slaughtered men, and boys, at the mine. And worse, how dare she deny that he, or any Yakut, was responsible for the raid. Perhaps her heart could be trusted, but not anything else about her. Still unanswered was the observation made by technically astute Petros that she, a presumably uneducated Shameness, had sabotaged the guns for the fort so that they would backfire on the users of such. Yet, she spared Alexi's life, or perhaps saved it. But for what purpose?

Alexi woke up after a long night of inventing to find a giftwapped box on the desk that he still revered as belonging to the slain Colonel Putinov, somehow. "Happy Birthday, Major Alexi," it read. It was signed 'Uncle Ivan'. Inside, the insignia of a Major, with written acknowledgement of such from High Command, an entity which still, thank God, Aiyy-toyon and of course Uncle Ivan, ruled from afar. With it



came a new sword, which Ivan slapped on his waist. He felt important, or most notably, valued and liked. He toasted his father, the Decembrist Reformer who had always been his friend, and idol. But only in his heart this time. A Philosopher King, and a Major, can never give voice to his madness, and never describe too much of what mortals cannot yet see. Alexi wished that his father had lived long enough to live in this new age of photography, so he could send him his picture as a Major, Philosopher-King, and Scientist, and so his father could send him a photograph of himself. But, for the moment, pictures ingrained in Alexi's heart and that of his father's ghost, who was still alive, someplace, and probably smiling, would have to do.

The private celebration of victory was rudely interrupted by a rider loping in to the fort who hitched the animal to the post near the Infirmary. The hooded messenger dismounted and grabbed three European-style medical bags from the back of the saddle.

"No she doesn't!" Alexi grunted. "No more!"

'Schoolteacher' Anna opened the door of the infirmary, welcoming the rider in. Alexi's hand prevented entry. "We have our own doctors," he grunted at Katerina when she removed the hood from her sweat-soaked head. "And where did you steal those bags!?"

"As part of my education, 'Major' KURSikov?" her reply.

"Killing your 'patients' with special medicines with green feathered arrows?" he asserted, taking the bags from her, inspecting them while two infantrymen, one limping, the other with a cough hobbled over to see how they could be of assistance.

"It's alright, Major," Anna interjected. "I sent for her."

"Well you can send her back."

"To-yo, 'Major' Kursikov?"

"Excuse me?" Alexi said, his mind focused on seeing what new brand of 'medicinals' the Shameness clandestinely trained also in European medicine had in her bag for the ill patients in the infirmary who seemed to not be responding to the usual medicines, for reasons he nor the normally proficient "Doctor Anna" could understand.

"To what?" Anna asked.

"It means 'why', Major Kuriskov," Katerina spat out with her hurt and angry eyes. "Why won't you let me help your people? And why are you making life harder for mine? Didn't you say that we are ALL one people here?"

"I was mistaken," Alexi's reply.

"Apparently, so was I." She said something to the patients inside. By the sounds of it, apologetic. One of the ill Comrade-prisoners translated for the others, focusing in particular on one whose advancing speckled skin and open sores now made all of them look alike.

"You are apologizing for your people killing my Comrades?" Alexi said.

"For you killing them, Major" she smiled back, bitterly. With that Katerina took back her bags and mounted her horse. She turned to Anna. "When the Philosopher King here gets sick, call me. So I can treat everyone else."

"Just one question first!" Alexi asserted.

"Tygyn again?" she laughed, turning the horse towards the gate. "You are not even ready to begin to understand that yet, Major Kursikov"

“Kurse-ikov?” Alexi asked, cautiously.

“There are other names I have for you, but I dare not think them. Or act on what they are.” With that, the Shameness who had power over body, mind and, when possessed by anger, human spirits galloped out of the fort, as another wagon load of ‘wounded’ workers came in from the direction of the ‘non-existent’ mine.

## CHAPTER 13

As any student of history knows, the Golden Age of Athens didn't end with the Persian sword, the Spartan spear, or even fires from Mount Olympus from gods jealous of humans who were becoming independent of them. It was a plague, an 'accident' of microbial nature which happens. It happened to the Yakuts when the first Russian trappers built forts amongst their mobile villages of yurts. And it seemed to be happening now to Alexi's Paradise. Certainly not on the scale of the Bubonic Plague that decimated half of Europe at a time when it only a century or two away from discovering the New World. But enough to worry about.

It wasn't about numbers of people who were afflicted, but who was being struck. The greediest, according to the stories about how they learned to sew gold dust into the inner linings of their pockets, only evident when they arrived at the infirmary. And the short sighted, who were listed as missing from the work roster at the mine, along with a horse or two, then--the lucky ones at least--found a week later. The rest of the 'deserters', as Alexi forbid them to be called, were found with feathered arrows and lead bullet in their backs, their dead pockets emptied of all belongings.

The numbers weren't that large, given the normal loss to 'natural' disease in Siberia for prisoners at the hands of the extremes of climate, soldiers at the hands of each other, and officers at the hands of disgruntled prisoners or soldiers. And if you add the self-induced deaths normally occurring in the hell Siberia could become for an exiled Russian of any kind, it was just another year of 'normal' and expected losses. But this year, the multiple causes of Russian death not due to Yakut arrows or bullets in 'hunting accidents' were reduced down to a delirious fever and erosion of the skin which started with the most simple and normally healable of wounds. Nothing the Saint Petersburg trained Doctor Anna had in her medicine bag worked, and Alexi's reading of medical texts from Germany, England and even Ancient Egypt provided no useful clues as to cause or cure. Perhaps the cause of the disease was an insect found only in Siberia, or perhaps a two legged vector for a disease indigenous to Yakutia, not stoppable by any buyable cure from anywhere else. Sergeant Ivan was working as fast and discretely as he could to buy medicines that could work, but would they work? And would they arrive in time? The vastness of the Siberian wilderness was always a source of its beauty, but distance was the greatest enemy to those in need here, the fastest way to get from one point to another still on horseback, a hundred miles a day for a skilled Russian rider, perhaps two hundred if he incorporated skills known to the Ancient Mongol hordes and some of the still-independent Yakuts. One tenth of that distance if Mother Nature decided her subjects should move at a slower pace. The solution, of course, was to design a supply wagon that could fly, perhaps with a horse or without one. But even if Alexi's experimental flying carts were still to stay airborne for than a minute, there were many minutes from here to ANYwhere else now.

Alexi's reasoning led him to even suspect Katerina as the cause for the unrecognizable plague afflicting his men, but thankfully not yet any of the women at the fort. Or perhaps some other Shamaness was at the root of the disease which turned eager workers at the mine into dying patients at the fort. HIS fort. HIS people. With HIS new scientific and socially-enlightened empire at stake. With HIS Christian God doing nothing to stop it.

As cold as the land was in winter, such was as sweltering with heat it was now, at least twenty degrees hotter than any summer day Alexi had recorded or experienced back home, a place which he now yearned for more than ever, no matter what his social station he would be assigned to occupy. Even being a servant to Elena and her new husband would be an easier life task than the one he had now, but he remained a servant of his Vision and his people, even if he had to serve them one at a time. With Doctor Anna and all the other available schoolteachers at the fort tending to those who could perhaps still be helped medically, it fell to Alexi to tend to those who couldn't.

"We made lots of money this month, didn't we Alexi?" Vladimir Petrishun slurred out from a mouth filled with ulcers, half of the flesh off his lips having sloughed off.

"Yes, we did, Comrade Petrishun," Alexi assured the man who could have been either a prisoner, or a soldier prior to his demise. The new rule banning military and prison attire, instilled by Ivan to

minimize Yakut raids, and re-enforced by Alexi for more idealistic reasons blurred any rank of social distinction. Indeed, if any man, of any rank or fate were to go 'home' before permitted to do so by High Command, a worse fate awaited him than Vladimir's present dilemma.

"My wife and children. They will get my share of the gold?" Vladimir smiled. "By what I estimate, it is now eight or nine hundred---"

"---Twelve hundred," Alexi smiled back, anonymously factoring in a cut from his own third, which was earmarked not for his own stomach or pocket, but to fund his research laboratory which would serve everyone, eventually. "Your wife and children will get money next month too. And the months after that for as long as..." Alexi choked.

"As long as what?" the once robust man, now emaciated dying corpse asked, desperate for an answer, grabbing Alexi's arm with cold, weak hands that gripped Alexi's soul into a pit of terror.

Alexi was not a 'hugger', keeping his hands to himself in all but required gestures such as handshakes. His hand did shake, but with a tremor as he forced his open palm to rest on Vladimir's shoulders. "For as long as I am alive, and anyone is alive here, your wife and children will be alive, happy and taken care of," he pledged.

Vladimir breathed a sigh of relief through the death rattle now clearly audible to Alexi's ears. He had heard of it, read about it, but had never heard it for himself. Until now, it was not in his job description as a Captain, Major, Scientist-Engineer, or Philosopher King.

"You know, we Jews don't believe in Heaven," Vladimir said, his glassed over, bloodshot eyes staring at the roof, or something beyond it.

"I did not know that," Alexi said, the prospect of his own death and the hereafter finally forced into a primary source of consideration, with no way of being shuffled back into the 'we'll deal with that later' category of things.

"We Jews also don't believe in hell," Vladimir commented confidently, his blistered lips breaking into a smile. "Even though eight years in Siberia will convince even your Christian devil that hell exists, even for Jesus. A third of the way through the twenty-five year long enlistment contract the Czar offers Jews in exchange for not burning down their village back home." He turned somber. "But one does have to believe in something beyond the fairy tales of Heaven or Hell," he said.

"Or someone," Alexi added, the words coming out before the meaning of such. Maybe he was talking about Elena. Maybe God. Maybe himself. Maybe a Deity which he somehow wanted, or needed, to personify.

"You hear that, you bastard!" Vladimir yelled up to the sky, pulling his cold, pus-soaked hands into a fist. "I still believe in SOMETHING, you sadistic bastard! Creator of misery, affliction and pain! And for your own Chosen People! Who You delivered out of bondage in Egypt so we could suffer at the hands the Inquisition! The Czar! And now..." Vladimir's voice was held hostage by a lump in his throat. His face turned pale, his bulging and determined Promethian eyes recedeing back into the sockets, fixed face to face with Demon fear. He folded his hands in prayer and wept. "Forgive me, Lord. Forgive me," he wept. "Please take care of my wife, my children, and if you can not send my soul to hell, I will give you anything. Anything..." The rest of the communication with the heavenly 'father' was in Hebrew, with eyes closed, diminishing to whisper, then sleep. Snoring this time, deep and loud, which amplified the death rattle.

Perhaps Vladimir would die in his sleep, or in a dream, Alexi thought, and prayed for. Perhaps a dream based in reason, courage and Truth. Perhaps it was time for Alexi to think outside of his own brain, or designed machinery he called intelligence. It was Katerina's voice that he heard the loudest. "Major KURSikov", as he was now apparently known to her Asiatic people, and perhaps his Caucasian people, would have to have the curse removed. The best of his reasoning and intuition told Alexi that he was

responsible for the nightmare his dream was becoming. As he looked at his sword, there was only one solution that would work for man, woman, God, and himself.

## CHAPTER 14

With summer in full bloom, the semi-nomadic Yakuts were on the move again. Their herds, which contained five horses to every cow, grazed one valley to the next, but as one large herd rather than the smaller ones of ten or twenty per family. It made finding the trail to Katerina's mobile medicine yurt, or perhaps Basili Manchury's summer hideout, very easy.

Alexi swiftly rode from one half eaten, manure-covered pasture to the next, noting the haybails tucked away into the scattered brush or recently dug holes covered with straw and loose sticks. Following him were the birds, magnificent creatures which effortlessly traversed distances and scaled elevations faster than anything on land or water. Harbingers of death as well, according to Slavic legends. Particularly if they were owls, the omen of impending doom according to the books Alexi had read about the American Yakuts, 'Indians' as the Whites called them there.

With each valley, the number of hoofs and human prints on the short-grassed plains increased. He calculated their numbers, and possible strengths. He further calculated how far the gifts on his packhorse and interconvertible wheel-less and wheel-bearing travail behind the animals would go with such a large number of disgruntled, well fed, and undoubtedly well armed Natives at the other end.

It was foolish to think the Yakuts knew nothing about the gold mine. It was foolhearted to bring them gold dust pounded from the rocks found there. Bringing them guns was unthinkable. Bibles would be insulting. The stores of tobacco and sugar at the fort had been stolen. As for furs, the Yakut knew very well how to skin the hides of animals, or people threatening to harm or steal their most prized horses, a fact that unsuspecting escaped convicts in past years learned very quickly when they needed to create distance between themselves and Cavalry charged with bringing them back to the labor camps.

The only thing Alexi could bring, besides his own now worthless and hated hide, was the gold-colored rocks. As such, the gold within them was worthless for any real material purpose, but the perception of sharing the wealth was needed. The reality was that the Yakuts had what they needed and wanted during this very grass-filled summer, whereas their Russian 'stewards' depended on them.

Alexi gave way to the hot sun above and let his horses drink in a stream amidst a clump of birch trees. By the count of hayfields, horsehoofs and manure piles, Alexi calculated that the Yakut outnumbered the Russians by fifty to one. He took out his map and tried to assess where they were heading. By the looks of it, the toyons were gathering in one spot. Perhaps for the Summer Festival which Alexi had been told about during better times in the dead of winter by the trappers and traders who WOULD talk to him. Even though he was an Officer in the Army that provided them with guns, tobacco, sugar, and iron knives, for the nominal price of most of their autonomy. But such was the 'golden past'. The future, if such a thing was possible for Alexi and his beloved Comrades back at the fort, lay just over the next hill.

The camp was larger than any Alexi imagined possible for the Yakuts. The laughter was more expressive than any he had seen. The music was more melodious than his ears every enjoyed, even though there was no clear melody and the only instruments employed was a sort of Jew's Harp and the most ancient of musical instruments, the human voice. There were children here too. More children than Alexi had ever seen at the fort's trading post, an establishment which Alexi insisted sell no rum to anyone. There were more children here than Alexi had seen in Bishop Lesenko's Church as well, their smiling faces reminding him of the golden, happy childhood with his own father which he had, or allowed himself to remember having.

Alexi sat on his horse on the overlook, still hidden by the trees. How to enter? What to say? Who to say it to? There were no sentries here. No guards with rifles poised to shoot first and maybe ask questions of the corpse later as it was in his world, in part by necessity. The only necessity here was Life, with a big L. Preserved most notably by a Healer between himself and the camp, tending to a the most deserving of patients.

By the looks of the mare, she had colicked badly, her week old colt restlessly running circles around her. Mother lay on the ground, kicking at her belly, breathing heavily. She was thrashing violently,

each effort on the part of the human healer answered with another kick that came closer to opening up the healers head as the healer tried to hear the mare's belly with her own ears.

"She's collicing," Alexi screamed out to Katerina with his rope and gun in hand, pushing her aside just as the mare threw another kick that cut into her neck. He grabbed his rope and gun and rushed to her aid. He knelt down on the horse's neck, prepared to put the dangerous and hurting animal out of its misery.

"You spooked her," the Yakut Shameness grunted at Alexi as she grabbed hold of her European-made medical bag. "And scared her colt!"

"She was going to kill you!" Alexi asserted, using all of his other available resources to hold the convulsing horse down. "She's collicing. We have to put her out of her misery."

"Maybe, maybe not," Katerina said calmly, examining the horse's lips, nearly averting getting her finger bitten off as the still-protective mare noted humans between her and the newborn equine life she valued more than her own. "Gums not too sticky, and the color comes back in two seconds," she noted.

Moving on to the mare's neck, Katerina felt the pulse under the jaw. She smiled.

"Good?" Alexi asked, running out of strength.

"Better. Only forty five beats a minute now."

Katerina moved to the belly now, laying on the ground, her head and body in places which violated every rule of safe horsehandling Alexi was ever taught, or read about. But she was not hurt, as calm as can be. And as for the matter of 'time', how did the pocketwatchless Katerina know how long a second was? Alexi pulled his pocketwatch bearing the inscription from his father, now lacking the likeness of Elena, and felt the pulse for himself. "Forty two now," he noted as the mare stopped kicking. Then forty, as he noted to Katerina, on the other side of the horse as the animal breathed easier. Then thirty six, as the mare rose up on her feet, the colt rushing in for a long-overdue drink from her nipple.

Katerina's hand held two long Chinese-looking needles, a European syringe and a now empty leather pouch of powder. She was exhausted. Drained in body, mind AND spirit. So many questions emerged from Alexi's scientific mind, but an inquiry which was more personal, and interestingly spiritual, came to his voice.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"Healer's drain," she noted. "It happens to you when you channel the right treatment, and the patient receives it."

The evidence of the claim was clear enough. The mare who seemed incurable, by all of Alexi's experience, and by the looks of it was doing better. Better than better. Well, as she munched on green grass springing from the black-rich Earth while her very hungry colt satiated himself most enjoyably on milk from her breasts.

Katerina let her knees fall to the ground, offered a prayer Aii-toyan, then crossed herself, kissing the crucifix around her neck and addressing Jesus in her own tongue, with a gentle warmth and laughter Alexi had never seen any Christian woman do.

"My doctor back home would pray BEFORE he would stitch up my cuts," Alexi noted.

"To remember the Source of our healing after the healing is done is more important," she smiled, still in a world of her own behind the eyes. "But you came for something other than to scare this mare's colt half to death Major Kursikov?" she continued, 'reality' coming back to her agendas.

“I want the curse lifted from me,” Alexi said, falling on his knees. “I need your help to lift it. With whatever powers or abilities you have.”

“And you offer what in exchange?” she asked.

“My packhorse.”

“The one with the shoeing job worse than any blind, one armed ‘Yakut’ farrier ever did?”

“In the saddlebag!” Alexi asserted. “Please,” he continued in Russian, then his best Yakut.

Katerina corrected Alexi’s pronunciation in the same harsh manner that Bishop corrected Yakut parishioners when they mis-pronounced Jesus’ loving name and took a look for herself.

“Rocks,” she noted, cynically, rummaging through the saddlebags overloaded with pebbles.

“Special rocks!” Alexi asserted.

“Maybe they talk to you now, but they don’t speak to me.”

“After you see what is inside of them, you will see that they talk to EVERYONE!” Alexi grunted. He rose, took one of the rocks in his hand, and split it open. “Gold!” he asserted, pointing to the specs.

“From OUR land. If it is gold at all,” Katerina smirked.

“It is gold! Which will make ANYone rich in this vast wilderness that WILL become colonized and conquered by MY people from the West, who outnumber your people here, sooner than you think. Gold! What rules the world that will take over this place very soon. Gold!!!”

“Now mined by your people...”

“And shared by yours. One quarter of it for the next...year.” Alexi said.

“A third.” Katerina folded her arms, standing firm.

“A quarter!” Alexi asserted, holding on to at least some of his arranged share of the very private loot raped from the earth according to some, acquired by application of intelligence according to others. “Unless YOUR people want to dig up the rocks yourselves. With...let’s see what kind of technology YOU have...Your still wheel-less led. Your horses, who I’m sure you would love to work to death pulling loads twenty times larger than any wagon. Or maybe your children, who can dig with their bows, arrows and iron knives at, let’s see, a rate of...” Alexi started doing the calculations of feet per day divided by numbers of human hands used, or severed in the mining process which was as repulsive to the Yakuts as was the practice of farming which he hoped they would employ into their lives, but knew now they wouldn’t or couldn’t.

“A quarter of the gold then,” Katerina finally conceded.

“Which you will pound out from rocks and pebbles which I will see are delivered to you, and you only.” Alexi said. “In exchange for you treating my miners so they can get back to work.”

“Agreed.”

“In exchange for you stopping those men from shooting the arrows, and now bullets, from Basili Manchury’s arsenal, and or those of any other murderous Yakut bandits.”

“I will do what I can,” Katerina said with a poker face. “And must,” she conceded, begrudgingly. “But as for bandits, I would suggest that you look beyond Basili Manchury” she asserted.



“And I suggest that you consider what we both, and ALL have to lose if our arrangement reaches the wrong ears. In your camp, and mine.” Alexi quickly buried the gold containing rocks next to a birch tree, covering the hole with dirt, moss and horse manure. He showed Katrina the saddle under it. “Please gather what you need quickly, Doctor. We have a long ride and little time.”

“Less than even you think,” Katerina warned, her medical belongings in the saddlebag, her legs around the pack animal, her final blessings bestowed on the equine mother and child she, and perhaps Alexi, had just saved.

## CHAPTER 15

By the time Katerina arrived at the fort infirmary with Alexi, Vladimir's soul had passed on. The still-agnostic young Major had no way of knowing if it was to hell or heaven. Or perhaps into an animal or, if he was Worthy enough according to Yakut beliefs, a giant tree which would be served with gifts at its roots. He was at peace now, or so Alexi, and the room full of patients about to have answered for them that Ultimate Mystery, chose to believe.

Katerina's treatment was as self-contradictory and elusive as was she herself. It was to be taken three times a day, along with a chant in Yakut and, excluding those who now claimed to be Jews, crossing oneself nine times with each hand to ensure drainage of the toxins leaving the points on the chest opened by insertion of Chinese-bearing needles into the skin. The extract to push the toxins out and restore the 'chi' within was part quinine powder, a spoonful of opium-tainted cough syrup, willowbark extract, ginseng root, echinacea elixer and a concoction of herbs neither Alexi nor Doctor Anne recognized in name, appearance or smell. According to Katerina it was the most important element of the mixture. According to the results obtained within the first two days, it worked, reducing the fevers and in those who had not scratched them open, healing of the skin ulcers without any evidence of scarring within a week.

On this morning, another three patients turned in their hospital gowns and traded them in for work boots. They gave thanks to Katerina, one with a greeting in her own language, another with a Hebrew blessing, and another with a hug containing as much force, and affection, as a brown bear, a creature which according to Yakut legend, was the result of mutually consensual inter-species ancestral cross breeding. Katerina was exhausted beyond measure after a week of 'healer's drain'. "It would have been nice if treating small pox was this easy," she commented to Alexi, still staring at the plant containing the most essential of the magic potion in her very scientifically-based experience.

"What did this, and everything else you did, cure?" Alexi asked.

"Plague, of one sort or another I suppose," she said. "The best kind of medicine is that which helps the body treat itself, not that which kills a specific agent that brings the disease."

"Just as the best cure, and prevention, to eliminate crimes is not more laws, but honor that makes crime irrelevant, and unproductive," Alexi smiled.

Katerina smiled back, with the kind of Comradship he never felt from Ivan, Petros or even his father. And the kind of love and respect he remembered from Elena, but upon further recollection, only imagined. "Thank you," she said, in Russian.

"Thank US," his reply in Yakut, the pronunciation of which she gently corrected him upon.

With that, Katerina kissed him on the cheek and started to pack her things.

"I thought that man was supposed to be the one who, you know, left home after, you know..." Alexi noted, sadly.

"I'll be back, soon," her promising and confident reply.

"That too is what a man says when he is leaving a..." Alexi couldn't describe who she was to him, in Russian or Yakut.

"Partner?" she interjected. "We are business partners, remember? One quarter of the take from the mine, which you are taking from your portion, discretely and without telling your other partners."

"Yes indeed," Alexi remembered of the deal he made with her on behalf of her people, having forfeited 75% or more of his own share. A wise investment, as it turned out, as the plague caused by the disease that would never be written about would have decimated ALL of the available skilled and trustable labor. Thinking about what he could get, rather than what he had to conserve, Alexi brought up the

investment question which would solve everybody's shortage dilemmas for generations to come. "These plants which you used. The ones that have no name or description in any book I know of."

"Because they don't grow anywhere else but here," Katerina replied, gathering the gifts left to her by the patients who were forced to trust her, then respected her. She sorted out what medical tools and botanicals which were hers. "In my travels these plants can only grow here. In the wilderness. Under the right conditions"

"Or a well-tilled, fertilizer-fed farm field, perhaps with a roof of glass on top of it," Alexi suggested.

"Save your glass roofs for growing tobacco," she mused. "It is an interesting enough plant which may provide some personal pleasures but, I suspect, may also cause some medical harm. I suppose it depends who is using it though." The Shameness slung the sacs three times her mass and twice her weight over her five-foot-three body and turned towards the door.

"So you want us to stop trading tobacco for furs?" Alexi asked.

"Unless you can find a way to keep your people warm in winter, and my people can find a habit they enjoy during the months of the long nights more than smoking, we are stuck with such practices," she smiled.

"And each other?" Alexi inquired, his open heart shaking on his terrified sleeve.

"I suppose so," her reply. Warm, respectful and loving.

## CHAPTER 16

“Make hay while the sun shines,” was the motto for Summer in Old Russia and, as Alexi now called Yakutia, New Russia. Only a man who was lazy or short-sighted would quit work when the clock hit six o’clock, as there was still four more hours of daylight given by Mother Nature to those who had the wisdom and tenacity to use it. As for Mother Nature being put to work, the windmills surrounding the mine continued to convert the dreaded Siberian wind into power passed down to people below them. Whatever power was not used immediately was stored in electricity-storing boxes containing nickel and other metals which, interestingly, were very plentiful. As for the economics of the Philosopher-King’s “New Russia”, each gave according to their abilities and took according to their needs. Added to that was a profit incentive. The man who works hardest reaped up to fifty percent more reward. The meaning of ‘work’ was a multifactorial formula which incorporated use of body, mind and heart, worked out by Alexi and overseen by Petros, whose salary was fixed. In fact, the former prisoner who was now in charge of soldiers and his fellow convicts asked for and took no salary for his labors. “I will get what I need when your New Russia is built, according to your father’s legacy,” he would say again and again.

It made sense. The Georgian prisoner who still let High Command think he was serving his fifteen year sentence of hard labor was now a free man in a place far from home, with no one at home to whom he had to answer to or who he still cared about, according to what he kept saying, again and again. It was as if Petros had found a new religion, or even better, was a disciple of Alexi’s new Vision. As such, he had the right, and duty, to tell Alexi things good and bad as they happened at the mine.

“The good word for today, Comrade Alexi, is that in the last week, no one has been stealing any gold from the Collective, or reported to have done such,” he said.

“You ARE allowing thieves to return what they steal without repercussions, and anonymously,” Alexi asked.

“Of course,” Petros answered. “It is interesting that at no time in our New Republic’s history, has its citizens been working more honestly and cooperatively.”

“Yes, we must be thankful for that,” Alexi commented, calculating the monetary worth of the gold after weighing it, comparing it to the ‘waste’ rock left behind. “Interestingly that it is taking more labor and rocks to get the same amount of gold as last week, and month,” he noted.

“And it is interesting that no Yakuts have been killing any more of our deserters,” Petros replied.

“You are letting them go, I hope,” Alexi said. “This is a Republic, not a Labor Camp.”

“Which must remain secret, unless ALL of us are to be sent to labor camps,” the former prisoner reminded the Major who had never experienced a day of incarceration in his life.

Alexi remembered that his brief experience with captivity was confined to a few hours of being tied to a post at the hands of the very gentlemanly Colonel from Moscow who had mistaken him for a common bandit, or worse, a Russian deserter. Would he have turned on men he respected or women he loved under torture? The refined Colonel’s sadistic whip master interrogator Corporal never did get a chance to use his branding iron on Alexi’s still unscarred, unburned and un-beaten flesh. Had it not been for Uncle Ivan coming along, Alexi would have found out what kind of man he really was. The not-yet-thirty Emperor of this new clandestine Empire had good ‘battle’ instincts, but as for what kind of captive he would be, all of his projections told ‘Alexi the Great’ that he would be a colossal failure. A disgrace. A man who would be the first to turn in his Comrades to avoid pain or suffering. The kind of man his father, the Decembrist who God chose to spare from the Czar’s hanging noose, would spit on, and which history would paint in the darkest colors possible.

But for now, matters focused on material dilemmas. Though Alexi was a brilliant geologist, he was a poor chemist. His instinct for sensing where gold-containing rocks were was godlike, but his knowledge or intuition about how to extract the precious soft element from hard rock was very backward

indeed. Pounding, panning, and filtering was the best information he could provide. Neither Petros nor anyone else could provide any other answers.

“You have any ideas, Comrade Engineer?” Petros enquired after seeing the numbers for the week’s yield of gold, the lowest in the mine’s brief yet eventful history. “The rocks have become bigger and stronger than we are.”

“So then we will have to become smarter,” Alexi said with as optimistic smile as he could muster.

“Or luckier?” Petros answered. “Like we have been with the Natives here. I have heard that those Yakut savages have stopped killing those who chose to resign from their post here. And those who have escaped from other labor camps who are not ruled by Philosophers.”

“Yes, they have,” Alexi smiled, turning his eyes away so that Petros could not ascertain the real reason for his satisfaction, and the identity of his new very silent Mongoloid-skinned partners.

“So this means we will have to shoot them ourselves, rather than let traitors to our Cause be shot down by Yakut arrows?” Petros grunted, standing at attention in the manner of the guards who used to beat him. He was awaiting word to enforce the will of the People onto persons who threatened the common good, for the Cause of Good, of course. He held his earth-prodding mineralodetector probe like a British Officer’s swaggerstick, or a Commissar’s personal whip. Dangerously close to using it on ANYone who he considered inferior or conquerable. All, of course, for the Common Good. And, thus far, in the service of “Alexi the Great’s” enlightened empire.

Such a shift in Petros’ psychological dynamic was inevitable. Give a person power who has not been used to it, and there was the inevitable period where pride became arrogance. To turn into intentional viciousness---such was neither in Alexi’s political speculations nor philosophical projections. But the extremes to which Mother Nature expressed herself in this vast and still untamed frontier reminded everyone that she, eventually, was boss. Petros’ infatuation with his new power would be temporary, replaced by wisdom, or perhaps enlightened self interest, the highest form of which was love. In any case, Uncle Ivan would put things right, and educate Petros just as he had educated Alexi.

The mid-day meal bell rang. The men came down from their work stations and were given the best food cookable by the hand of man, and even women. Uncle Ivan’s ‘Schoolteachers’, who now pleased men with private lessons after hours far more selectively than upon their arrival, served lunch at the tables set up at the mine. Today it was goulash and cabbage rolls, with Ukrainian perogies secretly enjoyed by the Russians more than any of the Ukrainians. The meat was mostly reindeer, moose and fox, rather than beef. The ‘chicken’ was in reality wild duck. The cabbage more of an endogenous leaf than the staple crop of the agriculturally-oriented steppes back home. But no one complained, and everyone seemed happy. Even about the lack of wine or vodka on the table. Even when Comrade Alexi asked the men, in confidential enough situations, about their food, work and new lives as cooperative owners in the ‘People’s Bank’. Perhaps it was common sense. Or perhaps a less altruistic and clandestinely-oppressive kind of control was underfoot, or transiently-necessary. Uncle Ivan would explain to Alexi when he got back from his ‘communications’ Mission, the details of which he refused to communicate to anyone, for reasons that made sense, even to the ever-inquisitive scientist Alexi.

Alexi hoped that he hadn’t become another ‘Bishop’ Lesenko, the priest who still lived under the illusion that it was through his efforts and prowess that the Yakut attended Mass at his Chapel, called themselves by Christian names around Russians, and wore Crucifixes around their necks when trading furs for guns at the fort. Perhaps the Bishop was as delusional about Christian Orthodoxy as Alexi now was about his new religion, or his favorite Missionary in it, Katerina.

Alexi met with the critically-thinking Shameness every at least once a week now, in secret from his people and, as was agreed to, without the knowledge of most of hers. They exchanged gold-containing rocks, ideas about the way each of their world should be, observations about how they were really becoming, and more personal thoughts always couched in philosophical and political banter. There were still some questions that went unanswered. Such as Alexi’s inquiry about the identity and whereabouts of

Tygyn, a man, or perhaps woman, who seemed to be able to empower the Yakuts to do anything. It seemed fair enough to Alexi for him to be told about Tygyn, since he had told Katerina about the spirit guiding him who spoke only in whispers now.

“Your father wants you to figure the answers out yourself,” Katerina commented to Alexi after he had exhausted himself talking to one of the large trees one of the five secret meeting places, still obtaining no answer he could hear in words. Even after he laid two gold containing rocks at its feet. “I think he wants you to think this whole Scientifically Formed Paradise in the Wilderness thing out for yourself,” she continued, her features looking more European than normal.

“Tell me about your father, or grandfather, please,” he asked.

“Great men, so my mother and grandmother told me,” she smiled, sadly, a memory of pain behind her angry eyes. “Most of the time. Some of the time.”

“And your mother, or grandmother. They were from...”

“It was my FATHER who was from where you are from!” she blasted out. “Those rumors about White women coming out here as wives for settlers and Missionaries getting captured and raped by our people are not true.”

“They are true to our schoolteachers, and now the men who are sworn to protect them and, as Doctor Anna suspects, the babies in their wombs.” Alexi noted, sadly.

“You believe every story you hear, Philosopher King Alexi?”

“My ‘subjects’ do. Even the ones who you saved.”

“So,” Katerina said, stroking the Mongaloid cheeks under her half-round eyes. “We must design another plague so that I, or we, can save them with Yakut Magic and Decembrist Russian science!” she proclaimed.

“That is not funny,” Alexi answered.

“Neither is what your people are doing to our people these days, I HOPE behind your back.” Katerina grunted out. “After the toyons all agreed to...” She abruptly collected the gold-containing rocks, placing them in the saddlebag of her packhorse.

“Agreed to what?” Alexi blasted out.

“To do what we have to do, Major Korsikov.”

“After they....we...did what?” Alexi really wanted, and needed, to know.

“You really don’t know?” she asked from atop her saddle.

“No. I don’t.”

Katerina dismounted and set the horses out into a lush patch of grass. It would be a long mid-afternoon meal of succulent salad for the animals, an overdue feeding of reality-meat stew for the still vegetarian-souled Alexi.

## CHAPTER 17

Katerina talked. Alexi listened and then asked more questions. Katerina answered him, then asked even more questions---very important ones about things he was not supposed to tell anyone, and wasn't really sure about himself. But before he could give her answers, someone found Katerina in the spot that only he and she were supposed to know about. It was an over-armed Yakut hunter on a horse drenched with sweat, carrying news about a sick child from a neighboring clan who needed her healing powers to treat all three of the child's 'inner bodies'. Whatever the out-of-breath messenger said beyond the medical report concerning the patient, it mattered more to Katerina to follow him back without delay than to continue to conversation. Alexi was off the hook again, 'miraculously'. He would not have to tell Katerina what he was really going to do about the deteriorating relations between the Yakuts and the now even better-armed European Immigrants.

"Misunderstandings between White and Yellow skinned people are as inevitable as babies from a brain-dead whore," Alexi remembered Uncle Ivan telling him just before he left this last time. Still keeping the identity of the 'brain dead whores' he had in mind quite confidential. Such confidences were to be kept, as it was a gentlemanly thing to do, even in this frontier in which no man who was 'gentle' could survive. But this time, now Major Korsikov, promoted because of Uncle Ivan, couldn't, or wouldn't leave the affairs of the Natives in the hands of the Yakut-speaking Sergeant whose communication skills still kept Alexi's Utopian Paradise private, and very well provisioned.

Alexi put his Hudson's Bay trapper coat over his uniform, slapped more mud over the Russian Army brand on his horse Salgit, and rode back to the fort, now emptied of the gold-containing rocks which now Katerina had to worry about pounding the wealth out of. She told him things to worry about, too, which raised volatile questions about what was going on at the fort while he was not at his post there. Like why the newest British and German made guns found their ways into the hands of the Russian 'citizens' of his New Republic, while arms became less available for Yakut hunters when they traded warm furs, fresh meat or gold in order to obtain them, with many of the weapons found to be defective when put into use. Like why toyan and commoner men were trading in their traditional robes for European coats. Their traditionally-carved spears for bullets. And after indulging in too much of the now very available rum, their women for mares, or more bottles of rum.

"Teach a man to hunt, and he will feed himself," Alexi pondered as he gazed at the game around him, which now could be meat in his stomach, should he choose them to be. "Teach a man to read, and he will educate himself and others," he extrapolated, glancing at his diary containing the observations about the rising literacy rate and, perhaps, learning capacity of the formerly illiterate soldiers and prisoners under his command. "Teach a man to distill his own potatoes and he can make his own vodka," came to Alexi's troubled mind as he observed a camp below him nestled amongst the birch trees, the still in the middle of it guarded by four well-armed men with hoods hiding their faces. The coats were Yakut, and perhaps the men wearing them were too. Alexi's fear turned into rage. The Yakuts had resisted the wheel, and still would rather go hungry than even consider attempting agriculture. Yet here they were, 'innovating' with a well-built distillation apparatus making firewater from something in the fermentation pots, berries amongst the mixture. Maybe 'wildberry wine' would have a taste that would make elixirs extracted from French grapes or Polish potatoes taste like piss-water, flushing the European tradition of fine wine making down into the gutter once introduced into the marketplace. But by the looks of the man tasting the brew, the alcohol's ability to give a tingle to the head rather than how the tongue tasted ANYthing on the way down was the measure of success, or failure. Nods of 'yes' were shared all around, a jolt of smoke emanating from the fire.

Alexi's pack horse snorted, then bucked, snapping the primarily lead line. He dismounted, reined it in as quickly and quietly as he could. Be they drunken Russians or Yakuts, they could still shoot straight enough or long enough to put a round into Alexi's chest, or worse, his horse's belly. Then Salgit got whiff of the distillery's very unnatural and terror-inducing 'excrement'. It found its way into Alexi's nostrils too, evoking memories of home, with another emotional response. While his hands were calming the horses down, Alexi's mind recalled the kind of undesirable odors that went up the smokestacks into the air which led to very fragrant products to be sold on the streets.

When Alexi asked his father why you had to make such smelly air to produce such great things, the answer was 'you burn off the bad, so you get more of the good'. Even when Alexi's father was a Captain, on his way to being a Major, he would say 'burn off more of the bad, and you get more of the good left behind'. The phrase would be used to describe everything from making delicious sausages from putrid smelling meat, to the exam process at school, to the ever-decreasing number of friends young Alexi had the more he was becoming truer to himself, and now----to something else.

"Smelting!" Alexi burst out of his mouth. He grabbed hold of a small pebble of gold-containing rock in the recesses of his torn up saddlebags. "You burn off the elements you don't want, and if you keep the temperature just right, you leave the gold behind!" he proclaimed proudly. His saddlehorse had other priorities and perspectives, as a mare below whinnied in his direction. A mare now mounted by a very armed and still hooded rider, joined by three of his three very determined companions, two of which had bows and green arrows tied to their saddle.

Calculations about how to extract more gold from rocks in less time and virtually no human effort would have to wait. Alexi mounted his saddlehorse and upon seeing the condition of the pack animal's feet, decided to let it run loose, coaxing it to ride East while he would head West. Common sense said that it might create two trails for the 'posse' to follow. Dumb luck resulted in the pack horse trotting as fast as it could to keep up with Alexi's steed's gallop. Worse luck resulted in the pack animal next to Salgit getting shot in the thigh, then the neck.

Alexi could hear arrows whizzing by him in the woods. The forest very quickly gave way to open grasslands. When Salgit's hoofs hit the soft dirt, he somehow found the fire in his feet. Faster and faster he galloped, thus far avoiding the fox and gofer holes that lay hidden between the thick summer grass. Alexi decided to give Salgit his head completely now and snuck a look behind him. His pursuers had vanished, fleeing in the other direction, running for their lives. But from what? Alexi would know very soon, as Salgit was galloping straight into it, its presence heralded by a blast that separated rider from horse, and rider from his all of his senses as he hit the now very hard, grassless ground.



## CHAPTER 18

Upon awakening from a head-pounding 'sleep' which lasted either a few seconds, or perhaps hours, Alexi saw ahead of him a tree that spoke to him very loudly. Not by the wind blowing through its branches, nor the water flowing under its roots, but the wood inserted into its trunk by the most dangerous of beasts.

"Utus!" the Yakut word for 'good', Alexi heard from his hidden vantage point as the man who had shot the green-feathered arrow strolled up to retrieve it from the tree, circles around it carved out like a target. By boldness of his stride, the embroidery on his traditional toyan coat, and the way his men were admiring his stature and the bulls eye he had hit, he clearly was the leader of the group. "Basili Manchury!" Alexi thought as the man turned around to face his men, blood thirsty mercenary Cossacks in Yakut clothing by the looks of them, 'Vladimir', Alexi's former guide being one of them. "My God!" he declared to himself when he stared into the man's face, and real identity.

"I am good," Uncle Ivan boasted to his men. "But both you AND I have to become BETTER!" he yelled out, grasping the Basili Manchury signature arrow in his fist. "This means YOU!" he yelled to all in the camp, inserting the blood-stained arrowhead under the chin of each and every man, all of them with rifles strapped to their backs. Rifles which were untouched. The best that gold, rubbles or any other currency could buy. Added to their arsenal were explosives, from the manufacture Alexi requested for mining, along with a small cannon and a gun that Alexi had read about which could, theoretically, fire a hundred rounds a minute.

Ivan carved another target on another tree. With bow in hand, counting off in very military Russian, he paced twenty steps, then turned around and released the arrow. From Alexi's perspective, it hit very close to the mark. Enthusiastic applause came from the men, a good portion of it sincere. But frustration from Ivan, who whipped out his pistols and shot up the arrow with perfect marksmanship.

A rider brought in two horses, dead men over them with arrows in their chests over them. "Two more deserters, Sir!" he saluted Ivan, who shot the rider straight between the eyes.

"What did I tell you about saluting?" Ivan sneered out as the "deserters'" bodies were taken off their saddles, the gold rocks inside their saddlebags removed and put into an overflowing cart.

By their uniforms, and now faces, Alexi recognized the arrow-filled 'deserters'. One was a former prisoner and the other an ex-guard. Nicholi and Sergei, as he recalled their Christian names. As their bodies were searched, their eyes and noses carved out, Alexi recalled the dead of other ranks. Such as the men in Colonel Putinov's 'lost expedition', who he discovered slain and mutilated, in the same manner. A slaughter for which Alexi was blamed another Russian detachment which he had not heard from again. A detachment which was sent in the 'safe' direction home, after 'Uncle Ivan' rescued Alexi from the hangman's noose.

Alexi watched the camp all day from his thankfully-still hidden pit amongst the brush. He didn't recognize the men coming into and out of Ivan's tent as his very White 'Yakuts' practiced acting, thinking and shooting like the Basili Manchury band. At least the way they were told it was by 'Vladimir', named such by Alexi not even a year ago when the young, arrogant Russian thought that the Ukrainians were so dumb that they could only remember one name to call their male children. But, the nameless Ukrainian Cossack guide who had abandoned Alexi, really was named really Vladimir. At least Alexi got one thing right about him. He would have to get MANY things right if he was to stop 'Vladimir', his 'Comrades' and Uncle 'Ivan'.

## CHAPTER 19

It was a long hike back to the mine, where the pile of rocks containing gold piled up faster than the ability to pound it out of them. Alexi's claim that he fell off his horse on the way back to the fort was as good as excuse as any to explain his absence. Salgit awaited him there. The horse certainly had the bruises to prove Alexi's story, and when asked what spooked the horse and left him penniless, 'bandits' was all he said. "Hudson's Bay Company men, most probably," his rehearsed and very much used reply, which Petros didn't buy for a minute.

"Yakuts again," Petros surmized. "Who almost killed YOU!" said the foreman who had kept the mine going while its engineer had been away.

"And if they had killed me?" Alexi mused, allowing 'Schoolteacher Doctor' Anna to finally tend to his wounds. Alexi anticipated a remark about his 1/3 investment re-assignment, to be related in a 'code' Anna would not understand, nor care to figure out. But...

"If those bandits out there had killed you, SOMEONE in this camp would be spared the opportunity to kill you themselves" Petros whispered into his ears, a mad laughter behind his eyes .

Alexi froze. "Who?" he said, dismissing Anna rudely and abruptly, affording her no explanation.

"Perhaps...hmmm...who?" Petros let his finger point to everyone in camp as potential candidates as sabatours.

Alexi looked for himself at those candidates. The miners who pounded the guts out of Mother Earth in the hopes that she would reward tenacity with wealth were very much included in a winner take all 'game'. The sentries posted around the camp, who seemed more terrified than ever and tight lipped about everything. The 'schoolteachers' who took workers in to their tents for 'private' lessons, as well as the schoolteachers who were really just cooks, laundresses, fiancées, mistresses and, in the absence of any men who could do the job, Doctors. All seemed to want 'more' of something as Alexi saw Petros' finger pointed at them from a distance, Petros making inference to what each one of them dreamed about, each of those dreams very expensive to obtain, and keep.

Alexi pointed his finger at Petros, ending the accusational festival. Petros smiled back at him.

"Yes, Comrade Alexi. That bump on your head didn't knock out your sense of humor!" Petros laughed Alexi's way, putting his arm around his shoulders and leading him to a dining tent from which emanated the odor of freshly cooked elk meat and perogies, garnished liberally with wild garlic,

Alexi figured that Petros' sense of humor was funny at home, wherever that still was, or used to be. Humor was subjective, but not so justice. Such was Alexi's conviction when he spotted riders approaching from a distance, one of them wearing a Russian Sergeant's uniform, a wagon load of supplies behind him, waving with a familiar and warm smile. Never had Uncle Ivan looked so much like Santa Clause. Never had he smelled more like the devil. Never was Alexi more dedicated to fighting evil in the Cause of good, and more aware that no Saint or Savior he knew of could tell him how.

The official leader of the Utopian mining society watched its unofficial organizer dismount and be greeted as a hero by men and women of all ranks and positions.

"He does look like Santa Clause," Petros smiled, watching as everyone under their 'technical supervision' dropped what they were doing to meet the long awaited wagon trail and its smiling wagon master. "Saint Nicholas is only saint Yakuts OR Russians really believe in," he continued. "No matter what Bishop Lesenko says."

"Where is the Bishop?" Alexi asked, remembering his absence for the last three weeks.

"Building some kind of Church somewhere, I think, Comrade Alexi."

“With what?”

“His share of the gold. And a little of...” Petros held back his lips, his jaw, his stare fixed on the new gold crucifix around his neck.

“Your share?” Alexi asked of the devout atheist.

“Insurance policy, I suppose.” Petros confessed. “In the event that your ‘People’s Bank’ here does not deliver what we want, or need.” As if a timed event, another convoy of wagons pulled over the wooded path led by Wagon master Ivan. He led down to the plateau which had been carved into a mining valley. Petros was the first to greet them, keeping everyone else who was ‘irrelevant’ away, but not for long. Men and women flocked to the wagons like thirsty cattle to water.

As for want vs. need, this long overdue load of supplies from “Saint Nicholas-Ivan” was more about ‘wants’ particularly the ‘wants’ of the schoolteachers. The dresses Petros retrieved from boxes labeled very officially as Russian uniforms were the prettiest Alexi had ever seen. Even if they fit badly, they would make any woman look like a goddess. And, as god Ivan seemed to decree it, there were fewer dresses than there were women. Ivan seemed to enjoy watching the women fight over who would be plain-looking and who would be beautiful, stepping in to stop the fights only when it looked like the dresses would be ripped during the disputes between those who wanted, or perhaps needed, them most.

“Wealth isn’t a matter of what one has, but what one has relative to anyone else, Petros,” Alexi commented to his still trusted foreman as was pushed away by the welcoming crowd that had become a crazed mob. “If we stop wanting more than we need, we are neither rich nor poor. We become something beyond those two man-made and evil-promoting extremes.”

“Yes, yes, Philosopher-King Alexi, and if we serve a Cause bigger than ourselves, we are always fed, always happy and always fulfilled,” Petros blasted back, his hand clenched in a fist. “Another Decembrist dream that was turned into a nightmare by...by....” Tears flowed down Petros’ beet red face.

“The man who was responsible for 30 of them hanging,” Alexi said.

“Justice will be served,” Petros vowed, wiping the tears from his face. “But in the meantime...I think you should see this.” With everyone else now concerned with the other toys and trinkets on Uncle Ivan’s wagon train, equally distributed to the men at least, Petros showed Alexi the ledger regarding the yeild of gold for the week. “More rocks than gold again,” he related as the bottom line of it all. “But, thank God, the rock samples this week have more gold in them than last week. And, with God’s help, and your science skills, there will be even more in the rocks we get the week afterwards.”

“And the gold that is tradable?” Alexi asked.

“Still in the People’s Bank. Comrade Major. A place which is well guarded. Known only to me, you and Saint Nicholas.”

Alexi looked over the figures on paper, the pile of rocks to be processed, and the holes carved into the mountain. Though bitter, Petros was still being an honest banker, and by all accounting, no one was being cheated. Everyone who was getting paid was working for it, one way or another. Mother Nature kept helping, of course, by spitting out rocks with gold contained within them that could only be obtained by long, laborious hours put in by mortal man.

A cold wind blew out of the West, the sky behind it turning black. A cloud settled in to the mountains in the distance, hovering there. “Snow up there now. Snow here in a month. Deep winter a month later, Comrade Major Alexi,” Petros noted.

“We’ll have to work together to build a weather changing machine then, Comrade Inventor Petros,” Alexi smiled. “Which actually IS possible, theoretically, if we send up a balloon containing silver nitrate, crystallized sulfur and...”

“Alexi,” Petros said, his term of address having never been used, along with his sense of urgency and sincerity. “We don’t have much time. What we do here must be finished quickly. Mother Nature will have her revenge for us raping her. And Moscow will never forgive us for not inviting the Czar to the orgy.”

Petros’ workers insisted that he come get a special gift Ivan brought back for him. Gift wrapped in burlap with his name on it. Everyone in camp waiting for him to open it. “You better go open it,” Alexi said.

“I hope it’s not a dress,” Petros quietly said to Alexi, putting on a forced wide smile for his workers.

“Even if it is, I’m sure you will wear it with dignity,” Alexi answered.

With that, Alexi made a discrete exit, got on his horse and rode out of camp. He looked behind to see if he was right.

True to Petros’ prediction, there was a dress inside the early Christmas gift, along with a pink-feathered whip. He smiled politely to the jokesters who thought the gift funny, then fell into the back of the wagon. A scarf was suddenly thrown around Petros’ neck, like a lasso in the American wilderness. Its end was held by a hidden and half naked Polish schoolteacher who insisted on giving him private lessons. He seemed to recognise the woman, as she did him. They shared a conversation between their loving eyes which involved no words, but was understood by everyone who saw it. Being a gracious acceptor, Petros accepted her offer to follow her a wagon with a covering over it and a man in a black coat and long beard inside of it. The man motioned for the couple to come inside. They did, after which the man in the long beard, which was as fake as his robe and liturgic chanting, illusion of having a penis between the legs. The woman pretending to be a man, in actuality, Doctor Anna, closed the flap on the wagon, then hung a sign on it reading ‘just married---for as long as they want to be’ as it rocked up and down with jovial songs coming from inside.

It had been a long, long time since everyone in Camp shared a joke together. Even Alexi, watching from a safe and ‘officerly’ distance, chuckled with joy and pride. The Russian King Arthur’s Camelot was, for the moment, secure. But was it sustainable? And as it prospered, would it get poorer in ways more important than worldly wealth? Alexi’s technology converted paupers to princes. His recent revelation about smelting the rocks to extract more gold from them could make them kings. As Ivan turned around, walking in Alexi’s general direction, it was time to make a Royal decision. A most enlightening intuition was brewing in the young pioneer-inventor’s Mind, a frightening awakening about to happen to his Soul.

## CHAPTER 20

Alexi exited from camp before confronting Ivan, following an instinct that was growing in him faster than a riverbank underneath a mountain of freshly melted snow. He did not know if he retreating, regrouping or re-thinking as he disappeared in the wilderness outside the camp, while it was still wilderness. Only the Sacred Trees and the Ancient Ground under Alexi's horse's feet knew for sure, and if they were telling anyone, it certainly wasn't Alexi, no matter how hard or fast he rode into the bush and disappeared into its vastness again. "No good act goes unpunished," he remembered from his father on the trip to the Royal Library in Saint Petersburg. "Compassion is a very mind-taxing and intelligence-requiring business," from their journeys to hear speakers talk at Decembrist meetings behind very locked doors. "He who has the money makes the rules, but he who is brave enough doesn't not have to obey any of them," at the steps of the Palace built by Ivan the Terrible, from which Catherine the Great initiated so many well-meant reforms centuries later.

"I suppose you want me to think for myself again," Alexi said to one of the Ancient Trees, after placing the third gift at its feet, still obtaining no answer. "I suppose you don't like chocolate, tea or tobacco," he mused. "Well, they aren't healthy for people either, I suppose, think, contemplate, maybe know, or want to think I know..."

"You look lost," Katerina said, riding in from the brush on the mare she, and perhaps Alexi had saved from colic, ponying its now very much larger colt behind her.

Alexi looked at his watch, then the sky. "You're late."

"According to that ticking machine in your hand or..." she pointed up to the sky.

"I think he wants me to do this," Alexi said, eyes fixed on the tree.

"The Spirit of your father?" she asked, dismounting with gifts of her own that she placed at the root of the giant tree. A Ukrainian scarf, a Yakut Pagan necklace, a Russian made doll with the likeness of Catherine the Great, all adorned with chunks of human braided hair.

"Offerings for your new patients?" Alexi asked, noting that the color of the hair was the same as Katerina's.

"Times are hard. We have to work harder. Pray harder. Heal harder. Chant harder." Katerina sung her prayers with more intensity than ever.

Alexi noticed that several chunks of her hair had been cut off. Such was what one did when a close family member died. And by the count of how much hair was still left on her head, many were now lost.

"Plague. Maybe Pox. Maybe from wool blankets we got from your people. Maybe from us trying to get rich enough to make our own wool blankets. Experienced hunters getting lost in the woods and not coming home. Children 'running away' from their mothers, according to their drunken fathers. They are shooting themselves with their own bullets afterwards, according to Bishop Lesenko, anyway," she said in answer to Alexi's unasked question. "The Earth is angry with us for raping her." She turned around and crossed herself. "Lots of death, and dying," she said.

"You need medicine, I can get it for you," Alexi said.

"You aren't rich enough to get us what we need," she said, covering her head with her hood, coughing a bit herself.

"No...But you could be richer than me, or any other round eyed idiot or asshole out here."

“How?” she yelled back. “The rocks you gave us, and told us where to find, have very little gold in them. Do you know how long it takes to pound the wealth from those rocks?”

“Yes,” Alexi said. “Too long for you to continue doing it.”

“While your people keep doing it,” she spat back.

“And your people use your heads instead of your hands.” Alexi contemplated the rest of it, but there was no time left for contemplation. He turned to Katerina, held her by her shoulders and continued. “The more you burn out the bad, the more good remains behind.”

“God knows that is the solution we need,” the sarcastic retort.

“The real bandits, and demons, and evil spirits here are US! Uncle Ivan is their leader.” Alexi related as all the loose data in his overloaded head hit his hurting heart. “To the best of my intuition, and observations anyway. A fact my mind did not want my brain to see, or consider.”

“As I suspected.” Katerina surmised. “And feared.”

“I will ride to High Command and tell them that WE are the real bandits here. And that Ivan is the man in charge of whatever is going on here.”

“And you will be shot yourself by Ivan’s band of Yakut bandits, or by the officers at High Command who are on his payroll. And in the meantime---“

“---You will be able to smelt out more gold from the rocks in my share of the mountain, and from any other mountain I can point you to, than Ivan and TEN Russian Armies can pound out with hammers, picks and grinder wheels,” Alexi interjected, allowing the swell of idealism to shine through the clouds that had separated his mind from his Soul, his imagination reactivated. “You can get gold from rocks faster than any Russian miner has ever done before. A hundred, no, a thousand times faster”

“You sound like a drunk.,” Katerina mused.

“I OBSERVED drunks when I was figuring it out,” he continued. “Smelting is like distilling alcohol, in reverse. You make some things go up in steam and smoke, and others stay down. A complicated process but a simple principle.”

“How hot do you heat up the rocks?” Katerina challenged. “I’ve never seen hot rocks turn into gold.”

“I will MAKE them turn into gold, for you, IF----“

“If what?” Katerina asked.

“Tygyn,” Alexi answered. “Who is he?”

Katerina pursed her lips. She rose up, looked at the sky, and became lost within it. “Some things, we take to the grave with us. Such secrets keep us Alive?”

“Your children’s graves? How many of them will be Alive, and how many will have free-thinking, free-roaming children themselves if the Russians get richer than you do?” Alexi challenged.

Katerina breathed deeply, several times. “I will tell you about Basili Manchury. Why he robs the rich and gives to the poor. Perhaps where he is. Who he is...”

“That Elder who met me when I met you,” Alexi answered.

Katerina's face showed shock. Alexi used it to his advantage. "He has a triangular scar on his left cheek, a burn mark on his right. A rope burn around his neck. And around his neck--"

"---How did you know about my uncle's---"

"---I know about your Uncle," Alexi continued, pacing around Katerina, not revealing that it was Petros who told him about Basili Manchury's real identity, and letting her think that he knew the famed and very 'wanted' Robin Hood of the Yakut was her uncle. "I have heard that he robs from the rich."

"And gives to the poor. Russian AND Yakut poor!" Katerina blasted out.

"Fueled by...Tygyn." Alexi clenched his fist in the manner of the Archer aiming a green-feathered arrow at him when Katerina first 'found' him.

"Tygyn," Katerina said with as much love as Alexi and her Robin-Hood uncle had hate when that Name was invoked. She folded her hands in sacred prayer.

Alexi took her wrists into his inviting hands. "Tygyn," he said. "For Ayyi-toyon's sake. Tell me about Tygyn."

"And you will tell me how we primitive wheel-hating, anti-agricultural savages can smelt gold from rocks?" she asked.

"Yes," Alexi replied. "God help me."

## CHAPTER 21

The story Katerina told was part fact, part fiction, but when applied, could remake a completely New Reality, for the Yakuts, or perhaps the Russians if they learned from it. According to the legends, Tygyn was a wise, think-before-shooting, and give-rather-than-take Toyon Chief who united all of the tribes in Yakutia. According to the legend, it was he who was responsible for trade and commerce between the Yakuts and the fact that one language was spoken in every corner of Siberia, with no dialect deviations. Like the Ancient Greeks, who provided the Ancient World and even that which came after the fall of Rome with a language which all could speak. Because of Tygyn, the Yakuts would never be conquerable.

Perhaps the legend was both correct and right. Though the golden age of Tygyn ended just before the arrival of the first Russians, his legacy had endured for two centuries. The Spirit of Tygyn kept the, by most European and Siberian definitions, conquered Yakuts from dying, and would inspire them all to achieve greatness one day. When that day would come was a matter of speculation. Perhaps it would be heralded by a Russian 'prophet' with a university degree in engineering and geology who would teach them how to turn rocks into gold, gold into wealth, and wealth into the kind of power which would make them unconquerable by anyone. Such was Alexi's belief, and new dream. A crystal-clear Vision which would compliment, or cure, his Russian-based Utopia. The reality of how to reach it was a bit cloudier, and smelled rancid.

Alexi demonstrated the route of that reality for Katerina and the four gentlemen called into very secret council in a cave Alexi created and furnished for this very special meeting.

"What is that smell?" a toyan who was called Sasha amongst the Russians, another amongst his own people, said of the odorous smoke emanating from yellow-flickered rocks from the machine which heated them to no less and no more than the prescribed temperature. "It smells like..." Sasha couldn't come up with the right work in Russian or Yakut.

"Hell. Just like Bishop Lesenko described it," the Pagan toyan whose Christian name was Joseph speculated. The elder toyan to his right representatives in the cave created for them by some dynamite stolen from Ivan's Camp looked at Joseph with cynical anger. The younger one to his left with fear. "But maybe we should ask the demon himself."

"So, now I am a demon," the very unarmed Alexi amongst very armed. Armed onlookers said. He adjusted the gold smelting devise which had built from the parts of five irreversibly disassembled distillery units which had been producing very sellable, profitable and marketable 'Siberian vodka' for its Yakut bootleggers.

Alexi adjusted the temperature under the main 'stove' which he set up.. He chiseled out five more rocks from its recently created cave walls, two of them candidates for smelting, the other three best designated for other purposes, such as to be held in his hand and thrown at whichever toyan decided to reach for his knife or gun before he did so. "In reality all that exists is science, and the potential for human goodness.. Not heaven. Not hell. Nor Spirits in between. All there is on this world is us."

"So, you don't believe in demons?" Joseph asked Alexi.

"It's alright, he doesn't believe in angels either," Katerina commented, and translated, with a gentle smile. The toyans around her chuckled. She looked at the smelting oven, its tubes and coils, and smelled the smoke which now filled the cave. Her face couldn't hide that it was putrid beyond Natural discretion. The toyans around her let their hands slip over the handles of their knives and pistols, all except Joseph.

Alexi found himself petitioning God, Ayyi-toyan or the still-silent Spirit of his departed father to start turning what was left of the smelted rocks into very recognizable gold. The smelting procedure was something Alexi had read about, so it had to be true. His adaptation of the devises to carry it out also had to work, because they had to. 'Believe in your hypothesis and if you are of sound mind, and spirit, it will become law'. he seemed to remember from somewhere. Maybe it was from watching Katerina cure



patients, never letting them know that her success as a healer was due to tenacity, humility and, thus far, luck which was more good than bad. Alexi didn't say no to her whispering a prayer for the smelting device to work. For gold to drop out of the rock as it was heated into gases that filled the cave. Alexi even asked the 'forms' he saw in the smoke for their technical advice and spiritual support. The stronger the odor, the more they seemed to talk. Just as it was for the mad hatter in Moscow, as he remembered, or thought he did.

Talk amongst the Yakut toyans led to grumbling, then tense silence. Katerina tried to reassure them that Alexi's 'magic' was worth the investment of their time and the parts they contributed to his very clandestine experiment. But still, nothing dropped into the pans under the once-yellow-speckled rocks which were now dissolving into smoke very rapidly. Perhaps the gold was evaporating into the air, or perhaps not. Perhaps lowering the temperature on the smelting device was the answer. Perhaps...perhaps.

"Yes, of course!" Alexi recalled. "The procedure I read about..."

Yakut faces turned to Alexi, all of them stern and angry. Even Katerina's.

"....And DID in my own laboratory," he continued. "Which was done at sea level. We here are at a mile above sea level!"

"What is sea level?" Joseph asked. Sasha nodded. The other two leaders folded their arms.

"Sea level is a mile under where we are now," Alexi tried to explain to the chieftains whose personal travels in the high-plains and even higher mountains of the Siberian continent had never taken them near any ocean. "Pressure and density in the air where we are is far less than what it is at sea level." The toyans were confused. Katerina skeptical. "Like when you take your horse up a high mountain, he gets tired faster," Alexi reminded them with authority. "And when you try to boil water for tea there it takes less fire to do so," he theorized, trying to remember if it was true in his personal travels, the fumes smelted out still affecting his memory. "All we have to do is adjust pressure and temperature a little bit," he said, making the appropriate changes in the knobs which he tried to design as being other than wheel-like. He hammered out another three rocks from the cave wall, picked the one which seemed by look, density and smell to have the most gold and placed it in the 'oven.'

The gods, be they real or created by the smelted gas, smiled on Alexi. As odorous smoke rose up, the demons formed by them 'shit' out gold powder. More in ten minutes than could be hammered out in ten hours, or perhaps ten days.

The toyans were pleased. Katerina was relieved. Alexi was elated. The 'spirits' in the smelted smoke said nothing at all, vanishing in the wind that blew into the cave and carried them back to...places that didn't matter anymore for any hand-to-mouth Yakut nomad who could now be richer than

Uncle Ivan, Bishop Lesenko or even Czar Nicholas.

## CHAPTER 22

The shelves of the trading post at the fort were now full, both in the original cabin and the two annexes which had sprouted up since Alexi's technology had re-activated the mine. It was now available to ANYone who came in with money or supplies to barter, though trading of people for goods was now officially outlawed, by military decree as well as a strict penalty stated on the sign Alexi hammered into the wall.

"Traders of men, women or children, even willing ones, will be shot?" Uncle Ivan smirked, wearing a hand-tailored Russian Army Sergeant's uniform, complete with faded impressions on the tunic where insignias of higher ranks had been. "I have one question to ask you, Professor Major Koriskov."

"How will they be shot?" Alexi sneered behind his now mistrusted ally's back, noting yet another Yakut family strolling into the store bearing even more silver and gold-plated pagan jewelry than the last four that morning, or any in the past week. "Slave traders will be shot with bullets through the head, a knife across the throat," he continued, gazing at Ivan's confused and perhaps scared eyes. "Or perhaps a green-colored arrow through the heart," the appendum which Alexi had to say, in words.

True to who he was, or had to be, Ivan didn't react to the remark regarding the mode of execution Alexi observed at the hands of the White-skinned 'Yakut bandits' under his command. Uncle Ivan, master marketer and manipulator of improvised and, thus far, secret economies was too busy wondering why the Yakuts who had come into his trading post with heads bowed, and eager to trade furs for tobacco, had money juggling in their pockets. And gold dust under their fingernails.

The Yakuts seemed different to Alexi as well. Yes, they were now, buying what they wanted from the trading post rather than what they needed. They had, apparently, been trading their gold effectively and selling it to other parties. They put the excess into Christian and pagan jewelry they were now, apparently, mass manufacturing and wearing with pride. They looked far better fed than the Russian miners, and had no blisters on their fingers. One of the Yakut children looked at Ivan's uniform and pointed to it. He said something to his father which sounded like a request, then something else to Ivan that came out as a command.

"What does that little brat want?" the ever-smiling Uncle Ivan whispered to Alexi in heavily accented Russian, smiling at the Yakut 'customer's father, offering the eight year old 'customer' a fist full of recently-arrived peppermint licorice, condescendingly refused by the boy.

"He wants your uniform," Alexi replied. "Or perhaps you," he smiled, winking to the boy's father behind Ivan's back. "Having a Russian servant is becoming quite fashionable for these Yakuts, or rather, Sahka's."

"And what do they expect to pay me with for my services?" Ivan grunted to Alexi through a forced smile, still maintained for the rich and well armed Yakut father, ignoring his wife and very attractive young daughter. "They think they can buy me, or you, or anyone with that yellow dirt under their fingernails which they think is worth something?"

"Which they KNOW is worth something," Alexi whispered back. "As do you."

The Yakut boy of royal Native blood kept insisting on purchasing Ivan, circling him and sizing him up like a horse. Ivan allowed it, perhaps because his father was a wealthy customer. Or perhaps because the weapons strapped to the shoulders of the Yakuts within the trading post now matched any of those Ivan had, or was hiding in his secret camp. One of them bore the German insignia from the parts on the now missing 'machine gun' Alexi had noted in Ivan's secret camp, its parts now converted into Yakut guns, arrowheads and ornaments.

"These heathen bastard gold-cross bearing sons of bitches are stealing from us, you know," Ivan grunted to Alexi. "It is your responsibility to investigate this."

“Which I will do, once the identity of the stolen material becomes known to me, and the other members of the governing board,” Alexi continued.

The boy seemed to like the way the ‘servant-Sergeant’ spoke the Slavic language he didn’t understand. He took a puppet of the Czar with golden eyes from out of his pocket, made it dance and then kick itself in the ass. He laughed, inviting his father to join in, then his mother, then his sister, then Alexi, then his new ‘pet’ Ivan.

“I’ll smile, but I won’t laugh,” Ivan grunted through the forced smile. “And I DO know that someone else taught this brat that this was funny. Just like I know that someone else told his cock sucking father where our gold was.”

“Nothing is missing from the people’s bank,” Alexi muttered back.

“This I know,” Ivan said, very truthfully. “But when I find out where these dumb-shit pagan savages are getting the gold from, God help me, I’ll...” The sacred pledge was not clarified, as Ivan had more urgent matters. No woman every touched Ivan without his permission, and certainly no man who lived to tell the tale. When the boy grabbed hold of Ivan’s ass, the lad found himself pushed into a wall, Ivan’s fist around the boy’s throat.

Ivan used every ounce of common sense to hold back his anger. Alexi utilized every word of Yakut at his disposal to keep the boy’s father, and other children’s fathers, from emptying their guns into Ivan’s back. It seemed like 1642 all over again, only this time the Yakuts would massacre the Russians. Yakut riders outside came to the aid of their Comrades inside, as Russian worker-soldiers on the perimeter of the fort walls aimed their weapons at the trading post within.

One voice, thankfully, spoke out. Katerina emerged from the back room of the trading post, her medicine bags now loaded with supplies.

“What is she doing here?” Ivan asked Alexi, shocked at yet another surprise in a ‘kingdom’ in which he had thought that was the absolute ruler, and provider.

“Saving your life?” Alexi turned Katerina, not sure if she would oblige. To Alexi’s relief, Katerina said something to the boy, something to the boy’s father, something to the other fathers, something to the mothers, then to the other children. The Yakuts put away their arms. The Russians lowered theirs. Ivan let the boy go, giving him an ‘I’m sorry’ pat on the cheek, along with one of the medals from his uniform.

The Yakuts left, peacefully, en route muttering something to Alexi in respect, and to Katerina with gratitude.

“What did they say?” Ivan asked Alexi.

“That they are through shopping at this store,” Katerina answered. “At least for today.”

“And for tomorrow?” Ivan insisted on a clear answer.

“Only Tygyn knows,” Katerina smiled. She laid her arm on Alexi’s shoulder, snuck a kiss onto his cheek, then, rode out into the vast wilderness with her people.

Alexi felt like waving to Katerina, but such a display would be premature, and dangerous. For her, him, and everyone else in the Noble Experiment in motion with her people and his. Alexi felt accomplished, but scared. Hard work was the hallmark of a well done scientific experiment. But as for social experiments, fear was the indicator that you were doing something important. Terror if it had the capability of being truly revolutionary, as Alexi felt a preminition from a spirit that could read his mind better than he knew it himself. His father, the slain Decembrist revolutionary. Jesus, the real brains behind all Revolutionaries. Tygyn, the representative of the Divinity here in Siberia. Or perhaps...

“So, that’s how it is with you?” Ivan challenged. “You think you are smart, don’t you?”

Alexi felt seen through. Found out. Exposed down to his most vulnerable and shaking bones. He turned to Uncle Ivan, whose eyes seemed more ‘uncle’ like than ever.

“You ARE smart, Major-Comrade-Inventor Alexi,” he smiled, sincerely. “It’s a stupid or weak man who lets his woman kiss him on the lips. The way they break us, you know. And it’s our most important job to keep them happy, and to never be broken. Every civilized man MUST come to the alter experienced, and every civilized woman must come to the alter as a virgin. The eleventh commandment!” With that, Ivan took out his flask of rum and toasted Alexi’s self earned promotion to ‘lover’. Another offer that couldn’t be refused, even though the berry flavored firewater tasted like it came from a Yakut distillery.

## CHAPTER 23

Summer gave way to fall. The Yakuts proved very adept at smelting gold in out of the rocks Alexi continued to secretly provide to them 'crude yellow rocks' from his share of the Russian mines. The process of extracting gold from yellow rocks was very efficient, though a smelly business. It didn't have to be, Alexi suggesting that the fumes emerging from the smelting fires could be funnelled into metal pipes. But the Yakuts seemed to like the sweet smelling fumes that had an amazingly pleasant effect on the mind. Alexi confessed to the same passing 'pleasure' when he did his rounds as technical advisor, leaving word with Petros and Ivan that he was negotiating important treaties with the Yakuts as a reason for his absence.

The Yakut villages smelled civilized, and just in time. Arriving as wrapping in the many goods to Alexi's Utopian fort, and on their way to other forts which were undoubtedly not so, were newspapers. The usual crap covered its wrinkled pages. Praise for the Czar's victories in Europe and the Crimea in 'engagements of containment' which resulted in the Russian Empire being more 'contained' by its enemies. More reports of crimes by Jews in high places who were responsible for all of Russia's troubled economy. Mention of balls and parties, Elena and her new fiancée featured as attendees. And a plan to build a new transportation system that would bring Mother Russia to the edge of the Pacific Ocean with lightening speed.

"An iron horse?" Katerina commented as she read the article about the latest venture planned by the Czar's Ministers, milking her mare while it grazed on the frost-covered grasses that still had a tinge of green covering the rust-brown blades.

"Carriages that can move faster than any horse," Alexi replied, stirring the rabbit stewing in the crock pot at their private campsite, gazing at the new life stewing under her enlarging belly. "A railroad, from where the sun sets at night to where it rises in the morning, coming through where we are now, most probably. I think they will do it, very soon."

"They could do it sooner if they hired you as their master engineer and surveyor," Katerina smiled at Alexi.

Alexi felt honored as well as loved. Elena would never have given him such praise for what he did, or could do. Perhaps she knew his heart, but she never understood his mind, and didn't appreciate his spirit. Katerina, Tygyn bless her, connected to Alexi's mind, heart and spirit. Or so he thought she did. Or so he HOPED she would, as fatherhood was soon at hand, a declaration of their union to soon have to be made public to her people, and perhaps his. But who were Alexi's people? It certainly wasn't Elena anymore. It wasn't the slant-eyed Yakuts, at least not yet. Officially, it still was the round eyes at the fort, and the mine, where his White skinned brethren toiled day and night to hammer out as much gold as they could from the mine, working against time now, harder than any prisoner did under the whip. But each man and woman was working for his own wealth, and future, now. Such wealth still shared equally, all things considered.

It was only a matter of time till the Czar's Army would discover Alexi's Camelot. Indeed, the more successful he made it, in terms of wealth and living conditions, the more word would get out. Everyone had a purpose in this new Utopia. Miners dug out the earth. Hunters shot wild game for the miners. 'Schoolteachers' kept miners and hunters happy. The still-unmarried Petros, the master banker and foreman kept everyone working with rather than against each other. 'Sergeant', and probably former officer, Ivan, who managed the black market so that gold could be discretely traded for needed and wanted goods obtainable elsewhere. And, ironically, the Siberian elements which, like Ivan, and perhaps even the real Basili Machury, made sure that those deciding to leave the Utopian Paradise to create one of their own were killed. Before they could leak out the location of the gold mines which was making common people of two cultures VERY rich.

As to how those riches were accumulating, for the moment, the Yakuts were doing well. As long as gold was king, the Native population was the real rulers of the land they had been living on for thousands of years. But would, or should, they be rulers of the round-eyed, white skinned newcomers?

Such a question emerged, yet again, as news of another 'hunting accident' reached King Alexi and Queen Katerina in their mobile, tented 'court' in the bush from a young Yakut hunter whose family supplemented that Calling with searching for and extracting the magic yellow dust that would make them rich.

"My father aimed his gun, and thought it was a bear. Said it was a bear. Told me it was a bear." the troubled young Yakut hunter ponying two horses bearing a dead rider related to Katrina. He was tired and hungry, unable to eat any of the dried reindeer or mare's milk offered to him by host Alexi. "We could have bought meat, but we hunted for it. With our new guns. Great guns. Good sites. Good bullets. Good..."

The boy who had just recently become a man after killing his brother wept, like a child. Katerina comforted him like a mother, and then looked at Alexi for some fatherly advise.

Alexi looked at the dead body. Shot dead, with five bullet holes in him, from two different guns. The smell of death on his flesh, the odor of smelted gold on his newly-purchased European-style clothing. Madness was frozen into the dead man's face, as if he didn't have sufficient time nor perspective to connect to the Divinity within before his death. A reminder of such expressions he had seen at the gold mine when he discovered Colonel Putinov's soldiers and officers.

"Ask him where his father is," Alexi commanded Katerina, sensing something else to the story, and recalling how the dead hunter's father was far more interested in how gold was found and extracted than how new guns from Moscow could be used to hunt game at distances well beyond a bow and arrow. And that the slain hunter's father was no where to be seen, and not spoken about.

"He's more concerned about where his dead brother's soul is," she reminded him, very assertively.

"I know," Alexi admitted, remembering that a Philosopher King must be kind as well as efficient, even when under a sense of urgency. The fourth reported death due to the new 'brain disease' afflicting the now 'affluent' Yakuts this week.

Something felt ominous about all of this. The dead Yakut was shot several times, in the back. By a shooter whose culture taught every hunter to take down his, or her, game with one shot, well aimed. Was this 'accidental' killing a 'rich man's' disease? Was gold fever corrupting the Yakuts with a severity it never had on Whites? A Caucasian round eye conditioned to fear the devil more than love God could usually hold his liquor and be put out but not put down by diseases of the body such as pox, diphtheria, cholera and the like. The Yakuts, because of their history or biology, could not handle alcohol, even the mildest firewater turning them into self-destructive drunks. Their 'virgin pure' biology which made them look and seem noble conferred upon them a vulnerability to pox and the like which was unheard of in Europe. Perhaps sudden wealth was deadly to the communally-oriented Yakut's spirit, converting a mind that looked out for the community into one that looked out after itself only---endangering everyone in the community.

Alexi took the slain Yakut brother's rifle, then loaded his own, acquiring whatever rounds were still left in the dead hunter's belt. He took the reins of his horse and led his beloved Salgit to Katerina. The greiving slayer of the dead Yakut had his head inside of Katerina's trusting arms. She knew what had to be done for his grieving brother, and any remaining family he had left.

"Where did your father go?" she reluctantly asked the grief-stricken youth, at Alexi's insistence.

His tearing eyes still in Katrina's lap, the guilt and grief-stricken Yakut lad pointed to where the other slayer of the Yakut hunter was, a situation of a suddenly gone mad father killing his most favored son, and now was going mad somewhere else. To a pass leading West, straight to where Alexi feared. A pass that he, Petros, Ivan and the Yakut toyans warned all to not go through. The pass leading to what reports said was a Russian Army column coming through to scout out a path for the railroad. With an active communication line to ears that would silence everyone in Yakutia if they heard what was really going on in the 'worthless wastelands' of Siberia.

## CHAPTER 24

When a Siberian-raised Yakut didn't want to be found, no Russian born tracker could ever find him. It was surprising, then, that Alexi could not find the trail left behind by the mad Yakut father who had just killed his son in the kind of hunting accident that only happened between White miners, and never Yakut hunters. The still-European-oriented Russian idealist could see, smell and even feel where he was going and easily affirm where he had been.

Maybe it was because the fugitive Yakut, whose name Alexi forgot to ask, wanted to be found. Or maybe Alexi was becoming more adept to this new land than he imagined possible. Or, the most likely explanation given recent events, was that the Yakut father had lost his anti-tracking senses along with his mind. That mind was probably very exposed to the elements now, as the trail of blood-stained chopped off hair continued to lead Alexi to the 'road' being used by the Russian mail service, Hudson's Bay trappers, and any columns of fresh Imperial soldiers.

Perhaps the Yakut gold-fever stricken hunter could buy his way to a river barge on his way 'away' from home. Or maybe he was just lost. Either way, he would tell someone about the secret stash of gold, and perhaps Alexi's revolutionary way of rapidly extracting it through the smelting process he shared with no white man, even his most trusted Comrade, Petros. Perhaps as a boast. Perhaps as a confession. Perhaps as a slip of the tongue. Or perhaps as a bargaining chip to fortune-seeking Russian OR Yakut authorities elsewhere to gain safe passage to a new life elsewhere. In any case, he had to be found, and stopped. And before the hallucination-plagued Yakut 'murderer' killed anyone else his deranged mind perceived as being a demon, dragon or deadly man-eating bear.

Alexi rode Salgit low in the meadows leading to the mountain pass. High along the wooded riverbanks. Quietly between the trees in the brush. His 'prey' was still armed, and in need of his help. The trail grew colder, and higher, light rain turning into a blanket of snow that covered the rock hard ground. It made seeing horse tracks far easier, manure deposited by its human rider frightfully easy. Up ahead, the bushes rattled with something that was not wind. "Father?" Alexi asked the familiar-feeling presence. "Is that you?"

"If you need it to be," it answered, in words that could be felt, but not heard. "But before you ask me your questions, I have to ask one of you."

Alexi prepared to be seen through, dissected and operated upon. Such became a normal occurrence these days, specifics of which warranted entry into his diary which could never be seen by military eyes for which it was originally intended. How would he record this conversation with no words, that was very, very real? As real as the gold extracted from rocks he found in the ground, and coaxed away from the elements around it with Promethian fire. "Ask your question," Alexi muttered, prepared to dive into the depths of his Soul for the most honest answer he could find, or handle.

"Is my youngest son alive?" the reply from the bushes, from a real man, in real words. The Yakut father emerged, his rifle aimed at Alexi's chest. His hands shaking. His eyes seeing demons everywhere.

"Yes," Alexi said to the nearly bald and completely mad Yakut in Russian, then his Native tongue. "He is alive. And wants to see you. To heal you."

"I cannot be healed. And neither can you," he continued, taking aim with his hands, those appendages possessed by something completely out of his control.

"You do not want to kill me," Alexi said, laying down his arms and approaching the man, his hands by his side. "Just like you did not want or intend on killing your eldest son. We can heal you. Make everything good. Right. Utos. Ob. Bier mie khe," he continued, hoping his words for 'give me the rifle' were understandable.

With each step forward Alexi took, the Spirit of Ayyi-toyan in the Yakut got stronger. So did the demons. Each kucin struggling for control of the hunter's trigger-finger. Alexi persevered, knowing he

had to achieve, and become, a new kind of Vision. The kind of Faith that transcended the bounds of Pagan and Christian religions. He found himself turning from a thinking lamb to an assertive...something. A wolf. A thinking and feeling wolf who finally connected to the man inside the madness which had possessed the Yakut. The old man was in misery, the kind that even Katerina couldn't fix. Thankfully, fate intervened to end that misery.

The bullet came from no where on first hearing, but on seeing its effect, the shooter had taken a safe vantage point in the brush just above them. His aim was on target, the mad, and grief-stricken Yakut hunter's death painless and final.

"He was about to kill you, you know," Ivan said as he slid down the rocks, rifle still in hand, looking for other Yakuts around him. "How many more mad, blood-thirsty Yakuts do you think are here?" he said, throwing the Yakut's rifle at Alexi.

"He was it," Alexi said. "And I was about to bring him in. Alive!" he yelled out.

Ivan 'shhed' Alexi, but the young engineer would not hear of it. "I'm tired of all of this death. Tired of these deceptions. Tired of taking one step forward then being pushed to the side or two steps backwards by things other people do."

"Or things you have done yourself?" Ivan said, peeling gold dust out of the dead Yakut's fingers, then smelling his clothes. "I hope you didn't show these people how to smelt gold."

Alexi had never heard Ivan describe the Yakuts as 'people'. It was the most human and respectful term he had for the Natives who provided him with the means to do business, as well as personal pleasure when the women were willing or their husbands and fathers were away.

"But if you were stupid enough to tell these people how to smelt gold from rocks, I hope they weren't dumb enough to do it without ventilation," Ivan continued.

"I recommended that they did," Alexi said.

"You only RECOMMENDED it!" Ivan growled at Alexi, turning his fear of being killed by Natives into determination to tear his nephew limb from limb. With his hand on Alexi's throat, Uncle Ivan continued his lesson, and admonishment. "Do you know what happens when you smelt gold?"

"You get certain waste gases."

"Like mercury! Which drives you mad! Mad as a hatter! You have heard of that expression, Comrade dipshit Alexi!"

"Mercury?" Alexi replied. "I thought that..."

"You didn't think!" Ivan screamed. "Just like the men under Colonel Putinov's command didn't think. They couldn't think! Their brains were turned into mush! As they turned each other into mush! Why the hell do you think that I had to..." Ivan's anger turned into grief, tears running down his eyes.

"Those arrows into their chests and necks?" Alexi said. "From your private army."

"A necessity," Ivan confessed, letting him down.

"And shooting the man who saluted you when he delivered you two 'deserters' who were shot by Basili Manchury arrows, which were probably yours..."

"---A necessity. Which you could never understand, my dear Alexi," he asserted, kindly. Uncle Ivan picked up his rifle. "And didn't need to be told about!"

"I want to be told about. And require that you tell me about," Alexi insisted.



Uncle Ivan aimed his rifle squarely at his 'nephew's' head.

"Another necessity?" Alexi stated with a fearless resolution emanating from someplace inside of him which he never knew before. Seeing something in Ivan's eyes that even Ivan didn't know about. He smiled while looking at the business end of Ivan's very loaded gun barrel.

"This is ME you are speaking to, Alexi, not your father's voice inside of my own." Ivan cocked the hammer of the rifle.

"Yes, I know," Alexi calmly said.

"You know too much," he continued, more sincere than ever.

"Yes, I know that too," Alexi replied to his executioner, or perhaps savior, or perhaps both.

"You have some of the mercury brain eating disease in you. And when it eats up the part of the brain that prevents you from killing people..."

"...Yes, I know," Alexi replied, closing his eyes, preparing for what would be another 'necessity'. One which he created himself. A miscalculation which perhaps God, Ayyi-toyan and Jesus would not deem an unforgivable sin in whatever afterlife awaited him. It was time to be re-united with his dead father anyway. And even his departed mother, who insisted that there be discussion about something OTHER than politics at the dinner table. Alexi smiled as his parched tongue tasted his mother's bread, the cabbage she always overcooked, and the sausage from the shop right next to the mad hatter's shop that tasted so heavenly that one could never imagine it had its origin in dead animal flesh. Yes, it was dinner time for Alexi's soul which yearned for home cooking in his belly, and familiar intellectual discourse. He heard his father's voice echoing in the wind, beckoning the first philosophical inquiry. "The difference between justice and retribution is--"

A human scream ended the question before it could be asked. Alexi could feel human blood on his fingers. Real blood. Spilt from the mouth a body laying in his arms, arrows shot into its back. Green feathered ones.

"Good night, Sergeant Ivan," the bearer of the bow said, reclaiming the arrows from Ivan's dying body.

"Basili Manchury, I presume." Alexi said to the Yakut shooter bearing the triangular brand on his left cheek, a scar made by a fork on the right as he pulled the arrows out of Ivan, spitting slain on his face as he took in the last breath. All manner of weapons were tied to his chest and strapped to his waist.

Alexi put up his arms and kept his eyes open. "Now my turn."

"I don't think so," he replied. "I am your uncle by marriage, after all." The famed Robin Hood of Yakutia went through the pockets of the Yakut father who had been slain by Ivan. He balanced the contents of them, then replaced equal amounts of the quantities into the pockets of each of the dead. "They will possibly need this in the afterlife." Manchury gave Alexi the remaining third of the booty. "For your daughter."

"Or son?" Alexi offered.

"No, a daughter I think. My niece Katerina thinks so, and she is usually right about most things."

"As I am usually wrong about most things," Alexi confessed, closing the eyes of the slain Yakut 'mad' hunter, then those of Uncle Ivan, cutting off a healthy chunk of his own hair and placing it into the cold palms of both of the dead.

“You are right about the things you have to be right about. Or will have to be, very soon,” ‘Uncle’ Basili Manchury said. He drew a map in the blood-soaked snow. “A column of Russians, very well armed are on their way here.”

“How far?”

“A week. Maybe longer if me and my men can scare them into another direction,” Manchury said, smoking his pipe. “But they will come here. Soon.”

Alexi let his gaze lay upon the animals around him as a small fox proudly walked in from the woods. Some animals ran away, some lodged themselves in the trees. Some seemed to ponder how powerful the fox would really be if the fox stopped thinking it was a wolf. Alexi did, anyway.

“You are not the same idiot I saw talking to the trees a year ago,” Manchury smiled at his step-nephew, offering him a smoke from his pipe.

“And you aren’t the same scary bear who I met when I first came here,” Alexi smiled back, coughing as little as he could with the harsh brand of ‘tobacco’ he had just puffed into his uninitiated lungs. “You speak very good Russian,” Alexi commented.

“A good thing, as long as you Russians don’t know I do,” he said. “I met some settlers a few days ago. Round eyes, white skin, big hearts, shit for brains and luck. They were in need of some gold to buy what they needed. So I stole what I had to from some of my people who had too much of what they wanted and gave it some of your people for what they needed. One of the things I do, I suppose.”

“In the service of OUR people, Uncle Basili?” Alexi put out. “What shall we call these people we have both created from your people and our people?”

“Corpses, or prisoners in the worst kinds of conditions imaginable, unless we can stand up to the Army of very Regular soldiers who are on their way here. Right now.” With that, Basili mounted his horse and rode away. Alexi hoped he would be back with some kind of answer as to how to defend what he had worked so hard to build. An accomplishment which now required not only hard work, but hard fighting. For a man who had never killed another, and probably didn’t know how to, even if his own life, or entrusted Vision, depended on it.

## CHAPTER 25

“All of them?!! Are you sure?” the bewildered former private, now ‘Comrade’ in Alexi’s ‘Army for the Enlightened’ asked his determined Commander.

“Yes.” Alexi asserted, gathering up a twenty pound load of the gold-containing rocks that had just been excavated from the most recent hole in the mountain, shoving it back into it. “As far as anyone here is concerned, the purpose of this mine was, is and always will be to keep prisoners busy breaking rocks to make salt for the Czar’s dinner table.”

Alexi’s men followed the orders as quickly as they could. Each carried, dug or pulled out what they could, leaving to him the job of placing the explosives at the mouth of the mineral-rich caves. They were a unified Army, convincingly back in uniform. Those who had been soldiers now wore, for the first time in nearly half a year, full attire in keeping with their assigned positions, very convincingly ‘military’. Prisoners did the same, though the schoolteachers had to add extra clothing to their uniforms to make them look like starved prisoners again. Hoods were provided to all so that their well-fed bodies, full faces and unshaven heads would not be seen by the Russian Army Brigade on route. While they were still out of view, former guards and former prisoners worked together as brothers, some of them having changed places for the charade which had to look very real. Even the most illiterate and apolitical knew that if the real reason for the ‘salt mine’ was discovered, they all would go to labor camps which were far worse than anything they had been imprisoned in or part of.

Major Alexi Korsikov looked and felt every inch the Officer in charge. His uniform was spotless, his boots polished, his medals shining back the sunlight that hit them. He did his calculations, placed the explosives in front of the cave after all of the gold containing rocks had been placed within it, and instructed his men to keep back. “Our gold containing rocks will be here for us after we have been inspected by the Czar’s idiots and assholes. Being an idiot and an asshole seems like it is not possible, but the high ranking officers in the Army looking for us are specially trained at being idiots and assholes, and both at the same time.”

Most of Alexi’s men laughed at the joke, intentionally not giving any names to the target of the pun, and fact. Some were absorbed in the moment of the humor. Others couldn’t laugh, their tight smiles revealing primal fears for themselves, their new families and their old families.

“This land and what we can honorably take, and have taken, from it is our bank. The People’s Bank. And the riches inside these caves which WE dug could only gain interest,” he continued. “I suspect that when we dig a little deeper, there will in most probability be some diamonds here as well!” he boasted, allowing the most optimistic portions of his geological speculations to be expressed and amplified. Thank God that he didn’t say that the diamonds WERE in the middle of the mountain. Such would be a lie and, thus far anyway, he had never lied to his men, or the schoolteachers, en masse anyway. ‘Most probable’, ‘putative’, ‘theoretical certainty’ were the tools of the scientist, employed when one had to seem like he was certain about something but would never be legally obliged to take the blame if it were not so.

Before the blast was to go off to seal off the caves from the Army of Regulars who had no business knowing their contents, a few more items had to go into them---the devises which Alexi designed to dig them out and keep the riches from inside coming out. Petros was put in charge of a detail consisting of convincingly-clad ‘prisoners’, one of whom had once been a soldier. Together they wheeled up a wagon to the door of the soon to be collapsed mountain chamber which would be reopened when the contents of man-made machinery and Nature-created minerals could be dug up again safely. The foreman who know how to build anything Alexi had designed in his head removed the hood of his blood and urine stained prisoner uniform, revealing a freshly half-shaved head underneath it.

“You got a haircut,” Alexi commented. “Which was unnecessary,” he commented.

“It matches my accessories,” Petros smiled, showing off fresh cuts on his face, a rope burn around his neck, a fresh burn on his left arm. “Inflicted by myself. I hope they are convincing to make me look like a convict, Major Korsikov, Sir.”

“Yes, Comrade Petros.” Alexi was touched, and honored. “You look very convincing.”

“Life is a stage, and all of us merely players in it,” Alexi’s now most trusted friend and confidant in the Russian world sadly smiled.

Alexi took another look at the next piece of machinery placed inside the cave. His most prized digging device, powerable by water, wind or electrical energy stored in ‘boxes’ containing nickel. A marvel of machinery which came as a flash to Alexi’s brain, and took two weeks of Petros’ hardest and most special labor that could dig out rocks with one arm and break them down with another, moving along with its legs at a pace that would make a young goffer look like a drunken old turtle. A machine which he proudly built according to Alexi’s designs, even named after the inventor.

“We’ll get our ‘Alexandra’ out of there, and put into full operation, after this show of ours is over, and our audience goes home and leaves us alone,” Alexi promised Petros, the builder of the most beloved beast on the mountain, most particularly loved by the horses who did not have to be beasts of burden because of what it could do. “She’ll be alright.”

“If she isn’t, I’ll come back from the grave and haunt you, Major Alexi Korsikov, Sir,” Petros pledged.

One of Petros’ men counted down and lit the fuse. The explosion brought debris down from the mountain onto the cave entrance, covering it with a layer of non-gold containing rock and dirt that was, by appearance anyway, just that.

While Petros organized the final ‘grooming’ detail on the now sealed and hopefully concealed cave, Alexi took his position at the circular, brush-constructed Western observation post, made to look like a tall tree rather than a fortress. With the aid of a magnifying glass made more powerful by his own design than any issued by High Command, or so he hoped, Alexi spotted birds flying out of the brush, a column of Soldiers on horseback behind them. Alexi looked at his map, triangulated the distances, calculated the probabilities. Then back at the men en route. All of the faces seemed cruel. Some important. All were very Russian in their rigidity.

“How do they look?” Petros asked.

“Numerous. Well behaved,” Alexi said, handing over the magnifying glass to Petros.

“And unbuyable,” Petros commented. “The 36<sup>th</sup> Battalion. The best paid bastards in an army of bastards, Major Korsikov.”

“Can we pay them more than their bosses do, Petros?”

“Maybe Sergeant Ivan could have worked out a deal.”

“Or we can?” Alexi replied. “With what was Ivan’s share, that they can divide among themselves as they report that all is uneventful here.”

“And when the column behind this column checks up on them, Alexi?” Petros challenged. “One in ten men in 36<sup>th</sup> Battalion is Secret Police. Common knowledge to some officers, and all soldiers who become prisoners.” Petros’ fumed with rage. He wiped his hand over his forehead, a ‘36’ burned on the arm, over the biceps he had always kept covered, until now.

“I didn’t know,” Alexi confessed, reaching out his hand. “You could have told me, Petros.”

“There is nothing lower than a man who turns in his comrades.” Petros pulled his rag-shirt back down his arm. “And worse shame to a man who claims to be a revolutionary then becomes a traitor to his own cause, and his own people, and his own...” Petros clenched his fist, his white face turning beet red. “May such traitors be found, one day, by a man, or even a boy, in the street. Who asks him what time it is.

Then steals his pocketwatch. Then when he asks for it back, takes out a knife, stabs him in the left side of his belly. Then the right side of his belly.”

Alexi shuttered as Petros recalled the details about how his Decembrist Revolutionary father’s wounds were described by the Policemen who laid his blood-stained pocketwatch to his wife’s dinner table. A few days after trials were over, and the nameless assailant had been miraculously acquitted.

Petros continued with the account, mad laughter in his rage-possessed voice, joyously demonstrating the events of the slaying in the ally upon himself and, when possible, Alexi. “Then, after having the money from your father’s pockets and any other notes of favor from the Czar taken, he is stabbed in the right thigh, then the left thigh. Then, finally, the tongue. Cutting it out. Then the attacker tears out his vocal cords so he can’t scream for help! So he can bleed to death in the gutter with the other rats!”

Alexi froze, speechless. No one else knew about such details which he knew only after having snuck a read of the police report that neither he, nor anyone else outside of the most Secret of Police, was supposed to read. And the man who everyone in Alexi’s family suspected of being behind the killing of his father. His mother never spoke of the events, choosing instead to tell everyone else about the good things which Major Basili Korsikov did, which became great, then legendary.

Petros grabbed hold of Alexi’s shoulders. “We are…brothers. Cousins. My father was a dedicated Decembrist, yours was a dedicated Decembrist. And since the Decembrist Revolution was supposed to be about all men being brothers, that makes us brothers. But…with one difference. Do you know what that difference is, ‘Major Professor Korsikov?’”

Alexi shook his head.

“Yes you do, my good brother!” Petros raged. “My father died like this!” he ranted, pointing to the rope burn around his neck. “Turned in by one of his comrades who was lucky enough to have all the charges dropped against him.”

“I didn’t know that---“

“---Of course you didn’t know, my darling little brother Alexi,” Petros smirked, grabbing hold of Alexi’s cheek. “Your father turned in my father to save his own skin.”

“Never!” Alexi asserted.

“Then your father, after being ‘perusaded’ by the Police, turned in my father, and twenty-eight others who hung, slowly, to save…you. So you could become…” Petros dressed Alexi up and down in the manner of a military inspector. “Tell me, what have you become Major Alexi Korsikov? What kind of deal did you father make to save his family at the expense of other people’s families? A deal he made with, interestingly enough, this General who on his way here now. And you insist on the continuation of your father’s dream? Was this the reason why so many innocent people and enlightened Decembist suffered. So your mother and her children could live, and prosper?”

“I can make it up to you!” Alexi asserted as effectively as he could, given the bombardment of guilt, shame and greif. “To the others! To their families! With my share of the gold that---“

“---is GONE! ‘Comrade’ Alexi. I moved the gold. ALL of it. Your share, Ivan’s share,”

“Where!” Alexi screamed, grabbing Petros by the collar. “Where! Tell me!”

Petros laughed. “You don’t have the courage, or brains to pull it out of me.”

Alexi turned his head back at the his men below.

“If you think that any of them can tell you where Ivan’s share of the gold is, you are more mistaken than your father, God curse his soul,” Petros smirked. He calmly looked at his watch, then slipped out from under Alexi’s fist. A lone rider quietly appeared from nowhere, ponying a well provisioned saddlehorse. It was the Ukrainian wagon driver who had brought Alexi into the Siberian outback a year earlier, by the looks of him. Well armed. Expressionless. All business, particularly when he pulled out his rifle and aimed it at Alexi, smiling sadistically with his mouth of half-rotted gold-capped teeth.

“Not yet,” Petros commanded as he mounted the half-Siberian, half Polish gelding. “Major Alexi has to prove to himself and his father’s ghost that he is a man. After he shows himself to be a betrayer of his own people of course.”

Petros and his Ukrainian Cossack guide disappeared into grasslands to the South. The 36<sup>th</sup> Battalion kept approaching from the West. Their leader, the only one not bearing the mark of the 36<sup>th</sup> Battalion on his lapel, halted them. His face seemed familiar. General Boris Alexender Rosminksov. The man who had ‘promoted’ the Second Lieutenant Alexi Koriskov to Captain in Moscow so he could be exiled to Siberia. Who had finally come out to personally escort ‘Major Philosopher King’ Alexi home.

## CHAPTER 26

A river still separated Alexi from the Army en route to inspect, approve or abolish his Noble experiment. Who sent them was an immaterial issue now. Perhaps it was Petros. Or one of the 'deserter' workers from the mine who evaded being killed by Ivan's 'Yakut' bandits, Basili Manchury's Tygyn-serving crusaders, or Mother Nature as she so brutally expressed her whims upon the ever changing and vast Siberian wilderness. Or perhaps the story about Comrade Alexi's Social Experiment leaked to the military of civil authorities through letters from one of the 'schoolteachers' to a sister at home who had a husband who was in the Czar's Secret Police who knew how to read between the lines. Or maybe it was a Yakut with saddlebags filled with smelted gold and a brain eaten up by toxic mercury vapors who hightailed it to the 'wondrous West' and talked too much at a Russian-owned tavern, confessed too much at a Orthodox Church, or had the truth about his riches extracted out of him by soldiers obedient to the Czar who had awarded them 'special assignments' to Siberia.

In any case, Alexi Revolutionary Experiment was soon to be a Revolutionary War. He mounted Salgit and rode around the mining camp, assessing its defendability. Thankfully, the schoolteachers were on their way back to the fort. Hopefully, they and the unborn children rumored to be living in their wombs would make it safely. If it were to come to a fight, the only advantage Alexi's now very irregular Army had over the highly Regular 36<sup>th</sup> Army detachment would be that of Courage, and Cause. Given a week, or even a few days, the young philosopher-king-Major-Comrade could have designed and built surface, underground and even airborne marvels of science that could beat 19<sup>th</sup> century military might with 20<sup>th</sup> century technology. All of the machinery that had been built had just been closed into caves. He discretely, and painfully, discovered that the canisters bearing the label of 'danger-explosive materials' were now filled with sand. The guns in the camp arsenal seemed intact, at least the three that he tested himself. Petros was certainly capable of making them backfire, and perhaps had designed them to do so on the second, or perhaps third shot fired from them. Alexi's sword still was as it had been. Sharp and on-the-ready. As were the knives that every Comrade in the Camp, thankfully, insisted on carrying, even through the 'good and cooperative' times.

There were no elders, or betters, left to consult as to how to deal with the fight which was about to happen, to be led by a very-respected leader who had only read about being in a full-scale battle. Alexi's Uncle Ivan was dead, killed by a very absent Yakut bandit, 'Uncle' Basili, Alexi surviving in the aftermath. His 'mate' Katerina had followed Alexi's orders to quietly evacuate the schoolteachers. His father had now become estranged, but was still loved. His former Brother Petros now stood besides his once-worshiped military 'role model', General Rosminkov.

Through his field glasses which would allow him to see, but not be seen, Alexi saw 'good general' hand Petros a Bible and a saddlebag filled with money. Meanwhile, 'General Boris' rejoined the officers under his command, gave them modified instructions, and sent them back to their crack troops...who outnumbered Alexi's now civilian-ized Comrades at least three to one. Petros stared straight into Alexi's lens, winked at him with sadistic delight, and rode off into the woods with a cargo of pack horses, a few bound and gagged Yakut women tied over them, one of them resembling but not clearly identifiable as Katerina.

The Captain who had been given a bootlegger's promotion to Major felt very responsible, and old. Alexi felt assigned the task of being autocratically noble, sharing none of his fears or agonies with anyone. As George Washington had been, according to the biographies written about him. The man who the American History books said was so honest that he could not tell a lie. The renegade brat who the British History books said was so skillful at telling half truths, and lies. Such as after the victorious surprise attack by the American rebels on the Hessians in Trenton, who had not yet finished celebrating the Prince of Peace's birth on Christmas night. Enlistments in the American Army ended in January, and Washington had no money to pay his exhausted, frost-bitten and home-yearning troops. He promised an enlistment bonus of ten dollars to any man who would remain for another two months to pursue the defeated British troops and push them into Canada, or perhaps England. It was an inspiring speech by Washington, an act of rugged individualistic revolutionary grit by the first man to say 'I been fightin' for this long, might as well finish the job I started', who was followed by a few others, then many others, than everyone who

didn't want to be labeled a coward. The only problem was, according to the British accounts---Washington didn't have the ten dollars to pay the men, and neither did the Continental Congress which was funding his army.

Alexi wondered how history would record his Washingtonian stand as a Revolutionary in the Wild, Wild East. Like 'His Excellency General George', Comrade Major Alexi had nothing to offer his men in terms of money. The gold they had worked so hard to mine was now gone. Stolen. Perhaps mineable again from the mountain, but only if they banded together for a final stand against the country they yearned to return to one day.

Perhaps a display of illusion would be sufficient for the reality of the situation. A display of Imperial Cruelty and human suffering that would still convince Rosminkov that it was 'business as usual' here. Theatre director Alexi looked down at his cast. They were a fine band of players indeed, each one getting into their assigned roles of making the mining camp look like a labor camp. Actively in the business of hammering out holes from impenetrable rock to the rhythm of bullwhips cracked behind their backs and patriotic anthems sung by smiling Sergeants in charge of the opera.

Even to Alexi's eye, it seemed like it was a typical labor camp. "A few tablespoons of salt, a bucket of prisoners' blood and a river-full of broken hearts the expected quota", he found himself writing in his head about the charade put on by his community of liberated prisoners and enlightened guards, some of them even having exchanged roles from their former 'professions' for this re-enactment. It looked like an even more intense version of cruelty than Alexi had discovered when he first set eyes on these men upon his arrival here. Perhaps, if Alexi had shot Petros in the back after he departed, he could have tricked the 36<sup>th</sup> into going home with an 'all is well for those in power and horrible for those who are not' report would have worked. Another moral miscalculation which Alexi took on as a mortal sin.

There would be no more time for miscalculations, or sins. Particularly as the soldiers under General Rosminkov's command positioned themselves on all sides of the mine, in the positions where 'Utopian Forces' sentries assigned by Petros now lay dead. What was a well-planned defense built to repel attack from Yakut raiders now worked itself into a trap.

Alexi made his way down the mountain to the valley below. "Gather round, please," Alexi announced to the camp of actors who would have to jump into very different roles. "We have been betrayed!" he said to them as they gathered around him. "By one of our own."

Each face looked at other faces, without any man turning a head. In that manner which every Russian knew about, which Alexi had made, thus far anyway, unnecessary for all except himself. "Your Comrade, and my friend, Petros has told an Army of troops over that hill who we really are and, I fear, what we have all been trying to do here. Though it is all in the ultimate service of the Czar, and his people, his Army is not trained to appreciate such a motivation."

"Who is commanding them, Comrade Major?" former Moscovite Sergeant Sasha Pastronik, now posing as a prisoner, inquired.

"The devil, Comrade idiot," sneered a Georgian convict whose love for his Islamic God had landed him in a Christian prison twenty years ago. "Allah and Jesus forgive us all for---"

"---For nothing!" said a half-Jewish miller who had been arrested for writing love letters to his Christian fiancée deemed subversive by her aristocratic Orthodox Christian father. He was then accused of killing his killed beloved's father when the old man died of a 'heart attack'. The punishment for both offenses had been the same, in any case. "I was sentenced to die out here, and now I am alive! We all are more alive than we ever could be anywhere else! Alive!" he proclaimed.

"With well fed bellies!" asserted a man who upon Alexi's first glance was a walking corpse of skin and bones, now well muscles in the arms, legs and between the ears. "With real food!"



“And well fed other parts,” a corporal laughed out, pointing to a third leg between the two he used to stand with. “With real women!”

“Wives,” a former private reminded the corporal in a stern but gentlemanly manner. “And freedom!”

“Not if you have a wife,” the corporal shot back.

The laugh was shared by all, except one. “Who is commanding the inspectors we are supposed to impress, Alexi?” Sergeant Sasha asked in a loud, sincere voice.

“General Boris Alexander Rosminkov, Sasha,” Alexi announced.

A third of the men stopped laughing.

“Leading a detachment of the 36<sup>th</sup> Battalion,” he warned.

Another third stood silent, stunned and terrified.

“Regular soldiers who are, under their shiny uniforms, men,” Alexi assured those who knew of the 36<sup>th</sup> ruthless reputation, and those who didn’t. “Men who...”

“Can be bought, Alexi,” the middle aged Sergeant Sasha asserted, seeing the need to be ‘Uncle’. “ANY man has his price.”

The assembly muttered to themselves and each other about the prices and possibilities of such.

“What is their price! They can join us!” Sergeant Sasha smiled, the crowd coming to his thinking and projection. “We all have enough gold here to---“

“----starve a churchmouse,” Alexi confessed. “Petros. The man who we ALL trusted. He...”

“Where is the thief?” the Islamic Comrade screamed out, whipping a newly made sword from under his berlap uniform. “I’ll cut off both his hands!”

“His head!” Another screamed out, clenched fist.

“His balls!” From another in the assembly not turned mob. “The lying thief!”

“The head of the man who let Petros go!” From yet another, as they looked around the camp for their missing Comrade, each man accusing the other, then taking out their frustrations on each other.

Alexi silenced the mob with a shot of his pistol, into the crowd, inches in front of the feet of one of the Comrades in Utopia building about to pick up a knife and use it on another. “Petros is gone!” Alexi screamed. “And I’ll shoot the first man who refuses to listen to reason!” he blasted out, moving the barrel of the second chamber from one angry, confused or shocked face to the next, most of the hands armed with something that could harm another, be it a knife, gun or clenched fist.

Sergeant Sasha lifted his hand up in the air, the soldiers formally under his command laying down their arms. The Jewish miller, now unofficially the full leader of the former prisoners dropped the knife in his hand, requested, then commanded that his former mates-in-chains do the same. The Comrade Sergeant and Comrade Miller folded their arms and looked sternly at Alexi. Everyone else under their command did the same.

Alexi lowered his guns, then threw them all in front of the crowd. He threw the medals on it into the ground, stripping it of any rank. He addressed the crowd, as naked as they were, in the ways of the world. “One plan, left to any who wish to take it, is to walk up to those soldiers up there over the hill. You, who were once prisoners in this camp, tell them that you were forced into enslavement in my

subversive political experiment.” A large portion of the prisoners around the Miller seemed to accept the logical benefit of it, a few taking the steps towards ‘survival’ on the other side of the hill.

“You who were soldiers, tell the General that you were following orders,” Alexi continued to the former soldiers who he once commanded, nearly half of them turning toward the hill leading away from camp, leaving their weapons behind.

“You soldiers of Mother Russia!” Sergeant Sasha barked out. “You will be shot for disobeying orders given to you by subversive officers who think they are Revolutionary gods.” The soldiers stopped dead in their tracks.

“And Comrade prisoners!” the Miller added. “What profit a man if he gains a piece of bread, or a few years taken off his sentence, if he loses his soul?”

The prisoners stopped, then crossed themselves, the Christian ones anyway.

“You are a Jew!” one of the Christian prisoners yelled at the Miller. “How dare you quote Jesus to us! To get us killed to save this ‘family’ we THINK we had here. We are going back home to our own families.” He removed his costume ‘Army’ uniform and walked up the hill towards the Russian Army battalion from Moscow, crossing himself, followed by another former prisoner.

Alexi had no choice but to let the men he liberated choose their own fates, even if it involved more bondage. A third chose survival of the body to freedom of the soul, despite the continued pleas of reason and comradeship from the Miller, and an Islamic Pagan.

One, then two, then three handfuls, of former soldiers joined them in the stand against the Russian Authorities who came back to claim Siberia as theirs. They exchanged clothing with the prisoners where appropriate, each man in his previous pre-Alexi positions and walked up the hill waving a white flag of surrender, their hearts tired, their spirits broken. All of them left their weapons behind. Sergeant Sasha and the Miller gathered them up and distributed them amongst the Spiritually Living who would perhaps soon be physically dead, as their departed Comrades walked over the hill.

Alexi drew out a plan in the dirt, his two new second in commands organizing the men around him. “Now would be a good time for your Yakut Shamaness bitch to call down thunder from the sky,” Sergeant Sasha muttered to Alexi.

Shots rang out from over the hill. Many of them. Heads of those who chose to live rather than die fell down the mountain, most of them landing in front of Alexi. Bullets and cannon fire followed.

Sasha and the Miller rounded organized the men into lines of defenses, keeping them busy with fighting instead of lamenting to the best extent that they could, keeping them safe from the bullets that showered the valley from above from General Rosminkov’s riflemen.

Alexi remained in an open position, bullets hitting everywhere around him. His stare remained fixed on the face of one of the slain victims, which was not a member of his own camp. Glued onto the face of the slain man was the face of another. One he had yearned to see, and finally did. “What do I do now, father?” he thought as he stared at the very human face that was that of his father. Skinned and saved for ten years, just for this occasion. Or maybe he was just seeing things, the mercury vapor from smelting gold finally entering the most vulnerable part of his head.

Alexi’s thoughts wandered to “Uncle Boris”, General Boris Alexander Rosminkov, who his Decembrist father claimed was the only hope for the New Russian Military, even in the days when the General had been a Major. He was a hero of the Motherland who had protected her against White Protestant foes from the East, and Dark-skinned Pagans from the South. The man who presented the eulogy at Alexi’s father’s closed casket funeral, personally laying three medals on the coffin as it was laid into the ground. The man who ten years later exiled Alexi to Siberia in the form of a promotion. The man who now was the only Uncle still alive, and accessible to Alexi’s reach as the now-embittered, guilt-

stricken young Major-Philosopher-King remained in the line of open fire, not caring if he would be shot. Perhaps such was the reason why the Christian devil and the Yakut demons shunted the bullets and cannon fodder into the men under his command rather than him. Or perhaps was an order designated by a 'Uncle Boris'.

The deeper Alexi pondered the nightmare his life and his Vision had become, the more furious the shower of bullets from above, none of them hitting him, no matter how much he begged the soldiers on top of the ledge to kill him once and for all.

"Get under cover, you idiot!" Sergeant Sasha screamed out to Alexi from behind an old shelf with had once stored books read and appreciated by most everyone in camp.

"We need you ALIVE, Major Alexi, Sir!" the Miller grunted out from behind the wagon that brought in the 'schoolteacher' who taught him how to live, and love, again.

Miraculously, Salgit was still alive. So were the other horses, concealed under a cave wall that was not blown up. So was Alexi. So were most of his men, and perhaps the schoolteachers. But only if he acted on the instinct that screamed at him from a place Inside he had never experienced, or even read about.

"If we stay here, they will kill us," the Miller said as three more of his men were shot in the leg.

"And if we make a run for it, they will kill us all," Sergeant Sasha asserted, a uniformed corporal behind him shot squarely between his eyes, another conscript still in convict costume hit fatally in the chest. "We have to stay alive!"

"By being dead." Alexi proclaimed, gazing at a cave still not blown closed. "Immortal," he continued, turning to piles of waste chemicals in very separate piles. "Ghosts riding to Liberation atop the clouds" he continued, smiling at Salgit, then the other horses.

The guns above fell silent. A cold wind blew in. Black clouds delivered by Mother Nature encroaching in their wake. Alexi walked over to his two second in commands and the rest of the army worked out its own command structure.

"They will starve us out. Force us to eat our horses," Sasha related.

"Or each other, God help us," the Miller added. "If you have a plan, I suggest you tell it to us, and now."

"Resurrection," Alexi smiled. "In the cause of truth. After just one more lie. I promise."

## CHAPTER 27

Mother Nature provided the cover of cloud, rain, then fog, made more eerie by a full moon. It was mystical to those not accustomed to the Earth Goddess' expressions here, just another day of variation to those who had learned to adjust their Western Russian perspectives to Native Siberian realities.

"So, Major Alexi, do you want me to tell our men that you, your machines or Doctor-Shameness Katerina created these conditions?" Sergeant Sasha asked from underneath a cloak of rags.

"Tell them it was a gift from God, for those who are serving His Cause," Alexi replied, overseeing the technical aspects of the operation. Being sure that the portions of brown powder were placed over but not mixed with the white powder in the barrels tied to his horse, the lining caked with two generous but not excessive layers of black soot the Miller's platoon scurried in from the cave walls.

"I understand that you are trying to make dynamite," Sasha said. "But why must we do it while we are nearly naked?" he continued, his nearly naked body shivering, his hand adjusting the loincloth around his 'tools of manhood' that shriveled each time the wind blew over them. "And to be painted like this?" he pressed, examining the skin on his arms which was any color except white. "We look like---"

"---Warriors of Tygyn," Alexi continued, cutting down the remainder of his Russian-length mustache to Yakut length, letting the soles of naked soles feel the vibrations of the earth, the rumblings of the underground streams, and the hollow points in the mountain which he could now clearly identify. "Are we all dead yet?" he asked.

Sasha took another look at the corpses on the wagon now converted into a catapult. "Every stitch of clothing we have, or had is making the dead look quite...dead," he noted. He pulled up the trousers on one of the corpses made of straw, and shined the buttons on Alexi's uniform around a 20 year old corporal's very real dead body, his face mutilated enough to not be identifiable. "You know," Sasha said. "You are not much older than this corporal, Major."

"I am now," Alexi noted, sadly. "And place him on TOP of the heap here!" he asserted. "The blood from this corporal and the five others just below him will spill into the others. We all did die in a bloodbath."

"We could have put some horses with them," Sasha suggested. "It would be more convincing, more bloody and more---"

"---We need the horses alive! ALL of them!" Alexi asserted.

"Even the lame ones?" Sasha inquired, pointing to two three-legged lame mares amidst physically sound horses which were paralyzed by fear. Particularly when the head to toe naked handlers approached them with tack and saddles, some regulation, some improvised.

Alexi looked at his watch, left to him by his father, with an inscription from General Rosminkov. "We die in twenty minutes." He said, listening to the owl still hovering around him up a tree that didn't say anything. "We become resurrected in---" he continued.

"---Three days?" Sasha mused.

"According to the schedule WE choose, and have already decided upon," the Promethian Visionary continued. He loaded three of the chemical packed barrels on his back and entered the cave, leaving a long fuse behind him. It would be a brilliant historical chemical improvisation, a scientific breakthrough, a discovery that no history book would ever record and no scientific journal would ever publish. Particularly if it worked.

The fog cleared faster than expected. The 36<sup>th</sup> Battalion made its way down into the valley, still maintaining its positions and advancing them in classic textbook military form. Alexi and his 'Warriors of

Tygyn' kept their horses in the brush. Timing would have to be just right for whoever would survive the battle to come, determined by the ticking of the clock as well as the cycles of the clouds. Both measures of time merged into the right moment. The only moment.

With a swing of his sword, now adorned with feathers and leather fringes, Alexi signaled the Miller to light the fuse. The caves coveted so much for their minerals an wealth blew up, as expected, bringing the lower portion of the mountain valley down with it. The outer edge of the explosion carried with it the bodies of the slain, along with their scarecrow Comrades. A volcanic mess of flesh and muck blasted up the ledge of the canyon. After it settled, it was examined by the 36<sup>th</sup> officers. Then looted for whatever goods were available by the 'incorruptible' 36<sup>th</sup> Regulars. Gold-flecked dust that shone brightly in moonlight were around each of the bodies, and had been loaded into the pockets of the mutilated corpses. The fish had bitten the bate, each soldier looking after his own welfare than his fellows' welfare.

Then, a black cloud that blurred the eyes of all who could see or be seen. It clouded perspective of the brains behind it. A special mixture of mercury infused with herbs Katerina had used on many occasions for medical purposes, was now combined in a mind-altering recipe which turned logical military minds into scared spirits. Spread up from the gold-plated ground to the winds by low impact explosives, it spread a mind altering substance to whoever breathed it in, particularly in the valley below.

"Tygyn!" Alexi yelled out putting down the mask over his mouth, galloping Salgit in front of the herd of 'ghost riders', each of them yelling out a montra of defiance of their own composition. To General Rosminokov's men, and officers they seemed to be devils, images of each of them amplified into four or five, their real location undecipherable. The terrified and dutiful soldiers fired their weapons on command. Into the mirages, into the moon, and into each other.

Alexi led his men, and their horses, out of valley and in a position to either escape into the brush, or fight on. A decision to do the latter was unanimously reached when the rest of General Rosminkov's army gathered itself in one location and prepared to attack the ghost riders. The General's scout, of somehow clear mind, observing the riders, yelled out something in Yakut.

Alexi couldn't make out what it meant. "He says this isn't your fight. We are here to kill Russians traitors not Yakut Pagans," a familiar voice said from behind him. "Their grammar is very poor, and as to their diction is criminal," 'Uncle' Basili Manchury continued. He signaled the rest of his men in from the bush, most of them interestingly enough in Russian style clothing.

General Rosminkov's translator repeated the announcement to the Yakut visitors, the detachment joined by more riders behind them.

"He's right," Alexi said to Manchury. "This isn't your fight. Your men, your people---"

"---If any of this gets into your book, or any of the history books, I will kill you," Manchury smiled, withdrawing an arrow from his saddlebag, inserting it firmly into his traditionally-designed crossbow. "Who should I deliver our answer to?" he asked.

Alexi pointed to the General. Manchury released the arrow, the shot landing squared into the General's hat, placing it squarely into a tree behind him. Terrified, and missing a chunk full of his already thinning hair, the 36<sup>th</sup> Battalion General ordered the attack, and in keeping with his rank and real reputation, remained behind to supervise the assault. Straight on, with military precision and deadly accuracy.

Acting on a hunch, Alexi led the charge on the Eastern flank, Manchury on the Western flank. For the first time in anyone's memory, slant-eyed Yakuts and round eyes Caucasians fought for a common Cause against a common foe, each fighting man being as effective as ten. The mountain took care of the rest of the task at hand, gobbling up the Russian Army in between the Eastern and Western flank in an earthquake, then avalanche. Perhaps such was created by the machinery and explosive devises Alexi had set up, or maybe Mother Nature broke the rules dicated by the Heavenly Father and allowed the

underground streams to become rivers that swallowed up and buried every enlisted man and officer in the 36<sup>th</sup> Battalion who rode, walked or ran upon the mine they were ordered to take possession of.

From above, 'General Boris' watched with a few of his aides, a terrified Ukrainian wagon driver, and Petros. They 'boldly' galloped into the woods behind them at lightening speed. They didn't make it very far before they were all to be brought down by the lowliest and most helpless of creatures, at least in their cultural definition of such.

Alexi and Manchury observed clothing, hair and body parts of what was left of the Battalion thrown into the air amidst screams of agony from the General who had sent thousands to die in labor camps, and the former prisoner, Petros, who had turned against his own imprisoned brethren. "I never knew schoolteachers and could be so vicious," Alexi noted of the women who had been ordered away for their safety who had returned on their own free will.

"Just be sure that what happens here is never taught by ANY school teacher!" the Yakut Robin Hood commanded. "The future of your son, and my nephew depends on it."

"Daughter!" Alexi insisted. "Katerina, who I trust is still alive, said that it is a girl."

"Sometimes even she can be wrong," Manchury said. "But don't dare try to tell her that," he smiled. With that, Manchury and his men rode away into the night, disappearing as a new dawn rose in the Eastern horizon. The rest was...., well.

## CHAPTER 28

I do not know who will believe this, or who will need to, but such is the story I was told, and believe. And one that cannot be forgotten, particularly that we have given the Czar the boot three years ago. In a land which still, in its own way, remained unconquered. The details about what happened next became irrelevant, and private. All that is important is that my mother and father were both Revolutionaries for the entirety of their long and productive lives, and we should remember that 'Revolution' is a word that keeps changing. Let us hope, and pray, that his new Revolution initiated for the good of the Russian people serves them. And if it doesn't work in Mother Russia, Mother Nature will protect Siberia for Siberians. God, Tygyn and humankind willing.

Alexandra Katerina Korsikov-Manchury.

1918