

ALTA CALIFORNIA COSSACK

By

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## CHAPTER 1

Don Cossack Stenka Denisov had some things in common with his fellow pioneers at the most Southern Russian fort in America in what the Mexicans called Alta California in the Spring of 1841, two hard days ride from the still sparsely populated capital of Monterey. The settlement which bore no real name except 'home' for most of those who lived in it was founded in 1812, had the mandate of being an agricultural paradise to provide food for the growing settlements in Alaska and Siberia, along with an unlimited supply of marine life that could feed, clothe and keep the stoves going in Moscow for a thousand glorious years, or 200 hard winters. And indeed it did so, until the fur bearing marine and coastal mammals were hunted to near extinction ten short years later by incoming Spaniards, British and the most interesting brand of liberation-obsessed adventurers, Americans. And the buyers in Siberia and Alaska found more economically feasible sources than California grown vegetables, hemp, grain and cattle. Then nature decided in her infinite wisdom, or sadistic pleasure, to limit the amount of crops that could be grown in the ground around the fort after it had been made to bleed under the plow.

But such bad timing wasn't any of Stenka's fault, or was it? He had arrived at the Russian Outpost just as the glory days of its past were ending in 1835. Glory days which had brought in the Russian scholars who were the first to describe with facts and poetry the natural history of California, along with its diverse cultural population. And Russian engineers who were the first to build windmills in Western America. And houses made of wood converted into lumber rather than mud and rocks, which all had glass windows through which people could, for the first time, feel the warmth of sunshine without feeling the biting chill of wind, or the hard hitting insults from their neighbors. And some of the first ships built by settlers on the West Coast of the Americas which could, and did, proudly sail back home to boast about the quality of their wood and the ingenuity of their builders.

"But that was then, and this was now" Stenka thought as he rode his horse away from the fort on a mission he was specially selected for in the Spring of 1841. Such was because of his unique abilities as a tracker, hunter and, according to his reputation and family legacy, killer of those who needed to be eliminated for the common good. This wasn't new for Cossacks back home, who were allowed to have far more freedom than most of the Czar's other subjects, as long as they kept the borders of the Empire secure, and eliminated its enemies while they dwelled within the Empire's domain. To the human eye, Stenka was all Cossack, from his upward tip pointed Yesaul leather boots, to the sash proudly worn around the waist of his kosovurotka shirt, to the warlock on his half shaven head. His overgrown mustache hid any expression on the lips to any enemy, and said 'welcome' to anyone he considered a friend. The Old Believer crucifix around his neck he considered more valuable than anything above it. He was a direct descendent of Vasily Denisov, one of the most noble and accomplished Cossack families that ever rode the Steppes, and kept them free for those brave enough to honor that land on its own terms. He was baptized as 'Stenka' by an Old Believer Priest who saw in his eyes the fire, courage and wisdom of Stenka Razan, leader of the failed but inspiring revolution that turned into a failed revolt in Kazan against the Czar in 1671. Stenka also inherited,

and kept, more good health and physical stamina at the age of 40 than any of his fellow Cossacks at the fort, as well as for that matter, any other volunteer or conscripted Russian pioneer there. Yes, upon seeing Stenka ride his horse, or any other he was required to befriend, he seemed to be the perfect combination of independent mountain man, Cossack liberator and justice-enforcing cowboy. And as such, he was a man who lived with many regrets, and secrets.

The first regret Stenka felt when leaving the still well kept but poorly stocked fort containing 24 dwellings, 8 bathhouses and 4 kitchens was when he let the horse have a drink of water from a stream, dismounting so as to adjust the girth on the saddle. His gaze was pulled away by the acres of plowed land which due to soil erosion now bore few crops which, if kept as natural grasslands, could have fed an abundance of Spanish cattle, Mustang horses and indigenous buffalo. Saddened by the sight of what had been 6 years earlier but was gone now, Stenka looked at the surf breaking against the shore below the rock cliffs, imagining what it must have been like when a multitude of sea otters and seals gleefully played there. A golden time when only the ailing old, dead and dying of their number fell into the hands of predators. Such provided food, skins and oil for those who would use every bit of their bodies so that new generations of mammals, including humans, could thrive, and be Alive.

Before visible tears could come into his saddened eyes, Stenka looked at the snowcapped mountains, allowing his ears to hear the drums and chanting of the Miwak. Slender red-skinned people with no hair on their faces who bore an internal resemblance to his bear-like, bearded, white Cossack Comrades back home. That tribe of 'savages' was now, for all practical purposes now, no more, because of a small pox epidemic brought to this new world non-intentionally, or perhaps intentionally, by his fellow Slavs. "Maybe I could have stopped all of this if I came here earlier," Stenka thought to himself, giving voice to that lament to his horse.

"Yes, perhaps," the steed answered with a knicker and nod of his head, as Stenka hear it anyway.

"And maybe one day, we Russians will give up the habit of looking for answers for our problems in the bottom of a bottle of fermented rotten potatoes," Stenka continued, opening up a canteen of vodka made from the only plant that could be effectively grown on the settlement. "And we'd outgrow the need to self sabotage and punish ourselves for sins the Priests say we did by allowing ourselves to be ruled by idiots, assholes and lunatics, to whose good health I am forced to drink to," he said as looked down at the fort. His thoughts wandered to the long chain of governors of the budding Russian colony who did their utmost to outdo each other in mismanagement.

"Yes, perhaps," the horse replied again, saying it this time by whacking Stenka's drinking arm, forcing the 'vodka' to spill on the ground.

"And I was born to a noble name, to a freedom loving and proud people," the Don Cossack continued, taking off his traditional fur Papakha, feeling the recently shaved

scalp around his now two foot long warlock. “Who came here to experience freedom, and enhance it world wide. And not because I was going to be arrested if I stayed back home. Because I was too much of revolutionary for the Czar’s subjects, or even my fellow Cossacks.”

The horse answered by turning around, aiming his ass towards Stenka’s feet, and laying a pile of manure on his boots.

“Yes, I know what I said was bullshit,” Stenka smiled back at his equine companion and on more than one occasion, advisor (as to more than just the presence of humans or animals out to do him no good) after which he took hold of the reins and mounted the steed. “But now that the settlement has a new boss now,” he said with a ray of optimism, The kind that, he imagined anyway, every Cossack felt at the start of every grass roots revolution to liberate the Motherland from the Russian Czars, Mongol Tators or Turkish Sultans . “A French speaking Swiss-Mexican is our new lord, provider and hopefully not executioner. Yet another overfed street peddler or horse thief from somewhere else who fancies himself an Aristocrat or delusionary Philosopher King here. Who paid \$9,000 for a plot of land that isn’t worth a handful of rubbles. Who named this place ‘Fort Ross’. Who assigned us a special task. Of finding, silencing or converting a man who will turn Alta California, this potential garden of Eden where the harshest expression of winter is a cold rain, into what the rest of the world has fallen into.”

The horse nodded ‘yes’, seeming to understand Stenka’s Mission. With a gentle prod on the horse’s flank, Stenka moved the horse in the direction of the footprints of the ‘escaped demon’ that he saw on the ground, and more importantly, smelled with his oversized nostrils. Yet again, for the first time in his life, Stenka felt himself to be on the verge of doing something important. Something revolutionary. Something that would change the world for the better, because he arrived to the battlefield on time for a change. Something that would make him worthy of having REAL vodka and perogies with his ancestors, brethren back home, and, if God was as kind as He was wise, his still not locatable brother, Andrei. An older sibling who had come to the battlefield against the Czars back in the old country on time, with total commitment to the Cause, and who had paid the price for it.

“Andrei!” Stenka yelled out to the sky as he rode his horse along the trail which his mind and brain said led to the fugitive who had to be caught. “After I get rid of this killer snake who has killed everyone else who sought to disarm him, I will find you. I will be worthy of seeing you. So you can tell me, clearly, what I am not doing out of cowardice or ignorance.”

The wind answered, ‘maybe’. As Stenka heard it anyway. “But only after you finish this Mission first,” he heard from another part of himself. A part that he didn’t know, and wasn’t sure could be trusted. But had to obey in the meantime.

Stenka then felt a hunger pang in his stomach that was hurting rather than merely providing a musical rumbling provided rhythm to 'When We Were At War'. The traditional yet always new song he sung to horse when alone on the Steppes, and to the women he tried futilely to come along with him on his all too often solitary hunts. He retrieved a potato from his saddlebag, one of the only crops that took to the soil once the ground was made to bleed under the plow around the settlement. It tasted sweeter than normal this time. In marked contrast to the drawing of the man he was assigned to hunt down, alone. So as to be sure that he got the right 'demon', fugitive or ungrateful employer this time, Stenka pulled out the folded up drawing of his assigned prey.

'Slippery Sam' Smith's cruel and demonic eyes in the wanted poster pulled you into them, trapping you into a realm of sheer terror that you were forced to surrender to. They made the most fear-inducing renditions of Ivan the Terrible, Boris Gudonov, or, when he was trying to make you feel guilty for the sin of being born, Saint Peter, look like an all forgiving Mother Mary. Those terrifying oculars were complimented by a three inch scar on his left cheek, and chiseled chin that seemed point you down to depths of hell by a goatee proudly hanging down from it. Yet, this 'latest incarnation of Satan', according to Vladimir Olinkovitch, head of the six man Cossack 'protective and hunting' squad of the Russian settlement, had a certain charm about him if you were a woman, or if you allowed yourself to connect to the 'woman' inside of you.

After finishing his ration of potato, and telling his grumbling stomach that he would feed it with a more substantial lunch, and dinner, Stenka put away the wanted poster of the always well dressed and overfed 'Slippery Sam', the first American he had ever met during his visits to the settlement. And, if he had any choice in it, the last he would ever have to encounter, or have any financial deals with. A man from a culture which valued competition over cooperation. And who believed, like all practical Americans, that taking was more noble than giving. And that suffering on earth for the sake of nobility in Heaven was for 'suckers'. No wonder the Catholic Mexican Padres, Russian Orthodox Priests and Pagan Native Elders warned everyone to not attend the Americans' Protestant religious services, or church socials afterwards.

But there was one question that Stenka had. Why was he assigned the task of apprehending 'Slippery Sam', alone, without any help? Chorazy, aka 'Lieutenant', Olinkovitch said that it was because the mostly seen but never heard Stenka, feeling himself to be a 'nothing' while amongst people in a crowded room, could seem to appear to be nothing while in the woods, and therefore be undetected. And that his instinct for catching killer wolves or as well as terrified runaway horses was 'unparalleled', a mathematical term the barely literate, in manners of letters in print anyway, Stenka assumed was a compliment. And that he had 'the moral stamina of a voluptuous looking 80 year old virgin nun', a reference to Stenka's discipline with regard to avoiding temptation, as well as other elements 'straight shooter and no bullshit talker' Stenka was still not sure about.

But Stenka was sure of one thing. That he would distinguish himself to Olinkovitch Olinkovitch, who he loved and hated, and new the Swiss Mexican of the settlement. Which would come with more food, better shelter, and the 5000 peso reward for the 'fugitive from justice' if he was brought in shackled to a wagon, or 10,000 peso 'thank you' for his decapitated head. An unprecedented reward that Stenka could use to woo a Catholic Mexican Seniorita (after of course convincing her than God would be alright with her converting to Orthodoxy) into following him back home to the Steppes, or settling in to said dream mate's home in Alta California. And, as icing on the cake, buying his way up to the rank of second in command Chorazy from his 'grunt rank', Such would ensure the approval of his Cossacks here, and family back home, all of which he claimed he never wanted, but needed more than he admitted. And, ultimately, to find his way to Andrei, Stenka's acclaimed Revolutionary Cossack Decembrist brother, who, according to rumors he heard from the Indigenous Redskin Savages before they were killed with small pox or Mexican bullets, was still alive and well up in the hills. Despite of, or perhaps because he was still wanted by the Czar's Secret Police back home for daring to question his authority.

Following the trail Slippery Sam made after the argument he had with the new Swiss-Mexican owner of what was now 'Fort Ross' was easy. The charming American merchant of goods legal and illegal who bowed so courteously to his culturally superior rivals, mocking them as well as their station with his all knowing smile, was in the habit of abusing his horses as much as his business partners. Differentiating his horse tracks from those of the others who rode the roads between the coast fort and the Sacramento valley was easy. The spiked shoes Slippery Sam had put on every horse he rode made deep, symmetrical imprints for the first two miles of his trip, at a full gallop, no matter how hard that ground was. By the fourth mile, the footprints revealed an off balance trot. By the tenth mile, a gait in which one of the horse's feet was so lame that it could barely be seen from atop of a tracker's saddle. A few miles beyond that, there would be a dying animal on the side of the trail if Sam was short on bullets, or, to be 'fair', didn't want to be heard slithering into the bush on foot, or mounting another horse one of his even more elusive outlaw pals had stolen from a farm, ranch or Indian village.

At least two trackers who stopped to pilfer what they could from the saddle of the dying steed left behind wound up dead themselves as a result of stopping, dismounting and taking the time to put the animal out of its misery, courtesy of Sam himself in hiding in the bushes.

This time, the abandoned 'portable source of food' (as Sam often called horses) was dead. Such required Stenka to halt a moment and cross himself, asking God to take care of steed in heaven or, if the Buddhists he met in Outer Mongolia were correct, the next lifetime on earth. The corpse from which the soul was emerging was nestled between a large rock jagged rock carved into its current shape by the hand of nature and man, its most self destructive inhabitant, and a clump of windblown, twisted pine. Stenka's nose and that of his horse detected something strange in the air, most of it coming from the riverbed below.

“No,” Stenka said to his horse just as it spooked, preparing to turn back for a hell bent for leather rider-less gallop back home. “That isn’t Slippery Sam’s cologne that we’re smelling, the ‘calming elixor’ that he was trying to sell that requires everyone who uses it more than twice to use it for lifetime, or the firewater that makes the Indians drunk after the first mug and blind by the second. It’s...” Stenka carefully dismounted the horse on his own terms before the terrified animal could buck him off. Keeping one hand on the reins, the other on the handle of the long barreled hand rifle his grandfather used in the Pugachev revolt against Catherine ‘the Great’ three failed revolutions ago, Stenka crawled upon the top of the large, blood stained, rock and looked down below to see the source of the odor that his oversized schnoz had not detected since his assigned duty in Siberia to protect Moscow raised mining engineers from Yakut Indians, and themselves.

Yes it was mercury. Created on a smelting forge which spit out at the other end, the most useless thing nature provided for its flora and fauna, and the most useful thing for people to become masters of other people. The rocks shimmering with yellow gold were in so much abundance on the unmapped stream which had, due to the snow melt, turned into a shallow river blinded Stenka’s eyes as the sun reached its zenith above. Men clad in blue uniforms with yellow strips down the trousers, and matching caps with small visors, all speaking very American English, worked feverishly at their stations, extracting what they could from the river, and, when none of their comrades were looking, pocketing the gold nuggets for themselves. The only diversion they shared equally was to urinate on the remnants of what seemed to be a Native burial platform, and to step or spit on a half dead half-breed, tied to the ground. One who Stenka has recognized by face, and the death song he was moaning out, but not name. One of the conscripts the last Russian ‘President’ of the fort had conscripted, with pay, to work as a farmer who, like all the others Indigenous people ‘loaned out’ by well paid chiefs, was not required to convert to Christian Orthodoxy.

“That Miwok-Muadi Injun, Rolo, knew what would happen to him if he talked,” Stenka heard from behind him. “But for those of US, who keep their mouth shut, there is more than enough gold here to share,” Slippery Sam continued, making his presence know in front of Stenka’s eyes, and gun barrel. “But before I hire you, we have to have a talk about your reflexes of empathy being quicker than your reflex to kill. But, for you to be hired at a bigger salary, I will request one thing of you.”

“To lower gun and let you go?” Stenka barked out in his best English, wondering why he was so afraid of an unarmed bandit in direct range of his hand musket. “Never. Never. Never!!!”

Slippery Sam’s laughter got louder and his all knowing smile wider, with every ‘never’ forced out of Stenka’s gritted teeth. Until Sam stopped laughing. The next sound Stenka heard was that of eight guns behind him, wielded by three White prospectors, two full blooded Indians and two camp followers, one Mexican and the other Negroid.

“Your men and whores shoot me, then I shoot you,” Stenka pledged. “I die with honor.”

“No you won’t, because...” Lord Sam boasted with a chuckle, in aristocratic Russian.

“I not afraid to die,” Stenka stammered out in English, then with conviction, in his, according to the last two aristocratic wannabees, or expatriate, Commandants of the fort, inferior Don Cossack, dialect.

Slipper Sam entertained his private Army with a mocking imitation of Stenka’s remark in a solo performance, which acquired harmony from every member of the ‘platoon’ behind Stenka. Particularly the women, whose mocking laughter echoed in the, truth be told, virgin Cossack, reminding him of so much unrequited love he had experienced at home, and in every place he ran to in order to do things that would make him feel worthy to return home. “I not afraid to die” the symphony members repeated, again and again. As Stenka grabbed hold of still ‘conductor’ Slipper Sam by the throat with one hand, aiming his hand musket at his head.

“Yes, he is going to kill me!” Slipper Sam finally announced to the congregation. “And bring back my mutilated head and chopped off ring hand as proof that he did!” he continued. “Go fetch them, please,” he requested of the Mexican woman.

Stenka didn’t know what to do when the platoon in front of him kept on smirking. And when the Mexican Seniorita, or perhaps Senora, presented him with the head of a slain and mutilated man which had scars on it identical to those on Sam’s still somehow charming face, and a chopped off hand bearing the rings Sam normally wore on his fingers. She aggressively slapped them on the saddlebag of Stenka’s horse, then gently stroked the Cossack’s cheek, kissing him tenderly on the lips. She smiled with her lips and eyes to him, then rejoined her comrades, inviting Stenka to join them.

“Yes, many rewards for you, Stenka Denisov,” Sam said to the stunned Cossack who for a few seconds, allowed himself to feel loved by the gun toting Mexican whore who was a traitor to her God and Country. “You bring my head back to your new boss at Fort Ross. Collect the reward. And an equal share of the gold down below. Spend it any way you want,” he continued in very American English. “On something for yourself if you have any common sense. Or spend the reward money on something noble if your self-sabotaging Slavic soul that was born with more guilt than any NORMAL human being can carry to the grave requires such.”

Stenka’s mind observed his brain consider the offer, one hand stroking his chin (allowing him to think that no one could see what he was really pondering) the other still holding the business end of his two shot musket on the portion of Sam’s chest that, rumor had it, contained a heart inside. Yes, Revolutions to liberate, empower and enlighten humanity cost money. As every Cossack in his family, heritage and his brother Andrei knew, all too painfully, and too late. Stenka’s memory then went back to the discussions he had with Father Basili Yelsivka, one of the First Eastern Orthodox Priests to serve in Western America in which the key point of the debate was exactly what to render unto Caesar, what to render unto God, and, as a joke the ancient clergyman with such innocent eyes



both absorbed and appreciated, how much the Clergy advisor gets in the transaction. Yes, maybe some kind of compromise could maybe be made whereby the still 'undiscovered' gold down below could be used to liberate Stenka's people back home. Or some other peoples somewhere in America far away from California, or Mexico. Or, perhaps, he could 'change the system from within', as Andrei tried to do when he abandoned the Cossack sword on the Ukrainian Steppes country to adopt the pen in the Moscow Military Science Academies to overthrow the Czar and his cronies. And if anyone was a key member of the 'system' in still-Mexican and still (in the hills anyway) Indian California, it was American Slippery Sam Smith, if indeed that was his real name.

Just as Stenka's trigger hand lowered the gun, and his 'professor paw' slipped down from his mouth, Stenka's horse whinnied, pointing its head up to the cliffs above the overlook.

A shower of Nicename, Ocheam Maide and Miwok arrows fell down upon the ground around, but not into Stenka, or, most thankfully, the horse. Stenka ducked for cover, stumbling upon dead and dying bodies of Sam Smith's squad of fellow entrepreneurs. As for Sam himself, he slithered away into the wood, a rain of arrows then bullets from the Natives below following him. The soldiers-miners below grabbed hold of their weapons, but before they could get out more than a shot each, the brilliant yellow gold collected from the mine was caked in human blood. A flood of warriors descended upon the mining camp below, skinning and scalping the living and the dead, including Roloï, the half-breed, still-living Native conscript Sam had previously confined, who now pleaded for mercy in his Native tongue from his own people.

Stenka, recalling the two good times he shared bread, and the one bad time he shared vodka, with Roloï, grabbed hold of one of a Henry rifle from the eldest 'civilian' prospector, aimed it at Roloï's head, and put him out of his misery. It angered the head of the Ochesam War party below, who commanded his appreciably larger force up the hill to pursue Stenka.

"Go, now, you idiot!" Stenka heard from behind him, in Russian, from a warrior pulling Stenka's horse out of the brush. "Before I forget which side I supposed to be on," Wuyi, otherwise known as 'Soaring Turkey Vulture', an Miwok Indian who more muscle and even more social standing than Stenka, yelled out in Spanish. With that, Stenka mounted the horse, as the multi-lingual Indian diverted his tribe to another group of soldiers trying to escape down below. "

Many thoughts ran through Stenka's head, as his main concern remained how to get his horse out of the site of the massacre. What to do about the head and hand still strapped to the saddle once he did get away. And what to do, if anything, about Slippery Sam, who was known to have escaped massacres of one of his many armies on more than one occasion. And, most importantly, what do in the upcoming Indian war, where old hunting friends such as Wuyi, and many others, would be on opposite sides of an un-escapable battle fueled by misunderstandings planted by the Devil, or more dangerously, by Slippery Sam, or, even worse the country the American so proudly hailed from.

## CHAPTER 2

“So, Mister Sutter, what are your real intentions in thank God still Mexican Alta California, and why did you purchase Fort Ross for such a high price?” budding novelist and newspaper reporter Antonia Fernandez asked the new Swiss Francophone who had just acquired the Russian Settlement in the administrator’s office under a recently added Bavarian cuckoo clock. “And, Mister Sutter, now you have become a Mexican citizen, does this mean you will also become a Catholic? And as a Mexican Catholic, abolish all forms of slavery the Protestant Americans just brought into Texas after their ‘fight for freedom’ at the Alamo? What is your Vision for Alta California?”

“I will tell you, the truth, if you call me, John, Antonia,” the Francophone Swiss gentleman adventurer smiled back with a courtly bow and fatherly smile to the young, fair skinned daughter of a Mexican State governor from South of the Rio Grande who would never let her come home if she ever published under her own name. “About my deep love and affection for this country of yours that I just became a citizen of. Its Catholic religion that I intend on honoring. My Vision for the magnificent paradise of California. And how to keep the Protestant Americans from importing American greed and slavery into California like they did to Texas after they ‘liberated’ it from Mexico, while in the process, throwing out as many of the original Mexicans inhabitants as they could, of course.”

“And, John, the real reason why you left your family’s estates Switzerland, where you were rich and secure, to the New World, where, John, you tested your metal against the wilderness, the Indians, the Americans, and finally worked out a deal with Russians, John?” Antonia gently pressed, using all of her female charms to get information that would liberate her people, and gender. By providing them with the truth about the man who was now legally in charge of not only the large expanses of land he had acquired, but the people on it as well.

The slender, long haired, twenty two year old literary scholar and adventuress listened to the 38 year old overweight balding ‘aristocrat pioneer’ with the kind of ears that she hoped would sift through enough filler, and falsities, to find the truth. The kind of truth that is expressed in words only between men in cigar filled rooms at the Governor’s Mansion in Monterey. Or in feelings more sincerely related between educated women in the tea drinking parlor, Or, even more so, self-educated women tending the fields outside the Palaces of power and comfort that were supposed to be given back to the people after the Spanish Viceroy was thrown out of power in the Mexican Revolution which the history books say was ‘won’ twenty years ago. But, as all real Revolutionaries and historians who write about them know, and keep learning, Revolutions are never complete, and can become Devolutions if one is not cautious, vigilant, actively intelligent and brave. And, so the history books say anyway, caring.

But for the moment, Antonia sat back and smiled, taking copious notes with her pencil, That writing implement was her most prized and guarded possession, along with the

blank books that she was determined to relate how the world was, and should be, to the next generation of adventurous women who would be underappreciated by even the most loving men they could find. She oohed and ahed at Sutter's tale about how he and 35 Germans left the old country then arrived in Saint Louis 1838, when Antonia 'was still in pigtails', then sojourned to Santa Fe carrying nothing but 'a fistful of dreams on one pocket and a handful of courage in the other'. When asked if he had family back in the old country, John related 'they were not up to the journey, and it was best that they remained behind'. With downturned guilty eyes that revealed both shame and guilt, identical to the way no less than ten other 'hard time rags to hard earned riches' pioneers Antonia had interviewed North of the Rio Grande for her book who, upon further investigation, were verified as those who married into money, spent most of it foolishly, and fled their impoverished wives and children to avoid inflicting on them the necessity to visit them in debtor's prison.

Then John related his tales about moving further westward to Oregon with eight of the 'strongest men I could find' so that he could negotiate deals of 'mutual gain' for the Americans, British, Russians and Indians, with a 'small commission' for his services. Next was the story about how he got stranded in Hawaii for four months as part 'the long way around' to California, picking up 10 native laborers who 'flourished on their own terms' once he employed them while building the Fort bearing his name in 1838 which was soon to be named Sacramento. Then, for the record, his dedication to maintaining 'healthy economic relationships' between Mexicans and Gringos. Then, when Antonia least expected it, he requested to have a look at what she had written down in her thick notebook, so he could 'admire' once again her beautiful penmanship.

Seeing as there were two very armed guards just outside the door, and that her horse was stable in Sutter's barn, Antonia had no choice but to say 'yes' with a gracious smile said yes to the request, keeping the prayers regarding what he would read behind tightly closed lips and a poker face she had learned to put on a long time ago when learning to lie to her mother as to what she was reading when she snuck into her father's library, and her father when he asked which of the suitors he chose for her she liked best. Suitors who were still waiting for her in Mexico City, as far away from Alta California as the sun is from the moon.

"Interesting what you wrote down here," John Sutter, who was 'General' of an ever growing private 'border guarding militia' of Indians, Mexicans and runaways from all over the world, noted as he flipped the pages. "And how you translated what I said in Spanish into----"

"Germanic Latin, John," Antonia related, hoping that Sutter wouldn't put the notebook in front of a mirror, so that the truths she gleaned between the 'facts' would not be visible in print to the immigrant 'Emperor' who could have her killed, sent to a convent or, worse, sent back to her father for 'treatment' in an asylum. "With a little bit of ancient Greek, John," she continued. "As a fellow scholar, you will agree, that ancient languages die only when we in these modern times don't use them, John."

This time, the smiles with each 'John' evoked suspicion, rather than loving trust in this genuinely lonely and perhaps remorseful 38 year old man who seemed to feel much older. For five seconds that felt like as many hours, Antonia wondered what 'John' or 'General Sutter' was thinking behind a face he covered up his hands as he leaned back on his chair.

Her concentration and focus was abruptly broken by an overly mustached Cossack on a sweat soaked horse galloping into the fort, who leaped off his saddle without hesitation after his abrupt arrive. "Chorazy Olinkovitch! Mister Sutter! I need to talk to both of you, NOW!" he commanded in his best Spanish, English, then Russian. "Alone!" he continued just as his terrified old eyes met Antonia's curious young ones.

"Excuse me, please, business before the pleasure of immortalizing history," John said to his journalist host, handing her back her journal with a tightly held smile. On the way to the door, he pulled out yet another handful of berry flavored biscuits, placing them gently on the empty plate in front of her. He then refilled her German porecelin tea cup with local brew tea which, truth be told, he hated as much as she did. "I will be back shortly. 'Man' talk which unfortunately, gentlemen like myself have to tolerate, endure and put into perspective. I will be back shortly, Seniorita Antonia" he promised and assured her as he walked out the door, closing it behind him. As well as the curtains over the glass window.

While swallowing the biscuits quickly, before her tongue could endure yet another insult with the rancid taste of the 'sweet jam' in them, Antonia snuck her way to the window, pretending to have dropped one of them on the floor. She looked at the three way conversation between the hunchbacked 'servant' rider, his Cossack enforcer superior, and their new boss, conducted with whispers. Their turned backs, as well as excessive facial hair, made it difficult for her to read lips. But the expressions on their faces were plain as day. Even through the dust covered window glass as the terrified rider explained the details of what he found to what seemed to be his two superiors, while securing the blankets around what seemed to be a large melon with hair coming out of it on his saddlebag. Chorazy Olinkovitch was very concerned, He held onto the crucifix around his neck with a tight grip while he contemplating a plan in his head regarding the urgent news that had to reach his ears. Four large framed, apparently lower ranked Cossacks, and the hundred or so civilian workers at the fort kept their distance, but only after Sutter had 'requested' them to get back to work. As for Sutter, he seemed to be not only in complete control of the situation. Smiling with an arrogant and gleeful 'ah yes, I already knew that' twinkle in his eye.

Antonia knew that there were more questions he had to ask these men. And more false compliments she had to give them using her feminine charms to extract what they were thinking, feeling and about to do. Most particularly the Cossack rider, who, upon finishing his explanation, took off his hat to wipe the sweat off his brow. Revealing a face that seemed to be holding the deepest and most dangerous secrets. His eyes met hers again, perhaps by accident or perhaps because of fate. Something that her logical and secretly scientifically educated mind now had to accept as real and indisputable as any

laid down by Euclid's geometrical mathematics or Isaac Newton's laws of physics. She felt something happen between the 40 going on 80 AND 8 Cossack's eyes. A matter of unfinished business somehow that was now open for business, or perhaps pleasure. Until Sutter pulled him away, his reassuring arm on the dismounted Cossack's shaking shoulders. The horse remained, staring at and into Antonia conveying to her that her fact gathering stay at the fort for her new fact based 'fictional' novel would be longer than planned, or perhaps desired.

## CHAPTER 3

Vladimir Olinkovitch hardly recognized himself after emerging from the new barber shop at Fort Ross. Afterwards, his stare was held hostage by his new light blue, freshly pressed uniform with Swiss insignia on the lapels in the mirror of the new tailor shop, whose clothing line for the first time since the settlement's inception in 1812 was made from more cloth than fur or hides.

"It suits you, Captain Olinkovitch, or should I say, Captain Olin?" John Sutter said to the now warlock-less Cossack, promoted to a higher rank than the Lieutenant 'Chorazy' had held with his former Russian supervisors, in a new country that would allow him to rise as high as his wits, luck, or ability to effectively exert his influence on another man would allow. "Our new army needs men like you to keep this country free, and strong."

"And rich?" Olinkovitch asked, still connected to his Don River Cossack roots, his new uniform thankfully including his traditional fur lined Cossack Papakha hat and boots. He glanced over at Sutter, noting that his new patron clad more as an old money aristocratic Moscow beurocrat than a self made conqueror of the wilderness and liberator of every settler in it. One who considered everyone below him as a subservient slave, instead of someone who was less able to lead. Something no Cossack would ever do another Cossack, or captive.

"He who earns the money, makes the rules, in new countries and old ones," Sutter replied after a long, pensive and thoughtful delay. "And can make his own rules. You as a ---"

"---Mercenary?" the fifty year old Cossack shot back, his words forcing his inner eye to look at the mirror reflecting his own life. His hand reaching into his pocket, feeling the gold nuggets snuck into the garment by Sutter himself behind the happily employed, clean-shaven Mexican tailor's back.

"A mercenary who is serving his own people here, and fellow Cossacks back home by buying their freedom with your skill as a warrior and bravery as a man!" the bold reply from Sutter as he paid the tailor. He then led Olinkovich out of the shop that had once been a library to his horse, upon which was a new saddle, a new rifle, and a new revolver that allowed one to shoot six bullets at a time rather than merely one musket ball.

Olinkovitch was given the honor to ride in grand parade style with Sutter out of the fort, leading four of his fellow Cossacks. Lev, Ivan, Yuri and Petrov were like brothers to him, not so much because they had lived less after exiting the womb, but because they had experienced and agonized over far less than Vladimir had. Notably missing was Stenka, who had ridden off on his own early that morning to hunt game he said he had spotted the day earlier. Perhaps because he was afraid of the free barbering and clothing offered to the Cossack platoon. Or because he feared something in his face that he saw every time he looked into a mirror the night before.

An emerging crowd of new Mexican, Indian and European employees Sutter had brought into the fort for its rebuilding, or perhaps demolishing, applauded and cheered the usually ignored and taken for granted slobbily clad Cossack hunter-grunts. Such made Lev, Ivan, Yuri and to a milder extent Petrov, put an arch in their back, lifting their heads up as aristocrats. Indeed, all happily groomed, re-clothed and re-equipped to look like the pride of 'President' (as the most probably non-elected ruler of half a million acres of prime Alta California land called himself) Sutter's 'defense and law enforcement' militia were impressive indeed. But memories of the past found its way to Olinkovitch's mind. Memories of being a better rider, shooter, archer and swordsman than any of his four brothers back in Ukraine, who because of such, was given the honor of being loaned out to the Czar's army to defend the Turkish border. Then another two years to push the Poles back into their shrinking homeland so they would not invade Mother Russia as they had done a hundred years before. Then 'patrol' duty in Siberia for half a decade to 'keep an eye' on the brown-skinned, slant-eyes, non-bearded Native Yakuts, whose way of life was not too different than his own White, round eyed, over-bearded Cossack brethren back home.

But Olinkovitch was well paid. In gold he could use for his own immediate needs and wants. And, more importantly, his Cossack family and village would be officially free from the excessive taxes the Czar inflicted on everyone else. Free from the Priests who wanted to inflict their brand of 'New' Orthodox Christianity on them. Free from Saint Petersburg aristocrats buying up ancestral Cossack land and turning it into estates, and the Cossacks on them into serfs whose children would also be, by law, slaves for life. Free to elect their own leaders and make their own laws. As long as some of them made moral compromises for the State and the Church, both of whom mandated, on more than one occasion, Cossack raids on Jewish settlements. But, as the Priests told them, and all too many Cossacks chose to believe, they were driving 'Christ killers' and 'greedy, corrupt money lenders' out of the Motherland. Unless of course, those Jews were smart or moral enough to convert to Christianity. It was that thought, and hope, that permeated Captain Vladimir Olinkovitch's mind as the expedition he was leading up into the hills beyond the territory normally allowed to most Fort Ross inhabitants was halted at an overlook by their patron, and, all things considered, relatively anyway, friend, President (and not Czar) John Sutter.

In the valley below, Olinkovitch saw no less than a hundred Indians, walking, riding or hobbling with their belongings from two forts he had never seen. Up into the mountains to what seemed like a single pass which, the maps said anyway, led to a large valley which was still 'uncivilized' Indian territory. Some were full breed Pagans. Some half breed. Some in Native traditional garb of their various and varied tribes. Some with haircuts, European clothing and crucifixes that made them indistinguishable from Whites if you didn't look at their hairless faces and hear them singing traditional songs. Upon closer examination with a spy glass, Olinkovitch noted that were Whites as well, three of them being fellow Slavs, none of them being Stenka.

“An afternoon stroll for a big picnic supper, or an exodus, President Sutter?” Olinkovitch said to his the man who he had somehow befriended after sharing tall tales about their accomplishments, and biased stories about families they had wisely left behind there.

“The latter, Captain Olinkovitch,” Sutter replied. “Unlike the old hacienda owners and the Missionary Priests who enslaved these Indigenous people, and runaways from their old lives in places they don’t talk about, and your former bosses who conscripted the Indians into your employment, I offer them chance to join us in our Quest to build a strong and free country. An offer I recently made very public, and known. An offering for them to have their contract with me, with us, null and void.”

“And now that they have chosen to legally and respectfully decline help from the hand that frees and feeds them?” Olinkovitch inquired.

Sutter placed his hand on his pre-maturely doubled chin, yet again, thought long and hard, then motioned for his Cossack Captain to ride over to his left, away from hearing range of his Slavic subordinates, and comrades.

“Well, in a world where they are not our friends, and this very volatile situation that has materialized with the Aboriginal population at the gold mine that , that makes them our enemies, correct?” ‘Professor’ Sutter put to ‘student’ Olinkovitch in the ‘Socratic’ method of teaching.

It reminded the Cossack Captain about the small framed, pretentious, born to money teachers who came to his homeland to woe him and his brothers to give up the way of the sword and horse on the Steppes, to become , accountants and waiters in Kiev.

“Once the bullets and arrows start flying, those who aren’t completely with us, are against us, and are a threat to our friends, comrades and families, is that not correct?” Sutter pressed.

Olinkovitch took in a deep breath of fresh California air, detecting a whiff of burning sweetgrass from the valley below from the traditional as well as Christianized Indians. Indians this time united not so much as being a member of their now small tribes, but as a people united to connect to the land, and hold firm to it as ‘the people’ in common cause. A Cause that could due to misunderstanding, greed or the urge for revenge, cost the life of Olinkovitch’s New World Cossack brothers, most notably the absent still warlock owning Stenka. A dreamer and idealist who Olinkovitch swore to Stenka’s brother Andrei that he would protect from the world, and himself.

“So, we have to do what we have to do, correct?” Professor Sutter continued, just after Olinkovitch had finished his own internal processing of the issue at hand. An ability that only the most skilled negotiators had, which the Cossack Captain didn’t possess.



But there was one question that the barely literate yet world experienced Cossack 'student' had to ask his 'teacher'. "The gold in these hills. Are you sure that you, me and Stenka are the only ones who know about it?"

"Such is so. Since you, at my request, you gave your word to not told your younger Cossack brothers about it, as it will corrupt their young, undisciplined souls. Is that not correct?" Sutter pressed.

"Yes, that is correct. But before we do what we have to do here, tell me why you bought this land, are not mining the gold yet in big ways?" Olinkovitch asked.

"You rob a bank, you spend the money slowly, so no one knows you have it," Sutter replied with a condescending eyeroll. "And so you can share it with only the business partners you like and trust," he continued, extending his hand to the Cossack.

It took a hard three seconds for Vladimir Olinkovitch to consider the offer, but he finally did. As a Cossack's word was his bond. One of those offenses that, if violated, would mandate a heavy stone tied to your left foot, your hands tied together, and a communal toss into the deepest part of the Volga river.

Olinkovitch turned to his men, ordering them to fire on the exodus below. Most of his men obeyed, some didn't. In the smoke that followed, he couldn't tell who declined the order and who obeyed and who were intentionally firing bullets that didn't hit their mark. But there were others who emerged from the bushes around Olinkovitch who fired away at the Indians, halfbreeds and self-emancipated Palefaces below. Sutter joined in the turkey shoot, inviting Olinkovitch to join him. Eventually he did, firing three rounds from his new rifle that hit their mark. Watched very carefully by his friend, patron, and now partner in a crime that would be required to be finished, to the bitter end.

## CHAPTER 4

The business end of Wuyi's stolen Mexican Army rifle was aimed Stenka Denisov's head, the Miwok Indian's stare was fixed upon that of the bodiless head which Slippery Sam Smith had put on Stenka's saddle which was made up to look like Sam. "So, there is a chance that this is, or was, your nephew, Kosumi?" the Don River Cossack asked the Miwok Indian who, in more peaceful times before small pox left him as one of the only surviving members of that tribe, had taught him to snare aged rabbits, trap rabid deer, identify eatable but not toxic berries, and, more importantly, how to laugh while preparing stew or perogies made from those ingredients. "After you helped me get away from the massacre YOUR people did to what some would call my people, I recognized in 'Slippery Sam's' head, our old hunting, gathering and drinking companion Kosumi by the eyes. Which could never have belonged to Slippery Sam," Stenka continued as he washed off the white powder that covered the Miwok Indian's reddish brown face. He then filled in the trademark Slippery Sam scars carved into it with red clay from the ground under him. "But, the facial structure of this head bears some resemblance to Slippery Sam, or his father, who, twenty years ago was, according to rumor, was---

"----His mother's secret lover, yes I have heard that rumor too," the last and now most fierce warrior of the all but extinct Miwok warrior grunted, after which he grabbed hold of Stenka's blouse, squeezing it around his neck. "Why is this head not on John Sutter's lodgepole? Or yours?"

"No one looks into the eyes of a decapitated head. It invites demons into your soul," Stenka replied with a sense of calm that he didn't expect to be in him. He recalled his tour of duty at the Turkish border, the camps of those Islamic invaders protected more by spikes in the ground featuring the heads of Russian captives than sleep deprived sentries. "I don't know what Slippery Sam with the rest of Kosumi's body. But maybe, if we bury his head in this sacred place, he will find a body of his liking in the afterlife. In the happy hunting grounds, as you call them?"

The grip around Stenka's neck tightened. Perhaps because of his having desecrated, with the best of intentions, the afterlife Wuyi called by a sacred name 'the happy hunting grounds.' Stenka held on to his last breath, hoping that he would give the out breath to God so that he himself could perhaps find out if there was a heaven for Cossacks who did horrible things at the advice and bidding of the weaponless Orthodox Christian priests. But just as the more Spiritual than religious Cossack offered the best deeds in his life to Jesus, the Father or the formless, attributeless, and genderless Spirit from which they were derived, he felt air coming back into his lungs.

Then, for reasons Stenka did not know, Wuyi let go of his color. The Miwok chief grabbed hold of Kosumi's bodiless head by the hair that had been carefully trimmed into Slippery Sam's trademark coif. Then he gently placed it into the middle of a circle of rocks. Holding back the tears from his glassy eyes, he looked up to the sky, singing a prayer that Stenka had not heard before. With words as well as a voice that he did not

recognized. After singing loudly, the song was absorbed into a determined whisper, during which time Wuyi entered the circle of rocks, sitting in the middle of it.

Stenka crossed himself, offering up whatever prayers he could to a God who perhaps was listening or, perhaps, could be awakened from a long slumber. Requesting that the Creator deliver Kosimu's soul to whatever heaven the 'caught between two cultures' lad choose. And before the three day 'waiting period' on earth which, according to religious doctrine and Stenka's own internal proof of such, was required.

After looking up to the sky, and finalizing the request, Stenka looked at Wuyi. The famous for the right reasons Miwok warrior's voice was now silent. His face was covered with tears streaming down his grief stricken eyes.

The sight of an Indian Warrior, particularly of Wuyi's stature, crying like a Cossack widow who had lost her husband and sons in a useless war was of course not in any sketches Stenka had seen in paintings in the old country. Or in sketches made by budding novelists in this new one. And, perhaps, never would be. Stenka felt himself drawn between consoling his old hunting pal, and perhaps still friend, or to give him the dignity of privacy. He had made such miscalculations before with so many Cossack widows, and warriors, whose sense or reason and perspective were drowned by overwhelming grief. "But," Stenka said to himself. "I will let Wuyi decide," as the weeping Warrior turned to the side, his stare trapped within his folded, shaking hands.

With that, Stenka carefully walked towards the collection of rocks. Carefully, compassionately, and quietly, so that his mouth could not distort things he was feeling with his heart, and a chest which tightened harder with each sob from the stoic Indian who had prided himself on being able to not be moved by death, until now anyway. Until Stenka's left foot passed over a line between the rock. Before that foot could feel the ground, a knife was thrown into the tip of his boot. "The next one goes into your head, which I will put on MY lodgepole!" Wuyi pledged, having gone from shock, to depression to anger in the grief process at record speed. Action to happen next which, no doubt, would pit Stenka's people against his in a war where no one would be the winner, or perhaps survivors.

## CHAPTER 5

The lone rider sat upon the steed atop a hill overlooking the Pacific surf breaking on the hard rocks of the shore, each of those elements in constant harmony and conflict as to who would give way. Three ships were anchored beyond the break, the ropes around their sails untied so as to allow the sails to begin a conversation with the wind. Smaller craft delivered the last bit of cargo to two of them.

The largest ship bore the Imperial Flag of the Czar, its declared destinations being to the distant rain-soaked Oregon coast, the more distant frozen shores of now Russian owned Alaska and, for those who paid enough passage or sufficient dues in the Americas, Siberia. From atop the poop deck, a young Russian Orthodox priest, barely old enough to grow an adult sized beard, blessed the sails, the cargo, then the cannons in place to protect the craft from pirates. His droning voice interested the rider atop the cliff, but bored the passengers so much so that they seemed to want to make the underaged yet overzealous clergyman walk the plank as soon as they set sail.

The second largest craft about to plow its way through the waters of the Pacific to distant, perhaps still unclaimed, islands to the West bore the Union Jack. Its old, clean shaven English Protestant Minister commanded the Almighty to bless the ‘humble god-fearing soldiers on board’ who had not been allowed to have shore leave for more than a day by order of the Mexican government, and its new Swiss born Francophone representative, Senior John Sutter.

The third vessel, a smaller craft built more for speed than sea-worthiness on the open ocean, bore no banner. It was destined for points south, to the portion of Mexico, where Caucasians outnumbered Indians, and where ‘civilization’ out populated lawlessness. Its cargo was the thing of most interest to the rider.

The equestrian, now clad in fringed buckskin with a hair-covering hat, noted a long haired Hispanic woman of proper Mexican and Spanish breeding on deck clad in a sleeveless low-cut dress summer dress. She waved a fond goodbye to the rider, and the horse, throwing kisses to both of them. A large framed Mexican Captain with a neatly trimmed black beard, a blue sash, ornate Castilian sword and hip high boots marched to her side. He placed his cape over her exposed shoulders, inviting her to come down below so as to not catch cold. The small framed lady averted her eyes, shunning him with the flick of his hand as a Baroness would a common serf. Then, hiding her face from his commoner eyes of course, she handed him a coin, which he seemed to value, after which he discretely pocketed it. After being granted a second then third coin, the Captain bowed to the lady, placed his coat over her shoulders, then took his spot at the wheel, commanding his men to pull up the anchor. The lady, remaining at her chosen solitary spot, leaned on the deck of the ship. Looking upward, she smiled once again to the rider atop the overlook, giving the rugged equestrian a thumbs up.

“Not yet,” the rider said, loud enough only for the horse to hear, after which the equestrian pulled out a spy glass, hoping not to be seen by onlookers below who were,

hopefully, more concerned with the whims of the waters underneath them. “There’s still one more thing we have to do.”

The Hispanic lady nodded ‘yes’, as she took out a notepad, and pencil. Just as the Captain turned her way, noticing such. Giving the wheel to the first mate, he approached the lady, who again turned her head, averting her eyes. He gently took hold of the notebook, then the pencil. The lady, her head bowed down, attempted to snatch it back, but the Captain’s grip on the diary and the implement used to write with it grew harder. After what seemed to look like a few kind, yet assertive warnings from the bear like Captain, the Captain handed the book and writing implement back to the lady. This time, she threw both of them overboard, averting her eyes as she wept, placing her trembling hands over her eyes. The Captain consoled her with a fatherly hug on her shaking shoulders, then was called back to his station. After he was out of sight, the Seniorita removed her hands from her face, and looked up towards the cliffs, with a big, wide smile, and a tearless face. She snuck a thumbs up to the rider.

The rider smiled back, giving the ‘distraught’ lady two thumbs up. Then the rider motioned with grubby, mud-soaked hands for the lady to cover her face. She did so, placing a veil over her face, then retreated into the cabin below.

The rider breathed out a sigh of relief, then looked up to the sky. Then removed from the saddlebag, a notebook and pencil. Antonia Fernandez, atop the horse, wrote in another entry into the notebook which, if she had anything do to with it, would be converted one day into a novel. One which told the real story about Northern Mexico, as it was, and should be. Such would include of course a special chapter about a low born Mexican cook, laundress, and schoolteacher who aspired to be an actress was able to successfully pose as her, for hefty fee of course. Said actress indeed did pull off being the daughter of one of the most powerful rulers and financiers in Southern Mexico, eluding the ‘rescuers’ specially commissioned by John Sutter. And, according to the plan Antonia devised, just before they delivered ‘her’ to Antonia’s overprotective father, and envious, socially conscious mother, said actress would find a way to disappear again in Mexico City. Leaving Antonia free to bring new glory to the Fernandez name, based on accomplishment and discovery rather than reputation and monetary inheritance. As perhaps a man when she had to be, or a women when it became necessary.

The first opportunity to test that materialized all too quickly when a Cossack rider galloped his horse towards Antonia, screeching his galloping horse to full stop. He pulled a gun on her, demanding in a voice made hoarse by exhaustion as well thirst, “Who are you, Mister?”

“Someone who thinks you have a story to tell, and a destiny to achieve,” her reply, in a female voice, to the Cossack rider who had rushed into Fort Ross to have a very private conversation with his Lord or perhaps master, John Sutter, and his Cossack commander, or perhaps comrade, now Captain Olinkovitch.

The low ranking Cossack in front of Antonia seemed fascinated and scared of her, both at the same time. The place Antonia always wanted men, or women, to be when the loner journalist/novelist met them. As the ships beyond the break were now headed off in their separate directions, she took off her coonskin hat, revealing her long thick mane of black hair. She slipped off her leather roping gloves, and extended her small fingered hand to his. "My name is Antonia," she self observed herself saying her real name, rather than providing a fake one, as she seemed to want to be herself with this Cossack with kind rather than warlike eyes. "And yours?"

"Stenka," the Cossack replied, shaking her hand firmly and gently. "Stenka Denisov," he continued, with a mixture of pride and shame.

Stenka didn't ask for Antonia's last name, thanks to the Orthodox Christian God, the Catholic Creator, or the Great Spirit which the Savage Redskins seemed to be on better terms with than the church or academy educated Whites. Perhaps it was because this Russian who was dressed for a cold winter on the Steppes of Russia rather than a warmer than normal Spring in California could understand Spanish, but was not proficient or bold enough to let it roll over his Slavic tongue. Or perhaps he seemed to not be interested in Antonia's surname was because girls or women in Cossack Russia didn't need such things. Or perhaps because he had matters more pressing than courting a lady, or being fascinated with a lady who dared to try to pass herself off as a horseman. She hoped, and feared, that she would find such out very soon as he seemed to hear something in the shifting wind. After Antonia experienced a loud Silence within that wind, he motioned for her to follow her, into the woods, at a full gallop.

"So, where are we going to?" Antonia yet again asked the innocent boy in a middle aged horseman's body after dipping into the third valley of low lying bush, this one with dried up creeks that seemed more like abandoned man-made trenches. "Or running from?"

Stenka had no answers to those two questions yet again. Except to grunt 'bistro' to his already sweat soaked horse. 'Rapido' to Antonia. And something that sounded like a Slavic curse word to her horse as he whipped it to move forward every time it stopped to turn around. Antonia held on to the reins, and, eventually, her questions, until the horses reached a thick wall of bush. Stenka pulled his horse to a halt, then grabbed hold of Antonia's mare just before it and its rider were about to take a leap past the wall of trees. Trees whose branches were covered with fresh spring flowers, and the reddish tinge of human blood.

Antonia's horse spooked, throwing her off the broken down 'commoner' saddle she had paid so much to buy, and onto the hard ground with a hard thump. Upon rolling around, she reconnected her head to her limbs, then her aching head to her wide open eyes that beheld the sources of the red coating over the green pine needles.

One came from a corpse of an old Indian stuck on one of the branches,. The other was from a mutilated, scalped White peach-faced boy in a Sutter Army Militia uniform, whose one eye carved out of the socket, and the other saying, along with his blood soaked

mouth, begged God for mercy. He looked at Antonia, whimpering ‘mother, take me home’. He extended his one good arm to Antonia. Upon feeling it, she pulled away, as if his touch would bring her into the depths of hell itself. ‘Forgive me. Take me back!’ the lad continued, staring at, and into, Antonia in the manner of a sinful son, lover or father. He then repeated that plea to the woman he left behind, or who left him alone in the land of the living, in German. Antonia, now on the ground, got up, to make a getaway

Stenka pushed a terrified Antonia into the Private’s grasp, freeing his other mangled arm and what was left of his legs from the grip on trees. Then he pushed her into an embrace with the soldier who, back at the fort barely two days ago, had tried so hard to show the visiting Seniorita that he was a brave man who was given the honor of carrying her bag rather than a scared boy who had bitten off more than he could chew when volunteering to be one of John Sutter’s ‘regulators’.

“Tell him you love him, and that all will be alright,” Stenka commanded Antonia, in Russian-accented Spanish, but with all the grammar correct. “In English!” he commanded. “And let him kiss you hello!”

Antonia felt the grip of the Private’s heavy arms, smelt the rotting blood that caked together the edges of his chest wound to his tattered uniform, and heard the sound of encroaching gunfire coming from every direction around her.

“Let him kiss you hello, Mamacita!’ Stenka grunted out, as Antonia observed him shooting at unseen assailants coming in from the West, then the East. “Forgive him! Love him! Kiss him hello!” the Cossack commanded as he continued to fire away into the brush in opposing directions, keeping the assailants at bay, for the moment anyway. “Before we all meet our maker, creator or who---” the rest of the philosophical speculation from the presumably illiterate Cossack about the most important and unsolvable mystery any man or woman would face while in living form was halted by more gunfire from the East, West and now North. Which was answered, and silenced, for the moment, by Stenka emptying the bullets from the militia man’s revolver and the Old Indian’s pistol, at whatever was moving in the trees surrounding them.

Guided by a reflex she never thought she had, perhaps courage, or perhaps smarts, Antonia embraced the militia Private, then in her best Gringo English said, accentuated with as much Texan twang as she could pull off, “I love you. And forgive you. And all will be alright. I promise.” With that she edged her way to his face, kissing him on both cheeks, then, as he still had fear in his eyes, the lips.

“And now, we all make our getaway, to a better place, to a pleasant and peaceful place, together, with a song,” she heard from Stenka, in authentic Texan English to the militiaman, followed by the Cossack giving voice to a hymn of some sort as joyous as it was somber, in German. Whatever it was, the dying man seemed to feel life while hearing it, and deliverance while singing it. Stenka motioned for Antonia to sing along, while he slithered away into the bush. Antonia did her best to take over the singing, a

skill she was never able to master despite, or perhaps because of, the numerous lessons her father paid overpaid for and the expectation of her mother to have a daughter who was as musical as beautiful.

The dying private's singing somehow sounded sweeter with each death rattle coming out of his blood soaked mouth. Indeed, maybe he was going to a better place. A kinder place. A more intelligent realm than earth for the 'living' was, or could be. A place that Antonia felt scared of, and fascinated by, both at the same time.

Antonia recalled a Priest saying that if you say the name of Jesus at your last breath, you will be able to share the next one with Him. The militia man, mouthing without spoken words that name, looked up the sky, his lungs somehow still pumping air into his lacerated chest. Until Antonia saw a sword sever his head from his body, with one swift blow.

She looked up at the wielder of the bloody implement of destruction.

"Why?" she demanded to know of the swordsman.

"Because," Stenka said, after which he put his saber back into its sheath. He handed her the reins of her horse. "This deluded young adventurer who is trying to live up to his father's fabricated reputation has suffered enough," the old Cossack said of the idealistic young crusader, who would not get the chance to become a cynical, bitter and betrayed one. And if the wrong people find him, or us."

Gunfire commenced again, from both sides. This time Antonia felt her body become cold, paralyzed, unable and unwilling to move. Then, a slap in the face from Stenka. "We have to get out of here, now!"

Unidentifiable mixed reflexes of other kinds kicked into Antonia's brain from her shattered mind, and oscillating soul. She felt the hard leather of the saddle on her bruised ass, made more painful by a hard ride to the South, the only direction in which the battle between Whites and Indians wasn't encroaching from, she felt educated, and ignorant. The books she had read and interviews she had with the many pioneer men, and few pioneer women, in this still remote region of Mexico said that when the bullets started to fly, there were four distinct kinds of people. Those who would fire back to effectively defend your comrades. Those who acquire a joy of killing that out overrides any bliss of romantic passion with your loved ones at home. Those who have the brains and good sense to run away from the battle as quickly as possible. And those who would become petrified, unable to do anything except shake with something far more terrible than terror until you are shot, or jump into a barrage of bullets voluntarily. Indeed, as Antonia made her getaway, she still didn't know which kind of 'those' she was. Or, for that matter, which one of 'those' her Cossack rescuer, companion, subject for her novel or perhaps executioner was either.



## CHAPTER 6

Captain Olinkovitch looked over the battlefield, assessing the damage done to the Indians and renegade Whites he had been assigned to do so as to convince them by a show of ‘forceful reason’ to come back and work for General Sutter. Then at the slain militiamen the notably absent General had given to the Cossack Chorazy while he was ‘fighting the real battles’ for the well being of California in the halls of the Governor’s Palace in Monterey. Then at his squad of Cossacks, who had by means of a miracle or their own skills as fighters, had survived the unofficial police action with lacerations that did more damage to their new uniforms than the flesh underneath them. And the bullets shot at them by their deserted Cossack Comrade, which did penetrate some flesh. Then Olinkovitch looked at the ragged tack next to saddle-less horse.

“So, what makes Stenka Denisov think that I’d fall for this trick,” Olinkovitch said as he ran his fingers through the girths on his saddle which had torn apart by Stenka during the heat of the battle. Just before Olinkovitch and his still loyal men to pursued Stenka and his rebel cohorts, throwing him onto the ground in a fall that caused severe injury to his ass as well as, or course, his pride. “That traitor to his own people and idiot who passed off an opportunity, for the first time, to be fighting on the WINNING side, will pay for this ‘moral miscalculation’ and betrayal with his life. By God I swear it!” Olinkovitch screamed to the sky. In full presence of the four Cossacks whose saddles had also been damaged while they were fighting on foot, and taken falls when they attempted to remount their horses. Men born to the Steppes who had elected him their leader when they first left the Don River in Russia. And had not questioned the result of that decision in numerous battles and raids since, some which would be recorded in the history books, some of which wouldn’t. Particularly the ones against the Jews, and, of course, the rebel Decembrists. Most importantly the Decembrists who had been Cossacks prior to their conversion to become aristocrats who preferred to read books rather than burn down libraries that poisoned impressionable minds with romantic tales of heroism based in ‘enlightenment of the mind’ rather than raw courage in the heat of battle. Personified most by Andrei Denisov, Stenka’s older and still ‘missing in action’ older brother who fled into the hills soon after arriving in North America. Who the Indians spoke of, but could never find. Or so they said anyway.

Olinkovitch’s attention then went outward, to one of the Cossacks gathering ammunition and jerky that had been thrown into the bush by Stenka during his private raid. “Hurry up there, ‘Uncle’ Petrov!” Olinkovitch screamed at his second in command, a white haired veteran warrior fiveteen years his senior who had the wisdom, humility or perhaps the cowardice to not want to advance in the ranks so that he would have to make his own decisions, or those for others. “We don’t have all day, Ivan!” Olinkovitch then grunted into the oversized ears of the youngest, and, to most women anyway, ugliest, of his devoted crew as he cleaned out the last of the sand out of the spare hand muskets which had been sabotaged to backfire just enough to render them useless, but not the man firing them handless. He then turned to a moderately portly Cossack whose new required Californian haircut and voluntary complete face shave made him look more like an

Americanized immigrant than anyone else on Sutter's lucrative payroll, reaching for a fresh jug of vodka that Olinkovitch didn't recognize. "Put that down, Lev!" Olinkovitch blasted into his face, pushing the small jug onto the ground, just before he was about to quench his thirst with a customary victory drink. "That 'gift' of vodka left behind by Stenka or his Pagan Indian comrades is probably spiked with something more than just firewater. As a Jew who was smart enough to convert to Christianity, you should know that!"

"And you should know something too, 'Captain' Olinkovitch," a small, meek voice echoed out from behind him.

"I should know WHAT, Yuri?" Olinkovitch demanded of a Cossack emerging from the bush with two freshly snared rabbits.

"That we are all hungry, and deserve, and need some food, Vladimir Olinkovitch" Yuri said with assertion as he commences skinning the first hare, an old rabbit with a deformed bad leg, who would have been coyote meat had it not been spared that fate by a human snare. "And that we have to work together as brothers," the smaller mirror-image of Olinkowich continued as he motioned for Ivan to gather some firewood. "Petrov, Ivan and Lev are our brothers by bond," he noted as Petrov picked some grass for kindling. "And you and me, Vladimir Olinkowitch, are brothers by birth," he said, after which Lev gathered berries from the adjoining bushes. "Who deserve to be addressed respectfully, Vladimir Olinkowitch," Yuri added, with calm eyes as he forcefully ripped the guts out of the old hare. "No matter how angry you are at our former brother, Stenka. And his older brother, and, to some, renegade terrorist Sage, Andrei."

"Yes, you are right, Juri," Olinkovitch said to his brother, placing his bear like arm on his brother's cub like shoulders. "Or rather, Juri Olinkovitch," he continued, noting that since his promotion to being an American Captain, he had forgotten that a Russian Cossack always addresses people he respects, or needs to connect to, by their first and last names. "Yes, indeed, Petro, Ivan and Lev," he nevertheless continued with a respectful but not subservient bow of his head. As he recalled that leading men into doing things they were didn't want to do, or thought they couldn't do, or were afraid to do, was an art, not a procedure. An art he would have to keep learning about if he was to effectively serve his new Hetmen, John Sutter. And, if Olinkovitch played his cards right, he could become a Hetmen land owner himself with a kingdom that would surpass Sutter's in power, wealth, influence and, according to present plan anyway, moral fiber.

## CHAPTER 7

Stenka Denisov stopped by three Indian villages. He asked the dwindled number of inhabitants if Antonia Fernandez could rest her horse and herself. And if he could speak to the tribal council regarding the new War which had broken out over who would get the yellow rocks that converted rational men into rabid dogs, and their women into wailing widows. Even if they did get the gold.

All of those reasonable requests were denied, in three different dialects, all 'on Wuyi's orders'. The Cossack who was trained for war who now wanted peace between his Slavic brothers from the Old World and his adopted people from the new one was called a new name upon being shouted out of the last village he visited and tried to help by the men. While holding back the desire of the women to avenge the deaths of their husbands, brothers and sons by giving the Cossack and his new Hispanic 'Adventurous' a haircut that went three inches below the scalp. Indeed, Stenka and his new White companion were sentenced to banishment everywhere they went, on Wuyi's orders'. As for that new name for him, echoing through his aching ears, Stenka need to know more about it.

"'Munios', what does this mean?" Stenka asked Antonia, when finally out of range of the rocks thrown at their horses and the accusations blasted into their aching heads.

"A Cree word," the young adventurous slurred through a voice made raspy, tired and old, with half closed eyes seeking sleep, even if doing so meant a permanent slumber at the hands of stray bandits bearing White as well as Red skins. Or bounty hunters who were better at their trade than Stenka ever was, seeking the 20,000 pesos reward on his head, and half that amount for anyone brave or stupid enough to be riding with him. "A Cree word which means 'those who have gone mad in the pursuit of money'," Antonia explained in an authoritative tone, after which she indulged in yet another beam of optimism. "And, those who still think they can do something right in a Province where everything has gone wrong, instead of---"

"---Heading North to Oregon, where I'll be arrested by the Czar's soldiers, then mercifully put into life imprisonment at the intercession of a well meaning Priest?" Stenka interjected. "Or maybe we can go South, where you can explain yourself to your father, a good friend of John Sutter. And your mother who, you say has a love affair with the devil, who wants you locked up in a Nunnery for the rest of your life, after the 'good nuns' chop off all of that long hair of yours so that the arrogance under it is cleansed by the 'mercy of God's sunshine?'"

"We can always go East," Antonia suggested. "To the United States. Land of opportunity."

"For Americans that it is," Stenka replied. "Who, so I was told, are not that different than the Gringos who convinced you Hispanic Tejanos to join them in their fight to liberate Texas from the brutal rule of Santa Anna. So those slave owning Gringos could take away the rights of you Tejanos, with the full blessing of President Sam Houston."

“So, what do we do then?” Antonia challenged, trotting her nearly three legged lame horse in front of Stenka’s. “Where do we go now? Other than further into this fog towards a light you think, hope or imagine is there?”

Stenka looked ahead of him at the fog which had clouded out the sun, as well as his sense of where North, East, West or South was. He looked down at the ground, pondering the issue. After careful consideration, and agonizing reappraisal, he decided a restatement of the obvious facts may lead him to the illusive truth. “Part of my soul is Indian, part of me is Slavic. Truth be told, every Cossack is are part Pagan, and part Christian. I have brothers on both sides of this war. A war that---“

“---You have to fight, and be involved with. And can’t just walk away from,” Antonia replied in a voice indicating that she had finally come to Stenka’s way of thinking. “But which you have to fight in, and participate in,” she added, with a new thought of her own. “Because it is your dharma.”

“‘Dharma?’ Is this another Cree word?” Stenka challenged. “Meaning ‘continuing act of self sabotage’? Something that,” he continued, breaking into a self-effacing chuckle, then an unbridled laugh. “Something that we Slavs are very good at. Self sabotage. And the need for self punishment. Like the time we banded together to throw Ivan the Terrible out of the Palace in Kiev. Then, after a year, because we didn’t have anyone to overtax us, starve us, and imprison us for the most minor of offenses, we begged him to come back to punish us some more. For sins the priests said we committed for being so selfish as to crawl out of the womb or allow ourselves to be pushed out of. So we could fight wars where all sides lose, even the winners. These sages of yours who came up with this word ‘dharma’. Where are they from?”

“India,” Antonia replied, with eyes that revealed to Stenka that indeed she was an old male soul fated to have the opportunity and burden to be in a young woman’s body. In the manner of a man, she crossed her legs over the horn of the saddle. “Which was written about in the Bvadvada Gita. Which said that it is better to do your own dharma, or spiritually assigned purpose, poorly, than someone else’s well.”

Stenka listened with fascination to the tale of Arjun, the ancient Hindu warrior who had the task of having to participate in a civil war in which he had beloved souls on both sides. And the dialog between Lord Krishna and the mortal Warrior-Prince who wanted to wash his hands of the dirty business of the world during peace time and the bloody mess that is war no matter who wins, and run off to become a monk. Then of the need to understand that beyond the worldly dualities of good and evil was Truth and, as felt by the Enlightened, Bliss. Then of the necessity to be detached from the fruits of the action, and the lower emotions of anger, jealousy and greed, even when charged with attacking an opponent you are obliged to fight, but not vanquish. To be unmoved by success or failure. To love all equally, none above or below another. And finally, as Stenka heard through the intense silence echoing off the hills, the loud sounds trees being pushed into

each other by a brisk Spring wind, that once one is enlightened, you know that--- within action there is inaction, and that within inaction, there is action.

As the young scholar allowed herself to become lost into the Ancient words she was quoting, or perhaps misquoting, Stenka felt somehow connected to what she was trying to convey, and to her. But as someone who was on the path of action rather than knowledge, or devotion, Stenka still had to be concerned with results in the material realm. As such, another source of practical knowledge emerged. “Andrei, my older and far wiser, and braver, brother, would know what to do,” he finally said, after Antonia was finished with the sacred offering that, as it seemed, she gave to very few people.

Professor Antonia rolled her eyes, frustrated that student Stenka mistook pearls for pebbles. She shook her head. Then dismounted, letting her horse have its head as she wacked in the ass, allowing the steed to munch on the early spring grass, a simple pleasure that creatures who were not burdened by intellectual discourse or the need to prove themselves to intellectual scholars were thankfully allowed to appreciate. “I give up!” she said to Stenka, then the sky. “I give up on everything!” she continued, pulling out a Bowie knife from the sheath attached to her waist, then grabbed hold of her long, black and, as far as she could do so in the woods, well cared for hair.

“No, you, we, won’t!” Stenka shot back, dismounting his horse. He ran over to her, grabbed hold of the knife, then gently released the grip her sweat soaked, clammy fingers had on her mane. Hopefully in time for her mind to not slip into a rut which would become an abyss for her soul. “Andrei, my older brother, and sage. And experienced revolutionary would not give up. He would know that to do. And that the good must always struggle against the bad. And that nature never gives you a problem without a solution.”

“And if the problems are man-made?” Antonia challenged. “Or, woman made?” she added, averting her eyes. “I have disrupted many people’s lives. Including yours, Stenka Denosiv,” she related, and confessed.

Stenka felt the balance of age and experience coming back to their original equilibrium. The middle aged Cossack moved his face within the range of the young Mexican woman’s blank stare, allowing his lips to move into a wide, confident, assuring smile. “Andrei would know what to do,” he said her, hoping that her ears would tell her guilt ridden lost eyes that all would be alright. And that though she could never go home again to Mexico City, that she would somehow find or create one here in the wilds of California. Perhaps, if his argument were convincing enough, Stenka could convince himself that such would be the same for him as well, perhaps with Antonia as a wife, or perhaps as a fellow loner, who needed to be herself somewhere apart from him.

Stenka went on to tell about Andrei’s bold choice to abandon the Cossack sword, after distinguishing himself in many battles, and take on the challenge of matching wits and wills with scholars in Moscow. As a writer, political scientist, medical scientist and physical scientist inventor. Then, after proving his superiority over the aristocrats who

thought they could understand how nature worked by reading about it rather than living within it, passing on the opportunity to become a high ranking beaurocrat, professor and priest in service of the Czar. Then joining the Decembists, well meaning revolutionary scholars, who sought to convince the Czar, through negotiations rather than force, to be a kind, considerate and compassionate coordinator for his people, and not an overbearing, closed-minded arrogant 'Heavenly Father'. Then, when that failed, to convince the Czar and his ministers to do the Right thing with swords in multiple battles in around the Volga River in White Russia. Then multiple battles in Siberia after being placed into exile. Then, after escaping captivity of body and mind, in North America, where he voluntarily went missing to join the Indians who were more concerned with killing each other than a common enemy, to wage war in a revolution rather than revolt against a common enemy. Armed with technological tools he could provide them, as well as the wisdom to know that if you let technology rule you, nature or a civilization with more technology will destroy you and your Vision. Then, disappearing into the mountains to places unknown to Whites or Indians.

Antonia listened with polite interest, then wishful thinking. Then, when Stenka finally described the physical features of the man rather than the philosophy behind and nobility of his acts, she gave voice to something Stenka didn't expect to here. "Yes, I know this man," she said.

"Indeed, we all should know such people in our lives," Stenka replied as he sat down on a stump next to her. "A hero, sage and mentor who can tell us, me, what I am not doing out of ignorance or cowardice," he related, as he was about to confess his mistakes, miscalculation and multiple misgiving to the surrogate priest. "A life where---"

"---I can lead you to Andrei, so he can set you on the right path, and maybe me too?" Antonia claimed. She pulled out her diary, showing him the picture she had drawn of the elusive Cossack Messiah. "If this is him."

"It is!" Stenka exclaimed, his spirits uplifted. He crossed himself, thanking God for finally finding what, and who, he stayed in America for. "Where is he?" the middle aged displaced Cossack asked the young homeless novelist.

"Not far from here," Antonia assured Stenka. "If here is where I think it is," she continued, looking at the sky, the mountains, and finally the sun, which gave the two lost idealists orientation to where the four directions were, and where the direction of their new lives would be headed.

## CHAPTER 8

Antonia had made many promises in her, what now felt like, two century long 20 years of life on earth in her present beautiful and privileged form. Some promises she kept. Long term promises like being sure that, like her two 'good' sisters, she would not be owned by a husband not of her choosing. Or owned by motherhood afterwards, with thinning hair, and thickening girdles on her loins like her double-chinned mother.

And short term promises like being sure that she discovered something new about the world as it is, and should be, and write it down somehow, somewhere so that the opportunities for mankind, and womankind, to advance beyond its chronically pathetic state would not be lost.

But there were some promises that Antonia Fernandez didn't keep, by necessity. Like the promise to not lie to her father who, though stuck in an age where women were born inferior to men morally and intellectually, did care about her welfare, as he saw it anyway. And telling the men, and women, she interviewed in her 'Northern Mexican botanical exploration expedition' that she would publish only what they wanted to be known about them. Breaking of such promises was, of course, necessary, for the ultimate good. And the promise she had made to Andrei Denisov two months earlier to not reveal the location of his hideout where he would carry out 'his final revolutionary project.'

Maybe it was something in Stenka that said it was time for the confused younger and wiser older sibling to meet, despite the elder's request that such not happen. Or the horror frozen into the dead face of the Indian Warrior who she had found at the bush overlooking the battleground as a result of a war that had to be stopped at all costs. And the terror in the dying eyes of the White Militia man who met his demise soon afterwards. Or the smell and sight of the battlefield she had fled which clearly indicated the contagiousness ignorance-fueled cruelty which was about to spread to all of California if not stopped. Or maybe that 'feeling' which women had that made them unable to keep a secret at all costs or put aside a grudge therefore, according to Antonia's father, being unqualified to be Priests who could offer communion or hear confessions. But there was one thing that Antonia did know as she led Stenka on the steep mountain road to a hidden valley known only to an old but still defiant woman who claimed to be one of the last surviving Necename Indians in her tribe. And because of the elder's demise a week later, due to unknown circumstances beyond any Indian's or Guardian spirit's control.

But one thing felt certain more than any fact to Antonia. Someone or something was protecting this pass leading to the valley where Andrei was hiding out from the world as it was. Other than the mountain's providing quicksand at unexpected places which swallowed up men, dogs and horses, spitting their bones out onto the ground above after the earth or some kind of underground creature (or demon), had dined upon every ounce of flesh. As she led Stenka into the small valley below it, those skeletons spoke to Antonia in worse that she could now clearly hear, with very earthly ears.

“It’s just the wind,” Stenka said as Antonia’s horse halted, terrified of taking a step further, preparing to throw his rider off the saddle and down onto the rocky creek below. “Convince yourself of that, and you will convince your horse of the same,” he commanded, from behind.

“Only if you convince yourself of that first,” Antonia said as she, this time anyway, kept the horse on all four feet, and her own two legs around its shaking flank.

“No problem,” Stenka assured her from atop a horse which tried to buck him off, clearly wanting to go back home, anyway it could. After regaining his seat in the saddle, and composure between the ears, the Cossack crossed himself, said a prayer in Russian, then proceeded onward. After nudging the horse forward at a brisk but careful walk, working the bit on the usually well seasoned steed like he was a terrified colt just introduced to saddle and tack. The Cossack then pushed his mostly downturned corners of his lips upward into a smile. “Problem solved. Forward now?” he requested of his guide, Antonia, who insisted on riding ahead of him.

Stenka said, then sang, some more words in something that sounded more like Ukrainian horse than human Russian. Such calmed his horse down, then Antonia’s mount, then, finally Antonia herself. Then the usually scientifically-based female thinker surmised, the restless spirit of the human skeletons at her feet seemed to be relieved of their stress, their echoing voices silenced.

The rest of the journey upward on the mountain trail marked with Yin-Yang carvings on the rocks and still surviving tree trunks was no less scary. Light seemed to come from places other than the sun, mirrored by nothing Antonia could detect, or Stenka would identify. The ground under the horse’s feet finally leveled out, which had been covered with enough winter grass to feed six horses for a week, was nothing more than brown stubble. The ground below it seemed to rumble, as if a river below the ground sought to take anyone who dared to ‘think too heavy’ into it, for a rocky ride to the Pacific Ocean. Portions of the ground leak black sewage from below, bubbling in a way Antonia had never seen water do.

“Oil,” Stenka said upon smelling it. “Some say it will be more valuable than gold one day. Others say it is black blood, coming up from dead ancestors who will punish those who violate their peace by making them rich in pocket, dead in spirit and destructive to themselves as well as everyone else around them.”

“And those ‘others’ are?” Antonia asked.

The middle aged Cossack looked up at the sky with the intense mystical stare, then, from his very earthly mouth, replied, “Others who I am honor bound not to say anything about, or against.”

His silence permeated Antonia’s guilt ridden conscience and critically thinking brain. Yes, she had violated Andrei’s trust by taking Stenka here, to him. But she had also



made a promise to Stenka to bring him to his brother. Perhaps, she thought, the most recent promises are the ones that one should keep. Or, as her father said in his kinder, saner and most reflecting moments, particularly when Antonia asked him about why he married her mother and committed himself to a loveless marriage, “One should be careful about making too many promises.”

Just as Antonia was on the verge of making another promise, this time to her travel weary horse that it would have a full day with all the grass, water and rest that it needed, or wanted, beyond ‘the very last next’ hill, she heard a bell ring. Looking up towards that next ‘very last’ hill, her eyes beheld between the trees lining a narrow deer path, a collection of wooden branches gathered together at 90 degree angles, something nature never did. And a patch of red at its center, a color Mother Nature allowed to be expressed by some naturally occurring canyons if viewed at the right time of day, or bloody corpses when artificially stretched out.

“So, this is the place?” Stenka said, sniffing the air. “Tea,” he commented, pointing to the smoke emerging from the collection of branches and fallen logs which, upon further examination, was a cabin. “And Don Spice Pryaniki,” he said proudly of the pastry covered with honey with a warm home grown smile, no doubt bringing back memories of a delicacy from the Old Country which had been specially imported into the new one. After which he galloped his horse down the deer path, disappearing into the clearing just below the cabin. Antonia followed, cautiously.

By the time Antonia had ridden to the cabin, Stenka had already dismounted, unsaddled his horse, and let it graze in an empty coral through which a stream of clear water flowed. The place looked the same as when the old Nicename woman led her to it, after being bribed by shining jewelry, a ticking pocket watch, and the promise to tell the real story about her tribe to the Whites who were responsible for its demise. But with some unusual smells coming from the underground structures adjoining the old cabin, with covered glass windows jutting out of the ground, surrounded by a lattice of industrial wire and California grown hemp. As for the man who came out to greet Stenka’s horse, Stenka, then Antonia’s horse, Andrei Denisov was exactly the same as the drawing she had put into her notebook, and engraved into her head.

Except for Andrei’s face, his long beard now shaven off. Except for the Cossack warlock on his head, which was now missing, accompanied by a long mane of evenly cut hair styled in a braid in the manner of no Indian tribe she had ever encountered. Except for the enlarged belly and under-muscular shoulders, which had replaced the slender waist which would be the envy of any Seniorita in Mexico City and the strong Herclean arms that any machismo man anywhere in Mexico would kill for. Except for the pistols, knives and hand rifles strapped to his Cossack sash, that sash now being an apron, its many pockets containing a mixture of carpentry tools and cooking utensils. All accompanied by eyes that were...more warm than firey. Kind rather than intense. Accepting rather than thinking. And a quality described best by something that Stenka gave voice to with shock, envy and fear.

“You look...happy, ” Stenka said to his brother after emerging from a hug more given by Andrei, and cautiously accepted by his younger brother.

“It can happen,” Andrei noted, with a wide smile, after which he looked up at the sky. “Just like, the wonderment of flight by those birds up there can, and does, happen.”

Andrei, his loving bear sized hand over Stenka’s man-sized shoulder, went on to refer his younger brother’s attention to the animals and botanical expressions of the earth by Latin and Native name, but not as a scientist. No, Andrei seemed like a child, enveloped in wonderment of how things are rather than a Promethian urge to make the bad good, and the good better.

Each time Stenka tried to bring up affairs of the world around this isolated valley, or the threat to it if the wars outside of got any worse, or how to convert passion-infused born-to-fail revolts into successful revolutions that would spread Enlightenment, Andrei would divert conversation to another bird, squirrel, plant or insect, handling the latter with more gentility than any woman would, even after that bug had taken a chunk of flesh from his very masculine arm.

Finally, Andrei diverted conversation to another source of wonderment he wanted to share with his frustrated, confused and, as he seemed to be becoming, angry younger brother. “I see you have finally found someone who you can care about, and who cares about you,” he said regarding Antonia. “She is a great woman. Who knows what promises to keep, and which ones have to be broken,” he added. “Which...happens.”

Antonia’s jaw dropped before she could utter an apology for violating her promise to keep the location of Andrei’s ‘revolutionary laboratory’ secret. And shock for him forgiving that transgression. And fear, because he somehow knew it would be violated, for an altruistic reason.

“Welcome to the family,” Andrei said, with open arms, motioning for her to drench in the bliss of his embrace. Which, upon accepting it, had a different kind of intensity to it than she had experienced upon last meeting with him.

From the corner of her ever watchful eyes, Antonia finally saw anger, frustration and fear emerging like a volcano in Stenka which finally burst open.

“What is the best way to fight against, and beat, the Unenlightened, Cruel and Powerful?” Stenka assertively inquired with an optimistic revolutionary fervor, dedicated above all costs to accept the assignment of this older brother who had become an Oracle, a Messenger from God, or perhaps, in some way, a human Manifestation of God. “Tell me what I am not doing out of ignorance or cowardice,” he continued as he edged his way towards Antonia. And then the brother who said, on more than one occasion, that a true Revolutionary should never marry because the Cause is always going to be his only wife, lover and mistress. “Tell me what the best weapon against those who oppress us all is.

Please!” Stenka pressed, boldly placing his hand on Andrei’s forearm which was still hugging Antonia.

Andrei, if indeed he still was going with that name in this present form an stage of life, gently released Antonia from his gently loving embrace. He looked inside of himself, no doubt reviewing every battle he fought against ignorance and cruelty. He felt the wounds inflicted on himself by life, and himself, in so many ways. Many of those wounds, according to Stenka’s tales about his idolized older brother, and the ones Andrei had told to Antonia herself, very honestly, still hurting. Finally Andrei answered the question Stenka had been yearning for and needing for the last decade. And which Antonia found herself needing to know more than ever.

“The best weapon we have against those oppressing the world, and who have oppressed us, and who seek to oppress other is to...live well,” Andrei said with an all knowing smile. A happy smile. One that confused both her and, upon looking at Stenka, his younger brother as well.

Before that answer could be processed, rebuked, or challenged, Andrei bellowed out with blissful enthusiasm. “Maria we have visitors.”

“I know,” came from inside the cabin, followed by a woman who seemed to be half Mexican and half White, but all beautiful by any cultural standard, bringing out a tray of tea and Mexican Pan Dulce sweetbread. The latter of which was, by yet another ‘coincidence’ perhaps, Antonia’s favorite.

After laying the tray of gustatory delights onto the level stump of a large tree surrounded by large, flat rocks, Maria and Andrei shared the most loving kiss Antonia had ever seen a man and woman dare to enjoy, or trust. From the corner of her eye, she spotted Stenka’s face. The Pilgrim Cossack had indeed fallen into deep despair. As if he had gambled everything on a climb up Mount Olympus, or Mount Sinai, to ask the ultimate question as to what he should do in life. And was rewarded for that most noble of all quests as to what he should do with...‘just be’ as an answer. Antonia also felt that despair. But felt that this quest was not in vain. The answers she, and Stenka, now brought together as Comrades who DO rather than BE had to be found. And perhaps they could be if they listened closely to what Andrei had to say, or what he could be cajoled into saying. It felt like the fate of the world, at least that of California, depended on it. A place of power and influence that Antonia, and Stenka, which, after so much effort to get here, had to do something with, whether they now wanted to or not.

Stenka listened hard to what Andrei said over the log table of tea , sweetbreads and honey cakes, as he was not very good at listening gentle. But finally, after three potfulls of whatever beverage this tea was, and two plates of made with love, or perhaps more earthly mind altering ingredients pastry, and of course countless observations about the beauty of wildlife which Cossacks like Stenka, and ‘older version’ Andrei usually hunted rather than befriends, Antonia was able to divert Andrei conversation into a tale about how killer wolves saved young Andrei’s life. It was a tale about the time he volunteered

to be in a battle Stenka knew nothing about, and wasn't supposed to, as he was barely old enough to pull a bow at the time or shoulder a musket. Perhaps one of the Napoleonic Wars, or perhaps not. But it didn't matter to Andrei, and eventually, to Stenka. Or Antonia.

"It was winter, the coldest I remember," Andrei said with both fondness and regret, after placing his empty, non-vodka containing, tea cup ahead of him." "A pointless war between 'them' and 'us' set up by the Counts on one side and the Barons on the other. With cannons, inflammable oil, and torches, a company of 'we' and 'them' managed to clear out more forests than an army of serfs. There was nothing to eat but leaves, rotting biscuits or, as some suggested, or dead horses or slain comrades. And less for the wolves to eat as well. So, as everything and everyone has the right to fight for their survival, the wolves went after us." After an intense review of the tale once again inside his head, Andrei sipped another round of tea to settle his stomach, and allowed his heart to be eased by a gentle stroke of Maria's hand on his forearm.

"Anyway," Andre continued, gently pushing Maria's arm away. "Someone got the brilliant idea to go after these wolves, and an even more brilliant idea to go after these killer wolves together. Them and us, together...we..." The rest of the words got frozen into Andre's throat. "We...we..." he rambled on, reaching with his shaking hand for the still not drunk from flash of vodka Stenka had put on the table as a gracious guest two pots of tea ago. "We...and us...and we..."

"Killed the killer wolves, a common enemy, right?" Maria intervened, her assuring hand gently holding Andre back from the jug of firewater his brother Stenka had brought to the table. Treating him with a kiss on the lips before the vodka could pass over them.

"Yes," Andre' said after gaining his faculty of reason, and strength, after which he handed the flash to Maria, who spilt its contents on the ground, angrily staring at Stenka while doing so. "We and them banded together against a common enemy," Andre proclaimed. "And fed ourselves with wolf meat. And then invited the reinforcements sent up from the rear finally, to share in the feast us and them shared together. Until..." Again Andre's words got stuck in his throat.

"You and them were well fed, had no common enemy," Antonia interjected gently. "Then.."

"Went back to your stations and started to kill each other again. We versus them. Business as usual," Stenka added.

"Yes, but...perhaps if in your present situation between your us's and them's, you could maintain or create a common enemy, you could..." Andre replied.

"You mean WE could stop this war," Stenka said extending his hand to his brother's forearm, one Revolutionary Cossack to another. "We can---"

“---You can!” Maria blasted into Stenka’s face, pulling Andre’s arm away from his brothers.

“As both of YOU now must do,” Andre said to his two visitors. “

“How?” Stenka demanded.

Andre thought about it, as did Maria. Both of them came up with their conclusions at the same time. As if timed by nature rather than intention, Maria got up from the table, then placed the mugs and plates onto a the slab of wood carved into a tray, on its own terms, “Supper in ten minutes,” she asserted.

“Twenty, Maria, please,” Andre requested

“Fifteen then,” Maria conceded, averting her eyes, and a whole lot of history about Andre, Stenka and herself that Antonia knew she would have no access to, and should try to obtain.

With that, Andre lifted up a patch of dirt which turned out to be a door, inviting his two guests to enter his underground cavern, or, as Antonia allowed herself to fear, eventual coffin.

## CHAPTER 9

Captain Olinkovitch led his mounted company quietly on the high ground overlooking the heavily forested riverbank below, hiding as best as he could behind the rocks and sparsely spread out windblown pine trees. The Cossack led cavalry of Mexican soldiers, Catholic-converted Gringo settlers, and citizen-less European immigrants seeking to find a better place in structured society than where they had left advanced single file, quietly. Each man on horseback, some for the first time, nervously hoping that their leader would find the hidden pass that would lead them down towards the riverbank so as to surprise the camp where Nicename, Miwok and even Maidu were making offerings to the Great Spirit, as well as Jesus, so that the arrows they were sharpening and guns they were loading up would find their way into White flesh. And that their knife blades would be covered with blood from the scalps of the slain, or perhaps still living.

Finally, Olinkovitch saw the marker which led to the overlook from which he could mount an attack from the West. Ahead of the second company of troops sent by the Mexican governor, commanded by Major Juan Carlos Maria de Santa Francisco Alvarez. The magnificent tales of glory in his battles to liberate Mexico from Spanish and the campaign that finally quenched the cutthroat White Mountain Apaches Indians were as real as the Christian charity of the Missionaries who had distributed to them small pox infested blankets.

“We should wait till we have reinforcements,” second in command, but always advising from the side, Petrov suggested to Olinkovitch. “We don’t know how many Indians are down there, and if we bite off more than we can chew, things could get---“

“---Glorious!” Olinkovitch interjected, envisioning his own portrait on the walls of schoolhouses here in an America safe from Pagan Indian raids. And history books back home on the Slavic Steppes, where he could finally return home both rich and famous. And so he can be worthy of his ancestor’s memory, most notably, his father.

“Glory at a cost,” Petrov warned his superior in rank, but so many times, not in intellect.

“God is with us,” Olinkovitch asserted.

“Oh yes,” Petrov ranted on. “Like ‘He was with us’ back when...”

Olinkovitch listened to at least ten places where the blessings of God were not quite sufficient to win the day, perhaps because maybe the Creator was paid off more handsomely with offerings, sacrifices or sincerity the enemy. But there was something that Olinkovitch did have up his sleeve. He pulled out a leather parchment, then presented it to Petrov.

The old sage who chose to remain at a lower rank was about to remind Olinkovitch of the eleventh, and most bloody, battle in which “God was with us”, but instead delayed providing that reminder. “What is this?” Petrov inquired regarding a map drawn in

many colors, figures of animals and primitive pictures of terrain identifying specific locations. “These are the drawings of a child. A confused girl.”

“A trusting young woman,” Olinkovitch replied. He recalled her jet black hair drenched in her own red blood, the image bringing back memories of returning home from a successful hunt after the Turks had their way with his young runaway daughter who was on her way to have an unapproved liason with a rich aristocrat’s son in Kazan. “A White woman,” he went on, recalling the lifeless pale face of his first love, and almost first wife, who whose throat was cut by yellow-skinned, slant-eyed Siberians who, after a few too many drinks of fermented berry juice, fancied themselves the direct ancestors of Ghengis Khan. “With scars on the inside and outside,” Olinkovitch continued, fuming volcanic anger from his bloodshot eyes and fire breathing mouth, remembering the pile of cut off breasts and ears French Papists left in more than one village in the Balkins so that the poison of Old Believer Eastern Orthodoxy would not contaminate to the next generation. “Who finally got away from those redskin savages, Wuyi in particular,” Olinkovitch said, recalling the sight, smell and touch of the escaped woman who wanted nothing else from the Cossack Captain except a horse to make her getaway back home to her Ukrainian husband in Oregon, a few days of food, and the Crucifix around Olinkovitch’s neck so that she would have Jesus as a constant companion again. “A woman who---“

“---Is leading us into a trap, Vladimir Olinkowitch?” Petrov offered, nudging his horse in front of his Commanders so he could not advance.

“Or an opportunity,” Olinkovitch asserted, as he whipped out his saber. Lifting it up in the air, he rode around Petrov. As did every man in the detachment and, finally, as did Petrov himself.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the bush covered ravine, to the North, Wuyi halted his horse, and the Warriors behind him. The re-instated Miwok chief who now commanded warriors from rival tribes as well noted a stream of dust that eased its way up above the branches down below his lookout point. That stream became a river of dirt, for those whose eyes were sensitive enough to see it. Wuyi leaped off his horse, removed his moccasins. He listened to the rumbling from the earth with the souls of his feet, his belly, then to confirm such, with his ears.

“A buffalo herd?” inquired Carlos, a half-White Mexican and half- very brown Maidu Indian, assigned by circumstances as well as his ability to inspire men of any skin color to follow him to be Wuyi’s second in command. This time he was clad in wooden soled boots more designed to climb on rocks or walk city streets. “Or long horn cattle? Which can feed our army here, and our people back in the hills,” he offered.

“Or eat us,” Wuyi replied. Using the visual sensors in his eye sockets rather than his ears, belly, or soles of his feet, he pointed Carlos’ attention to shimmering lights amongst the trees within the tree-covered slopes of the hill on the opposite side of the ravine. “Those long knife bastards think they can’t be seen, or heard because their ears are plugged up with arrogance.”

“And ignorance, of our presence here, perhaps?” Carlos stated, as well as inquired. “How many are there?”

“A lot,” Wuyi replied.

“And how many of us are there?” the half-breed inquired, the need for security from his White mother overshadowing the desire to make a mark in the world from his, prematurely slain in battle before his prime, father.

“Enough,” Wuyi replied with confidence. “Probably.” He noted how many reflections of swords and blue capped riders passed through a hole in the bush. “Possibly,” he continued, assessing how long the stream of dust was. The Indian leader who was not only was able to bring together warring tribes of Native Peoples (who all called themselves ‘the people’ in their own dialect) and whose ability to calculate numbers in his head faster than any White man, leaped back on his saddleless horse. This time, the Appaloosa paint beneath his life-hardened ass saw something he didn’t.

There, at a clearing at the opposite side of the ravine was none other than Captain Olinkovitch. As shocked to see Wuyi as Wuyi was surprised to see him. “So, we meet again!” Wuyi yelled out in Russian. “Who told you we were here, on a hunting expedition? With a whole lot more braves than you have mounted cowards and shitheads?” he continued in Spanish.

“No one you are ever going to find, or find out about,” Olinkovitch screamed back. “But how did you know we would be here? A hunch from the Great Spirit, or the only survivor in Major Alvarez’ Mexican detachment who you tortured?”

“We didn’t torture anyone!” Wuyi asserted, having never heard of the Mexican Major with the long name, nor seen any of his troops. “But, we have our sources, who will remain confidential, who maybe is someone in your own ranks now,” the First Nations General continued. He considered the very real possibility that after Stenka warned him about Olinkovitch’s attack plan, he would have re-enlisted in the Olinkovitch’s Cossack brigade out of good fellowship, or stupidity. Wuyi looked at the line of troops that now lined up next to Olinkovitch to see if, under the blue Sutter Militia caps and Cossack pokapha’s Stenka was hiding amongst one of them. So as to make a getaway, or, perhaps shoot Olinkovitch in the back during the heat of the battle, as the turncoat Stenka promised to do so that he could go home. But Stenka was not there.

Before Wuyi could give the order, the Warriors, at Carlos’ command behind him advanced, forming a single long row around him. Once again, Carlos had effectively read Wuyi’s mind, though the new Chief of the alliance of Native would have a talk with his old mentor and advisor about how he followed through with his commands. As would, no doubt, the pensive elderly Cossack advisor to the side of Olinkovitch.



“An equal number of us, and equal number of you,” Olinkovitch shouted out to Wuyi, in Russian. “Which means of course---”

“---That is a good day to die!” Wuyi blasted back in Russian, then declared in no less than three Indian dialects, raising his war lance in the air. Appended by Battle Cries from his Warriors which would scare any enemy, as well as their horses.

“A great day to vanquish!” Olinkowitch declared in Russian, Spanish and English to his mixed language troops before the steeds under their shaking feet took off to the hills.

The screaming matches as to whose side God or the Great Spirit was on got louder and louder, until a shot rang out into the air. But not from the Cossack or Miwok led horde.

All at once, a second bolt of thunder came out of the clear blue sky. An earth shattering shrill followed, which echoed the sides of the hills. Everything on four hoofs went into sheer terror, tossing off their riders onto the ground. The mixed breed of conscripted equine combatants from both sides of the battle line ran off into the hills into the same direction, as if following a Messiah who would save them from the Incarnation of Evil coming up from the ground, as long as they ran fast enough.

Upon gaining reconnecting to their senses, use of their limbs, and what was left of their weapons, the very pale faced Cossacks and Militia volunteers gazed above them to a roaring creature far which drove all of them into primal terror. Particularly their leader, the previously fearless Olinkovitch.

“Viy!” the always in control Cossack Captain blurted out, shaking like a small boy as he beheld a creature from the depths of his own visual imagery of hell roar from atop the overlook on the Eastern side of the Ravine. The demon spewed out firey thunderbolts from the demon’s blood-tinged sharp spites emanating from his knarled fingers. His multi-horned head took in a breath of fresh air, then spat out smoke of putrid sulfurous dust. Extending out from from his eyes sockets were two shiny green eyes which at and into Olinkovitch. The demon danced with delight a trickle then stream of urine drenched Olinkovitch’s trousers. The rest of his men, be they believers in the existence of witches, warlocks and demons or not, clenched their swords with shivering hands and fear infested minds. Those who could overcome that paralyzing terror fired their pistols and rifles up at the beast, but the bullets deflected off the demon’s chest.

“Unk Tehi!” Wuyi bellowed out with more control of his senses and, for the moment anyway, bladder than his Cossack counterpart as his disbelieving eyes gazed up the serpents in ‘Viy’ which were identical to those of the Lakota demon who were responsible for disappearance of people who got lost in the woods. Indication of their fate came from degenerated human arms, legs and eyes covered with caked blood which the demon threw down upon them.. “Unk Cekula!” the Indian Chief who believed in Spirit but not spirits exclaimed when called up by Unk Tehi’s female counterpart emerging from the rocks on the other side of the panic stricken ravine. In addition to throwing down arms, legs and eyes to Wuyi and his terrified First Nations and mixed

blood warriors, she tossed into their midst bloody testicals attached to half eaten penises. Her red lips smiled with delight as she dined on prairie oysters, and, of course, the fear of the men turned into terrified boys below. Then, the earth shook from under Wuyi's feet.

Indians and Whites huddled into a mixed circle, their backed against each other. Their weapons were all aimed at the laughing, flesh eating demons above. Their prayers were directed at any Deity they usually under-worshipped, or sought to reacquaint themselves with. Meanwhile, the demons above retreated back into the woods, preparing for the next round, or flesh feast.

## CHAPTER 10

Unk 'Viy' Tehi looked over the horseless mortal combatants below with satisfaction as those pathetic mortals considered their options for survival. This time not at the expense of each others. "We did a lot to them," he boasted with satisfaction to his female companion.

"You mean we did a lot FOR them," Unk Viy Cekula countered, as she took off her reptilian magic armour of chainmail scale, noting the holes in it that nearly got through it. "But they could still do a lot to us," Antonia Fernandez continued as she peeled off the underlying body suit of pig skin made to look like mutilated human flesh. Then dipped her mane of long, black mangled hair into a bucket of water, thankful that the imitation red blood Andre Denisov had scrunched it up in actually DID wash off with the special shampoo he had provided when she was posing as a white woman who had escaped from Wuyi's mobile and well armed camp to an unsuspecting Captain Olinkovitch. "So, what's the next step in making the White and Indians down there more scared of us than of each other?"

"Make them look into a mirror?" 'Unk Tehi Stenka suggested removing his dragon suit, gazing at its head. Such arose fearful memories he himself had of Viy as a child which still plagued him in nightmares as an adult. "Fear works very well to compel ignorant people do the right thing until reason makes them want to do the right, and then the Rightest thing," he noted.

"Yes, but what happens when we run out of arms, legs, eyes and testicals from the dead that we collected from the last battleground, and which Andre got from sources you still haven't asked him about?" Antonia challenged, dipping into the last sac of body parts. Some of them were from once live bodies, others were from fabricated very convincingly from materials in Andre's underground laboratory. The latter felt more authentic to the touch and evoking a more terrifying collective human memory when sniffed. "So, what happens when we run out of these props?" he pressed.

"Ask them," Stenka said, referring Antonia to the herd of horses which had taken the riders to the designated site for their 'final meeting' with their Most Glorious Victory, or most revered Creator. "They will help us in that, and more," the once gruff low ranking and now self-promoted Cossack continued. He tended to his assigned duties of re-adjusting the trajectory of a multipurpose cannon which could fire out bolts of lightening, echoing shrills of thunder, blinding clouds of fog, or pellets of mind altering loco weed which master Inventor Andre had devised to make mortal men think they had seen immortal gods. As did Mechanos, Andre's hero from ancient Athens. Who was able to devise heavenly illusions for the Priests in the temples so as to pay for his expenses, visual effects that would take audience members in the theatre to places far more magnificent than they had in real life and, when he could, provide ancient back broken slaves with labor saving devices which would not appear again for another thousand years. But, for the moment, Professor Stenka referred his student, and perhaps protégé, Antonia to the runaway horses that had found their way back to the overlook,

through sounds from Andre's specially designed whistles and scents they emitted. "See how the older, and slower, horses teach the younger ones, telling them what is necessary for those who still have all their faculties, and abilities?"

"No!" she replied, noting a three lame horses, two of them unable to get up, surrounded by spry younger ones. "We are not going to kill these horses to scare those soldiers and warriors down there into thinking that the canyon we trapped them in with the earthquake and lightening making machines your brother made in his spare time will be a mass gravesite for them!"

"Absolutely correct," Stenka replied as he adjusted the final aim of the last in a row of carefully hidden 21<sup>st</sup> century cannon made of 19<sup>th</sup> century wood, scrap metal, and deerskin. "We are not going to kill these animals to scare those men below into reasoning with each other rather than fighting with each other with blood," he assured Antonia, after which he pulled a hand rifle out of a scabbard of Olinkowitch's newly awarded saddle. Then he shot the two old, but previously sturdy, horses and the irreparably lame young one in the head. "It is not my fault that these animals got injured!" he asserted, guilt and sorrow in his eyes. "And not yours either!" he yelled at Antonia, so as she would not allow her grief to lead her into tears. After which Antonia could hear the Cossack weep for the horse who were collateral damage. In a war of deception designed to end a war of cruelty.

Yes, logic told Antonia that cavalry charges were not healthy for horses, as well as for riders who decided to fight cannons with lances. Yet the 20 year old adventurous still tried to believe that to 'above all do no harm' while 'making a lasting, big change in the world, for the betterment of man, woman and animal kind' were not mutually exclusive agendas. She recalled the expression went that made writers seem colorful and publishable, that no good deed goes unpunished.

"And blessed be the peacemakers for they shall..." she heard Stenka say, again reading her thoughts, aspirations and inner fears. As he pointed her attention to the mass of humanity down below. Now a horde of Red and White skinned men mounting an armed assault against the demons on top of the hill. Together, as one. With a single agenda. To kill whoever had left them horseless. And, for a time, courageless.

"Stage two! Ahead of schedule," Stenka yelled out with a smile of contentment, and apprehension. He lifted up a long range cannon, loaded it with bright yellow stones from a bag Andre told him to not touch without gloves, and fired it into the river below. After seeing that it hit its mark accurately, quietly, and without being noticed by any man born of woman, the middle aged Cossack leaped upon own, still uninjured, horse with the energy of a young man, feeling the pain in his joints like an old one. He rode straight into the herd of horses munching on some well deserved grass, summoning them with his voice, whip and special siren devised by Andre to follow him away, into the next valley. Leaving Antonia alone to man the next set of guns. After having only one lesson in how to fire them. And not knowing completely what was being fired down into the mass of man storming up the hill. Or, in the event of a backfire, what would be aimed into her.

## CHAPTER 11

The new Catholic log cabin Cathedral in Fort Ross which had replaced the Eastern Orthodox Church was packed to capacity with Parishioners of all races, even the Chinese. Its new Padre, Father Paco Inglesius, a former Missionary who had been forgiven his excess use of starvation, intimidation, torture and the fear of hell to get Pagan Indians into accepting Jesus as their savior, took the opportunity to welcome four new members into Mother Church as monks. "Each of these men who had lived lives of sins or omission or intention have seen the light! They have banded together to fight the devil! Who indeed has risen again out of the bowels of the earth!" Father Paco proclaimed with a bellowing baritone voice more akin to a Texan Fire and Brimstone Baptist Preacher than a Mexican-born Priest who entered the Church as a 'better to love than be loved' Franciscan monk. "A devil who is indeed here, in this great land of opportunity. A devil who threatened the great opportunities to convert this wild wilderness into an agricultural and industrial paradise for those who serve the Lord Jesus, not themselves! But there are those who fill the mouths of the hungry with food rather than their own pockets with ill gotten gold! Who--- "

"---Think that this new Padre can get their sinful and pathetic souls into heaven if they put enough money into the poor box," Olinkovitch, from the back row clad as a rich Mexican rancher in a frilly laced coat that would in the old country get him hung as a lady man rather than a lady's man, whispered to the parishioner next to him.

"Which has a hole in it that leads directly to his own pocket, and his own overfed belly," Wuyi added, hiding his identity behind a Seniorita's veil, keeping of course two loaded revolvers under the dress he was wearing in case he was spotted by greedy and uninformed bounty hunters.

"These four sinners, who are men of God now, have seen the light!" Father Paco proclaimed as he moved to the four men in brown robes to the left of the Alter. "Yes, they have seen the light!" the Priest continued, placing his hand on the shaved down to the scalp crowns of their bowed heads. He went on in Latin, blessing them for their future deeds as Catholics, then whipped their outstretched arms raw so as to let the 'sins' bleed out of them.

"Lev said it was a Vision he saw, when Viy and his wife, Satan's most powerful enforcers, finally faded back into the hills, after we all made a stand against those incarnations of evil," Olinkovitch blurted out as he saw the Jew who had become a Cossack now become something even worse, a Catholic monk.

"And Carlos, half breed who was all Indian at heart, said that he had something that was, well, something in Native Spirituality that's far more powerful than a White Man's Vision," Wuyi added, angry at losing to the Church and worse, to Padre Paco's Parish,

his best field commander in battle. And friend during the time between wars that defined men to themselves, and their progeny.

“What color was Carlos’ Vision?” Olinkovitch asked. “And who did he see in it?”

“He didn’t say, or couldn’t say. What color or form did you see in yours?” Wuyi inquired regarding the cloud of ‘dust’ fired by the demons on top of the hill that made everyone who breathed it in see something different.

“My vision was more about mixed senses,” Olinkovitch replied, still trying to make sense of Mr and Mrs Canabal ‘Viy’ dust that made him mad, then the magic dust from the bright light in the sky that sent him into places in his head he had never seen nor imagined possible “I could see sounds, hear sights, smell what I thought my fingers touched.”

“And when your fingers touched your penis, and you saw green blood with dead golden pellets come out of it, after we drank from the river and washed the painful dust from our eyes with that water?” Wuyi inquired. “With your real eyes!” he continued, pointing to his own heavily mascara elongated oculars. After which the long haired Indian took Olinkovitch’s arm into his, deflecting the amorous glance of a machismo parishioner who seemed to be taken by his feminine charm.

“I don’t know,” ‘Senior’ Baron Olinkovitch whispered into his ‘wife’s’ ear. “I don’t know why the Devil decided to incarnate Viy, his favorite messenger, to bring souls to hell. And why God would allow them to dine on their arms, legs and eyes as a ‘tip’ for his service. Maybe this is the end of the world as we know it.”

“Yes,” Wuyi added, raising his eyes to the sky beyond the humble, people’s Catholic Church’s ornate ceiling. “The sages said that the Ulk, in male and female form, would come at the time of our people’s demise as well. Which is happening---“

“---because of our people, yes, I know,”. Senior Olinkovitch added.patting Wuyi’s lace covered forearm with his, for the moment, bloodless hands. “But for the moment, we both have to fight these demons together.”

“Ulk and Viy you mean? Or John Sutter and his bosses?” Wuyi asked, and proposed. “Who have no idea how powerful Ulk and Viy, or for that matter Satan himself, really is!”

“So, in the meantime we fight these demons together, and pray together?” Olinkovitch asked his assigned enemy.

“Sure,” Wuyi replied. “But when you come to our church, our ceremonies, for a reconnaissance mission, it’s you who will wear the dress.”

“Sure,” Olinkovitch replied with downturned eyes. Stealing a glance at Wuyi’s dress, wondering what he would look and feel like as his pale-faced bride. Something that no doubt God the Father back in the old country would punish him for but that, perhaps, Jesus the son would...understand.

The Eastern Orthodox Cossack considered the words of Saint Francis. “Better to understand than to be understood”. And knew, all too well, that no one who had not seen the Unks and Viy in person, nor experienced their wratch as flesh and soul eating entities that really DID exist, could appreciate the urgency of hunting them down. And that unless he and his Native companion, and the experienced band of Indians and Whites now united in a common cause slew these ‘mythical monsters’, they would destroy every Native village and Mexican town in California, and beyond.

## CHAPTER 12

For Stenka Denisov it was just another routine day in his now non-routine life. Wake up with the sun a smile on his face rather than a ‘do I really have to go through living another day, Lord?’ grimace, having had dreams about having a son with Antonia who was smart enough to write books but still connected to the woods so that he would know that he shouldn’t believe everything he reads. Breakfast with Antonia at their portable ‘tent’ home on the trail consisting of Mexican chilaquile and molletes, which he was admittedly far better at preparing than she was. Venture into another town in yet another disguise, telling the editor of yet another one sheet newspapers that would never be stored in any library in this or any other century about how monsters from the wilderness were awakened from a slumber in hell or in caverns still unexplored by man, were kidnapping and eating innocent Mexicans, Gringos, Indians and especially (because they prided themselves on being so White) Americans. Pay off yet another kid in town with candy to convince the learned budding journalist in question (who hoped that the town he, or she, settled in would grow into a city one day) to say that he or she was witnesses to said atrocities by a common enemy to all people. Convince yet another secretly atheistic and part time naturalist Mayor elected by a Christian population that people who were terrified of the devil were more likely to do Godlike acts than those whose religion was based in love for Jesus and humanity. And, in this case this morning, bribe said Mayor with the gold from a secret source Stenka and Antonia were honor bound to say nothing about. And, after lunch, make more imitation blood coated massive footprints in the desert and grasslands to lead another mixed blood and multi-cultural Army who had put aside their differences so that their children, wives and elderly parents would not be whisked away by Viy, the Unks. Or by their other reptilian underworld relations who had been awakened from thousands of years of slumber, dedicated to the proposition that all men, women and children are created as equal as insects, and therefore just as expendable.

By the time the sun hit high noon, Stenka and Antonia had reached another site where they would set up a battleground between a, so far anyway, united mankind and fabricated demonic beasts. While setting up more of Andre’s portable machinery for another show of force by the demons, this time without the mind altering mists that made them see demons of their own, Antonia recalled a story from a part of the world more familiar to Stenka than herself.

“Do you remember the story of Beowolf?” she asked the Cossack Comrade, co-worker in Enlightening humanity and possible life partner for a life whose nature and location was still in active negotiation. “A Viking tale,” the literary adventurer continued, her the sleeves of her blouse rolled up while hammering together a portable catapult with hands covered with blisters, as well as fingers that had been made prematurely painful by writer’s cramp. “You Cossacks were derived from Vikings, right?”

“I don’t know about that,” Stenka replied as he sewed up the last portion of a tear in Antonia’s ‘Mrs. Viy’ armor, repairing his own if or as they had time. “But I have heard



of Beowolf. A spoken tale about a monster who attacked Vikings who were quarrelling amongst themselves about who should get the most brew at the Mead Hall, and who should have first crack at marrying the most strong, intelligent and beautiful Shield Maidens. And who should have the right to have the biggest horns on their helmets! Who united them all in a fight against Beowolf. Which after losing some good man and a lot of weak ones, they did win.”

“True enough, with the exception that real Vikings did not wear horns on their helmets,” Antonia replied.

“True enough,” Stenka volleyed back according to the musical score of the symphony orchestrated by the third brain, and soul, which had evolved between them.

“But, true enough, these Vikings killed Beowolf,” Antonia interjected, in the very non-musical tempo of fear, as Stenka handed her the repaired suit. “And if they find out that they were fooled by mortals who were trying to pass themselves off as demons, or gods.”

“They won’t” Stenka promised, placing his assuring bear like, grease covered claws on Antonia’s shaking, slender shoulders.

“And you say this as a man who is a god?” she challenged.

“No,” Stenka answered, averting his eyes, thoughts, and lingering fears. “It’s because I am...hmmm.” He thought about it, long enough for Antonia’s face to become that of a little girl whose father is about to scare away the monster under the bed. Then as a friend who cared too much for her to be a lover, for reasons he still kept hidden from her, and himself. Then, finally, after slipping on his new, enlarged, and embellished ‘Lord Viy’ suit. “Grindel! I am Grindel!” Stenka proclaimed, dancing around like lovable bear in a circus who had no intention of eating anyone in the crowd except the parents of any child who would deny them the joy of hugging him.

“Yes, yes,” Antonia replied, her quivering lips and tight chest giving way to a smile, chuckle and release of finally a laugh. “But there is one problem with you being Grindel,” she proposed, retreating back, or perhaps forward, into being a pensive woman who wrote stories rather than a wonderment filled girl who listened to them.

“And what is that, Antonia Fernandez, whose four middle names you don’t want, or need?” Stenka replied in his deepest baritone ‘dinosaur’ voice, as he danced around her with more expression in his left hoof than twenty high born ladies or gentlemen back in Mexico city had in their whole body, even when the orchestra was playing their favorite tune.

“Grindel was a woman,” Antonia explained to the jolly dinosaur. “Beowolf’s MOTHER. Who went after Vikings who killed her son. A very maternal instinct for a mother.”

Stenka retreated back into himself. Somehow feeling the ‘herself’ within him. Not knowing how, or if, he should play Beowolf’s Mom. At least not to someone else, especially the woman who considered him such a virile, strong and macho man. But there was something else that disturbed Stenka even more than opening the door to his hidden past, and perhaps most truest nature, that put the fear of God, Beowolf and Grindel into him, all at once.

“Riders,” he said, having heard a break in the Silence. “Many of them,” he confirmed, placing his hands on the ground.

With her still thinly muscled arms, Antonia picked up Andre’s twenty pound spyglass. The most powerful magnifying lens available in California. “More than we invited,” she said, confirming with her eyes.

“But will make ourselves prepared for,” Stenka asserted. “The show must go on!” he said.

“Led by a new member of the audience,” she said, startled. “Led by a preacher in a black robe, cape and hat with a pale face and...”

Stenka pushed Antonia aside. “A head that I should have taken while I could,” Stenka growled back, recognizing infamous Indian killer Slippery Sam Smith, by his eyes, the pompador mane on his head that didn’t move with the wind and, most notably, the horse under him, running with a higher step than all the others with one lame leg.

The scars on Slippery Sam’s face were covered with white powder. He was leading a defiantly proud Olinkovitch. And a very trusting Wuyi. Along with an army of other crusaders armed with a weapon more power than any mercenary ever possessed----the conviction that they were willing to lay down their lives for not only their comrades, friends and family, but strangers, foreigners and enemies as well.

“This time we fire REAL bullets at them, some of them anyway,” Stenka yelled to Antonia, pointing her to the leader of the demon hunting expedition which elected to follow the tracks made by the lesser monster rather than the biggest one. “And do it fast!”

“I don’t think so,” Stenka heard from behind him in a voice not unlike his own. From a demonic half-reptilian, half-human beast popping up from one of the gullies atop the bush covered overlook who seemed three times his own size and twice that of Viy. Something that he recognized from his own imaginations. Whose picture he shared with only one other mortal. “Andre, is that you?” Stenka inquired of the beast as he approached it.

Stenka’s advance was halted by fire breathing out of the demon’s mouth, forming a wall of fire between him and the beast. Then he felt a needle go into his arm, the kind that doctors give to patients. Then a strange odor in his nostrils. As he battled to retain

consciousness, Stenka perceived two more demons crawling up from the bush, taking their positions behind the 'projectors of illusion and necessary harm' he and Antonia had set up. With Antonia gone. As he screamed out to her, his eyes saw only fog. Then his body felt cold, stripped of his Viy costume as well as the Cossack tunic. But still with his warlock intact, unless of course that was an illusion as well.

The rest of the battle between mortals and monsters Stenka heard from inside a burlap bag. For the moment, the monsters won. Who or whatever they were.

## CHAPTER 13

“No, this isn’t brother Andre,” Stenka heard in a familiar after being awakened on a comfortable cot in a dry tent filled with creature comforts worthy of a Baron back home. “It’s someone else,” Slippery Sam Smith continued as he took off the head of the monster, revealing a small, peach-faced lad underneath it, who he dismissed a minimal flicker of his left palm, followed by discretely placing a gold nugget into the young actor’s pocket. “As you have just been promoted to something else, Chorazy Stenka Denosov,” the American outlaw who owned more sheriff’s than the Governor did went on, inviting the Cossack to rise up from the cot.

Stenka was as equally surprised to feel his legs leap out of the cut restraints on them as his ability for his feet to touch the ground. And for the of himself in the mirror clad as a Cossack again, this time, elevated to a rank he always said he wanted, but knew he would never be awarded. Of all the questions he had competing to be asked, one shot into his mouth through lips he didn’t recognize through his newly waxed mustache. “What happened to Chorazy Vladimir Olinkovitch?” Stenka asked regarding the superior he envied, feared and secretly revered.

“That is of no concern to you, and to us, now,” Sam volleyed back. “But before I answer any of those other questions you have, we imbibe of refreshment together, as is customary between men of power and influence.” The American bandit turned Californian war lord, and, according to his present interfaith outfit, Catholic Bishop and Baptist Preacher, retrieved a bottle of French brandy from an oak cabinet, pouring a glass for himself and his guest, offering the latter to Stenka..

Stenka said ‘no’ the glass extended to him. Then to the other one, when it was extended to him. Sam rolled his eyes, sipped from both glasses, then offered his guest a choice of drinking vessels. Stenka took the glass from Sam’s right hand, sniffed it, then lifted it up to his lips. As quickly as he could, he put the glass down.

“Where’s Wuyi?” Stenka asked.

“Again, of no concern to you, or to us, now, my son, and brother in Christ,” Father-Reverend Sam, assured Stenka, laying his clean to the sight but not to the inner smell hands on his shoulder.

“And Antonia?” Stenka pressed, pushing away Sam’s outstretched arm.

“This is of concern to you, and to us, now,” Sam replied with a confident, and cordial smile. He turned to the entrance to the tent, opened the flap and treated his new Cossack Captain to a barely recognizable with jet black hair that was mangled and bloody, a detached eye hanging from one of the locks gazing at him.

Stenka lost no time in reaching for his new dagger, holding it to Sam’s calm, and collected throat.

“Perhaps that eye hanging down Antonia’s mane of still intact hair is real, or perhaps it isn’t,” the Outlaw Priest said as Stenka edged the blade deeper into his skin, which didn’t bleed. Perhaps because the dagger was not real. Or the flesh of this most sinister of outlaws in California, like his inner nature, was not human. “But Seniora Antonia does need two good eyes to be able to see the world she wants to write about. And to put those illusions, dreams and aspirations into print. But...”

Stenka found himself surrounded by armed guards. And from the corner of his bloodshot, angry and disbelieving eyes, noted two men pointing swords at Antonia’s throat. “What should we do with this demoness, Padre Paul?” a Texan half breed in a General Sutter provided Militia uniform inquired of Slippery Sam. “Whatever you need me to do to this witch, I promise I will do,” a young Slav with large ears and a face that would only get uglier with age said a lost inside of himself stare in his ocular portholes said. “And whatever you command me to do as well, Chorazy Denosiv,” Ivan continued.

“He commands you to not do anything to her,” Smith interjected. “As we desire no harm to come to her, or to me, or to anyone else. Despite this play were are all rehearsing to simulate death.”

After giving a Protestant blessing in what seemed like German, Latin, and an Indian tongue Stenka didn’t recognize, the oversized and, no doubt, over-drugged guards around Antonia and himself pulled away, but remained in close enough distance to lash out a sabre blade, spear or bullet into anything or anyone Smith commanded. But what was most shocking and alarming to Stenka was what he heard from Antonia. “Kill my body, before they kill my soul, and turn me into something else...please, Stenka.”

“That’s non-sense, my child,” Smith said. “Your wanting Stenka to kill you makes you guilty of suicide, which is a sin in the eyes of the lord. And if Stenka kills you, well, he’d be a murderer. And, besides, our Cause is the same now!”

“And what cause is that?” Stenka demanded.

“To keep the world thinking that Satan and his pals have come up to reclaim humanity, so that we can unite humanity once and for all,” Smith proclaimed. “Liberate it from itself. And from the demons in your own imagination, which only you and Andre knew about,” he went on. “Your brother Andre who...”

“---Who is where?”

“Somewhere you will help me re-capture and bring into the fold,” Smith informed his new partner, revealing. “As a trapper who, well, has the instincts and smarts to find anyone anywhere. But, who, is naïve and sloppy enough to leave a trail that is pathetically easy to follow. Because, maybe you WANT to be caught? Or, like your

Slavic friends, and former Chorazy Cossack leader, you are most highly skilled at one thing!" he stated with a confident and all knowing glow in his pale face.

"Which is what?" Stenka dared to ask.

"Self sabotage?" the reply. Which, considering his life, and the fate of most of his ancestors, and home country, was very true.

## CHAPTER 14

“So, after being born with the mandate our real fathers and glorified ancestors granted us to be on top, and over-achieving our whole lives so we could match their never satisfied expectations?” ex-Captain, former-Chorazy and now prisoner Vladimir Olinkovitch said to his cell mate while eating what remained of his last meal. “How did we wind up on the bottom like this?”

“We’re not so much on the bottom, but on the side,” Wuyi replied from the adjoining cell in a Mexican built fort that he had once burn to the ground, above ground that is. “We’re very much on the OUTside. As for our people, or people who used to be my people anyway, life is a circle. No one on top, no one on the bottom. Everyone somehow connected.”

“Unless you were tossed out of the circle, like I was,” Olinkovitch pointed out. “And you were, for, maybe the right reasons or maybe the wrong reasons.”

Olinkovitch continued to eat the Indian bannock Wuyi requested as his last meal, while the Indian Chief who had united the tribes dined on the Russian biscuit that the Cossack had been granted, contemplating how and why they were dismissed from duty, then convicted for treason after successfully making the monsters retreat back into the woods.

“Maybe we’re being crucified now because we made those child stealing and people eating monsters retreat back into the woods, and didn’t go after them hard enough?” inquired the Cossack who had slain so many Yakut Indigenous people in Siberia asked the Indian who had, by force, persuaded so many Gringos from the East and Mexicans from the South to turn his homeland in present California into an agricultural and industrial paradise like Mexico City, or Madrid.

“Or because we, you and me, without our men, WERE brave enough to pursue those beasts into the woods, and saw too much,” Wuyi replied “When in fact, we saw nothing.”

“When there was something that we should have seen?” Olinkovitch offered.

Both men tried to put together why they had been taken into chains rather than given a victory parade after they had single handedly chased the demons back to their home in the mountain caves, or into the depths of hell. But, both men knew as well, theoretically, that what, or who, goes up, does come down, and hard. As such, speculation went into matters of the next battle for those who were too virtuous and brave to be sent to hell, and too intelligent to be allowed to be compliant happy angels in heaven.

“Do you know anyone who has come back from...there, Wuyi?” Olinkovitch asked, looking up to the sky.

“I have heard stories,” the middle aged Indian who would not be allowed to become an old one replied, gazing at through walls. While hearing the White and Indian scaffold builders, born again members of Smith’s new Church, speculate as to how long it would take the two confident, independent leaders to plead for their mother or wet themselves once the noose was put around their necks. “Yes, I’ve heard stories,” Wuyi continued, recalling what an old man who he wished had been his grandfather said with a smiling face after he had thrown himself into the path of an angry bison, saving a young boy from an early death.

“Do you believe them?” Olinkovitch pressed, gently.

“I’d like to,” Wuyi replied. “And, I suppose need to,” he confessed.

“And must believe,” they both heard from a woman’s voice outside of bar. “You both have much atoning to do,” the Nun continued with a stern face. “And in the land of the living,” she went on, after which she snuck two black robes from her order into the cell. Then looked to the right and left, and opened the door with a lightening-emitting metal object that had far more mechanical parts than any key.

“Who are you?” Olinkovitch asked as he converted himself from a still very male Orthodox Christian into Catholic Nun.

“And why did want to rescue us from our eventual fate?” born again Pagan Wuyi inquired as he yet again, had to hide his male identity to achieve the male tasks he was required to do in this lifetime. “Who sent you?”

“Andre Denisov,” the woman said.

“Your husband, Maria?” Wuyi said, finally recognizing he natural voice and diction she was trying to hide.

“EX-husband, after the three of you do what you have to do to correct this mess,” Maria said. With that the sure of herself half-breed Mexican wife of the master inventor led the two very confused convicts out of their cells. Leading them in prayer as they snuck by two guards who were snoring in a deep slumber, and one whose slumber was accompanied by not breathing at all.



## CHAPTER 15

There were many questions the large bellied Vladimir Olinkovitch had for Andre Denisov while being led to his hopefully still secret hideout by “Sister Maria”. All of them ran through his mind like a symphony of different musical themes that somehow were connected to the same melody on the trek up the steep paths up the lush coastal mountains on rain drenched slippery mud covered rock, and the treacherous downward trail on the bone dry descending slopes. One of them was why Andre had deserted his Cossack Comrades, and fellow Slavic non-Cossack pioneers, and on the day after the entire assembly elected him provisional Governor of the Fort after the home-assigned Indian hating Commandant had died in his sleep from causes the Doctor said he didn’t know, and the Priest refused to share with anyone. Andre left no forwarding address as to his whereabouts, most particularly for his brother Stenka, or the Indians who he seemed to love more than his own people, or, most particularly, himself. Then there was the matter of why Andre had allowed himself and, more importantly, his technology, to be captured by Slippery Sam Smith. And what Russian was low enough, or gullible enough, to translate Andre’s notes regarding how to use his illusion machines and recipes for mind altering potions into American English that now “Savior Sam” was so much better at using than Andre ever was. And why the Cossack who said he would rather die for the Right cause than live supporting merely a justifiable allowed himself to be captured, alive, by Smith. And how much of his engineering and medical genius he shared to save his own skin, or perhaps, Maria’s.

As for Wuyi, who could usually ‘think himself cool’ under a hot sun, he was soaked with sweat under the head to toe black robes he still had to wear as a junior Nun on a Pilgrimage. On his way to a very old Convent he had never heard of but which Mother Superior Maria, due to her knowledge of the region, or perhaps necessity-fueled ability to lie more convincingly than any man, was able to make convinced more than one roving band of Father Smith’s heavily armed ‘Demon Hunters for Jesus’ believe was indeed real. Aside from asking Andre why Russians, who had barely mapped the infinite expanse of resource rich land they called Siberia, wanted with the already Mexican ‘claimed’ (and therefore, to White men, ‘owned’) small area of region of California half way around the globe from Moscow, or Kiev. And why Andre had decided it would be inappropriate for him to accept the invitation to be one of the leaders of the newly evolving Pan Indian alliance that was emerging from what still remained of the tribes that had been decimated in stages by the Spaniards, Mexicans and now American Gringo settlers. As to the answer for that, an old joke that would find its way into a new age, someday, materialized in Wuyi’s head. ‘I wouldn’t want to be part of any club that would have me as a member,’ he recalled Andre saying the day he disappeared from his people, leaving his sword, dagger, muskets and cut off warlock behind him. But there was one question ‘Sister’ Wuyi had to ask Mother Superior Maria.

“What did you see in Comrade Andre?” the demoted Indian Chief asked the self-promoted Mexican woman, once he was sure that the hairy figures moving on top of the hills above were wolves or cougars looking for easy lunch and not bounty hunters in search of a big score.

“The important question is, what did he see in me,” she replied with a warm smile, recalling past times.

“Which is?” ‘Sister’ Vladimir enquired.

“I don’t know, what Andre saw in me,” Maria replied. “But it is an important question.”

“And what does he see in you now, Maria?” Wuyi asked.

“Or more importantly, what do you see in HIM now?” Olinkovitch pressed.

Maria kept silent. Bowed her head, then raised it to the sky. Then she spurred her mule onward after hearing a ‘caw’ echoing around the canyon. The burros ridden by the two fugitive horsemen followed, considering their riders as passengers rather than masters. Finally, using all of their strength, and power of prayer, to stay on top of the saddle rather than plummet onto hard rocks or hungry quicksand, Olinkovitch and Wuyi found themselves in front of a fur covered cave. Andre stumbled out of it, a hunch backed, old, man with the look in the eyes not unlike a proud horse that was tricked or beaten into being a passionless, obedient one. His wrists bore bandages around them. Perhaps due to rope burns caused after he had escaped, or slashes made below them that had been wrapped up by Maria, or his captors.

Maria and Andre gazed at and into each other for two minutes that felt like twenty, indulging in a conversation between their eye which took them into a myriad of emotions, and an inevitable conclusion. She threw off her Nun’s habit, revealing a back covered with no less than twenty lashes. Andre attempted to place an ointment on it but she refused both the liniment in his loving hands, and an apologetic gesture from his remorseful eyes. “One last supper, ‘gentlemen’,” she pledged throwing a cotton pancho over her shoulders, then pushing aside the camouflage fur door to the cave. “Then you figure out how deflect and expose Savior Sam’s plot to unite under him everyone in California into a common enemy, without giving away how you created that enemy in the first place, IF you can. Or dare to.”

With that, Wuyi and Olinkovitch looked at the Cossack Sage who somehow had the Right answer for every question, even if you didn’t want to know it. This time, Andre shrugged his shoulders in mutually shared ignorance, and frustration. Wuyi and Olinkovitch looked at, then into, each other, hoping that ‘a third brain’ would materialize between them. But they knew an added participant would be needed to awaken that fellow player who, theoretically anyway, came when ‘two or more of you are gathered in my name’, or a common Cause.

## CHAPTER 16

For Stenka, it was just another day of united the world against a common enemy to insure world peace. He woke up under a bright, rapidly rising sun. Had a king's breakfast of steak and beans, provided by Savior Sam so he could be a more effective tool for insuring peace amongst former enemies. Set out to yet another town as now a Cossack Major, informing them that Father Smith's Army and God enabled them to save most, but not all, of the inhabitants of Indian villages and White towns, some of those places being fictitious, some real. Then, after collecting more money for the Army of Unified Liberation to procure weapons, supplies and horses for the common good, headed out along on the trail to make more demon footprints in the grasslands, the number and size of those human eating monsters amplified. And of course scattering around those footprints red paint and human body parts. But this time, the paint was real blood. And most of the arms, legs, eyes, breasts, testicals and heads were littered were real, rather than fake.

Maybe it such was because Pastor-Father-General Smith's sworn to secret Engineering Corp had run out of the ingredients that Andre had used to make authentic looking, feeling and smelling body parts. Or someone had to get rid of the evidence regarding the battles with the demons where combatants united against the monsters inadvertently, or sometimes in the quest for personal glory, inflicted mortal wounds upon each other. Or maybe Slippery Sam Smith had found pockets of expendable people who would not join his Cause to Unite Humanity against a common enemy under his Spiritual Guidance, or who had figured out his game.

But there was one thing that Stenka was grateful for. None of the body parts were from Antonia. Though, secretly, he wished that some of them were from Andre. Thoughts about his once revered brother, who, to the best of Stenka's knowledge and available data, had allowed himself to be captured, alive, went through his head. It was the issue of Compassion that went through his Stenka's aching head. Selective Compassion that made Stenka do Smith's bidding so that no more harm could come to a very heavily guarded Antonia. And universal compassion which dictated that he care as much for any stranger as for her, being a friend, comrade, and core member of a family he still sought to have. A theoretical battle of wits and wills between the primitive and advanced area of the brain, which yet again, was won by emotional practicality. But this time, another piece of data entered into the equation as he shot three bullets towards flock vultures seeking wanting a breakfast of arm flesh, and a single crows eyeing the delicacy of an eye still left in its socket. "Go home! This is bait for weaklings, idiots and opportunist assholes! You can have dine on ALL of our bones when we all completely destroy ourselves!"

Having convinced the non-casted avian participants by force, or perhaps empathy, to leave the stage for this next illusionary 'educational play', Stenka found his stare drawn to the eyes on the head he had saved as intact prop. Indeed, it was the head of a child. A very real girl who, at the time of dying, still maintained her dignity. Despite whatever was done to her below the neck. A girl who looked like she could have been Antonia's

daughter, and Stenka's 'warrior princess'. A girl who reminded Stenka that it took more courage to allow doomed family members to perish rather than spare their lives at the expense of many strangers, foreigners or 'enemy' souls.

"I know!" he informed the child. "I will set this right!"

In an instant that felt as transformative and liberating as it was terrifying, Stenka abandoned all of the plans to cause minimal harm and ride East into the mountains with the cart of Wizard Andre's tricks and tools, according to born again Savoir Smith's instructions, and decided to head West, back to Slippery Sam's expanding camp. Thus far a 1,000 population military and spiritual salvation town that, if the slimy American who knew how to befriend Mexicans better than anyone else had his way, would become the new Capital of California. Then the Capital of Mexico. Then, with special favors he was no doubt able to wangle from the real demons who haunted the earth and humanity's collective soul, the ruling City for America itself.

Stenka unhitched the cart of monster gear which had been designed to leave no tracks in its wake, chopped it up into as many pieces as he could. Then gathered what he had set up for the next 'final battle' against the demons, throwing that onto the pile. Everything forged in metal, constructed in wood or chopped out of once living human flesh. He then struck a match, setting it ablaze, being sure that the smoke blew downwind.

Stenka's horse spooked at smelling the odors emitted from chemicals it had never encountered while in his service, and the universally repugnant smell of burning flesh. And, seemingly, the angry bloodshot rage blasting out of in its rider's eyes. "All is alright," Stenka assured, in Russian, the horse he had trained to understand Indian languages and usually mutually agreed upon commands in Russian. But for whatever reason, the horse was best assured in English. "The bullets in my guns are to kill Sam Smith in the most painful way possible," the Lone Ranger Cossack growled he threw himself upon the saddle. "Annihilated as many of his followers as we have to," he continued, as he turned the horse around his leg towards the West, directly into the sunlight and an oncoming wind. "And Antonia if I have to," he continued regarding the right woman who he was doing the wrong things for, so that she would not be killed, or worse. "And the last bullets, are for me. Or whatever man, or woman decides that he wants to kill you, my friend."

The horse seemed to agree. But not the rider who came up behind Stenka. "All of that is not such a good idea," he said in a voice made raspy by the smoky desert air. His breath was deep, and heavy, his horse smelling sweat soaked, holding up on of his legs as if lame. The Cossack who usually had ever vigilant eyes in the back of his head and quicker reflexes to act on what they saw looked down to the ground. He noted a long rifle pointed at his back, from a rather large man on a draft size horse.

"Whatever you want from me, you can't have anymore, 'Savior Sam'," Stenka said as he tried to reach for the two barreled hand pistol under his coat. "We both die here today!" he grunted, after which he turned around, aimed and...couldn't fire.

“So, you do think before you shoot, Stenka,” John Sutter, clad in a ragged buckskin coat and torn laborer trousers with mismatched ditch digger boots said from atop a well fed, but exhausted horse. The incognito President who still, legally anyway, was in charge of looking after the interests of Mexican citizens in most of California, glanced at the burning embers in the bonfire, still giving out small sparks and strange odors. “Which is why I kept you on as the first go to tracker, scout and criminal hunter back at Fort Ross,” he continued, lowering his ornate Swiss manufactured rifle, then slipping it into the scabbard on his saddle. “Yes, like me, you are a killer who prefers to think rather than shoot. Most of the time anyway,” perhaps still-General Sutter said feeling twinges of pain in his shooting arm from two fresh bullet holes that decided to open up again.

“Which is why, because I ‘think before I shoot’,” Stenka replied with downturned eyes from the perspective of his new morality, ashamed of his previous ones. Recalling more than one occasion when he could have shot him dead. “Slippery Sam is----”

“---a common enemy to BOTH of us now,” Sutter replied to the Cossack who though quick on the draw, and accurate with his aim, had somehow never shot any non-combatants, or anyone on the opposite side of the battleline trying to surrender. Or so Stenka still hoped anyway. “This American invader to MY country,” the Swiss-born Mexican citizen continued after a deep reflective breath. “Who----“

“---is working together with you,” Stenka interjected, raising his gun at Sutter’s head. “According to everything I was told.”

“From people who are lying to you, and who were lying to me,” Sutter replied, calm, collected and, with an emotion Stenka had never imagined possible from his latest boss at Fort Ross. “We both have to work together now,” Stenka’s once all knowing, all confident boss said with remorse and vulnerability.

“Why?” Stenka demanded to know of the man who rose to power with slippery tongue rather than a strong shooting arm. “Why should I work with you?”

“Because none of us can go home, to the old country, or to wherever we want to live in this new one before Antonia is safe, alive and allowed to be the kind of accomplished woman she wants to be, and deserves to be,” Sutter replied, after which he carefully reached into his breast pocket and retrieved a letter, extending it out to Stenka with a shaking arm.

Stenka grabbed hold of the letter, opened its many folds, and strained his eyes and mind to read the Spanish writing on paper that had been stained with sweat, dirt and a bit of blood.

“I know some of the words are above your level of understanding, and the requirements of practical communication, but basically it says that---“ Sutter said.

“----Antonia’s father, now a State Governor in the civilized regions of Mexico is to be returned to her safely within the month, or you will face a de-throning that makes the public beheading of King Louis and Marie Antoinette in Paris seem like a slap in the wrist,” Stenka replied, summarizing the key details in the correspondence. “And if you are wondering why I know so much about history and how to talk about it like a poetic aristocrat when I have, Antonia has been teaching me a lot about the battlefield of wits and words,” continued the Cossack who had ended his formal education early in life, and unlike his brother Andre, didn’t’ make many efforts to continue it on his own.

“Yet you haven’t taught Antonia enough about the battlefield of fists and swords, because, you needed or wanted to be her protector?” Sutter challenged.

No bullet or blade could have cut into Stenka’s heart more deeply. But for now, life had forced Stenka into one option. Starting with one question. “So, Mister John Augustus Sutter,” he asked his former boss, lowering his own gun, addressing him in the manner that all Russians do when they seek to be told and know the truth. “What do we do now?”

“Something that Antonia will never be able to record in her fictional novel about real life Californians,” Sutter replied with the wisdom that Andre once had. Or perhaps was regaining. “And which no biographer will ever write about me,” he continued. After which the Swiss-born Mexican-citizen entrepreneur pulled a gun on Stenka, aiming it at his head. “Panimoo?” Sutter demanded.

“Yes, I understood,” Stenka replied, in Swiss French.

## CHAPTER 17

It was just another night at Smith's Camp under a warm summer night sky. Its founder giving a sermon from atop a well lit stage that made his head seem to be surrounded by the most magnificent of halos. Another group of followers arriving in mid speech, given white robes by a smiling greeter so they could look and feel like the rest of the congregation. Then being cleansed of their sins, and doubts, with metal colander of incense that was pleasing the nostrils and easing to any troubled mind. The wind and all the animals in the woods, as always, expressed themselves at key points in Smith's masterfully scripted sermon which, of course, he was receiving from 'The Lord Above and Within' anew with each new breath. And two new visitors to the newly evolved Visionary City of Paradise, California, who were thinking about what to do with and about the promises for a 'New Republic of Spirit' promised to all who came to join in.

"If you do what I ask, for the sake of a world I can create where there is no more war, and a prosperous peace for those who see the value of the new Spiritual Order, not a hair on Antonia's head will be touched, not by my hand anyway," Stenka, said to Sutter, recalled from the smooth talking, slick and seductively reasonable voice of Savior Sam Smith regarding the head-strong high born, eye-patch wearing adventurous who he saved from losing BOTH eyes when she ventured off into the woods, against his recommendation, and encountered a rabid crow who thought itself brave enough to dine on the contents of her eyes sockets while she was playing dead so as to not alarm the rescue party.

Indeed, if you closed your eyes when listening to his appeal to join the Interfaith, Intercultural and Interracial Movement beginning to take hold in the thus far isolated agricultural paradise of Northern California, you could imagine that he really was Jesus re-incarnated, though he never openly claimed to be in so many words. But as Stenka's eyes were now wide open, he saw everything. Most particularly when the midnight clouds saw fit to move aside so that the quarter moon could shine down below on the luxury cabin in newly founded City of 'Salvation'. Its walls were stained glass reliefs and carvings featuring likenesses of Visionaries from every Christian denomination, all the Native Pagan religions and even the Christ-killer Jews, so as to protect its single dweller from evil spirits that the now fully bearded, long haired and plainly-black robed Sam Smith claimed were competing to make 'light seem like dark and dark seem like light'. By necessity of course, for her Antonia's safety, the windows were barred during the day, and locked shut at night so that the moonlight would not make her any more dangerous to herself, or others. And surrounding all of that, no less than 20 trusted guardian angels. Three of which were recognized by Stenka all too well, as he was clearly doomed to the hottest circle of hell for the rest of his days on earth as well as the afterlife due to so many things he didn't do, and opportunities for greatness he didn't access aggressively enough. They had all too familiar names.

"Ivan, Lev and Yuri," Sutter voiced regarding their identity according to those who only saw what the human eye could perceive, and not the inner Realms which spirit could feel. "Three of your former Cossack Comrades for most of your life," he noted. "And my most trusted, and grateful, employers for a brief time during mine," the 'real men never

have to or should apologize' Swiss born Californian pioneer lamented. "But I don't see the low ranking old man who has the wisdom, or good sense, to influence decisions on top from an ever elusive position on the bottom. What was his name?"

"Petrov," Stenka replied, the principalities of anger and grief competing to own, and paralyze, his mind so they could occupy his soul. "Yes, Petrov," he continued, pointing to the only gravestone with an Orthodox cross on it within the cemetery near the cabin. "God, if he is still around, and forgiving, bless his noble, undervalued and ancient soul," he said while crossing himself.

"Yes, indeed," Sutter appended, while crossing himself in the same manner of the Eastern Orthodox Christians. A gesture which, if done in a Catholic Church as a religiously converted Mexican citizen in a very Catholic country would cost him several business deals, or his life. "But who are those well armed Indians who seem so...so..."

"Converted to 'peace keepers'? In Savior Smith's new brand of Christianity?" Stenka whispered. He strained his eyes, looked through his spy glass, and recognized some of the faces. "Maidu, Nicename and Miwok," Stenka said recognizing the Pagans who, prior to the Russian fort being named Ross, he was charged to trade with, make peace with and inform on if they became too dangerous to the Russo-American's financial interests. "And...hmmm..." he continued as he struggled to recognize whose eyes were within the face of their red-skinned leader, clad from his recently barbered short hair to his boot rather than moccasined feet as a White man.

"That's Elki," Stenka heard from behind him. From a cape-wearing member of the congregation, smelling of fresh blood rather than purification incense. "A Miwok warrior from a rival tribe who I once trusted as a brother," Wuyi said as he pulled a blowpipe out from his hidden gunbelt. He aimed the toxic dart at the end of it in the head Indian's direction while his back was turning. "Before he became irrevocably lost." Wuyi took in a deep breath, then fired away.

Elki swatted himself on the back, as if swatting a mosquito. Then walked over to a stump, where he sat down comfortably, took in a breath of night air. Then took a swig from a jug next to him.

As the contents of it went was going down Elki's parched throat, he seemed to sense something different on his tongue. Then the once clear headed Miwok warrior closed his eyes, snored deeply. His smiling face indicated he was in some kind of very happy hunting ground. His Native underlings looked at each other, drank from the same jug, and decided it was time for a break. Some faded into dreamland behind closed eyes. Others become lost in day dreams under the moonlit sky. The most conscious of them invited the Militia men who had belonged to Sutter and the Cossacks who claimed to belong only to themselves to imbibe of the brew from the jug which normally kept them alert, awake and trigger happy. The Palefaces of the higher ranks took gulps, the lower grunts in sips.



“Far more effective elixir than our gypsies, witches or herbalists have back in the old country,” Stenka heard from another unexpected familiar voice, which somehow felt very different. Vladimir Olinkovitch adjusted the ties on his white robe so as to hide the blood, and patches of scalp, left there by its previous owner. “You’ll have to tell me how you make it, Wuyi,” he continued, in a mixture of cordial Russian and colorful Native.

“Only when you whites, most of you anyway, decide you’d be happier to go back to your old country,” Wuyi shot back, in Russian. “Or welcome us as visitors to your country, while we figure out ways to make it our own, exclusively.”

“Fair enough,” Olinkovitch replied, not sure who the ‘most of the whites’ was referring to. And, for the moment not caring, as he pulled out a variety of rod-containing instruments, some of which Stenka recognized as weapons and some which he didn’t. “Donations from what was left of Comrade Andre’s storage pile of tricks, which we stole before he could bury them,” Stenka’s former boss, protector and predator said. “For our new revolution.”

“You being new to revolutionary movements, of course,” Wuyi pointed out to the Cossack who avoided being part of any grass roots revolt in the old country until it became a ‘legitimized’ and legally sanctioned revolution.

“A man can change,” Olinkovitch shot back.

“And prove himself by his actions,” Sutter interjected, examining the various devices no doubt intended to cut apart human flesh, disrupt their consciousness, or perhaps magically change their beliefs. “What do we do?” he asked the three men around him who now had to become legends. The kind who would of course never be written about in any legitimate history book.

Olinkovitch, Wuyi and Stenka looked at each other, each connected to the other with the third brain between them. And all fulfilled beyond measure by having a common servant to share. One John Sutter, who previous to this prided himself on being beneath no other man. And being dependent on no one.

## CHAPTER 18

The plan was simple, diabolical and deadly if any of it went wrong. Part of it required the wind to speak against Savoir Smith rather than for, or with him. Such was easily done by Olinkovitch as he snuck under platform the American Messiah was speaking from, gagging the engineer operating the machine which converted even the most gentle wind from the ground into a loud, godlike voice from the heavens. Converting 'yes' from the Lord Almighty into 'no' wasn't all that hard to do on the machinery designed by Master Inventor Mechanos in ancient Athens and improved by Innovative Cossack Andre Denisov..

A flick of the switch was all that was required after the congregation of pilgrims for peace and Crusaders for Connection between all people heard Smith's claims and promises. Such wind-negated negated 'truths' included, of course, 'This New Republic of Ours is the Greatest Country in the World', 'All of us are on a Holy Mission Sanctioned by God Himself' and 'if we unite as one against these flesh eating demons coming out of the depths of hell, we will create Paradise on earth where no man, woman or child goes hungry.'

While the newly generated wind blew 'no's rather than the scripted 'yes's' to the congregation, it had its way with Smith's private meditation shack. With the help of Sutter sneaking around it, burning deep lacerations into its support beams with a 'blow torch laser', the wind blew away the roof, then three of its walls as if they were brown autumn leaves eager to be returned to the earth. Such revealed chests filled with gold, silver and paper money, all of which were scattered to all four directions, pocketed by pilgrims fortunate enough to be in their vicinity and lucky enough to not be robbed immediately afterwards by those sharing the same nationality, skin color and religion. Other items included deeds to undeveloped land and two hundred year old estates stretching from Sacramento to Monterey, signed over on future dates to Smith himself. Amongst those who found that they would voluntarily donate their hard earned property to Smith was Sutter himself. Along with a former Mexican cattle baron and de-possessed dirt poor wheat farmer, to whom Sutter had done the same thing in his quest to liberate California from its former owners.

From behind trees where he could be heard but not seen, Wuyi told insulting jokes about Smith while he was delivering his Sermon in Indian languages that the Native Population within the Congregation understood, believed and laughed at. Most particularly when the red skinned heckler chased by White Security Police who tripped every time they tried to catch the ever elusive Wuyi.

The pursuers emerged from the ground with flowers jammed into the barrels of their pistols and rifles, and horse shit covering their pale faces and aching groins. Such of course gave Wuyi the chance to deliver quips and witticisms about their blackened faces, white teeth, slow turtle like reflexes and cocks that were so small that they had to use extensions in order for any woman to feel that they had any manhood between the legs.

But still, there were more ready and able soldiers in the Camp to inactivate those who wanted to desert the cause, and to annihilate the band of four still unseen liberators. And just to make things interesting, Stenka's feet heard a company of riders approaching from the east. They seemed like a battalion when he looked at the ridge above them, with the kind of eyes that could differentiate people from anything natural in the woods. Stenka noted that they were carting small arms artillery. The kind that fired 20 rounds a minute. Such brought attention of the Cossack to eyes, most notably those of Antonia inside. She had worn a patch over one eye every time he was allowed to see her. As for the other ocular porthole, Smith had guaranteed that stuff it into her mouth once he had blinded her for good if Stenka didn't do his bidding. Or serve it to Stenka in his soup if he didn't come back from every Mission for the Cause having done everything commanded of him.

But that was then and this was now. It was easy to sneak by his slumbering former Cossack Comrades as well as the mesmerized star gazing First Nations guards around Antonia's cabin. A gift from God, he thought.

After reaching the back door, he found that it was easily opened with a push of his arm. A blessing from the Great Spirit, he pondered.

Upon seeing Antonia, she was sitting in a comfortable chair, wearing a purple dress, the color and style worthy of her born to Mexican royalty station. The slashes she had made on her wrists so that she could not be held as a live hostage had healed up, covered with fine lace that did not show any fresh blood. The patch over her left eye was surrounded by a face which had not been punched, cut or burned. Her right eye was open, but seemed to be seeing nothing except images behind them. A delivery of terror from a demon far more powerful than Viy or Ulk, or even Satan himself.

Stenka gently approached Antonia, knowing how vulnerable those who went catatonic in the heat of battle are. How they could go into uncontrollable seizures when touched the wrong way. And go into shakes that would make them hit their head on the hard ground until they bled out all of the bad blood and horrible memories inside them, along with large chunks of healthy brain tissue. Slowly he edged his way to her. "Antonia, it's me," he said in a soft, loving voice. "The Russian Cossack who keeps mispronouncing every Spanish word you speak so artfully and write so creatively."

Antonia's clenched lips broke into a slight smile, her stare still held hostage by memories Stenka wished he could take upon himself. "The gruff voiced Slavic trubador who, on a good day, maybe does hit most of the notes he tries to sing to you and my most probably deaf horse," he continued, evoking a chuckle. "And," he continued, gently placing his firm, sweat soaked palm on her cold, trembling wrist. "An honorary Russian Injun who will never let you become Slippery Sam's slave, or my squwa," he pledged. Such got Antonia to turn her head and look at Stenka with her good right eye. Something in what he saw in it made him stroke her cheek, which made her smile, until he reached the strap holding the patch over the left eye intact. Antonia lowered her head, as if in shame. "No," he assured her, lifting her head up. "You are the most beautiful creature in my

world,” he said as he lifted the eye-patch up. “And any other world that is worth living in, because...” he continued as he got a full view of what was under the patch.

“Because I see now with both eyes,” Antonia replied, but with a voice that was not her own with two very intact and functional ocular portholes. A drugged voice which simulated Savior’s Sam’s diction, accent and, purpose, as she screamed out. “Savior Sam! My demon husband is here. Time we eliminated him for good!”

Before Stenka could grasp what was happening, Antonia, threw an angry stare at her liberator, then kicked him in the belly, causing him to double over. She grabbed hold of a bell, ringing it with the zeal of an Old Believer Priest announcing to everyone in the a Christian Cossack village that he had trapped a band of thieving Moslem Turks inside the monastery’s cattle pen. “Come and get him!” she proclaimed, again and again, until Stenka was able to gag her with his sash, then tie her hands up with his layette, then hoist her over his shoulder.

Stenka heard, then saw, five heavily armed men coming through the front door. He reached for his pistol and ray gun, blasting at them. This time, shooting before thinking. He wish he hadn’t, as he saw once fellow Cossacks in common Cause Yuri and Ivan, fall into the pile of aching and perhaps dying intruders. A Monk, his face covered by his brown burlap robe, was the next to enter, pointing his rifle at Antonia’s head.

“Go ahead, make his day,” Antonia said with a sardonic laugh. “Then send him to hell, too.”

“No, Lev, it’s me,” Stenka said to the Jew who became an Eastern Orthodox Cossack, then a Catholic Priest, then an enforcer for Savior Sam.

“The enemy of my people, the Chosen people!” Lev declared, after which he edged closer to Stenka, kicking Antonia out of his arms. As soon as she hit the floor, he gently placed his boots on her chest, edging his way to her neck, while still holding a gun to Stenka’s head. “Which one of you wants to go first?” he asked with a sadistic sneer, while sprouting a third leg between his two hind-limbs.

Stenka knew he was facing someone who had learned to enjoy killing others, as a sexual experience. Perhaps because Lev had been drugged, or otherwise indoctrinated. But beneath whatever monster Lev had become, he was still perhaps Lev. A Jew who at one point in his life valued the giving of life more than the taking of it. Or perhaps had a hidden agenda for so many years.

“Let me see you beg for your life, Cossack Orthodox scum!” Lev growled with a vengeance to Stenka, whose people had killed his family in a ‘cleansing’ raid ordered by the Czar, then adopted him as a command from Jesus. “You too, Liberal Atheistic Revolutionary bitch!” he sneared at Antonia.

Antonia, somehow awakened from the drug she had been given, sung the Marseilles, the anthem sung by the Revolutionaries who had dethroned the oppressive monarchy in France. Such made Lev's boot-heel on her even harder. Edging closer to her throat, about to break it two until, at the point of a gun to his head, Stenka started to sing something from Lev's childhood. A Hebrew prayer for mercy from God, appealing to all Jews to love each other as they loved themselves. Which, of course, worked only if one were not a masochist. With each hopefully accurately remembered phrase in the Jewish hymn, Stenka prayed to the God beyond all religions, and pagan beliefs, that the spirit of that song was there. Miraculously, Antonia began to hum along, then sung harmony, pronouncing the words as best as she could pick them up. Then, Lev joined in. He lowered the rifle, recalling the magical life of Jewish life back in the Old Country, for a people who had not had a country of their own for nearly two thousand years. He lifted his leg off of Antonia, tapping it to the beat of the music. His eyes softened. His growl turned into a fond and blissfully-filled sacred grin. His back arched up with pride at being the Chosen people who had chosen the wrong country to live in. Till the voice left his throat, and he doubled over in pain, then fell onto the floor.

Behind Lev was none other than Andre, wrapped in clothing more suited to a battered and psychologically beat beggar than a self-made genius inventor or heroic revolutionary. He sprinkled powder over Lev's face from a leather pouch strapped to his waist. Then, what he had left in his medicine bag over the thankfully still breathing faces of Ivan and Yuri. Then, the last of it into Antonia's nostrils. They all woke up as if from a dream, or nightmare, asking each other where they were and how they got there, none of them having an answer.

"You all have to get out of here, fast," Andre said, reaching into the burlap sack slung over his head. "Olinkovitch, Wuyi and Sutter are outside, with horses to take you all far away from here."

"Why, Andre Denisov?" Stenka asked his once worshipped older brother. He expected an answer as to why, after promoting the Revolutionary Cause in America, he had abandoned it in its greatest hour of need, then returned to the battle. "Why have you---?" he demanded.

"---Allowed myself to get shot?" Andre replied, showing Stenka and the fellow Cossacks he had come to America with a belly wound under his robes that would not heal, painfully pushing protruding intestines back into it. "Penance, I suppose," he said with one of those 'what else can you do me' laughs that only man who knows, for sure, that this is the final act in his life opera, is entitled too. And accepting it. "Father Basili said were born guilty, so, logically, if we live a heroic life, doing all we can with every opportunity we have, for at least one moment, we die...redeemed."

Silence permeated the air. But before Stenka could hear the voice of Spirit within that Silence, his earthly ears heard shots outside. And battle cries. "Indians fighting Whites again, Mexicans fighting Gringos," he explained. "Each group blaming the other for the deception of the monsters from hell, and the tragedies in those faked, manufactured

wars,” Andre explained. He then turned to Antonia. “That maybe you can makes sense of in fictional print, while the rest of us try to disown in life?” he said as more blood than words came out of his mouth.

“And what of Slippery Sam Smith?” Antonia demanded to know. “The devil incarnate who---” The rest of the memories of what Savior Smith had done to her, Stenka, and so many others got stuck in her throat, the truth of those events expressed in tears streaming down her, thankfully two intact, eyes.

“---I want his head!” Stenka demanded, taking Antonia into his loving, but not ‘me strong man, you weak woman’ overly protected arms.

“As will that crowd out there, some of them anyway. Enough of them,” Andre said through more of a death rattle than clearly distinguishable voice. “Now, if you know what is good for you and me, leave here! So I can be sure that I send him and his non-drugged loyal followers back to hell, where they belong!” he grunted, as he reached into his burlap sack pulling out what looked like grenades.

“And what do I tell Maria?” Stenka asked as he helped Antonia up onto her feet, then to the one of horses waiting for them outside the back door, held by Wuyi. “Who doesn’t want you to die.”

“But who knows you have to, now anyway,” Antonia, having collected her grief and channeling her anger, informed Stenka.

With that, Stenka hugged his brother for the last time, got on his horse, and rode off with what was left of his Cossack Comrades and his hopefully new wife, to join Olinkovitch and Sutter for a ride back to someplace that was home, or could converted into such. For all concerned. After they took a detour to the still unsettled location of the gold strike which started it all, blowing it up, so as leave it to future generations to uncover. And for the present generation of pioneers to seek getting rich quick to the North in Oregon Country. Or to get rich in deeper ways by digging into their own souls rather than drudging up Mother Earth.

## CHAPTER 19

Not too long ago in Ancient Greece, Prometheus defied the rule of the head god Zeus and gave mankind the ability to read, write and create fire, thinking it would unite them against the common enemy of ignorance, cruelty and pain delivered by Mother Nature. The punishment for this noble deed was for Prometheus to be shackled to the ground, crows eating up his liver by day, that organ growing back by night. Master Inventor Andre Denisov was spared that fate, and perhaps, somewhere is being rewarded for his noble plans to save humanity from itself, and forgiven the mishaps postponed them for another era. Perhaps that common enemy will be a monster that can't be seen with the naked eye that would plague rich and poor equally, uniting all nations and ethnicities in a common Cause. But as for what this writer can tell you about how the rest of the decade worked itself out after the Spring of 1841 in Alta California, such is well documented.

In 1845, Americans instigated and fueled the Big Bear Flag revolt to liberate the region from Mexican rule. It failed, thankfully. As did Swiss born John Sutter's attempt to become Governor under the rule of Mexico City or President under his own command, his various attempts to do so landing him in jail for a time, though it was not an uncomfortable confinement.

In 1846, the President in Washington decided that it was in the best interest of his own country to invade the country of Mexico, resulting in California being ceded to the United States very soon afterwards. In 1848, gold was discovered by a worker on land still owned by John Sutter, on the same spot where it was discovered seven years earlier. Said worker was not paid off to keep quiet about it, or put into the grave to insure his silence. A year later, the population of California soared to numbers that no one imagined possible, the demographic not including many Indians, Mexicans or Russians. It was accompanied by the kind of wealth unheard of for those who struck it rich. John Sutter was not one of those who did.

Antonia and Stenka pledged to never tell the truth about what happened in 1841 in Alta California, be it through fact based fiction or straight fact. But they never promised that I wouldn't. Yours, for the offering, and consideration,

Maria Antonia Stenka Andre Fernandez Denosov.

END...for now