

FINDING SVETLANA
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Prologue

My name is Svetlana, but that isn't important. I was born in what was temporarily Poland after the The First Great War to a Great Mother who loved me, and a not so great Father who loved Comrade Lenin more than he loved me, or my mother, or even himself. But, that's not important either. I was very good as a musician, but terrible with my hands if I had to build anything that wasn't musical with them. When it came time for my fellow Comrades to determine how I would best serve the People's Paradise, my mother took my exams for me and forged my signature at the bottom, so that the Comrade Commasars would not think that I was useless. That isn't important either, and the job they assigned me to, well, it isn't important to you. It would have been important to me if I was making violins instead valve shafts, but we were told that valve shafts would enable to make more Soviet families be able to eat, and violins would only feed their heads with empty dreams. Maybe that's important. Four years after my flat, girlish chest grew what some said were womanly breasts, I met a man who I thought was a good soul who turned out to be a vicious one, and another man who I considered a sinner of the worst kind until I saw how well he was able to be a good husband to my best girlfreind, then a servant of the State in a Siberian Work Camp because of a clerical mistake that would cause more trouble to correct than to hide. Such is, and was important.

But what is most important is that during the 'transition' times just after our non-aggression pact allies, the Germans, decided it was in their best interest to be our enemies, I met Tanya. I never knew her last name, maybe because it wasn't important or that it was important for her to not tell anyone. But she had many first names. Major Tanya to the men in the Army who came to respect, or fear, her. Doctor Tanya to the wounded soldiers and civilians, if indeed anyone was a civilian during those times, whose bodies came to be saved by her. Mother Tanya to the boys and girls who became men and women despite themselves, and their surroundings. Sister Tanya to the women who served under her, and with her, which were the same thing. Comrade Tanya to nobody, except me, if of course you redefine Comrade to mean something beyond politics. But, maybe that isn't important. Not until you know the real story about what happened to Tanya, me and the other 'girls' who always knew more about each other than they ever said with their mouths, or wrote in letters, or whispered in soft hushes when they didn't think anyone else was listening. That IS important.

Where I am writing this from, and who I am now, or more accurately, WHAT I am...such will be important as you enable me to entrust my story, her story and everyone else in 'Alpha Company' to you. Tanya would have it no other way. But, as she was

logical under all of her agonies, Passions, and ‘miscalculations’, let us start at the beginning, or the important events that define what the beginning was.

CHAPTER 1

What I recall about most of the days that merged into months then years at the factory where I was assigned to work was that it was a long period of things being ‘the same’, which I hated, but got used to. It is astounding what kind of ‘same’ we get used to, and how it slowly kills us. Until the possibility of death materializes into our tired, prematurely aged faces.

It was June, 1941, as I recall, and I had just celebrated my 26st birthday, in a private celebration of course. A few days after the longest day of the year. Long for the warm sunshine as it shone through the factory window, and even longer for me and my fellow Sister Comrade workers as we sweated away at another day under the command of ‘Comrade Ivan’, whose never saw fit to waste anything. Most particularly daylight that would illuminate the dark grey steel parts we had to put together to meet quotas that always kept increasing. I remembered that when I worked at the Collective Farm, we had to work even longer hours when the sun shone longest, and when the moon was full, even longer. Thankfully, Comrade Ivan was more afraid of the moonlight than his wife, who was a high ranking Party member who got him the job as the foreman of the factory. I don’t remember if we made our quota that day in June, but I do remember the moon rising early, and Comrade Ivan giving us the night off. Just in time to see eagles up in the sky, with metal wings, and Swatika’s on the sides of their bodies. They flew in just North of the factory, then turned around, swooping down even lower, as if to show off their plumage. Then, as they flapped their wings, things fell from their overstuffed bellies.

“Relax, they are dropping off supplies to us!” Ivan assured us. “Bavarian sausages that are far better than any perogies than you Ukrainians consider food. No human meat in them, which means that you Georgian bitches wouldn’t be interested in eating them. And if you Lithuanian whores decide you want to steal more than your share and sell them on the black market for inflated prices, be sure that I will find you and---“

Before Ivan could finish his woman-hating remarks flavored with ethnic slurs about ‘impure’ peoples who were now part of the Soviet Republic under Russian rule, he was silenced by bullets blowing a hole into his big, fat head, then his small, weakling torso. As he fell to the ground, other things fell behind him. Small bombs at first that shook the ground. Bigger ones afterwards that brought down the building. Then a cluster of explosive devises that burst into flames when hitting the ground, setting ablaze the ground both sides of a mass of Red Army troops who emerged from the woods. Katerina, my best friend since my assignment to the factory as a ‘mechanical instillation technician’ recognized one of their commanders. Their leader yelled out orders for his men to stand their ground, pull in the artillery carts and aim them up at the swarm of

invading bombers. Showing how it is done, he stood proudly atop his horse, pulled out a pistol, and shot it at a dive bombing plane, sending it to the ground in a stream of flames.

“Stand your ground, Comrades!” he proclaimed, smiling at Katerina, feeling very proud of his manhood, and Cossack ancestors. “

“Sergei is here, to save us!” Katerina exclaimed. “Comrade Stalin will give him a promotion, and many more to spare to my best friends,” she continued, looking at me with bondship, at Anna and Elena out of obligation.

The women huddled together behind the collapsed roof of the factory they had publically built, and privately cursed, as the ‘men-folk’ protected Mother Russia, as they had done against invaders for centuries before. Against Napoleon, the Tatars, the Turks, the British, the Swedes, the Poles and even the Mongols. There was something about a common enemy that made us fight for Mother Russia, even if we were Ukrainian, Lithuanian, or Georgian. Yes, this German invasion would be short lived, as long as Sergei led his men from the back of his horse, and pointed the artillery gun towards the planes. Until small shell from another plane spooked Sergie’s horse, throwing him to the ground, rendering his legs and arms useless. The second in command, a Lieutenant with that look of blind obedience and lack of intelligence which no doubt saved him from Comrade Stalin’s purges that had decimated nine out of ten officers in the Army over the last two years, tried to fire the Soviet built weapons and discovered that it was only destructive to the people who tried to fire it. His corpse lay against a tree, the look of shock in his eyes as the remnants of the shell backfired into his belly. He lay with outstretched hands to other men in his command who were now listening only to themselves in an ‘every man for himself’ retreat that enabled the Germans to shoot freely at their backs. A handful of men escaped the field, disappearing into the woods, for the moment anyway. For most, the agony of being wounded was prevented by the delivery of death. Some remained, the unlucky ones, screaming for their mother, in tongues that were forbidden to be spoken by Military policy, some begging for mercy from God, defying orders from Comrade Stalin himself, that Man of Steel who was supposed to save his beloved Mother Russia nowhere to be found, or felt.

Mother did arrive, in the form of a woman on horseback, pulling two more mounts loaded with medical supplies and a few rifles. Red hair flowed outside her cap, generously down her lean back and over her muscular but still very feminine arms, her face revealing the worry lines of a woman aged 40, her determined eyes both 19 and 90. As she dismounted, she announced herself to the wounded. “I am Tanya. And you are going to be alright,” she said to some of them. She kept her word one way or another to all of them, providing medical aid to those for whom it was appropriate, a bullet delivered discretely into the head for those who were too far gone for repair. Between bandagings, she pulled out two machine guns from her saddlebags and shot down two more planes, and blowing into a ball of flames three trucks containing German Soldiers.

We girls, now in a world void of all men, at least those who were standing, watched as Doctor Tanya saved lives of the wounded, held down the advancing German army, and

commanded three women in her own troop. They looked more like girls than women when they emerged from the woods, but they seemed to be more man than women. Leading horses that had been shielded from stray bullets with improvised patchwork that seemed to be put together by craftsman burrowing equipment and supplies from the time Prince Vladimir all the way up to Catherine the Great, they loaded up the wounded onto wagons and rode them into the woods, disappearing from view almost as quickly as they arrived. Shuttling the wounded to the 'back lines', which seemed to be getting further back all the time, while Tanya remained on the battlefield. Looking into the eyes of the wounded she could save, gazing up at the sky at the encroaching storm or Nazi eagles dropping toxic detritus of all kinds onto the ground, and staring into the souls of us the factory.

"Come on!" Tanya beckoned, then commanded all of us.

"I'm not in her army," Katerina said of the Red Army soldier in a crisp, angry Ukrainian accent. "Not after what those Bolshevik bastards did to my family in the Ukraine during the holocaust of 1931. When, without even the American newspapers knowing about it, they took away all the food, a third of the people and---"

"---taking Sergei to safety, and perhaps the ability to use his legs again?" Anna reminded Katerina regarding Sergei, who thanks to whatever medical things Doctor Tanya did, enabled Sergei to be lifted to a wagon and move his feet on his own, then his hands in a prayer to God in thanks.

"Come on!" Tanya beckoned, with one look that was directed somehow to all of us.

"I'm going!" Anna proclaimed. "This war the Germans started may be what frees us from Comrade Stalin's chains. Even if everyone else says that we're fighting for him."

Anna threw off her factory coat, ripped the insignia off her blouse and ran towards Tanya. She was instantly put to work helping the wounded to the back lines, then moving Russian troops upward to what was looking to be the 'front' lines. Men who were now fighting under the command of Tanya, even those of higher rank than her.

One by one, most of the girls I had worked with (who were now out of a job) ran out to work under Tanya. I remained, not knowing why. Maybe it was the shock of it all. Or maybe the spectacle of seeing this embodiment of Catherine the Great and Prince Vladimir doing so many magnificent things. Or maybe it was because I was always an observer of humanity, rather than a participant in the conflicts that define and seem to often be the goals of human interaction. Actually, at the time, I had not developed the 'voice' of being a writer such as the Great Russian hero Antone Chekov, or healers of broken minds such as the Forbidden Jewish 'warlock' Sigmund Freud. No, at the time I was not anyone very important. But when Tanya stared into my soul for the most intense three seconds of my, until then, unimportant life, I felt Called to answer her.

She motioned for me to come with the smallest of hand gestures, and the most intense stare. Something reserved, so I felt, for me. As if God was channeling Himself through her for an opportunity to be...Important. How, I did not know, but I would be a fool to not answer Him, or her.

I don't remember exactly what I did on my first day in Tanya's Company, which she had formed presumably when the Army had been abandoned by its high command, orders coming from the boldest and one hoped the smartest people, being followed by the most desperate, or needy. It was all reflex, like I was a rat in a maze that, as I found out later. Men like Skinner would put into cages and train to do things they were incapable of doing under normal circumstances. Driven by fear of death, or perhaps a recently discovered love for life. I don't know what made me an instrument of God's will, and Tanya's command in a 'battle' that enabled us to save a third of the men who had been wounded, bring back half of those who had retreated to points very far east, and repel an advancing German Army, for the moment anyway.

It was a magical moment as silence took over the battlefield. I remember rediscovering my ears, and the miracle that a few seconds of peace really was. Most others did as well. All eyes went to Tanya. Those saved from death, or with their fear of death replaced by dedication to fight for their Comrades looked to Tanya in her Lieutenant's doctor uniform, each giving her a promotion to a higher rank in an army of their best imaginations. Though it was short lived, it was the first victory of the War for the Red Army against the Nazis. A time to celebrate, or feel good about oneself, for any normal hero, or heroine. It was then that Tanya shocked me even more, in ways that it would take me a very long time to figure out. A man whose arms had been preserved by her medical skills started to clap, joined by those who used all other mannerisms to applaud her intelligence, courage, and compassion, something that I intuited in later years, from the place I am speaking to you now, is the inevitable result of intelligence. As for courage...I was never able to figure out the 'anatomy' of that accident of fate and unannounced savior from bad fates. As for Tanya, she seemed offended by the applause. She was not at all concerned with being its recipient. She tended to her work with a hatred of it, and a hatred of herself for being so good at it. Another swarm of planes arriving from the South. Of course, German planes, as ours had not even found their way off the runway from ANYwhere in the Soviet Union.

Tanya organized the retreat 'forward' to the East, as more units congregated in the area. The 'men' in these units conferred amongst themselves as to what to do. We women seemed to know what to do...listen to Tanya and allow her to organize ourselves into her newly-formed Unit which would do most of the fighting, working and get the least amount of credit for it. Such was acceptable, or perhaps necessary, if Russia, God bless its self-tortured heart, was to be saved.

Chapter 2

I remember reading Dostoyevsky, and seeing that he gives descriptions about everything the people in the novel are wearing, and what kind of skin is underneath it, and what kind of hair is over it, or in the case of bald men, not over it. So, since I am Russian, part of me anyway, I owe it to Dostoyevsky to tell you about 'the girls' from the outside. Since part of me is German, I will be accurate and maybe not so poetic about it. Yes, as Poland belonged to Russia or Germany since the last decade of 1700s, except for between the Wars, being Polish is a contradiction. You have German fire and Aryan confidence in your Destiny, but the Russian requirement to not let yourself be happy about it (or anything for that manner) and to feel guilty for things that you did, AND didn't do. I think that's important because, I remember Major Tanya playing Wagner for us when we she gave us our first lesson in how to be effective for Mother Russia. Maybe because she was perhaps Polish too. She didn't say she was, but I suspect she was. Nothing about Major Tanya was obvious, or clear. But what was clear was that first day of 'training'.

For reasons we were grateful for but did not understand, we found ourselves in the woods someplace far away from the invading tanks, planes and troops. And away from the men in the Red Army. But there were men of another kind who Tanya required us to master, and work with.

"This is a horse," she announced as she paraded in front of 6 steeds, four of which had Russian brands on them, two of which had been stolen, or lost, from the German cavalry. "They can move anywhere, anytime and for most any purposes as long as they have enough hay, shelter and..." she hesitated for a moment, letting her gaze be caught by the gelding whose eyes were the kindest, and strongest. "Love," she continued in a softer voice, stroking the animal's muscular neck, avoiding the patch of injured skin she had recently stitched up with a sewing pattern that seemed odd, but apparently was very functional. "They can save your life, and give you a reason to live when you have killed or lost so many people that you have lost even the basic survival instinct," she continued, a world of pain emanating from her shaking but still confident voice.

I looked at the other 'factory girls' in our new platoon, whose rigid stand of attention slumped into a relaxed tone of body and mind, as they shared opinions between themselves about their new 'mistress', who was about to lose her throne as soon as the first tear started to be shed. Jockeying for position as to who would be the REAL 'Den Mother' already started amongst us 'cubs'. Tanya seemed to sense that, and snapped back at us with the voracity of a Wolf who would die rather than surrender to anything, or anyone. "BUT!" she yelled back at us, the abruptness and volume of her loud voice blasting hard reality into our still soft hearts, and mushy minds. "Horses are not machines! It is up to YOU to know when they are breaking down and when they need a rest. It's not so easy as looking at a gauge on a truck, or a thermostat in a tank, or an altimeter in an airplane."

Most of us girls knew what a gauge was. Anna knew what thermostat was, by the way she smirked and gave Tanya a condescending eyeroll when not being observed. But none of us knew what an altimeter was, or had even seen the inside of an airplane. Yet, Tanya insisted that we put on our list of things to do as we grow up, which would have to be fast, to learn about such things. By looking at her new students, as I moved my own eyes outside of the classroom, she would have her hands, and hoofs, full.

Katerina seemed to be around my age, 25 or so. The short-legged, long armed, Ukrainian conscript to the Russian factory system seemed as out of place in her recently-issued, oversized riding trousers and loose-fitting blood-stained boots as the horse assigned to her. She somehow survived the winter of 1930 in the Ukraine, in ways that she never really talked about. She did describe how the rest of her family died, her mother, father, sister and brother. After the Red Army took away all of the food in September to take to Moscow, leaving the Ukraine with no food of its own, and the requirement to somehow grow more food from the frozen ground. She didn't say how she survived, but when Comrade Ivan made jokes about 'killing your enemies and eating them or feeding them to your favorite dogs', she could not fake a laugh like we could. No, Katerina breathed in grief and exhaled anger through her oversized nose, a honker which was three sizes too big for her gaunt, long drawn face. With her mismatched breasts, thin mustache, and lips that were three sized too small for her mouth, she bore a face that only a mother could love, or failing that, a 'Sergei', a dashing-enough looking cavalry officer who was now recovering in the back lines somewhere. Why Sergei saw anything in Katerina I would never know, but maybe it had something to do with her hips. Twice the size of her waist, built to bear children. However, I pitied whatever life passed through those portholes from the womb, as between her elephant-like ears, Katerina had hatred for anyone who enjoyed life, and gave new meaning to the motto 'misery likes company'. The horse assigned to her knew this from the beginning, and it was already a negotiation as to who would be master or who.

Anna was had not seen her 21st birthday yet, but her eyes had seen a hundred years worth of suffering, and passion. Everything about her body was perfect for a man looking for a mistress rather than a wife. Her blonde hair was fine, yet full, her face angelically childlike, but her attitudes about men seemed rather childish. I remember my brother Johan, boasting louder than thunderbolts about how he made every woman his servant, making them obey every wish of his like it was her commandment. Thankfully, it was the other way around back in 1933 when a Jewess from Warsaw decided that it was time for her to take him to New York to live with her family. Letters from him came through for a while, with very happy-looking handwriting on them. However, most of the words were covered with ink or cut out so that what he really wanted to say about life in America would not be known to anyone in Russia, Germany or Poland. But, for now, that is not important. What was important was that Anna kept boasting about every new man in her life, bragging about how much of a lion he was, till she turned him into a pusscat, a transformation which left her disappointed and alone. Every three months it was another 'lion' who had lost his manhood. A shame that she didn't adopt Comrade Ivan as one of her 'pet' experiments in redefining relationships within a Soviet model that seemed to leave that aspect of life to people, as long as it didn't interfere with the

People's Agenda, as determined by the few people on top. Ironic that Tanya assigned her one of the mares to now establish a relationship with, whose flowing blonde mane and elongated eyelashes seemed to make Anna jealous.

Elena was another story. She claimed to be from Moscow, comparing everything she saw and had to do in Comrade Ivan's factory and the small towns around it to the gold standard of the big city. Though she wore her hair down and curled it as she could like a maiden of 19, she seemed to be at least 30. She seemed always better fed than the rest of us, though ate not that much more than we did in the factory mess halls. Her clothing was tattered just like ours, but her shoes always fit very well, and were seldom scuffed. Maybe because she was better at 'kicking ass' with her sharp, tastefully protruded mouth than with her feet. After Comrade Ivan would throw us more extra work to do, claiming of course that it was for the good of the people and he was just following orders, it was Elena who would have the courage to complain about it. Sometimes to Ivan's face, but most of the time to the rest of us, after claiming that he was no match for her husband, who, according to her, 'was ready to wage the REAL people's revolution in accord with what Lenin really had in mind before he died by 'mysterious' causes'. She claimed that 'nothing gets made right until you say and face what is wrong'. We could never match her ability to display wit and humor with regard to the men who ruled us, be they our fathers, politicians, or husbands. She made us laugh, then feel confident in ourselves. Then rant on like we never had before about what and who really bothered us. It was then that Elena listened far more than she talked. Maybe because she was our "Den Mother" at the factory, assigned to us by Mother Nature, or perhaps because she was the one in ten paid informants sent by the Soviet to look after the survival, and security, of Mother Russia. I don't know why I never really wanted to trust my stories to 'Comrade Elena', but I needed to. And no one else would listen. Except my own mother, who had died in a truck accident two months before I was sent to work in Ivan's factory. But as for Elena now, the mare assigned to her did not trust her as much as we girls did. The horse seemed scared of her, its head down, as if holding back what was in its eyes.

There were others in the new company, whose faces I knew at Ivan's Factory, but whose minds and hearts I was about to know, and value, all too well.

The rest of the lesson continued, with Tanya showing us the basics with regard to putting a saddle on a horse, how to pack that saddle with medical and military supplies, and how to move the whole ensemble forward. "How many of you don't know how to ride? I need an honest answer." she commanded.

We all lied, or at least it seemed like we did. We had to, after all. Whatever Tanya was doing required people under her command, or tutelage, to be more horsewoman than woman. The other alternatives were walking, or crawling on the ground. And in case a fast retreat East away from the Nazi Army was needed, and it was every girl, or woman, for herself, we would have a fighting chance. Unfortunately, Tanya had other ideas about the direction of movement of woman and beast.

“The purpose of the horse is to move FORWARD! Ultimately anyway,” Major Tanya proclaimed as she put her foot into the stirrup of her mount, instructing us in our new uniforms and blood-tinged boots, most of which surprisingly didn’t have holes in their soles, to do the same. “When the time comes, good will confront evil, in a single moment of...clarity, and finality,” she proclaimed, looking up to the sky.

While Tanya looked up to the sky, we all pretended to act like we knew how to ride. Those of us who knew how to sit on a horse instructed the rest of us. Those who knew how to handle the reins showed by way of example how to make the beasts go in the direction of our own choosing. Those whose horses were moving backwards, me in particular, were told to kick harder with the legs. Unfortunately, the tighter I kicked with the legs, the more backward the horse went.

“To move forward, you push with your feet and let GO with your hands!” Major Tanya commanded, as if she had eyes behind her back. Just as, so I was told later, horses did. “You keep your heels down, your backs erect and eyes looking forward,” she continued, correcting all of the wrong advice we had given to each other. “The rest, the horses will teach you, if you listen to them!” she proclaimed.

With that, Major Tanya led our new platoon forward, into terrain that was once forest green, now ash brown and charred black. Joined by others who were far more skilled in the art and science of horsemanship who galloped in whispering word about something to her, then riding back out. With each piece of information, Tanya seemed more concerned behind her eyes, doing her best to convey to us with a confident smile the exact opposite of what she was probably thinking, but needed to feel so that we would all survive, somehow.

Chapter 3

The thing I remember most about the next three days is that we saw no one else, but worried about everyone else. The other members of what was left of our families for the first day. Our fellow ‘Comrades’ in the Red Army the second day. And by the third day, Comrade Ivan’s wife. Maybe because she was also a woman in, despite what Comrade Stalin said, a man’s world. Or maybe because she had to endure being married to Ivan.

Every day, Tanya, who never gave us her last name, and didn’t ask us ours, worked extremely hard teaching us how to shoot rifles, then how to carry people who would be wounded by rifle shots, then how to stitch up wounds inflicted by bullets. Most of the girls became good at one of those tasks.

Katerina, cursed with a body in which all parts were disproportionate to the whole, acquired a masterful understanding of how to put mangled body parts of those less cursed together, her surgical hands having as much natural born talent in them as perhaps even Tanya herself.

Anna, whose natural good looks always enabled her to ask MEN to do all of the 'mechanical' work, and which were responsible for her being specifically requested to work in Ivan's factory rather than sent to a Goulag after she had written a 'Dear John' rejection letter to an ordinary looking suitor who turned out to have extraordinary connections in the Kremlin, found herself being a Mastress at putting together things made of metal and wood, a skill she discovered now because she WANTED to be skillful rather than had to be.

Elena, a master manipulator of people if I ever knew one, turned out to be able to negotiate with horses as well as anyone else I had known. Perhaps the 'dumb animals' were smarter at manipulating than she was, or they assured her that it was easier to ask what she wanted directly rather than by trickery or deceit. She had developed 'brains in her feet' when on top of the horses, and 'smarts' in her hands when handling them on the ground, and surprizingly better at instructing those of us with fewer equine skills as to how to find our 'horse feet and hands' than Tanya was able to do so.

But me...there was something about all of those tasks, and the others in Tanya's list of 'real life' skills that didn't stay with me. Though I could feel life in biological human flesh, I could never make mangled flesh do what I wanted it to do. Similarly with broken equipment, complicated by the fact that I could never see the 'soul' in a piece of metal or chunk of lumber like others seemed to be able to do. As for horses, they still remained 'big' for me, no matter how small the mount I was given to ride. I needed to feel the earth under my feet for myself to be able to trust moving on it. Or maybe my mind didn't want my brain to learn all of those things so it could do other things. As for what those things were, there was one thing I was good had ridden through three villages on the fourth day, each charred more than the one before it.

We had taken what we needed, and if it was available, what we wanted. One item in an old church that had been turned into a temporary prison for those who dared to believe in anything except the atheistic beliefs of Comrade Stalin's revolution was a large wooden box that had somehow been spared from the German bombs, and fleeing Russians burning down the houses so that the Nazi army would have to 'sleep under the stars'. Inside were blankets, half of which went to the horses and half of which went to us. Books for those who could read, by Chekov, Dostoyevsky and others who were far better at being writers than celebrities. Food which had been reserved for Bolshevik Officials, which now finally belonged to the People, ravaged down as quickly as the cans and wrappings could be opened, even by Tanya, who started to eat her ration of the booty slowly, but then gave in to be as ravenous as the 'commoners' below her. But though my stomach was as empty as anyone else's, I was sustained by something else in the box---a violin, all of its stings still intact. I picked up the bow buried under it, and it broke into two, the strands on it tethered away into unrecognizable whisks of hair blowing in the wind. Moving the broken bow across the air on top of the strings, I found myself humming something by Beethoven that I was sure no one else would recognize, but one of my Sisters did.

“Someone should fix that bow,” Tanya noted, looking to Elena, whose mouth, eyes and skillfully-mechanical hands were focused on demolishing a loaf of hard, black bread. “Now?” our Commandress asked, then insisted.

“I’m still eating,” Elena replied by way of explanation. “An Army moves on its stomach.”

“And is inspired to move to where it should by food for the ears, and sustenance for the mind,” Tanya offered.

Elena put her food aside, hoping that none of her other Comrades would sneak it into their knapsacks, or stomachs. Tanya moved it next to her so that the temptation to do so would be minimized. “Each gives according to her abilities, and takes according to her needs,” she said while Elena reluctantly demonstrated the point. Cutting off a chunk of hair from the tail of her horse, and ‘splinting’ the bow into a single shaft with loose wires and twine, much like a broken bone, according to Tanya’s technique of doing so, Elena quickly turned to broken bow into something worthy of shooting a musical arrow.

As for what that arrow would be, Tanya nodded to me, in a very ‘official’ Soviet tone. “Something inspirational,” she said.

German music for a platoon about to fight Hitler’s storm troopers didn’t seem right somehow, though Beethoven would certainly have been the first to fight Hitler. And I had heard that Lenin forbade some piano pieces by Old Ludwig to be played in his presence because it would soften his heart so much that he would lose the mental concentration and determination to do what was needed to be done to free the People from Imperialist oppression. I took in a deep breath and prepared to play what, now MAJOR Tanya seemed to be commanding me to perform as ‘dinner’ music for the girls, and her, as we were preparing for a battle tomorrow, according to all the information Tanya told us, and didn’t tell us.

The Soviet National anthem was, musically, a very inspiring tune. It still is, as long as you don’t know the words, or believe in them. But Tanya stopped me after the first four notes. “The Internationale,” she said, with a warm smile.

It seemed to fit our mental and musical needs. This was the song we as very young girls and our bliss-and-fire infused parents sang when we defeated the Czar. Before our revolution was taken over by the Bolsheviks, the Mensheviks, the Trotskyites, the Korinskites, the other ‘vik’s and ‘ite’s. The music flowed out of me like water down a gentle mountain valley as the Spring sun melted the Winter snow. My hands and mind were moving as one, till Comandress Tanya made one more ‘request’. “With feeling, intensity and HUMOR, please.”

It was an order that couldn’t be refused, but was difficult to follow. I was ordered to be free but didn’t know how to leave the prison cell that the Soviets, my mother, and me had build around my soul. But when Tanya commanded me to put MORE humor into it, I

felt the jokes. And the Passion. And the Bliss. All three merged, my hands taking over, as if moved by a magical muse who finally was able and willing to come down from the sky and up from the depths of Mother Earth and bring both of those places, and perspectives together, expressing it's Truth through---us.

The girls pondered the music. Some, like Anna, sang along. Some, such as Elena, smiled. Some, the love-sick still-hard to look at Katerina, laughed. In one way or another, they all danced with each other in steps that they made up. Katerina made up new words to the People's Liberation song which said what she really felt about the People's Revoution and its so called elite, culturally superior 'liberators'. The others in our 'inferior culture' club became co-composers as I tried to follow their lead, and provide them with musical jokes and variations on the theme that gave rise to new insights for new lyrics. As I felt it, the new words that Sacred Theme, which actually rhymed in most cases, exposed, mocked and deflated the fear of Comrade Stalin with, as the song went on, pity for him.

But Tanya's face remained---preoccupied. Though she was smiling behind tightly held lips, there was something else in her eyes. I snuck a look through them when I thought she wasn't looking. Yes, it was envy, then jeaousy, then regret, then vulnerability. That mixture of agonies intensified the more the girls laughed and smiled and indulged in the human experience which was most outlawed and least appreciated in the USSR---fun. And happy. These two things were something that seemed foreign to Tanya. Foreign, and fearful, exposing her naked soul to what it needed most. A meal that could cure her, it seemed, but would kill her if she wasn't careful. As for being careful, that is what Tanya was good at. Her watchful eye sensed something on the distant horizon. She looked Westward and said nothing, but felt called back to 'duty'. What she said, under her breath, in words, though she would have preferred it to be song, were these words, "better to do your own Calling poorly than someone else's well." She addressed them to herself, then to the sky. "One day I will get around to doing that, but for now...well, I have to do my...duty. My Calling for...later."

Just as I felt myself understand what she was really meaning by that, Tanya turned around to me and gave me a 'this is not any of your affair' stare with her eyes. But her heart seemed to say something else. I didn't know if she was trying to talk to me as a mother, a sister, or, yes, a lover. Maybe all three at once. War brings out a wide variety of 'love', perhaps because there is so much variation in 'hate'. That latter emotion made itself felt with a buzzing from above that sounded like bumble bees, then a swarm of locusts.

"Move! Now! We meet at the fork in the river," Tanya commanded us. With that, we loaded whatever we needed on the horses, and left most of what we wanted, fleeing in a scattered pattern into the woods so that we would not be spotted from above.

Chapter 4

The more I was away from my books the more I remembered them, or maybe rewrote them in my head. After the panic turned to exhaustion, I asked myself—‘Does God reward honesty and virtue with Enlightenment and Creativity?’ If such was the case, then Tanya seemed to certainly believe it. Each act, thought and strategy of hers was for the benefit of someone else. Especially those who thought little about her benefit, and plotted against her in any way they could. Such was Colonel Kostinov, a man who seemed to rise up the ranks the way manure floats up from the bottom of a rotten trough of stagnant water. He drifted into our rendezvous point with his men like a burst of colorless grey clouds edging its way across a clear blue sky.

The five-foot-four man with a head having no hair growing on it, but a big opinion of himself under its bright, blinding shine insisted that Tanya salute him. When she didn’t, he put her on report. He threatened to send her to a labor Camp or send her to one of the newly formed ‘suicide brigades’ made up of recycled Soviet prisoners if she, or one of us girls, didn’t cook his meals, do his laundry and laugh at his jokes. And other things as well that he hinted at without using the right words, which he tried on us girls first. ‘Private’ Anna almost accepted the Colonel’s offer, thinking that she could turn around the chain of command in her service, but Major Tanya threatened to cut off Anna’s long blonde hair if she ever let Kostinov run his grubby fingers through it, for her protection, she said, and his, she seemed to think behind her ever-secrative eyes. Private Elena considered accepting the deal, but turned it down, saying she had a ‘disease’. One of Kostinov’s junior officers seemed to observe the proposal while taking down notes in a black book. I found out later that the black book was not a record of reporting counter-revolutionary indulgences, but a diary the over-educated Lieutenant was trying to turn into a novel one day about his Colonel. Katerina’s protection against such advances by men who would spit her out once they had tasted and digested their fill was her large nose, hairy lip, monkey like long arms and stubby legs, topped off by big hips that already made her look like a grandmother who had five daughters and as many oversized sons. As for me, Kostinov looked a me like I was ‘off limits’. Not because I wasn’t pretty, or appealing to a man, or woman, but because of something else. Maybe it had something to do with how Tanya looked at me, again and again, proposing something with her eyes that she was terrified of saying with her lips.

It was the third day of us being attached to Kostinov’s Unit, an arrangement inflicted upon us by natural coincidence of meeting them, and the tragic necessity of his men needing more medical help than he could provide himself. Tanya had just finished up stitching a ruptured belly that Kostinov’s surgeon had botched up before he headed off towards the East to join the German army. Kostinov approached, puffed up the shoulders of his uniform, wiped the dust off his medals, and asked her, “Would you like to have dinner with me in my tent? I can do a lot for you, you know, if you do some things for me.”

“So will you fuck me, or will I fuck you, Colonel?” Tanya replied, her full attention on the wounded man, a Sergeant thinking himself to be a General, who had, just that

morning, stolen her surgical instruments and offered to help find them if she would have 'breakfast' with her in HIS tent,

It wasn't the insult of words that Kostinov seemed most offended by, but the lack of eye contact. Indeed, Tanya said with every word NOT spoken to him that no matter what rank a Soviet bureaucrat decided to pin on his uniform, he was a man of flesh and blood, entitled to no more, and no less, respect than anyone else.

"Comrade Stalin is a friend of mine!" Kostinov proclaimed.

"That would explain why a man not worthy of being a private is wearing a Colonel's uniform," she shot back, in full range of his inferiors, who chuckled, until he turned around and stared at them, pushing their upturned heads downward again. "You know what Comrade Stalin can do for someone," Kostinov continued.

"Or TO someone," Tanya answered, solemnly and with a determination to have the Truth be known, no matter what the consequences.

All but Kostinov held their secrets even deeper behind fearful eyes. Even Elena, the one who I suspected was most likely to be Stalin's eyes and ears in the factory, recalled deals she had made for survival that had saved her life, but had cost her another pound, or ton, of self respect.

"Stalin's eyes are everywhere!" Kostinov reminded Tanya, and everyone else in camp.

"So why didn't he see that your men better guns, our girls needed better surgical equipment, and all of our horses need a day off from retreating away from the Nazi Army, who, unlike our Army, has a leader who is communicating with the people doing the fighting?" she replied. "No one knows where Stalin is. And those who I know, do know that he is in hiding someplace. Perhaps dead by his own iron fisted hand. Playign a 'game' with us to see what we would do without him. Or maybe he is just having a nervous breakdown. But for certain, Stalin is NOT commanding the Red Army right now," she spat back.

"Then who is?" Kostinov shot back at her, placing his small hands on his particularly enlarged hips in the manner of Mousillini. "Who is commanding the Red Army?"

"All of us, Comrade!" Tanya replied. "Because unless we work together, thinking with our heads instead of our reproductive parts, and being motivated by Comradeship rather than the need to feel superior to one another, then we will all wind up being cooked for supper in a Nazi death camp, and served to storm troopers who will claim ALL of Mother Russia for the Fatherland. From Kiev in the South, to Leningrad in the North. From Vladvostok in the East to---"

"---Lithuania in the West," one of Kostinov's junior officers offered. Others joined in, noting the locations of their homes, be they where they lived now, or from where they

were displaced for the ‘benefit of the Revolution’. When it came my turn to give a reply, I think I said ‘My pond in the middle of the woods,’ not revealing the specific location. Perhaps I should have, as Tanya didn’t reveal where she was from either. “The ground where I am standing on,” she said by way of explanation. “All of it is sacred, and all of it is holy. And all of it is...” she picked up a fistful of dirt, the charred ashes of a recently burnt building mixed in with it. “Regeneratable,” she continued, holding back the tears, letting fire replace grief, and fear.

I remember a particular sound that afternoon, as it merged into night. Misquitos edged their way into our camp, as if they wanted to share what little food we had, and dine on the tired blood of our overworked horses. Tanya seemed to care about them more than people. Or maybe it was that she felt more at ease with them, and able to have conversations with them about life, death and everything in between that were out of the range of experience and understanding of us two legged beasts of burdon.

When the moon rose, it illuminated everything under it. It felt warm, somehow. I was called upon to play a song to sooth the horses, and the people who would be riding them tomorrow, or ride in wagons pulled by them. And those people who, by lot, as the new policy was now, would have to walk.

We were a mixed unit now, with one order of business. Engage the enemy when we could do it effectively, or find the best way to retreat from such. We were, for the moment, free to choose which to do. As Comrades. Perhaps Hitler’s Army had ironically liberated us from living in constant fear of being carted off to a Labor Camp by Comrade Stalin. The worse that could happen to us now was to be killed. Somehow, a chance to live a short and glorious life in which our deaths would MEAN something, gave ALL of us a badly needed infusion of Life. Even the soul-dead Colonel Kostinov.

CHAPTER 5

Over the next week, or two we became combat veterans. How we felt about it, and ourselves, well, we never knew that even ourselves I suppose. In any event, what is important to tell YOU is that we fought some skirmishes, and avoided big battles, but for the most part, our path was a circular one, most of the time leading us Eastward. But not as Eastward as most units, though I was never certain of such because no one had radios, and when we did find one, it was held by a soldier who was dead. And even if Anna could get the radio to work, there was no one to talk to on it for two weeks. Our news about the war came to us through our eyes, as we looked at the kind of smoke on the horizon, and our nostrils, as we smelled dead flesh and burning villages. The horses were of course better at this than we were. They could smell German tanks and trucks, but thankfully those tanks and trucks couldn’t smell, or see, us. Most of the time anyway.

But word did get to us about what was going on everywhere else in the country we cursed but now vowed to defend with our lives. Comrade Stalin did finally come out of ‘hiding’, though the rumor Morale Officer Illya Ivanovitch tried to make us believe was

that he was 'resurrected'. He arrived on foot, carting a wheelbarrelful of rifles which were better suited for using as clubs than instruments to shoot bullets. He presented to us two orders from 'Central Command' after presenting his stomach with a badly needed meal and his feet with even more badly needed boots that had been taken off a German soldier who was stupid enough to take a crap in the woods without looking to see who was around when his pants were down.

The first order was, 'Not One Step Backwards' This we could live with, as a well organized retreat in which we gained more men, and women, to fight another day, was 'forward'. Even by Kostinov's definition of such.

The second Command was something else. It had a number, but such is not important. What it said was. ANY Red Army soldier or Soviet citizen who surrendered to the Germans would be considered a traitor, and would be shot for it. "It is National Policy," Illya Ivanovitch said by way of explanation, and apology. "From the top!" he continued.

"And who will carry out those orders?" Tanya challenged, with the whole camp watching. Ivanovitch and pulled out from the pocket of his freshly-issued, perfectly fitting uniform, a fist full of straws. "We all pick from them," he announced. "The lucky ones get to have the best rifles, and have the special responsibility of using them against those who desert, or surrender," Ivanovitch said. "It is better than being appointed to being assistant Morale Officers, isn't it?" he continued, as Illya. Underneath it all he was just an over-educated lad from the Urals who wanted nothing more than to be left alone in the magnificent woodlands of his homeland, as his diction seemed to reveal.

Kostinov looked at Tanya, and Tanya looked at us, then back at our uninvited 'guest', who was now officially part of our Unit. But even that was uncertain. "What if we say YOU deserted, Illya?" Tanya offered.

"Or surrendered to the Germans, Morale Officer Ivanovitch " Kostinov suggested. He inspected the guns, on his own, taking the ones that seemed to be least broken down, throwing them to the best shots in his unit. "These guns are to be used to fight Germans, not ourselves," Kostinov proclaimed in the manner of a liberator, or Emperor. On more than one occasion, Kostinov talked on and on about how brilliant Napoleon was, until he invaded Russia. The French madman who crowned himself Emperor seemed like a liberator too. I recalled that Beethoven dedicated his third symphony to him, then almost tore up the manuscript after he knew the truth about Napoleon.

Yes, what the truth was about Kostinov was not quite clear to us, or him yet. Indeed, the truth about any of us, even me, was something that was emerging, evolving or erupting. Or all three at once. Another step in that process came over the ridge, without warning or welcome. Katerina was the first to recognize the rider.

"Sergei!" she boldly exclaimed, running out to the strong black horse upon which rode a man who was even stronger, in ways of body, mind and soul. "God DOES want us to have that family! Come to Moma, you sperm-loaded wonderful Papa!"

Tanya tried to hold her back, sensing something was very wrong, but it was too late. Katerina pushed her Commanding Officer, and as I saw it, most trusted friend, onto her back, into a pool of mud that sucked in her hands and feet.

“Come back here!” Tanya screamed out, sniffing something foul in the air.

In five more strides of Sergie’s horse, we all saw what she smelled. All of Katerina’s senses were now blinded by seeing the man she had always loved, and the man who loved her for the beauty hidden within her ugly body. “Sergei! God wants us to be together! Come to me! Come to me! We will fight for a free Ukraine together. Free from the Germans. Free from the Russians. Free from everyone!”

Sergei’s horse stopped ten strides ahead of Katerina, spooked by a bullet that Tanya had shot at its feet. The horse reared up, turned to the left, and tried to high-tail it back into the thick woods from which it emerged. Clear to all now, except Katerina, was a wooden stick holding up the rider, whose face was pale, his eyes frozen in shock, his body lifeless. The body that once held Sergei’s soul fell to the ground. Against Kostinov’s strict, unspoken command from what we thought was our undiscovered campsite, Tanya pulled her bare feet out of the muck that had kept her boots stuck in the ground and ran towards the live horse and very dead rider.

Katerina continued to ran to Sergei, reaching him before anyone else could. Her outstretched, monkey-long hair-covered arms felt the cold blood on his lifeless chest before she saw it. She screamed in grief. Loudly and uncontrollably. Kostinov ordered his men to hold their ground. They did so, pulling out their guns and taking cover, fair-haired smooth-faced ‘academic’ Illya pulled down by a bear-like illiterate Corporal to protect his over-educated ass.

Tanya ripped off a portion of her shirt just below her neck and gagged Katerina, holding her onto the ground with all of her strength, but the power in Katerina’s body was amplified by grief. Major Tanya called upon Anna and Elena, but not me, to come help her bring Katerina back to the camp, pulling off a note from the body, read it. Anna and Elena carried their former, more tolerated than liked, factory worker back to Camp.

Tanya looked around the woods, smelled something, then rushed back. She remained in Camp, Kostinov approaching me very gently, keeping his distance, handing me one of the best of the guns from the deliver wagon. I accepted it, as it was given in a very human way. “Tanya saved his life. She did a miracle cure on his back.”

“Miracles give way to other realities,” Kostinov said. “No matter what your beloved says, or wants to believe,” he continued, speaking for the first time from his heart, and a mind too scared to lie.

I watched Tanya remain in the danger zone, reading the note she had retrieved from Sergei's pocket with one glance, then the terrain with another. "What is in the note?" I asked.

"An offer for us to abandon Comrade Stalin's tyranny and accept Germany's offer to join them as the new liberators of the world. Except, of course, if one is Jewish, a Gypsy, a homosexual man,, or, well, you know," he replied.

"And in the supply pack on the horse?" I asked, noting Russian writing saying 'medical supplies', 'food' and 'radio' printed on it, as the animal emerged again from the woods. Along with a fat mule and thin mare bearing even more goods which we needed, and wanted.

"Not what they seem to be, apparently," Kostinov replied, as I noticed Tanya doing her best 'horse talk', so that she could approach the horse and the mule, slipping its cargo off, then looking at its content, then, after a moment of shock, fear and reality-inspired determination, throwing them off into the woods.

Tanya ducked down just as the woods blew up with a big explosion, disappearing from my view.

"We will need that mule, and horse. As transportation, or when they fail to serve that purpose as food," Kostinov informed me. "As for Tanya, who is probably dead by now..."

I found the tip of my rifle aimed a Kostinov's throat. He smiled, as if I was being given a promotion behind his, apparently, battle tested experienced eyes. "So, you don't believe in eating your own horses?" he remarked with a gentle smile, meaning a lot more, about someone else. "It is good to care about someone who seems to care about you so much, and in so many ways," he said as we both noted Tanya waving up her hand, saying that she was alright, walking back to camp with injuries no more severe than cuts on her bare, bootless feet.

"Yes, it is good to care about someone who seems to care about you," I found myself saying. "It makes you...Alive? And that is what we are doing, why we are fighting this War, trying to stay Alive, right Colonel?"

"So far, yes," his reply, hiding something else from me. He walked away, and let me keep my new rifle, and my naïve view of a world he know would be shattered one day, very soon.

CHAPTER 6

The summer went by quickly, the leaves starting to turn dark red as as quickly as they had budded into bright green. Katerina was out looking for herbs to replace the

medicines we had run out of, and berries to fill our empty stomachs, and noticed the changing of the seasons first. She smiled somberly. “We ate these in 1931 when Comrade Stalin took away all of our food, I remember,” she said. “You can live on leaves, you know, if you can make yourself not throw them up. But, oh, how great it would be if we could be like, them.”

She turned her rapidly aging eyes towards the horses, eating away at the late summer grass, turning brown now in the shadows, greenish in the sunlight. “Maybe you could figure out what we need to eat so we can eat grass and get as fat as they do?” she asked me, jokingly at first, but then as if she meant it. “You have brains in your head, it seems, but none in your hands, unless it is to play music, which in these times is...hmmm.”

Katerina didn't finish what she was about to say. She looked me up and down like a plant she was deciding on whether to collect, pick the flowers from, or tear up and destroy like a useless weed. Indeed, useless was toxic. When not playing music I was just another mouth to feed. Another body to keep away from bullets. And another human the horses, magnificent beasts of burden, would be burdened with.

Katerina knew now how to keep horses going longer than their ‘expiration’ time, as she was still better at repairing wounds in them that bullets, wire and blades had inflicted. Perhaps she would do the same for me if and when my body was violated by metal. So far, God, or perhaps Major Tanya, had seen to it that my fair skin remained unbroken and unblemished, with the exception of blisters on my hands and the soles of my feet of course. Not the same could be said about others in our circle.

Anna nearly lost an arm to shrapnel while repairing a cart which tank shells had tried to convert into firewood. Elena, while pulling five loose horses away from a pasture which was about to become a charcoal pit, fell off her mount and tore the ligaments in her left leg, the names of which I could not remember. Katerina didn't know the names of the ligaments but was able to put them back together, not telling anyone that she had her lost use of two of her fingers, a misfortune she turned rapidly into making the remaining eight work like eighty. Major Tanya promoted all of them with medals she conferred to them with a proud smile and grateful eyes.

As for me, the only skills I had were with things not seen by the eye, but heard by the ear, the inner ear anyway. I looked over the meadow where we ‘girls’ were sent to gather botanicals for the ‘men’, at everyone else in Tanya's medical brigade which did as much fighting as doctoring. Each one of them looked useful. Like they belonged here. Like God had perhaps inflicted this war upon them so they could become stronger at whatever they were already strong at. As for me, I was still...weak. As useless as teats on a bull, and just as expendable when it would come time to draw straws as to who would eat and who would be eaten. Such was happening in other units, so I heard.

“All of them are builders,” I heard in a voice that was gentle, and firm. “But you, are a composer. A Creator,” Major Tanya smiled fondly taking my shaking hands into her rock solid ones.

“A Creator of what?” I asked her, demanding an answer that would make sense in the world that I could see, and not just feel.

“A creator of special calluses,” she smiled, looking at my fingertips, admiring them in ways that felt different in ways that I never remember Dostoyevski or even Chekov talk about, “Callouses that were made putting string to wood, and evoking from their vibratory undulations, sounds that make tortured mortals aspire to Promethian tasks and become conduits for qualities of life, vitality and essences of Pure Being that...”

Major Tanya froze in mid speech, as if she had run out of poetic words. It was she now who felt useless somehow, and said, “Forgive me, Svetlana. I forgot what I was going to say. But, you will remember, and remind us...Remind, me.”

Tanya took away the herbal collection bag hanging around my neck and threw it around her already burdened shoulder. “You collect what is up in the sky. And in the air. And in the...” she breathed in an excessively large amount of air which was stagnant with rotting weeds. “Yes, what is in the Essence?”

It seemed odd that Tanya was asking ME for advice. She knew everything. Perhaps I should have told her that what she meant to say was Ethers, not Essence, but I didn't have the heart, or courage to do so. Instead I nodded my head in what felt like approval, which it seemed that she needed.

“Good,” she continued, pulling me aside away from everyone else, especially Elena. She looked around her in all directions, in the same way that someone who is about to tell the real truth to you in a society built on lies does when they are about to say something that is very, very important. “It is easy to fill people's bellies with food, make their bodies able to walk, and give them transportation so they can go where they need to. But it is harder to fill their hearts with Passion, enable them to dance to their own drummer, and give them wings to fly out of the prisons that are of their own making. To BECOME life instead of studying and dissecting it. You do understand me, don't you?”

“No, I don't,” I confessed, which was accurate at the time.

“Better,” she said, lowering her eye. “So, we teach each other?” she continued, raising her head, daring to smile. It was a quivering smile, needing an answer. I did not even know what the question was, but I answered a kind, and affirmative ‘yes’ to it anyway.

Like a child in need of a mother, my maternal protector who was the embodiment of everything I wanted to be, put her arms around me and squeezed me tightly. I felt every ounce of ‘Essence’, and ‘Ether’ in her body. She wanted me to teach her something that I seemed to know. If I was unable to do so, I knew somehow that she would die in the next skirmish, or perhaps put the bullet into her own head. I do not know why, but for the first time in a long, long time, I felt...useful. I thought it would make me relieved, and confident. Instead, it made my ever-present, still controlled fear turn into terror.

Something I could never show anyone, especially the ever fearless Major, Sister, mother and perhaps lover, Tanya.

CHAPTER 7

My private lessons with Tanya were taken when we both went out on patrol, looking for herbs, wounded Russians, special herbs, wandering cows and pigs, or Germans. Or special training exercises. If we went North, she would tell 'Uncle' Colonel Kostinov we were heading South, 'Comrade' Elena that we were going East. Machinist' Anna and 'Doc' Katerina that our direction was West. As Tanya was the most useful Comrade in our resistance unit, which had miraculously gained as many members as we had lost, and I was the most useless (according to all but her anyway), no one really voiced any objections. But I seemed to have in me the cure for what Tanya needed to be treated from. 'Dull Out Virus', she called it. "A disease that makes you dull, boring, procedural and lifeless inside," she told me by way of explanation, again and again, in private. "The kind of disease that is contagious, in which any notes you play destroys any music that can come out of them."

I wondered what kind of 'cure' she wanted, or thought I could give her. When we set up 'camp', she pitched a camouflage tent up and set up boards behind it which absorbed any sound. And, on each lesson, she would see to it that we were not seen, or heard by anyone. And, surprisingly, no matter how hot it got, her tunic always remained buttoned all the way to the top, though I could feel that she wanted to take it off. I know I felt the urge to take mine off. And my trousers. And everything else that would prevent our flesh from getting to know each other. Who would be the man and who would be the woman seemed to not be important. We were both beyond that, it seemed. Particularly because of how she 'ordered' it to be.

"First the music between the ears, then the rhymes below the neck," she insisted, again and again, as she picked up a newly acquired Estonian violin, then a Ukrainian flute, then a Russian mandolin we had acquired from the Germans after she made a special raid into their camp to claim back 'instruments of the REAL Revolution," as she put it. Each time she tried to play it, it seemed hard to her. And harder to listen, for me, I admit. She grunted in frustration each time, handing it over to me.

"You do that so well," she said, as she always did, no matter what I was playing. "And with less notes than I do...Though sometimes with more. And sometimes with...I don't know!!! Why can't these hands do something CREATIVE instead of useful!" She banged away with clenched fists at her surgeon hands which were God's instruments in saving so many lives of Comrades who walked on two, and four legs.

It was all I could do to grab them, look into her eyes, and scream back, as gently as I could, "Let go! All you have to do is let go, inside!"

“If I let go, I’ll fall further into the black hole!” she confessed, and related me. “That black hole that everyone trained me to live in. The black hole of being responsible. Vigilant. Always correct, but never really Right. And…”

She grabbed hold of the violin, looking at it like it was a machine. “How do YOU make this make ALL the notes you want, and without mistakes!”

“I trust my fingers?” I confessed, and related. I know she wanted an answer and not a question, but I really didn’t know how to cure her of the disease that had apparently plagued her ‘talented’ soul since as long as she could remember. All I wanted, it seemed, was to be like her. To know how to save lives of Comrades, kill the enemy effectively when I had to, and spend more time telling people what to do than doing what they tell me to do. So, I picked up the violin, gave her the mandolin, and started with something simple. Or complicated. It seemed to be both at the same time. A tune emerged as a composition for my own, suddenly liberated head.

“We have a conversation, with these. Just notes, or sounds, or music. Whatever your fingers want to say, it’s alright. Alright?” I asked the mistress doctor who had now become my patient.

The conversation started with a few sounds, then a few notes, then a few passages of songs of my composition, then hers. Grunts led to smiles, then giggles, then laughs, then the language of Silence, as we looked into each others eyes, fascinated and terrified of what we felt, and saw. My body shook as it was deep winter, though the air outside the tent was hot. Hers seemed to shake as well, but somehow it was with the same vibration and rhythm as mine. The ‘song’ continued. I think I hummed something. Maybe she hummed something back. All I remember was fingers meeting in mid air, out bodies feeling to be one. Then becoming merged with the earth itself, as we unbuttoned each others tunics and relieved our souls of them. I found my face moving towards hers, our lips moving closer together. She kept her eyes open. I had to close mine. It was a moment of Life which could have only been born of a time in which there was so much Death. But Death and Life seemed to be the same entity, and I felt myself about to become free of fear of them both. When, without warning---

CHAPTER 8

“Lesbinish?” a man with a gruff voice and even harsher looking face asked, as he stuck his nose into our tent. His helmet was more tarnish than metal, the smile embedded into his stubble-bearing face caked with mud. The Eagles on his uniform were faded, looking more like wild turkeys and emasculated ravens. When I saw how he looked at us, I turned into a scared chicken.

Tanya turned to the German soldier and replied with controlled sense of calm, and humanity, “Du willst uns ansehen?”. I gathered that it meant “Do you want to watch?”.

The storm trooper nodded his head 'yes', his eyes starved of the experience and sight of love, apparently. "Yes, I want to watch," he answered in German then badly mispronounced Russian. He took a seat in the back of the tent, picked up the violin and played a tune. I didn't recognize it as being German, Russian, or Polish. But it was unmistakably beautiful---to his ear anyway. Tanya hummed along, beckoning me to do the same as our visitor was in closer proximity to his weapon than we were to ours. Maybe he didn't know that we were combatants. Or maybe he did. In any case, Tanya thought it best that we both play along with him. Naturally, I followed her lead. Ironic it was, that my first real experience with love as expressed with the body was driven by fear. But, as we continued to do what we were bid by our 'guest', and he continued to 'play for his supper', fear was replaced by something else. Something---real, perhaps. Maybe this was how I was supposed to die. In the arms of someone I loved, and who loved me. There were far more agonizing ways to leave the realm of the living, God knows. As do most of the beings in his Creation.

Suddenly, the music from the violin stopped. Our guest commanded heard something outside, and ordered us to stop with a loud, desperate 'shh'. I don't remember what words he used, but they were clear enough. He seemed as scared as we were, as I was anyway, as he buttoned up his tunic, did up the belt around his waist and covered the wet spot that had emerged between his legs with the butt of his rifle. Another visitor came into the tent, his boots polished, the birds on his hat looking like very eagle-like, his face cleanly shaved around a mustache trimmed with precision accuracy.

"Du bist Juden?" he asked both of us.

"Nein," Tanya laughed, hugging me with an outstretched arm. "Wir sind Lesbianish," she announced, proudly. "Du willst uns ansehen?" she asked, becoining him to watch, stroking my cheek so my trembling lips would turn into a smile rather than reveal our real identities.

"You address me as 'du', the familiar form of 'you'?" the officer asked us softly, in our own language. "DU address me as DU!" he growled, slapping both of us across our faces like insolent dogs. "You address your superiors as SIE, because you are inferior beings," he instructed us. "And worse than being Unterleuten, lower people, you are homosexual. This makes you more inferior, and toxic to us, and your people."

He barked some orders to his inferior (German but not Nazi) violinist, which meant 'round them up and take them away,' by the way they were spoken, and obeyed. I felt a rope being put behind me, tied tightly into my wrists. While our captors conferred as to where to take us, I snuck my hand over to Tanya's, for one last touch of bondship. She gave me something far more valuable, a sharp stone she had snuck up from the ground, along with a miniature pistol she had, according to how it smelled and felt, pulled out of a portion of her anatomy that was hidden from the touch of any man, or woman. I felt my hands freed from the ropes, and held captive by a pistol inside of it.

“Why didn’t Tanya give the gun to herself?” I asked myself. “She knows she is a better shot than I am! Or maybe her hands are tied tighter than mine, and she can’t get them loose,” I reasoned.

The ‘valiant’ Corporal smiled apologetically to us as his superior took a map out of his pocket. A hand from outside the tent reached in to tap him on the back. The others seemed indignant, but then turned to Tanya, eyeing her up and down. Then me. He seemed impressed with both of us. He whispered to her, and and me, in Russian, “After I shoot this insolent enlisted man who dares to ask for my attention by touching me on the back..” he bowed. “I will see that both of you lesbians are properly processed. With that he turned around, his ‘gentlemanly’ smile turning into a grimace as he pulled out his revolver. He did not get a chance to use it, as his head was preoccupied with something else. A bullet placed there by Colonel Kostonov’s own hand. The second round found its way into the Corporal’s groin, the third into his chest. I found myself pulling out the pistol from my own hand and firing away, not knowing where my two bullets went. It was the first time I fired a weapon at such close range, at anyone.

Kostinov appeared in front of us, two of his most trusted men behind him, their backs turned. “Now it is your turn to---“ he said to Tanya, soaking the blood off his arm, which perhaps was from the pistol I had shot.

“---We had it all under control, Comrade Colonel!” Tanya protested. “As did Comrade Svetlana,” she asserted.

“Well, maybe you, or her, did, and maybe you didn’t,” Kostinov said, looking at his most recent wound, proudly. “You can sew it up, and I can count it as another medal of honor on a body that will never die. But in the meantime...” Kostinov pulled out a large knife and cut apart the thick rope that had been placed around Tanya’s wrists, far tougher than the ones put around mine. I got a glimpse of what he was doing as I put my tunic back on, Tanya sensing instantly what I had spotted.

“Yes,” she said of the slashed wrists she had hidden under her long sleeve shirts, and never showed to anyone. “I did try to kill myself several times,” she confessed, softly enough for only me to hear. “But I was, so far, unsuccessful. God was sadistic enough to give me a survival instinct that is still too strong for my own good.”

It was the first time I heard Tanya speak of her relationship with the first ‘person’ who was exiled from Russia once the Soviets took over. The person, or Person. who still ruled us no matter how much we denied, doubted nor defied His existence. I hoped, and prayed, that He, or She, if such was the case, didn’t deny, doubt or defy OUR existence, or lives. A frightening thought came to my still shocked, yet rapidly learning mind. If God really was a sadist, his first victim would be Tanya, his most favored and valuable sacrificial Angel. And perhaps the Almighty would use me to do His dirty work. It was explain why Tanya had been so ‘lucky’ to avoid getting even a scratch while putting herself in the line of fire in so many skirmishes and battles while in

uniform, and almost getting killed now that she was with me when she was stripped of who she was assigned to be by life, small l.

CHAPTER 9

Fall gave way to winter, faster than we expected. Thankfully, even faster than the Germans expected it as well. Now, it was a matter of fighting the elements, rather than people. First it was the cold, a thin layer of ice on the hard ground, making what was under it feel like rocks to the now fragile feet of our overworked horses. Then the snow, as it made for slow travel with anything on wheels. But, Nature seemed to want us to fight, or die, another day, as we were better equipped to move what we had on sleds than the modern method of doing so.

“My Siberian grandfather said that the wheel was marvelous invention, which enabled Moscovites to claim his homeland as their own,” Illya said as we passed by a German truck stuck in the snow on one side, the mud underneath it sucking the metallic machine back into the earth on the other. “But the wheel made in Moscow only works if you stay at home in Moscow,” he laughed, dismissing the misfortunes of the inhabitants of the truck as just deserves from a God Who, despite Soviet mandate, was still protecting the atheistic state of the Soviet Republic.

Kostinov had other ideas with regard to the truck that had been abandoned by the Aryan invaders who, apparently, had moved farther East than their orders dictated. He looked at the footprints in the snow, leading Westward. “Some blood in their tracks, and bits of flesh as well,” he commented regarding the wherabouts of the invaders. “But there is something else that they will hold onto with more deperation than their blood or boots,” he continued, picking up pieces of torn paper caked into the snow, much of it intact enough to be used for their original purpose.

“That money these invaders stole belongs to the Soviet Bank. Our bank,” Tanya reminded Kostinov.

“Well,” Kostinov said, taking into account the opportunities and risks involved. “I suppose that those of us who will follow the trail West, will be entitled to a raise in pay.” He quickly calculated a third of the money and slipped it under his coat, all the while hiding it from view of his Comrades out unit huddled behind the trees in the upcoming wind trying to stay warm, and the wounded huddled up inside blankets converted into tents, and privately-delivered prayers, trying to say alive. He turned to me, as I had seen it as clearly as he did. “You won’t tell anyone, Svetlana” he assured me, grabbing hold of a bottle of vodka from the blood-spattered cab of the truck which the German patrol had been unable to carry with them.

“Why would she do that? Why would Comrade Svetlana not tell anyone about what you just found,” Tanya asserted.

“Because Comrade Svetlana is coming with me,” Kostinov replied. “Leading the way, because she, well, has better eyes than I do. Or you, Major Tanya, can come along too. Do you know how many medical supplies you can buy for the wounded you seem to care about more than yourself, and feed for those horses who you dot on like they are your children? Do you know what this money can buy?”, he continued holding up what to my calculations was more than I could earn in ten years working for Ivan in the People’s factory. “Do you know what this is worth?” he challenged, holding a fistful of money with large numbers and Soviet portraits I didn’t even recognize.

“Five wipes on an asshole after a healthy shit,” Tanya said. “Two on one that has the kind of dysentery that’s putting as many of us out of action as bullets and bombs. Or a soak bandage on an artery that’s just been shot open by a---“

Before Tanya could describe the nature of the weaponry, the cold winter air snapped with hushed fire from the distant woods, opening up an artery on Kostinov’s arm, red blood gushing onto the snow. Tanya rushed to his aid, pulling him down into the snow, stopping the blood flow as fast as the volcanic eruption had been opened. By some reflex that I did not even know, I found myself grabbing hold of Kostinov’s rifle and ‘sensing’ three figures in the woods. I took three shots, exhausting the remainder of bullets in Kostinov’s gun. Two bodies fell to the ground. A third rose up, under a blood stained white cloth, a bag of money hanging over his left shoulder.

Tanya busied herself offering up yet more pieces of her soul in exchange for Magical Mystical healing wisdom to a Divinity to whom she owed debts far more than she could ever repay. Meanwhile, I dealt with life on another level.

The German soldier seemed younger and more human with each step he took towards me, as I aimed my empty rifle at him. “Take the money!” he said. “The money for my life!” he said as he laid the money down in the snow, shaking like a leaf, his pants becoming drenched with fresh urine. “Please!” he pleaded.

“Remember what they did to Sergei!” Kostinov told me, sensing my reluctance to kill an unarmed man. Indeed, I had not even killed any armed men yet, at least none that I knew about. “And what that officer was going to do to you,” he continued, reading my soul again as I saw this soldier not as a Nazi, nor as a German, but a scared private who had no choice but to be enlisted into the Army. Indeed, my enlistment in the Red Army was not my choice either. He smiled, in the same way that Johan did, the man who, well, almost turned me into a complete woman, when I had just grown out of being a girl.

“They take no prisoners, we take no prisoners. That is the rule of this war,” Kostinov said, his senses returned to him by Tanya, or perhaps God, restoring life to his yet again wounded body.

“He can tell us what is really going on around us,” Tanya said. “I would believe him more than those lies we get from other units on the radio, when our radio is working, and

certainly on the radio when we get orders told to us from Moscow from Comrade Stalin's podium," she continued.

"You are right, again," Kostinov conceded as he observed Tanya miraculously close up the gusher of blood in his arm. He seemed more relieved than amazed, or thankful. "He can tell me where the rest of the money is," he continued, as if nothing out of the ordinary had ever happened.

The German soldier looked to ME for the answer as to what would happen to him. I motioned for him to kneel down in the snow and put his hands on his head. He obeyed me as if I was God himself, or even more so, Comrade Stalin himself. Or Hitler. Never before did I feel so powerful. So in control. So...important. I felt myself promoted in some way to a higher station. I could ask him to screw himself and he would find a way to do it. It was so...sustaining. But as all things sustaining, it was short lived. As was the life of the man whose life I could own, save or perhaps convert to another Cause.

A bullet came out of the woods. I am not sure if it was from our Camp, or theirs. I only know that it was a single round. And that it landed into the German soldier's head, very accurately placed there by someone who knew how to use weaponry well, then escape detection even better. The German soldier fell into the snow, atop the booty of cash he and his, apparently senior by looks of them, buddies had stolen on a private patrol without orders. Tanya raced up to save him, pulling him back towards our side of the 'line' which rifle range had established.

"He's dead," Kostinov commented as he stumbled over the site of the 'assassination', feeling sorry for the lad somehow. "But he did not die in vain," he said, grabbing hold of the money in the bag rapped around the cold hand of the dead soldier. He offered what seemed to be a third of it to Tanya, who neither accepted nor rejected the 'gift'. "For better times, during which we will not speak at all about these times," he said by way of explanation, and offer. Tanya nodded, 'yes', but didn't take the money. She deferred that situation to me. Kostinov offered me another share of the booty, which Tanya said, with her eyes and nodding head, I was allowed to accept. Kostinov decided it was appropriate to take Tanya's share as his own, forcing Tanya to grab it and keep it herself. Perhaps it was plan, or a Divine Design. She stuffed all of her share of the booty under her trousers, most of it between her legs. "Interesting," Kostinov smirked. "So you are a pragmatist with matters of money, and I am assuming, flesh, most particularly for the wounded who are in need of fresh meat?" he continued, pulling out a knife.

Tanya looked over the grey horizon, and saw that we had not been seen, nor heard, by the rest of our unit. "Be sure that it is cooked very well," she said to me, motioning to Kostinov to begin the butchering process.

Katerina had told me about how disposing of bodies of dead Bolsheviks in such manner saved the lives of many non-Soviet Ukrainian children in those desperate years of 1930 and 1931. And that the worse that happened as a result of doing so was an upset stomach, though occasionally she said an undercooked meal did make the diner a bit

madder than the others. But maybe being madder was a requirement for winning this War, or at least surviving it. The children of the wounded who would survive would not have to know. And none of us would tell them. And, as it happened, the lives of our horses were spared. They were, thankfully, far more valuable as means of transportation, companionship and humanity than food. For us in our isolated corner of the War, anyway.

CHAPTER 10

The money I had stuffed into my trousers and undershirt turned out to be far more useful as insulation than for spending. As for some of the rest of it, it seemed appropriate to put them atop my nipples on days when I wanted men to notice me, atop my belly button and stomach when I wanted them to leave me alone. I don't know why but my interest in men seemed to warm up at some times, and shut down without warning sometimes. Maybe it was because the temperature outside my body went down a lot, then up a little, at unpredictable times that first winter of the war. Actually, we were officially at war against Counter-Revolutionaries since overthrowing the Czar. But what were we fighting for now? Was it really survival, and preservation of life? After 1925, we all saw that Moscow cared only for itself and not for the people who lived everywhere else, and fear of purges was what we measured our lives by.

No, what we were fighting for was not the glory of the Revolution, nor for Comrade Stalin, or even Mother Russia. It was for hope that something would happen that was different than anything else we had ever experienced, and every day was a new experience.

I seemed to develop an interest in Illya, maybe because he seemed to develop an interest in me first. Or maybe not. On a sunny and not so windy day in, as I recall, probably February, he asked me to join him for dinner. "A rabbit decided to give up the ghost in front of my tent, and to honor its spirit, it is appropriate to share his body with someone who deserves a good meal," he smiled at me while I tended to my duties fixing wagons, and tending to flesh of those aboard them, both tasks which the wounded could have done better than I, of course. "Perhaps because I am such a horrible shot, it decided to die on my doorstep," he said by way of explanation as to how he got the game which was becoming very scarce, or good at running away from even the best marksmen in our unit.

The klutz who was even more inaccurate with a rifle than I was, but so accurate with how he aimed, and fired out, his words, glanced down at my money-padded belly, seeing something there that I didn't want to show him. "A woman in your condition, or possible condition, has to eat," he said to me with kindness rather than judgment. "Maybe you could allow me to play some music with you? I am not very good, but the notes I can play, some say, can be quite musical. I've been practicing on a harmonica I found on the body of a charred man, maybe Russian, maybe German, who wasn't using it anymore. And I think his spirit is still in the instrument."

I looked across camp to Tanya to ask her permission. As always she was occupied with important things, and doing them well. This time it was teaching two German Jews who had escaped the Concentration Camps that one day the world might know about as to how to stitch up wounds and fire guns by day, and roll their 'rs' and embellish their 'ys' like Orthodox Christian Russians around the campfires at night, as under all of the Soviet veneer, most of us still were Christians who somehow still blamed the Jews more than the Romans for our Savior's being Crucified. There was a price on Hans and Gretchen's heads, offered by the German-appointed mayors of each of the Slavic towns we avoided, attacked or burned. For murder and child molestation as a result of them being Gypsies, a group of people hated by everyone, according to the dispatches printed in Russian. But Tanya said that it had something to do with what they (Ivan and Sophia, according to their new names) saw, and did, in the 'bakeries' and 'soap factories' hidden in the woods that the German High Command could not afford to let anyone know about.

I was expecting Tanya to tell me, again, to stay away from men, as she seemed to hate them, while I merely mistrusted them. The men were in charge of the battlefield. And Tanya was in charge of all of the women. Yes, I would indeed go through this War as a virgin, at least with regard to laying with a man. It seemed to suit me too. My 'friendship' with Tanya showed me that women were far more intelligent, more spiritually dedicated and more...interesting than men. Yes, 'interesting' was something that was missing in Russia after the Bosheviks took over. But something about Illya was...not boring. I don't know what it was, but he was...not boring. Still, there was something about him that I wanted to trust, but knew I shouldn't. And it didn't have anything to do with his being the officially-commanded 'morale' officer.

But Tanya agreed to let me explore my options, or seemed to be determining what his might be. She motioned with her hands, to me, and to Illya, that he and I should 'dine' together. When Illya smiled a 'yes' back, my upwardly turned lips took a downward turn, and started to shake. "Something wrong?" he asked.

"I'm...cold is all," I replied, pretending to shake my arms and legs, though the heat in them was so bad that I could feel the sweat penetrate through my 'special padding' onto the clothing over it. I found myself fearing that the ink from the money which was not supposed to be reported as stolen would leak out and stain my khaki uniform green, red or blue. But, it didn't. And I was able once again to hide what I was fearing. But Illya seemed to see instantly what I was feeling. "Tonight, we are who we are, not what these uniforms say we should be," he smiled. I found myself smiling with him, then breaking into a jovial chuckle as he bowed slightly and invited me to join him in his tent as the sun started to turn the boringly greyish sky a deep blue, the sunset having a golden quality that felt as well as looked...warm.

The rabbit tasted like chicken, which is what everything tasted like, so it seemed. No spice in it except the person I was sharing it with. I found myself wanting to share more with him, as it seemed mutual. Half way through the feast which was shared away from everyone else in camp, our eyes met. His brown eyes seemed to turn blue, and my green ones a color that I couldn't see but could feel. He stroked my cheek, moved his head

closer to my lips, then kept everything still. He moved both of his hands around my chest, directly on top of but not touching the areas of my 'special padding'. The Red Star on his uniform to me looked like a dagger ready to pierce into me once he determined that I was hiding money that belonged to the people, or possibly to him if he was to keep quiet about it. The lining of what I was wearing seemed the safest place, the prospect of keeping some of the larger bills inside body cavities both impractical and repulsive to me. I did not speak about where I hid my share of the money with Tanya, and certainly not Kostinov, and they didn't speak to me with regard to where they kept their stash, though I always wondered where they could hide it when we were always on the move. I thought of what I would say to the Commissar who would be questioning me. The lies I would rehearse enough times so he could accept them as the truth. Contemplating how long it would take that Inquisitor to see through my lies, and how easily I could save my hide by giving up or make up stories about Kostinov, who was now like an Uncle or father to me, or Tanya who was...a lot more. Just as the time when I smelled that Inquisitor's breath on my shaking, sweat-soaked face in the interrogation room, Illya put his hands around my neck. Gently he touched the skin around it, working his way to my frostbitten ears. "It is who and what you are between here that I care about, not what you are, or could be, below the neck," he said. With that, he kissed me, on the lips, with a love that was described by him in Greek words I had never heard spoken so...poetically. "'Agape' is what I have for you. Love of Spirit. Combined with 'Philos', love between Comrades. 'Eros', love of the body, is for those who are...not us," he said. "Though someday, if we win this war, or on the last day before we lose it..." he continued, asking the question.

I found myself answering 'yes' to his proposition. He hugged me. I felt his gratitude and kindness, and did my best to convey mine to him, through the tips of my blistered fingers. It was one of those 'eternal' moments where we felt, smelled and saw each other. An eternal moment that always was, always will be, and of course...is. Thinking on it, there was only one other person with whom I had such eternal moments. I felt her presence outside the tent, but when I looked with the corner of my eye through a small hole in the tent made bigger by a falling branch, it was someone else.

"We have to relocate, again," Anna said, the confidence about who she was to the camp emanating through her body in the same manner as Tanya.

"Retreating again?" Illya asked, hiding the rabbit as best as he could.

"Forward this time!" Anna proclaimed, with pride.

"Yes, forward," Illya smiled at me.

"Forward," I confirmed, in Polish, 'forward' meaning geographically heading West, towards my original and still most beloved homeland. Where, perhaps, Agape and Philos could co-exist with Eros, someday soon.

The “superior raced” German invaders brought all of us “inferior” Soviet Slavs together. It was the Soviet Army that brought me and ‘the girls’ closer to each other. The Mission of the Red Army was to kill as many Germans as possible. The heart-sworn duty between me, Anna, Katerina, and even Elena was to keep each other Alive, big A. Our inspiration in all of this was Tanya, a fortress of strength and wisdom whose weaknesses and miscalculations I started to sense, but could not yet define. Still, she kept our stomachs from fed with food and our bodies free of bullets, at least the ones that would put us under the ground we fought so hard to keep, then regain.

As for how the war was going, Colonel ‘Uncle’ Kostinov measured it in real estate gained or lost, or what he could report as victories to Central Command, when there was a radio to use, or a Central Command to relate them to. Comrade Illya calculated it in terms of how many recruits we gained from units that had lost their leaders, or clothes-less civilians who had decided to put on the uniforms we gave them to wear. I found myself telling ‘time’ according to how fast the horses were losing weight. And, as Winter led to Spring, how quickly Anna was becoming...’fat’ around the belly, even though she seemed to eat less than the rest of us.

For the first time in visualizable memory that I saw water on the dirt roads under my feet instead of snow, March, maybe April, as I recall. It was a day when, as a child, we would take off our clothes and bath in the water. Tanya decided it was a good thing to do, for all of us, and allowed us half an hour ‘leave’ to do so. I declined, making the cold in my nostrils sound like pneumonia. Tanya knew why, and assigned me the job of standing guard for the women, my girls and some others, against the men who considered it their job to ‘take care’ of them, some in ways that were kind, some that were not so kind. Both ways of ‘caring’ were amplified by vodka, or any other kind of elixir that was found, or created, as we went along. But being miserable when appropriate and drunk when possible was, I suppose, part of being Russian. An experience the men were allowed more than us women, in wartime as in peacetime.

“It is tradition!” Katerina proclaimed as she pulled the bottle of wine that she had been saving for two months out of her pack, pouring it into small glasses which had been used by now missing or dead children, acquired as we passed through what had been a well populated village around Christmas. “A fine wine that is naturally fermented, with a taste that is---“ she continued, pouring the red fruity flavored treat, her hand knocked hard enough to nearly detach it from her shoulder by Tanya.

“No drinking!” Major Tanya declared, with no room for compromise. “Not unless we need it for anesthesia,” she continued by way of a reasonable explanation. “We need to keep our heads so our hearts don’t get distracted, or turn black on us without knowing it.”

No one argued with Tanya, not so much because she was making sense, but because she was...Tanya. A heroine who wanted to be out of the arena of heroics, and by the way she held the bottle of wine away from her like she had more fear of it than hatred, someone who had at one time sought an answer to life’s miseries at the bottom of more than one

jug of wine, vodka or whiskey. “We’ve come a long way, and we still have a long way to go,” she reminded the girls. “Starting with bathing away the stench of winter, no matter how cold this water is,” she smiled, being the first to take off her clothing and immerse her shivering naked body in one big leap into the still-cold water.

The others stripped down and dived in too, but slowly, first with their ankles, then wrists, then bellies. Anna turned her back so that no one could see the reason why her waistline was getting wider than everyone else's. But Tanya did spot it. “I know,” Anna said. “I’ll take care of it,” she said pointing to the life incubating in her body, determination in her eyes to follow no one’s orders but her own. Tanya allowed her to continue doing whatever she was doing. And what Anna, who now looked more matronly than maidenly, lingered in her eyes. The right one was vulnerable, kind and giving. The left was infused with anger which was about to merge into being cold and heartless, a necessary tool for survival, so it seemed.

At that time I chose to look at the eyes of my other female Comrades, wondering how all of this ‘war thing’ had changed them. Besides being tired, everyone had been transformed in a different way. Katerina’s heart was opened the first time she had seen the chest of a soldier opened up by German bullets. She agonized each time she had to perform surgery to put together what metal had taken apart, never losing empathy for the soul who had to endure a pain-infested body. Elena went in another direction. No matter how much human suffering she saw, she remained ‘mechanical’ behind her eyes, and numb in the heart. As for me, like Anna, I seemed to be caught in the middle of it. I tried to figure out what was happening in, or to, me through music, when I was allowed to play it anyway. I wondered about the new recruits, most of them widows who needed a family to belong to. Whose hearts would be opened by all of this agony around them and whose would be closed? I recalled visiting with my Uncle Gustav who operated a butcher shop. “Some people look into the eyes of a chicken, pigs or cows they have to kill and see souls. Some just see meat, and the needs of hungry children who have to eat” he would say. “But it doesn’t matter, just as long as they make the kill clean and know how to carve up the meat more than their own fingers,” he would continue.

Thankfully, I was bad enough with a knife so that my mother never forced me to work for my Uncle, and my father was well off enough so I didn’t have to. But it brought up the question to my still ever-inquisitive mind: If you want to make someone an effective healer of people, is it necessary that they see the sufferings of a thousand dying souls, or it is more necessary that their eyes remain open for just one who is hurting? I had seen my father suffer from wounds he got in an ‘accident’ with police, the details of which he never revealed. And my mother coughed up more blood than air when she nearly expired from pneumonia. Caring was just something...I did. Or was trained to do. But maybe being effective in caring has nothing to do with what one feels. Such was the case with Tanya, I considered, once again. Though her body needed the sweat, blood and grime of winter washed away by early Spring water, she didn’t seem to enjoy it. She never enjoyed anything very much, for that matter. Not playing music with, and for, me in private. Not even my touching her in ways that I know moved her heart, which she could not tell anyone about, even the other girls. No, Tanya did what was good and

pleasurable for her because it would make her a more effective instrument of healing and liberation, not because anything made her happy. Perhaps she knew what 'happy' was at one time, and vowed to never experience it again, for reasons that I asked her and got no answer. At least one that I could understand.

There was one thing that I found myself wondering about. The money, again, most of which was blood stained one way or another. What did Tanya do with her share of it? Where was it hidden and what were her plans for it? She, Uncle Kostinov and me had, after all, made a pact to never reveal it to each other. But such was a minor secret relative to the other matters that one had to be secretive about. I'll tell you about those later, as you need to know them, and as I discovered them myself.

But in the meantime, the War decided to put introspection on hold, survival being a first priority. Bullets sprang out of the brush on the West and North of us where the women were bathing. The men were a healthy distance away, having stuffing their faces with the meal we women had just cooked for them and, by the sounds of their very offkey 'singing' and misogynistic lyrics, helping themselves to the vodka anesthetic box that Tanya tried to keep locked up.

My gun jammed after firing two shots, one of them nearly backfiring in my face whether by luck or intent, none of the German bullets hitting their mark. The girls took cover. Tanya grabbed her weapon and fired, the naked Amazon showing no mercy to our attackers. Helping out, thankfully, were men from Camp, some overfed, some drunk. They worked their way up the hill, one, maybe two, German falling to the ground for every body of ours, even a few Illya's shots finding their way to within two feet of their target. Such was a far better ratio of losses than the 'one of theirs to seven of ours' which had been the case with regard to human bodies, and machinery, and horses when the German Army poured over the borders they had been ordered to not trespass over when the non-Aggression Pact was signed two years and two thousand dimensions of experience ago. Leading the attack was Colonel Kostinov, firing his pistol like he was a gunfighter in the American West. With each shot, he'd yell at the German soldier he hit, then back at one of the women he had saved. By this time, all of the girls who become fighting women again, arming themselves with weapons they had brought with them for, ironically, protection from Red Army men who would have wanted to join them for a swim. Anna seemed to be the least scared, and most determined. She and Tanya took cover next to me.

"You are alright?" Kostinov seemed to ask the three of us, his main focus on Anna.

"Yes," she said affirmatively, rubbing the new life growing in her womb. "We are, and will be."

Kostinov became a superman, recharged with the most powerful tool known to man---the adoration and admiration of women. He turned around and shot three rounds into the trees, as many bodies falling into the dirt, spewing out blood in their wake. A fourth round was fired, from Anna's rifle, finding its way into the back of Kostinov's head.

Anna's kind right eye closed shut, her cold, angered and now well satisfied left one opening wide. She turned to Tanya and said, calmly and with determination regarding her unborn child, "Like I said, I'LL take care if it. Better to be born a bastard than have a father who is still alive who is one."

With that, Anna took out the rest of her anger against the Germans, bringing down enough of them so that the remainder retreated. Uncle Kostinov died before any help could be gotten to him. Tanya was the first there, pronouncing him dead, hiding his face from view by any who wanted, or needed to see it. She had lost someone very important. I lost someone very valued.

"Why?" I asked Anna regarding the 'accidental' shooting that apparently only I and Tanya had witnessed..

"Kostinov was drinking too much last night, and said that you and Tanya were thieves and worse. If he kept talking was making up stories to have both of you sent to the Labor Camps. Separate labor camps. She rubbed her belly, assuring the life inside of it that was okay. "And after he did what he did to me," she growled in anger from her left eye. "Or what I allowed, or may have teased him into," Anna continued, a tear of remorse and regret falling down from her right.

Both eyes turned away from me and went on the the business of staying alive. Or, surviving anyway. At that time I realized deeper than ever the difference between the two agendas.

CHAPTER 12

The orders came over the radio, which still belonged officially to Illya, decoded by himself and, as a courtesy to us girls, Elena. "I am to be promoted to Colonel," the very civilian Morale Officer with the Captain insignia on his uniform announced to me, more as a lamentation, perhaps as a confession. "Would you do what is necessary, please?" he said to me, looking straight from his burdened eyes to my astonished ones.

Under the shade, and shelter, of a pine tree in the most unseeable part of our still mobile camp, he handed me Colonel Kostinov's summer tunic, his winter wear stained with too much blood for any purpose. "I know that it is premature for summer attire this early in Spring, but, could take the insignia off this and sew it onto my uniform, please?" he continued. Such was the way Illya had given orders ever since he found his way, by accident, co-incidence or perhaps purpose, to us prior to the first snow of the now vanishing winter. Each command was appended by a 'please' and a smile which showed how much he would be willing to do the task requested if circumstances allowed it. Everything from carting wounded off a battlefield being strayed with bullets to cleaning out a latrine overloaded with manure after a bad communally-shared meal, or vomit after a good communal 'drunk'. But, through no fault of his own, Illya's hands remained free

of blood, and shit. Did I say shit? I suppose I did. In the telling of this tale to you I suppose I am reliving it.

In any case, I removed my knife from its sheath, as 'ordered' to, and cut off Uncle Kostinov's insignia from the padded, plain khaki uniform that had been too big for his small shoulders and sewed it onto Illya's tunic, which fit his large shoulders all too well. Shoulder that looked like they could carry the weight of the world on them after they were adorned with the 'Colonel label' I sewed on it with far better skill than I ever had in my hands when stitching up flesh on our own men, women or horses. "Thank you," he said with a bow. Not a slight bow as he did to any of the men, or women, under his command as Morale officer, but one that was 'big'. No, even better. A bow that was more poetic each time he did it. There had been so little 'poetic' over the last year since the invasion happened. Perhaps we all became the poem. Someone else would write about it, and us, someday. If we survived. Maybe such was the honor, and burden, of the survivors.

But before I get weepy, I had better continue the story. My sorrows, and mistakes, are not your fault, nor responsibility after all. Not unless you let me make them yours. I hope you are wise enough to know that, and strong enough to apply such practical wisdom.

Illya, who chose to be addressed by his Christian rather than Surname, just 'Comrade' to those who felt uncomfortable with it, turned out to be a natural born leader. He was able more than ever to make men WANT to do what they had to do. His long brown hair, chiseled face, and Herclean physique were something straight off of one of those paintings the Czars had made of themselves before the time of photography so that they would look like gods rather than the deformed, vulnterable, and real people that they really were. When atop a horse, 'Comrade Illya' embodied the highest ideals about every revolution, the visual accompanymnt to Beethoven's Eroca Symphony AND Tschicovski's 1812 Overture. He inspired every man to be the best man he could be, and made every woman yearn to be with him. How fortunate I felt to be his 'favorite', at least for the first few weeks after I had conferred the military promotion on a man who was every inch the honorable civilian, Illya was more about honor than power, chivalry rather than lust. Still, he looked more impressive holding a firearm or sword than he was effective in using it, a flaw which all of us accepted without malice or disappointment.

One of Illya's first orders was that there was to be no drinking in Camp. He did this by example first, of course. Such was obeyed, most of the time, unless the misery of reality overcame someone, in which case Comrade Illya understood the transgressions all too well. His second major order was that no man was to enter a woman's tent without her permission. As far as I knew, or was told, such was obeyed. Maybe my knowledge of such things was that I was the one he bowed lowest and most poetically to above all other women in camp. Anna, Katerina and Elena were happy for me. Tanya was less enthusiastic about it. Especially after I let Illya into my tent two, maybe three, times a week. To play music only.

It was the music that we made, with notes rather than our bodies, that Tanya was angered, and worried about most. One day when the asculations of birds and frogs were louder than the the groans of the wounded or thunder of guns that made more of them overcame us, she pulled me aside to ask my help in holding down a new stallion who would be happier, and most useful, as a gelding rather than a breeding animal. After cutting off its testicles, and throwing them into the multi-specied 'stew' that kept our tired and hungry bodies going, she commented on the music I had played for the camp the previous night.

"You are playing more music now under the command of Comrade Illya than you ever did with Kostinov, I notice," she noted.

"Yes, I am," I said, understanding perhaps the real reason why the war, for me, had become more of an endeavor than a hardship.

"And you play less music less with me," I expected Tanya to say next, knowing and feeling that my expanding job as the Camp musician to boost morale gave me less time to instruct her in the art, and science, of making music. And, other things we shared privately, once a week now if we were lucky. But, no, Tanya, said to me something very different, in a voice that I had never heard from her. "Be careful around him," he said. "He calls you Comrade but sees you as a woman, and as long as he sees you as a woman, you will be an instrument in the kind of evil that will destroy man, woman and horse alike."

With that, Tanya kissed me tenderly on the cheek, hiding it of course from the girls, and most importantly, the men who Tanya and myself seemed to 'entertain' with the fantasies they had embellished. "I would love you no matter what, or who, you have to become," she said, somehow knowing I was worried about Illya.. "And if Illya really loves you, he will do the same," she added. She pushed aside my long now brown, and more slimy than flowing, hair, placing it into a tight bun behind the back of my neck. She padded me gently on the places in my uniform where I now hid the money we had acquired, and would, by silent agreement, spend wisely and compassionately. "Sometimes we have to hide who we are, and what we have, so that we can give it to the right people," she said. "Pearls before swine," she continued, pointing me to Comrade Illya after he had, once again, given a 'please' order to one of his men in the woods. The man he smiled a 'please' to had just caught a German deserter clad in a dress he had stolen from a village his 'buds' had plundered, and just wanted to go home. The command, by the way it was given, was to have him shot. Perhaps a necessary order, to keep us protected from a German spy who would turn on us and reveal our location as soon as he could to his 'buds', or perhaps not. But when when the bullet went into the prisoner's head, Illya smiled in a way that I never thought he could, or would. It was for maybe two seconds, but that two seconds changed my life, and the way I would present myself to everyone.

CHAPTER 13

There is something I forgot to tell you, because up till now, it wasn't important. What did Sventlana, me, look like? The uniforms of the Red Army were designed to make everyone look alike, and ordinary, even the officers. And as for looking ordinary, I found myself doing something very extraordinary as the leaves of Spring started to express their summer colors, earlier than usual, it seemed.

It had been a 30 hour long surgical shift in which we saved more legs than we cut off. The facility we found ourselves in had been a spa for the rich who, in theory, didn't exist anymore in the People's Soviet Republic. Why the Germans had not occupied it and turned it into a spa for high ranking soldiers in their own Army was a miracle, or perhaps not. The outside of the oversized, brick facility was labeled an abattoir, with hand painted warning signs about diseases including leprosy and cholera inside in three languages. Perhaps that is why no common Soviet citizen found his or her way into it while it was Russian.

How wondrous it would have been if we could set up 'camp' there for the duration of the... 'endeavor', as I now described the War. There was more shelter than we needed, more food than we could eat, more clean water from an underground stream than we could bath in for five 'endeavors' and an abundance of something we seldom saw, nor carried with us, as a mobile fighting, and healing, unit. They made a small space big, and forced you to look into your own eyes in ways that you looked into any others.

"Mister Mirror," I said to the reflection of myself in front of me, to the left, and to the right. "Comrade Mirror" would not let me out of its sight, presenting to me a sharp object that would transform or end my current miseries, and dilemmas within easy grasp of my blood-stained fingernails. "Comrade scissors," I smiled at it as I looked around me and still found myself alone in the abandoned beauty salon while everyone else was still in the dining hall. Including Tanya. There was a reason for me being alone, I thought, a divine reason other than my having lost my appetite, or developing a smaller stomach which had grown to become sufficiently fed with smaller and smaller quantities of food. The mirror answered me with a very womanly body that looked... beautiful. More beautiful than I ever thought I was. Perhaps more beautiful than I should be, I thought as I shook my head, letting my long, freshly-washed brown hair, which was not blonde again, flow down over my shoulders. Shoulders that felt burdened by the hair laying on it. "Yes?" I asked myself as I grabbed a fistful of hair on the crown of my head with my left hand, holding the fresh, clean blades of the scissors six inches above the scalp. Then four inches, then two, then directly onto the scalp. "Yes?" turned into "Yes," then "Yes!", as if fueled by an inspiration inside of me that was perhaps demon, or perhaps angel, or perhaps just something that would change the circumstances of my current 'life'. After all, that is what the 'Endeavor' was all about. This war was about changing the dead-infested existences we had been born to into something that we could perhaps call, and would be, Life.

I observed my lips turn upward when the blades of the scissors cut through the outside chunks of my, as I noticed it, 3 foot long mane. Then into a mad grin of exploration when the middle portion of the fistful of hair began to be freed from my head. The view

of what was underneath was...different. I didn't know what kind of different, but there was no turning back now as I saw, for the first time, my scalp. It was whiter than I thought it would be. Pure and experienced, both at the same time, it seemed. With my soul in continuous motion to discover which was the case, my hands allowed Comrade Scissors to continue the journey into the depths of hell or perhaps the heights of heaven. My body became light, and heavy. I became two people, it seemed, until finally, at the end of the transformation, when the last strand of the lockes which Illya admired from a distance (and I hid behind for most of my life), lay on the floor in front of me. In front of my eyes was someone...different. Someone who, would maybe please, or offend, the only person who mattered in my life now. She walked in, somehow expecting me to be done with the job at hand.

"You knew I would do it," I said to Tanya, her hair still long, red and more womanly than I certainly was now. I put my fingers through my own patchwork shorn mop which stuck up on its own obeying its own rules, each strand poking out in its own direction.

"I knew you had to do it," she said. "But, you have a question for me?"

"Yes!" I answered, turning to her. "Do you like it?"

I don't know if Tanya's answer to me was 'yes' to the haircut, or the mind/soul under it. She answered the most relevant of inquiries with a kiss on my lips, stroking my naked head with her fingers. We had a beautiful moment from then onward for, well, enough time for both of us to find ourselves, and each other. For now, that is all that is important for me to tell you.

CHAPTER 14

I don't know what possessed my hands to convert myself from Svetlina to Sven, but whatever or whoever it was seemed to have some surprises in it for me. I hardly recognized the face staring at me in the mirror after Tanya said it was ok to look at it. It, he, or she was...not so playful, not so kind, not so flowing, but also not so helpless, not so vulnerable and, somehow, not so useless when it came to tasks in the 'real' world.

To start, I became better at repairing the holes in the sewing that kept the money inside the lining of my tunic and trousers. And with shorter hair, or in places on top of my head, so it felt, no hair, I could 'hear' things I hadn't before. See opportunities that didn't exist before. "I can infiltrate the men's camp and get information for us girls," I suggested to Tanya as I noticed her helping herself to a long overdue shampoo and comb out of her still long, red hair.

"So, maybe you will be the man in this relationship after all," she said to my reflection in the mirror with a strong but very feminine smile.

“Maybe such was the plan all along,” I thought but didn’t say. But one thing was for certain. Colonel Illya would not want to undress me with his eyes, nor his hands. The third of the money which I was entrusted with was secure. Tanya, of course, had hidden her share someplace so safe that she didn’t even tell me about it. But there was one party whose booty was not accounted for.

“Kostinov’s share,” I grunted out, noting that for the first time I didn’t prefix it by saying Colonel, Comrade or Uncle. “Any idea what he did with his? There will be many orphans who will need it after the War, you know.”

“What makes you think that orphans are, or will be, the only ones in need, Sventlana?” Tanya challenged.

“So you will give your share to dysfunctional and self-destructive families in the hope that it will buy them sanity, compassion and wisdom?” I proposed.

“Maybe the books that will advise them as to how to do so,” my Sister in arms smiled back. “Or the music you write for them to play to and with and for each others,” she continued, offering me a flute from under her tunic, madly grabbing sheets of paper she had converted into music sheets to write down what I would compose from my head, heart and/or soul.

I don’t know why, but the flute lived in another universe when I blew into it. As if I was missing something it needed.

“Perhaps if you can grow a mustache, or I can glue one on to your upper lip?” Tanya offered as the skin under my nostrils started to shake then pull in on itself. Indeed, everything that I seemed to be was pulling in on myself, as there was still something inside that had to be discovered, utilized, or conquered. I’d know which after the encounter, or battle, with it was over.

CHAPTER 15

The ‘Abattoir’, as we referred to it was the ideal place to treat soldiers and civilians who kept finding their way to us. Finally, a location where they could eat real food, be treated with real medicine, and have a real roof over their half-mad heads. Tanya’s success rate in terms of sending patients out walking on two legs instead of hobbling on one, or being carried out, was nearly 90 percent. All exiting the place were told to tell no one else about it. And to be sure they would not let the world know we were there, blindfolds were put on them, taken off only after what was left of their unit, village or family was in plain site. A suggestion from Tanya, an order from Illya. They seemed to get along very well personally as well, according to Illya’s account of it anyway. And, on some days, Tanya too. Maybe it was because they both had something to lose, or something to gain. I do recall that he looked more manly than ever before, and in his presence Tanya looked more...womanly.

As for me, with my new haircut and the persona that rushed into me after it, I was able to sneak into the men's camp and get whatever I, or the other girls, wanted. Sometimes the girls wanted food. Other times blankets. Most times, information, particularly about how long we could stay at our current location, and what our next ones would be. I recall a night when I was the messenger who brought all of these to them, the material aspects of such stuffed into my winter coat, which I still had one.

Anna talked about how she might someday own a beauty salon like this on her own, or at least one room of it, which of course would only give a woman a man's haircut if she WANTED it. Katerina dreamed about maybe converting the place to a school for girls, so they could become assertive women rather than servants to men. Elena felt compelled to share her stories about the Socialist Royalty who had spent time 'taking care of the lepers' while away from their wives, and children. I was asked what I would do with the place if ever fell into my hands, and by reflex, I said "set up a music conservatory that welcomes and plays all kinds of music. With no state bans on what could be played, or enjoyed."

"All it takes is money," Katerina commented, gobbling down half of her portion of fresh meat, hiding the rest in her now overblown buss oms, feeling to be more womanly than she had in a long time.

"You aren't fooling anyone, you know, Katerina," Elena pointed out, as it was her custom to bust balloons that could not hold onto their air.

"Maybe or boss could work on your nose, chin, and...mouth," Anna offered Katerina, trying to pull her suddenly lowered face from falling completely into the ground of despair. "Major Tanya is the best surgeon this side of the Urals."

"Colonel Tanya now," I interjected. "Comrade Illya insists on promoting her."

"Even though she hates being an officer in the first place?" Katerina barked out.

"But she is very good at being an officer," Anna pointed out.

"And a Comrade who is forgetting how much of a woman she is, or wants to be," I felt like saying, recalling the way she smiled at and FOR Illya the last three nights during dinner. Yes, it was across two tables, but he seemed very interested in her, as a woman, now. Just as he became uninterested in me as a woman. Another look in the mirror reminded me why. Staring me back in the disruntled face was a man, with a bump on the crown of his head, cheekbones that made his gaunt face look fat, and muscles around the shoulders and legs, and between the legs, that said 'don't mess with me, or my woman'. Of course I was the only one who knew that those muscles were money.

"Money, the most powerful kind of muscle," I heard myself saying clearly enough for Anna, Elena and even always-talking-but-never-listening Katerina to hear me.

They didn't say anything with their mouths, but everything with their eyes. I sensed that they knew I was keeping a secret from them. But I had no choice. Tanya made me swear, at least three times a week, that neither her nor I would reveal to ANYone that we were wearing, or hiding, a fortune in cash at a time when no one had any to spare. And at a time when any soldier having any money on him, or her, would be questioned, shot then robbed by even the most honorable KGB policemen. The War would have to end first before we would spend any of it, and telling even one's closest Comrades about it, would demoralize the War effort. Such is what Tanya said, and I believed.

I had to say something to the girls, MY girls, that was true, and important. Once again, practicality found its way blocking the road to hell which we became so good at building for ourselves, and others. "We will be moving out of here in two days, under 'surprise' orders," I said, relating the information that only the men were supposed to know. "So if you want to take anything away from here that you want to keep...For yourself, or your grandchildren." I found myself dreaming about us surviving and actually having children, who would go on to have grandchildren. Anna felt most special about this as she rubbed her enlarging belly, feeling good about what, or who, what inside of it, for the first time.

"If it's a girl, we'll call her Tanya," Anna said with the first glow I had seen in her smile since before the 'accident' came into her womb. "And if it's a boy," she said looking at me. "Sven, Svetlana?" she mused.

We all shared a gentle laugh together, and I felt...more like a protector of my girls than just another hen. Maybe I felt like a rooster. Someone had to be protecting the hens, and the chicks, as Tanya was busy redefining what kind of bird she was. At least to me.

CHAPTER 16

Maybe it was Tanya's idea all along to make me the 'man' of the relationship which we had, which was expressed only when Illya didn't want dinner company. Now it was me telling Tanya that talking to him too much could be dangerous. Trusting him beyond a certain level, treacherous. Yes, maybe I DID underestimate Tanya's instability which I could always sense, but never see. Now, I could see it, and sensed that no one else could. "The physician is healing herself," I wanted to say, but couldn't. Three cc's of kisses from Illya and one caress doth not equal a cure for an embittered heart, though some might call it a remedy. I tried to play out the dilemma in my heart and head on the violin but all that was coming was...notes. Then sounds. Then a request by newly enlisted civilians wearing Red Army Uniforms in a blanket-constructed tent behind me requesting me to shut up.

It was the first time that me and music didn't connect. Something had taken my always present lover and friend away from me, and granted her a divorce. Thinking about what and who I had become, I couldn't blame Mistress Music. Two months had passed since

my visual transformation, and it felt like two years. But not all together a bad two years. I became a better shot with a rifle, a smarter horse-rider, more astute mechanic, and found that I could indeed do the kind of surgeries that 'Lady Svetlana' would botch up, or lose control of. My stride became wider, my chin held higher than that of people I talked to rather than lower. Maybe it was because now I had not only 'man' power, as people perceived me, but money-power as well. I knew that I would be rich after the War, able to give to what was left of my family, and anyone else who was destitute who I chose to call family. As did Tanya, who never did tell me where her share of the money was. And never did know, or care, about what happened to Uncle Col, Kostinov's share of the booty that God, Nature and Lady Luck decided in their Wisdom to give to US! Not until one day in late Spring when our 'Gypsy German Jews' came back from a reconnaissance patrol posing as Nazis to get information back to their new masters, and friends. It was myself and Tanya who were assigned duty to meet them in noman's land between the 'lines' that had emerged between the Red and German armies in a standstill that lasted 40 days now.

"A company of SS to our North, the same number of Ukrainian recruits in German uniforms to the West," Hans commented as he ripped off the German Officer's uniform he had posed in when doing such 'visits' to his former fellow countrymen, spitting on it three times, muttering a curse in Yiddish. "But there are four companies of German draftees to our South. Who have no more stomach to keep fighting."

"But think that if they surrender to us, they will be sent to a Gulag in Siberia," Tanya said to him, offering him a fresh horse she had brought for his tired ass, a bag of unleavened Jewish matza to celebrate Passover.

"Do you know why this night is more special than any other night?" Hans asked as he helped himself to a much needed bite of real Jewish food, celebrated privately.

"The night a few more Jews fight back against their Nazi oppressors instead of thinking God is supposed to do it for them?" Tanya proposed.

"Yes, there is that," Hans said, offering me and Tanya some of the motza, which she refused, for reasons I did not know. And I accepted, because she refused it. "It is also a night when God bestows on us...Manna from heaven!" he proclaimed, noting something being blown from weed to weed by a gentle wind. He picked a portion of it up, holding it to the fading sunlight. "Or, as it should be used for...asswipe from Heaven." He spit on what I noticed was a piece of paper, wiped it on his ass, and looked at it again, with intense hatred. Then overwhelming guilt. Then with tears that poured down his cheeks, as I felt a chill going through my buttcheeks, now opened to the elements courtesy of a tear in my trousers which I thought had been sewn up.

"This 'money'" Hans commented. "The best counterfeit Soviet bank notes we, or maybe anyone, could print. And when enough of this gets spent, the Soviet currency will be even more worthless than it is now. Destroy a people's economy, and you will be sure to destroy their future. But.." he began to sob. "Me and my fellow other inmates were

guaranteed a future if we helped to destroy yours. And if we didn't, our children would be..."

Hans didn't provide any details, but when Tanya and I looked at each other, we know. No wonder this gypsy Jew had a price on his head stamped there by the Nazis, collectable by Germans, Russians or anyone else in between. I felt the padding in my trousers, arms and breasts, that I felt the obligation to TRY to make bigger, for Tanya, and felt to be enwrapped by a snake's venom rather than an angel's blessings.

I thought about asking Hans more questions, but knew better than that. As did he. He gratefully took the horse delivered by Tanya with the German saddle, and rode it back into the woods to get more information for us. I heard once that sometimes if you ask someone something, 'too much information' is what you strongly request of them so that your world is not shattered. It was now a matter of not only being penniless, but correcting the good deed we attempted to do.

"A large bon fire and a change of clothing?" I asked of Tanya regarding my own uniform and its contents.

"And a shovel to dig up what's UNDER the latrine," she added, referring to the new location of her stash.

"And for the other 33 percent?" I asked.

"Maybe it is time to have Hans' gypsy wife Gretchen resurrect Kostinov's ghost. And once she does, we kill the ghost, and be sure we get HER out of Russia, and Germany. And her husband."

"And where do we send them?"

"Newfoundland, Canada. Or Arkansas...Someplace that doesn't know it's important, and can't find itself to saying that it is," her reply. "But in the meantime," she commented, looking back at camp. "I think there is someone who knows something about Kostinov's share of the money. And when we find him, or her..."

All manners of horror ran through my mind. Maybe Tanya was wrong, but her intuition was always right. A blessing, and a curse.

CHAPTER 17

The bonfire was not so bon, and more of a burning ember than a fire. I felt lighter, and less burdened, having burned the padding in my uniform. As for Tanya, she brought in her share of the counterfeit money for burning after leaving me alone for an hour. Maybe longer. I don't remember exactly how long, but it was...long. And she had changed her

clothes into something I had never seen her in before, and which I had not seen any of our girls in for a long, long time.

“Where did you get that dress?” I asked of her as she returned in a flowing garment of red, blue and green with a faded but still intricate peasant gypsy design, its hem just below her knees.

“It found me,” she said with wonderment and glee, as she shook her head, untying a ribbon around her long, red hair, letting it shake down over her now very exposed shoulders, down to the small of her back. “And its last owner has no use for it now!” she continued as ‘Major’ Tanya, as defensive about the matter as she was authoritative.

To my best intuition, the dress that made any woman look like a maiden, and which made Tanya look like a Pagan goddess, had belonged to Hans’ wife, who he had referred to as many different names after she joined our Camp. The last one he had used, and she answered to with the least amount of anger, or guilt, was “Selena”, one which she chose to go by for with all the rest of us. Like Hans, in a ‘give according to your ability and take according to your needs’ unit (which despite the APPLICATION of Soviet ideology nationally, was what we did), ‘Selena’ did her part to keep everyone in our mobile community alive, and fighting. She was a hard worker when it came to physical tasks, but didn’t say a lot, and didn’t voice a single complaint to any of us, or to Comrade Illya. However, she did, on many occasions, express her discontents to Hans, in tongues that I didn’t recognize, in one-way conversation that often resulted in Hans sleeping in his own tent. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that in the marriage between them, it was his job to do the listening, and hers to do the drinking. And, of course, no matter how had anyone tries to hide vodka, a dedicated drinker will always find her, or his, way to it.

I wondered, on more than one occasion, if being addicted to vodka or the various other medications we had around (when we could get them) made you smarter. There were all manners of ways that these ‘addicts’, as Tanya described them, found ways to get, or make, vodka even when it was strictly forbidden by Major Tanya and Comrade Illya. Perhaps, as non-drinking overseers, they were not as smart as drinkers. Or they were too busy trying to be sure that the medical supplies that altered perception of pain and reality designated for the wounded would go to those who were wounded, and not soldiers who had developed additions to them.

Speaking of which, Tanya was on something that made her five different people, each of which were taking turns sharing her body, mind and spirit. It was more than mood swings now. But all of her personae (a word I learned from one of the scholarly personalities who decided to give me special lessons in how to not be tricked by the rest of them) concentrated on the matter at hand, as Tanya’s body sat on a rock, her eyes caught by the blaze of the fire I had built and kept going.

“We have to find out where the money making factory is from Hans, and without letting Hans know we asked him,” she said as I saw portraits of great and not so great Soviet

leaders go up in smoke, their asses settling onto, then into, the wet muck around the firepit.

“Why?” I asked Tanya, “We would be heroes for destroying a facility that is making counterfeit money.”

“There are too many people, Germans and Russians, who are too eager to spend it first,” she said. “This kind of booty in war is something that our bosses would kill us for telling them about, and their bosses would kill them for passing the information up the ladder,” she continued. “No, it’s up to us to become heroes who will receive no medals,” Tanya said with the most sober sense of finality I had felt from her till that time. “And we have to become...” she continued, looking straight into my cautious, yet actively curious eyes.

“Become what?” I asked as she remained silent, more lost with each thought that was going through her head. I went through the possibilities. “We have to become stronger, braver, smarter, more crazy, more sane, more---“

“---Dead,” she uttered as if she nailed the lid on her own coffin herself by saying those words. “I’ve taught Anna, Katerina and Elena everything I know, or at least what the world needs them to know, and as for the rest...”

Again, Tanya turned quiet. Deadly quiet, her face taking on a pale complexion that was somehow at peace with itself, and firmer than ever as to what had to be done. She looked at my eyes then around them to the sweat-soaked temples of my head, then the nearly hairless side of my head, then the crown, the tufts of hair blowing in the wind. She pushed her fingers through it, making them all somehow fall into place, the thoughts in my racing brain underneath at ease, somehow. She took my hand, the left one, pulled out a piece of metal from her pocket and wrapped it around my wedding finger. She invited me to do the same for her.

“Now that we are married, as husband and wife, it is time for us to take our leave of our old lives, and have a very...interesting honeymoon. How it will turn out will determine the fate of...many people’s children,” she said.

“And our children?” I found myself asking.

“Walking corpses don’t have children,” she said, looking out at the horizon to the East as if she would never see it again. “But maybe dancing ones do,” she said, turning around with a smile, using every effort to make it more hopeful than desperate. “A song, please?” she asked me, as she got up, letting her feet sway in the wind in a manner that was like a gypsy maiden. Actually more like a maiden than a gypsy.

“I have no instrument to play it on,” I reminded her.

“Yes, you do,” she said to me three times, in song, from her high pitched voice, which was out of key. Somehow I found my own voice to add to hers. It was surprisingly low

in timber, more supportive and structural than flowing. But, it worked. For her anyway. It was as if the music in me had died, and was resurrected in her. Each of her personalities seemed to get equal time with her body, as I saw and felt by the way she moved her feet, flay around her arms, and give voice to tones I had never heard from her. Some would say she was going mad, but as I saw and felt it, she was becoming something even more dangerous to the world---Alive, big A. All manners of emotions burst up through her. Laughter. Joy. Anger. Empathy. Grief. Sometimes one at a time, sometimes mixed together. But fear was not part of any of it, nor was caution. It seemed to be me now who was the one who was supposed to be cautious, being the ‘man’ in this relationship. Ever watchful of the horizon for invading enemies so the villages could keep...dancing. And singing. And living. The one in charge of all external matters while the ‘woman’ took care of all internal ones. Why was this happening to her, and me? I allowed my chin to fall on my left hand, and stroked the right over the top of my now aching, and worried head. Perhaps it was because of the haircut I had given myself and the transformation of everything below it which I allowed to happen. Something was happening, I felt, Tanya continued her dance. I envied HER vitality now, though I was safely ‘numb’ inside. A state of mind, and (I know now lack of) soul which was broken by Tanya’s dance ending, abruptly, her hand grabbing me by the front of my tunic, and pushing me into a tree. Before I could make sense of the thud of the tree against my back, she stuck a barrel of a revolver into my mouth, one that had been used in the 1905 Russo-Japanese War, by its inscription. She presented me with a piece of paper, and a pencil.

“Sign it!” she commanded me.

“What am I signing?” I asked.

“You’ll see. Or maybe you won’t. But if you don’t sign, I’ll...” She cocked the hammer, and seemed to mean business.

I don’t know if it was fear, curiosity or respect for the Tanya I still loved (and hoped was still accessible), but I signed the paper. She looked at it, and seemed well satisfied.

“So, will you let me go now?”

“Yes,” a voice that was the Real Tanya said, with a sense of finality. “I have to let you go now,” she continued. She stroked my quivering lips, kissed me gently on the cheek, smiled with a sadness and love which was beyond any I had ever seen and said, “Dosvidonia, my love.”

I closed my eyes, heard a loud noise from somewhere I couldn’t identify, then, after being overwhelmed by a pitch black Dark, saw a Bright Light.

CHAPTER 18

My death was tragic, and those who came to mourn my passing were not those who I expected. It was Selena, Hans' wife, who laid the flowers on my grave with the most reverence, love and respect, and sang me off to the afterworld with a gypsy hymn that had no shortage of Yiddish words thrown in. Odd, as I recall when I was alive, that Jews were not supposed to believe in heaven. Perhaps that also enable them to be more creative and fearless in life, as it would diminish the fear of hell.

Those who did seem to be closest to me kept their emotions to themselves, or maybe didn't really have them in the first place. Each took their turn saying what they wanted to or needed to on the marker which had my name inscribed on a piece of wood, and a piece of paper which I had signed. "How could you do this to me? Taking her own life like this!" Anna grunted when it was her turn. "How could you do this to US," Katerina added as she came onto my final resting place. "We have no idea what got into you, Svetlana" she said to me, then to Anna and Katerina. "We should pray for her damned, weak and cowardly soul," Elena told them, and anyone else who was listening, or who cared. She crossed herself, three times (an act I hadn't see her do even once while I was alive, for anybody), then looked at the remains of my body under the ground with a final farewell.

According to orders, and custom that had evolved in our mobile "Medical and Combat" community, everyone else walked by the grave, stopping as long as they wanted, or needed to, and did what was in their ritual. I got many gifts for the afterlife. A few of the drinkers put down partially-filled bottles of vodka next to the the drinking hand of the body bag containing my corpse. Five men who had been wounded, thinking that it was me who was responsible for their being in the land of the living, threw down everything from stale bread to jewelery that had been given to them by their grandmothers, mothers, or lovers who were now missing, or dead.

One of them proposed marriage to me "whenever it's my time to go to heaven," or "a 'mixed' marriage between ghost and living human in the meantime. I'm yours forever and ever, my dear Doctor Svetlana," he said, not caring how many tears rolled down his cheeks, or how many of his equals mocked him. I remember smiling from where I was at the time, thinking that he looked nothing on the outside like Sasha, the man who stole my heart when I was...much younger, and more Alive. But on the inside, he was the same Soul. One who I felt drawn to but now, was unable to touch, feel or be with in the ways that I thought all women were entitled to be by God. No, this malformed, hunchbacked, triple-chinned, pot bellied 'Sasha' was anything but a dreamboat. He was more like a tugboat constructed by drunk and blind carpenters, but in his eyes was a Captain and Mate with whom I could sail the eternal oceans with forever.

Illya was next. I recall having had real feelings for this overly-book-smart morale officer who was inept at everything in the bush from aiming a rifle to digging a latrine. I thought, or hoped, that he had real feelings for me, despite the fact that I uglified myself up for him. Perhaps to see if it was my long hair and feminine features that he loved, or the Soul inside. Several of the women in my family had intentionally put aside or hid their most beautiful features to test the worthiness and longevity of potential husbands back in

their day. I'd meet them soon enough, if the Scriptures they made me read about the afterlife were true. Illya knelt, lowered his head, and put his nose to the ground, then to the body bag. No one else had laid their head so close. Maybe he didn't want anyone to see what he was really thinking, or saying. Yes, that had to be it. I strained my 'new ears' to hear, and opened my 'new eyes' to see as much as they were permitted to, given my new 'condition'.

"He knows where we are, but not what we have to do, or what's ahead of us," Tanya said to me, as herself. From our very hidden vantage point atop the hill overlooking the make-shift graveyard, she turned to the Western horizon. "Tanks, I think," she said, affirming it with a spyglass. "And too many to fight against, no matter how fast our horses and trucks can maneuver around them," she concluded, making two long and one sharp chirps of a nightengail.

Illya turned his head towards the nightengail, then looked in our direction. Tanya confirmed the coordinates and distance in another code of sparrow-speak, owl-talk and hawk-lingo. "We have to move on now," Illya instructed his men, and his women, both of whom trusted his strategic intuitions as mystical wisdom, more powerful than any vision Rasputan or Prince Vladmir ever had. "East by Northeast. Anyone who wants to stay, stay. I'm not responsible for you if you do."

It was the way Illya gave all of his commands, which were always followed. And, as I intuited in Tanya's eyes. It would be the last time she would, or could, provide Illya with 'mystical visions' that he could represent to those under him as his own mystical visions. "They're on their own now," Tanya said to me in a very real voice. "As are we."

I looked around me at my still very alive body, now clad in a very civilian, and male, carpenter's clothing. My horse which was still in the land of the living. And Tanya, now clad as my commonly dressed, but commonly beautiful wife, her long, wavy red hair now black as night and straight as a Yakutian arrow. She mounted her horse, motioning to me that there was no time to lose in mounting mine.

"There's a few questions I still have to ask," I said, stroking the top of my head which was now shaven bald in the pattern of a man who had lost his crown follicles. The hairs that were there were now glued to my upper lip and chin, unpluckable no matter how hard I pulled.

"Being bald and bearded?" she said. "It makes you look more distinguished, my husband. Like Lenin. And less recognizable to where we have to be going," she continued.

Tanya had informed me about where we were heading, and it was not the way I wanted to return home. By divine accident, my home village was close to where, according to Hans anyway, there was a large storage place for the counterfeit Soviet currency that would be sent out for 'spending' within the next month. Oh...and I know, I forgot to tell you about my home village. Those background details you're used to reading in

literature, or books, or diaries. I don't know which one this is yet, perhaps you or the people who sell books to you will decide. I'll tell you when I think you need to know. The way Tanya gave me information. But before I would work with her as 'husband and wife' on a mission to save Russian, and Polish, families who would never know who we are, and what we did, I remained on the ground, and demanded her to tell me something...important.

"You want the trust of my old friends, who I'm not supposed to be recognized by, you tell me how I died!" I demanded of my 'wife' in an angry husbandly tone.

"That's very good," Tanya said in her most alluring female persona, perhaps amplified by some pharmacological (a new word I picked up) help. "An assertive man can make people do more than a manipulative woman. Most of the time anyway."

"Why did I commit suicide?" I asked.

Tanya rolled her eyes, more condescending than I ever had seen her. And for good reason, as it was a dumb question. "Because if you didn't die, EVERYONE would say you as a deserter and shoot you for real once they found you," she said.

"But I've heard of deserters leaving suicide notes," I asserted. "And you still didn't tell me why I committed suicide," I pointed out.

"Because you killed me, you selfish, cowardly idiot!" Tanya grunted at me as she looked down below her at our Unit, HER Unit prior to her self imposed 'death'. They took everything they could carry and moved on, once again, leaving nothing more than charred campfires, booby trapping various non-essential 'valuables' with explosives for whatever Germans came along wanting war souvenirs (with a note in Russian warning at least those who could read) and her own gravesite, which had more gifts bestowed upon it than mine. "I was wounded very badly. You felt guilty for me taking the German bullet that was meant for you, and for not being able to repair the wound, so...you killed me."

"And the bodies?" I asked.

"You set up a fire, threw me inside, then shot yourself as you fell into it," she continued, doing a double-check on the supplies we'd be needed.

"Why did we have to die?" I pressed.

"Because the Germans have posted a price on BOTH of our heads now, with orders to take us Alive," she said. "And before you ask 'why' again, Hans came back here after you took a nap---"

"---was put into sleep, my dear 'wife'!" I countered, noting the fresh needlemarks in my arm.

“For your own good now, and the good of the Mission, beloved husband,” she grunted. “Colonel Kostinov has an uncle who he talked to a lot. His uncle, a ‘for the people before the Church’ priest who was defrocked for ‘love affairs’ with boys he never had, listened to his nephew’s grand scheme about how Kostinov was going to build a new Russia with his share of the money. He gave his uncle some of the money, to keep for a rainy day AFTER the war. The War ended for his Uncle after his beloved nephew got killed. Then to honor Kostinov, Kostinov’s uncle started to build some of his ‘no one goes hungry ever again’ paradise now, then talked to the wrong people about how he got rich. Whether the money is real, or fake, it doesn’t matter. Bounty hunters on BOTH sides think we have a whole lot of the money now and know where the rest of it is. And as for where I hid MY portion of the money---“

“---Illya?” I inquired abruptly, trying to make sense of the arithmetic of it all while the numbers were still in my head. “Why is HE the one who is supposed to know about all of this?”

“The only thing he knows is that you and me are officially dead, and not deserters,” she said.

“So why did ‘we’ desert him? The wounded we have? The wounded we WILL have? And the girls? YOUR girls, I thought?”

Tanya’s eyes looked into her head for reasons for it all, trying to rationalize the whys of it all. She had no satisfactory answer for herself, or me. But she finally did give voice to an explanation to it all. “We succeed, then we are dead to the world for good,” she said, looking back at the column of soldiers that family to her as much as anyone else she knew, or told me about anyway.

“There is one more question,” I said, mounting my horse but refusing to prod it forward in ANY direction till I got a satisfactory, or at least a TRUTHFUL, answer. “Why the gunshot and mock execution? Another part of my ‘education’ so I’d learn what it was like to die, and not fear it?” I continued, not knowing that I had answered my own inquiry.

“Are you through, Vladimir?” Tanya asked adopting a high-pitched tenure. “We do have to get moving,” she ordered in a gentle, subservient ‘wife-like’ tone.

I stroked my Lenin beard, trying his Christian name on for size. It didn’t fit, but I knew it would have to if we were going to save the Russian economy, or ourselves.

CHAPTER 19

I remember my Uncle Gustav telling me that there was no such thing as a coincidence in life. “No such thing as something happening by accident, as long as God is in the heavens and we are on earth,” he would say, ignoring making any reference to the devil

in hell, or course. But, maybe Uncle Gustav was right. It was no accident that the camp where Hans had escaped from was twenty kilometers from the village where I grew up in. No accident that Mrs. Kewlaski, my teacher for most of the time I was in school, who taught me to write there said that I would be called upon to save it one day. No accident that Mrs. Kewalski was having an affair with Mister Gotlieb, a violinist who taught me everything he knew about that instrument and everything he wanted to know about the piano, and everything he wanted to be about my voice as an opera singer. No accident that it was my musical activities, which some people called talent, endeared me to Major Tanya. No accident that Tanya reminded me of every teacher I ever had, and every friend I ever was too good to have. No accident that we were now 'married' as husband and wife on the way to destroying a factory which was making fake money that would destroy the Russian economy, even if we did win the War. No, as Uncle Gustav said, 'there are no accidents in Life, as Life wants to serve the living'. Ironic that he said those words the very morning that he was killed, in an accident involving a car, being driven by Mr. Gotlieb as he was on his way to see Mrs. Kewalski, and that Mr. Kewalski discovered love letters between Mr. Gotlieb and Mrs. Kewalaski in his pocket on the way to the hospital, where Uncle Gustav died with breaks in 27 bones in his body, and Mr. Kewalski died of a bullet delivered into his own body by his own hand, after he emptied the rest of his revolver into Mr. Gotlieb and Mrs. Kewalski. Yes... 'accidents'.

I remember that it took me and my new wife, Selena as she called herself now, a week of hard riding to get from where the fighting was to where people had given up the fight. My country of Poland was, of course, no country at all. Such is as it had been since 1939, when Hitler helped himself to the Western half of my beloved land, and Comrade Stalin was granted the Eastern portion of it. Yet, it was POLISH that was spoken by the citizens there, nor German or Russian. As it had been from 1795, when the last remnant of Poland was given away by whoever thought they owned it, till 1918, when the Allies decided to punish the Germans for losing the war, and contain Russia for deserting the fight against the Kaiser in 1917, or was it 1916? I forgot...But what I do remember is the sight of the village of my very female youth from the eyes of my, as I learned to feel them, very 'male' viewpoint as an adult.

"I thought you said your people were poor, Vladimir," 'Selena' said to me as we halted our horses on the bush-laden hilltop overlooking the valley which I remembered as being muddy, grey and climatically unpleasant even during one's most favorite seasons.

"They...were," I said, seeing amongst the shacks and barns several houses which looked more like mansions, relatively speaking anyway. And occupied by civilians who spoke Polish. With no German soldiers around to steal the wealth of goods they stored inside their 'castles'. They marched rather than walked, and held their heads up high out of arrogance rather than self esteem.

"Germans pretending to be Poles or Poles trying to be Germans?" Tanya asked me as she passed the spy glass to me.

“Maybe they think that the money from the labor camp counterfeiting operation is real,” I suggested, trying to make out who it was I was looking at. I recognized some old friends from my childhood, and some old folks who had grown...older. But there were many who I didn't recognize in face or attire. Then again, I didn't recognize myself of late, a necessary deception for the soldiers and other informants who no doubt were lingering around.

“Do you see anyone who may know where the counterfeiting camp is located?” Tanya asked me. “AND will tell you, ideally without having to ram a gun into their mouth, or the mouths of their children?” she continued.

My visualizations of Tanya threatening to kill the children of the parents who I knew as fellow children were held in abeyance by a wind that blew up from the North, again, maybe by ‘accident’. The branches of tree that had hidden us from view had opened the curtains for us to be seen, but more ominously, to see a wanted poster for me and Tanya on the sign announcing the name of the town. The photographs and sketches were us as our former selves on one of the trees as the wind blew the loose branches aside. We were now child molesters, baby murderers, as well as thieves, though the poster did not say what we had stolen, or run into by ‘accident’.

Tanya stuffed another piece of clothing under her blouse. “So?” I asked her. “You are going to have my baby in, now, two months instead of four?”

A closer look revealed that there was more than clothing within the ‘womb’ of our clandestine ‘child’. “Yes, two pistols and two knives,” she said of the metallic portions of the ‘womb’. I noticed as well her pockets were filled with medical items she only now took out of tightly bound leather pouches. “This one if for loosening the tongues of people who are afraid to talk, or who refuse to talk,” she commented as Selena regarding the ones labeled as gypsy ‘herbs’.

“And the ones with no labels on them?” I inquired.

“To disable us from talking to anyone if we fall into the wrong hands,” Tanya said, very much throwing one of them to me, instructing me to place it in my ‘crotch’. She put hers in an intimate female compartment over her shaking flesh, ghostly white with fear that I had not seen from her before.

I had heard that music hath charms to sooth the savage breast from Shakespear. And Plato said, at least according to Tanya, that it was the most powerful tool to convert indecision into action, and weak souls into enlightened ones. And Illya, who now I missed more than ever, said that music is a good way to make one forget a horrible present by living, as one had to, in a ‘better’ past.

The season said Easter, but my instincts, and longings, said ‘Christmas’. Recalling songs from that season, I gave permission to my hair-covered mouth to be moved by my still active angelic heart. Coming out of it, at first as Sveltana, then as Vladimir, a Christmas

song to which I had forgotten the the words, but humming them was enough to convey their meaning to Tanya, and Selena..

She nudged her horse forward, moving ahead like a very pregnant Mary looking for an Inn for the night. As Joseph, I knew that if the explosives we had packed within the lining of the garments atop our pack mules were not to be used on the counterfeiting operation, they would have to be used on ourselves, along with a farewell drink to the world from the unlabeled ampules.

CHAPTER 20

The questions we needed to ask most urgently was where the counterfeit camp was, how one could get into it, and how we could liberate, or kill, whoever was necessary to stop the operation forever. The ones we asked first, in dull, Vladmiric baritone grammatically-correct Polish, or broken colorfully-expressive Selena-ese Polish, were more practical. “Does anyone in town need a doctor?” “Does anyone need a house built?” “Does anyone know where one can get some authentic POLISH vodka, wine or beer?” And after finally we saw a face that seemed to know something, it was my turn to ask it, discretely, “Do you know anyplace where I can bed down with a NON-pregnant woman for the night, since my wife is out of service for a while?”

“I understand your dilemma,” the apparently well-fed, amply breasted, and exceptionally well-dressed barwench in the tavern in front of me said with an inviting smile, after I had dismissed Tanya for the night, having secured lodgings with her by dipping into my bag of REAL money, candy, nylons and jewels we had collected from various corpses along the way. The barwench was drunk enough to be talkable, but still smart enough to not say everything he was thinking. Yes, she was a servicewoman, but serving far more than drinks to people who passed through here. “You look familiar,” she said, staring at my face, around my temples, then through me somehow.

“We all do, to you,” I said, stroking my beard with my hand. “:Just like YOU do, to us,” I said to her, gazing with approval at her slender legs curving inward alluringly at her hips, opening up with grandeur to her breasts, then down again to a small neck which was topped off by a gentle chin surrounded by mounds of angelic, blonde hair---like I used to have, as I recalled. “What is your name?...no let me guess.”

I put my hand on my forehead and allowed myself to become a ‘mystic’ as well as an itinerent doctor and roving carpenter. “Natasha,” I said, eyes closed, faining seeing the gods.

“That’s right,” she said, amazed, then fearful. “How did you know?”

This time I looked through her.. This time she couldn’t read anything in MY head. Yes, it was the first time that I was able to intimidate Natasha since the time we were children. She was always the mother hen, the top dog, the alpha bitch. I offered her one of the

counterfeit bills we kept with us, allowing her to see it. I held it up like one of those inspectors who always made me confess to something that I didn't do. Or something that, I am ashamed to say, someone else did.

"You know anything about these?" I demanded of her.

"And if I did?" she asked, shaking in her boots, which were very high priced relative to the kind of job she was doing at the tavern. And very German made as well, by the design of them.

"You tell me what I need to know, and all I do here tonight is order drinks," I said in my best Gestapo-KGB mannerism, and diction. I noticed a cross around her neck, which she held onto tightly as to the decisions she would be making about it. "I will tell no one we had this conversation, none of my other colleagues, none of yours, and none of the priests you have confessed your sins to, or committed them with."

Yes, as I predicted, Natasha had been a good Catholic, in more ways than one. It was confirmed by the way she looked at the Father Leck passing by the window, who peered a look in on her, an old man now but still thinking himself to be a young and virile one. I recalled at that time the previous time when Natasha had made a 'contribution' to Father Leck behind the altar, and behind the curtains when neither of them thought I was looking. At that previous time, I thought it was Natasha giving him music lessons or cooking lessons, as she excelled at both of these. But at this current point in our very adult and endangered lives, I had outgrown being a virgin and Natasha, apparently, strangely, seemed to want to wish to become one again. One of those feelings that I had to follow to see if it was really true.

I continued to hold up the bill, waving it up and down, counting down from ten, intermixing it with a nursery rhyme in Polish about a pretty princess who was about to be turned into an ugly toad if she told yet another lie to the Prince who wanted to know her real name, and feelings for him. By the time I got three quarters of the way through the counting, and the song, she pulled out a piece of paper, grabbed a pencil, and scribbled something down. She gave me the paper, then fled outside.

As I looked at the paper, the envious eyes of other male drinkers and diners lingered on me. "So, you're gonna be the lucky one tonight?" one of them said to me, winking at me the way Uncle Gustav did. "Pay her like a Princess and she'll make you feel like a Prince," another one commented. "A fucking King!" another added, more German than Polish in his diction. The three not-so-wise men shared a laugh, then a toast to Eros...in a German tune sung with absolutely no Polish diction in it. I joined them in the toast, bought them another round of brew, the most potent in the house, then snuck away after pretending to gulp more than they actually did. As for the note---it made the rest of what Tanya and I had to do so much easier, then, after thinking about it, harder than either of us imagined.

CHAPTER 21

“So, there are children mixed in with this too,” Tanya said as I prepared the steamed cabbage and onion soup for her, and she sat as ‘the man’ at the table of the room I had rented earlier. “Some of your friend Natasha’s and some of others you knew? That...complicates things.”

“Because we have to get them out of captivity first?” I asked as I stirred in as much solid food as I could into the soup to perhaps turn it into stew. “The people working in this counterfeit operation seem to care.”

“So the others have told me too,” Tanya replied, pensively staring at the wall, holding back more details and insights from me than she had revealed, as was usual for our ‘open’ relationship. “The problem is that their compassion is...selective.”

“They are family people,” I said in the defense of the people I grew up around, and the others who had apparently wandered into the village after I was taken away. “Each one of them have children, brothers, sisters, and other blood relations who they would do anything for.”

“And anything to anyone else for the survival, or benefit, of those blood relations,” Tanya informed me. “Like what we did to any German, or Russian, that threatened to do any harm to those in our family of non-blood military relations, which we...” The strong-willed, always thinking rather than feeling model of resilience started to break down. Her ever-upward cheeks swelled up, her eyes letting down a flood of tears which she kept trying to deny by defiantly wiping them off with a shaking hand clenched in a fist. Maybe Tanya had indeed become Selena more than she thought she had. And maybe I had become Vladimir more than I thought I had, as I remember feeling the tightness in my chest that comes with grief, and loss, and holding it all in with breaths that were held tightly at the base of my tight neck.

“We left our Unit so we could save them, and other Russian units, from losing the War, and from losing the peace in the event that the Germans wind up infiltrating even more of our Motherland’s currency with fake money,” I reminded my ‘wife’ in a voice which was, as I observed, more Vladimir’s than my own. I gently lay my hands on her shoulders and tried to absorb what was going on inside her, knowing that I really couldn’t get to the heart of the real matter. But there was something I could do.

“I’ll finish making the stew, you’ll eat it, and we’ll devise a plan afterwards. It was you, after all, who had told me on more than one occasion that artists are inspired by having empty stomachs, but they create their most effective works only when they are adequately fed,” I reminded her.

Tanya saw the wisdom in such, and ate the soup I put in front of her. Her lips puckered up in distain at the first tasting of it.

“I know, I’m as good a cook as I am a carpenter,” I confessed.

“You have other skills,” she said, pouring the soup back into the pot and reassembling the food that was left by our landlord, and what we had gathered ourselves along the way from where we had been last week to where we were now. She sent me back to the table, and the papers lying over it.

“You look at those maps, and write down a list of the five people in this mess you would trust most,” she said. “I’ll do the cooking, we’ll BOTH do the eating, but you do the cleaning afterward. But not like you ‘cleaned camp’ for the last four nights. Though, for the moment, I’ll pretend that you were being a slob because it is in character with who we are supposed to be for this performance here,” she said, her lips breaking into a smile. “Our final performance,” she continued, turning sober, and relieved somehow. Staring into space again, writing an opera which would make us both immortal, but only after dying. Such felt...okay, for the first time. For me anyway.

CHAPTER 22

The Compound where the unofficial new ‘printing press’ for the Russian treasury lay was deep in the German-owned Polish woods, unnoticable from the air, built into freshly re-camouflaged underground caverns that had been used centuries earlier by my Slavic ancestors to hide their fellow villagers from Vikings who sought to take them as slaves after taking everything of material value from the village. Yet, somehow the village had survived, in part because of a ‘Eric the Compassionate’, a Norseman leader who by accident or intention decided that he would tell his superiors that the only inhabitants of the underground caverns were bats, wild cats and ghosts of slain Goths who would do all manner of harm to anyone who chose to disturb them. Such was the story anyway.

The reality of the labor Camp now which had built into it was far more interesting, and dangerous. “Say nothing but pretend that you know everything that you are supposed to know, and no more,” Natasha told me and my ‘wife’ as she brought us in as new employees, past checkpoints of well armed German guards and all manners of cameras and other hidden observation devises on the ceilings. We passed by well fed workers, all well dressed. Some wore the Star of David on their arm, others marks indicating their being gypsies, or the other transgression Hitler decided was a mark of inferiority which was infectious to his Bold New World. “Homosexual,” Natasha commented with disdain, and pity, regarding a Herclean-looking man busy at his desk with ink while making adjustments in the press that laid out another large sheet of 20 ruple notes.

“Yes, that is George,” Natasha said as I made out the last remnant of his still very handsome face. “You wonder why you were never able to get him interested in you when you were a girl. And it took me a while to wonder why he never was able to get George interested in me. I suppose that we never can judge who people are on the inside if we only see what they are on the outside, but we pretend to be what we have to be to protect those we care about most, Sventlana.”

She kept walking, smiling at the guards, and her fellow co-workers, allowing both ample view of her very female body. She was very good at pretending to be a worry-free whore in a world which needed worry-free 'fun', but behind her eyes I could hear her worry about her daughter, who was in the other holding facility at the other side of the valley, well fed and well clothed, but heavily guarded.

I wondered how Natasha figured out who I really was. After I had contracted her for a night of carnal pleasure as 'Vladimir', I told her my real identity. She didn't seem very surprised, but perhaps that was also an act. Hookers are not supposed to be surprised at anything, and all of us had been playing roles of other people so much that it was often hard to know who we really were, or were becoming. But all of that aside, there was an odor in the air which I remember as being...completely unexpected. A lunch cart was wheeled out, the waiter, a German soldier who bowed to US, offering us first pick of the delights. Never had I seen such a spread of food! Fresh cream on the deserts. Three kinds of meat. Five varieties of vegetable flavored in ways that would any pauper feel like a Prince, or Princess, after tasting the first bite. Natasha prepared plates for both of us, insisting that we eat it. "There are no drugs in here that make defiant people obedient, so I think anyway," she whispered to me, then to Tanya. "The commandant is a very educated man who believes in positive re-enforcement to motivate people. Give a rat the best cheese and he will do his best to please the maze master."

"And if the rat decides to stand up on his two hindfeet and walk out of the maze?" Tanya challenged.

"Some of us value people we love over Causes we're supposed to be fighting for," Natasha reminded Tanya. "And if you value your 'husband's' life you'll---"

"Ladies!" I heard from behind me from a very confident and charismatic man. I did my best to not respond to the greeting, and bowed slightly when he said "And Gentleman".

"New workers," Natasha smiled at the aristocrat who somehow made the oppressive insignias on his Nazi uniform seem dignified, and friendly. Artistic rather than militaristic. His hair was long, combed back in an artistic manner that made him seem wild, and free. "Colonel Ranselhoff, this is Vladimir and Selena."

"Who are finding our lunch to their satisfactions?" Ranselhoff said in the manner of a *matre-die* who was both king and servant.

"Yes, thank you, Colonel," I said in my most baritone Vladimir voice while the sensation of gustatory sugary delight and the saltiness of fear mixed in my throat.

"Johan, please!" he insisted when talking to me. "And you, madam?" he asked Tanya. "Please, help yourself to as much as you want, as you are eating for two," he said, smiling at her weapon, chemical and explosive-filled 'womb' as if he owned the child

inside before it had been born. Somehow he seemed to feel that he would be the best father for it.

Tanya bowed her head in gratitude, hiding her eyes of course.

“So,” Ranselhoff said to me. “Natasha said you are a master carpenter, and physician.”

“Me and my wife work together on such things,” I replied, hoping that the claim would not need to be tested, stroking my still cleanly-shaved crown of scalp, feeling the ends of the hairs that hadn’t sprouted more than a millimeter in four months sticking out in terror of being found out.

“Natasha also said that you have other skills which we need in this dark, dank but necessary workplace,” ‘Colonel Johan’ said, looking into my eyes as if he wanted something...personal from me, perhaps as a man, or perhaps as a woman posing as a man. He snapped his fingers, a Corporal delivering to me a violin, and to Tanya a flute. “Music inspires. Inspire us, please,” he requested. Then commanded when I dared to hesitate, and Tanya’s hands shook when holding onto the flute.

I jumped in and played something by Beethoven. I don’t remember the Opus number, but it was something from one of his quartets. As for Tanya, she still held on to her flute, blowing into it and making more noise than music. One note at a time at background which was sometimes in key, sometimes out of key. ‘Johan’ seemed suspicious, gazing at her enlarged belly, wondering what was really under her coat. Before he could assess what was there for real, I said. “My wife’s lips are injured, but her voice is certainly not.”

“Ah yes, the voice. The most ancient, and truth-revealing of instruments,” ‘Johan’ commented, inviting Tasha to join in. She did, with enough convincing notes to make her sound musical, and for me to become lost in the music. I felt embraced by the magic that Tanya and I had shared when she asked me to teach her about music rather than just notes. Yes, it was a magic moment for all. Natasha forgot what she was doing for a living now to stay alive, and keep her child alive. The ‘workers’ in the counterfeit factory enjoyed a lunch with real music, like the old times. And even Ranselhoff seemed to enjoy the moment, summoning in someone to bring in a viola, which he played with...tenderness, and love. And longing for a time when the War would be over for all of us. I noticed a wedding ring on his finger, with the inscription ‘come back home safely, my love’. Maybe he was doing horrible things to people in my Motherland because he cared about his family back in his Fatherland. Perhaps through the music, all the Mothers and Fathers would understand that all lands were part of one earth, one family of man, woman and those ‘in between’.

Another cart containing a large ‘roast’ covered by a metallic lid was pushed specifically to Ranselhoff, away from view of everyone else, except me. The Sargent insisted with a sense of urgency, and joy, that he look at it. While playing he motioned for the cart to be brought closer to him. The Sargent discretely opened the lid on the serving platter and

revealed a view of the meat under it. Ranselhoff nodded in stern approval at what was under it, motioning for the Sergeant to do what was appropriate with it. He continued to play, putting on his joyful Beethoven face. I tried to keep mine going, hiding as much as I could behind my glued on mustache and beard as the head of 'roasted Hans' was whipped off the platter and nailed to the wall. A third of the workers lost their lunch out of horrified lips, a third dropped their jaws in shock, a third continued to eat as if something good had happened.

"He was a traitor to all of us," Ranselhoff said as he kept playing. "He got greedy and stole money beyond what his salary was. A very kind and ample salary, much of which comes out of MY personal pocket," he continued. "A reminder of what happens if any more 'samples' of money leave this facility without approval. There is so much ALL of us can have if we ALL are...patient." His voice was firm, authoritative, and scared, as if he knew it would be his head up on the wall if he was caught for the many transgressions that he had made against his bosses. Odd, in that he activated my ability to read minds now. I suppose that necessity is the mother of ALL inventions.

I was not sure at that point whether Ranselhoff was working for Hitler, his workers, or himself. But I did know at that moment what I was working for, as I pretended to play the Beethoven with detachment, and Natasha pretended to be innocent of stealing samples of money for herself, and the others around her pretended the same. Tanya wasn't pretending when she discretely stared into me a look of utmost urgency.

CHAPTER 22

As we devised our plan that evening as to how to get the children out, destroy the printing presses, and confine Ranselhoff and his REAL colleagues for good, there was one person I yearned to ask most as to 'what to do'. Someone who I found I could trust. No it was not my departed mother, or my still absentee father, or Uncle Gustav, or even 'Sister' Tanya. "Illya, he would know what to do in this situation," I commented to Tanya in the room which we were still allowed to rent in town until our new luxury quarters, no doubt with listening devises, were being prepared for us.

"Illya would know what to do, but have someone else do it," Tanya replied, but with a smile of fondness in her accusations as she sat at the table eating the stew I had cooked for her which was, by force of will or perhaps dumb luck, actually somewhat edible. "I do what I ask others to do...ASKED them to, that is," she continued, putting down her spoon, about to be lost in the memories of the family of girls who we both had when in the Unit back home fighting Germans, as well as protecting them from some of our own men. "I wonder what Katerina, Anna and Elena are doing right now."

"Having a three way love affair? Or figuring out a way to make such things happen." I speculated, sitting down to my own dinner, prepared to endure the cooking I had inflicted upon her.

“It only works if the right person does the cooking, the right person does the eating and the right person does the cleaning up,” Tanya smiled. She chuckled, then laughed. It was a gentle one, then an releasing one, then one coming up from the depths of madness. It stopped abruptly. She looked up onto the wall, then stared into space, then out onto the black night outside the East window. She looked at her watch, then pointed to the West window. She counted down with her fingers from five. By the count of one, I was startled by a transport truck arriving, then a whistle that sounded more man-made than birdlike. Actually it was woman made, and very off key.

I didn't think that Natasha had it in her to steal an Army truck capable of evacuating an army of prisoners and their families, but she did. Tanya instructed me to load the still-closed duffel bags which we had carted by horse and mule from the German Front in Russia to what was now the backcountry of Germany in Poland. I did so, without looking inside. After all, married couples do have to keep some secrets from each other to keep their relationship from falling apart. But everything was about to fall apart anyway. While I packed the bags behind the extra German Army uniforms which Natasha had somehow 'burrowed' for the night, I opened up one of Tanya's bags and looked inside.

“Yes, they are explosives, which emit a very toxic gas afterwards,” she said, sneaking up behind me. “A new kind which we will use to destroy what and who we have to, including, most likely, ourselves. Along with anyone else within five miles of us. Part of the plan, just as you going behind my back to open these bags was part of my plan. But there is one question I have to ask you,” she said as she finished putting on a woman's Camp guard Nazi uniform, her new posture befitting the insignia. “Was defying me now part of your plan?”

If I said yes, or no, it would satisfy her. But for now, once in my life, and probably the last day of it, I wanted, no I NEEDED, to satisfy ME. I answered her with silence, slipping into my German 'costume', medical wardrobe far more appropriate for Tanya than myself.

CHAPTER 23

The plan was simple. Or rather 'einfach' in the language of the conquerors who would liberate us from Comrade Stalin's unending rein of terror. Natasha presented a forged letter from Colonel Ranselhoff that said there was an epidemic of typhoid going around and that I had the only medication within 200 miles to stop it. Once past the first gate, I buttoned my freshly ironed lab coat, pretending to be the overtrained doctor with wondercures that Natasha had built me up to be, and proceeded to examine the children. After giving sugar pills to the ones who said they were sick, and some real medicine to those who were actually ill, it was time to give their souls therapy. I played some solo Bach pieces on the violin while Tanya fed the children at one table with special soup. Special stew containing vodka, and some other ingredients, was served to 'caretakers', some of whom were Polish, all of whom were very male, or pretending to be anyway.

Natasha danced with them all individually, then had a drink with them all collectively. Her eleven year old daughter didn't recognize her in her 'entertainment' clothing, which was something she was grateful for, for now anyway.

According to plan, the guards fell asleep, each of them dreaming of spending a week of lustful passion with Natasha. We snuck the children into the trucks, dressing those big enough into uniforms, putting the others into duffel bags. The older kids were told to keep the younger ones quiet, by whatever means necessary. When they asked where they were going, we told them that they would be united with their parents. Some of them celebrated the re-union, some dreaded it, and some were angry at having been taken away from the German caretakers who had been so good to them. One of them, a ten year old boy trying to be a man, barked orders to me, Tanya and 'the whore' (Natasha) in German, ordering us to stop the truck, or he would scream out even louder if he weren't obeyed. Natasha's daughter decided to join him, trying to get everyone else in her 'class' motivated by starting to sing 'Deutschland Uberalles'. Before the 're-educated' young lovers could get the mutiny going, Tanya forced a pill into their obscenity-screaming Nazi infested mouths, putting them into a restless sleep that looked painful enough to anyone else so that their motivation to open their mouths were silenced.

"When I was being smart-mouthed, I would have my mouth rinsed out with soap," I commented to Tanya with a lilt of levity that I felt she needed.

"The kind of filth these mouths have been fed, and digested, needs more than soap to be washed away," she grunted, then turned to me, sneaking a pistol with a silencer into my hand. "Any more infected minds here, or where we're going, have to be put out of their misery, and ours, with this," she ordered. "When treating a body containing a cancer, you confine the cancer or kill it, any way you have to."

Tanya went on, whispering in Russian to me what the rest of the plan would be, using medical metaphors. I don't remember what the particulars were, as I understood far less medicine than she gave me credit for. But I do remember arriving at the 'production' mansion and finding someone I least expected in front of me when we opened the latch of the truck. "I thought you could use some help," Illya said, the worker-prisoners in the counterfeit factory behind him in German Army uniforms. Illya was dressed as a German Colonel, that garment somehow fitting his stature better than any Soviet Army uniform he had ever put on, but then again, fashion sense was something the Germans were far better at than we Russians, or Poles.

I looked to Tanya for an explanation, but she didn't have one. We both looked to Natasha, who informed us that "he came into town a day after you did, and seemed to know a lot about you," she said. She pulled out a revolver from under her dress and told Tanya, in a whisper, "if he's a bounty hunter after the reward money on your head or Svetlana's, I'll shoot him myself."

The liberated grateful parents in German uniforms and hugged their very confused children. So many questions the children had regarding why their parents didn't visit

them more often, to which the adults said 'I will explain later' in all manner of tones, and languages. As for me, I had one question to ask one person. "Comrade Illya, You look dashing in...Colonel Ranselhoff's uniform?" I said, noting the freshly-shined metals with my eyes and the still-present viola-varnish odor under the shoulder.

"He won't be needing it anymore," Illya commented. "After his bosses find out what he's been keeping far more money than he is printing, with a mistress in Switzerland who is exchanging Russian money for German Marks..."

"He left a note with a full confession. Or, well, I suppose I wrote it for him. He lost his professional composure and perspectives when his mistress decided that she would tell his children about their affair if he didn't marry her. You want to see?" Natasha shared her marvelously forged letter with me, then Tanya.

"We Russians are supposed to be better forgers than you Poles," Tanya replied in amazement. She looked up and down at Natasha, assessing her abilities and weaknesses as one would a 'mystery horse' presented to you by a captured enemy cavalry soldier in exchange for letting him walk back home. She seemed to meet Tanya's approval.

The night was dark, and quiet, and our getaway to...somewhere else was well underway. All that remained was to blow up the printing presses in the renovated underground caverns which, to those who lived on the surface, didn't exist anyway. "A waste of fine subterranean engineering," Illya said as Tanya threw him a bagful of dynamite.

"And a waste of lives, and tragic loss of life," I found myself saying, regarding the bound and gagged German guards in the entrance way to the underground caverns, tied to posts just inside the entrance.

"They knew what they were doing," Tanya informed me. "And this is War after all."

I wanted to argue the point but I couldn't. Or wouldn't. All I remember was that state of numb taking me over again as I helped prepare the counterfeiting operation for demolition. Seeing that the children and their parents in the truck were quiet. Then hearing someone in the back of the truck say something to someone on a radio, in German.

Within a minute, two armored trucks appeared on the dark Eastern horizon, three more on the West. One on the North. Tanya grabbed hold of whatever weapons were available, prepared to make a stand. She threw an extra machine gun to me, and one to Natasha. But Illya had other ideas, and plans, in mind. In the back of the Officer's Car which he was to use in the escape was something that looked very powerful, and hard to aim. Neither I nor Tanya nor Natasha had seen such a weapon. Without flinching and with the utmost confidence in his abilities and Mission, Illya aimed the device at each of the armored trucks and blew them into oblivion. Then he ordered the underground cave fuses to be set for demolition in exactly 50 seconds.

We made our way out of the village under the cover of the underground explosions, which hid us from view from any other German intruder. Within 20 minutes we could not hear any trucks or soldiers. Within an hour we were driving on roads going East listening to nothing but the sounds of wolves howling in the woods, and deer fleeing from them. I was amazed, and grateful, even though I know that you expected me to tell you a tale about an intricate escape from the money-printing operation which was now no more. But what was now very present was Illya, the man who could not hit a barn with a pistol at 20 feet, being the expert marksman who had saved our lives. Something about that was very right, and wrong.

I kept the suspicions emerging in my head to, and from myself. At this point it was a War with personal objectives, and as for what side of it Illya was on, I didn't know. Maybe Illya was working for some secret Soviet Army Intelligence service that we weren't supposed to know about. And that he arrived just before Tanya, me and now Natasha were about to bite off a bigger Mission than we could successfully chew.

Or maybe War was all about saving one's own skin, or grabbing what you could during the chaos so that when 'peace' finally came, it was YOU rather than the other guy, or gal, who was on top of the food chain. But, for now, mutual survival was at stake, identities for a later time.

CHAPTER 25

The driver of the closed truck took us a long distance away, which, according to my compass, was not a circle leading back to where we had left. The night which was defined by hearing German spoken around the enclosed troop transport truck eased into a morning in which I heard Russian spoken, and with more optimism than pessimism this time. The children, who seemed to know nothing about what their parents really did for or with the Germans, were let out at a Mansion that one housed the Czar's nephew, now converted into a hospital, according to the looks of it. Their parents were escorted to an old Church which, because of its architectural design and acoustics, had been turned into a concert hall, and treated like Czars and Czarenas. Me, Tanya and Natasha were taken further down the road where our bodies were fed a heroine's breakfast on a table set up in the middle of a camp that now had radios that worked, and weapons which were better than any I had seen before in OUR camps. And better cooking than I ever remember eating or trying to prepare. News about Stalingrad was all about, optimistic rumors that we had stopped Hitler dead in his tracks. They seemed to be real. Even if they weren't, believing it made us feel more unified, and accomplished.

After finishing breakfast with my dining mates, I was asked to follow a soldier who seemed more like a waiter than an officer, who treated me more like a gentile lady of breeding than an embittered man. When I asked him where I was going, he simply said that I was "being promoted" from being an undercover civilian. I looked to Tanya for her opinion regarding the invitation. She agreed that it was a good thing to do. I found myself asking Natasha as well, whose eyes told me that it was a GREAT thing to do. So,

I went, though I would have wanted Illya to say something to me about it. He was somewhere else, where he was supposed to be. Maybe all of it was God's plan, including the Socialist Experiment which had become, for the most part, a success. The Atheism which was supposed to be part of our ideology perhaps also being part of God's plan, since people who don't believe in God or think he has turned His back on humanity often work harder than He does to make the world a better place for humanity. Another Uncle Gustav theory which, it turned out, seemed to be more correct than not.

It felt good to be back in a Russian Army uniform, that 'one-size-fits-no-one correctly' invention of a tailor who was probably better at drinking vodka than putting pieces of cloth together. The ensemble was only mildly stained with blood from the previous owner, but the boots fit this time. As did the name on my new papers. As did my face, which was now free of hair glued onto it, and most of the glue that had held it in place.

"Lieutenant Maria Kublichov," I said, reading the details on my new documents. "I get to be a woman now?" I asked of the man responsible for my promotion back to the land of the living.

"And look like one too," Illya said, offering me a wig made of long black hair with red roots. "The wig was hastily made, but until your own hair grows back, which it will, I hope it suffices," he continued as he put the wig on me, combing it around my face, letting it fall over my breasts, which now could breathe easily, having not been tied down tight anymore. His gentle smile, strong hands and re-assuring eyes made me feel...like a woman again. I felt in the wig another person's presence as well, and looked around, and recalled that Tanya had dined with me wearing a hat worn tight as a turban. I looked around for her, daring to ask of Illya, "This hair isn't from..."

"...Someone who was still using it?" Illya said, continuing my sentences as he always seemed to be able to do. "No," he continued in an assuring manner, informing me that it was appropriate, and best, for me to continue asking questions concerning other matters at hand.

Illya introduced me to his elite unit of gentlemen and gentlelady soldiers as Lieutenant Kublichov, a fellow student he had met while in the Music Conservatory in Moscow. He told them that I had liberated a camp of Polish scientists forced to work for the Germans, and had killed several hundred Germans in the process. And that I had convinced the liberated laborers to join their Russian Comrades in the fight against Capitalism and Imperialism. "Capitalism and Imperialism", I thought silently as he converted my new 'comrade's' suspicions to trust. "I thought we were fighting Nazi-ism," I pondered, but dared not say, even with my eyes. I was offered 'welcome back' drinks from everyone else in my new unit, and then was given a violin to play. Illya pulled out a flute from his pack and started the melody off. I joined him, and he joined me, and many in the unit joined...us. While everyone was listening to the melodies and harmonies they were playing, with eyes more closed than open. Keeping my own eyes open, I spotted Tanya off in the distance, her head covered with a different kind of 'turban', tending to wounded as the chief operating surgeon in holding camp of wounded which she now had

converted, by force, into an operating field hospital. As determined to save legs of those who were about to get them chopped off as she was to keep her head covering on.

We exchanged glances of thanks, and gratitude. Between strokes of the violin bow, I pointed to my new hair, asking Tanya if was hers. She seemed to smile 'yes' to the 'gift', then went on working, her motions more assertive than any man around her. As for Natasha, she was learning how to be a nurse, clad in a uniform that had been tailored to look more like a fertile cavewoman's dress than that of a medical professional. She was as inept at nursing as I was as a doctor, but by the way most of the male, and some of the female, patients were looking at what she had under her 'smok', and asking for glasses of water and so forth, it seemed that she had found a higher purpose as well.

Yes, it was about 'Higher Purposes' now, and considerations that we actually would not only survive the war, but win it. Though at the cost that others seemed to pay far more than I. The only damage to my body was a severe haircut, but more severe wounds had killed, and maimed, so many others. Again, I wondered where Anna, Katerina and Elena were. After the 'motivational concert' featuring new works by Shostakovich and old ones by Tyschakovsky was over, I asked Illya about it.

"They are not part of your new life now," he said, as he whisked me away from the crowd, and into his life. And away from the Mansion where the liberated children were playing outside. And most particularly away from the old Concert Hall in which their parents had been invited into. Only moments before it burst out in flames after a single plane emerged from the sky and dropped a bomb into the middle of it. The plane circled around, spraying the rest of the camp. More flying machines flew in, sparing no one and nothing, though thankfully doing only minimal damage to the field hospital and the Mansion holding the children, which had Red Crosses over them.

"They know they'll lose the War, and don't need another atrocity on their record," Illya told me by way of explanation before I could even formulate the questions. "Come on!" he commanded me, pulling me to his back while he, with deadly accurate aim, shot at and brought down two planes.

I don't know what happened after that, but I do remember that I held in my hand a rifle that I also shot at the sky. Again and again. What was going on around me, I didn't know. It was all a blur of smoke, screams and explosions that...finally ended. With the children being led into the woods by Natasha and Tanya. Then a final shell blowing up the Mansion, and the field hospital, and what remained of the Church. Many times the Church was blown up, as if whoever was in the air wanted whoever was inside dead, burned and buried under so much ash that no one could dig them out.

All that remained of Illya's elite unit now was...Illya. And me. And Tanya, who emerged from the woods saying only that "The children are safe. Natasha snuck them away into the woods. And that they know nothing about any of what happened here back home."

“Except that they are alive!” Illya asserted, angry at everyone, most importantly himself. . “Unlike my...” It was the first time I saw Comrade Illya cry, as he began to name the most valued of his elite Comrades, who lay dead around him. He chose to break down on MY shoulder. Not Tanya’s. I considered it a moment of special...bonding, him crying on my shoulder into, apparently, Tanya’s hair. But the moment was tainted when I hugged him, sneaking a peak with my fingers on the bottom of his fieldpack through the holes which revealed fresh money. Money that was supposed to have all be destroyed. Enough to...perhaps buy a whole new set of Comrades, by my calculation. Yes, Illya was dangerous, but as I heard more planes above. Then tanks. I didn’t know if they were theirs or ours, as the gears sounded rusty.

“The children,” Illya asked Tanya, grabbing her by the collar.

“Natasha will take care of them,” she assured him, calm and collected as I ever saw her.

“And who will take care of Natasha?” I interjected, somehow feeling more kinship for the bitch who made my life miserable in childhood than any of the women who I met as an adult, except for (on a good day) Tanya. During the middle of a bad day which was about to get a lot worse.

CHAPTER 26

Thankfully for the horses in my new unit, most of them got away from the surprise attack from the planes which came in so quickly, that I could not even see the decals on their wings. Unthankfully for the soles of our feet, the rock-hard, jagged ‘ground’ was the kind that was created to be crossed on horseback. I don’t remember most of what Tanya said and Illya screamed, but it had to do mostly with where Natasha was. And the children who Illya kept asking about with more anger than concern through very tight lips with eyes he held in the back of his head with lids half closed. And his accusations that Tanya was leading him in circles, to certain death at the hands of the Germans, who would put us ALL to death.

Then there were the things I heard in my own head as the thoughts acquired words. Words that asked why Illya had faked being a bad shot since the day he ‘wandered’ into our unit during the dark days after the German invasion of our country. And why he seemed to always know when danger was around. And why he seemed to know when the last air-raid of German, or perhaps German anyway, planes came by to massacre everyone except me, Tanya and Natasha. And, of course himself. Yes, he was a magician, or a master manipulator, who seemed to read my mind as well.

After the second day of hiking through the woods by day, and being ‘protected’ by him at night from anyone and anything which came close to our camp, he stopped. “I’ve had enough of this!” he announced to Tanya, and me. “I’m taking a shit. And I don’t want to hear, or sense, any more crap from either of you!” he warned us. He turned to Tanya, staring her down as never before, his body shivering and shaking, “And if I find out that

the berries you put in my 'lunch' is giving me these cramps and these watery shits, I'll rip your ovaries out!"

With that he excused himself from us, and pulled his brown-stained trousers down, allowing only the animals in the woods a view of what was between his legs.

"What he's got between his legs is a lot less impressive than what he has between his ears," Tanya mused.

She sat me down, sneaking out another batch of nuts which she told me that I should eat 'as an antidote', chewing on a few of them herself. She breathed a sigh of finality, and reached for the lid of her turban. I prepared to see her as a hairless wonder, but was surprised to see that her hair was still long, intact and very disheveled. I ran my fingers through the wig which I thought was made of her red locks, which had been dyed black. I felt the roots, realizing something just a moment before Tanya said it. BEFORE she said it this time, I tell you, which IS important. "Yes, those red roots on your new head of hair is blood," she said. "From..."

"The prisoners who worked at the counterfeiting factory?" I speculated. "Who knew too much, and who..."

"Didn't want to tell Illya what he wanted to know about where the reserve printing press was buried?" Tanya said, reading my mind.

"Which Natasha knows about," I surmised.

Just then, a unit of our own troops, Illya's anyway, approached from the East, and the North, and the South. Well clothed, and well armed, looking more victorious than challenged. They raised their rifles against us, thinking us to be the enemy. Illya ran out to them, showed him papers, then directed the attention of their commander to us. Another 'Colonel Kostikov' who was no Uncle at all. By the looks in his eyes, and Illya's, they are not about to throw us a 'welcome back from a heroic mission, Comrade' party.

"So, where should we go?" I asked Tanya.

"Anywhere but here," she replied, leading the way out of the brush. We slithered away as fast as we could, found a mound of leaves and buried ourselves under them. I felt what it was like to play dead, wishing that I was. It would have been a far better fate than what happened next.

CHAPTER 27

The official accusation was that we were deserters, and traitors. Illya did his best to tell the 'judge' sitting on the highest stump under the deforested sky that we had been

captured by Germans, and had escaped. The 'judge' said that we should have not allowed ourselves to be captured in the first place, and should have chosen to fight to the death. He praised Comrade Stalin for forsaking and disowning his own son when he had been captured by the German Army, stating that a special punishment awaited any other Russian prisoner of War we liberated.

When he asked Illya why HE had allowed himself to be captured, Illya turned around the accusation into a whole other set of explanations for not having been killed with the rest of his unit, with stories of grandeur, heroism, and bravery which the cowardly crook weaved like a spider's web around flies who enjoyed being caught. Yes, Illya was as smooth a talker as he was an alluring lover. The man who had stolen my heart, then crushed it, asked me if I knew where Natasha was. I told him I didn't know. He asked Tanya next. Having promoted himself from witness to judge, he announced to both of us that the first person to tell him where Natasha and the children she was hiding were would be allowed to have their rank and position restored, and without being sent to one of those 'suicide units' which I now knew really DID exist. He counted down from ten, looking to me, then Tanya, as we looked to each other, in the manner that perhaps women in times of old who knew too much were tried as witches because they knew more than any man in the village. Somehow, both of us knew that whatever hell awaited us at the end of this witch trial, it would be better than anything we had experienced on earth. It was at that moment that Tanya and my knew were were lovers who redefined the meaning of the word 'love'. At the count of two, just before 'Judge Illya' would declare us both exportable to the Gulags, or the torture chamber, or both, we felt the Spirit between us inviting us to extend our hands to each other.

We smiled warmly to each other as now Commissar Illya declared us traitors to the Soviet people, doomed to the worst kind of revenge that the Revolution could inflict upon us. I suppose that part of my brain was listening to what the sentence was, but the part of my Soul that mattered didn't care. I experienced my moment of eternal Bliss then, with Tanya, through the touch of her hand, and her by mine, so I think, and hope anyway. Yes, it was, as the Indians of old said in America, a place where I dreamed of running away to with Tanya, "it is a good day to die." Only such was destined for...someone else, today.

A bullet rang out from the woods, much like the shot that ended the life of the German soldier who had stolen a truckload of counterfeit money and, apparently, was trying to make a profit or a new life for himself in Russia. On that fateful day when me, Tanya and 'Uncle' Colonel Kostinov had found the German truck stuck in the snow loaded with what we thought was real, Russian-made money. On that same day when Illya had 'by chance' discovered the money-filled truck 'stranded' in the snow and mud before the Tanya, Kostinov and I did. And who with an expertly-aimed shot had assassinated the only remaining German witness to the 'bank robbery', from his hiding place in the woods. Only on this day, the shot went into Illya's head, in the same spot where he had fired it into the German soldier's skull. But today's bullet was fired by....Selena, Hans' wife.

“My husband Hans is avenged now,” Selena exclaimed proudly by way of explanation, just before she ran into the woods and was shot dead by one of the Russian soldiers who had been under Illya’s command.. More shots were fired from other places in the woods, our Russian judge and jury taking cover. Me and Tanya somehow got away, close enough to the edge of the clearing to find some woods to crawl under. And a familiar face covered by mud, everything under it in a Commando’s outfit from an Army I didn’t recognize, except for an American eagle and a 18th century Polish flag on its lapel.

“The children are safe too,” Natasha informed me in Polish, as she pulled me to one side, and Tanya to another.

“And the economy of the Motherland?” I heard Tanya ask. “MY Motherland. Mother Russian!!!?” she demanded to know.

Natasha laughed, her senses and perspective gone mad, her soul being massacred with each bullet she put into the Russian soldiers which had been her liberators. She yelled out a few expressions in Polish that I recognized from the failed 1795 revolt against the Russians, and the Germans, the gunfire from the special unit behind her making the words inaudible to my now deaf ears. I felt a fist punch me in the face, then pin prick in my arm. I woke up...quite a long time later, in quite another time, and quite another place.

CHAPTER 28

It was a solitary room, a bed that was not much more more than an old door mounted on four logs. I opened my eyes and saw a chair and a desk a few feet away from me. I ran my hand over my forehead and felt the hair atop of it, my OWN hair, which had now grown and flowed down to the middle of my back. A pad of paper lay on the desk, a pencil laying on top of it. The walls were all windowless, but somehow light came into the room between the cracks. A bright white light, so it seemed. “So, tell us again what happened,” a gentle, male voice echoed from behind the cracks. It sounded familiar, so I answered it, addressing it appropriately.

“If I told you, you would not believe it, Uncle Gustav,” I said. “Or...hmm...my aunt said you thought you were God. So, are you?” I inquired.

I know, it sounds odd. But that’s how it was in ‘the ward’. Strange voices sounded familiar, and familiar ones strange. Maybe it was the drugs I was taking, or maybe I really was dead. I DO know that Poland was taken over by the Russians soon after the Red Army liberated it from the Germans. And that one of the orderlies had snuck in to me a bootleg copy of a novel describing how a band of Polish Freedom fighters were responsible for setting back the Soviet economy by flooding the market with fake currency, printed with a press that was buried somewhere in Eastern Poland and unearthed by a whore-turned-patriate. And that one of the authors of the book, and

perpetrators of the deed, had a strong resemblance to Natasha's daughter, and her once-Nazi childhood boyfriend.

I never knew who my captives were, or who stuck me with the needle that put me into this condition. Or where Tanya was, but...somehow, I felt myself to be in, yes, Heaven. Perhaps it is heaven from where I speak now. I'll pretend that it is, and...it will be. But Paradise is only fulfilled when it is shared with others. So, on this day, I chose to write all about what had happened to me, Tanya and all the other girls I knew who made me the woman, or ghost, that I am now. Perhaps by writing about them I can bring them back to life for me, or more importantly, make them live inside YOU. After all, it is this YOU who are reading this now, which you may believe as fact, or fiction. But as a song from YOUR time says, 'Believe it if you need it, leave it if you dare'. I think the name of the musicians was 'The Grateful Dead'. Be it true, false or merely imagined, I remain...Grateful. Yes, it is always, in the place I am now, a good day to...Continue.